

Change of pace



Wipa Nareerak is transforming Thailand's Amatar from a leisure resort to a luxury wellness destination built on first-class Thai hospitality. **Amanda Pauley** talks to the resort's general manager about the move

As of November last year, Wipa Nareerak has been implementing change at Amatar Wellness Resort in Phuket, Thailand, taking on the role of general manager at the ocean-view destination spa. Nareerak is the first Thai person in the position and as such plans to use her heritage to strengthen the brand around Thai hospitality, as well as drawing on her 20 years' experience teaching yoga and working in well-known beach resorts such as Absolute Sanctuary in Koh Samui.

"Thai culture is very soft and gentle, and this makes us better listeners. It shows in the quality of our services and training," says Nareerak. "I always remind staff that 'we are Thai' – our mission is to provide a memorable stay >



Clockwise: Amatara's lobby area, external view of the grounds, a couple's treatment room, the yoga sala

so guests return. At the moment, 90% of our customer feedback is about the helpful staff. Our service is key to the resort's success."

Nareerak is in charge of establishing Amatara as a luxury wellness destination in Thailand and making it one of the big players in the industry. She is doing this by focusing on three core pillars – the "authentic and warm" Thai service, health-driven wellness packages and a refresh of key facilities. It's a big job, but Nareerak is by no means fazed.

"Amatara didn't start out as a wellness resort. It developed into one over time because of its great potential for wellness due to its location, staff and identity. The business is strong on offering a luxury experience for guests who just book in for leisure but it needs to develop more packages for the health-orientated wellness guest," she explains. "Our client mix is split between wellness and leisure, which is a challenge, but we need to motivate all guests to be in line with our new direction."

Leisure vs wellness

Current figures show that, on average, 20% of guests who visit for leisure book in to the resort again, while wellness clients make up 5% of return custom, but this figure is growing "because we are still new in the wellness market and cementing our reputation", says Nareerak. Europeans and Asians make up the majority of the resort's returning guests, and trying to offer something that appeals to both of these cultures can be challenging.



"It's about trying to find something for everyone. For Asian guests, it's all about the health boom. Their typical stay is three to five days and focused on a health-orientated experience – they want to destress while being active," she explains.

"Meanwhile, European guests come for longer, a week or more, and their goal is to get away from the stress of work. They want to relax and pamper themselves with traditional and spiritual Thai spa treatments."

The resort offers a variety of wellness packages, including Weight Management, Detox, Spa Revive and Active, but Nareerak plans to add more as it expands further into wellness. Staying true to the resort's Thai roots, all programmes include access to the Thai hammam experience, which blends traditional Turkish and Moroccan bathing practices with "the gentleness of Thai spa therapies," she adds.

Marketing services to families has been a great touch point for creating new clients, "as we have a combination of facilities that work for people of all ages," explains Nareerak. "So, if a family came to stay, the mother might do a wellness programme, the children can enjoy the Kid's Club [a supervised area dedicated to looking after kids from four to 12 years old, which offers group exercise classes such as yoga and kickboxing] and the husband could rejuvenate by the pool."

Staff are also introducing leisure guests to the site's wellness services in smart ways, based on the client's record and



preferences. “For example, guests on a leisure holiday may be dealing with back pain, so they could benefit from seeing one of our physiotherapists on the wellness programme, which we can easily add on to their holiday itinerary,” explains Nareerak. “We want them to tap into some aspect of wellness and take that home with them.”

New era of customisation

This leads on to Nareerak’s biggest project of the year, progressing into more personalised programmes – “figuring out how we can further enhance guests’ stay and help them reach their wellness goals,” she says.

All guests will be given a complimentary wellness consultation when they arrive, which would result in a recommended à la carte menu of treatments and activities, rather than undergoing a full pre-set wellness programme.

Staff have also been trained on wellness cuisine, so now they know how to take care of wellness guests’ dietary needs. “They need to know before the guest arrives what meals we’re supposed to serve them that perfectly fit with the package they’re booked in for,” says Nareerak. “It really is a new way of thinking for our staff.” The spa is also working with visiting practitioners to expand its wellness offering, including the likes of metta healing with David Stojanovic and self-healing with Leela Sylvia Isani.

The wellness centre is undergoing an uplift, with everything due to be completed

by April 2019, as WSW went to print. “We’ve started refreshing a few areas already but because of the high occupancy of the spa, we’re looking into doing it section by section to cause minimal disruption,” explains Nareerak.

The spa has also taken on French skincare brand Guinot’s anti-ageing firming facial technology, previously only offering the brand’s body treatments. Apart from being results-driven, Nareerak says Guinot was chosen because it has a good heritage and “helps attract more European clients”, adding, “It is challenging sometimes if all the product houses we use in the spa are ones they’ve not heard of before.”

Nareerak is also planning to increase the number of PT sessions the resort offers with its in-house trainers so it can target a broader range of clients. “I want to bring all these elements of wellness together – spa, holistic therapies, fitness and lifestyle – into a successful 360-degree offer,” she adds. **WSW**

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