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The beach provides another romantic setting for guests to enjoy dinner.

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Tropical romance fit for a queen

There are two choices when you arrive at Phuket airport, writes **Di Bauwens**. You can turn south to Phuket or turn north and head for the wondrous region of Khao Lak.

Snakes hang from the trees and monitor lizards scuttle up the river bank as I lie back like a queen propped up on cushions in a traditional long boat listening to the hypnotic beat of insects and birdsong as I'm transported through an ancient sacred forest in Thailand's version of the Amazon.

Past twisted vines, mangroves and sprawling banyan trees in a place where stillness speaks, the light is golden and Nang Mai's haunting songs of golden pythons

and other legends seem to whisper from every leaf.

My fantasy-like pleat boat ride is the precursor to a cooking class on the river bank — one of the tailor-made experiences on offer at The Sarojin where you're only limited by your imagination.

It's a luxury resort run much like a private estate, surrounded by five spectacular national parks including the primary rainforests of Khao Lak and Khao Sak. A place of limestone mountains, lakes, caves and waterfalls

cascading into 160 million-year-old rainforests; not to mention a wild postcard of a beach and the lush reefs of the Similan Islands.

"Where shall we set the table," is the catchcry. On the beach, beside a waterfall, on a river bank? And equally important is how we'll arrive. By car, by elephant, helicopter or, in my case, boat.

The property has only 56 residences with 200 staff to look after the guests and there are 40



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chefs. Each luxurious residence, set in private gardens with sala sundeck and plunge pool, is accessed by crossing a stream. Rain showers and couples' baths are set on pebbles in lavish bathrooms and the whole feel is one of space and absolute comfort.

The Sarojin is a place of grand romance and adventure popular for intimate weddings, with honeymooners and for couples. No children are allowed.

On my morning walk, there is an almost guilty pleasure being alone on a perfect beach. The spines of abandoned fishing boats jut out of the sand, and coconuts and crabs are my only companions where the jungle meets the sea.

A small lunch table is set under a massive sea almond tree on the beach. White orchids intertwined with fish fashioned from coconut leaves drip from its branches reminiscent of the way the tree is decorated for weddings.

I'm being treated to one of The Sarojin's special experiences in an extraordinary location. Before a delicious lunch, I succumb to the pleasure of a foot massage overlooking the turquoise waters of the Andaman Sea.

And so, back to my cooking class and the boat ride which affords a close-up view of river life and fishermen in ramshackle huts counting their daily catch. I explore the local markets with chef Khai, stopping to taste fried

banana, fried chicken and steamed rice, corn balls and scrumptious little coconut cakes, all washed down with fresh sugar cane juice.

Later I chop chillis, galangal, lemongrass and shallots. I tear up kaffir lime leaves and dip into bowls of palm sugar, fish sauce and curry paste, preparing an Andaman seafood salad with chilli and lime dressing, tom kha gai — chicken soup in coconut milk with galangal and lime leaves — and a Massaman beef curry with fragrant jasmine rice.

Afterwards, like Lady Muck, I dine at a pretty table for one set in the shade of towering, mossy trees and vines on the picturesque banks of the Takuapa River.

On the way back to The Sarojin, we pass through Takuapa, the old capital of Phang Nga and stop at a Buddhist temple. I swim alone in the rock pool below the Rainbow Waterfall in an impossibly beautiful scene with water gushing over the rocks from above.

The jungle waterfall is another of the extraordinary locations where you can do a cooking class or enjoy an exquisitely romantic dinner for two. By night the path to the waterfall is lit with hundreds of candles. Natural stones become the table and chairs and the waterfall and wildlife provide the music. Stunning.

At the resort's Pathways Spa where the ancient and sacred belief in "meta" — a Buddhist

term for an act of loving kindness — flows through the wide range of treatments. My signature massage and facial were first-class affairs enjoyed in a haven integrated with the natural surrounds.

On my last night I dine in splendour with a charming young Irishman named Paul Counihan, The Sarojin's director of sales. Gin and tonics at the bar overlooking a huge ficus tree are followed by dinner in a private over-water sala adorned with foliage, flowers and candles reflected in the sparkling, azure pool. If he was trying to impress me, it worked.

That north turn at the airport was, after all, the right turn. > Di Bauwens was a guest of The Sarojin and flew with Thai Airways.

> From January 11 – April 30, rates at The Sarojin range from \$468 per night for a garden residence to \$726 for the Sarojin suite. See www.sarojin.com.

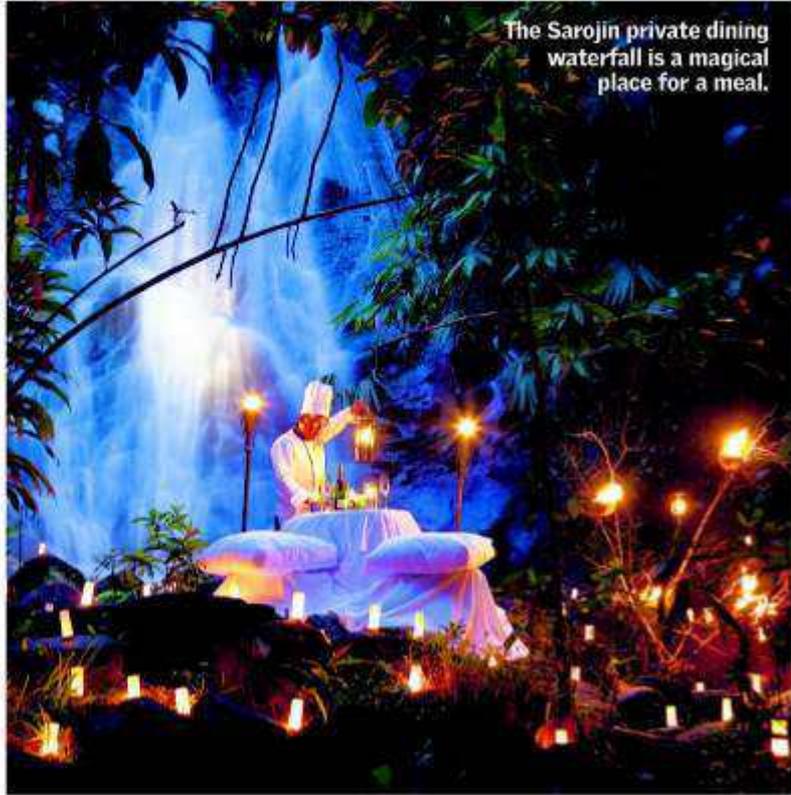
I swim alone in the rock pool below the Rainbow Waterfall in an impossibly beautiful scene.



Orchids decorate the sea almond on the beach.



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The Sarojin private dining waterfall is a magical place for a meal.



The lights of The Sarojin lobby contrast with the moody night sky.

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An opulent
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The Sarojin.