

.finding inner balance at the farm

writer Rebecca Walker

Known as one of the Philippines best holistic hideaways, The Farm at San Benito is a wellness-lover's dream. Spread over 48 lush hectares and encompassing a medical clinic, healing sanctuary and 24 spacious villas, it is the perfect place to press pause and regroup.

They say you don't appreciate your health until you lose it, and the month leading up to my stay at The Farm proved this to be true for me. It all started with an innocent cough, which quickly developed into bronchitis before morphing into pneumonia. Throw in a nasty gastro bug, a few trips to the hospital, two courses of antibiotics, and a seriously depleted immune system and you have a recipe for one very sick individual.

This all occurred at the most inopportune time (right before deadline), and on top of feeling physically exhausted and emotionally fragile, my stress levels went through the roof as I tried to do my job from bed. In the end the magazine went to print on time, however the lingering symptoms of my illness continued to plague me, and as my plane soars above Hong Kong's polluted skyline and heads south, I cross my fingers that my health woes will soon draw to a close.

DAY ONE:

I arrive late in the afternoon and after unpacking my bags in the gorgeous garden villa that will be my home for the next week, head to the clinic for a medical consultation and nutritional microscopy. I'm greeted by a friendly nurse who weighs and measures me before ushering me into another room to meet an equally smiley doctor. I've already sent in an extensive health questionnaire pre-arrival and Dr. Homer runs through my answers before conducting a live blood cell analysis after a quick fingerprick test.

He places a drop of my blood under a microscope and frowns at the deformed looking cells floating around on the TV in front of us telling me, "Your red blood cells are very dehydrated. These should be round!" He then moves to another blood sample and asks me, "See all this black?" I nod, because all I can see on the screen is a black smear. "There should be no black. The black means there is a lot of heavy metals in your system." Do you have a lot of fillings in your teeth? I have none. "Ok that means your bowel is quite toxic at the moment." How delightful. We then take a look at the capillaries in my fingers under a microscope. "Hmmm. Your circulation is not so good right now," he tells me. "Do you have cold hands often?" Always. By this stage I am starting to freak out. I knew I was in bad shape but this seemed dire.

We talk about my ongoing symptoms (namely chronic lethargy and dizzy spells) since the bronchitis and Dr. Homer grabs his stethoscope and takes a listen to my chest. "I know why you're so tired," he declares. "You're not getting enough oxygen. You have asthma." He makes me take a listen and true enough, my chest sounds like a wheezing train whistle. He calls the nurse and within minutes they have me hooked up to a nebuliser and before I have time to blink he's stuck two acupuncture needles in the top of my back. "This will help open up your lungs," he reassures me. Dr. Homer's manner is extremely cheerful and as I suck down lungfuls of pure oxygen he instructs me to eliminate dairy from my diet until my chest clears up.

After my visit to the clinic I head to the cafe and eat a delicious raw lunch before heading to the spa for a wellness consultation and relaxation massage. I'm expecting my consultation to consist of a quick rundown of the treatments I'm going



to have during my time at the resort; instead I am greeted by the bubbly Lem, who ushers me to a waiting outdoor platform and tells me he's going to 'prepare' me for the massage. I lie on my back as Lem 'scans' my body with his hands before honing in on tender zone after tender zone. His technique is profoundly intuitive and I sense that he knows where all of my energetic blockages are hiding, without even asking any questions.

When Lem's silent investigation draws to a close he tells me there is a lot of 'distress' in my body. "Your head and heart are not connected which is why your mind is so noisy," he tells me. "You must be true to your heart, and release the things that are making it heavy or you won't heal." His words ring true and I feel instantly vulnerable yet equally comforted by Lem's insightful advice. We close the session and before I head into my treatment Lem gives me a heartfelt hug that lifts my spirits instantly. "Let us look after you," he encourages me.

