



Game Changer

Nicknamed “Disneyland for athletes,” Thanyapura Sports and Leisure Club in Phuket, Thailand, is the ultimate active holiday destination. Just a short trip has the power to change your body *and* mind for the better

By Yi-Hwa Hanna

To the average person, a holiday where you’d spend the majority of your days working out—many times, more than once or even several times a day—might not sound like much of a blissful break. But then again, Thanyapura isn’t

about being average—this is a place where one of the slogans is “Optimize Your Potential” after all. And they certainly know a thing or two about fine-tuning people to their very best self, be that physically, mentally and emotionally: A sports and leisure club with a high-end hotel attached to it, celebrities from musicians to star athletes—including Maria Sharapova and Jenson Button—have graced its premises. This is a facility that’s well versed in helping people leave fitter, stronger and generally healthier than when they arrived. And so I found myself booked in

for a quick stay at the place that’s been unofficially deemed “Disneyland for athletes”, hoping to come out a new and improved version of myself within less than a week.

Based in Phuket, just a short flight away from the GCC with airlines like Etihad and Emirates both offering direct flights to the island, the site is spread across a glorious 23 hectares. It boasts two lush swimming pools—their 50-metre ozone-filtered Olympic-standard option is, simply put, breathtaking, and their 25-metre teaching pool is nothing to sniff at either—along with two beautifully spacious and fully equipped gym areas (one dedicated to cardio-based

work and the other weights-focused), six tennis courts (including both indoor and outdoor options), an outdoor Muay Thai ring and training area, an epic running track and an extensive mind and wellness centre, as well as plenty more training rooms in which classes are held. And that’s not even counting the healing centres, where you can have everything from physiotherapy sessions to sports massages and thorough consultations with holistic therapists, nutrition experts and doctors. “I’ve only been here for about an hour, and I think I want to move in—it’s like a beautiful hybrid baby of an incredible gym and a luxury hotel,” I gushed to a friend as I

logged on to WhatsApp on the resort-wide free WiFi. As I tucked myself into the luxury bed in the pool wing—the hotel is separated into a garden wing and a pool wing, with the latter best suited for those who are visiting for training the body, and the garden wing for those there to work on the mind—I sighed with bliss, blackout lights on and head snuggled onto the soft pillows.

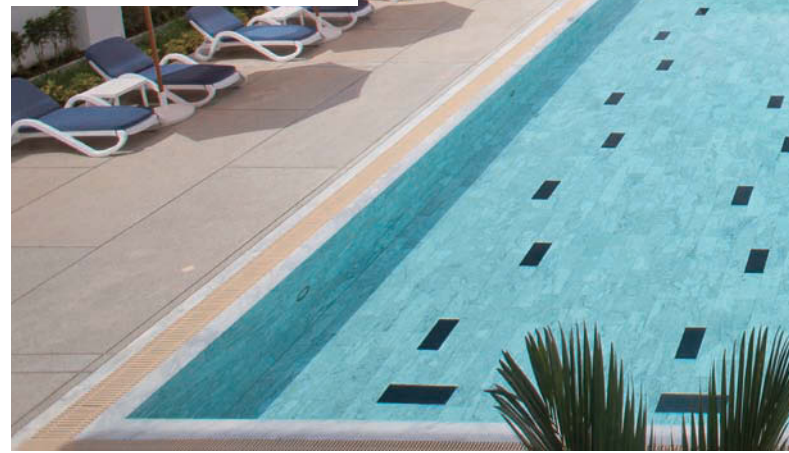
TRAINING TOUGH

The next morning—my first day—I woke up a little nervous. I was booked in for a swimming session with Coach Arm, and although I’ve always been a relatively strong swimmer, it had been a while since I’d got



into a pool, not to mention the lesson was taking place in what can only be described as the resort's star child in terms of facilities. The main restaurant, DiVine, and juice bar, Booster Bar and Deli, are situated right in front of the pool, and for good reason: It makes for a pretty awesome view. But when you're heading there for a swimming lesson where some of the world's best athletes and tri-athletes have trained (in fact, so dedicated are they to helping pros improve their swim game that the pool even has windows along one side, so coaches can stand alongside and watch your stroke, like a super-fit human aquarium), it was a little nerve-wracking thinking of people able to watch you as they ate their breakfast. Thankfully, Coach Arm was so friendly he instantly put me at ease, and before I knew it, I was gingerly lowering myself into the 25-metre pool for some warm-up laps. And, soon enough, the coach was complimenting me on my technique, which boosted my morale so much that I forgot about my nerves. "You've got this, what were you worrying about, silly!" I told myself, and a few minutes later, Coach Arm insisted we move to the other pool. "I think this one's too small for you—we need to head to the Olympic pool," he said. I tried to keep my cool while, on the inside, I squealed with glee

