

The Spa Specialist

Pornphen Lalitnuntikul, Managing Director of Iwara Spa and American Express Platinum Card Member since 2001, speaks to Laurence Civil about the spa business

THERE COMES A TIME IN EVERYONE'S LIFE WHEN THEY feel after working for other people for so long, its time to open their own company. Pornphen Lalitnuntikul, who has been involved with Thailand's spa

industry, for 10 years of which four were with Banyan Tree in Phuket, it happened too. She eventually founded her own spa company, Iwara Spa.

Her first project was to create and manage Chedi Spa a few metres from Chaweng Beach on the tropical island of Koh Samui. It has been created with total authenticity, down to the very last detail, of which there are many. A miniature rice paddy here, a lotus pond there, all surrounded by traditional, wooden, Ayuddhya-style pavilions, stone 'city' walls, and not forgetting the magnificent chedi structure itself. Pornphen has clearly shown her ability to create the right spa environment.

Success breeds success, senior executives from the Amari group were so impressed with her work at Chedi Spa that they invited her to submit a proposal for a spa brand exclusively for them. Her response was 'Sirawa Spa' the name means 'creator' chosen because she was creating something new and different for Amari. Rather than an established spa operator coming in and telling the hotel group how to operate their spa, Amari first researched the needs of their guests and Pornphen tailor-made the spa concept to match the customer profile.

Sirawa Spas first opened at Amari resorts in Samui, Phuket and Trang and have recently opened in Koh Chang and Bangkok. They will also be opening one at Amari Orchid Pattaya in 2006.

"I am passionate about my job," says Pornphen, "always having to come up with new ideas on how to rejuvenate our guests and customers. We don't just customise the service but also provide the right spa products to suit the needs of each of our customers."

"We must find people with the right



attitude to work in our spas," she continues, "many therapists see working in a spa as a good way to earn a living but it's how they interact with the guest that counts. Eighty per cent of our therapists join with no experience but the right attitude. I have found it's easier to train someone with just the basic knowledge our style than having to handle the excess baggage of previous experience."

"A massage should be in rhythm with the breathing pattern of the guest," she adds, "slow and relaxed. We start teaching our new recruits basic meditation, breathing and stretching, learning to apply the techniques first to themselves before applying it to the guest. Training takes from two to four months but on an average, it's completed in three."

"Once the therapists are in the spa, we have a travelling on-site trainer monitor them for six weeks. Our training manager then will check them out to ensure that they are using the right techniques; final checks are made by me."

A spa experience is not just about a good massage, perfect ambience is needed and Pornphen is more than aware of that. Says she, "The spa experience focuses on all the senses therefore we have a team of design consultants work on floor layout, water elements, music and lighting."

"The majority of visitors to Sirwara Spa are guests staying in a Amari Hotel or Resort and have had little or no previous spa experience. To help them select the right treatment we have created a spa menu that works on four types of massage – soft, a pampering experience, pressure points, sports massage for the athletic and a strong massage for those who think they can take it."

"Even though we give the four options, what they have asked for may not be what they are looking for, so we train our therapists to constantly check with the guest that they are comfortable with the degree of pressure. There may be specific areas that they feel needs treatment or others that should be left alone due to previous injuries."

The passionate entrepreneur feels that the spa industry is still a growing one and is being seen as alternative medicine to managing stress. She elaborates, "When event organisers book conferences at the hotel they often schedule a spa treatment as well. Not so much as a sweetener... they are now realising that a massage can ensure that the attendee is relaxed, rejuvenated and vitalised, thus ensuring that they get more out of the next session."

"The spa must work as a team, resourcing not only the right people but those who can work together is essential. We have three groups of staff who have to be able to interact to give the guest a seamless spa experience – the



therapist who provides the treatment, the receptionist who can explain the treatments to the guest and communicate with the therapist and the spa manager who needs to understand all elements of the spa culture. Our aim is for a zero complaint rate."

In addition to Sirwara Spa for the Amari Group Pornphen is also providing Spa Consultancy for Hotel de la Paix in Siem Reap, Cambodia.

On American Express Experience

She has been a member since 1997 and particularly enjoys joint promotions such as at the Pacific Club, which allows her to entertain her clients.

"I also like the 24 hour service I get from the Platinum Travel Service, I just give them one call, tell them what I want and they take care of all the details. I was once surprised when I got a call from them to let me know a flight I was taking later that day had been rescheduled by half an hour."

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