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STORY BY
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SERENE BEAUTY

A journey to Thailand's second-largest island—the exquisite Ko Samui.



Tucked away between the expanse of bright blue water between Indochina and Indonesia, Kamalaya Ko Samui is a yet-to-be-spoiled tropical dream long favored by Buddhist monks as a sanctuary for spiritual retreat. The island, they say, has a special energy that enriches and enlightens their spiritual path and helps them connect profoundly with the universal energies. Through the wisdom and synergy of East and West, Kamalaya Ko Samui provides a most unique approach to wellbeing and personal fulfillment.

The Kamalaya story began in 1982 when its founders, John and Karina Stewart, first met in the jungles of the Himalayas. John, a Canadian who spent more than 15 years living in caves in the Himalayan rishis, fell in love with Karina at his ashram in India. Karina, who hails from Mexico, was visiting during her anthropology studies at Princeton University (she also has a master's degree in traditional Chinese medicine). They married, traveled the world, and dreamed of an ultimate collaboration.

More than a decade later, while hacking through the thick tropical jungle forest of Ko Samui with his machete, John discovered something truly unique: a cave nestled in the heart of such a densely forested landscape—jungle-shrouded and centuries-old, once clearly used by Buddhist monks as a place for meditation and spiritual retreat. There, he found leftovers of incense and dried flowers and mantras written on the walls. There were precious statues of Buddha. It was the sign they had been waiting for; serendipity had led John and Karina to find Kamalaya.

Guests of all ages and backgrounds have found their own personal nirvana at Kamalaya since it first opened in 2005. The multiple award-winning wellness sanctuary and holistic paradise is known in sophisticated circles for giving back far more than the most stressful daily life can take away. The original cave of inspiration, still preserved as a sacred place, is literally underneath the Wellness Sanctuary at Kamalaya—the “nerve center” where more than 100 of the sanctuary’s 350-person team work across a variety of modalities, from fitness to massage, naturopathy, traditional Chinese medicine, and Ayurvedic medicine. Throughout the property exists a most impressive collection of state-of-the-art wellness facilities, including two herbal steam caverns, plunge pools, far-infrared saunas, two yoga pavilions, and a Shakti Fitness Center.



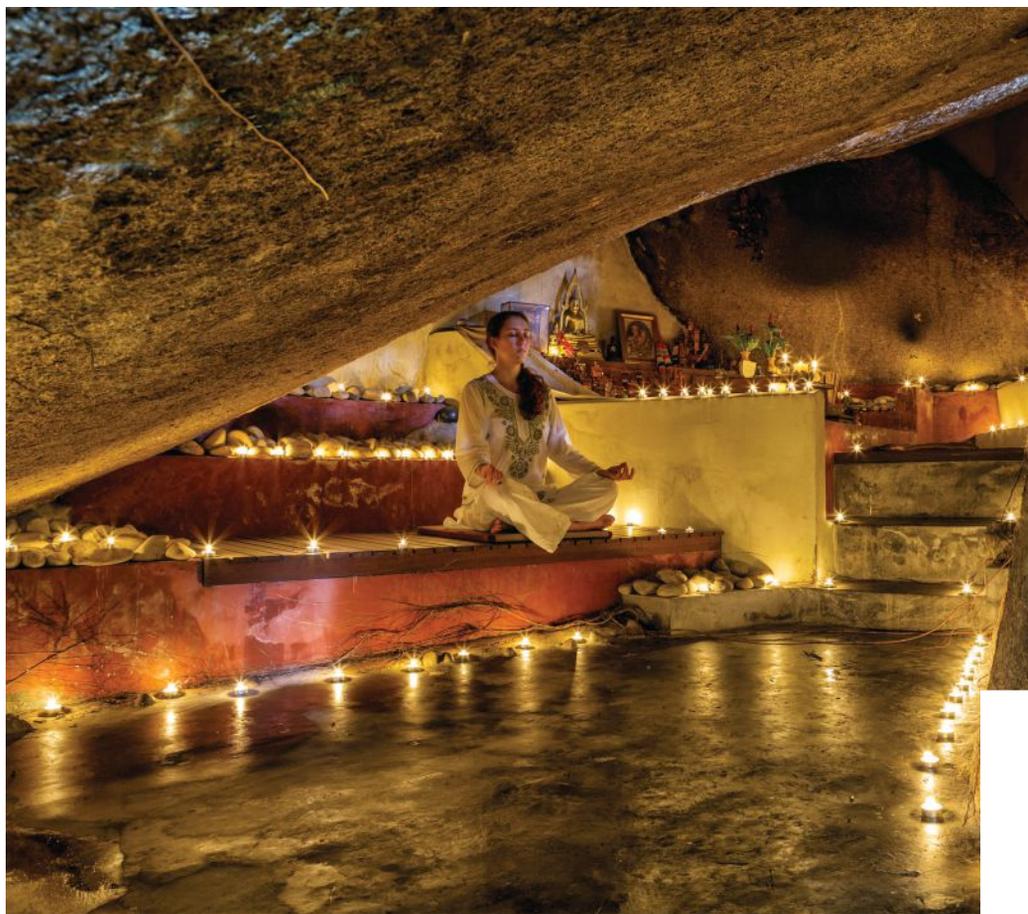
Kamalaya's facilities and accommodations encircle a centuries-old cave, once used by Buddhist monks as a place for meditation and spiritual retreat. Built on Kamalaya's secluded beach, the beach front Villa puts you in close proximity to the sea and is nestled atop granite boulders.

