

A taste of Thai in Punta Cana

anne dimon, for Metro Canada
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Mixed in with the snorkeling, wind-surfing, deep-sea diving and other waterfront activities typical of beachfront hotels everywhere, the upscale community of Punta Cana Resort & Club in the Dominican Republic offers weekly activities of a more holistic kind.

The week I visited, the scheduled activity was Crystal Bowl Sound Healing. Available to groups of eight to 10, it's an optional spa activity that's actually included in the price of a stay.

Located about a five-minute golf-cart shuttle from this sprawling resort's main lobby is the Asian-themed Six Senses Spa. Headquartered in Bangkok, Six Senses is a collection of spas sprinkled throughout Asia, the Middle East and Europe, but this is the only one in the Americas and it's one of the best in the Dominican Republic.

It's not huge — just eight treatment rooms plus two outside treatment areas — but it is well appointed with Thai-inspired decor and many of the therapists are from Thailand.

The Crystal Bowl Sound Healing session takes place inside the spa's spacious candlelit couples suite.

Thailand-born and trained therapist Noom Paweennuch Soisongsee, who studied with a master sound healer in her homeland, begins the class by distributing mats and asking us to find a comfortable place on the floor.

She explains that sound generated by the chakra-tuned "singing" crystal and silver bowls can have a powerful healing effect as the vibrations resonate through the body.

We begin sitting in a yoga pose with eyes closed as Noom takes us through a series of breathing exercises.

Once relaxed, we watch as she performs a ritual of cleansing and energizing the bowls — three are made of crystal and the fourth is a cherished silver bowl given to her by the "master." While lying in our relaxed poses we listen to her playing the bowls and singing mantras in Sanskrit. I cannot vouch for the healing aspects of the treatment, but I can say the pure, angelic notes emanating from these bowls seem to have a transporting quality and are profoundly relaxing. Guests can also book the experience on a one-on-one basis.

One of the core purposes of the Six Senses brand is to create experiences in a "sustainable environment" and this makes for a good partnership with Punta Cana Resort & Club. The development is all about sustainability. They even have their own Ecological Foundation maintaining (among other things) an eco reserve, an organic garden that services the resort's restaurants and residential community, and an aviary producing as much as 250 litres of honey in a high-season month.

Ecological director Jack Kheel says the honey bees are local and some of them were "rescued" after they built hives in local residences including the home of designer Oscar de la Renta.

"The honey is 100 per cent pure," says Kheel. It's harvested, filtered, bottled and sold locally through the foundation's own organic market. The spa uses the honey mixed with oatmeal and milk for exfoliating the skin, and mixed with yogurt as a cleanser in the 90-minute Natural Thai Facial, which is \$138 US. The honey is also used to sweeten their signature ginger tea.

Other treatments using local products include the 40-minute Natural Sunburn Soother, \$50 US, with aloe vera that's picked fresh from the spa's own garden, then hand ground and mixed with lavender to form a soothing balm.

There's a cleansing Tropical Fruit Body Smoother using local papaya, watermelon, pineapple and rice grains.

Several chocolate treatments, like the chocolate-and-rose-petal soak they whipped up for me to try, are made with fresh cacao from Santo Domingo.

Sun, sand, surf and chocolate. How can you beat that?

On the web

For more info on Six Senses Spa and the Punta Cana Resort & Club, visit www.sixsenses.com and www.puntacana.com

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six senses spa
The sunporch at the Six Senses Spa in the Dominican Republic.