

DESTINATION **THAILAND**

James Bond Island (Ko Tapu) in Phang Nga Bay is a tourist magnet. The Sarojin entices with its fine food and romantic setting, and wildlife abounds.

PICTURES: ISTOCK, SAROJIN

JAMES BOND ISLAND



COAST TO KHAO LAK

You won't need a golden gun to harness the sun and abundant wildlife

MARGARET BARCA

Just an hour north of Phuket, Khao Lak is perfect for a flop-and-drop holiday, a family escape, or as a springboard to spectacular snorkelling, diving, kayaking and jungle treks.

The shimmering turquoise waters of the Andaman Sea lap the west coast of Thailand, including the string of beaches and villages collectively known as Khao Lak. While only an hour or so drive north of busy Phuket, the area is considerably more laid-back and low-key. And that's a good thing.

Peaceful sandy beaches, coconut palms and casuarina-fringed inlets, spectacular offshore islands rimmed by crystal waters dense with marine life, impossibly lush national parks filled with wildlife, and resorts of all types are quietly tucked away.

MARINE TREASURES

Khao Lak offers easy access to the translucent waters, rich marine life and birdlife and exceptional diving and snorkelling of the Similan islands, ranked by National Geographic Society as one of the top 10 dive destinations in the world. It takes about 1½-2 hours to get there by speedboat from Khao Lak's Thap Lamu pier.

A little more remote, further north of the Similans, the five Surin Islands are another premier dive and snorkelling site, offering amazing coral, schools of reef fish, sea turtles, giant whale sharks, blue-spotted stingrays and manta rays.

More experienced divers are lured by the isolated, coral-covered Richelieu Rock, teeming with sea horses, clown fish and leopard sharks, and, from February to April, giant

whale sharks. There are many day trips, though live-aboard boat trips (from budget to luxury) for two to five days mean less travel time and more time to dive and explore the islands.

Both island groups are within marine national parks. To protect their fragile ecosystems, the islands are closed to visitors during the monsoon season, from mid May to mid October.

KHAOLAKEEXPLORER.COM

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

The national parks around Khao Lak provide swathes of virgin tropical rainforest, native wildlife, waterfalls and jungle-fringed rivers, secluded beaches and walking trails.

Head to Khao Lak-Lam Ru National Park, the closest to Khao Lak, for easy walks and the chance to see reptiles sunning themselves, tropical birds

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DESTINATION THAILAND

and butterflies. Check out the park's restaurant for its sea view and authentic Thai food.

Further north lies the lush Khao Sok National Park (it has the country's highest rainfall). Deep in the park, a surreal landscape of islands and jungle-clad karsts emerge from the waters of the vast Cheow Lan Lake. Reptiles, monkeys, gibbons, tapirs, boars, even elephants, and more than 300 bird species, inhabit the wilderness areas.

Canoe, kayak, trek, swim or just marvel at what's there. Although accessible on a day trip from Khao Lak (it's about two hours to the lake), consider staying at least one night in a floating bungalow or luxury floating villa for total immersion.

KHAOSOKLAKE.COM, KHAOSOKACCOMMODATION.COM

CANOE THROUGH EVERGLADES

Gliding in a canoe, on a bamboo raft or in a long-tail boat beneath the vast banyan trees overhanging the Sang-Nea River takes you through the "Little Amazon" mangrove ecosystem in Sri Phang Nga National Park, north of Khao Lak.

Birdsong echoes, tree snakes are curled above, there are monitor lizards, hornbills, white-throated kingfishers and darting dragonflies. The trip is often combined with a visit to the Old Town of Takua Pa.

KHAOLAKLANDDISCOVERY.COM/TOURS

BOND WITH PHANG NGA BAY

Forty years after James Bond classic The Man with the Golden Gun was filmed in Phang Nga Bay, tourists still search out "James Bond Island" or Ko Tapu. During peak season it's peak tourists. Having said that, the bay is mesmerising with its islands and craggy limestone karsts at times ethereally draped in mist. You can whizz out in a traditional long-tail boat (prepare to get wet!) or a larger vessel. Just remember - you won't be the only ones there.

