

# Retreat and recharge

A three-day wellness getaway helps **Alexandra Wong** turbo charge her way to positive transformation and a healthier lifestyle.

PHOTOS LAW SOO PHYE



**I**f anybody needs hope – and that’s what 21st century wellness centres are really peddling – it’s me. I’ve developed spare tyres and my once-oily skin is now, horror of horrors, flaking from dryness. It’s not just the outward physical signs. Stressed out from battling deadlines and traffic jams my energy levels have dipped since hitting my 30s. Recapturing my 18-year-old figure is out of the question – I know that – but I have not lost the will to put myself back on track. Or have I?

As I’m pondering the state of my wellbeing (or a lack thereof) at the Jentayu Lobby of The Andaman in Langkawi, a stunning woman advances down the lobby in my direction. Her jacket and bikini top reveal a trim, tanned figure; her smiling face glows with an inner radiance that could only come courtesy of some pampering. Now that’s one fine-looking ambassador, I think, extending my hand to Kamila Delart, Spa & Wellness Director and my host during this V Integrated Wellness (VIW) programme.

“What would you like to do today?” Her opening question catches me by surprise. She continues, “Although we already have your programme outlined, I want you to relax, so I’m not going to pounce on you and put you on a treadmill straight away!”



(Facing page) One of the five Rainforest Villas; (this page clockwise from right) gemstone discs are used in selected treatments; bamboo and ginseng polish; drifting into an ocean of bliss; the succulent ginger-scented steamed sea bass



## Health on a plate

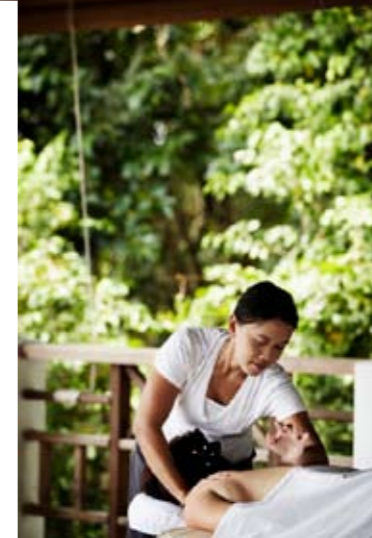
Secretly relieved that I would not be at the mercy of some New Age drill sergeant, we walk down to the Beach Bar, one of the resort’s four restaurants, to discuss my itinerary over lunch.

In line with its wellness agenda, the V Healthy Cuisine is available at all the restaurants. Guests can request for tailor-made menus according to their health goals, but generally, the Healthy Cuisine aims to shift the dietary mix from acidic (one that’s heavy in red meats and dairy products) to alkaline (one that emphasises vegetables and fruits).

Acidic food makes digestion difficult and the liver work harder.

It is evident from the menu – which features an interesting mix of locally and overseas-sourced ingredients – that the culinary team demonstrates a keen interest in keeping to the local food culture. Lime tofu cheesecake with honey oat crumble, or chilled red pepper soup with fennel and mango puree?

Though intrigued, my expectations are not high; previous encounters with ‘spa cuisine’ have been bland and unmemorable. I go with Kamila’s favourite: A ginger-scented steamed sea bass with celeriac puree. To my delight, my first bite reveals juicy, melt-in-your-mouth, ocean-fresh fish. Feeling inspired, I request for the seared sea scallops with marinated wild mushrooms, which turns out to be good too. Okay, I concede to a beaming Kamila, maybe eating healthy need not be such an ordeal after all.



## Healing hands

Come afternoon, I’m off for my first pampering session at the V Botanical Spa, situated at the end of a cobblestone path that winds past and under some of the island’s oldest and largest trees.

The north-west tip of Langkawi where The Andaman is located – between Mat Chinchang Mountains and Datai Bay beach – is one of its most untouched areas, and the spa makes full use of this natural bounty. The Botanical Spa contains only five open-air Rainforest Villas, making this a truly exclusive getaway. Befitting its namesake, each villa rises from wild jungle to overlook Datai Bay, commanding stunning views of island-speckled clear

waters. A stone-walled, wooden-fenced compound ensures privacy while open-air rain showers enhance the sense of communion with nature.

After a refreshing welcome drink of ginger and lemongrass tea intended to improve digestion, circulation and unwind my belly, my therapist administers a relaxing aromatherapy foot polish to prep me for my first treatment.

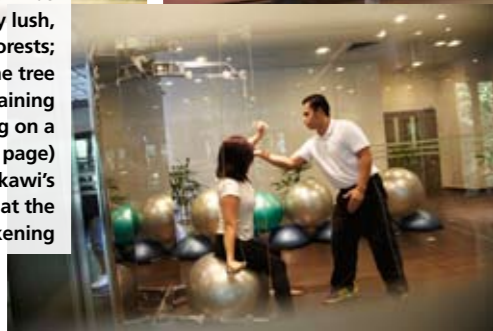
Any spa worth its salt scrub will rub out tension and cleanse away your cares. My bamboo and ginseng polish goes further. “The salt-and-silica contents in the bamboo fibres will remove dead surface cells from your skin and the ginseng extracts will boost metabolism and enhance your skin tone,” my therapist explains. “So your skin will glow after this.”

