

spa business



BURGENER | SPA
SWITZERLAND



Pauline Burgener

HAUTE COUTURE
CUSTOMIZED TREATMENT

www.drburgener.com



p38 Irene Forte gets into spa



p44 Keemala, Phuket



p22 Amazonian healing with Tyler Gage



p58 Skin expert Dr Claudia Aguirre

7 Editor's letter

Liz Terry shares her thoughts

20 Letters

Can spas do well by doing good?

22 Spa people

Tyler Gage working with Channing Tatum in the Amazon; and Todd Hewitt takes up global spa role at Shangri-La

30 News

Major new destination spa in India; and Morgans moves into mindfulness

38 Interview: Irene Forte

Daughter of hotelier Sir Rocco Forte and niece of designer Olga Polizzi tells Jane Kitchen why the Rocco Forte Hotel's new spa concept is a family affair

44 Design: Natural wonderland

Neena Dhillon visits the striking new Keemala resort and spa in Phuket and finds out about its unique design

54 Ask an expert: Next gen skincare

Should therapists combine skincare with nutrition and psychology?

58 Skin deep

Modern research is redefining the way we think about skin. Neuroscientist Dr Claudia Aguirre explains what the findings mean for spas

64 Interview:

Franz Linser & Susan Harmsworth
Katie Barnes speaks to the co-chairs of this year's Global Wellness Summit

70 Healthy investment

Does investing in wellness stack up? Rhianon Howells investigates

Natural Wonderland

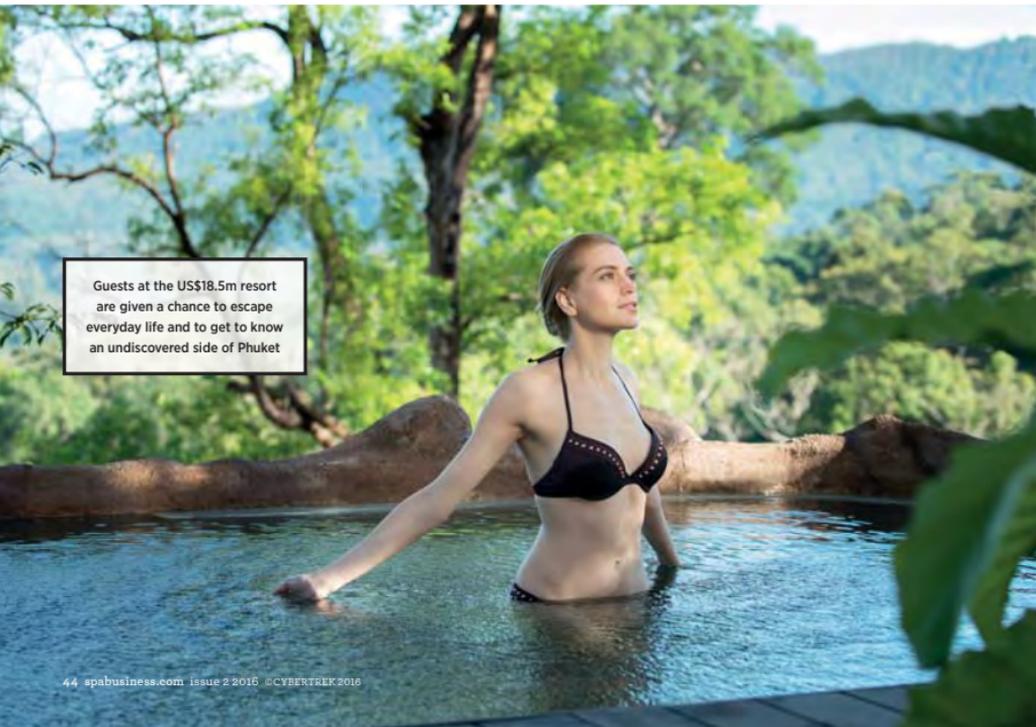
A forest sanctuary that embraces culture and holistic living in equal measure, Keemala is the vision of the Somnam family. Neena Dhillon heads to Phuket to meet them

Phuket's most hotly anticipated hotel is a family business in every sense. Inhabitants of Thailand's largest island for four generations, the Somnams were once involved in the tin mining industry before becoming merchants, landowners and then hoteliers. Today their main hospitality concerns, both of which they own and operate, are the Kee Resort and Spa open since 2011 in Patong and the enchanting Keemala, unveiled in December 2015 from a setting of

verdant woodlands overlooking Kamala Village on Phuket's west coast. 'Unique' is an overused word but for Keemala, an all-pool-villa retreat nestled on close to 29,000sq m (312,153sq ft) of canopied hillside, it is fitting. Realised through an investment of THB650m (US\$18.5m, €16.3m, £12.9m), the new property comprises 38 distinctive cottages, tree houses and villas complemented by facilities conceived to offer a window into the cultural and wellbeing aspects of the indigenous lifestyle.



