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reclining to the challenge

I WASN'T FAR OUT FROM THE BEACH — JUST BEYOND THE lightly rolling breakers. My feet had left the sandy bottom, and amniotic water bubbled around my shoulders. A sea eagle sailed between me and the hot afternoon sun. The starburst tops of a coconut grove delineated the beach. An arc of sugar, it stretched away to a cluster of rounded rocks and, beyond, a rise of greenery leading into the tufted mountains of a national park.

I was floating in the Andaman Sea at Khao Lak, in Thailand's southwest. A paradise of mangroves, tropical islands and emerald coves set in electric-blue waters, the Andaman Coast is one of the world's best-known beach destinations. It includes the island province of Phuket, the spectacular small island Ko Phi Phi, hopping Rai Le Beach and more sedate Khao Lak. Its vacation options range from some of the most luxe accommodations on the planet, through unassuming hotels priced for the modest budgets of middle-class European and Asian families, to pristine natural areas accessible only to those willing to rough it. The area is legendary for its lush coral reefs and caves and the green-shrouded sugar-loaf rocks rising from the sea in Phang Nga Bay.

But the softly humid breezes of the Andaman Coast also carry an echo of menace. At the end of 2004, this beach at Khao Lak was littered with bodies and debris. Horrific, indelible scenes that spread around the world almost as fast as what had caused them, the great tsunami. All told, the disaster killed a quarter-million people worldwide and more than 8,000 in Thailand — fishermen, villagers and more than 2,000 foreigners from 16 countries. The United Nations estimated that around 150,000 people in Thailand lost their livelihoods in fishing and tourism that December morning.

I visited this part of Thailand in November last year, just before the start of the tourist season, with an eye toward assessing the coast's recovery. What I found was a placid seaside with few signs of the disaster. Instead, it had the expectant atmosphere that any popular tourist area has just before the high season. The beach at Khao Lak was empty, and few tourists were around, but the palm-shaded resorts were spotless and occupied with preseason preparations. Everywhere I went I heard the rhythm of industrious hammers and smelled fresh paint.

Statistics from the Tourism Authority of Thailand support the impression of a full physical recovery for the tourist business. Other than Khao Lak and Ko Phi Phi, which, respectively, lost 75 and 60 percent of their hotels, most of the Andaman Coast was spared complete devastation. Hotels were refurbished and repaired, and after visitors returned in large numbers in 2006, a vigorous building boom began.

In 2007 alone, Phuket's stock of hotel rooms climbed a tenth, contributing to an 11 percent increase in visitors to the island, to more than five million—more than in any year before the tsunami. In 2008, more new hotels went up. For travellers willing and able to spend the money to get there, this coast is once again an inviting place to stay.

ESCHEW YOUR SPIRIT OF
ADVENTURE AND GIVE IN TO YOUR
INDOLENT URGE AT KHAO LAK

words LEENA NG



The Khao Lak area, which suffered much of the Andaman Coast's worst devastation, now features a low-key set of immaculate resorts attracting families from around the world, especially Northern Europe. Instead of boisterous night life like that in Patong, on Phuket to the south, or stunning cliff faces like Rai Le's, to the east, Khao Lak's charm is in its long serene beach at the foot of a range of thickly forested mountains.

Though it retains its mellow vibe, swish hotels and resorts are changing things: Khao Lak now features more upscale luxury than it had before, with newer resorts joining rebuilt ones like The Sarojin, which was scheduled to open in late 2004 just before disaster struck. One will find few signs of the tsunami—a vacant lot here and there and a few trees' exposed roots and stumps of twisted branches alarmingly high up their trunks. The town, a strip of shops, restaurants and tour operators' offices in utilitarian concrete boxes, was bustling if uninspiring.

Now is as great a time as ever to go to the Andaman Coast. In normal years, the beaches can be overrun, crowded with as many snorkelers as fish, or by sunburned, jabbering tourists jockeying for position to shoot a scene as it appeared in *The Man With the Golden Gun* or *The Beach*, which were both partly filmed there. But with tourist visitation still concentrated on the main traps of Patong, lounge lizards will have noticeable elbow room at Khao Lak—even sometimes the solitude that is the often imagined, little realised ideal of a tropical beach vacation.

At the high end, hotels are competing to push luxury to new levels, — combining global style with Thai hospitality and tropical luxury—with private villas overlooking pristine beaches, pampering by attentive staff, deeply relaxing Thai massage, top quality international food and wines and a sense of splendid respite from the woes of the world.