Her hands are firm but not aggressive, putting to rest any fears that I will emerge with red, raw, angry skin (as has happened before). The next session, the highly anticipated

## Wellbeing



(Clockwise from top) Andaman's villas are fringed by lush, ancient rainforests; attempting the tree pose; weight training while balancing on a Fitball; (facing page) study Langkawi's bountiful nature at the Rainforest Awakening



### Wealth of wellness

V Integrated Wellness ([www.vintegratedwellness.com](http://www.vintegratedwellness.com)) runs a suite of Core Wellness Programmes which are conducted at the Botanical Spa. Designed to deliver results, the programmes comprise carefully selected and mutually complementary treatments and services that aim to help you reach a state of complete wellbeing. All Core Wellness Programmes – choose from Detox, Anti-Aging, Deep Relaxation, Vitality, Soul Connection – are designed for the duration of five days/four nights (please check for the latest promotions). Accommodation and breakfast are charged separately. An array of wellness journeys, bathing ceremonies and holistic therapies rounds off the menu.

Alternatively, pick from the extensive a la carte menu. A must-try is the Holistic Gemstone Facial, which capitalises on the unique healing properties of precious stones: Jade to drain toxins from facial tissues, jasper to improve circulation, aventurine to calm breakouts, obsidian to even out skin tone, and unakite to regenerate skin.

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Tel +604 959 1088 [www.theandaman.com](http://www.theandaman.com)

### A natural connection

As spas evolve from sanctuaries of physical relief to sanctums of mental restoration, VIW aims to go beyond offering indulgent pleasures in a salubrious setting. It hopes to inspire individuals to live a life in tune with one's spirit, nature, community and purpose. Their Core Wellness Programmes typically include fitness (body and mind) activities and nature walks, such as the Rainforest Awakening I am attending the next morning.

Conducted by naturalists from nature tour specialist Junglewalla ([www.junglewalla.com](http://www.junglewalla.com)), the walks are hugely popular because The Andaman is one of the most bio-diverse parts of Langkawi; flying lemurs, long-tailed macaques and monitor lizards live among the dense tangle of strangler figs, meranti and bamboo trees. The guides' infectious passion and charisma also play a big part in the programme's popularity.

A few feet along the curving incline up to the spa, our designated leader, Francis Samuel, points out the multi-purpose Tongkat Ali plant. "It is used by body builders, and is an aphrodisiac as well. When you mix it in a drink, your testosterone levels will increase by 400% ... That's one powerful man!"

Peals of laughter follow, but the best punchline is yet to come. "If a woman drinks it ..." Francis pauses suspensefully, "... she will grow a beard!" As the laughter dies down, he adds, "It's available in many places in Malaysia. Just ask for the Tongkat Ali drink at any coffee shop or roadside stall where it is infused into coffee."

Francis, it seems, has an interesting backstory for every kind of indigenous flora and fauna encountered along the way. At the end of the 1.5 hours, it's not just the foreigners who have developed a newfound appreciation for Malaysia's rich natural bounty.

### Total wellbeing

I am reminded of what Kamila said earlier about wellbeing being a holistic process. "The whole idea here is to set people

on the path to achieving balance on a spiritual and physical level. Let's be honest – you are not going to change overnight, or even in three days. What we do hope to do is to instill a heightened sense of awareness of yourself and the world around you, the realisation that every action counts. Every rich meal you indulge in, every gym class you skip, every cup of coffee you drink – it all adds up."

Her words ring in my mind when I emerge breathless from my introductory fitness session. It takes place in probably the most beautiful gym I've seen – a glassed-in workout area under a canopy of towering tropical trees – but I'm too winded to appreciate the surroundings fully. A rudimentary workout at the Kinesis Wall (a groundbreaking fitness machine which integrates the cardiovascular, strength and flexibility components of exercise and burns up to 30% more calories compared to conventional training) leaves me huffing and puffing. During yoga, two guests at least twice my age successfully hold the tricky tree pose for all eight counts, while I struggle to even get into position. Oh yeah, those months of zero exercise and uncontrolled bingeing



have added up all right!

When it's time to leave this sanctuary and head home, I have warm fuzzy memories... and more significantly, softer, more supple skin. I feel re-energised, refreshed and rejuvenated. Who wouldn't, after three days and two nights of blissful pampering in a luxurious resort?

The real test begins when I get home, and determined not to slip back into old habits, one of the first things I do is to announce a 100-day walking plan on Facebook to help me reach my target weight by my birthday. For insurance, I ask

a friend to SMS a wake-up call every morning, "Time for your walk – 9.9lb to go!"

As I type this, I'm sipping a celery-green-apple-bittergourd-cucumber detoxifying drink. In the three days at Andaman, I have made more progress than I've done in years, and I am determined to build on what I have learnt. ☑



Malaysia Airlines community airline, Firefly, flies nonstop from Subang (SZB) to Langkawi (LGK)