Returning to Thailand is always a welcomed gift. The land of a thousand smiles has given me precious days filled with palm-fringed beaches of white sand, towering golden buddhas, sacred temples and palaces, lush rainforest adventures, spicy, fresh, delicious food, and the world's most coveted tropical island escapes. Yet even at first blush, Kamalaya is exceptional. Stepping out of my private car, the setting charmed my senses and put me at ease. As the warm air began to thaw my over-air-conditioned skin, the sight of koi dancing in a flowing pond and the smell of the fragrant tropical jungle touched by essential oils signaled the start of something new.

Flowing down the tropical hillside, Kamalaya's 76 rooms and villas range from cozy hillside rooms to open suites, spacious villas, and private pool villas. Designed by Australian-born architect Robert Powell, Kamalaya masterfully embraces the diverse elements of the very special piece of land on which it rests, with ancient granite boulders, streams, tropical vegetation, and existing rocks and trees as defining elements for many of the structures.

I stayed at a coveted two-bedroom Beachfront Pool Villa. Having joined me on my retreat, my mother unpacked in her private adjoining suite while I unwound with a dip in our cool and refreshing private pool. Our secluded villa nestled amid the trees included a plethora of open space to rest and reflect, stunning views of the Kamalaya beach, and an immense cerulean blue ocean. From Asian textiles to carefully selected art pieces, nature's restorative presence can be felt in every direction. Kamalaya's public spaces and accommodations refreshingly embrace a digital detox philosophy, with only the library approved for mobile calls, television, and other technological cheating.

Similar to all Kamalaya journeys, mine began at the Wellness Sanctuary with a Bioanalysis expert and a private evaluation. Customized programs range from the popular Detox, Stress &



Burnout, to Healthy Lifestyle, Yoga Synergy, and Emotional Balance. The Wellness Sanctuary and Holistic Spa offers over 70 treatments incorporating holistic medicine and complementary therapies from Eastern and Western traditions, some taking place as a series spread over multiple days.

In Asian culture, there is a strong focus placed on balance. As energy flows in one direction, it ebbs in another; interactions and relationships within the universe are only harmonious when kept in balance. The five elements—earth, metal, wood, fire, and water—are believed to be the fundamental roots of the universe. Combining Ayurveda, Chinese Medicine, and Thai Therapies, the resort's Asian Bliss program seemed a perfect choice for me to learn about myself and the holistic healing traditions of Asia. Inspired by the elements and the apparent bliss to be found amongst them, I looked forward to discovering a new center.

