

winter's thaw

As the cold season starts its steady approach, *HL* deputy editor Jessica Ross dreams of an endless summer travelling through southern Thailand's hidden gems

TEXT JESSICA ROSS PHOTOGRAPHS SUPPLIED

Come April, sun worshippers are already edging deeper and deeper into denial about the imminent departure of summer. It might be all blue skies outside but there's a distinct nip in the air. At least half of the morning drive to work is spent in darkness and, as the mercury dips closer to single figures, you're no longer able to defend wearing precious summer dresses when it's clearly time for autumnal slacks and scarves.

It's around this time that the islomaniac in me is stirred, and seeking endless stretches of velvety shore and luminescent crystal seas is its only goal. It's in the market for a way to clear the mind with a touch of indulgence, far away from swarms of moon-bag-toting tourists. A quick google produces the answer I need: six nights in three different parts of southern Thailand – a spot that ticks all the boxes – leaving me free to do what I do best on a beach holiday: dig my feet into the silky sand and soak up the sun in peace. tourismthailand.org, theholidayfactory.co.za

KHAO LAK

When I touch down in Phuket, there's still a 65-kilometre trip from the airport to Khao Lak, where I'm treated to a good taste of *real* Thailand (that's the Thailand outside of the groomed resort landscapes). Phuket city bustles with activity, and as we reach more rural settings I catch glimpses of locals standing beside the road, flashing wide friendly grins while bowing slightly and clasping their palms together prayer-like in a *wai*. There's fresh fruit *everywhere* – hanging off trees, piled into locally woven baskets or displayed colourfully under the shade of market stalls – and the backdrop all the way along Route 4 is verdant indigenous vegetation. In the village areas, mopeds and tuk-tuks speed expertly through the narrow roads lined with cars. But the road is mostly quiet – it's midday, which means the locals are at work.

Khao Lak was hardest hit by the 2004 tsunami that ripped through beaches, properties and shops, and took with it the tourism that the area so relied on. But the 'Land of Smiles' is populated by hardworking communities who banded together to restore the area; now Khao Lak, with its pristine coastline, is fast becoming the destination of choice for likeminded winter-fleeing travellers.

THE STAY: THE SAROJIN

The Sarojin reminds me that true luxury exists in even the smallest details. From the refreshing lemon-grass-scented towel guests are handed upon arrival to the massive spa-like bathrooms in each of the 56 suites, this is boutique hotel bliss at its most relaxing. The property is modern and unconventional – it doesn't feel like a hotel so much as a wellness retreat. That's until one of the servers at breakfast hands me a glass of bubbly. 'It will wake you up!' Noo-Dang insists. After a good, filling meal served up next to a tranquil lotus pond, it's unlikely any visitor will be able to resist the water for long, alternating visits to the private beach and the glistening aquamarine swimming pavilion. I get to the pool early enough to snatch one of the 'floating' pavilions, grab a cocktail and languidly let the day slip by. sarojin.com ▸



THE EXPERIENCE: PRIVATE DINING AT THE SAROJIN

Those who, like me, are disinclined to cheesy romance will be rolling their eyes at the thought of dining underneath the stars at a nearby waterfall. But after treading up a slight rocky incline peppered with 1 000 candles, getting closer and closer to the thunderous crashing water, indulging in a delicious private dinner and finishing off with a swim next to the majestic falls, it's too late to be cool: you'll have been swept away by the magic of the moment.

LEISURE TRAVEL

KHAO SOK NATIONAL PARK

Your mouth will be agape for most of the 70-minute drive from Khao Lak to Khao Sok. The vegetation is thick and dense. You turn a corner into a treeless part of the road and you're treated to endless views of hundreds of kilometres of misty, damp, breathtaking, mysterious jungle. Craggy limestone formations soar upwards, hugged by the hot, heavy fog and blanketed with moss-like undergrowth. 'This must be where they keep the dinosaurs,' I (wittily) caption an Instagram. Khao Sok's reputation has come a long way since 1944, when it was affectionately known as 'Ban Sop' (Village of the Dead) courtesy of an epidemic that swept through the area. Today it's a far less dreary place, where elephants, monkeys, tigers, snakes and spiders roam among tropical palm trees, and where you can zone out and tune into the sounds of your surrounds: the ubiquitous whine of circling insects, whooping of playful gibbons and shrill calls of nearby swifts, all punctuated by the great hornbill's gruff barks.

THE STAY: ELEPHANT HILLS

Roughing it isn't so bad when you're staying in one of the lavish suites at luxury tented camp Elephant Hills. The 34 tented rooms are spacious and cool – welcome after a day exploring the rainforests – and each has an en-suite bathroom (where you may even meet a frog in the shower). But the best thing about Elephant Hills isn't just the serene setting. Try one of the canoe safaris, during which you can chill out and watch the gibbon monkeys swinging overhead – keeping a watchful eye out for snakes curled up in the branches above, of course – all the way down the Sok River. elephanthills.com

THE EXPERIENCE:
ELEPHANT INTERACTION

For South African safari enthusiasts, elephant sightings might be standard, but in Thailand you won't want to miss Elephant Hills' Elephant Experience, during which you'll get up close to a dozen of the trunked beauties. You don't ride the Asian pachyderms and that's a good thing – elephants aren't built to carry our weight. However, you can watch them frolic in the mud, lacing their clay-covered trunks together in happy union. Things get interesting during feeding, and you'll quickly come to know the different personalities of those ellies.