at the prospect of finally dipping my toes into it. We spent the next hour performing various drills that saw me improve my stroke, breathing and technique so much that, by the end of the session, I was able to swim at double the speed and distance as I had previously, with much less effort. "You swam too fast," the coach explained, adding that if I wanted to ever swim in a race, I needed to learn to pace myself, just like one would with running longer distances. By the time the session was over, I was starving, and schlepped over to DiVine for breakfast. At first, I was dubious about the fact that the hotel not only doesn't offer room service (perhaps because it's healthier to have to walk everywhere rather than opt for a lazy in-room meal option, I couldn't help but wonder) but that it only really has two dining options: The main restaurant, DiVine, and the Booster Bar and Deli, which serves light snacks and sandwiches along with an array of healthy refreshments. They even have a smoothie created by Maria Sharapova on their menu, which came about as a collaboration between the star and the resort chefs during her visit. My foodie concerns were quickly nixed within a couple of meals there: My first dinner saw me pleasantly surprised to discover that, not only was there a vast array of options to



choose from, the food was, simply put, delicious. Healthy and wholesome, made with ingredients sourced from their gardens and chock full of organic specialities, it serves up a great balance of both Asian and Western dishes—and all of the dishes display nutritional information, from calories to fat and protein content. At brekkie, fresh eggs and omelettes, juicy fruits, and even crispy bacon, Asian style breakfast options and warm Viennoiseries and waffles were on offer. "Hey, if you're working out as much as the athletes here, it makes sense that they'd offer everything you need before you make an informed choice about what you eat here," I figured, happily tucking in with the comfort of knowing all of the ingredients used to make the dishes here are of the highest quality, which is a key concern of mine when it comes to nutrition. I couldn't

hang out at breakfast for too long though—I was a due for a post-digestion meditation session in the Garden Wing.

MIND AND SOUL

In the past, I have always truly struggled with meditation. While I enjoy the concept, and I completely support the need for it, I've just never managed to switch my brain off enough to successfully do it—until I visited this place. Before we began, my instructor Andrea took his time to explain the process behind meditation, and being able to understand not only how it worked but how I could improve my efforts was an immense help, and as his soothing voice took me through the requisite mental processes, I found myself drifting into a state of deep relaxation that I had never experienced before. By the time I "awoke" to reality, I felt considerably soothed and had



PHOTOGRAPHY: SUPPLIED.

more mental clarity than I had had in months. But I wasn't done for the day just yet—it was time for some consultations at the clinic. Here, an encounter with physiotherapist Tom was the antidote to the months of hardcore training I'd been doing at home, and although he pointed out that my shoulders were in a dire state of distress, he managed to use electro-based therapy to not only make a deep impact on my weary upper body, but even released the tension in my knees that had been flaring up for months since I'd aggravated them in a race at the start of the summer. A consultation with holistic wellness expert Maam revealed some truths that I'd long been avoiding: While my natural disposition to never give up is an admirable trait, that very same tenaciousness also means that I seriously need to learn how to relax, or I'm going to

burn out. "It's a gift, having this kind of drive, but you have to take care of that gift by giving yourself time to heal and rest sometimes too," Maam put it beautifully. A short discussion on the balance of my yin and yang energy was nothing short of eye-opening, with events in my past—including the passing away of my father years before—revealing themselves to be key influences in why my mind works the way it does, why I react to things the way I do, and how my body responds to that—and how the resultant energy balance translates into my exercise regime and all of the injuries that come with it. This may have been one of the more calm activities during my stay, and not the ones I'd looked forward to most—it was the training sessions I had been most excited about—but the lessons I took away from these consultations will stay with me

forever, and have had a truly monumental impact on the way I choose to live and my mentality ever since my visit, and likely for the rest of my life.

UPPING MY GAME

It was with this new clear mindset that I headed to my Muay Thai session, a class that I had been fearing since, as someone who had only taken it up recently (this was my fourth ever class!) doing such a brutal sport in the country it began in, with expert instructors who had booked me in for a two-hour session—double what I was used to, which normally already left me shattered—it's safe to say I was nervous. We began with a thorough warm-up that involved me performing standard moves, which meant I could work on my technique while warming up, before we moved on to the bags. The class was non-stop and fast-paced, but I approached it with such gusto that my coaches grinned in delight. Each proclamation of how I was a "tough girl" only spurred me to work harder, and by the end of class I realised I'd worked a couple of my knuckles into bloody cuts, with a plethora