Thankfully, I was immediately directed into my first treatment—a luxurious and effective 90-minute traditional Thai massage with an herbal compress. With every expert manipulation of my body, my therapist Jira's skilled touch encouraged me to disentangle body and mind. In my open-air massage room high above the trees, I lost myself in the epic ocean view. I breathed in the sweet warm air infused with absolutely nothing but the sound of tropical birds in the trees and the faint smell



of essential oils floating in the air. The doubts and distractions I brought with me from home began to dissipate.

The following morning, my mom and I embraced our new routines pretty quickly. At breakfast, Korn and Bew and everyone assigned to serve and guide us to a healthy start, offered us their radiant and reassuring greetings, a routine we began to relish. Everywhere we went, we encountered welcoming, friendly, helpful, accepting people with a love of laughter and professional dedication to their jobs. The team at Kamalaya exuded an en-

thusiasm for a healthy and balanced life that was contagious.

Despite my fear of needles, I came to enjoy my body's response to Traditional Chinese Medicine, including my acupuncture treatments with Lynn and her gentle and reassuring touch. As she placed the minuscule, hair-thin, sterile needles on specific acupuncture points, she described the need to re-establish the flow of energy within my body. Apparently, I was on fire. And not in a good way. Full of passion and joy, the element of fire keeps us energized, driven, and fearless. However, it can also blister and cause burnout.

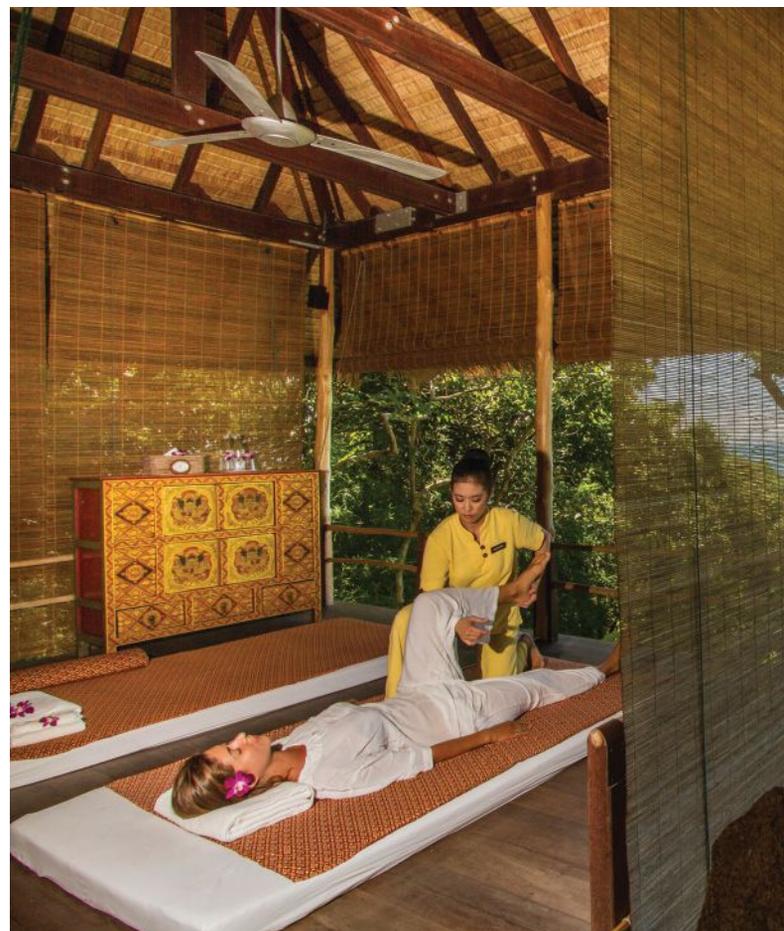
"You are filled with too much heat," Lynn determined. "We will work the needles to correct imbalances, restore health, and bring about enhanced states of physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing."

