

Resort

THAILAND



A holiday with heart

A luxury resort is helping to change the lives of some of Thailand's most vulnerable children, writes Kerry van der Jagt.

There's a skill to rolling fish cakes, but judging by the lumpy orbs in my hands I haven't quite perfected it. "You need to pinch the centre with your thumb," explains "Dang" Phialumkheak, executive sous chef at the Sarojin, taking my butchered baubles and reshaping them into perfect patties. "Our critics won't let you get away with this."

Here at the Sarojin in Khao Lak I've joined a masterclass with a difference – there's no prize, no fame and no glory. The stakes are higher than that: the chance to change the lives of some of Thailand's most vulnerable children.

By participating in the Street Food Cook for Kids initiative, guests not only prepare the nutritious lunch, but also deliver it to the nearby Camillian Social Centre, a non-profit organisation providing day care and rehabilitation for children with special needs.

On arrival there is no time for formalities or faux welcomes; these children – some with Down Syndrome, others with cerebral palsy or autism – are hungry and this meal is perhaps the only one they will receive today. And what a three-course meal it is, prepared not from leftovers or unwanted supplies, but by a sous chef from a five-star resort. This level of respect, and the dignity it bestows, is the first hint that the Sarojin marches to its own beat.

"We bring lunch once a month," says operations manager Kasithadej "Kade" Preechanond, who is known for making time in his busy schedule to join the children, and perhaps play a game of soccer or tag.

It is the Sarojin's dedication and support of the local community through the Sarojin Khao Lak Community Fund that come to define my four-night stay.

Making a difference: (Clockwise from main) poolside at the Sarojin in Khao Lak, Thailand; chef Dang Phialumkheak; a bike excursion to Takuapa Old Village.

Photos: Kerry van der Jagt

Established as a first-response to the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, the fund has helped dozens of community projects including hotel trainee placement; support for the Baan Than Namchai orphanage; medical provisions such as prosthetic limbs; and school classroom buildings and equipment. The annual "charity bike ride for children living with disabilities", also goes towards raising much-needed funds.

Situated 90 minutes' drive north of Phuket airport on an 11-kilometre sweep of beach, the boutique resort comprises 56 residences housed in seven separate buildings dotted through the sprawling grounds.

Our residence is a "spa suite", one of 14 one-bedroom, 150-square-metre suites tucked away on the upper floor of each building. The resort also has 28 garden residences, 14 pool residences and seven ground-floor, two-bedroom pool residences (note: only children 10 years and above can stay at the Sarojin).

Full-length glass doors lead from the lounge area to our terrace garden, complete with sun chairs, towels and a couples' spa tub. Inside, polished floorboards are

balanced with a simple colour palette giving a contemporary, gallery-like feel. Nothing is overlooked, from the beach bag and sarong to the handbag-sized mosquito repellent and daily bowl of fresh fruit. The true scene-stealer is the resort swimming pool, an aquamarine oasis of loveliness, resplendent with three floating pavilions, shady sunbeds and attentive staff ever ready to refill your water glass or take a meal order.

The Sarojin is serious about quality dining in its two outlets. While the beachfront restaurant, Edge, serves up traditional Thai dishes (the best I've ever eaten), Ficus Restaurant specialises in contemporary Mediterranean cuisine. There's also a wine bar and cellar, and a chic and stylish Beach Bar, with views across the Andaman Sea.

Every staff member I encounter is warm and welcoming, but never intrusive, each looking genuinely proud to work here. To understand this pride you have to step back to Boxing Day 2004, a day seared into the soul of every person in Khao Lak. The Sarojin, set to be Khao Lak's first luxury resort, was more than 80 per cent completed and

Trip notes

FLY

Singapore Airlines flies to Singapore daily from Melbourne and Sydney with onward connections to Phuket in Thailand. See singaporeairlines.com

STAY

Garden rooms start from THB 6400 and spa suites from 10,265 a night, for two people, including a la carte breakfast and Wi-Fi (spa suite guests also accrue spa credits). The Street Food Cook for Kids at the Camillian centre costs THB 5900 for two people. See sarojin.com

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Kerry van der Jagt was a guest of the Sarojin.

just 17 days from opening when the infamous tsunami hit.

Thankfully, owners Kate and Andrew Kemp had given their staff the day off and no lives were lost at the Sarojin. Faced with the decision to walk away or rebuild, the Kemps chose the latter, to support their staff of 100 and to help the wider Khao Lak community. Like other great hotels and resorts, the Sarojin became a cornerstone for social and community welfare.

If the Sarojin has a mission, it is to treat every guest like family. Breakfast is inclusive, prepared and cooked fresh to an a la carte menu, served with sparkling wine and is available all day. Let me be specific – all day means until 6pm.

Our first day disappears in a slow haze of swimming and snoozing, wandering along the beach and pampering in the Pathways Spa (all spa suite guests accrue one hour's worth of spa credits a room for each night of stay). On day two we sign up for a bike excursion to Takuapa Old Town, once an important stop on the spice route. We follow quiet roads, riding past rubber plantations and through small villages where children pause to wave and give us high fives. Afterwards we take a boat adventure down the Takuapa River, known as the Little Amazon.

The sluice of our paddles is the only sound as we drift beneath a canopy of green, the gnarled limbs of banyan trees reaching out like human arms.

On our last full day we rise at dawn for a "glimpse of local life" excursion, setting out in the near dark to offer alms and to receive a blessing by a Buddhist monk. While I don't understand the words, I know he chants about the universal desire for protection, grace, hope, health and happiness, virtues that have come to define the Sarojin itself. T

