

I'm accompanying Dawid along a plastic jetty in secluded Khao Lak to greet a private charter of guests who've just returned from a day's adventure scuba diving in the Similan Islands national marine park. Apart from the warm white sand that scratches inbetween my toes, the experience is quite magical. We've each got a tray of chilled jasmine-infused hand towels which we pass out to the arrivees whose flushed exhilarated faces are just caught by the flickering of the tea lights that line the pathway back to our boutique hotel. The air is warm, humid and soft against my skin, the sky is dark and quiet. Safe. Although the Sarojin qualifies as a seriously high end luxurious hotel – and winner of several awards including best boutique hotel in Thailand its most recent award for "Best hotel in Thailand" is perhaps its most significant.

Owners Andrew and Kate Kemp, British expats who left Blighty over 25 years ago, are especially thrilled that their efforts in corporate responsibility have finally been recognised at the prestigious Thailand Green Awards. Having built their hotel from scratch, restoring the local environment after the devastating effects of the tsunami in 2004 and employing 100 local staff, the pair have raised considerable funds for local community projects, including welfare and education for hundreds of orphaned school children, a full-time vet for local animals and prosthetic limbs and long-tail boats for fishermen.

In addition to the idyllic setting and the welcome guests receive at the extraordinary Sarojin, it's this connection between the hotel and real, rural Thailand that sets it apart from other destinations. During my stay I met locals who told me about the history and customs of the area. I visited a local market, sampled exotic sweet and sour fruit, sticky rice and coconut, walked through a rubber plantation, took a long-tail boat through the Thai "Amazon" of banyan and mangrove trees, cycled up to a waterfall where Sarojin staff were preparing a romantic dinner for two, festooning the entire forest

Words
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Thailand

Khao Lak and Phuket



floor with hundreds of candles, and the list goes on. Nothing is too much trouble for the staff at Sarojin. Want a private barbecue on a candle-lit, white sandy beach by the shimmering Andaman sea? You've got it. Want a gourmet picnic in your private garden or apartment? No problem. Fancy canoeing through the sea-cave tunnels, or learning how to cook authentic Thai food, bird and wild-life trekking or a personal jungle adventure? The sky – or perhaps your budget – is quite literally the limit.

Unlike neighbouring Phuket, Khao Lak doesn't have a gay scene but the gay and gay-friendly staff at the Sarojin welcome guests whatever their sexuality. Come February, the Sarojin is inviting guests to renew their vows or celebrate their civil partnership for six nights with a special package costing £2,675 for two people – check website for details. If that's too pricey, ask the hotel about their upcoming special offers. You won't regret or forget the experience.

If it's an (understated) taste of gay Thailand you're after then Phuket is the place to go. Gay celebrities in Thailand are pretty thin on the ground but gay life in Bangkok and other tourist hot spots is thriving. My local gay guide, "Jonno" namechecks gay film director Apichatpong Weerasethakul who won the top prize at Cannes Film Festival last year with his film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* and a few pop stars who are not openly gay. He adds, "Gay people here know that they are but it's not common knowledge."

A local lesbian I meet tells me the problem for lesbians and gay men in Thailand is not one of direct state repression. Rather, it is a question of subtle negation through invisibility and a lack of social awareness. There's very little overt discrimination against lesbians or gay men. Nevertheless, though many people acknowledge the existence of homosexuality, they are still not used to the idea of openly gay people. Even fewer have any understanding of the

notion of lesbian and gay rights.

An absolute must-visit in Phuket old town is the camp restaurant-cum-drag show and dance venue, Kra Jok See where local drag queens lip synch to show tunes. When I visited, the DJ and owner was spinning an inspired mix of Brazilian electro swing and once the tables were moved to the side of the dining area, the dance floor was heaving with locals and tourists alike.

In the gay "complex" in downtown Patong, I notice a banner for Phuket's annual Pride event (23-26 February 2011). At the Boat Bar a low-cost, 20 minute ride in the hotel shuttle bus, Jonno tells me that Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell visit the bar's owner, Khun Daeng, a local gay celebrity when they're in town.

If you do visit Phuket, I recommend a stay at The Shore or the Katathani both on the southernmost tip of the island. The classiest and newest of the hotels on the island, The Shore is a luxury boutique villa resort with its own gorgeous beach at Kata Noi. A 20 minute drive from trashy Patong – the Blackpool of the island – its enlightened owners are keen to welcome more gay honeymooners and holiday-makers. Chatting to staff there, I'm told there probably are gay men among the staff at the two resorts, but no one – not even the heterosexual staff - discusses their private life. Although its gayer than Khao Lak, Phuket island isn't exactly a gay Mecca but if you're staying at either of these enchanting locations, you won't be complaining. ■

Travel details

Getting there Jane flew with Eva Air, evaair.com, and Bangkok Airways, bangkokair.com. Flights from £555 return. **Staying there** Jane stayed at The Sarojin, 60 Moo 2, Kukkak, Takuapa, Phang Nga 82190, Thailand, sarojin.com; The Katathani Phuket Beach Resort, 14 Kata Noi Road, Karon, Muang, Phuket 83100 katathani.com and The Shore, 18 Kata Noi Road, Muang, Phuket 83100; theshore.katathani.com. **Going out** The Boat Bar 125/20 Rath-U-Thit Road, Paradise Complex, Patong beach, Phuket 8315, boatbar.com. Kra Jok See Restaurant, Takua Pa Road (off Ratsada Road), closed Mondays.