

HIT REFRESH

Take time out to recharge your batteries. Our round-up of spas offer treatments from high-tech cryotherapy to traditional hay baths.



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Very little is allowed to distract. Music plays second fiddle to birdsong



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1. Inside The Rakxa Wellness & Medical Retreat
2. The riverside spa is 45 minutes from Bangkok
3. Healthy food
4. Outdoor shower
5. Indoor pool
6. Gazing at greenery is encouraged
7. Earthy tones

glimpse of where the entire spa industry is heading. Blood is taken on site by “anti-ageing” doctors and whisked off to the Bumrungrad International Hospital laboratory for analysis of hormone levels and micronutrients, as well as glucose and cholesterol. Three days later, guests can be getting injections to help with weight loss or tailored supplements to aid sleep.

Bangkok has long been a favoured destination for annual medicals. Rakxa’s sales pitch is that it’s able to treat any deficiencies or imbalances before guests go home. At no point, though, does it feel like a hospital. Even when the treatments involve sitting in a hyperbaric oxygen chamber rather than lying on a massage table, or standing in a cryo-freezer instead of lounging by the pool, these expensive high-tech machines are wrapped inside the soothing skin of a resort-style hotel and delivered with a generous dose of Thailand’s famed hospitality. Rakxa has raised the bar for urban spas. — JCH
rakxawellness.com



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1.

Best urban getaway
The Rakxa Wellness & Medical Retreat,
Thailand

Escaping city life in Bangkok used to require an actual getaway, to somewhere remote in the mountains or next to the coast – not any more. The Rakxa Wellness & Medical Retreat provides overworked executives with a chance to recharge and reconnect with nature without making a huge dent in the calendar or requiring a bumpy afternoon in the back of a car. And for guests from out of town, the 45-minute drive to the retreat on a tree-covered peninsula known as Bangkok’s green lung, is as close to the arrivals hall at Suvarnabhumi Airport as any of the hotels in downtown Sathorn or Sukhumvit. It’s convenient enough to fly in for a three-day detox or tack onto a business trip.

Rakxa (pronounced “rak-sa”) opened at the end of 2020. The retreat’s generous estate occupies a riverside spot just south of the Thai capital – Bangkok genuinely feels a million miles away. Everything about Rakxa’s design and layout, starting from the first glimpse of the centrepiece lagoon, encourages tired and overstimulated eyes to gaze out at the surrounding greenery; meanwhile very little is allowed to distract. Music plays second fiddle to birdsong and there are no overpowering smells or

artificial spa scents wafting over the breeze. Earthy colour tones blend the architecture into the background and even the Jim Thompson fabrics that decorate the villas are muted and subtle.

There are 60 villas in total and privacy is emphasised over people-watching. Bicycles are provided for every guest (along with a map) and there is ample space to pedal from room to restaurant, treatment room to tea pavilion. The first stop, though, is a check-in with a wellness co-ordinator to plan an itinerary. “We are an integrated wellness retreat, not a spa,” Aum tells *Konfekt*. A nurse by profession, retrained in the language of energy and balance, she ends her health survey with a surprise question about claustrophobia (some of the high-tech medical machines can get pretty snug).

Though Rakxa’s comprehensive menu can be a little overwhelming at first, it essentially breaks down into three pillars: physical fitness, traditional spa treatments and medical procedures. Rakxa has partnered with Bangkok’s best private hospital and the VitalLife clinic offers a

PHOTOGRAPHER: Natthawatt Theja

2.

Best for an indulgent detox
Villa Stéphanie, Baden-Baden

Established the 19th century and named after Stéphanie de Beauharnais, the grand duchess of Baden and adopted daughter of Napoleon I, this 15-room villa feels more like a sumptuous retreat fit for an aristocrat than a wellness centre.

That's partly down to its owners, the grand hotel Brenners Park, who have leant the villa its excellent cuisine and five-star service. But while there are no shortages of starched linen and well-mixed drinks on offer, the villa also offers state-of-the-art medical care.

"You won't notice any doctors here," says Timo Maier, head of spa. "We work with doctors but they have their treatment rooms in the adjacent Haus Julius. That's why our guests don't see any white coats in the spa. This makes for a relaxed atmosphere." Nature is in abundance too, even in the treatment rooms, which have a view of the extensive grounds and the Black Forest beyond. "It's a true haven and no car noise can be heard, which our guests really appreciate," Maier says of the location. Those who want to relax completely can even activate a digital detox in their hotel room at the touch of a button. This shields all radiation through metal mesh built into

the walls and takes you offline. Treatments in the spa range from deep-tissue massage to craniosacral therapy and reiki. *Konfekt* tries a full-body therapy developed by German skincare brand Augustinus Bader. (The brand's patented technology was developed by Professor Bader, head of stem-cell research at the University of Leipzig, to support the skin's regenerative process.) Our hour-and-a-half ritual starts with a fine sea salt and oil body peel before a deep-acting fascia massage activates tissue metabolism and stimulates cell repair.