Family entrepreneurs: sister Samornpun Somnam (top) and brother Tanapong (above)



Guests at the US\$18.5m resort are given a chance to escape everyday life and to get to know an undiscovered side of Phuket

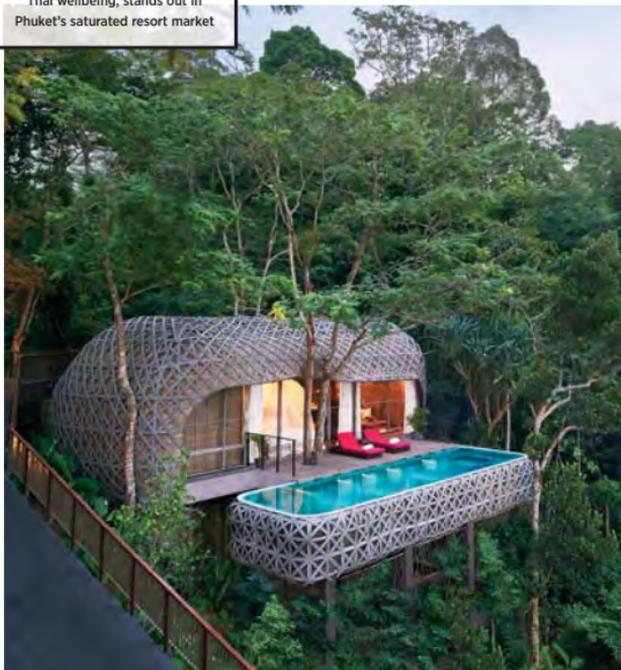


Keemala, with its rustic luxury feel and focus on traditional Thai wellbeing, stands out in Phuket's saturated resort market

Changing perceptions

Along with his sister Samornpun, Tanapong Somnam represents the latest generation of the entrepreneurial family; both siblings are actively involved in sales, marketing and operations at an executive level at Keemala. "My grandmother purchased this plot of land with its natural resources, orchard, streams and groundwater over five years ago," he recalls. "We didn't initially have a concrete idea about how to use it but then my mum decided she wanted to bring something different to Phuket's resort offering, based around a village community concept where ancient Thai knowledge about health and wellbeing as well as cultural customs could be shared with modern travellers. When people think about Phuket, they see beach resorts, luxury hotels, Thai or Sino-Portuguese design, even architecture inspired by our tin mining tradition - all these concepts have been done. So we knew we had to create a genuinely unique experience - somewhere that guests could escape from everyday life while getting to know an undiscovered side of Phuket."

Having been active in hospitality for 15 years - Samornpun and Tanapong's



DESIGN: KEEMALA

► parents, who remain managing directors, first stepped into the business at the helm of a three-star property since demolished to make way for Kee Resort – the Somnams are conscious of how overdevelopment has affected parts of Phuket. With roots that go deep, the family is also concerned about the preservation of natural resources. These twin considerations – to introduce an alternative ethos to the resort market and to highlight the island's tropical landscape in a sustainable way – have underscored every step of Keemala's development. Aimed at travellers seeking rustic luxury, wellbeing and relaxation, the retreat is attracting couples, honeymooners and small groups, with Australia, China, Germany, the UK and Thailand top feeder markets to date. Featuring a full-service spa, ozone-filtered resort pool, fitness centre and an abundance of outdoor space for physical pursuits and cultural activities, it's expected to make a return on investment in 10 years.

Fiction feeds design

Committed to working with local contractors, the Somnams invited Thai firms to respond to a design competition, selecting Bangkok-based Architect Space and Pisit Aongsuktong of Pisud Design Company for architecture and interiors respectively. "Both these partners came with their own inspiration and an inherent understanding of our desire to build something distinctive," explains Somnam. "As we were determined to keep as many trees as possible and work around the land's steep incline and topographical conditions, we knew we would be pushing

Many treatments draw on traditional healing techniques and have an energy-based approach



To take the creative vision into the realms of the magical, a story of four fictional clans has been developed complete with accompanying traditions, rituals and skills



Rescued water buffalos are among Keemala's residents (above); exterior of the all-suite Mala Spa complex (below)

construction techniques. We needed partners who would accept a certain fluidity because we had to change drawings to build around the vegetation – we actually have decks and a villa with trunks incorporated into the structures."