One of the most gorgeous (yet low key) boutique beach resorts, The Sarojin, is nestled inland at Phang Nga Bay amongst five spectacular and adventurous national parks at the north end of Phuket—a world away from the jet skis and beach umbrellas of Kata Beach to the south.

Owned by British couple, Andrew and Kate Kemp, the resort is laid out along an artificial lake, mimicking a traditional southern Thai water village. Soaring wooden roofs peak above the enclosed compounds of the villas, each of which includes its own small swimming pool and outdoor and indoor sitting areas complete with big daybeds for savouring Thai massages. A dark teak roof and wooden planks arc around a ficus tree set off the smoothly polished Ficus cafe, with swooping terrazzo, fiber-optic chandelier curtains that sway in the benevolent sea breeze and soft settees for contemplating the setting sun with a ginger margarita in hand.

The 58 guest residences themselves are exquisitely well-considered, with big sliding glass doors opening the bedrooms directly onto the shimmering pools, and with big bathtubs sunk directly into the water, separated by a glass partition.

The Sarojin's executive chef, Gogh, is an amiable and industrious Thai who knows a good beach. "This is the best office in the world," beams Gogh, stretching his arms across the horizon at sunset.

The food at The Sarojin is deserving of praise. Shunning the standard buffet breakfast, waiters rove around the tables at Ficus restaurant 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 Leisa Kenny-Protstat, the resort's general manager. "Sit, enjoy, talk to each other." No wonder this is popular with honeymooners.

After the brioche starter, the main fare is a hard choice. Spicy noodles, banana pancakes, sweet corn fritters or scrambled eggs? There are 40 chefs, which is about 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.

More impressive still is The Cellar, an open air bar and cooled wine cellar tucked away under the ancient ficus tree. For the last four years, The Sarojin has received an 'Award of Excellence' from *Wine Spectator*, for having one of the best wine collections in Thailand.





This is a definite nod to the resort's imagineer, Dawid Koegelenberg, who has previously lectured for the London Wine Academy and the Wine And Spirit Education Trust, and had run the floors in several of celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay's restaurants. The South African-born Koegelenberg regularly conducts wine tastings for hotel guests, and encourages them to taste and choose their favourite fine wines and beverages from around the world from his well-stocked bar and cellar.

To be sure, there are no restrictions to dining experiences here for the creative and eager-to-please team believe in granting guests the freedom they need to make the memories they want. That's why the experience and intimacy of dining privately wherever they wish is encouraged. Whether it's a romantic candlelit dinner next to a jungle waterfall or on a private sand isle, a gourmet picnic breakfast on a secluded white sand beach, a barbecue seafood dinner on the beach or a private dinner in a pool island pavilion or in their own sala, they will make it happen. Indoors or out, on the beach, in the jungle, in the gardens—you just choose the place, the time, the menu and they'll do the rest and set your table.

One of the highlights of the resort design is the ability to go from a refreshing ocean swim to the beach-side shower and onwards to The Edge (the other bar in the resort) for a mojito all within about 50 steps. It's best to hold off on the cocktails, though, if you plan to take advantage of all the available activities: a Thai cooking class by the banks of the Takuapa River, a private charter of the luxury boat Lady Sarojin, scuba diving, elephant trek, city tours of the Bang Niang markets and cashew nut factories, pitch-and-putt golf, yoga, beach volleyball, and bicycle tours of the surrounding national parks, etc. Thankfully, The Sarojin doesn't have that feeling of detachment from the host country; the type where you wouldn't know whether you're in Thailand, Toronto or Terrigal.

In fact, the concierge desk is manned most of the day to organise excursions across the island and across the Andaman Sea. It's not strictly part of the service but then again it is. The only limit is your imagination. Koegelenberg the imagineer will tailor-make your stay. A Mediterranean cooking class? Fruit carving and natural art lesson? Golf or yoga? Both? Check, check and check.

The nondescript Pathways Spa also draws guests in. The open-air pavilion of the 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. The potent smell of Tiger Balm mixes with the spicy scent of ginger tea and the floor is tiled and sparkly. My feet are washed in a rose petal bath and my hair is braided after my massage. And the massages are so good, I linger over my ginger tea.

In this cocooned paradise, the misfortunes of the world rarely do intrude, although the day after riot police confronted demonstrators in Bangkok, the Bangkok Post's headline screamed: "Brink of Anarchy!"

Perhaps. But that was the only sign of it.



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