

THE CULTURAL COMPASS



VITAL ENERGY

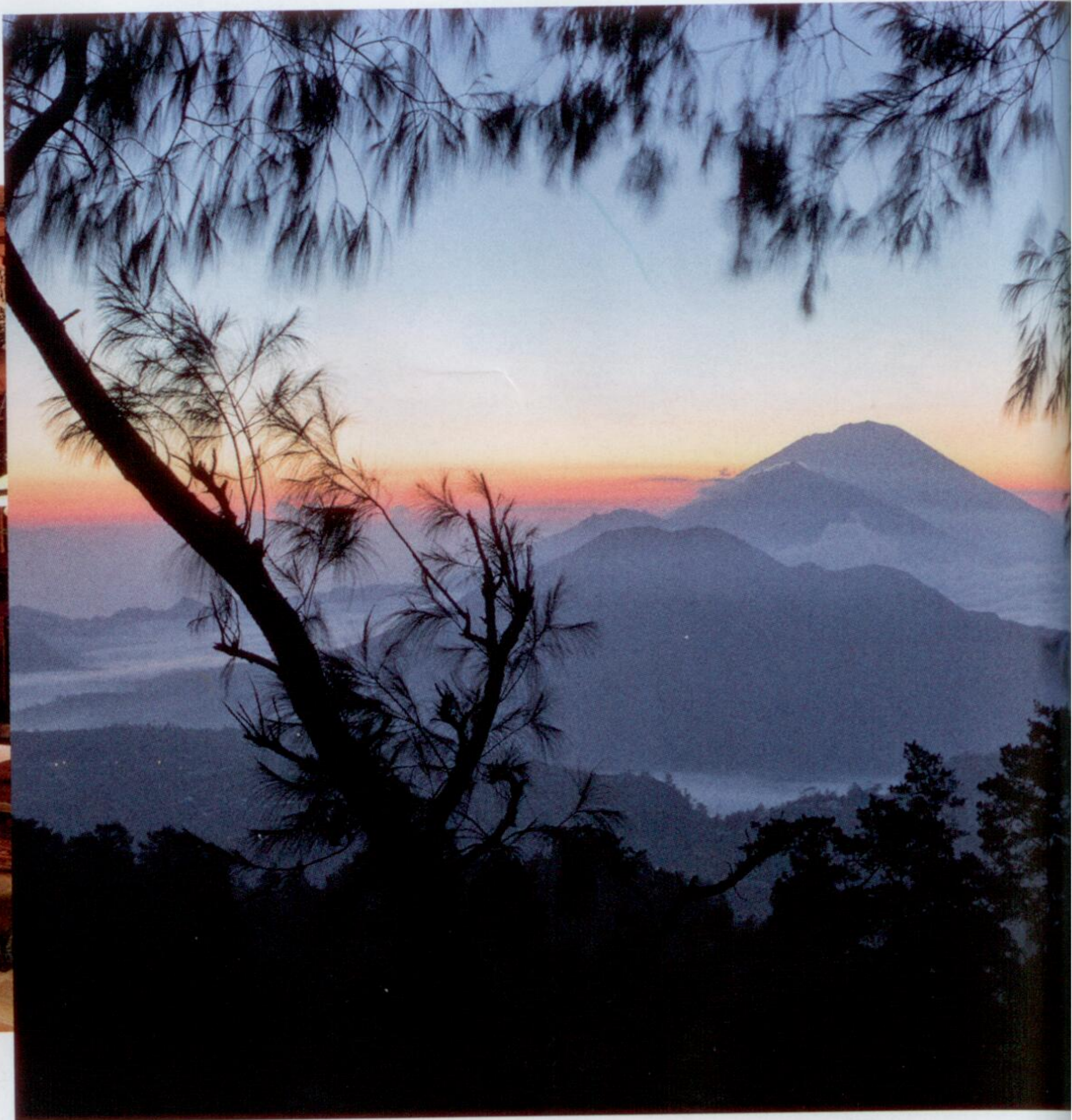
AMONG ASIAN SPAS, BALI'S COMO SHAMBHALA HAS ALWAYS BEEN A BIG HITTER. NOW ITS FOCUS ON WELLNESS IS SHARPER THAN EVER

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE JUNGLE, AS THE SUN COMES UP, there is pilgrimage to swim in a healing pool, 100 steps down a ravine watched over by an ancient Ganesh sitting with his garland of marigolds, eternally guarding the site. The water is cool and silky. Just stepping into it and then ducking deep feels like some sort of ceremony of consecration, one that is well worth the journey to get here.