 [READ MORE ABOUT ELEPHANT HILLS AT HOUSEANDLEISURE.CO.ZA](http://HOUSEANDLEISURE.CO.ZA) 



 [FIND OUT WHAT TO EXPECT IN A THAI RAINFOREST AT HOUSEANDLEISURE.CO.ZA](http://HOUSEANDLEISURE.CO.ZA) 



STAY DRY IN
A MONSOON

If you're travelling any time between July and October, you'll discover that blue skies can quickly turn dark and very, *very* wet. Avoid getting totally soaked with a good waterproof jacket (water repellent clothing won't help you here). Alternatively, disposable plastic ponchos (which thanks to the pervasive heat may make you feel as if you've been vacuum-sealed and placed inside a sous-vide machine) are available at convenience stores.

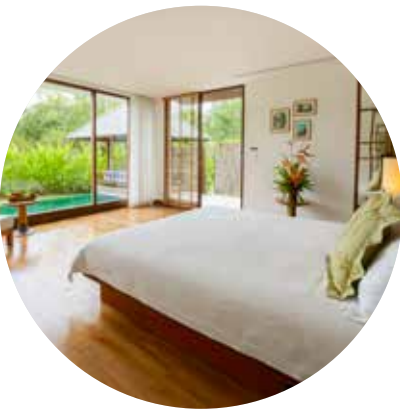


CHEF GOGH, OF THE SAROJIN HOTEL, ON HIS TOP THAI DISHES
'I like easy noodles such as phad thai (fried rice noodles with prawns and tamarind sauce) or noodle soup (rice noodle tom yam with pork). I also love local seafood in any style, such as steamed snapper with chilli-lime sauce, crab curry with wild pepper leaves or fried mackerel steak with green mango salad. The best thing about Khao Lak is that I can find all the good food I really like.'



KO PHI PHI

You'll need to catch a ferry to get to this island, the most touristy of the three southern Thai destinations. Depending on the weather it can be a bumpy ride, but when the sight of the archipelago looms closer any seasickness is soon forgotten and the only thing you can think of is jumping into the azure waters. The distant coastline is dotted with boats – the kind you'd expect to see in a castaway movie. They're called long-tails and they're the mode of transportation between each of the islands. We disembark on Ko Phi Phi Don, the largest of the islands. This is the place to swim, snorkel and sail – anything you can do on water is encouraged here. Nights can be spent bouncing between the beach-shack tiki bars, watching fire dancers on the white sands or catching some Zs after a day in the sun. To avoid the crowds, charter your own boat and engage in some island-hopping. When it comes to legendary Maya Bay, however, there's no way to sidestep the masses – you're just another gawker there thanks to *The Beach*. And yes, it's that beautiful in real life too.▷





DID YOU KNOW

The shells of a cashew nuts contain toxins called cardol and anacardic acid, which can cause pretty nasty burns. They need to be carefully processed by hand and roasted before they're ready to eat. Visit one of the nut processing factories in Khao Lak to find out more.



PACKING ESSENTIALS

A pair of hardy flip-flops fit for the beach. Lightweight clothing (think materials that wick sweat and moisture easily). A good pair of sunnies. Mozzie repellent. Sunscreen and a hat. A good hair protector.



THIS WAY TO EVACUATE!

Because the island is located a good distance from anything, Phi Phi's sands are pegged with signs directing the route to safety in case of an earthquake, fire or a tsunami.

GETTING THERE

First-class travelling is the privilege of few, so it's wonderful to discover that Cathay Pacific's Economy and Premium Economy classes are spacious and comfortable, with great service. Not one to look forward to in-flight dining, I was pleasantly surprised by the food on the long haul (over 12.5 hours) between South Africa and Hong Kong: choices include locally sourced, sustainable options where possible and are based largely on traditional and modern Chinese cuisine. From Hong Kong you're able to connect to Phuket, which is just under four hours away, via Dragonair. The best part? No visa is required for South African citizens. cathaypacific.com



THE PLACE: ZEAVOLA

There are few places I've stayed that are as luxurious as Zeavola. A very tanned, very polite Spaniard shows me to my room, which might be the home of my dreams – it's all rich turmeric, fuchsia and turquoise, complemented by teak furnishings and thoughtful, minimalistic details throughout. The bed is big and comfortable, but after dinner I recline on the patio mattress, which is where I fall asleep. It's so private and quiet, you feel as if you're the only person on the whole of Phi Phi – and that's how it ought to be. If, by the last day, you haven't been pampered into coma-like bliss, make sure you visit the skilled masseuses at the Zeavola spa, who stand ready to work every little bit of stress out of your body. zeavola.com



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT The pool villas at Zeavola where, thanks to your own private pool (and a Champagne bar), you're likely to stay put for the whole vacation; Ko Phi Phi is all golden sands and azure seas; the Zeavola spa.



VISIT HOUSEANDLEISURE.CO.ZA TO DISCOVER *HL*'S FAVOURITE BEACHES IN THE WORLD