



Clockwise from top left: **A statue at Samahita Retreat;**
the Wellness Sanctuary at Kamalaya Koh Samui;
yoga on the beach at Kamalaya Koh Samui;
one of Koh Samui's idyllic beaches;
a yoga class at Samahita Retreat;
the Yoga Pavilion at Kamalaya Koh Samui

PHOTOGRAPH: MICHELE FALZONE/COPEIS

View

Why we travel ★ Feeding fussy kids on holiday



TAKE A YOGA RETREAT ON KOH SAMUI

WELLNESS The idyllic Thai island is home to some of the best yoga centres in the world. **Insiya Rasiwala-Finn** presents her top five

With its azure sea and powdery white beaches, Koh Samui fulfils all the clichés of a picture-perfect paradise. And while these obvious charms continue to draw sun-seekers of all tastes and budgets, a different type of tourist is also being drawn to the island. Echoing the Buddhist monks who travelled to Koh Samui to meditate in caves and on clifftops in ancient times, a new generation of spiritual seekers is using the island as a place to practise yoga and retreat from the stress of everyday life. You'll find them in low-key lodges hidden away in forests and down jungle paths, at one of Koh Samui's award-winning yoga and wellness centres. With retreats for everyone from serious practitioners to yoga virgins—and with plenty to offer non-yogi partners, too—they provide the perfect setting for a mind, body and soul overhaul. Here are our five favourite hideaways on the island.

THE CLASSIC RETREAT: **ABSOLUTE SANCTUARY**

The grande dame of yoga and detox centres on Koh Samui, **ABSOLUTE SANCTUARY**'s Moroccan-inspired aesthetic is a luxurious foil to some serious wellness credentials. Choose from five-, seven- or 10-day holidays that combine yoga, healthy vegetarian cuisine, and spa and detox treatments (colonics are a house speciality). The centre has jungle, pool and ocean yoga studios and conducts at least three yoga classes each day—often taken by world-renowned teachers including Hong Kong based 'teacher of teachers' Michel Besnard, who returns to the resort year after year. Your choices include **ABSOLUTE**'s special hot yoga (the sweating will aid your detox regime); yin (super-gentle); hatha; or the more dynamic vinyasa, power flow and ashtanga styles. For that extra burn, try a group fitness class—afterwards you'll probably →





want to stretch out by the pool and do 'absolutely' nothing. (www.absolutesanctuary.com) **From THB47,716 (₹84,500) per person for a five-night package, including yoga classes, meals and use of spa facilities**

THE BOUTIQUE RETREAT: SAMAHITA RETREAT

Tucked away on Koh Samui's unspoiled southern shore, Samahita Retreat combines the soulful tranquillity of a yoga ashram with the creature comforts of a boutique resort. Featured in the Taschen book, *Great Yoga Retreats*, the centre was founded in 2003 by New York yoga teacher Paul Dallaghan and his Thai-American wife Jutima, and boasts an enviable ocean-side location and meticulous eco-planning (solar panels heat water; bathrooms are stocked with biodegradable toiletries). Alongside its yoga programmes, Samahita Retreat offers a range of supportive therapies such as ayurvedic and Thai massage, reiki and reflexology. Miami-based yoga teacher Kino MacGregor teaches a popular ashtanga yoga programme here and is effusive

about the resort: "More than a yoga retreat, Samahita is a paradise where travellers and yoga students from all over the world come to heal their bodies and minds." Ashtanga too much for you? Choose the 'simple balanced living' retreat for some gentle re-balancing, or the more intensive 'de-stress programme' as a respite from a high-powered lifestyle, with classical hatha yoga, coupled with breath-work to soothe overworked adrenal glands. (www.yoga-thailand.com) **From THB3,860 (₹6,840) per night per person for a shared room, including meals and twice-daily yoga sessions**

THE DELUXE RETREAT: KAMALAYA KOH SAMUI

Hidden in the lush grounds of this yoga resort and spa is an ancient Buddhist meditation cave, which is said to form the centre's spiritual core. An understanding of Eastern wellness philosophy runs throughout Kamalaya Koh Samui, which was founded in 2005 by John and Karina Stewart, a dynamic Canadian-American couple who have spent decades deepening their

Above, from left: Wok-steamed mixed vegetables with shiitake mushrooms at Kamalaya Koh Samui; the pool at Samahita Retreat. Below: Beach yoga at Kamalaya Koh Samui

knowledge of yoga, wellness and Eastern holistic medicine. The Personal Yoga Synergy retreat features private one-on-one yoga sessions with asana, breathing and meditation practice, along with complementary spa therapies including ayurveda and traditional Chinese medicine. Three-, five- and seven-night programmes can all be customised according to your requirements. Book a session with a visiting healer, enjoy the healthy, light cuisine and sweat out any remaining toxins in the property's steam cavern. Recently lauded as Destination Spa of the Year (Asia and Australia) by the World Spa awards, the property was featured on the cover of *Great Yoga Retreats*. British yoga teacher Lara Baumann, who happened to be the cover model, regularly teaches at Kamalaya and cites the centre as 'one of the most exquisite, relaxing and nurturing places' she has taught at.