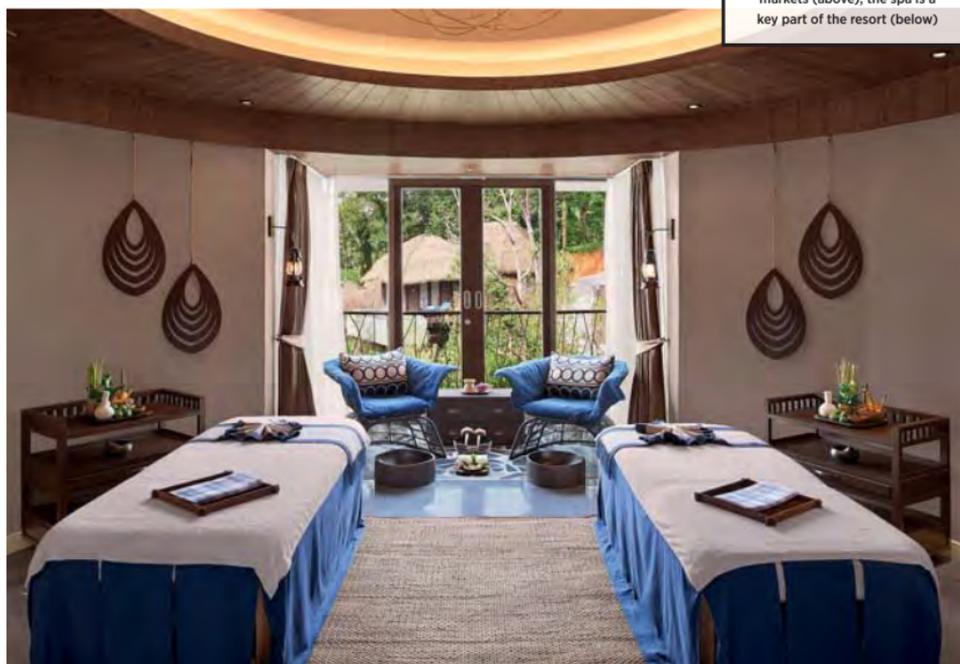
Acknowledging Phuket's history, which over the years has seen Chinese, Thai and Europeans move to the island and live together peacefully, the Somnams were keen to incorporate a village narrative into the design of Keemala. But to take the creative vision into the realms of the magical, they agreed to Aongsuktong's suggestion that a story of four fictional clans be developed complete with accompanying traditions, rituals and skills characteristic of these early settlers. "Khun Pisit is the dreamer," reveals Somnam. "He imagined a maritime caravan [carrying the early settlers], a fleet of ships heading from west to east on a Silk Road trading route. Forming a strong bond, these people encountered a storm while crossing the Indian Ocean en route to China and, set adrift, end up starting a new life on this arable rich-island."

With the grounds designed as an expansion of the natural landscape, harnessing mature trees, streams and mini waterfalls, Keemala's built environment comprises four accommodation types, closely connected to the fictional clans. As the highest category, Bird's Nest Pool Villas reflect the opulence, intellect and spirituality of the 'Rung-Nok' community, ►





Australia, China, Germany, the UK and Thailand are top markets (above); the spa is a key part of the resort (below)



spa business uniting the world of wellness

DESIGN: KEEMALA

▶ with roofs formed of an interwoven mesh and bathrooms installed with a mural highlighting the clan's belief that bathing under moonlight replenishes souls. In the Tent Pool Villas, the nomadic lifestyle of the 'Khon-Jorn' clan has prompted semi-permanent homes made from twin layers of tent fabric, coupled with decorative references to animals and exploration, while furniture in the two-storey Tree Pool Houses is suspended from ceilings, the house exteriors encased by bamboo and metal shells shaped into hanging pods, in deference to the 'We-Ha' or sky people who worship the universe.

