



KICKING IT

THESE PLACES MAY LOOK LIKE PLUSH RESORTS BUT THIS IS NO HOLIDAY. **GURLEEN KHANIJOUN** VISITS THE HIGH-END REHAB CENTRES THAT AIM TO BREAK THE CYCLE OF ADDICTION



THIS PICTURE

The Cabin rehab centre may look like a resort, but it is no vacation

AT A PLEASANT RESTAURANT IN CHIANG MAI, IT'S TIME FOR lunch. There is an easy, laidback ambience. Many are tucking into generous helpings of grilled salmon with a tangy lemon sauce. Others leave the enclosed space to go to a nearby lawn where they immediately get out their cigarettes. Smoking is allowed here because nicotine is probably the easiest tool with which they can fight stress. "It is the least of all evils," says Alastair Mordey. "You won't crash your car and you won't beat your wife just because you've been smoking a cigarette."



We're in The Cabin, a rehabilitation centre for people suffering from various kinds of addiction. Most seem from their clothes and accessories to be pretty affluent but otherwise they're a mixed bag. A brawny man discusses therapy sessions with a young, slim woman who seems to be friends with everybody. An elegant Italian octogenarian praises the kitchen for providing her with such fine soup then changes tack and suggests that I'd be an ideal wife for her 50-year-old son. Looking into the eyes of our dining companions we can sense aggression, stress, sadness. "We need to teach addicts about real happiness and how to enjoy life's pleasures," says Reeya Chaicharas, the PR manager.

The Cabin is well hidden in a peaceful corner of Chiang Mai, ensuring visitors' complete privacy from locals and tourists. Adapted from an old riverside resort, the establishment is set in a serene tropical garden and offers a comfortable living environment of traditional Thai-style teak villas with modern facilities such as showers, cable TV and DVD players. You can easily imagine enjoying a weekend getaway here. "It's far away from the triggers or temptation that exist in a client's regular environment," says Reeya. "If you're going to stay here for at least 28 days, you may as well be in luxury."

Certified by the Thanyalak Institute on Drug Abuse Treatment, part of the Thai Department of Medical Services, the centre provides treatment programmes for both chemical addictions such as drugs and alcohol and process addictions including sex and gambling; many people



"In therapy, you are as sick as your secrets. And only when you start to share are you on the path to recovery." Alastair Mordey



here are addicted to more than one thing. The Cabin's policy is that addiction is a brain disease, not just a habit. "Dopamine is the main culprit," says Mordey, the programme director. "However old they are, clients suffer symptoms of feeling unrewarded by life. But they feel well and normal when they're drinking or taking drugs." Most such substances target the brain's reward system by flooding the circuits with the neurotransmitter dopamine, leading to a sense of euphoria. "It's very black and white for them. They don't get pleasure from winning a game or getting a promotion the way we would," he continues. "Their brain tells them to seek the drug compulsively, despite its harmful consequences."

The staff at Drug and Alcohol Rehab Asia (Dara Thailand) share the same philosophy. "People come into our care when their life isn't working for them," says Martin Peters, the treatment programme director. As an individual's reward circuitry becomes increasingly dulled and desensitised by drugs, nothing else can compete with them – food, family and friends lose their relative value. To an addicted person, a drug becomes life itself. And the need for help is measured by losses – your job, your spouse, your health or even your will to live. "We see them at varying stages," says Peters. "Some are chronic addicts for years, while others are going through a short experimental period."

In common with many other rehab centres in Thailand, Dara's sites tend to be in the quieter corners of tourist destinations. While Dara Koh Chang provides 40 private villas with a garden view, sea view and pool, Dara Chanthaburi includes 16 private rooms with superior, deluxe

and suite options. All 56 beds operate at an average of 80 per cent occupancy. Facilities at both rehab resorts comprise a fully equipped gym, a meditation centre, massage room and dining area as well as a library lounge. "The location depends entirely on the recovering addicts and their families," says Darren Lockie, the director at Dara. Whether a tropical island or a rural town, again the target market revolves around more affluent users.

