



getaway
WITH A "K"

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BY JOHN BORTHWICK

Thailand's Krabi, Khanom and Khao Lak. If you're "over" mass tourism magnets like Koh Samui, Phuket and Pattaya, try this trio of impeccable Thai hideaways — coincidentally, all commencing with "K".



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Some eight million tourists descend on Phuket each year, so it's no surprise that when I find myself stuck there in a Patong traffic jam that could rival one of Bangkok's best, and with the local transport mafia charging me an arm, leg and toe for the privilege, I reach for the map. Goodbye, Paradise-gone-parking-lot and hello to a trio of fine Thai beach retreats - Khao Lak, Khanom and Krabi.

KHAO LAK, LACKING NOTHING

"Hotel years are like dog years," jokes Dawid Koegelenberg, manager of Khao Lak's Sarojin Resort, as we sample his wine cellar - awarded "Thailand's Best Wine List" in 2012. "One hotel year equates to seven human ones," Dawid explains, but somehow he doesn't look at all stressed about having spent 21 hotel years beside this balmy, untrammelled stretch of

Andaman beachfront, some 100 km north of Phuket in Phang Nga Province.

"Think of The Sarojin as though you're in a friend's estate," he says next day as we breakfast beside the rolling lawns of the 56-room resort. I take his advice but eventually have to tear myself away from the Sarojin's scrumptious "all-day breakfast" before I spend, well, all day at it. A dip in the warm Andaman waves follows. Then a massage and, much later, a feast of marinated prawns, chilli beef and pomelo salad, plus a rare Argentine Torrontes white wine.

"We explain to new resort developers that our success here at Khao Lak is based on peace and quiet, nature and relaxation," says Praprut Khorpetch, managing director of Khao Lak's seafront Laguna Resort. The policy has worked well and, as a result, when I travel Khao Lak's 25-km shoreline I find no hooning jet-skis, parasailing speedboats or hectares of



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sit just 60 km offshore. With superb snorkelling and diving, plus prolific sea-life and stunning visibility, a day-trip to at least one of them is a must.

The tsunami of 2004 hit Khao Lak hard but, other than a large patrol boat that washed-up two kilometres inland (and remains there as a monument), there is little evidence of the disaster. The township is an unremarkable work-in-progress of mini-marts, tailors (“Johnny Armani” and the like), small restaurants and dive shops. Meanwhile, Khao Lak’s shoreline still looks much as it did a decade ago - a slumbering zone of palms, sea-pines and low-rise resorts. It remains a favourite with honeymooners, long-stay Scandinavians and others like me, getting away from all the others who are getting away from it all.

KHANOM, IS WHERE?

Never heard of Khanom? Consider that an excellent start. This unsung fishing town with nine kilometres of white sand beach sits on the Gulf of Thailand, south of Koh Samui, mid-way between Surat Thani and Nakhon Si Thammarat.

Best known among Thais for its rare pink dolphins, Khanom is now emitting a definite ping on the radar of discerning international travellers. Five years ago a pair of young Finnish backpackers/flash-packers wandered along the remote shoreline of Hat Na Dan beach and had the smarts (and, fortunately, also the resources) to buy a prime little slice of it. Today, Atte Savisalo and Kati Hakkinen (no relation to Finnish Formula One champ, Mika) are justly proud of their luxury, 28-room, boutique retreat, Aava Resort & Spa, which was recently voted by Tatler Travel Guide as one of the “101 Best Hotels in the World”.

In Finnish, the name Aava means “open, spacious, calm” and the experience here is just that. Blazing white beach, a vast blue sky above and bummer-all obligations except take a dip, read a good book, siphon a cocktail or two, stroll to infinity, have a spa session, check the local market, then another swim in the pool, the sea or both.

Khanom, however, is far from being some “coma coast”, Kati gives us a wake-up call and we head to the town pier to join local character, Mr Dang on his dolphin-watching cruise boat. Khanom locals are proud of their pink dolphins – some 60 of them, although they remain vulnerable to entanglement in trawler nets – and Dang seems to have made an appointment today with several of them. As we cruise this

rental beach chairs. As well as “lacking” these, plus high-rise and go-go bars, Khao Lak also is not on the map for the large Chinese, Russian and Indian coach tours that have so enthusiastically “discovered” Thailand of late.

Like being in Casablanca for the waters, if you’re in Khao Lak for the thumping nightlife, you’ve been misinformed. But the eating is excellent. My favourite, non-resort dining place is the Blue Mist restaurant, a rambling wooden structure plonked on the sands near the J.W Marriott, where we feast on seafood, chicken and Thai vegetable dishes, plus cocktails. We left extremely well fed and watered for \$12 a head.

This Andaman coast is the gateway to the Koh Similan and Koh Surin mini-archipelagos, both marine national parks that



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BEACH BREAKS

Clockwise from above: Rayaverdee charm; Khanom River; Private dining at Sarojin; Raitaly Villa at Rayavadee

Opening spread: Aava Resort & Spa on Khanom

marine national park the dolphins romp around us, ride the boat's bow wave and then linger to woof down the sardines that Khun Dang's deckie throws to them.

Later, we head inland to explore the fantastic stalactites of Wang Thong Cave and our final stop for the day is a freshwater stream and Tontarn Natural Fish Spa. This fish spa is no shopping mall variety of feet-in-the-aquarium experience. We dangle our legs in the cool, running stream and then, suddenly, it's shrieks and crazed giggles all around as our toes are nibbled by small, black *ki kom* fish. Despite our din and the awful piranha jokes, we emerge with our feet still on. Later they carry us across the sands to an al fresco dinner of lamb, mussels and merlot, and much more, as served beneath countless stars on Aava's endless beach.