(www.kamalaya.com) **From THB10,270 (₹18,190) per night per person, including meals and yoga**

THE PERSONALISED RETREAT: NATURAL HIGH RETREAT

Tucked away in Thong Krut, a small fishing village in southern Koh Samui, Natural High Retreat's location is as peaceful and idyllic as it →





gets. The lobby is housed in a restored 100-year-old Thai teak building, while accommodation is in private villas or tree houses surrounded by tropical greenery. Established in 2003, Natural High is known for its seven-day Cleansing Fast, an intensive detox programme with a strict liquid diet, twice daily enemas, fresh juices, therapeutic massage and natural herbal steam treatments. Supporting you in your detox are daily Iyengar yoga classes by Koh Samui resident Mike Cooper. Until September 2012, guests will also have the opportunity to work with Martin Garret, a life coach, personal trainer and massage therapist from Los Angeles, who counts various celebrities—including Oprah Winfrey—amongst his clients. The centre can also tailor bespoke detox programmes according to specific health concerns. With a supportive team on hand, Natural High is the place to come for a personalised wellness renewal in a peaceful, idyllic and private setting. (www.naturalhighretreats.com) **From THB47,784 (₹84,620) per person for a seven-day detox programme, which includes meals and yoga sessions**

THE FIVE-STAR RETREAT: **SIX SENSES SAMUI**

Scattered across 20 luxuriant acres on Koh Samui's northern tip, Six Senses' stylishly appointed cliffside villas have private infinity pools and Thai salas, or open pavilions—perfect for some individual yoga practice. The resort's most popular retreat is its three-day yoga programme—led by resident physician and yoga expert, Dr Serge Landrieu—which begins with a lifestyle evaluation and includes daily two-hour spa treatments, as well as spa cuisine to boost your immunity and help you detox. Complimentary Pilates and yoga classes are available to guests each day—the latter led by Landrieu himself. With a personal butler to ensure your juice contains just the right amount of spirulina, this programme feels anything but gruelling. If you're looking for a yoga retreat in an über-luxurious setting, this is the one to book. (www.sixsenses.com) **From THB19,375 (₹34,310) per night per person, including breakfast and yoga sessions** 📍

For a destination guide to Koh Samui,

www.cntraveller.in 🖱️

● See What to Pack, page 190

Above: The main pool at Six Senses Samui

HOW TO CHOOSE A YOGA RETREAT



With the dazzling variety of yoga retreats on offer, picking your ideal getaway can be a challenge, says wellness expert **Insiya Rasiwala-Finn**. Retreats run at various price-points, feature different styles, and range from soothing to vigorous. So how to make sure you experience a week of bliss, rather than a 'What am I doing here' crisis? Here are her tips for finding the right retreat:

LOCATION: The first step is deciding where you want to go. Do you crave a beachside idyll, or clear mountain air? Perhaps you're looking to combine yoga with culture in Istanbul or Marrakech? Picture yourself in your ideal setting, then Google away.

YOGA: How much yoga do you want—and what style? How much can your body handle? Some retreats are designed for die-hard yogis (think three-hour yoga sessions, twice daily) while at others, yoga is just one of a range of activities on offer. As for style, is it a vigorous practice like power flow or ashtanga you crave, or a gentler one, such as hatha or yin?

PEOPLE: Are you hoping to meet like-minded people and make new friends, or do you just want to be left alone? Ask a few questions about the atmosphere at the retreat before you book—and look at the schedule. If you see silent meditation till noon each day, you can safely assume that socialising is not a priority.

TEACHING: Research is important here. If you don't know the teacher, ask the centre about their experience and approach. All the comforts of a luxurious retreat won't compensate for a yoga teacher you don't connect with.

FACILITIES: From budget to eco-chic to luxe, choose what works for you. Save money by sharing a double room (most retreats offer shared accommodation) or ask if you can bring a non-yogi partner at a reduced rate. Be sure to check if meals are included, and what type of food is served.