Land and ocean motifs

For communal areas such as the spa, lobby, bar and restaurant, such narratives are merged to collectively display the settlers' societal traditions. Six iconic pods, constructed from wood-plastic

composites, bamboo accents and rubber-shingle roofing, rise from behind the welcome pavilion to dominate the arrivals area, their shape inspired by the poppy flower that has great significance in ancient eastern cultures.

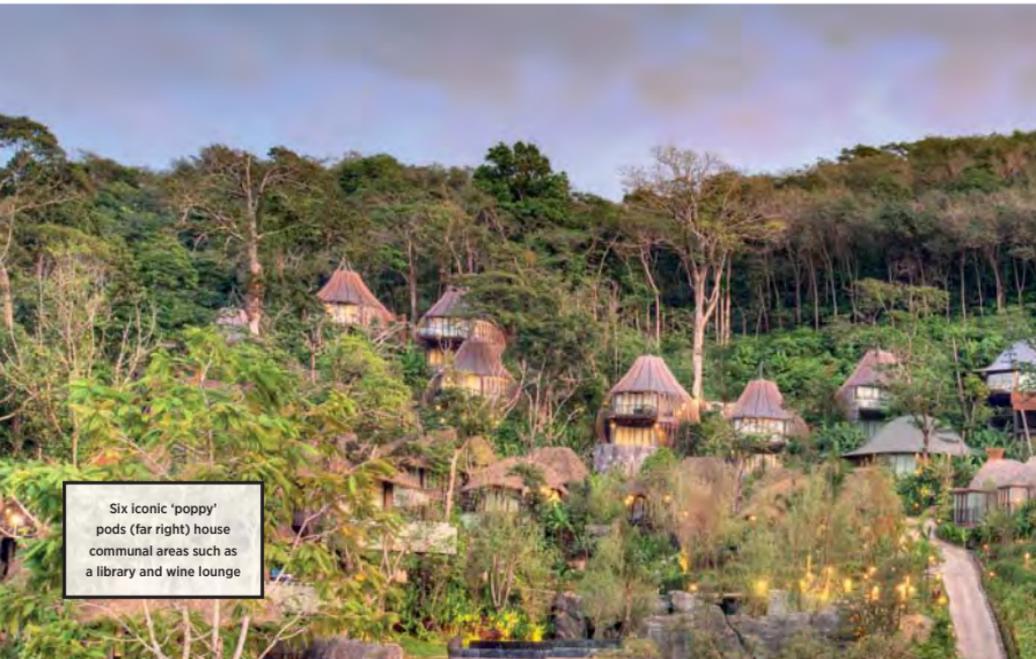
As is evident across the retreat, Mala Spa features wood, rattan and bamboo furnishings, with the design of the eight tranquil double treatment rooms influenced by traditional fishing tools. The two types of double room – one rectangular in shape featuring clay-effect cement surfaces, the other rounded with a synthetic thatch roof and seemingly sunk into the water – both include a connected bathroom amenities such as steamrooms. Referring to the design, Aongskultong explains that the flowing water surrounding the treatment rooms

As we were determined to keep as many trees as possible and work around the land's steep incline and topographical conditions, we knew we would be pushing construction techniques



The welcome pavilion is enlivened by mosaics hand-laid by a native artist

Six iconic 'poppy' pods (far right) house communal areas such as a library and wine lounge





Wellbeing is not just about a spa session – daily activities include tai chi, yoga and Muay Thai



Wellness consultant Cherrisse Yang

is “reflective of the ocean where fishing tools are used – a key part in the survival of ancient folks – while symbolising peace and serenity”. For interiors, decorative brass pendants appear like falling leaves and rattan chairs allude to the royal seating placed upon elephants.

Back in reception, a hand-laid mosaic mural by Chiang Mai native Surachai Sripaiboon has two reflective parts: the ceiling is inspired by meditative bells seen in Tibetan monasteries and Indian temples while the floor section mirrors the blue colour and petal shape of a Thai herb.

A sacred triune

Wellbeing infuses its way throughout Keemala. Southeast Asia-based wellness consultant Cherrisse Yang, who’s overseen Mala Spa’s concept, says she was impressed by the owners’ attitude. “The family recognises that wellbeing is not just about a spa session, it permeates everything from how you sleep to what you eat and the products you put on your skin,” she observes. “Our bathroom amenities are 100 per cent natural from Siam Botanicals, guests can sample slow-cooked cuisine in Su-Tha Restaurant

and daily activities vary from tai chi, yoga and Muay Thai to luk pra kob-making classes where guests learn how to create a healing herbal compress. Alternatively, lotus flower folding calms the mind.”

