



SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE



Taking inspiration from the legendary hospitality of a Thai woman, Kate and Andrew Kemp built their award-winning spa resort. WORDS: TONI EATTS

The spirit of Thai hospitality coupled with Kate and Andrew Kemp's desire to make guests feel as though they are staying with friends are the cornerstones of the multi-award-winning property, The Sarojin. Opened in 2005, this five-star luxury boutique resort nestled between a secluded beach and five national parks in Khao Lak, Thailand, was recently named Asia's Leading Boutique Hotel for the second consecutive year at the World Travel Awards 2007. As the owner and executive director of

The Sarojin, Kate says the latest award is "a wonderful acknowledgement of the staff's hard work and truly exceptional spirit". And there's that word again – "spirit". When you hear Kate speak about the "adventure" of creating the resort with Andrew, "spirit" comes up time and again but not as a cliché – it is clearly central to the couple's vision for their slice of Thai paradise. Born in the historic English city of Bath – one of the world's original spa towns – Kate met Andrew in 1984 at university. The couple

worked in the UK for a few years and then their shared passion for travel took them backpacking. After several months on the road they decided to rest for a while in the then British colony of Hong Kong. "We ended up staying for 10 years," Kate chuckles. During that time Charlotte, now seven, and the first of their two children arrived. Five-year-old Jeremy was born in Thailand, but we're jumping ahead. By 1998, Kate had earned her stripes in the cut-throat world of sales and marketing and



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Andrew had successfully managed large and small luxury recreation and leisure operations in London and Hong Kong. One day, the Kemps found themselves discussing their future over champagne in the departure lounge of Cape Town airport. "We decided the best hospitality you experience is when you stay with a friend overseas and in the evening you sit down with a glass of wine and the friend gives you ideas on what you can do the next day," Kate recalls. That concept of treating guests like friends became the seed that blossomed into The Sarojin. "Our spirit of travel and adventure makes us want to share the beauty of Thailand. Guests make a huge commitment to come and stay with us. We want to respect that." Even the name of the resort reflects those values. It was named after Lady Sarojin, a Thai woman who became renowned for the hospitality she offered guests. In fact, it's that 'spirit of hospitality' that prompted the Kemps to choose Thailand as the location for turning their dream resort into a reality. "Thai people treat you as if you are a guest in their home. It's linked with the Thai spirit." So naturally when the Kemps decided their resort should have a spa those same values

were incorporated. "We chose the name Pathways for the spa because when you go to a spa you go on a journey mentally, physically and spiritually." Kate says that in designing the resort they were determined spa guests would feel as though they were enjoying a luxurious experience but were still linked with the natural beauty of the location. "We have made sure there are views to the sea and you can hear the wind in the trees and the sound of the waves." As you listen to Kate speak of the importance of creating a peaceful sanctuary where guests "have the freedom of spirit to create a personal experience" you could be forgiven for thinking The Sarojin rose mythically from the white sands and lush forests. Then you learn of the tsunami. While Kate and Charlotte stayed in Hong Kong, Andrew found the site for the resort – the then underdeveloped Khao Lak, an hour's drive from the airport at busy Phuket. By the time construction began in 2003, the family was living in Phuket and by December 2004, the finishing touches were being made for the mid-January 2005 opening. By a lucky twist of fate, the Kemps had given the 400 construction workers and 100 other

staff December 25 the day off, as a holiday. When the tsunami struck on Boxing Day, "only 20 people were on site and no staff were lost". A large headland had offered some protection but the beach restaurant, spa and all the decking were destroyed. "The rebuilding of The Sarojin and recovery of Khao Lak has been an intensely emotional experience," Kate says. "It was an experience that has integrated us very closely with our staff and the local community and has forged strong relationships." The Sarojin opened in October 2005 and a year later won its first gong as Asia's Leading Boutique Hotel at World Travel Awards 2006. That same month it also appeared as the front cover of *Condé Nast Traveler*, October 2006 issue. Now the Kemps, through their company, WhiteKaps Resort, are researching other locations in countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia, where they can extend the Sarojin brand. So what does Kate see as the secret of their success? "Success comes when you do something for the right reasons and you do it with excellence and respect," she says. Find out more about The Sarojin at www.sarojin.com.