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Singing chefs and solitude



Bright horizons ... (clockwise from above) an uncrowded beach at Khao Lak; taking an elephant ride; a cooking class at The Sarojin. Photos: AFP; Getty Images

Turning right at Phuket Airport, **Erin O'Dwyer** leaves the crowds behind for lessons in prawn twirling, yoga and simple village life.

THE Thai chef has taken a fancy to my mother. They stand eyeball to eyeball, in identical black aprons, their white toques standing to attention. In their hands are raw green prawns, fresh from the Andaman Sea. They are preparing an entree made from marinated seafood. It's wrapped in rice noodles, then deep fried.

"You one prawn, me one prawn," chef Mon Chukaew says. "Slowly, slowly we do it together."

Like precision artisans, they twirl

the prawn tails and weave the noodles around the fleshy bellies. One by one, they lower them into a boiling bath of spitting oil.

"At home I am a cooking teacher," my mother admits.

"Oh," says Mon, his eyes wide. Then he bows low in front of her. "You are teacher, so I am your baby."

If the best chefs learn their trade at their mother's knees, then Thai cooks are no exception. Mon tells us he learnt to cook when he was seven. He returns to his mother's home every three months, like clockwork, for a feed.

"I remember when I was even younger," he says. "She would send me on my bike to the markets. I had to buy what she forgot."

It's at the Bang Niang markets in Thailand's southern Phang Nga province where we first meet Mon.

A muscular, moon-faced man, he has a chef's sense of smell and seems keen to share it with us. He picks up a pair of rosy sweet apples and sniffs them. He does the same with an inky century egg that, frankly, pong. Next, he crushes pieces of sweet basil in two fingers and waves them under our noses.

Later, as we pass the fresh-meat section, he stops and cranes his head over a bucket of writhing catfish. "What's that smell?" he asks himself. "Ah, fried chicken."

I've given up counting my visits to fresh food markets overseas. It never bores me. In Thailand, something about the swollen purple mangosteens, the spiky dragonfruit and the hairy rambutan excites me. Arranged in precarious triangles of



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colour, they look even better than they taste.

Our market visit is an appetiser to Mon's own home-style cooking course. It takes place in a timber-floored beach bar with only two walls and no doors. Strange how even chopping onions seems exciting when you can see the Andaman Sea.

Our fresh produce is arranged on a long trestle table and it's time to begin. Mon conducts the lesson to an eclectic musical soundtrack. Red Hot Chilli Peppers, Jimi Hendrix and James Blunt ring through the speakers. We dub him the Singing Chef. By the time Johnny Cash comes around, both Mon and my mum are bopping.

"Love is a burning fire," he croons, fishing the prawns from the copper wok. The soundtrack seems themed to love and cooking. He insists it's purely accidental.

In two hours, we cook two entrees, two soups, and two mains. It's enough food for four people but somehow we get through it. My mum's beef massaman is the stand-out, though she likes my sweet corn starters. Afterwards we recline on loungers, staring out at the flat blue horizon. Kayaks and a windsurfer are parked on the beach. Even a dip seems like too much effort. A butler comes running with a drinks menu. Here, you barely have to think about it and it happens.

We've travelled to Thailand because a family holiday to Singapore fell through. It takes us a while to adjust; we even order Singapore Slings. Still, there's something about Thailand that grabs and grips you. The people, perhaps. Or the food, or both. Though we've both been before, we're charmed all over again.

We stay at The Sarojin, a gorgeous low-key beach resort that seems to nail the affordable luxury category. It's in Khao Lak, a region of five national parks and five golf courses, just an hour north of Phuket.

To get to Khao Lak, we turn right at Phuket Airport. It's a little like turning left on a

jumbo jet – more spacious, more luxurious, with better food and fewer people. It wouldn't be everyone's cup of tea but it's perfect for getting away. Every morning, my mum walks the deserted 11-kilometre beach. I commandeer the king-size bed and sleep late.

Like most resort towns on the Andaman Sea, Khao Lak was swept away by the 2004 tsunami. Everyone lost someone.

"My sister died," says Rong, who hosts us on a tour of the historic old village, Takua Pa. "But it is very good, no one else. Not mama, not papa, no one else." The Thais are truly a graceful people.

Takua Pa village, we learn, was once a tin mine and the Chinese settlers who came here grew rich. Today their children return for Chinese New Year in Bentleys and Rolls Royces, the proceeds of the Phuket hotels they own that are again enjoying good times.

Still, Takua Pa is a small and humble village. Unpainted timber shophouses line the street and there are only two cafes, both serving Chinese tea. The village is also home to a community of Jains – an extreme Buddhist sect that each October holds a vegetarian festival. An austere fast for locals, it's a colourful treat for visitors. By day, devotees parade through the streets, piercing their skin with metal spikes and knives. At night, they chase the spirits away with lanterns and firecrackers.