Breakfast is taken in Le Salon at Villa Stéphanie, where guests are served a menu that reflects their personal nutrition programme, such as detox or weight loss. On the morning we visit, two guests choose porridge with wild berries and nuts, while a third tries the vegan Villa Stéphanie bowl with rice, avocado, edamame and wasabi *shoyu*.

While it is clearly a centre of wellness, the villa is only moments away from the Brenner's Fritz und Felix restaurant with its indulgent menu that includes Black Forest delicacies and baked goods of all kinds. In the evening, Fritz und Felix, which opened in 2018, is a relaxed, chic, pleasantly lit venue with regional and seasonal gourmet cuisine, not forgetting a first-class wine list.

You won't find the classic Black Forest torte in the dessert showcase but there is an interpretation by Parisian pâtissier Pierre Hermé, who hails from nearby Alsace. We admit to having a slice before setting out for a ramble in the Black Forest. That's the joy of staying here: spa-goers can sip champagne without a twinge of guilt – after all, this villa was designed to be enjoyed. — MAP
oethercollection.com

1. Your table awaits
2. Villa Stéphanie's welcoming sauna
3. Grand pool
4. The menu reflects guests' personal nutrition programme
5. Mayrlife medical health resort
6. Plants are grown on site
7. Decking overlooking Lake Altaussee



3.

Best for hay bathing
Mayrlife, Austria

Walking in an alpine meadow can be transformative – plants underfoot such as arnica, thyme and yarrow release their soothing scent, tickling the nostrils and ushering in a sense of contentment. The team at Mayrlife medical health resort on the shores of Lake Altaussee, in Austria's Styria region, make use of these plant powers. Hay baths have a long tradition as a "sweating cure" to stimulate metabolism and purify and detox the body. The composition of the hay determines which essential oils are released from the variety of grasses, herbs and flowers. Coumarin, in particular, gives the hay its characteristic smell. "Mother Nature provides us with healing processes to restore our body's system," says Maximilian Schubert, who leads Mayrlife's medical team. "There is a German saying that for every problem there is a plant grown." The modern method of hay bathing involves lying in a cosy bed with a pillow filled with arnica, cinquefoil, yarrow and sweet clover laid on the chest to release its essential oils. Add to that the view over the mountain and you feel just as though you are lying in a meadow.

Mayrlife health resort specialises in healing the gut and restoring the immune

system, and the hay baths play a key role in the road to recovery. Lisbeth Amon, head of hydrotherapy at Mayrlife relies on the hay's anticoagulant effect for the treatment of thrombosis and oedema. "The detox wrap has a relaxing and calming effect. Liver activity and metabolism are stimulated and cell detoxification is optimised. Surrounded by the scent of hay, you forget everything."

Mayrlife is known for its immersive approach to detox, weight loss and tackling stress. Set in a cluster of wooden buildings, it relies on the connection to nature as much as it does on the team of nutritionists, doctors, therapists and personal trainers.

Days begin with a visit to the medical staff for an abdominal massage that stimulates all systems, followed by hay baths alternated with full-body salt scrubs with sweet rose oil and wraps to help flush toxins out of the body.

Konfekt's week-long stint left us reset and rejuvenated, especially after sleeping well and deeply. The key to the clinic's success is in encouraging its guests to take the practices home with you. Beyond the clinic, many sustaining routines can be adopted at home to boost the immune system, relax the body and brighten every day, from taking brisk walks in nature to cold showers or Epsom salt baths. "Simply add peppermint or St John's wort to your bath," says Amon. "It's an easy way to detox the body and mind alike." — MZ
mayrlife.com

PHOTOGRAPHERS: Felix Brüggenmann, Karl Steingger



4.

Best for new perspectives
Zenbo Seinei, 'Ren', Awajishima

Though it's become a byword for calm, Zen in Japan is a strand of Buddhism rooted in no-frills meditation. True Zen meditation is not for wimps: nod off mid-session and you can expect a quick thwack from your teacher's bamboo stick. But if you're looking to try something gentler, look no further than Zenbo Seinei, a Zen-based retreat on the island of Awaji in the Seto Inland Sea.

Awaji holds a special position in Japan's version of the creation myth since it is said to be the very first island formed by Izanagi and Izanami, the divine couple who made the world. Back in the mortal realm, Awaji is a place to breathe the clean air and shrug off the demands of daily life. Yasuyuki Nambu, founder of recruitment company Pasona, thought so too and moved some of his firm's 1,050-strong workforce to the island. He's also the man behind Zenbo Seinei. The building is the work of Pritzker Prize winner Shigeru Ban. Mostly made from Japanese cedar and pine, it sits in a forest, almost entirely hidden from the road. From Tokyo it's a swift two-and-a-half-hour bullet train ride to Shin-Kobe, then a 30-minute drive across the Akashi Kaikyo bridge.