When we're done, a therapist, Yona, guides me into one of the treatment rooms for my relaxation massage. Beginning the session with the words, "This is your time to relax. Clear your mind. All is well," Yona pours warm coconut oil all over me and begins to unravel the tangled knots in my

muscles using long, soothing strokes. Her touch is strong and after 60-minutes my muscle tension begin to ease. I walk back to my room, eat a light dinner and fall asleep listening to the sound of crickets, geckos and frogs.

DAY TWO

I wake at 8am and head straight to the clinic for a blood test. I have had a deep, irrational phobia of needles since I was a child and the minute I walk into the room my heart starts pounding and I go clammy. What's strange is that I don't flinch when having acupuncture, yet a blood test sends my stomach into an instant squeamish mess. The nurse, Lita, sees my distress and gets me to lie down as she tightens the strap around my arm. I try to distract myself but when I feel the sting of the needle my whole body goes rigid and after a few minutes Lita tells me nothing is coming out. She eventually gives up and I burst into tears. Pathetic!

I leave the clinic and walk shakily to breakfast where I down my daily shot of coconut oil and demolish a fruit platter before heading to the spa for a body salt bath. Lita is waiting for me at the spa and gives me a big cuddle, asking me if I'm ok. Her warmth is palpable and I feel deeply touched by her kindness. She takes my

blood pressure before I climb into the bath, which contains a large dose of salt (five kilos to be exact) – including Epsom salts, Himalayan salt, Dead Sea salt, rock salt and Lahore salt – all of which are rich in natural minerals and known to eliminate toxins from the lymphatic system, ease muscle tension and aid relaxation. I climb into the warm water and instantly melt.

After 45 minutes Lita gives me some homeopathic bio-minerals and a few drops of flower essence to swallow before therapist Rhona arrives to begin my reflexology massage. I flop onto the table and she tackles my head, neck, hands, arms and feet – focusing on pressure points on the base of my skull, and easing the dull headache that has been bothering me.

After an accidental nap on the spa's outdoor daybed, I head to my next treatment: a kidney cleanse. Considered the body's 'third kidney' and largest organ, the skin plays a huge role in detoxification and my therapist Bernadeth, starts the session by 'dry brushing' my entire body. Said to stimulate the blood and lymph circulation, body brushing eradicates dead skin cells and invigorate the pores. Next, Bernadeth applies a thick layer of black goo (it's actually activated charcoal), then wraps me in a cocoon and leaves me to rest. After

a quick shower I climb into a bath full of what looks like swamp water, (Bernadeth reassures me that its full of indigenous Filipino herbs to aid the detox process) and by the time I climb out 20 minutes later my skin is smooth as silk.

I spend the afternoon swimming, reading and napping and before I know it, the sun has faded and the crickets are singing again.

DAY THREE

I wake feeling rested after a wonderful night's sleep and head to the outdoor amphitheatre for morning yoga. I am used to practicing in an urban studio, and taking in the lush greenery and sounds of nature around me is truly uplifting. I am the only one to turn up so have Anusara teacher, Francesca Regala, all to myself. I usually practice four to five times a week, but I haven't been on my mat the entire time I've been ill and feel weary about my energy levels. Francesca begins with a breath-focused meditation before moving into some gentle stretches to wake up my sleepy muscles, during which two of the resort's resident peacocks strut past the shala. She guides me through some twists and hip openers and it doesn't take long before I'm pouring sweat.

Anusara is an alignment-focused practice and Francesca adjusts me in each pose, correcting my tendency to put

strain on my over-flexible lower back. We continue through some balancing postures but I start to feel lightheaded so Francesca wraps up the session with some floor-based poses before we finish in *savasana* (corpse pose). She tells me to imagine myself floating on top of a body of water and I picture myself in the ocean, buoyant and light like a drifting cork. Although I am tired, it feels wonderful to practice again and I get a renewed sense of spaciousness in my body, particularly in my chest, which has been congested for weeks.

After yoga I head directly to the clinic to re-attempt the failed blood test. I'm greeted by Lita and a smiling doctor named Dr. Maan, who reassures me that she is very good at this and it won't even hurt. I'm dubious. The problem is not the pain itself, it is the fear of the pain. I lie down and as she tightens the strap around my arm, a wave of nausea washes over me. I close my eyes and attempt to breathe into my belly while Lita tries to distract me with conversation, suddenly Dr. Maan announces she has finished. Success! My fear is replaced by embarrassment and I feel ridiculous for being such a baby.

