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## Spirituality Tourism in Thailand

By Dan Eldridge



Meditate with monks in a monastery, or increase your karma with a lemon juice fast. Spirituality seekers are spoilt for choice in Thailand: here's a guide to the best rests.

Every year thousands of tourists head to Thailand for a dose of Buddhist spirituality and liberal open-mindedness. But many opportunities for travellers on the Thai trail to Nirvana go unadvertised and unnoticed. We've compiled this list of suggested meditation and alternative health retreats as something of a print 'n' save mini-guide.

### **ALTERNATIVE HEALTH RESORTS**

#### **[The Sanctuary, Ko Pha-Ngan](#)**

Tucked into a postcard-perfect bay and almost engulfed by the surrounding jungle, the non-traditional healing centre known as the Sanctuary rests upon the largely undeveloped southern island of Ko Pha-Ngan. Many of the Sanctuary's guests come specifically to spend time in the Detox & Wellness Centre, a non-eating area where the removal of toxins from the body is the only item on the menu. Visitors, or 'cleansers', as they're known here, have a wide variety of scheduled events to choose from - everything from sungazing to pilates to shamanic healing. Colonic and liver cleansing programmes last anywhere from one to seven days. And should you happen to encounter your soulmate during, say, an Iyengar yoga session, the Sanctuary can even organise a traditional Buddhist wedding ceremony.

### **Samui Dharma Healing Center, Ko Samui**

Interested in numerology or hypnotherapy? Care to take a Chi Gung class? Aqua detox?

Founded in 1998, the Samui Dharma Healing Center was originally a language school where spiritual counselling and water movement were also taught. These days, the main activity is an intense diet known as an elimination fast. The process involves ingesting a Chinese herbal formula that acts to soften the body's toxins. Twice daily, fasters give those toxins a helping hand by self-administering a caffeinated colonic irrigation (also known as a coffee enema). Twenty classes are also offered; most teach participants how to maintain their newfound healthy lifestyle after returning home.

### **The Spa Samui, Ko Samui**

This is the Samui location of a Thai-based chain of health resorts, all of them reportedly well-managed. (There are other branches in Ko Chang and Chiang Mai.) The Spa's American founder, Guy Hopkins, likes to call his business 'a family-run oasis for self-improvement', although this collection of body- and mind-improvement resorts are also known for their high-quality vegetarian and raw food, meditation, yoga and massage. The Spa especially stands out because of the sheer number of courses and activities on offer. Interested in numerology or hypnotherapy? Care to take a Chi Gung class? Aqua detox? Even if you aren't the macrobiotic-and-Bikram yoga type, consider checking out the Spa's website to read about its [Five Habit System to Longevity](#).

### **Health Oasis Resort, Ko Samui**

Health Oasis is a good example of a slightly higher-end Samui resort and a smart choice for families travelling with children. Its wide array of educational courses means it's also recommended for anyone more interested in relaxation than, say, starvation. Of course, like many of Samui's health centres, fasting and colon cleansing are featured activities, but Thai cooking classes can also be booked, as well as training courses in yoga, reiki and meditation. There are specific events for children, a standard free-weight gym and a large selection of takeaway health products.

## **MEDITATION RETREATS**

### **Wat Suan Dok, Chiang Mai**

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Formerly known by backpackers primarily for its Monk Chat programme, Wat Suan Dok is now sponsoring a two-day, free-of-charge meditation retreat - certainly one of the most unusual ways to spend a Tuesday night in Chiang Mai. The retreat begins every Tuesday at 2:30pm with a brief series of lectures explaining the basics of Buddhist thought. Following three hours of meditation and an early bed call,

participants rise at 5am the next morning to the sound of a gong. More meditation, chanting, and even alms-giving follow; the retreat ends that day at 1:30pm. The retreat is understandably popular, so call the temple (tel: 0 5327 8967) well in advance to book.

To participate in Wat Suan Dok's **Monk Chat**, during which foreigners are welcome to speak with monks and novices about nearly every aspect of their lives, simply arrive at the temple a few minutes before its 5pm start time on any Monday, Wednesday or Friday. Monks chat freely until 7pm.

### **Wat Kow Tahm, Ko Pha-Ngan**

Recommended only for experienced meditators or those with extreme powers of mental discipline, the Mountain Cave Monastery (AKA Wat Kow Tahm) offers a virtual bootcamp of compassionate mental development. The Monastery is owned and operated by Rosemary and Steve Weissman, a couple who have been meditating for roughly 35 years. The enhancement of compassion and understanding is a particular passion of Steve's, although the 10-, 19-, and 20-day retreats explore all manner of Buddhist practice. To assure that participants are achieving their desired goals, all retreat-goers are interviewed three times throughout the meditation experience.