

Inner peace

If you want to look good then you need to feel good. *Jeremy Langmead* visits a Vietnamese retreat for a helping hand



I'VE NEVER, TO MY detriment, been a big holiday person. Spending so many hours at work, few of us get enough time in the houses that we work so hard to afford. So if I have some time off then I tend to want to reacquaint myself with homes, family and friends.

However, after a hectic 12 months with no sun and little downtime, I needed somewhere healthy and warm to recuperate, somewhere that would help me to reset the diet and exercise clock and learn some easy tricks to continue a better work/life balance. However, since it was also my holiday, it needed to be enjoyable rather than gruelling – instructional, yet not feel like a task.

Some friends had recommended various European clinics where you get fed dry biscuits and go to bed hungry with a headache at 8.30pm every night (one of them had swum across a freezing Austrian lake in search of a Mars bar). Others had sworn by detox retreats in Thailand where you are taught to self-administer colonics and endlessly discuss the results with your fellow patients. Oddly, neither of those were for me.

Then someone recommended a five-day “wellness immersion” retreat at one of the spa houses at the Amanoi resort in Vietnam. An Aman hotel, set on the south coast by Vietnam’s Nui Chua National Park, beats draughty Austria any day.

The two spa houses, overlooking the resort’s lake, are designed to enable you to focus entirely

on yourself (never a problem for me), with food, exercise, treatments, a pool, a hammam, a hot tub and a steam room all within your own private villa. Nothing is further than a few feet away. After your massage at the end of the day you climb the few steps to your bedroom, flop on the bed and fall straight to sleep. You don’t wake up again until the next morning when a herbal drink – tailored to your personal needs – is delivered to your door before breakfast arrives. If you do want to venture further then there’s a beach club, a spa, a gym, a yoga pavilion, two restaurants and a number of hikes into the national park on your doorstep.

This isn’t just pampering dressed as remedy. You have a consultation with your therapist – in my case, David Melladew, a licensed acupuncturist and herbalist – and they put together a programme to treat you. I wanted to de-stress, detox, sleep, eat well and learn to do some do-able, non-gym form of exercise. My course involved meditation, exercise (yoga and chi kung), diet (I was given a tailored menu), herbal remedies, massage, acupuncture and no alcohol. The truth is that, despite it looking full-on, it was delivered in such a calm, easy manner that it always felt manageable.

Obviously, being an Aman, the accommodation was absurdly luxurious in size and design, and the joy of stepping out of bed and jumping into a pool overlooking lush mountains and the serene lake made up for the bitter-tasting herbal medicine.



I would never have known that I was on a special diet – the menu wasn't restrictive, there was lots of fresh fish and it was all prepared by the hotel's celebrated chef. In fact, the hardest thing was that the food was so good that it always, in my mind, deserved to be accompanied by a delicious glass of sauvignon. I didn't give in.

The day was filled with acupuncture to work on stress and body balance, yoga and chi kung classes (I learnt to stretch bits of my body that

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The Amanoi pool overlooks the spectacular Nui Chua National Park and the South China Sea

I didn't know were there), meditation (I was worried that I would snigger, but was remarkably focused), hammam scrubs and some of the best massages I've ever had. At the end of the stay, I could easily have passed for a piece of Kobe beef.

Did a five-day treatment work? In truth, yes. I lost weight (incidentally rather than intentionally) by cutting out bread and alcohol, my aches and pains were pummeled and stretched away, I kept off email and fell asleep at 9pm each night. More importantly, rather than quickly return to the desk-bound job and pick up where I'd left off, the course had a takeaway element that was easy to continue at home. The meditation techniques that we were taught by Sascha Wagener, a martial arts expert, are quick and easy to practise every morning before work. Shyam Goyal's yoga lessons inspired me to start a course back in London and I still haven't eaten any bread. The only element that I've struggled with has been persuading my partner to give me a massage each evening. Oh, and I may be back on the wine.

The best way of summing up this programme is with the words of my resort therapist, David Melladew. He pointed out that we often look at pictures of hotel resorts or holidays and think to ourselves: "I want to feel how that looks." Google pictures of the Amanoi. That's how I felt. *Healing Holidays* (thealingholidays.co.uk; 020 7135 2436) offers a five-night stay at Amanoi in a spa house, from £6,399 per person sharing including flights, transfers, accommodation on a full-board basis, a wellness consultation on arrival and departure, a five-day itinerary of treatments, specialist sessions and group sessions