I leave the clinic and eat my breakfast (fresh fruit of course) and head up to the pool where I laze in the sunshine until it's time for my first treatment – a chlorophyll body wrap. Known for its powerful antioxidant

properties, chlorophyll contains enzymes which cleanse the lymphatic system, alkalis the body and remove toxins and waste from cells. Due to its unique structure, which resembles the haemoglobin components in human blood, this potent green pigment (found in plants) is a wonderful natural cleanser.

My therapist, Jhen, begins by rubbing freshly ground coconut flesh all over me and as I lie cocooned, feel (and smell!) like a human-sized bounty bar. After a quick shower, Jhen paints a thick coating of green goo all over my body, including my face, before wrapping me up to soak in the nutrients. After about 30 minutes, it's time to wash off and as I glimpse myself in the mirror, resemble a creature that has crawled out of a lagoon. After washing off though, I see and feel the benefits of the treatment – my skin is absolutely glowing.

My body wrap is followed by an ionisation detox footbath. Using natural water ions to permeate the body's energy field, this inconspicuous machine is said to cleanse cells of chemical toxins and nucleic waste products. The nurse, Grace, hands me a chart with a colour scale ranging from dark brown to light green and tells me, the water will change colour throughout the

THIS PAGE: *Peppermint foot scrub; Barako coffee scrub.*
OPPOSITE PAGE: *Chi Nei Tsang massage.* OPPOSITE PAGE:
Big lagoon. OPENING PAGE: *Meditation.*

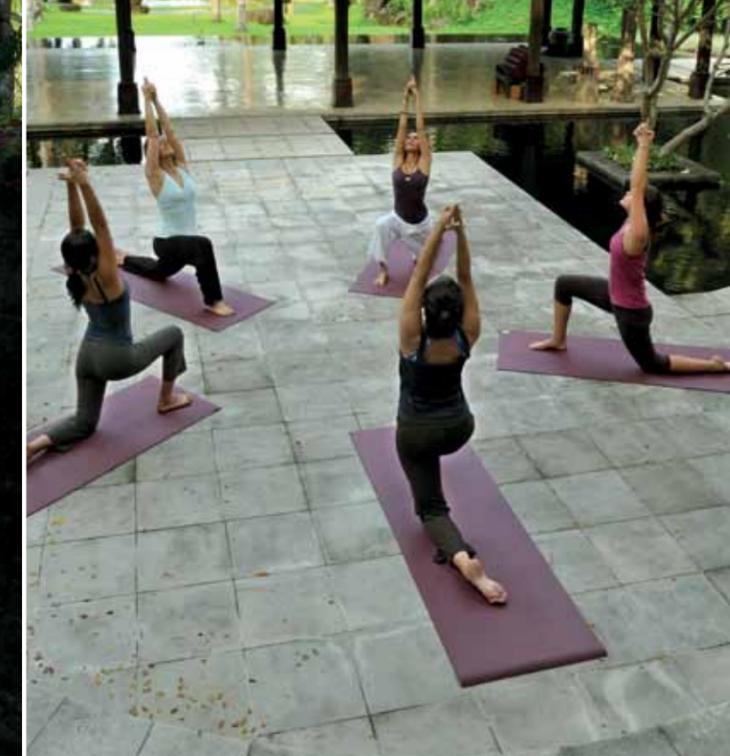


treatment, depending on the level of toxicity in the body. 30 minutes pass and the water is still clear, except for a slight murky tint, much to my disappointment. Grace laughs at me. "Don't worry! Your body needs time to open up before it can release the toxins."

