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INSIDER REPORTS ON THE BEST PLACES TO BED DOWN. EDITED BY ISSY VON SIMSON

THERE'S A NEW CONTENDER
FOR THE TITLE OF ASIA'S
MOST RESULTS-DRIVEN SPA.
BUT DOES THE TOP-LEVEL
MEDICAL-GRADE ETHOS
JUSTIFY THE EXPENSE?

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THE LOBBY AT RAKXA ON BANG KRACHAO ISLAND, NEAR BANGKOK



THE HOT, HUMID AIR SMELLS OF TOM YUM. Wafts of lemongrass, galangal and kaffir lime. Water drips from the ceiling. After a run through the jungle and a chakra-balancing marma massage, I am now bouncing between an infrared sauna, vitality pool and herbal steam room. The restlessness of the city has left my muscles, but through the foggy window I still see, behind a lagoon, palm trees and strips of green, Bangkok's indomitable skyline.

A bold addition to Thailand's already star-studded spa scene, Rakxa has an urban postcode that perhaps doesn't instantly signal rest and relaxation. Not like the tropical locales of its trailblazing peers, the Chiva-Soms and the Kamalayas with their soothing ocean views and lush surroundings. But they don't have the trump card of this fully integrative retreat: serious medical back-up from the country's renowned Bumrungrad International Hospital.

It was a brush with cancer that prompted managing director Dusadee Tancharoen to dive deep into preventive treatments. Attributing her condition to the high-stress lifestyle that came with heading up a real-estate development firm, she set out to restore balance to her life. She studied hormone theory and DNA analysis, took nutrition and reiki classes and met fitness professionals to research corrective training regimes, which ultimately led her to the idea for Rakxa as a way to help others find the best medical and alternative-health expertise in one place.

The turbo-powered offering feels like a Lanserhof warmed up with the healing prowess of Vana or Ananda in the Himalayas. A one-stop, cure-all destination delivering quick fixes while still drawing on ancient methods for lasting change. It's not a place

Other injections include bespoke vitamin cocktails and Botox or fillers, if you're up for that. Soft-spoken staff make recommendations for lifestyle changes at check-out and will send you home with a month's worth of relevant supplements.

But just as much consideration has been put into the holistic side of things: yin-yang-balancing Chinese medicine, crystal-healing sessions (that's as spiritual as it gets here), and Ayurvedic Elakizhi oil massages that leave my mind mellow and my body smelling of coconut and honey. The traditional Thai treatments are a particular point of pride: going far beyond the usual, Tok Sen hammer massages and medicinal herb-burning are performed by the capable hands of a doctor whose ancestors practised at the court of King Rama II. Some of the other therapists, all compassionate and caring, were cherry-picked from leading names around Asia (rumour has it that a rival owner was so upset about one of his consultants moving he needed hospitalisation to calm down).

Rakxa's medical edges have been cleverly disguised, making it feel more like a hotel than a hospital extension, with no clinical whites but lots of warm wood and brushes of indigo, antiques and weathered earthenware. Interior designer Vichada 'Dao' Sitakalin, who also worked on Raya Heritage hotel in Chiang Mai, travelled around the country to collect old window shutters and wicker-work. The 60 villas, jutting out from private gardens, follow a similar theme: bright, natural-hued and connected by *sois* (side streets) lined with flowers.

The food makes up the final piece of the puzzle. Focusing on a balanced gut as the foundation of a healthy body and mind,

FEW OTHER THAI RETREATS START THEIR PROGRAMMES QUITE SO ACADEMICALLY WITH BLOOD AND HORMONE TESTS, TRANSLATING VAGUE COMPLAINTS INTO ACTIONABLE DATA

for lolling by the pool but for putting in the work – and really significant funds – to get your health back on track. And for a spot so close to the notoriously un-green capital – Bangkok proper is only a short river-hop away – its setting on a verdant island, in the horseshoe bend of the Chao Phraya river, is an agreeable compromise.

Wellness is approached like a science here. That's not to say its competitors are any less devoted, but unless you specifically request it, few other Thai spas start their programmes quite so academically with blood tests and hormone screenings, translating vague complaints of fatigue and nagging ailments into actionable data. The introductory mindfulness course involves a clip-on wire connecting my earlobe to a computer for a full breathing analysis. At the medi-gym – a temple to rehabilitative training overseen by a former orthopaedic surgeon – athlete-grade equipment measures everything from posture to muscular imbalances. It's this attention to the bodily nitty-gritty, combined with the initial tell-all consultation, that results in fine-tuned three- to 14-day plans addressing issues including weight management and destressing. Or, in my case, feeling flat but without symptoms that would warrant a GP visit.

There's some heavy artillery to combat aches and misalignment, often with near-instant, show-me-the-money results. The hi-tech VitalLife clinic is fitted with a hyperbaric chamber, cryosauna and colon-cleansing machinery. A neon-glowing laser Weberneedle straight out of sci-fi is inserted into my arm, purportedly increasing blood flow on a molecular level, though in this particular case I'm not sure I felt any different afterwards.

German chef Kien Wagner, formerly at Shinta Mani Wild in Cambodia, uses unprocessed, anti-inflammatory ingredients. Forget about sugar or dairy. Instead, there's lots of pickling and fermentation (gluten-free breads, kombuchas), matched with herbal infusions blended by a sommelier in a dedicated tea lounge. But unless you are on a liquid fast or weight-loss course, you would hardly notice the diet part: portion sizes feel unrestricted and flavours far from depriving. Plus, with a nutritionist making sure doctors and chefs work in sync, the personalised menus top up the exact micronutrients your body is lacking. For me, hopelessly low on amino acids, that meant meat-heavy mains – duck breast with curry and couscous, massaman lamb with quinoa – and a concerned waiter nudging me towards an extra order of poached chicken to top my breakfast salad.

With Thailand still inaccessible to most travellers, at the moment this place is the domain of locals hiding their crow's feet behind oversized sunglasses. Suited-up businessmen, for whom the £12,200 yearly membership fee is nothing to balk at, come here for a pick-me-up on days off. Eventually, it hopes to attract more than half of its guests from overseas. The top-notch treatments are there. The thoughtful hospitality is present. But only time will tell if Rakxa offers enough to start poaching from Chiva-Som's pot. 📍

BOOK IT Healing Holidays (+44 20 3031 3838; healingholidays.com) offers a three-night Immunity Booster programme from £5,155 per person, full board, including flights, transfers and treatments

Opposite, clockwise from top left: superfood salad with courgettes, garden vegetables and edible petals; bedroom; wooden shutters and stools; hydrotherapy lounge; lagoon-side pool; the holistic Jai centre; citrus fruit and herbs used in Ayurvedic treatments; floral display in a bedroom; lotus flowers. All at Rakxa