

Phuket Restoration

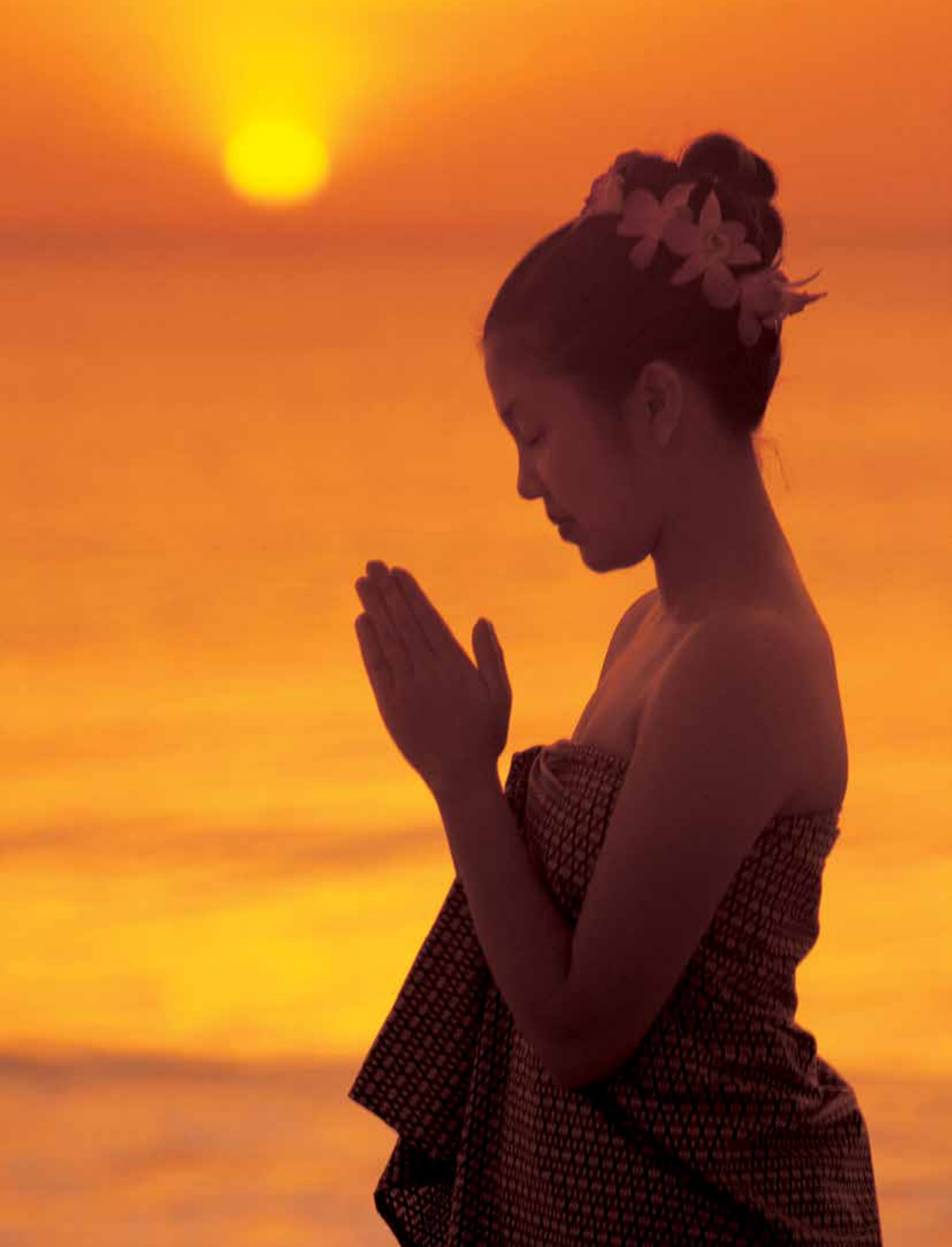
When last did you do something meaningful for yourself, to balance your body, calm your mind and soothe your soul? VERNE MAREE heads off to the very first **Wellness Workshop** at the **JW Marriot Phuket Resort & Spa** to do just that – and finds an island that is undergoing a restoration of its own.

First off, I'm blown away by Mai Khao beach – a full 17 kilometres of gleaming sand and azure waters. Who knew that there was still such pristine sand and surf on Phuket? Must be because it borders a National Nature Reserve, I decide, but no – it's not just happening here.

Since the May coup, explains local journalist Maurie Grant of the *Phuket Gazette*, the military junta's drive to improve Thailand's image has cleared almost all the umbrellas, sun-beds, masseuses and tacky restaurants from Patong, Karon, Kata and other beaches. The effect is wonderful, and long may it last.

I admit to having all but written off Phuket after my last visit a couple of years ago. The relatively unspoilt beaches I'd fallen in love with 14 years earlier had become so overcrowded that they were no longer pleasant. And expats like us don't travel to tropical island resorts just for their swimming pools. Most of us live in a condo where the pool is nearly as good – though sadly lacking a cocktail menu.

With its beaches restored, this lovely Thai island is again on my list of weekend getaways. New government restrictions on drinking hours may be a nuisance, though; the same goes for rumoured plans for tourists being required to wear electronic identity bracelets – for their own protection, apparently.





Why a Wellness Workshop?

