

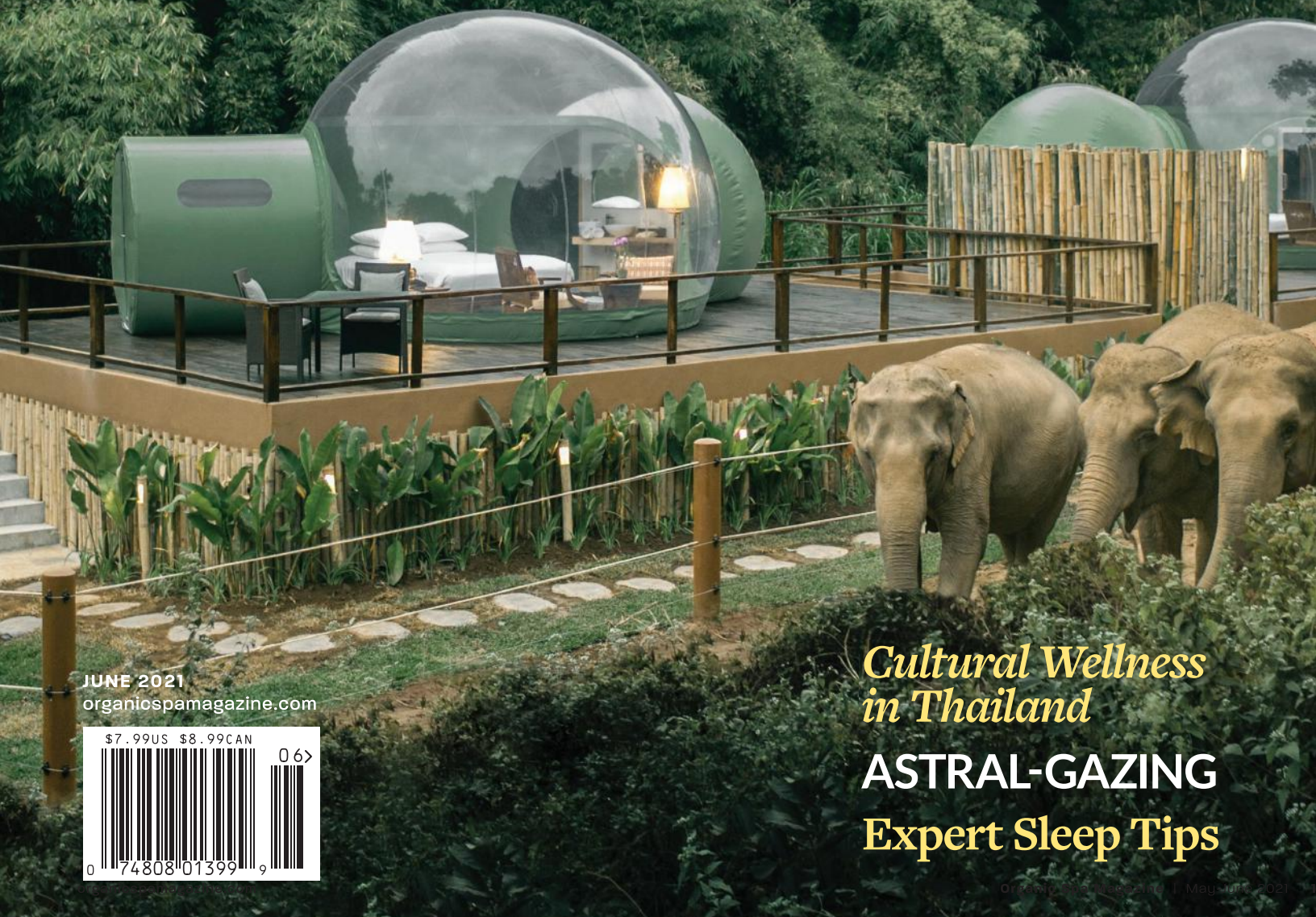
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# BEYOND THE SPA

Hotels across Thailand celebrate cultural wellness by connecting guests to the destination in authentic and meaningful ways

By Sandra Ramani

Four Seasons Resort Chiang Mai



As we've learned while navigating the challenges of the last year, "wellness" means much more than getting a spa treatment or taking a yoga class—it's about all the ways we nourish our bodies, minds and souls. A big part of that, as we have also seen, is about feeling connected to others, from our inner circles to society at large. Through everything from daily interactions and sharing a laugh to enjoying an art exhibit or live performance, the connections we make contribute to our overall sense of well-being.

For travelers visiting Thailand, these types of connections are part of what makes the country so appealing and fascinating—and a top wellness destination. While famous for its healing therapies (this is the home, after all, of traditional Thai massage, herbal poultice treatments and more), Thailand has always incorporated cultural and spiritual aspects into its wellness offerings. Here, we spotlight hotels across the country that do just that.

