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Our essential guide
to spas in Thailand

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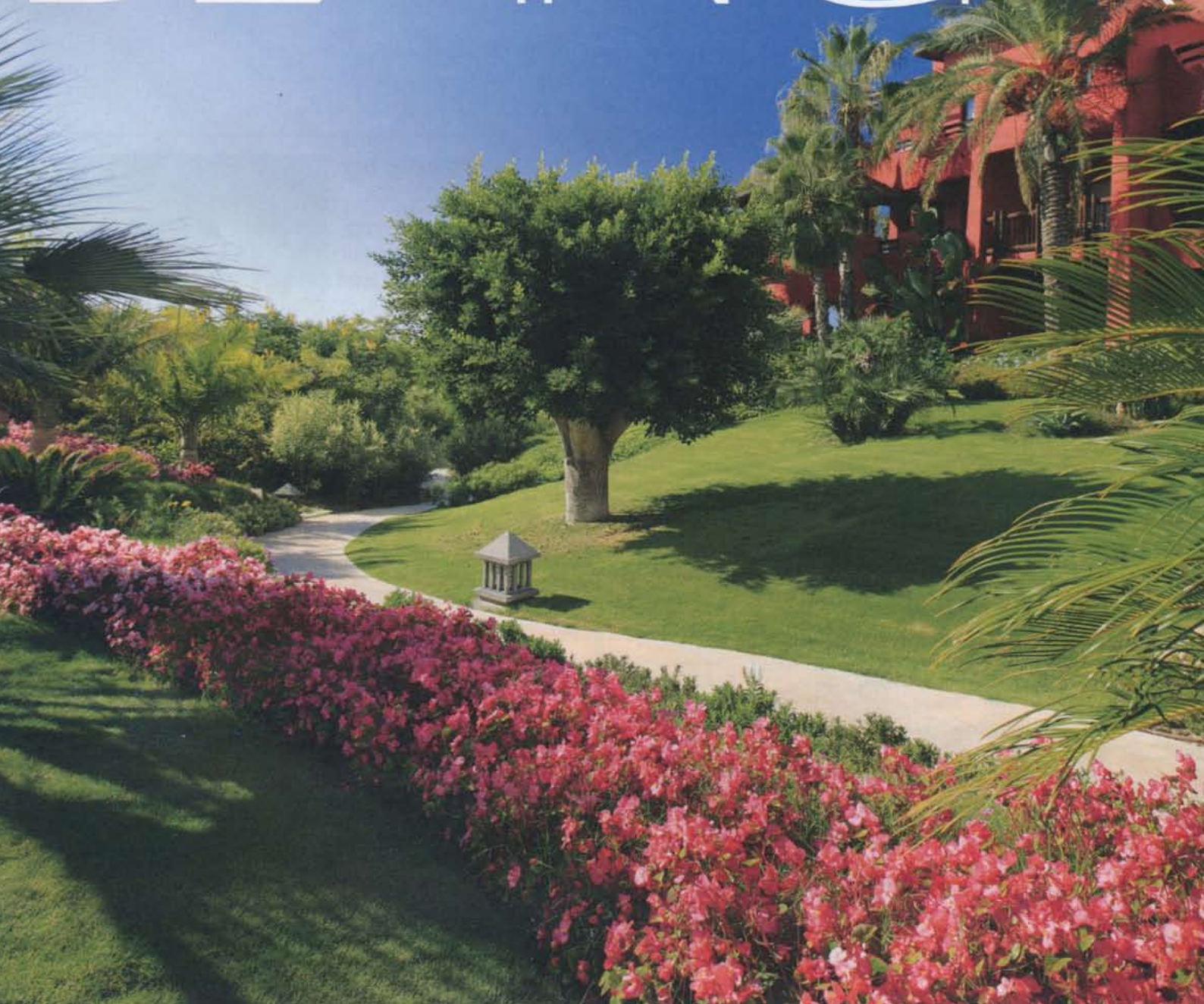
A LITTLE BIT OF

ASIA

*Indulge in a luxury Eastern getaway that
is only a short flight from the UK at The
Barceló Asia Gardens Hotel & Thai Spa*