As general manager Oriol Montal says, today's traveller in search of a healthy and relaxing break is looking for more than just sunshine and massage. And when getting away from it all is not enough to fully recharge the batteries, a structured wellness programme in tropical surrounds could be just the thing.

You don't have to go off alone as I did, leaving the family behind. A rare selling point of this wellness workshop is that you could take along not only your significant other, but the children too, if they're not *too* young. Though couples make up 50 percent of its guests, the Marriot Phuket is well known as a family hotel.

Exploring the huge grounds on my first day, I can see why. Even with an occupancy of more than 90 percent, there's space for everyone. A trio of ten-year-old boys kicks a football on a patch of shady grass complete with goals, muted squeals emanate from the Kids' Club, and I've never seen a water-slide like the one delivering a continuous series of ecstatic youngsters into the main pool. If I wasn't already late for my session on Cosmic Healing Sounds I might be tempted to have a go myself.

The Practices

The first of what will be a quarterly event – the next one is planned for February 2015 – this three-day workshop in late September was put together by the in-house Mandara Spa's warm Aussie director, Linda Overman. Sessions were led by a stellar line-up of teacher-practitioners, all of whom are based in Phuket.

Londoner **Mandy Kealy**, the **Feldenkrais** practitioner, came to the island as a slip of a thing 25 years ago and never left. She calls herself a "movement educator", and the somatic movement study that she espouses is something I'd like to know more about. **Pat Thummanond**, who qualified in California and worked there for a long time, practises **Core Unwinding**: her own integration of craniosacral therapy, visceral manipulation and lymphatic drainage. **Meditation** teacher and author **Nikorn Banjerdlert** is on hand, too; and then there's trainer and nutritionist **David Catudal** of **Phuket Cleanse**.

The Programme

Our mornings start at 7.30am – one day it's yoga, taken by Pat; the next day is Nikorn's meditation class (simply a nap, for some of us); the third is a "mindful" beach walk.

Apart from Mandy's daily Feldenkrais lesson, Pat leads us in more-or-less **spiritual sessions** such as "Awaken the Healer" – meaning the healer within you, "Six Cosmic Healing Sounds", "Five Tibetan Rites" and a couple of others. Our group is just the right size to bond, despite being a mix of Thai and English speakers. There are even tears.

Lunch one day is a fabulous bento box from Kabuki Japanese Cuisine Theatre, served on the lawn under shady trees. On the next, an enthralling presentation of raw-food dishes from the island's famous Phuket Cleanse – creamy protein shakes, enchiladas, curries and even raw chocolate, all bursting with nutty textures, goodness and flavour.

Each afternoon culminates in an hour's treatment at the resort's splendid

Mandara Spa. Top-notch therapists aid the wellness process with blissful aromatherapy, Thai, Balinese or head massages. Then, sometimes still anointed with various gloop, we all meet for dinner and toast our wellbeing with a couple of glasses of wine and a lot of laughter.

The Inner Woman

With six restaurants and five bars on site, we're eating exceptionally well – healthily, too, it must be said. A day that starts with a fresh beetroot-juice shot just has to be a good day, and that's readily available at the **Marriot Café's** huge breakfast buffet, served from early until 12 noon.

Ginja Taste (pronounced "'ginger"), located next to the resort's Thai cooking school, serves delicious Thai meals, and **La Cucina** comes up with some of the best lamb cutlets I've enjoyed for a long time. Other options include the **Andaman Grill** (for steaks and seafood), but I never made it that far, nor to the various inviting-looking bars.





Felden-what?

The Feldenkrais Method

(TFM) is not easy to explain, even when you've undergone it. TFM recognises the brain as being the core of movement, and its lessons aim to rewire an individual's movement patterns at a neuromuscular and therefore subconscious level to effect lasting improvement. It's a way to unlearn bad movement habits and restore the natural alignment we were born with.

Mandy's speciality, she says, is "helping people move through their limitations, and use themselves in an easier, fuller, better way". She treats people with a range of orthopaedic, neurological and musculoskeletal conditions.

Many of them complain of back pain, so during this three-day programme she teaches us some gentle, mainly mat-based movements designed to "re-educate your brain to direct your movements with greater efficiency and comfort". In Lesson One, we learn about improving posture and breathing through twisting; Lesson Two focuses on easier bending for a flexible spine; Lesson Three, moving the pelvis for a stronger back.

I find it thoroughly enjoyable, and after each session we all walk effortlessly taller and straighter. Best of all, we receive detailed notes on the exercises and can continue the good work at home.



Looking Forward

You won't find the same line-up of healing practitioners in the Marriott Phuket's future wellness workshops; here's the tentative schedule for February 2015:

- Buddhist ex-monk, Nikorn (as above)
- Patrycja Rogers, teaching Emotional, Physical and Spiritual Balancing
- Julian Eymann, musculoskeletal therapist
- Fon Tarinee, on "The Natural Facelift"

Getting There:

Singapore Airlines (code-sharing with SilkAir) took off from Changi at the civilised hour of 1.30pm on a Thursday afternoon, arriving in Phuket at 2.10pm; there's a one-hour time difference. From two or three options, I chose the 2.55pm flight home, allowing plenty of time to deal with emails and have a leisurely late breakfast. 🍳

To find out more, go to marriott.com/Phuket.