

Held captive by healing hands

By Julie Miller

Julie Miller discovers you don't have to visit a luxury resort to get a five-star massage in Thailand.

If there's one sector of the tourist industry seemingly impervious to the global economic downturn, it's the luxury spa.

In these hallowed sanctums of fluffy robes, scented oils, whale songs and tinkling water features, tough times do not exist. Economies may be plummeting around them; there may even be military coups, raging war and abject poverty on their doorsteps. But in a five-star spa, there is only one currency: extremely expensive.

In all my travels, I am yet to see a resort spa offer a last-minute discount, bargain-basement deal or even happy hour - a spa menu remains resiliently fixed, with nary a variation to reflect the outside environment.

Case in point: the spa at the Four Seasons Chiang Mai, voted the World's Best Spa by the readers of Conde Nast Traveller (Britain) in 2007. In this undeniably exquisite oasis, a 90-minute Thai massage will set you back 4300 baht (\$190). Meanwhile, down the road in the local village, the same treatment can be negotiated for about 300 baht, or \$13.

The difference? Apart from the ambience, standard of cleanliness and possibly the qualifications of the therapist, nothing.

In the Land of Smiles, a Thai massage is a Thai massage, with very few variations to the theme. This age-old tradition, introduced to Thailand in the 5th century BC, is a physical, strong massage that utilises yoga-like stretches and pressure to energy meridians using the thumbs, elbows, palms, feet and knees. It is traditionally practised fully clothed on a floor mat, without the use of lotions or oils.

Originally performed by Buddhist monks, these days it is largely the domain of women servicing the tourist industry. Although sullied by association with the sex trade, most Thai massage establishments are legitimate and above board, providing a steady income to women who might otherwise be forced into less honourable professions.

In the northern city of Chiang Mai, you can get a massage on every street corner. During the Sunday Walking Street Market, Western tourists recline blissfully on plastic chairs, watching the world pass by as they indulge in a 60 baht foot massage, while those undergoing full body massages lie prone on mats, legs stretched above their ears and oblivious to the fact they are providing fodder for curious photographers.

It's a healthy, symbiotic relationship - happy, relaxed tourists getting a cheap rub-down and happy therapists, grateful to be earning a decent income.

Although more visible in the cities, the massage industry is providing an escape from poverty in rural parts of northern Thailand. In the tiny village of Mungkut in the Mae Taeng Valley,

an hour north of Chiang Mai, the local women recently received massage training through the University of Chiang Mai. They now proudly display their certificates at the nearby tourist attraction, Elephant Nature Park, where they offer massages to weary volunteers who've spent the day scooping poop and washing three-tonne pachyderms.

Unlike the ethereal silence of a resort spa, these evening massage sessions are social events. As my masseuse leant, bent and contorted my body into seemingly impossible positions, she was inevitably chatting with the neighbouring therapist.

It's a unique cultural exchange - during my nightly massage here (at 120 baht an hour, why not?) I was taught the Thai words for "fine" (sabai), "harder" (nak nak) and "ouch" (jep).

If there was one place I wished my Thai language skills extended beyond massage terminology, it was at the Chiang Mai Women's Prison. Here, convicted felons - beautiful young women locked up for petty theft or drug crimes - have been taught the art of massage, with one-hour sessions offered to tourists for 180 baht. Not only have the girls learnt a valuable commercial skill but the money they earn goes directly into an account they can access on release, giving them the chance of a fresh start on the outside.

Chiang Mai prison spa is surprisingly unimposing, located in a brick building adjoining the main prison complex. Massages are conducted in a single air-conditioned room, stripped of character by stark fluorescent lighting and with no visible signs of security.

After checking in at reception, I was handed a pair of light blue wraparound pyjamas, directed to a back room to change, then led back to a bare mattress covered with a towel, clutching my handbag harder than necessary.

What ensued was the best massage I have ever had in Thailand - firm, decisive and intuitive. It was also one of the most fascinating hours I have ever spent, gleaning as much information from the tiny slip of a thing pounding my body as our limited language skills allowed.

Nat, I soon discovered, had just started an 18-month sentence for selling drugs; her friend Lek, working on a client beside me, had just two months to serve before being released. While excited about the prospect of freedom, the girls were sad they wouldn't be able to attend the Loy Krathong festival that night. They also told me they hoped to find work as masseuses when they were released.

With impeccable technique, an increasing grasp of the English language (thanks to classes held in the prison) and a charming manner, these girls are certainly looking at a brighter future, thanks to the rehabilitation program they are undergoing.

From a tourist's perspective, it is also gratifying knowing your fees go directly to the person administering the treatment; and I left feeling as warm and fuzzy inside as I did stretched, invigorated and healed on the outside. As the ad goes ... priceless.