

EDEN IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

You don't need to trek long haul to find an exotic oasis, Montaz Begum-Hossain discovers Eastern Promise in Spain



With less than six months to go until we tie the knot, my fiancé and I have been swamped by the mammoth task of organising *the* event of the year. From finalising guest lists to short-listing entertainment, the pressure had been eating us up. So it was a blessing to be whisked off for a long weekend of luxury pampering to enjoy some well deserved 'we time'. Just a couple of hours from the UK, Barceló Asia Gardens Hotel and Thai Spa on the Spanish Mediterranean coast is the ideal pre wedding getaway, a dream hen destination for your bridesmaids and offers an exotic honeymoon for couples seeking the magic of an Eastern oasis without the strain of a long haul flight. Set in an acre of pine forests and built on three levels into the foothills of the striking Sierra Cortina Mountains, Asia Gardens offers five star hospitality, exquisite fusion cuisine, spacious Balinese themed bedrooms and authentic Thai spa treatments.

A magical setting

Comprising a series of pyramid shaped pavilions with thatched roofs that contrast against striking red walls; the architecture is incredible. The soaring lobby ceilings lead you to your first glimpse of the stunning



gardens, pools and sea view. Alongside the Asian artefacts that adorn the walls are intricately carved wooden doorways that once graced Indian and Thai palaces. As we stepped into the luscious gardens that characterise the hotel and strolled along the winding paths beside 1000 varieties of exotic plants and flowers, we felt as though we were a million miles away from civilisation.

Enjoy a room with a view

Complete with Japanese-inspired sliding glass screen doors that reveal an en-suite

Honeymoon must-dos

Take a dive: With seven swimming pools to choose from, it's only right you pack a swimsuit for each one. A perfect start to the day; opt for a morning refresher, afternoon splash or night time skinny dip.

Embark on a private flight: Take a helicopter ride over the resort and explore the breathtaking mountainous backdrops

before landing at the hotel's heliport.

Build up a sweat: Get your trainers on and explore the exotic gardens that wind around the resort. Underneath a canopy of tropical foliage you can jog along together and take in the picturesque views.

Land a hole in one: Challenge your other half to a spot of golf in one of

the two spectacular adjacent 18 hole courses designed by Jack Nicklaus.

Propose a toast: The lobby's champagne lounge is a perfect place to quench your thirst or head to the Bonsai Terrace overlooking a tranquil water pool where you can sample fresh and fruity cocktails throughout the day.



bathroom, each of the 312 bedrooms are the perfect hideaway to escape the midday sun where you can snuggle up in kimono style robes and slippers and watch movies. There is also a choice of deluxe suites with four-poster beds, panoramic views and a private Jacuzzi. For the ultimate luxurious experience there's an impressive Presidential Suite on the top level of the hotel with glass chandeliers, separate kitchen and living area.

Indulge in 'we time'

Wafts of incense and aromatherapy oils draw you into the hotel's calming Thai Spa; a tranquil haven of relaxation. Couples can unwind in private cabins with a petal strewn spa bath. Two of the cabins have Tatami style beds for massage and reflexology and raised beds where scrubs, wraps and Ayurvedic treatments, can be offered in addition to a hydrotherapy pool with outdoor swimming area and Turkish steam bath. We opted for a traditional nuat phaen boran massage inside an outdoor tree house where we were stretched and pressed while gazing across the gardens and mountain backdrop. This was followed by a relaxing afternoon spent on sun loungers sipping the best herbal tea I've ever consumed; made of fresh flowers, and dried fruits and with a delicate sweet flavour. Having trained at the Wat Po

Temple in Bangkok the Spa's therapists are experts, providing a genuine Thai experience. Keeping with the holistic theme we attended a morning Qigong session and were so hypnotised by the harmonious movements that we've vowed to continue practising ancient exercises when we get home.

Dine like royalty

On our first night we headed to In Black, one of the resorts divine evening venues, an intimate gourmet restaurant holding just 35 guests. Our meal was preceded by a delicious iced apple and cucumber soup served with warm fruity scones which we devoured on a candlelit patio while listening to a live frog chorus. For main there was a plethora of seafood dishes to try including scallops and seabass. In keeping with the resort's commitment to chocoholics, dessert consisted of a mini chocolate coulant served with chocolate soup and white chocolate foam. At the oriental fusion Koh Samui restaurant on our second night we fully immersed ourselves in Thai culture and dined on spicy beancurd and Sayur Asam soup with stewed jackfruits. Lunchtimes were just as elaborate; we sampled paella by the poolside Palapa Bar while for breakfast gorged on a lavish buffet at Udaipur Restaurant which served warm pastries and fresh fruits. The evening's

NEED TO KNOW

Where to stay: Barcelo Asia Gardens Hotel and Thai Spa, www.asiagardens.es.

Room/suite prices: From £218-£1240 per night.

Flights: Return tickets on Monarch Airlines cost from £152 travelling from London Gatwick to Alicante Airport. Other airlines include British Airways, KLM and Iberia.

Treatments: From £45 for a body massage to £350 for a full day of treatments including lunch.

Temperature: An average of 19 degrees centigrade, reaching up to 35 in the summer months.



entertainment took place in the Bonsai Terrace where live jazz continues until 2am. Finding a paradise so close to home made the trip extra special. After spending our days by the infinity pools, breathing in the refreshing aromatic air, discovering the resort's natural wildlife (including cute fluffy bunnies) and being pampered in the spa, we're now both feeling ready to start tackling the wedding planning again. □