of shiners across my sore calves. My coaches whipped out a tube of Namman Muay cream and set to work, assuring me that I would be fine by tomorrow, and that I had earned some rest. My head hit the pillow craving *deep* sleep that night, a euphoric endorphin-fuelled smile on my face. The next day, I woke eager for my one-on-one yoga session. I had met my instructor Natasha the day before and instantly clicked with her over shared life philosophies and our love for getting bendy, and the class was a wonderful exercise in not only perfecting moves I already knew how to do but was looking to improve upon by perfecting my technique, but also learning new tricks—by the end of the session I managed to do a handstand unassisted, a goal that I'd been aiming for for months, as well as a new friend and kindred spirit. Next came the part I had been nail biting about the most: The running session. Although I've attended running clinics in the past, and had spent much of this year finally learning to not only overcome my hatred of running but actually learn how to enjoy it, I still found it a struggle. A dodgy knee, a propensity to tire

quickly albeit recover quickly (thank you very much, mild heart arrhythmia) and a natural inclination to avoid cardio meant that running longer distances wasn't easy for me, and despite the fact that I have completed several 10 k races in the past with pretty decent timings, I'd never been able to run for more than 2km at a time without stopping to walk for a while. My coach, Ricky—who isn't just a keen runner and pro coach but also a triathlete—had me perform a series of drills that, admittedly, made me feel a little silly. In particular, the one where I slowly had to lift my knee up and forward, stroking my foot slowly against the ground, then pushing back in a kick, much like a horse would. But boy, did it work—after my session was over, I'd asked if I could go out for a run around



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the trails near the hotel, and as the coach's assistant and I headed out into the thicket, I was delighted to find that I managed to double the distance I was used to before I had to pause for a quick walking break. Running amidst the rubber trees, the air thick with the scent of nature and the ground still dewy from droplets of rain, inquisitive cows and dogs peering at us as we flew by over rocks, streams and dirt paths, was so joyful I'll be recalling that feeling for months. By the time we returned to the hotel, I was absolutely elated and on a runner's high. A quick shower and change later, and it was time for Pilates. I thought it would be a piece of cake—little did I know that the instructor, despite the class being quite slow-paced, would work my core so hard I was wobblier than a bowl of jelly by the end of it. At sunset, I took my tired but

happy body down to the pool for a sunset swim, where I watched the sky turn a hundred shades of golden, red and pink, like an egg that had broken over the sky before slowly washing away into a riot of colour like a watercolour painting. That night, I got a phone call—the staff were participating in a Fun Run to benefit a charity for marine turtle conservation the next morning, and wanted to know if I'd like to join them. Of course, I said yes—the people had been so friendly that I felt instantly at home here, and it was an opportunity too good to pass up. So at 5am, I crawled out of bed and was on my merry way to Mai Kho on the Northern side of the island. The vibrant energy, friendly faces and simply spectacular sunrise were a sheer delight to run in—especially with my new tricks to hand—and by the time I got back to the hotel, the

amount of smiles shared that morning had left my heart as warm as my body. For my last afternoon, it was time for a personal training session with Stefan, a para-athlete who was so jovial that I spent my entire session with a smile on my face despite being pushed beyond my limits in what was probably the toughest training session I've ever had. Stefan's wisdom and inspiration has translated into my workouts since coming home, and fuelled me on for my last class: Spinning with Coach A. Despite not being an experienced spinner, his watchful eye kept me on point throughout the class, and by the end of it, both my brow and my bike (and the rest of me) were utterly soaked through with sweat.

SPORTING BLISS

I packed up my suitcase—almost entirely stuffed with

activewear, much to my delight—with a bittersweet smile, both deeply saddened to be leaving and full of joy at the incredible experience I had had, and the illuminating lessons I'd learned while there. It was in that moment I decided I was not only definitely coming back next year, but would like to try and do so every year thereafter. While my trip to Thanyapura was heavy on the training, it is suited for people of all fitness levels, ages and inclinations—whether you're looking to just stay a little active, want to train for a triathlon, or want something in between like I did, this is the perfect place to do it. It wasn't the scary training camp that some friends had suggested it might be—if all you want to do is lie by the pool and soak up the sun, you can do that with no judgment, and there's even dessert on the menu, and utterly delectable options at that—and I could have easily stayed for weeks longer, especially with so many beaches and islands to explore within a short driving distance and the bustling city of Phuket Town with all of it shopping, nightlife nearby. As I said to friends upon my return home, I felt like I had stumbled across a healthy little slice of the world where I truly felt like I belonged. ■

Rooms and Rates

► So, how much does it set one back to stay at sports paradise, you might wonder? Room rates at Thanyapura begin at U.S. \$115 a night. Hotel guests are welcome to attend an unlimited number fitness group activities during their stay, from yoga, Pilates and Zumba to boot camp and CrossFit classes, inclusive. If you're looking to step up your game with some one-on-one training or other group training for specific sports or programmes, such as triathlon, swimming or cycling training, rates begin at an additional U.S. \$20 per session. Find out more at Thanyapura.com