COOL KRABI

Krabi Province and its Andaman coast beaches, 800 km south of Bangkok, have been on the Thai tourist trail for years but its jewel, the Phranang peninsula, remains quarantined from mass visitation by a rainforest national park. The lush peninsula, home to Rayavadee Resort, can only be reached by boat from Krabi (that's *Krah-bee*, not *Crabby*). With the earliest "longtail" arriving at 8 am and the last departing at 6 pm, the peninsula's resort guests have plenty of castaway time to themselves.

By day, spidermen and women (and sometimes children) claw their way up fixed lines on the vertical, 50-metre karst limestone walls that tower above Phranang beach. Meanwhile, more Earth-bound souls swim, sunbake or check out the Sea Goddess caves at the end of the beach – where scores of



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ON THE ROCKS

Below: View over Nammao and Rallay beaches

Right: Pool service at Aava Resort



formidable phalli have been left as hopeful offerings to this local fertility deity.

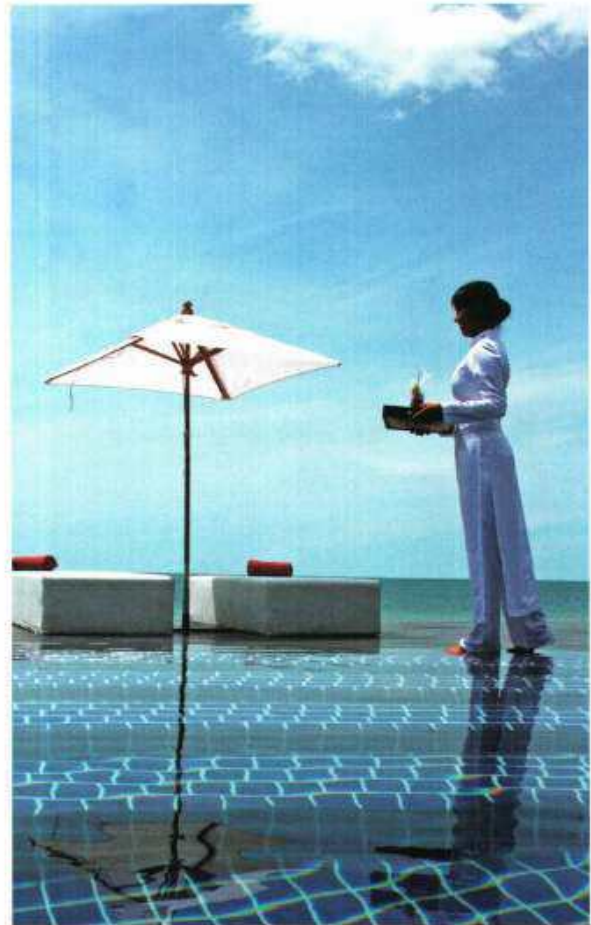
Rayavadee is a well-established retreat – “mature luxury” might be the term – that has been on this spectacular shore since the 1980s, and is ever evolving. Today its tropical gardens are a maze of (sometimes baffling) paths that lead to 102 pavilion suites and villas. My two-storey deluxe pavilion is so well endowed with sofas, a desk, screens, wireless, a vast tub, cloud-size pillows, a huge bed, coffee, tranquil decor and other indolence-inducing features that I’m tempted to just stay indoors, hanging loose, sloth-style.

But this is not to be. I am summoned to a cooking class where our instructor, chef Salma bin Roheem succeeds in instructing me, a culinary troglodyte, in producing chicken and prawn cakes, tom yam gung and pad thai – all of which are even edible. Sensing that I might not be able to repeat the performance without ongoing tuition, Salma assures me, “Even if you forget the recipe, the fun remains, right?”

Banyans, frangipani and cascading jungle overshadows the pavilions. Langurs and hornbills hide and hoot among them. Monsoon rains arrive and unload on the eaves and leaves and squirrels, and it’s all alright. Umbrellas, standard issue in every room, get us to sunset cocktails on time. As the green lure-lights of distant squid boats define the darkening horizon and fireflies flicker in the garden groves I try to figure if there’s a way I can stay a month?

Next day, between the lime green shallows and lunchtime, a spa session is de rigueur. My treatment, a combination of oil and Thai techniques, is so good that I can barely remember a thing, such is the magic dust that the masseuse sprinkles about. By night we dine in a high, open cave, The Grotto, on tuna tartare and extraordinarily tender white snapper. A fruit salad dessert topped with palm sugar and coconut pandan cream rounds out this sybaritic day. •

Photography by John Borthwick and respected establishments



 **travel facts**

GETTING THERE

Thai Airways, Qantas and other carriers fly direct from select Australian ports to Bangkok and/or Phuket. To get to Khao Lak, fly Bangkok Airways to Phuket (bangkokair.com). For Khanom, fly with Thai Smile from Bangkok to Surat Thani (thaismileair.com) then book a road transfer for the 90 minute journey. For Krabi, Bangkok Airways flies from Bangkok to Krabi then transfer to Rayavadee by the resort shuttle boat.

WHEN TO GO

Thailand is a year-round destination. In general the hottest months are April-August and the coolest (relatively) November-February. Regional variations are significant, especially with rainfall. See travelfish.org/weather/thailand

WHERE TO STAY:

- The Sarojin, Khao Lak, sarojin.com
- Le Meridien Khao Lak Resort, lemeridienkhaoiak.com
- Khao Lak Laguna Resort, khaolaklaguna.com
- Aava Resort, Khanom, aavaresort.com
- Rayavadee Resort, Krabi, rayavadee.com
- Bangkok – If you want to stopover in Bangkok The Rembrandt hotel on Soi 18, Sukhumvit is a central and stylish city base. rembrandtbkk.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

Tourism Authority of Thailand, tourismthailand.org