After my footbath, it's time for some acupuncture with Dr. Homer. Surprisingly, even though I am terrified of needles, I'm ok with acupuncture. I lie down and Dr. Homer proceeds to insert needles around my feet, legs, arms and belly. "This is to help stimulate your lungs and kidneys," he tells me. He leaves the needles in for about 20 minutes then moves onto my next treatment: life force nourishment therapy – a form of energy healing that promises to re-connect

the receiver to their 'inner essence' by clearing energetic and emotional blockages.

Dr. Homer hovers his hands above my body and begins asking me questions about the past – my family and emotional 'triggers' in particular – and queries me about my relationship with my own heart. "There is a heavy weight on your heart, I can feel it. There are emotions trapped inside which is why you are having problems with your lungs," he tells me. Dr. Homer moves his hands to above my abdomen, murmuring quietly to himself. "Why do you strive so hard to be perfect? Why do you seek the approval of others? You are already perfect, just the way you are." My perfectionist streak is one of my signature personality traits.



THIS PAGE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Meditation Pavillion; Yoga at The Amphitheater. OPPOSITE PAGE: Amphitheater pond.



It is the thing that fuels my achievements and constantly drives me to push myself to exhaustion – especially when it comes to work. I suspect I would be a much happier person if I could let my perfectionism go and am amazed that this total stranger can detect it.

He goes on to ask me a series of personal questions that make me well up. Some of his questions are rhetorical, as though he is speaking directly to my body, and even when I don't answer out loud he seems to hear my thoughts as though my spirit is giving him the answers of its own accord. Each and every enquiry is spot on and it's only a matter of time before I start sobbing. This makes him happy. "Yes, let go!" he encourages me. Dr. Homer's manner is gentle and he dabs my tears dry as he continues to ask me questions. The session eventually winds down and I feel utterly exhausted afterwards. I have a pounding headache which Dr. Homer reassures me is normal after such a big release and before I leave he gives me a huge hug, telling me I did well. Phew.

An hour or so later it's time for my therapeutic massage and at this point I'm feeling a little fragile. I lie on the table and Jhen gets to work, quickly diving into my muscles, employing deep tissue techniques with reflexology and Swedish massage. The result is a vigorous and energising experience and as she kneads out my knots with precise skill, I feel the heaviness of my

mood lift. I wander back to my room feeling grounded and sleepy and quickly fall asleep after dinner.

DAY FOUR

I wake from a deep sleep and as I walk to breakfast, notice a distinct lightness in my step. My first treatment for the day is a Hara Puri massage. Said to enhance a strong 'hara' (energetic core), remove excess gas and clear dormant toxins from colon and gut, this purifying therapy is ideal for those with poor digestive function. My stomach is delicate at the best of times but after two courses of antibiotics and a gastro bug, it feels bruised on the inside. Lita greets me as cheerfully as always and once I'm lying down, employs a sequence of stimulating techniques as she massages peppermint oil into my belly. I focus on the thought of letting go of stagnant energy and imagine all of the stress and worry that has accumulated in my stomach dissolving.

Although I'd been hesitant about having any colon hydrotherapy during my stay, at this point I think it makes sense to 'clean out the pipes', so to speak, and Lita moves me to another table for a 'colega' (coffee enema). I won't go into details of what followed but I will say that Lita made me laugh about what was a completely undignified experience and my stomach was certainly flatter afterwards.

I go back to rest in my room for a while then head up to the spa for my purification

treatment. My therapist, Josephine, begins by drizzling warm coconut oil all over me before beginning a sea salt scrub. She moves around my body, swirling the mixture in expert rhythm as I doze and I when I eventually wash off afterwards, my skin feels soft and dewy.

I spend the afternoon journaling and reading and in the evening a nurse, Janet, comes to my room to give me my liver compress. Incorporating crushed herbs such as yarrow and amplaya (bitter melon) leaves, this gentle yet potent therapy provides nourishment for the liver by drawing out toxins externally. I lie on my bed and Janet rubs coconut oil over my abdomen (the liver area), then applies the herbs and covers them with a warm compress, telling me to relax for the next 60 minutes. I snuggle into my bed and after an hour, wash the herbs off before sleeping.