Treatments for drug and alcohol addiction are the most common procedures at Dara and The Cabin and both are recognised as leading rehab destinations for foreigners. These are people who often have respectable jobs and lives, businessmen, teachers, sportsmen and even celebrities, and most are over the age of 30. "But a Thai addict is no different from a farang addict," says Lockie. Even when the substance abused varies – the methamphetamine-caffeine blend called *yaa baa* is popular among Thais, cocaine is a perennial favourite among the wealthy while newer crazes such as bath salts and krokodil are constantly cropping up – all addicts undergo the same therapy.

The recovery treatment at The Cabin in Chiang Mai focuses on primary and secondary care to teach clients how to control their addictions and prevent them from a relapse once they return home. After a medical assessment upon arrival, the clients' luggage is checked for possibly harmful items such as pocket knives or mouthwash with alcohol. Those who need serious detoxification are referred to a partner hospital for treatment. For simpler cases, detox and medical care are handled by the in-house medical team. During the stay, clients not only have large private guestrooms, but also full meals with a wide selection of non-alcoholic beverages, pampering services and more importantly, 24-hour nursing as well as in-house personalised medical care. Mobile phones are taken away, except for those who need them for business communication. "We allow clients to interact with their work for a few hours," says Reeya. "They have to return to reality, so it would be wrong to cut off all connections."

The centre likens its programme to a college course. "We have a very strict curriculum," says Mordey. "We keep the clients busy

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Clients can relax by the pool before and after therapy sessions at The Cabin; healthy meals and exercise are an important part of the recovery

OPPOSITE FROM LEFT There is a laidback and relaxing ambience far away from the triggers that exist in a client's regular environment; The Cabin's Alastair Mordey poses with a member of the medical staff

RIGHT

Recovering addicts at Dara Koh Chang dine together in a social setting

OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE**FROM TOP LEFT**

Dara's director, Darren Lockie; Dara offers two rehab resorts with similar facilities; water aerobics is part of the recovery programme; addiction is defined as a brain disease



with a day-long programme, from 9am to 9pm, to slowly change their behaviour, their reactions and the way they think about problems they encounter." While drug abusers may be labelled by some as people who fail to live normally, The Cabin has its own definition of addiction and so tries to raise awareness of its nature as a disease. "The first step is to educate," he says. No doubt some clients will disagree and identify their own illnesses as moral failures. This is often the case with Asian people who may attach a stigma to those suffering from addictive disorders. "There is a lack of understanding. They associate their problems with shame and guilt and they feel it is their fault. We need to break through that misconception." And the road to understanding involves group therapy. "Imagine you hear a judge telling his story. He talks about tearing his clothes off and running down the street. You can relate to his place at rock bottom and you don't feel so bad. And if a judge, doctor or any other high-ranking professional can go through what you've been through, you recognise that it doesn't make you a bad person," says Mordey. "In therapy, you are as sick as your secrets. And only when you start to share are you on the path to recovery."

At Dara, primary care also focuses on group therapy sessions that involve psychological treatment. Both centres employ two therapeutic philosophies – CBT (cognitive behaviour therapy) and Steps to Recovery, a 12-step based treatment programme that is governed by ITM (integrated treatment model). CBT aims to change the way you think. "You have to focus on the fact that you have emotions, but your emotions are not you," says Mordey. "You aren't running away from anything. You have to be able to face what is happening and get used to focusing your attention on your problem. It's not so much what is actually happening to you, but what you think is happening to you." Meanwhile, ITM began in America with Alcoholics Anonymous and is based on Christian teachings. However, addiction has no respect for religious beliefs, culture or ethnicity. "Our clients are from everywhere," says Dara's Lockie. "Many are not very religious, so we have adapted the

12-step programme and use it with other therapy treatments such as journaling, mind mapping and group communication."