Back in 2005, when hotelier Christina Ong opened her flagship wellness property, COMO Shambhala, the Balinese village of Ubud was attracting a scrappy mess of itinerant backpackers who had wandered inland to the paddy fields. The mosquitoes were rife, but so were stories of the spiritual energy of the place and tales of its healing powers. Bali has always been a challenging spot to get to, with flights arriving via Jakarta or Bangkok, Singapore or Hong Kong. It takes a dedicated traveler to commute to that 22-hour schlep from New York. But the estate—graceful, grand, beautifully designed—soon carved itself a reputation as one of the most glorious places to stay on the planet. Wellness was always at the fore, yes, but in its early stages the hotel

Clockwise from left: At COMO Shambhala, a bath detail, chilled cucumber soup at Kudus House restaurant, the Bayugita residence

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➤ was primed for indulgent indolence, a jungly bolt-hole for newlyweds, with a side order of soul soothing.

As of last year, though, things have become more serious. If you want to tap into the magic of its wellness programs, you must commit to three nights, at the bare minimum. There may be just four plans to choose from—Ayurvedic, Be Active, Bespoke, or Cleanse—but they are rooted in what works rather than what's on trend, exquisitely devised to suit both the burned-out businessperson and the anxious millennial, the exhausted parent and the party-hard Peter Pan. It is for those who need a restorative reboot, both physically and mentally, and often emotionally too.

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A probing pre-arrival questionnaire, plus discussions with a team of experts—Oriental medicine specialist Paula Choi, Ayurveda practitioner Dr. Prasanth, chakra healer Dewa Sulendra—results in a meticulously personalized itinerary, though yoga will almost certainly form the bedrock of your reset. There is also Pilates and Qigong, a powerful combination of Asian-based therapies and bodywork; pranayama meditation; and Japanese acupuncture, all offered with group activities and guided estate walks.

If the spa is full, you'll never notice it. Occasionally you pass other guests, smiling vaguely, blissed-out, quiet. The 30 rooms, suites, and pool villas across the property reflect that air of absolute tranquility, seeming to fold into the side of the ravine or dizzily overhang it. Wood, stone, cotton, and silk make up the interiors: natural textures and colors that mimic the surroundings.

All of this adds up to a long-term health-boosting vacation with programs that are impeccably cohesive and holistic. Aside from the influential treatments (done at the highest possible level, by staff cherry-picked from around the world) the key therapeutic element here is the setting. The 23 acres feel like a tamarind-bursting Rivendell, with baby monkeys play fighting on lawns where mists

mysteriously rise and fall. COMO Shambhala sits above a sacred valley. The estate's healing pool is blessed daily by a pair of local Hindu priests. Everywhere, all the time, is the presence of water. The Ayung River surges through the site. It's not a river that murmurs; it has propulsion, limitless energy, the sound shivering up through the trees with such positivity it seems to physically take hold of you, especially in the outdoor yoga pavilion, where early morning classes are also attended, albeit separately, by staff (gardeners, teachers, doctors, waiters), all quietly honing every gesture. It is this energy that draws people back again and again.

The streamlined focus on well-being brings this retreat neck and

neck with South Asia's other big hitters: Chiva-Som, Kamalaya, and the Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru. At a moment when some spas are tripping over themselves to invest in the latest fat-freezing cryo lipolysis machines and install cosmetic nurses for Botox and filler, COMO Shambhala remains true to its Ubud roots: understated, spiritual, transformative. It has an atmosphere of tender resolve. Seriousness without pomposity. No single afternoon will be spent wrapped in algae like a melancholy burrito. Instead there will be outdoor baths in tubs hewn out of rock in view of distant rice terraces shimmering neat and domestic as putting greens, giving on to wild forests full of parrots and wood pigeons fat as ducks calling from banyan trees. The name Ubud itself comes from the word *ubud*, meaning "medicine." And while COMO Shambhala is no medi clinic tapping into its wizard-like healing powers is phenomenally curative in an altogether more authentic way. ANTONIA QUIRKE

Healing Holidays (healingholidays.com) offers a seven-night stay at COMO Shambhala from \$4,729 per person.

Above from left: Kudus House restaurant; a view of Mount Batur and Mount Agung from Pura Puncak Penulisan temple at dawn