On arrival, guests remove their shoes and change into meditation-appropriate

attire. There are two options at Zenbo Seinei: a compressed four-hour mini retreat or an overnight stay. Rooms are a contemporary nod to the monastic cell: simple, wood-floored, with little more than a desk and a tatami bed on wheels.

Proceedings begin with a welcome drink: a cup of pesticide-free *sannen bancha* green tea and a mouthful of *umesho*, a fermented mix of pickled plums and soy sauce said to be packed with detoxifying enzymes. Then it's up to the long wooden deck, open to the elements at treetop height. It's an ideal spot to connect with nature; when *Konfekt* visits in high summer the background noise is a cacophony of cicadas and birdsong. Walking barefoot on the timber floor and breathing the humid air, guests feel better already.

Meditation is led by one of a group of teachers, some of whom speak English. It's an easy session of mind-quieting, with no reprimands for brief snoozes. *Zazen* (seated meditation) can be a challenge for those not used to sitting on folded legs but the team here has provided a chair that supports stiffer muscles in the correct position. The yoga that follows is a gentle stretch for tired, deskbound limbs. The session ends with calligraphy, seen in Japan as another form of meditation. Guests copy the words of Japanese calligrapher Sisyu on tissue-thin paper with a brush pen.

One of the highlights of a visit to the retreat is the vegan Zenbo cuisine, devised



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PHOTOGRAPHY: Yoshisuga Fuminori



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On the menu:
The food selection changes monthly but dishes include:

1. Fish-free *chirashi* sushi with local vegetables, edible flowers and Awaji salt
2. *Mitarashi* soy-milk *mochi* – a Japanese sweet soy-sauce-glazed rice dumpling made with three-year-old mirin and soy sauce
3. Bamboo-steamed tofu with chopped red shiso leaves
4. Handmade nutty *konnyaku soba* with *sudachi* citrus
5. Seasonal *amazake* fermented rice drink to help with digestion
6. *Amanogawa yokan* (Milky Way jelly) made with butterfly-pea flowers, white bean paste and fresh peach

1. The Shigeru Ban-designed Zenbo Seinei retreat in Awajishima
2. Service with a smile
3. Food is based on a monastic diet
4. Treetop-height wooden deck
5. Austere room
6. The locals at Le Grand Bellevue
7. Its cabin-style sauna

by chef Nobuaki Fushiki, known in Japan as “the prince of fermentation”, and prepared by chef Kenichi Karimata and his team. You won't find any added sugars, oil, dairy, flour or animal products in the food here; it is all Awaji-grown produce and wild vegetables picked by the chefs, alongside seasonings that are brewed slowly for up to three years. As with the meditation, the cooking is inspired by a monastic diet but given a fresh (read, more palatable) interpretation. The final act for guests is to whisk their own bowl of matcha – rich in relaxing L-theanine amino acid – into a creamy froth and enjoy it with a sugarless Japanese sweet.

An afternoon at Zenbo Seinei is like a warm bath, soothing without the harsh rigour of more serious practice. No wonder guests are reluctant to leave. If you are staying the night, you can expect an early morning call for sunrise yoga and meditation. And there's a shop for anyone who wants to keep the spa spirit alive at home with the pyjamas, aroma mist or even that leg-supporting chair. — FW zenbo-seinei.com

5.

Best for herbal saunas
Le Grand Bellevue, Gstaad

In an octagon-shaped chamber lined with sage and olive-green tiles, a ceramic-clad furnace infuses a collection of alpine herbs into the hot, dry air. The camomile, lavender and sage are local botanicals – and at 55°C the herbs create a soothing infusion for the surrounding guests, who loll in the neo-Ottoman alcoves. This is one of 17 different zones at the Le Grand Bellevue's sprawling spa complex, which includes a Finnish cabin-style sauna, a mosaic-lined laconium (less intense than a sauna), a cobalt-blue and gold-tiled Turkish steam bath and a salt-inhalation grotto.

The complex sits beneath one of Gstaad's most notable hotels; it's a rambling cornucopia of rooms that uses local alpine know-how. In the treatment rooms on the other side of the complex, therapists carry out Barbara Sturm, Cellcosmet and Caviarlieri facials, alpine salt scrubs, mineral body

wraps and long deep-tissue massages designed to rejuvenate travel-weary limbs. The alpine aromatherapy uses everything from arnica to lavender. Guests can return from trips to the mountain – or yoga sessions in the valley, surrounded by lowing cows and green fields – and be immersed in botanicals.

“Some of these therapies are part of the ancestral heritage of this area of Switzerland,” says therapist Lucia Garcia before she sets about giving *Konfekt* an alpine salt scrub that leaves the skin soft and buzzing with vitality. “The people of the Bernese Oberland region and the Swiss Alps have been using hay baths for hundreds of years as a cure. We've updated them for the modern consumer, but the principles remain the same today.” — SG bellevue-gstaad.ch



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