DAY FIVE

I wake feeling rested after a great night's sleep (I can't believe how much I'm sleeping!) and after my morning coconut shot and breakfast, head to the spa where Grace greets me for my second salt bath. It is much hotter than the first time and afterwards I have a thumping headache and can't stop sweating. Grace assures me this is a good thing because it means my body is purging toxins through the skin. Jhen takes over and gives me my reflexology massage and attacks my pressure points with skilled

precision. Afterwards, I still feel slightly shaky and lightheaded from the salt bath and wander back to my room to lie down.

After lunch, it's time for my second acupuncture and life force nourishment session and Dr. Homer greets me with his characteristic smile. "Ready?" he asks. I'm a little trepidatious to be honest. My last session opened up a few unexpected emotional wounds and I'm nervous about what other deep-seated emotions might arise from their dormant lair.

My head is still pounding from my morning salt bath, however Dr. Homer quickly locates the pressure points causing me pain and within minutes my throbbing temples relax. While I'm lying there he tells me my blood test came back clear, which means other than the remnants of pneumonia, I'm not suffering from any sinister illnesses. 20 minutes later it's time for the energy session and as Dr. Homer moves around my body quietly, barely uttering a word, I slip into an extremely peaceful state.

Afterwards Dr. Homer tells me my energy has changed drastically since our last session and that I am much 'lighter'. "You've made a big decision, yes?" I don't know how he knows this but he's right. I have been trying to decide whether to continue living in Hong Kong or not and over the past five days, have finally reached

a decision. "Whatever you've decided, it is the right choice. The weight has lifted from your chest," he smiles.

I head to the pool for a swim then head back to the spa for my therapeutic massage with Lem. He navigates the muscles in my neck and shoulders, easing the stubborn knots that are still hiding there, despite all the treatments I've had and thanks to his magic touch, I feel as though I am sinking into the table.

"Your energy feels so different from the first day!" he tells me when we finish. "You are less distracted now." It's true. I can feel a new quietness in my spirit that has been noticeably absent in the past few months. Although I have no doubt the treatments are partly responsible for this, I also credit the serene surroundings for my newfound Zen. By day I have been drinking in the sound of tropical birdsong and by night, the sound of nocturnal wildlife. Not once have I listened to my i-pod and the room doesn't have a TV, so I have no choice but to read quietly in the evenings. Bliss.

DAY SIX

I rise at 7am and head to morning yoga

where five other yogis are waiting. The class is a Vinyasa flow class led by local teacher Chris Panis, and we begin with a short meditation session followed by a series of sun salutations and standing poses. The poses are not challenging, yet I struggle to keep pace with the class and I'm surprised that I still feel so weak. I surrender to child's pose a few times throughout the session and am secretly relieved when it's time for savasana.

I go straight to the clinic after yoga where nurse Cleo waits to give me my second Hara Puri Massage. I haven't yet eaten breakfast and as she swirls her hands around my abdomen, my tummy grumbles hungrily. I eat my fruit platter between treatments then return to the clinic for my second ionisation footbath. Much to my surprise, this time at the end of 30 minutes, the water has turned a dirty brown and the bath at my feet looks like river water. Logic tells me that as the week has gone on my system has become cleaner, but in fact as Dr. Homer explains later, my circulation has improved due to The Farm's detox diet and all the treatments I've been having, making it easier for my liver to purge toxins – hence

the reason my second treatment has been more successful.

Next I have a skin 'kayud' (scraping) detoxifying treatment, a therapy that is said to purify the lymph system, stimulate the glands, improve circulation, remove dead skin cells and strengthen the immune system by eliminating toxins. I enter the treatment room and am greeted by two therapists, Rose and Ephren, who proceed to pour a thick coating of coconut oil all over me, then massage me with synchronised movements before scraping the oil off using mother of pearl shells. This may sound painful, but it's anything but. They then apply a coating of yellow ginger mixed with coconut flesh and wrap me in a cocoon to rest. After about 20 minutes it's time to wash off and as I climb into a huge outdoor bath that is filled with coconut milk, feel like I'm playing the role of Cleopatra.

