



SPAS WARS

(EPISODE V: THE EMPIRE STRIPS WAX)

Chiva-Som has ruled the pampering universe for more than a decade, but a new Six Senses is trying to lure these famous faces and their unbalanced chi. Susan d'Arcy checks in for a clash of the Thai titans



Chiva-Som is the Manchester United of destination spas: a seemingly invincible force, feared and revered by rivals. For almost 15 years, this tiny Thai resort has been the place where the likes of Kate Winslet, Elle Fanning and Liz Hurley retreat to hone their bodies.

But has Chiva-Som finally met its Mountain? The Special One, in this case, is the Six Senses Destination Spa Phuket (pictured), which recently opened with the daring claim that it is now the premier spa of the 21st century.

Will it topple Chiva-Som from the top of the league? We lined the two teams up for the spa equivalent of 'The Big Match' — and here's the running commentary.

First impressions: from the white, Six Senses is piling on the pressure. The resort sits on the lush hillside of a sleepy fishing island off the coast of Phuket. From its pristine golden beach there are sublime, time-stands-still views over the cool-green Andaman Sea over the limestone cliffs that were immortalised in the 1964 film *The Man with the Golden Gun*. It feels instantly glamorous and admirably exclusive.

Chiva-Som, on the other hand, is

their design favouring windows over walls, but rooms are somehow still resoundingly prime.

The driftwood decor means lengths of timber are lashed together with thick rope, lampshades are made from white muslin, with acres of cool indoor and outdoor living areas, fabulous atrioo bathrooms and sexy plunge pools. The beachfronters extraordinary glass-based loungers.

Soreline: Six Senses 2, Chiva-Som 0

Services: this is where Chiva-Som comes into its own. Bautiful surroundings encourage an overall sense of well-being, but good service does it too — and at the old favourite, it's almost a

form of therapy in itself. Many of the team have been at the resort since it first opened — they're sick, yet still their work — they're sick, yet still charming.

At Six Senses, staff are gracious, but have yet to get to grips with basic protocols. Service is inconsistent and, at times, borderline incompetent, which quickly causes cracks in your karma. It's bound to improve, but it will take some time before it challenges Chiva-Som's exemplary level.

Soreline: Six Senses 2, Chiva-Som 1

Food: as weight loss is a key reason for many spa visits, this is crucial. At Six Senses, the meat-free cuisine was worryingly bland. Dinner at the rav-food restaurant made the thought

of chewing on a rubber band strangely exciting.

And Chiva-Som? Its executive chef, Pichan Chienonakwint, is nicknamed 'Chef' and is 100% into it. Like a wife and still somehow lost 3lb in as many days.

Soreline: Six Senses 2, Chiva-Som 2

Treatments: Chiva-Som has excellent resident therapists, but also attracts some leading practitioners from around the globe as visiting experts. Walking down the stairs at its spa dispensary, with wall-to-wall plasterwork and built-in shelves full of herbs and oils, to a department-store beauty hall but once your session begins, all reservations dissolve. This is quality 'me' time.

Practically all the key personnel (including the general manager) have previously worked at Chiva-Som and are, therefore, some of the best in the business, but they prefer the pure take on holistic health at Six Senses. Over the years, Chiva-Som's principles have been refined and its spa has adapted to cater for the needs of its guests, from the little company to the big ones, such as in-room televisions, to rather contradictory bigger ones, such as

The two-storey Indian spa is set around a courtyard with intricate fretwork and delicate filigree. The authentically simple Thai spa is elevated to the exotic by borders of hand-carved teak wood. The spa includes Indonesian centre hot steamy saunas, a sunken bath and an eye-catching watsu pool.

Travel details: Charter (0161 491 7650, charter.co.uk) has a week at Six Senses for £1,200 (on all prices 9pp), including flights, transfers, and treatments daily; a week at Chiva-Som is from £2,670pp, full-board, with one treatment daily and a spa credit of £240; both include flight from London, and transfers. Or try Kuoni (01206 747006, kuoni.co.uk) or Elegant Resorts (01294 897906, elegantresorts.co.uk). Chiva-Som files from Heathrow and Manchester. Six Senses is on an island in Phuket. For more information, visit www.chiva-som.com or www.sixsenses.com or Thai Airways (0870 666 0211, thaiairways.co.uk).

offering cosmetic surgery and providing a smoking area. Overall, Six Senses carries the wellness flame with greater conviction.

Final score: Six Senses 3, Chiva-Som 2

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