



Absolute Sanctuary blends exercise programmes with emotional healing therapies, pampering spa treatments, detox protocols and wholesome cuisine.

A New Beginning

Charmaine Tai heads to Koh Samui to find out why guests are still making repeat visits to Absolute Sanctuary, even after much fancier resorts of the same vein have opened.

MY FACE IS flushed. I pause to catch my breath, appreciating the hum of the ceiling fan.

“Don’t give up on me now!”

I blink.

“Two more to go. Come on!”

Where am I? Oh, that’s right. On set three of my squat burpees overhead press. On a Bosu ball. It’s my fourth of the sixth personal training sessions with Dloris and I wonder when I’ll break. If the name of the workout is any clue, completing the reps isn’t a walk in the park. Not when you’ve overhead lunges, crunches and cycling that follow shortly after.

But why would it? After all, I knew what I was in for when I corresponded with Healing Holidays (www.healingholidays.com), a luxury fitness and wellness tour operator that recently set up its Asian headquarters in Singapore. Instead of asking me about my travel plans, I was instead asked about my travel goals.

What would I be looking to achieve? Was I looking for a detox or fitness programme and would I be keen to fast? Was it physical restoration or emotional healing I was seeking? What are my thoughts on medical retreats? Would I be travelling alone and how many days could I spare?

After some mulling over, I decided I needed a week of teeth-gritting, butt-kicking workouts. What better way than to ring in 2020 with a fitter, leaner body?

With that, Healing Holidays suggested a list of partner resorts and retreat types that would suit me best. Which is how I ended up selecting Absolute Sanctuary’s week-long Ultimate Fitness programme.

It wasn’t easy getting the go-ahead for this trip, and even when it did, I too, had my doubts. Reason being, a picture paints a thousand words, and Absolute Sanctuary (www.absolutesanctuary.com) had retained its original egg yolk-yellow paint job from when it welcomed its first yogi in 2008. And you know what they say about first impressions.

But this is also one of the few established fitness and wellness resorts in Southeast Asia that has guests making repeat visits and for weeks on end. Which counts for something given that throngs of fancier places have sprung up the day the world suddenly decided that being fit was in, which may have had something to do with trendy yoga pants and cropped tops. And among the resorts suggested – such as Chiva-Som, Kamalaya and The Farm at San Benito – Absolute had one of the most extensive mix of activities.

Also worth mentioning is that this is the sister brand of Absolute You, which began as Absolute Yoga studio in 2002 in Koh Samui. Today, the boutique wellness concept offers Pilates, yoga, cycling, HIIT and functional training in Singapore (with branches in Millenia Walk, OUE Downtown and Peranakan Place), Bangkok and Phuket.

I nervously chew the insides of my cheeks when I arrive at the resort. It's exactly what you see in the photos. The Middle Eastern-inspired resort is filled with patterned tiles; you'll see it on the steps, around the pool, juice bar... even in the shower and bathroom countertop. Lights are encased in coloured glass domes lined with filigree trimmings, while the rooms are decorated with Arabic-styled mirrors and oil lamps. I'm not expecting a Como or Six Senses, but the design is, to put it bluntly, dated.

of classes. Despite the influx of guests, head yoga instructor Jana never fails to address each student by name, dropping the gentlest reminders when we fall back into old habits.

Then comes the spontaneity of the instructors to ensure you get the most out of your session. During the Aqua Challenge, Marco – an ex-water polo player – decides that I am up for water polo training. I've never played the sport, but he has me doing eggbeater kicks, dry passes, dribbles and in-water jumps. This impromptu session turns out to be the most enjoyable class.

But it's not all work and no play. My programme includes daily massages to soothe out all the kinks in my neck, shoulders and lower back. It's as if the instructors have secretly passed notes to the therapists, telling them where exactly I need to be sorted out.

Absolute Sanctuary is like the plain Jane you'd never take notice of in class, but once you get to know her, you can't tear yourself away.

A 50 million baht renovation was originally meant to take place in November last year but has since been pushed to May, with interiors given a new lease of life. Renderings show a beach-like paradise with light wooden tones complemented by hues of cream and azure, along with sheer curtains and day loungers.

My first glimmer of joy comes at dinner. While lacking in presentation, the dishes are divine. You'll find a variety of cuisines on the menu, each given a healthier twist – the pad thai uses Shirataki noodles and carrot strips instead of rice noodles – but no less flavourful. My only gripe? Portion sizes can be unpredictable, with some erring on the small side.

My call time varies between 6.30am and 7.30am, with Pilates, personal training and twice-daily yoga, along with aqua sessions and beach jogging on certain days. According to my timetable, I'll be working out for an average of four hours each day. Which is just what I need. After all, I'm here to burn the extra calories, and then some.

Given my packed schedule, it's a good thing that the resort is self-contained; each activity is less than 30 seconds away from the other. In the left wing, you'll find a Pilates studio and jungle pavilion for yoga, and in the right, a gym and Pilates reformer studios. A 20m pool sits between both wings.

My second glimmer of joy comes in the form

It's so easy to fall in love with Absolute Sanctuary. She's like the plain Jane you'd never take notice of in class, but once you get to know her, you can't tear yourself away. While under par in terms of looks, it more than makes up with its service, programmes and food. It also offers the most bang for your buck. Packages are on a full-board basis with mental well-being workshops, and in most cases, complimentary yoga classes and daily spa sessions. There's little reason to leave the premises (except to head to the night market or attend a muay thai lesson across the road).

I also meet people from all walks of life, including a variety of C-suite executives. Like me, most are here on their own, armed with similar goals in mind. We end up bonding over meals, classes, and even exchange numbers when I leave.

My third and final glimmer of joy seals the deal for me. A prospective investor happens to make a visit while I'm there and we strike up a conversation. He, like other resort owners, has seen how Absolute Sanctuary has been coming up with the right mix of programmes and wants the brand to manage the fitness and wellness aspects of his properties.

Given that Absolute Sanctuary has already nailed the software, it now only has to work on its hardware, which will be unveiled in June 2021, and I can't wait to see how that will turn out. 