Distressed over my rock-hard shoulders, Lynn added Cupping Treatments to address these knots and body stiffness and muscular pain. The ancient healing technique uses glass cups to release blockages and improve circulation in specific areas of the body (neck, shoulders, upper and lower back, thighs). She decided the cups on my lower back would be kept stationary and others on my shoulders rotated to increase circulation. "This stimulates the movement of stagnant Qi and blood to the surface," she shared. "And we need to allow for the flow of new, healthy energy and blood to these key areas."



Explore new levels of vitality and health at Kamalaya's Wellness Sanctuary and Holistic Spa. Whatever your pleasure, Kamalaya delivers wellness programs and treatments with depth and variety to cater for individual passions such as yoga, cupping, and massage.

Exceptional expertise and outstanding personal attention during a hybrid of therapy, massage, and other treatments reigned supreme throughout my five-day program. I came to crave my yoga with Dana, meditation with Sujay, and Qi Gong with San Bao, always in an inspiring outdoor natural setting, seemingly far away from anyone else on earth. Afterwards, my private time to swim in the landscaped pool near the beach was usually followed by a perfect portion of expertly prepared fresh salmon at lunch at the nearby Amrita Café. Amrita translates from Sanskrit as "divine nectar" and the restaurant is located by the swimming pools at the edge of flowering lotus ponds, overlooking the sea. There I often met my mother in a similarly glowing and blissful daze. She was equally as pleased to enjoy her own *a la carte* approach to her time at Kamalaya. Choice is the guiding principle for each guest during his or her stay.



What you do, and how much or how little you do it, is entirely up to you.

Beyond the Wellness Center, fellow guests would occasionally be found lightly sprinkled throughout the stunning and secluded areas. There are endless landscapes—sea, earth, streams, ponds, open skies, bouldered hilltops—to find one’s own place of comfort; a place that resonates with an energy that nurtures and re-connects each of us in our own way. For me, mediation practice in the warm and embryotic cave was important. Far from an

off-limits area, the Monks’ Cave is always open and guests are welcome to enter this sacred space for quiet contemplation and meditation. During meditation inside the cave, an aura of spiritual and sacred energy was palpable and connected me to my confidence and calm. For my mother, the cave appeared a bit claustrophobic; the lap pool with its gorgeous ocean views proved far superior for her own reflection and development.

To those who adore food but think wellness means starving, think again. The Soma Restaurant’s Community Table in the evenings was a time to bond with fellow guests—intelligent and sophisticated travelers, business leaders, artists, intellectuals, and soul searchers from around the world. It was love at first bite of the locally sourced cuisine—a fusion of Eastern and Western culinary traditions with endless options paired with information and even instructions for enjoyment when needed. Guests can pick and choose to eat from either a detox or regular menu, but even the latter steers clear of dairy, sugar, salt, fat, and additives, instead focusing on fresh, organic food, served as close to its natural state as possible. We dabbled in skillfully prepared vegetarian options as well as fresh seafood, poultry, and lamb dishes. Fresh juices, signature tonics, herbal teas, and wines were also not to be missed. (Yes, never fear, there is wine.)

My final day at Kamalaya was spent further fanning my flames enjoying the property’s abundance of tropical liquid luxury. In addition to quiet reflection at one of the many streams naturally flowing down the hillside to the ocean below, I took the time to dip in both the lap and leisure pool. My mother and I united to spend an afternoon of cruising around the southern coast of Koh Samui on a 30-metre wooden Turkish ketch, the Naga. Whether on land or sea, never did we find the Kamalaya lifestyle arrogant, inaccessible, or crowded. Kamalaya thrives during each of Thailand’s three seasons—wet, cool, and hot. We found June to be an utterly ideal time to visit, with fewer visitors on the island, lovely dry weather, and a pleasant and consistent 76° during the day.

Peace and quiet enjoyment abound, leaving the ears to adjust to new sounds in nature’s melody. An absolutely cathartic experience, a visit to Kamalaya to tune up, tune in, and explore my value, and my center continues to stay with me. The Kamalaya magic reveals itself subtly, slowly, and then powerfully. As the days fly by, the mind clears, the eyes shine, the skin glows, and vitality increases. In other words, you are more confident and attractive than ever. Don’t be surprised if you fall in love with *you* all over again. ♦