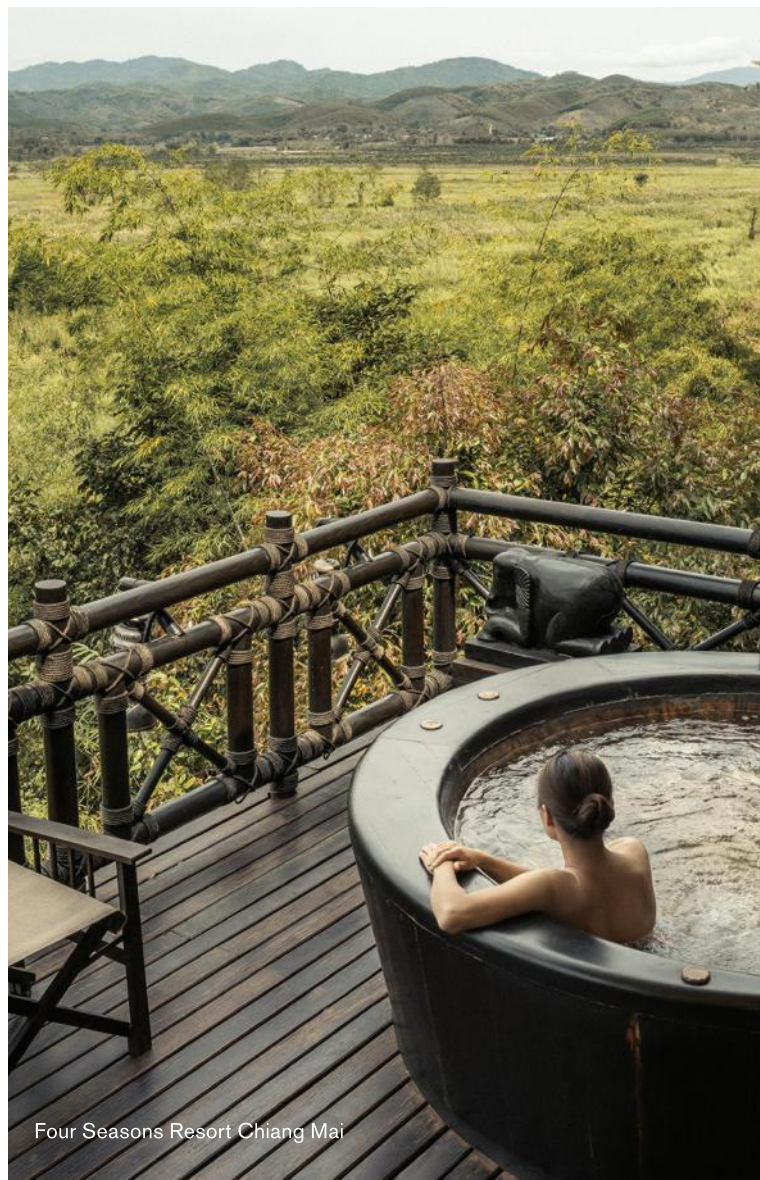
### Chiang Mai

Once the religious, cultural and trade capital of the Lanna Thai dynasty, Chiang Mai is now the second largest city in Thailand—and, according to a recent report by a top U.S. travel magazine, the "friendliest city in the world." Located in the north of the country, the city is known for its wealth of heritage sites, monuments and temples, as well as for being a culinary hotspot and a great place to learn how to cook signature Lanna and Northern Thai-style dishes, which are influenced by the flavors of nearby Laos and Myanmar.

Located in the countryside about an hour and a half outside of the city, amid lush rice paddies and views of misty mountains, Four Seasons Resort Chiang Mai offers an array of activities that connect guests with the local culture. Get a feel for the agricultural life with lessons in rice planting and buffalo bathing, or try your hand at Thai kick-boxing with the in-house expert. Day trips to visit the villages of the indigenous hill tribes or to go hiking or river rafting further help bring the rural areas of the region to life.

And then there's the food. Guests can learn more about signature Northern Thai dishes, traditional cooking styles and locally grown products, herbs and seasonings at the resort's Rim Tai Kitchen Cooking Academy. Led by in-house chefs, the offered experiences include a morning shopping trip to a local food market to select fresh ingredients, followed by a cooking class and meal; in the afternoon, you'll visit area kitchen shops where you can purchase essential tools and handmade tableware. Children's classes are also available.

[fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com)



Four Seasons Resort Chiang Mai





## Bangkok

Sprung from the creative mind of noted interior designer Bill Bensley, The Siam is an oasis amid the bustle of Bangkok. Located in a less touristy part of the city, the hotel is set on three riverside acres dotted with verdant gardens, courtyards and an infinity pool. Greenery is found indoors, too, with a mini forest of trees running the length of the ground floor. Throughout the property, antiques, vintage memorabilia and striking artwork help give the place a dreamy, back-in-time quality—which helps make it a true retreat, as well.

Cruises and boat shuttles departing from the hotel's private dock help connect guests to the rest of the city, but there are plenty of authentic experiences available on-site, too. The Siam is home to the first professional-level luxury Muay Thai gym in the city, and offers guests the opportunity to train with a master in the fitness art form for anytime from one day to one week. Cooking classes are also held in a traditional wooden house overlooking the Chao Phraya River.

Most unique, though, is The Siam's in-house Sak Yant tattoo studio, led by a noted master who boasts a roster of celebrity clients. Based on 2,000-year-old traditions, Sak Yant tattoos typically feature geometric, animal or deity symbols, and are said to be like "prayers" on the body, imparting the bearer with powers for good luck and protection. The hotel's master uses traditional tools and techniques (with modern safety and hygiene protocols, of course) to impart the tattoos, and works with the guests to find the designs that would be most meaningful to them. Located near the superb spa, the studio itself feels more like a meditation room—making the whole experience fit right into the cultural wellness realm.

*thesiamhotel.com*

## Krabi

An expansive white-sand beach and views of the Andaman Sea and its rocky islands set the backdrop for Phulay Bay, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve resort on the southern Thai island of Krabi. This is the ultimate beachfront resort, with gorgeous, oversized rooms, spa-like bathrooms, butler service and spa treatments rooted in Thai traditions and herbal ingredients. Guests can spend their days strolling on the beach, enjoying speedboat rides out to the Phi Phi Islands, exploring the Tiger Cave Temple or hiking past waterfalls up to the peak of Naga Mountain. In the evenings, gourmet cuisine—both Thai and Western—awaits at the resort restaurants, many of which have sea views.

The resort also celebrates local flavors with chef-led cooking classes, while complimentary longtail boat trips out to Hong Island—which is actually a collection of a few pristine, beach-ringed islands—and to the nearby Ao Thalane Mangrove Forest help bring the tropical destination to life. Also complimentary are sessions with the Thai Culture Experts, who are actually staff members (from an array of departments) who have a personal passion or skill that they are open to sharing with guests. Open to all ages, these casual sessions might include a resort driver sharing his expert skills in carving and creating shadow puppets, for example, or another team member detailing their love for batik or weaving.

*ritzcarlton.com*



## Chiang Rai

Located in the far north of the country, where the borders of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar meet, the hilltop Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort is spread out over 160 acres of jungle landscape, ensuring that all guests see for miles is lush greenery. Given the location, the resort is uniquely positioned to offer visits to an array of authentic Thai spots—from ancient temples, pagodas and palaces to local markets—as well as day trips to Laos and Myanmar, where you can get a glimpse at life on the other side of those borders. Tuk-tuk rides, longtail boat trips and more also help showcase traditional life in the north, while cooking classes, yoga sessions and herbal-based treatments—performed at the three-story spa surrounded by views of rice paddies—are also available.

But given the resort's perch in the heart of elephant country—in a region where generations of villagers have worked as mahouts (elephant owners/trainers)—the heart of the hotel lies in educating guests on these gentle giants. The renowned on-site elephant camp—which is ethically operated alongside Anantara's Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation—is both an educational and research facility, and home to a stable of rescued pachyderms as well as their entire mahout families. Guests can join the mahouts and either a vet or biologist on a Walking with the Giants experience, during which they will accompany the graceful animals as they roam along a river and through grasslands and forests.

Along the way, the experts will speak about the elephants' biology and behavior, and guests can help feed them snacks.

The resort also introduced the Jungle Bubbles, two custom-designed domes set on raised wooden decks in the forest. For an additional fee, guests can spend one night of their stay in these unique suites to get the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to relax, sleep and wake up to views of the grazing elephants in their natural habitat. (They are also prime spots for stargazing.) Each air-conditioned bubble features a bedroom with a king bed, a lounge area, mini-bar and an attached (and non-transparent) bathroom with shower. The overnight experience also includes a dinner for two that can be enjoyed while you're watching the best show around.

With this introduction of the bubbles, the resort is able to allow the elephants to live undisturbed by humans, while still giving guests an up-close look at the majestic beasts. It's also another way in which funds can be raised to benefit the camp and foundation's endeavors, which include establishing research clinics and conservation centers in other parts of Thailand, and supporting mahouts and their families with education and financial help. The Foundation also built the world's only facility to scientifically research elephant intelligence and behavior, and runs a program to teach scientific positive reinforcement-based training methods to traditional mahouts. [anantara.com](http://anantara.com)