After my kayud treatment, I head to the clinic for a 'sustainable lifestyle discussion' with Dr. Homer who immediately performs another live blood analysis. My cells have improved since my first test however the doctor tells me from their shape, he can tell I'm still suffering from a vitamin B

deficiency. He gives me a list of take-home tips and tells me to start each day with a glass of warm water and lemon and to include more low-glycemic foods in my diet, along with foods rich in Omega-3 fatty acids. Additionally Dr. Homer suggests I introduce 'cordyceps' (a type of fungi known for their anti-inflammatory properties), to help my asthma. I'm also encouraged to take probiotics along with a number of supplements including vitamin B, Omega-3 and multi-mineral vitamins.

My day finishes with a deep tissue massage using hot stones. My therapist, Geraldyn, executes my instruction for strong pressure perfectly and alternates using her hands and the rocks with seamless ease. When I roll onto my back she places small stones along the seven chakras (energy centres), and even places warm pebbles between my toes. The experience is heavenly and by the time Geraldyn finishes, my whole body feels soft and gooey. I wander back to my room where Grace promptly arrives to apply my second liver compress. I'm in such a relaxed state that my eyes are already closing before she's even tucked me in.

DAY SEVEN

I wake on my final morning and have my first 'real' breakfast in a week. By real I mean, something other than fruit, however I'm only halfway through my delicious vegetable stack when I realise I'm already full – an indication that my stomach has definitely shrunk. After breakfast I head to the spa for my last treatment – an Anti-

Stress Facial. The facial begins with a face massage and my therapist, Mateo, traces the lines of my sinuses and jaw with the perfect amount of pressure. I've never been given a facial by a male therapist, yet Mateo's huge hands are surprisingly nimble. He applies an aloe vera mask (known to rejuvenate skin and tissues, stimulate nervous system and improve circulation) before giving me a neck, shoulder and scalp massage. The treatment finishes and I grudgingly force myself to snap out of relaxation mode and head back to my room to pack.

OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

I finish the week feeling like a totally different person. My head feels clearer, my heart feels more peaceful and my spirit feels nurtured and re-inspired. On a physical level, my energy has increased, my chest feels clear, my digestion has improved and my skin is glowing; although it wasn't a priority, I have also inadvertently lost weight since arriving (one kilo according to the scales). And while the treatments, facilities and food have all been fantastic, the thing that stands out the most is the warmth of the service. The entire week I have been surrounded by beaming smiles, nurturing hugs, kind words and heartfelt care, the effect of which is healing in itself. And although there is a lot of activities I didn't participate in (mainly because I was too busy sleeping!), I got what I came for – rest, replenishment and a renewed sense of connection to my heart.

www.thefarm.com.ph



THIS PAGE (LEFT TO RIGHT): *Ingredients for Hampol Compress; Organic garden; Tropical fruit salad.*
OPPOSITE PAGE: *Infinity pool overlooking Mt. Malarayat.*

live food

One of The Farm's most unique features is its 'living cuisine.' Harvested daily from the property's own organic gardens, vegan-friendly dishes are crafted from dehydrated vegetables, nuts, seeds and fruits and morphed into tasty, enzyme-rich meals. Based on a raw food concept of 85 percent raw and 15 percent cooked, culinary delicacies take the form of fresh salads, wholesome soups, vegetable-laden mains and delicious (guilt-free!) desserts. Complemented by an extensive menu of cleansing green juices and refreshing coconut water, each meal is a true treat.

coconut oil

Known as the 'tree of life', the coconut palm is considered somewhat sacred at The Farm and is incorporated into the resort's cuisine and spa treatments. Used for centuries as a vital source of nutrition within traditional communities of tropical regions, coconut oil provides the body with one of the highest sources of saturated fats and also contains a high dose of medium chain triglycerides (MCT's) – which are important for building and maintaining the body's immune system. What's more, it functions as a protective antioxidant and helps protect the body from harmful free radicals. Each day at The Farm begins with a 10ml glass of coconut oil with breakfast.

