



Museflower Retreat & Spa is located on the outskirts of Chiang Rai in northern Thailand.

NOT YOUR USUAL WELLNESS BREAK IN CHIANG RAI

A holistic wellness sanctuary far from the city offers a physical and mental detox. **BY PAYAL DHAR**

Yoga retreats are believed to be great enablers in reconnecting with yourself, and for mental and physical detoxing. A retreat, in particular, is folded inside a lush, tropical landscape, far enough from the hurly-burly of urban life to make it seem like the middle of nowhere. I learnt two life-changing things about myself at Museflower's three-night yoga getaway—one, I'll never be a farmer; two, when backed against the metaphoric wall, I can swallow my debilitating dislike of worms, and escort them off the premises.

Museflower is located on the outskirts of Chiang Rai in northern Thailand. Not to be confused with the larger and busier Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai is a laidback place, where the most exciting thing that happens during the day is probably the changing of traffic lights. Yet, it houses some spectacular temples and museums—and if you

know anything about Thailand, you would know that 'spectacular' takes on a whole new meaning in architecture here—and at night, a variety of bazaars light up the sky.

But the city itself is a mere footnote in this story. I was headed to Museflower Retreat & Spa, a 'holistic wellness sanctuary' as per its founder and owner Tania Ho. As a small and exclusive eco-resort, Museflower offers balms for both body and soul through their spa and yoga retreats, and regular workshops that foster well-being and creativity.

Metalled roads end about two kilometres from Museflower, and by the time you get there, you have already disconnected. Since I arrived well before the 2 pm check-in, I

had plenty of time to kill. After the formalities—which included a briefing about my schedule with the rigour of a military training course—the receptionist Tony took me on a tour of the property. If I wasn't already enraptured by Museflower, the walk around the resort did it.

There are 16 guest rooms—or bungalows as they call them—arranged around a sprawling garden with a landscaped pond. Despite the careful tending, the space manages a sense of wild abandon. From my air-conditioned room and even from my personal sit-out, I could almost imagine I was camping out in the tropical wilderness.

The Butterfly Room is the usual yoga and workout venue, while the beautiful wooden lakeside Pavilion hosts various wellness activities. The lake itself—you're free to swim in it—features a floating deck with recliners to read or laze on, provided you are game to battle the heat and humidity by day and mosquitoes by evening. Across the lake is the Soul Food Corner, the dining area and kitchen, and a small common room. The latter is the only public space with air-conditioning apart from the gym. There is also an organic farm, but more about that later.

The other main Museflower landmarks are the spa complex, with a sauna and mineral bath, and the pool and gym complex. The Himalayan salt crystal pool here soon became my favourite place. You get used to the saltwater very quickly and you definitely get used to your eyes not stinging from chlorine.



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The Butterfly Room is usually the yoga and workout venue at the retreat.

My retreat package would have officially got underway with a group yoga class in the afternoon, but the 60-minute functional training session at 4 pm caught my eye and I asked for a switch. Our trainer was Watchararat Srichamroen—A for short—a yoga, tai chi, and qigong instructor among other things. I had already crossed paths with A during a workout session at the retreat's gym, and I should have known from the gleam in her eye that she had sized me up. My only workout companion, a Dutch woman, smiled gamely through the intense session, but bloodshed might have been contemplated.

Night falls early at Museflower, or at least it seems to, particularly because dinner, the last meal of the day, starts at 6 pm, and by 8 pm, the kitchen is closed. Famished after my 60-minute Tabata workout with A, I had an early dinner of noodle soup with mushrooms, a stuffed duck-egg omelette, potato chips on the side, a dragon fruit and persimmon for dessert, post which, I set out in the direction of my bungalow.

With minimal lighting in the outdoor spaces (to avoid disturbing the local creepy-crawlies and larger creatures), navigating the winding paths seemed akin to a tropical jungle adventure—looming shadows of mysterious trees, rustling in the bushes, calls of night insects, a spooky cat hissing at something unseen, and most of all, the paths indistinguishable from one another. In other words, I got lost and suffered the ignominy of having to call at the lobby for help. It was the closest I've come to losing my way in a forest, and it was quite enough.