IN
THE
COSTA

BLANCA





OPPOSITE: PATHS WIND THROUGH THE HOTEL'S GARDENS. THIS PAGE. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ONE OF THE IMMACULATELY DESIGNED OUTDOOR POOLS; THE ENTRANCE TO THE KOH SAMUI RESTAURANT; A LUXURY SUITE



Walk slowly. Breathe deeply. There are pine trees all around you and the air is fresh and pure. Wandering through the lush, deep, green foliage of the vast gardens, with the delicate scent of lemon grass on your skin is an almost hypnotic experience. You step into a warm pool and feel the stress drift away, rippling gently across the water. Lifting your gaze, the Mediterranean glitters just a short distance away, and you remember that you are not in the Far East, but on the Costa Blanca, Spain's White Coast.

The Barceló Asia Gardens Hotel & Thai Spa is all about water, light, space and sensuality, features that are integral to life both in Asian countries and around the Mediterranean. Perhaps that is why there is such a calm vibe at this hotel, which brings the best of the Eastern way of life to southern Europe.

If you want to escape the city for a re-energising break, you can be here in just a few hours, with no

time wasted recovering from the journey. As soon as you arrive, your senses awaken and you start to unwind at your own pace. There is no pressure to do anything here; you can be as lazy or as active as you like. But take things slowly at first, switch off your mind and just let your body enjoy the natural beauty of the Mediterranean coast.

Set in the foothills of the Sierra Cortina, a range of rugged hills above the sea, this feels like a secret rural retreat, miles from anywhere, but is in fact within easy reach of Alicante airport. The location between the mountains and the sea means that it is warm enough all year round to bathe in the outdoor pools, which bask in the dazzling Mediterranean light.

There are seven outdoor pools (two of which are heated) in the landscaped grounds. The hotel is set on three levels, making the most of the sloping terrain. Streams and waterfalls link the different areas, accentuating the harmonious environment where everything is focused on the natural flow of energy.

Entering the spa pavilions is like being instantly transported to the Far East. All the therapists are Thai and were trained at the revered Wat Pho temple in Bangkok. Tatami beds on the floor are used for most of the massages, with private terraces which open onto the gardens. There are no claustrophobic, cell-like treatment rooms here; the sense of space, light and freedom is present wherever you go. With six double massage areas as well as five

individual outdoor rooms, you never feel hemmed in.

The treatments concentrate on the ten key energy channels in the body and are carried out using Harnn & Thann products from Thailand. Aimed at re-establishing the body's natural balance, these techniques have been used for more than 2,500 years and have been honed and developed over the centuries. Everything unfolds in a calm, silent environment, with nothing to detract from the therapeutic effects of the various treatments.

During the traditional Thai massage, Nuad Thai, the therapists use not only their hands but also their elbows and feet to massage pressure points, elongate the muscles and unblock the body's energy channels. This can be followed by the Luk Pra Kob treatment, when warmed muslin compresses containing ginger, turmeric and lemon grass, which each have different healing



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: INDULGE IN A MASSAGE; A HEATED SWIMMING POOL WITHIN A TROPICAL GARDEN SETTING; THE LANGKAWI SUITE; CATCH SOME RAYS ON YOUR ROOM'S BALCONY; ONE OF SEVEN POOLS TO RELAX BY



"THE THERAPISTS USE NOT ONLY THEIR HANDS BUT ALSO THEIR ELBOWS AND FEET TO MASSAGE PRESSURE POINTS"



qualities, are pressed onto the skin in gentle circular movements to relieve tension and alleviate any aches and pains you may have. This is particularly good for anyone suffering from backache, migraines or sore muscles after sports.

The therapists are also trained in Ayurvedic methods, as well as Balinese massage and the Lomi-Lomi technique which is traditional in Hawaii. There is also a programme for pregnant women, for which the therapists have undergone extensive specialist training. This massage focuses on improving circulation and relieving tension in the neck and back. There is even an extra gentle massage for babies, given by highly-qualified therapists. Afterwards, you can relax in the Turkish steam bath and in the Jacuzzi in the spa garden, with views of the mountains and the sea.