Yang’s approach has seen her reach back to learning from tribal and traditional communities, placing focus on the interconnectedness of body, mind and spirit, considered the triune at the core of healing. Keemala’s spa team of seven has had four months of training with Yang looking at how an intuitive, energy-based approach to massage and movement can facilitate a deep rapport with guests. While first-timers opt for familiar treatments such as the Harmonising Massage, the more adventurous are trying specialised therapies including Raindrop Healing – where oils are applied from a height along energy lines, in combination ▶



Yang has a network of international masters who work with both guests and the in-house spa team when they visit



Somnam is confident that the spa will impact positively on resort occupancy

with specific massage techniques – and integrative Thai bodywork. Local practitioner Cholatee Intachak delivers the latter and healing methods used in response to individual needs during her session can include tok-sen, chi nei tsang (see SB06/3 p90) and pranic healing. Feeding into the sea story of Mala Spa, meanwhile, are facial and body treatments from Ireland's Voya (see SB12/3 p78). "In addition to local brand Siam Botanicals, we wanted to work with an international supplier whose philosophy chimed with our own," notes Yang. "As a family-based business that hand-harvests its organic seaweed, following sustainable practices, we felt there was an alignment in terms of our rustic, authentic approach."

Herbs and healing

The Somnams and Yang believe in the age-old power of Thai herbs and medicinal plants. As part of Keemala's Holistic Living Retreats programme – which presents four packages themed Purify, Energise, Unwind and Rejuvenate – all daily tonics are formulated in Bangkok, some drawing on a fermentation process that sees local herbs and honey left in a jar for a year to create an enzyme- and

KEEMALA BY NUMBERS

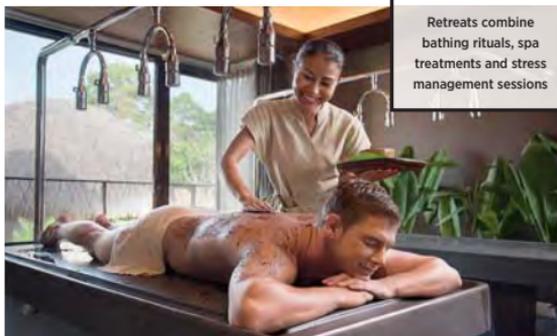
- **Clay Pool Cottage** prices start at THB19,050+++ (US\$543, €476, €380) per night
- **Bird's Nest Pool Villa** prices start at THB25,500+++ (US\$726, €637, €508) per night
- THB3,200 (US\$91, €80, €64) is charged for a 60-minute **Harmonising Massage**
- A 90-minute **Raindrop Healing therapy session** is priced at THB3,800 (US\$108, €95, €76)
- The **'Purify' Holistic Living Retreat** is THB35,000 (US\$997, €874, €697) for a three-day programme or THB76,500 (US\$2,179, €1,910, €1,524) for six days, per individual
- **Visiting practitioner sessions** start at around THB5,000+++ (US\$142, €125, €100) for 60 minutes

probiotic-rich drink. Keemala's three or six-day retreats are gentle, bringing together consultations, pampering treatments, bath rituals and stress-management sessions. Yang adds that Keemala's team can tailor retreats, with one guest asking for only meditation, energy healing and assisted deep-breathing sessions to manage his stress.

Another facet of the spa is the visiting practitioners programme involving traditional healing specialists dropping in for a 10-day residency. Although the preference is to employ local practitioners, Yang has a network of international masters who work with both guests and the in-house spa team when they visit. Recently, Phil Davies from The Sanctuary in Hong Kong offered vibrational attunement – an energy healing therapy, while Japan's Yutaka Homma provided Namikoshi shiatsu (see SB15/3 p88). Other examples of sessions include Mayan abdominal massage, Tibetan singing bowl healing and clinical aromatherapy.

While it's too early to give an accurate spa capture rate, Tanapong Somnam is confident that by giving an insight into traditional therapeutic healing, Mala Spa will impact positively upon Keemala's occupancy and average length of stay. It is, after all, a central component of the wellbeing philosophy of this resort embedded in nature promising retreat from everyday life. ●

Retreats combine bathing rituals, spa treatments and stress management sessions



Neena Dhillon is a spa, hotel and travel journalist
Email: ndhillon@spabusiness.com