Next morning, the sight of breakfast relegated my jungle trauma to the back of my mind. Breakfast was my favourite meal at Museflower, with the wholesome spread of fresh local fare, eggs to order, cereal, and





fruit. After the morning group yoga class and meditation, I was scheduled for a half-day sightseeing tour to see some of Chiang Rai's attractions, including the magnificent White Temple and Blue Temple, and the maverick genius of Thawan Duchanee at the Baan Dam Museum (or Black House).

Back at Museflower, frazzled from the heat and humidity, I was more than ready for my scheduled wellness activity—a body alignment massage at the magical hands of Kanlayanee Marthuean, or Jang as everyone called her. Imagine an hour-long stretching session where all you need to do is lie down. I had been nursing a deltoid muscle injury, so I had some trepidation about the way Jang coaxed, twisted, and pounded the kinks out of my body. But when she was done, I was able to touch the middle of my back with my left hand for the first time in four months. It was magical.

My morning yoga class the next day turned out to be a solo one, again in the company of A and her cheeky grin. I had expected the yoga to be traditional. Instead, A customised a lower-body balance and stretch torture, with a few yoga elements supplementing it. It was challenging, as was the walking meditation she introduced me to afterwards. This left me alert and charged, very unusual for a night owl like me, who is usually grumpy until lunchtime.



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▶ Museflower's organic produce goes into their homemade Lacto-Ovo-vegetarian cuisine.

▼ The kitchen rustles up delicious, yet healthy, fare thrice a day.



That morning, Tony also took me on a farm tour, showing me their organic and aquaponic (out of commission for repairs at that time) vegetable farm. Kitted out in boots and gloves, sweating even at 8.30 am, he announced, "You are going to feed the ducks and then collect the eggs." Then he handed me a basket. We shall draw a veil over the proceedings, except to say that I collected a dozen eggs and made a satisfying Thai omelette with one of them for breakfast.

Museflower's organic produce goes into their homemade Lacto-Ovo vegetarian cuisine. Helmed by the versatile Dada and aided by the cheerful Mookie, the kitchen at the Soul Food Centre rustles up delicious, healthy fare thrice a day. They serve no bread, no refined sugar, and no additives. Local flowers and fruits are used as food colouring, and every morning a fresh pot of lemongrass, butterfly pea flower, or chrysanthemum infusions is laid out. You can get used to this diet—the fried greens, the noodle-and-vegetable soups, the coconutty desserts, and the variety of fresh fruit, particularly the yellow watermelon.



▲ Trained wellness practitioners hold group yoga sessions at Museflower Retreat & Spa.

▶ The 16 guest rooms at the retreat are arranged around a sprawling garden.

▼ You can see some magnificent temples and rice fields on a sightseeing tour from the retreat.



On my final morning at Museflower, I attended a yoga session by Eugenie Lenain, a freelance practitioner from Nantes, France, who has made Chiang Rai her home. Again, rather than traditional yoga, it was a deep hip-opening workout—slow, but challenging. Thus, loosened up, it was time for one final workout, this one for the mind. Founder Tania Ho, a trained wellness practitioner herself, led me and four other guests in a Soul Care Workshop, a gentle guided meditation to 'connect with our ancestors'.

I could nit-pick about the technicalities of yoga or roll my eyes at 'connecting' with dead relatives, but underneath all my scepticism, Museflower turned out to be a surprisingly humbling experience. Travel writing, particularly about Asia, is laced with Orientalist overtones; frankly, it's racist. At a retreat that was largely tailored to a Western, maybe white, clientele, being the only South Asian was an illuminating experience. Yes, I found some casual appropriation, but I also found a desperate need among my fellow retreaters for a kind of reaffirmation that they had travelled far, some literally, some metaphorically, to find. A hulking Scottish man in his 50s or 60s cried in a room full of strangers because the ancestral meditation reminded him of his lost connection with his parents. A Dutch woman travelling across Asia with her family had taken a few days alone to recharge. A Singaporean woman was on her annual pilgrimage-with-self. And I, determinedly sceptical yet unwittingly charmed by Museflower's gentle soul. +



GETTING THERE

Chiang Rai airport has daily flights coming in from Bangkok and Phuket, which are well connected to Indian metros. Museflower can arrange for airport pick-ups.

STAY

Museflower Retreat & Spa offers standard double rooms (with fans), and superior triples and doubles (with AC), including a superior room with waterbeds. Tariff starts at ₹4,550, including three meals and one wellness activity. museflowerretreat.com