The soothing atmosphere continues in the 312 rooms and suites, which are distributed among

the different buildings in the gardens, and have a minimum surface area of 30 square metres. Decorated with traditional Balinese fabrics and furniture, in natural tones of burnished gold, no two rooms are the same. All have balconies or terraces and huge beds with a feather-and-down mattress topper. Bathrooms have black lacquered screens and all have black slate rainforest showers and separate bath-tubs. Some rooms have sloping Balinese thatched roofs, either inside or on the terrace. More contemporary features include free Wi-Fi internet access and a fabulous sound system with an iPod dock, DVD player and 32-inch plasma screen television.

The Asian fusion theme also extends to the elegant Koh Samui restaurant, which serves zingy East-meets-West dishes such as king prawns sautéed with ginger, garlic and hoisin sauce. You could also choose to have dinner at In Black, which

specialises in contemporary cooking inspired by the best cuisines from around the world. The menu changes according to what is available seasonally, but might feature a rack of lamb with a spicy vegetable tagine, or monkfish medallions with caramelised onions and roasted root vegetables.

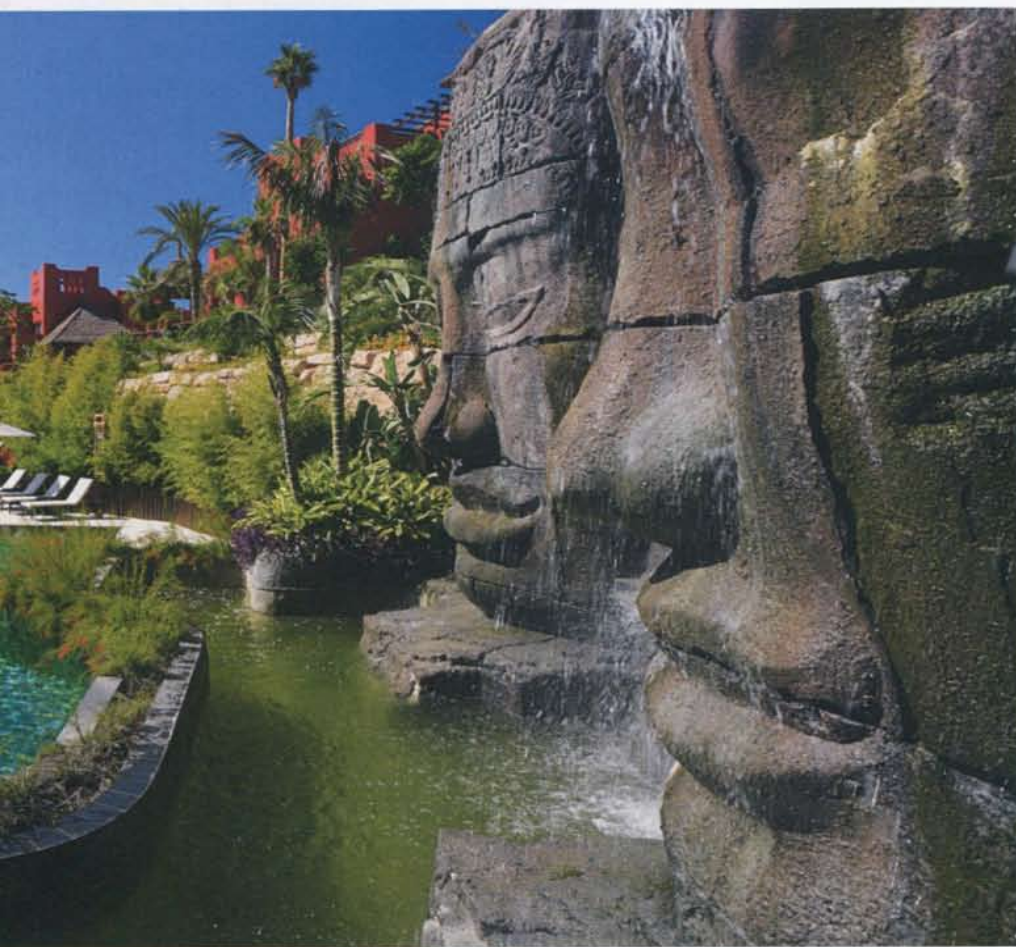
The Mediterranean area is a rich source of fantastic fresh produce, and this is reflected in the Palapa restaurant which serves traditional Spanish dishes at lunchtime, when it is nearly always warm enough to eat outdoors. The locally-grown rice is renowned throughout the world. The chefs here combine it with the tastiest vegetables and the freshest fish to create amazing paellas. Your senses go into overdrive as first you see the vibrant colours, then you smell the different ingredients as the steaming platter is put before you, and finally taste the rich flavours of the Mediterranean.

