

Beyond Boutique at The Sarojin in Thailand

The Sarojin hotel is big on service, personality and heart

By [Dean Blaine](#)

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A private candle lit dining experience is just one of many personalized touches to be found at The Sarojin hotel. // © 2010 The Sarojin.

The Details

The Sarojin

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The appeal of a boutique hotel is twofold. First, because a boutique property is, by definition, smaller, one hopes for a greater attention to detail. One also expects a higher level of personal service. In all of my many travels and hotel stays, I've always found that it's the little things that make the boutique experience stand apart.

The second decidedly unique appeal of the boutique hotel is personality. The most celebrated boutique hotels are those with charisma -- or a place in history. They hold the potential to surprise and inspire, to elevate a destination rather than simply exacting a profit from it. A boutique hotel can, in fact, be a destination in and of itself.

So it is with this haughty opinion that I found myself in the south of Thailand, bound for Khao Lak, an hour's drive north of Phuket, to the confines of The Sarojin, one of the more ballyhooed boutique hotels in all of Asia.

The Sarojin was working her charms before I even reached the hotel. The drive from the airport includes a transfer in a luxury sport utility vehicle, complete with the simplest, brilliant amenities such as cold drinks for the road, your choice of soundtrack (80's Brit-pop, anyone?) and a room service menu. Yes, guests can order from the car, have the driver phone in their request and find their pad Thai noodles waiting in their room upon arrival. Again, it's the little things.

The Sarojin's reputation precedes it. Winning the title of Asia's Leading Boutique Hotel for

three years running at the World Travel Awards is no small feat. Being named to Conde Nast Traveler's Hot List of Hotels in 2006, less than a year after opening, is remarkable, as is landing the cover of Conde Nast Traveler later that same year.

As a travel writer, however, it is not uncommon that I visit properties touting a long list of world-class accolades. It's a definite perk. One review of The Sarojin, in particular, I simply couldn't ignore.

"People cry when they leave this hotel," I was told by the Tourism Authority of Thailand in New York City. Well, I thought, sign me up.

The blueprint of The Sarojin is that of a standard beachside resort, with 56 suites and residences spread out among seven, two-story buildings, arranged like a horseshoe around the grounds and fronted by a secluded, white-sand beach.

Rooms are spacious and comfortable with hardwood floors throughout, high ceilings, modern Asian decor, indoor/outdoor showers, freestanding bathtubs and the occasional plunge pool. My favorite touches were the homemade treats (breads, chips and nuts) in the minibar, and the coconut placed in front of the door that stands in for a "Do Not Disturb" sign.

Outside, The Sarojin comprises 10 acres of lush gardens, meandering streams, a sprawling ficus tree and a picturesque lotus pond. The omnipresent vials of homemade, all-natural bug repellent to be found throughout the grounds were a welcome convenience. Hotel amenities include a large infinity swimming pool; a spa; one of the more impressive wine cellars in southern Thailand; and two restaurants serving an ambitious selection of fresh seafood, traditional Thai fare and Mediterranean-inspired dishes.

The Sarojin also does a superb job of introducing guests to the surrounding environs of Khao Lak's five nearby national parks and stunning coastline. Excursions include a private charter of the resort's 38-foot luxury boat Lady Sarojin, Thai cooking classes held by a waterfall, snorkeling or diving in the Similan Islands, jungle safaris, fishing trips, bamboo rafting and more.

The unmistakable personality of The Sarojin derives from her friendly and attentive staff. Owners Andrew and Kate Kemp handpick staff members for their accommodating demeanor and creative sparks. Jowell Philemond-Montout, The Sarojin's novel "Imagineer" -- charged with crafting one-of-a-kind experiences for hotel guests -- was formerly a longtime dancer at the world-famous Moulin Rouge in Paris.

Service, according to staff, is paramount. The Kemps named the resort after the local legend of Lady Sarojin, the mythical daughter of a prominent Thai nobleman who was renowned as the perfect hostess. A stay at The Sarojin should feel like a visit to a friend's private estate, the Kemps tell their staff, and the notion has bloomed.

But the most affecting aspect of The Sarojin, and the true impetus of the boutique hotel's personality, is its compelling story of tragedy and perseverance. Just weeks before the resort's scheduled opening in early 2005, the area of Khao Lak was devastated by the crippling tsunami of Dec. 26, 2004. The staff had been given the day off for the holidays so, thankfully, no one was injured. However, the water rose to the tops of the hotel structures, obliterating the guestroom interiors. Local homes and schools were destroyed, and friends and family members perished.

No one would have blamed the Kemps if they had called it quits. Khao Lak and The Sarojin had been written off as viable tourist destinations for the foreseeable future. The Kemps' contractor abandoned them and returned to London, as did their head chef. The local bank stopped payment on the financing. Nearby resorts laid off entire staffs.

The Kemps called a staff meeting. Employees expected the worst. The Sarojin is up to its rafters in sand and debris, they said. The bank has frozen our financing. The contractor,

the chef and the interior designer are gone. But we can't give up on The Sarojin. If you still want your jobs, they're yours, they told them. We've rescheduled the grand gala opening for nine months from now [October 2005], and we need your help.

The staff came together. They picketed outside the local bank until the financing was released. The Sous chef, a local Thai, stepped up as executive chef (a position he still holds today). The head of housekeeping designed the room interiors. Waiters, managers and bartenders repaired the structural damage.

The day of the grand gala opening arrived and a red carpet was unfurled in the lobby. Staff members scurried to apply finishing touches. The kitchen hummed. A stage was assembled in the hotel's interior. Chairs were arranged on the lawn. The designated time had arrived, and a long black limousine eased down the driveway. The staff was assembled along the drive. The car doors opened and out stepped the Kemps' two young children, but no one else.

"Where are all the guests?" the staff wondered. "Where are the dignitaries?"

There are no guests, the Kemps explained. This party is for you, they told them. So, they took to the stage and dedicated each one of The Sarojin's 56 suites and residences to an individual staff member who had helped them rebuild the resort, a designation and the root of the hotel's personality that remains to this day.

I did not cry as I left The Sarojin, even as the entire staff lined up along the portico to bid me farewell, waving until I disappeared into the midday sun. I am a grizzled travel writer, and goodbyes go with the all-too-familiar territory. Besides, the easiest way to stave off tears, I've learned, is to promise yourself that you'll soon be back.