



Far from the madding crowd

AMONG THE COGNOSCENTI, THE LUXURY AND TRANQUILITY OF KHAO LAK ARE AN OPEN SECRET. SIX YEARS AFTER THE DEVASTATING TSUNAMI STRUCK, JANE CZYZSELSKA FINDS NAOMI WATTS AND EWAN MCGREGOR HAVE ALSO DISCOVERED THE REMOTE THAI DESTINATION.

Almost as soon as I arrive at the Sarojin, I learn that a crew is in the area filming *The Impossible*, a movie that will once again put Khao Lak on the map – this time with Ewan McGregor and Naomi Watts in lead roles as a mum and dad who experience the world's most devastating natural disaster, the 2004 tsunami. But more on that later. After settling into my Garden Residence, feng shui'd to perfection, I'm invited to accompany Dawid along a bouncing plastic jetty 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.

Dawid's job title is "Imagineer" which basically means he gets paid to create dreamy events and excursions for guests at this breathtaking zen paradise. We pass chilled jasmine-infused hand towels out to the arrivees whose flushed, exhilarated faces, are just caught by flickering tea lights lining the pathway back to our boutique hotel.

The air is warm, humid and soft against my skin, the sky is dark and still. Khao Lak is an altogether quieter, more remote and relaxing Thai holiday location than its neighbour,

Phuket. And although the Sarojin qualifies as a seriously high-end luxury hotel, its most recent award for Best Green 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 recognized. Having built their hotel from scratch, restoring the local environment after

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the devastating effects of the tsunami 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 (spiky) 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 floor with hundreds of candles, and the list goes on. Nothing is too much trouble for the staff at Sarojin. Want a private barbeque on a candlelit, 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

TRAVEL



Whether at twilight or during the day, Sarojin's Edge restaurant will ply you with delicious and exotic gourmet local dishes



PAY

The Sarojin's six-night "Just For 2 Renewal of Vows" package starts from 141,785 Thai baht (approximately £2,675) for two people, and includes six nights' accommodation in a luxurious Garden Residence, the services of an experienced and professional wedding coordinator, an exclusive wedding ceremony complete with renewal of vows certificate, a private candlelit dining experience at a jungle waterfall with a choice of a five-course Thai or Mediterranean dinner served "Just For 2", one bottle of celebratory champagne, all day à la carte breakfast with sparkling wine, and private airport transfers to and from Phuket airport with cold towels and refreshments served for two people.

WAY

Jane flew with Eva Air evaair.com and Bangkok Airways bangkokair.com. Flights from £555 return.

STAY

The Sarojin, 60 Moo 2, Kukkak, Takuapa, Phang Nga 82190, Thailand
sarojin.com

Above: clean lines and natural furnishings in the Garden Residence apartments
Below: no, it's not a Disney scene, it's a candle-lit dinner for two by a waterfall

the limit. And if all that sounds too energetic, you can always kick back in the al fresco spa that takes relaxation to new heights. Meals at the Sarojin will be of particular interest to foodies – gourmet room snacks are just a hint of what to expect in either of the two restaurants. All-day breakfast really is served all day. Should you decide to slum it in your apartment till dusk, you can still look forward to a tasty range of traditional European or local dishes. My favourite was scrambled egg on toast with spinach and truffle oil, and with their free flowing champagne, you'll never be short of bubbly.

Unlike neighbouring Phuket, which has at least a couple of gay hangouts, Khao Lak offers nothing so cosmopolitan but I did spot a couple of lesbians walking hand-in-hand along the beach and the gay and gay-friendly staff make guests welcome 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 (see box). If that's too pricey, ask the hotel about upcoming special offers. You won't regret or forget the experience. 📍