This area of Spain is now making some first-rate wines too, so try a few out during your stay. If you want to find out more, the hotel will arrange for you to visit one of the many wineries in the area.

There are little pockets all over the grounds where you can chill out with a drink and a book, but in the evening you might be in the mood for a more glamorous setting, in which case the Champagne bar awaits. When you're feeling fully revitalised after an afternoon in the spa, you might as well flaunt that glow. There is a definite vibe of wellbeing among the guests as they meet up here for a cocktail while deciding which of the hotel's restaurants they fancy for dinner.

But if you're still in laid-back mode and don't want to trade your sandals for stilettos, just hang





the skies in a hot-air balloon or enjoy a helicopter tour from the nearby heliport.

Children will never be bored at the Asia Gardens either, with a wide range of sporting activities to keep them amused during the day. The highly-trained staff look after them at mealtimes too, just in case their parents might like to have a romantic dinner on their own once in a while. Afterwards, there is a disco just for the little ones, and at weekends the kids can camp out in the gardens – all properly supervised but a great adventure nevertheless. Near the hotel, the Terra Mítica and Terra Natura theme parks are two of the best in Europe.

There are some quaint local villages that offer some surprisingly good boutiques, particularly for shoes and bags, and the pretty little town of Altea, which is good for handmade gifts and local ceramics. The lovely outdoor cafés dotted about are perfect for people-watching with a cold beer. Or hire a car and head inland to discover Moorish villages hidden away in the mountains.

However you decide to spend your time, after a few days at the Barceló Asia Gardens Hotel &



"THERE ARE LITTLE POCKETS ALL OVER THE GROUNDS WHERE YOU CAN CHILL OUT WITH A DRINK AND A BOOK"



out in the Bonsai lounge bar, which is named after the 150-year-old tree on the candlelit terrace. After dinner, drift back in and catch some live jazz or blues. You never know who might be performing.

After a day or two in the hotel, it is difficult to imagine ever wanting to do anything except lie languidly by one of the pools, but you can be more active if you insist. There are several running routes around the gardens, some taking advantage of the different levels to get the heart rate up, others offering flat paths for a gentle jog. Bikes are available if you want to cycle around the grounds, or venture further afield into the hills or down to the coast. There is a gym on site, with yoga, tai chi and chi kung classes, and an added advantage of the hotel's

situation is its location between two 18-hole golf courses designed by Jack Nicklaus.

If you've never tried scuba diving, you can do an initiation course at the hotel, while more experienced divers will love the rich marine life on the Costa Blanca. All sorts of sailing can be arranged, including yacht hire. And if you would rather see the area from the above, you can take to

Thai Spa you'll have had so many experiences that you'll feel like you've been on a long exotic holiday to a far-flung destination – just without the hassle of getting there. Here, all your energy is focused on making you feel better and leaving you thoroughly refreshed, re-energised and ready to slot into real life again.

Visit asiagardens.es for more information, call +34 966 81 84 00 or email asiagardens@barcelo.com



Barceló Asia Gardens Hotel & Thai Spa is offering readers an exclusive four-night package for two for only 1,360 Euros (saving you 340 Euros). The offer includes two 60-minute Thai spa treatments per person, a cup of Traditional Tea, per guest, upon arrival, VIP check-in, daily 90-minute yoga and chi kung sessions, three-day admission to the Thai Spa relaxation area. For reservations call Barceló Asia Gardens on +34 966 81 84 00.

Offer valid from 1 March – 30 April 2010. Days of stay Sunday, through to Thursday. Subject to availability. Terms and conditions apply.