Rehabilitation programmes do not only include all-day exercise therapy, mind therapy and massages. There are also weekend excursions to get that naturally high feeling like normal people. Thai cooking classes, cliff diving, temple visits and kayaking are a few activities foreigners enjoy. "It reconnects people with the outside world," says Lockie. "It's a good break for them." Clients at Dara are allowed mobile phone or internet usage outside course hours, permitting contact with friends, family and business associates. "Our treatment programmes are tough, but only where they have to be." The place boasts a highly-experienced team of Australian and UK-trained psychologists and counsellors. However, there isn't an onsite medical doctor or any registered nurses like at The Cabin. Instead, the rehab centre has affiliations with nearby hospitals such as Bangkok Hospital in Chanthaburi. "We will always have access to the medics," confirms Lockie. "Once a client didn't turn up for a mandatory water workout at 7:30 am. We went to the room to check on him and he was suffering from a brain aneurysm. We rushed him into surgery and saved his life. So it's extremely important that we always have an accessible medical team."

When clients try to break from their addictions, they usually substitute them with something else. "We've witnessed some people who were previously drug abusers drinking 20 cans of Red Bull or Coke each day," Mordey says. "They have a high level of caffeine, and now we have banned all such soft drinks." Users are not allowed to build romantic relationships with others at the centre either. After spending a certain amount of time being treated, recovering addicts who show progress are moved on to secondary care which costs a quarter of primary care. At the halfway house, they take care of themselves doing everyday mundane tasks such as cooking, laundry and housecleaning with some regulations and curfew. They live normally too – going shopping, meeting people and doing voluntary work. But the psychiatric team is always available to offer them advice. And while some visitors are obliged to stay in such enforced sobriety for a few months, others might need to reside longer – sometimes requiring a six-month stay before they can finally move on. But rehab doesn't end there. "It is a chronic illness," Mordey says. "Once you suffer from substance abuse, you will always be a recovering addict."

A relapse can often be triggered when clients feel ill or unrewarded. The trick then is to make yourself feel better by doing a good deed, improving your career or family relationships, exercising or eating well. "Many people go in and out of different rehabilitation centres to treat their addiction," says Peters. "You can look at it in two ways, either as a failure or a feat. And we

Leisure activities such as temple visits “reconnect people with the outside world. It’s a good break for them.”

Darren Lockie

choose the latter, as users are taking responsibility for their addictions. They know they can get better.” Many recovering addicts also continue their counselling from afar. At The Cabin, a weekly video conference with counsellors and fellow addicts is popular. Former drug and alcohol abusers must always be around their peers or sponsors for ongoing support. Clients from Dara, meanwhile, can return for free for five days every year to refresh and reset their compass. “Staff members remind former users how drug usage can affect their brains, their minds, their lives and families,” Peters says. “Clients really enjoy these sessions and get a chance to renew old friendships with counsellors.” And you can never be too old to recover at a rehab resort. “Why does someone come in when they are approaching the end of their life?” asks Mordey. “It’s because they

don’t want to die in that state, so they are making an effort to change their behaviour.”

Although these rehab

centres have the superficial trappings of a resort, this is no vacation. Tension often arises when a client is reluctant to recover. “A few addicts are sent by families and don’t want to stop using yet,” says Mordey. “They refuse to participate in group sessions and isolate themselves.” Indeed, isolation is one of the key behavioural changes associated with addiction. Users often abuse substances when alone because they don’t want anyone to see what they’re doing. “We have to reason with them,” he says. “If they continue to detach themselves, they won’t get better.” A small percentage of clients also choose to leave before treatment ends; one such high-profile case was the English musician – and one-time partner of Kate Moss – Pete Doherty.

When you’re struggling with addiction, sobriety may seem impossible. But recovery is never out of reach. The Cabin has a completion rate of 96 per cent, while Dara’s completion rate is 92 per cent. Most of the counsellors and psychotherapists at The Cabin are recovering addicts. “A doctor will stop you from having a seizure, but he can’t convince you that you will get better,” says Mordey. “When I talk to you, you will be persuaded because I have done it all before.” A counsellor’s paramount qualification is his or her past experience rather than academic training. It is their own recovery that credits them as experts on the matter. After all, who better to understand clients than someone who has walked in the same shoes? “I have been at rock bottom,” Mordey continues. “And I got healthier. I haven’t used in decades. Today, I drive a sports car and I have a stable job. So if I can do it, why can’t anyone else?” **T**