The food at The Sarojin is deserving of praise. The Sarojin shuns the standard buffet breakfast. Waiters rove with baskets of croissants, banana breads and brioche. Tall flutes of sparkling wine are complimentary – another of the resort's points of difference.

"The idea is that you should have a leisurely breakfast," says Jeff, the resort's Thai-born sales manager. "Sit, enjoy, talk to each other."

No wonder it's popular with honeymooners. By the time we make it into Khao Lak town, it's after midday. The shopping strip takes a long siesta during winter and that's

fine by me. We poke our heads into the few alleyway shops flogging T-shirts, beads and fakes.

A nondescript massage place draws us in. The potent smell of Tiger Balm mixes with the spicy scent of ginger tea and the floor is tiled and sparkly. The Khao Lak township was also destroyed in the tsunami and almost all of the four- and five-storey concrete buildings are new. The massages are so good we linger over our ginger tea.

Back at the hotel, we sign up for more pampering. The open-air pavilion of the Pathways Spa is so close to the beach, I can hear the waves crash. Not surprising that it has won a raft of awards since it opened in 2006. My feet are washed in a rose petal bath and my hair is braided after my massage.

It's not strictly part of the service but then again it is. The only limit is your imagination. There is even an imagineer to tailor-make your stay. Breakfast on the beach? Dinner by the waterfall? Golf or yoga? Both? Check, check and check.

The next day, we choose an early-morning yoga class. Our teacher meets us at dawn and we find our beach "studio" deserted. Afterwards we beeline to breakfast. After the brioche starter, the main fare is a hard choice. Spicy noodles, banana pancakes or scrambled eggs? There are 40 chefs, which, at the time we visit, is one to every guest. The resort is justifiably proud of its staff ratio. Even in peak season there are never more than 110 guests and with such spacious grounds, you feel mostly alone.

Only on Tuesdays does the resort become a party town. There are drummers, dancing girls and a buffet table with food from all continents. Mon mans the desert table, urging people to try his creations. "I love cooking and I love sharing it," he says. "If people are happy, then I am happy, too."

The writer was a guest of The Sarojin.



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Trip notes

Getting there

- ▶ Thai Airways flies to Phuket. 1300 651 960, thaiairways.com.au.
- ▶ Most hotels will arrange transfers for the one-hour trip to Khao Lak. Taxis cost about 1500 baht (\$51) and the bus is 700 baht. See khaolaktourism.com/transfer for bus timetables.

Staying there

- ▶ The Sarojin, Khao Lak, has a "buy two nights, get two nights free" package until October 31. Villas from 13,500 baht a night. +66 76 427 900, sarojin.com

Touring there

- ▶ The Sarojin has a three-page list of ideas for venturing forth from the hotel.
- ▶ Spend a morning visiting local markets and learning the finer arts of Thai cooking, from

4000 baht a person. Take an afternoon tour of Takua Pa, from 2900 baht. Journey along the mangrove canals in a longtail boat; see traditional fishing village Baan Nam Khem, which has been built on stilts by Burmese fishermen and the sea caves of Phang Nga Bay, from 2800 baht.

More information

khaolaktourism.com.

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Affordable luxury ... poolside relaxation at The Sarojin, Khao Lak;
(below) a sleek, simple Sarojin hotel room.

Three (other) things to do

1 The region's real attraction is the **Similan Islands**, a group of nine islands surrounded by spectacular coral reefs, about 50 kilometres off the Phang Nga coast. The islands' dive sites regularly rank in the world's top 10 but the shallow waters make them great for beginner divers and snorkellers, too. Boat charters leave Khao Lak daily from November to May. Day trips include three snorkel points plus lunch on the beach. Rates from 2500 baht (\$85).

2 The **Khao Lak** and **Khao Sok** national parks are among the oldest and most pristine rainforests in the world. Endangered species of tiger and leopard are found in the parks.

Hiking, elephant trekking, canoeing and four-wheel-drive safaris are all on offer. Day-trip rates from 2500 baht; five-day packages from 16,900 baht. khaolaktourism.com, khaosok.com.

3 There are five golf courses around the Khao Lak region: Tap Lamu, Mission Hills, Thai Muang and the championship Blue Canyon. **Tap Lamu** is the highlight, a stunning but unpretentious 18-hole course located along the Son-Ngam Beach. The course was rebuilt after the 2004 tsunami at a cost of 30 million baht but remains little known among visitors. Package rates for Tap Lamu from 8000 baht. khaolak.net.