Consider booking one of the kayak tours that visit some of the 40 other islands (still in a more pristine state).

Padding a kayak (or having someone paddle you) into the sea caves, or hong, reveals secret mangroves, secluded lagoons and surprising wildlife - snakes, lizards, fruit bats, even monkeys. Watch for fiddler crabs and skipper fish at low tide, and sea eagles and other birds perched in the dense foliage.

Many tours stop at Koh Panyi, or "fishing man village", a floating village of about 360 rustic houses on stilts, with its own golden, onion-domed mosque. Originally settled by Malay and Indonesian fishermen.



THE SAROJIN



SURIN NATIONAL PARK



WILD MONKEYS

today the community survives mainly on tourism, with shops and restaurants (with bay views).

KHAOLAKEXPLORER.COM

TAKUA PA OLD TOWN

Take a leisurely stroll around the Old Town at Takua Pa (25km from Khao Lak), once a busy port and hub for the wealthy tin-mining industry.

Original Sino-Portuguese shophouses, Chinese temples and pagodas and Buddhist temples reflect its history and multiple cultures. Go early morning to see saffron-robed monks collecting alms and giving blessings, or join the busy street market on Sunday afternoons (November to April).

TURTLE SCOOP

The Royal Thai Navy is actively involved in the conservation of the

area's endangered Hawksbill and Green Turtles. Visit its Sea Turtle Conservation Centre at Tab Lamu, which runs a hatchery, nursery and release program. Healthy baby turtles are returned to the ocean when about eight months old. There is another turtle sanctuary opposite Thai Muang beach, about 40 minutes south of Khao Lak, but it's not set up for visitors, so make sure to go to Tab Lamu. Entry fee is about \$2.50 - no need to join a tour to see this.

WHERE TO EAT

Like Khao Lak itself, food here tends to be casual and low-key, with family-run restaurants serving traditional Thai cuisine plus "international" food. Still, seafood is fresh and abundant, service is friendly and prices usually more than reasonable. Each of the beach villages has a

cluster of restaurants or bars, with most centred around Khao Lak Town.

Sample Thai street-food style at the Bang Niang market - there are even fried insects if you're yet to try these (open Monday-Thursday, and Saturday, 10am-10pm). At Takieng restaurant, near the market, order traditional dishes such as tom sum (green papaya salad), green curry with fresh seafood and crispy crab cakes.

For fine dining or a special occasion, the food and romantic setting at Ficus at The Sarojin, are hard to beat.

FAMILY STAY

The vibe at Khaolak Laguna Resort is family-friendly at a budget price, with two swimming pools, beachside sun lounges, plenty to do (yoga, tai chi, Thai boxing), and a casual restaurant perfect for kids.

ESCAPE ROUTE

THAILAND

GETTING THERE

Thai Airways flies daily from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth to Bangkok with connecting flights to Phuket. Jetstar flies three times a week from Sydney and Melbourne direct to Phuket. thaiairways.com, jetstar.com.au

Local buses from Phuket Airport to Khao Lak take around two hours and cost about \$4.30.

Taxis take around one hour and cost from about \$55.

airporttransferphuket.com Most hotels can arrange transfers for a fee. Some tour companies also arrange transfers, often at a better price. khaolaklanddiscovery.com/transfers

DID YOU KNOW?

Khao Lak's low-lying coast was one of Thailand's worst hit areas in the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, with waves pummeling up to 2km inland and an estimated 4000 people dying in this district alone. Displays at the small Tsunami Museum at Bang Niang village are a salutary reminder of the power of nature.

Indulge yourself at Chiva Spas with a coconut oil massage (blissful), black sesame scrub or perhaps a steam therapy. It's in a great location for those wanting to stroll up the street to check out the shops or eat at one of the local venues. The Club Bar has a pool table, board games and free popcorn. Beyond lie tropical gardens and the Orient restaurant (where the buffet breakfast is also served and you can sign up for Thai cooking classes).

There's loads of birdlife and wildlife (a small monitor lizard scooped past me, and there's a symphony of frogs in the wet season!).

Rooms, villas and chalets are generous in size with rattan furniture and tropical garden or beach views.

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THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF KHAOLAK LAGUNA RESORT

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