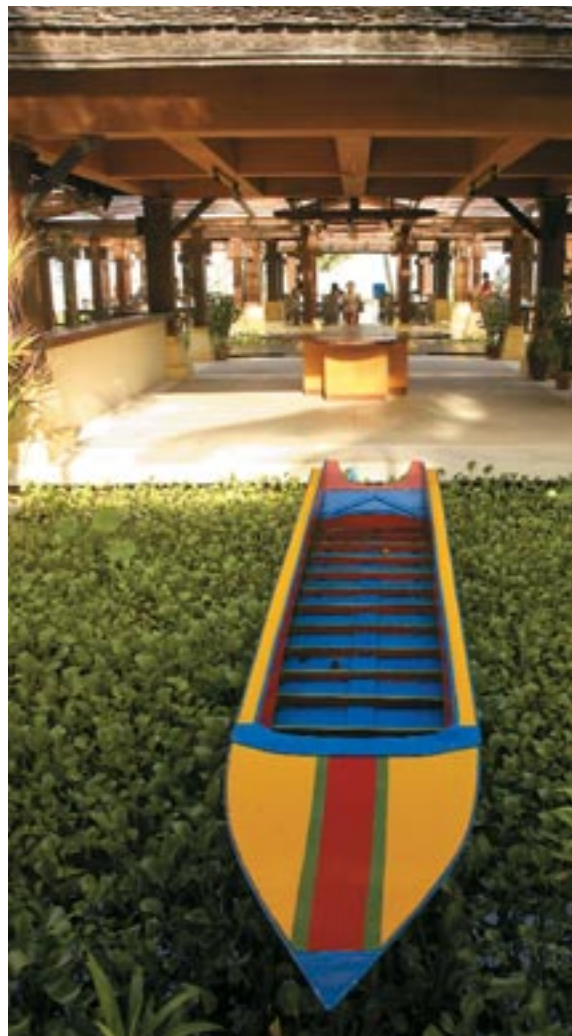




Clockwise from left: Mu Ko Similan National Park, a divers' paradise; the restaurant at Sofitel Khao Lak; one of the beautiful Similan Islands; the pool bar at Sofitel Magic Lagoon.



# EASTERN FLAIR

You may remember a different Thailand from backpacking days; today, travelling through this jewel of the east is all about exquisite luxury.

STORY **RACHAEL OAKES-ASH**

Thailand has always been a backpacker's mecca. The appeal of a coastal paradise with \$5 bungalows and \$2 pad thai each night has students reaching for their *Lonely Planets* every summer. It's been 10 years since I went on my own student pilgrimage to Thailand. I went to a Full Moon Rave Party on the east coast island of Koh Pha Ngan, where I chose to sleep on the beach. In the intervening decade, the Thai tourism industry has experienced a boom and so have I, or should I say, so has my income.

There comes a time in a woman's life, and bank account, when the backpack must be traded in for an Italian leather carry-all, preferably monogrammed (it's easier to spot on the baggage carousel). Five-star travel does not take kindly to backpacks still carrying the dust of Mount Sinai, the salt of the Red Sea, chewing gum from the Spanish Steps and the aroma of Rotorua. Besides, hauling your luggage on your back only ruins the line of your Egyptian cotton suit, or so they tell me.

There's something very grown up about sitting up the pointy end of the plane. I keep expecting to be caught out and sent to the 'back of the bus' but instead, I am waited upon by smiling Thai Airways stewardesses offering me champagne before take-off (and not asking for ID). My destination is Khao Lak, the forgotten Thailand of Phang Nga Province on the Andaman Sea. This is the Thailand before the tourist boom, hectares of national parkland and sleepy villages, an hour's drive north from the mayhem of Phuket.

Khao Lak is the closest land point to the dive pleasures of the Similan Islands and their sunken wrecks. There are a handful of resorts facing the ocean and edged by jungle, which means tranquility and peace for stressed out *farangs* (foreigners) seeking solace. The Sofitel Magic Lagoon Resort sits on Khuk Khak Beach and opened in May 2004. Impossibly elegant Thai dancers in their finest silks greet guests, as we sip a tropical beverage served inside a pineapple.

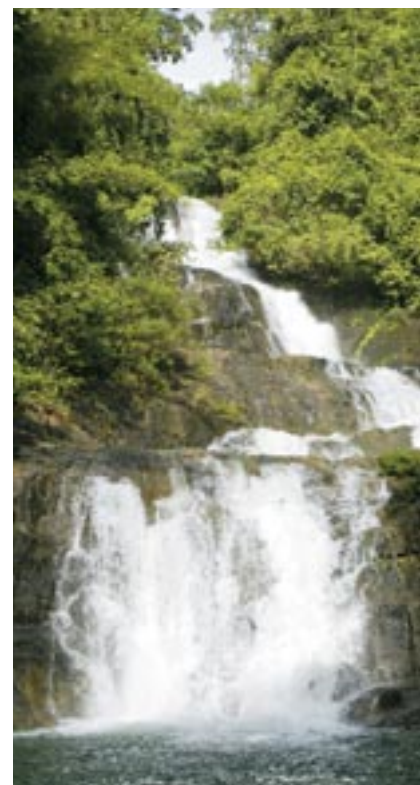
Water is a feature of this resort; the 'Magic Lagoon' is the world's largest beachfront pool, over 14,000 square metres. One lap takes over

an hour, longer if you stop for a cocktail at the pool bar. Hotel rooms front the pool, with direct access from ground-floor patios and private gardens. You know you are in five-star heaven when you sink into the mammoth bathtub and pull back the wooden concertina blinds to take in the view of the marble elephants splashing water from their trunks into the pool.

Elephants in Thailand are a symbol of power and peace, and within hours of my arrival I find myself on intimate terms with the local mammoths, as we make our way through the nearby jungle for a two-hour elephant trek. The elephants run wild in this national park and are called in for trekking by the handlers. A century ago there were 100,000 Asian elephants in Thailand. As a result of ivory hunters, only 3,000-4,000 remain, and they are now a protected species. It is a far cry from the 300-year war between Thailand and Burma in the 18th century, when 20,000 of these magnificent creatures were trained and used in battle. These animals still hold a special place in both Thai culture and history.

Elephants are the only other mammal on Earth that cry tears; they also have funeral rites and adopt orphaned babies. I feel moved to be so close to such an ancient animal, although that could also be the jetlag kicking in. Rain drips onto fleshy leaves, trunks rip sustenance from the ground and the fauna provides percussion. Shades of green dominate the vista with the ocean in the distance and not a man-made structure in sight. The pendulous movement of the elephants' walk is meditative and I find myself drifting off, dreaming of beaded fabric, figs and palm-leaf fans.

The Khao Lak-Lamru National Park covers 125 square kilometres and was established in 1991. Both the Phang Nga and Takuapa Rivers are sourced here, creating a number of waterfalls and streams for eco-tourism. Kayaking or rubber canoeing among the mangroves is a popular activity, though the hot-pink of the inflatables clashes with the muted tones of the creeks upon which they ride. Waterholes are filled with local school children swimming in their uniforms at the end of a hot day and laughing at the westerners in our indiscreet bathers.



Above, clockwise from left: The pool at the Sofitel Khao Lak; the Reclining Buddha at Wat Tham Suan Khua near Phang Nga Bay; a waterfall near Khao Lak; elephant trekking in Khao Lak.

The magic of this region comes from the relative lack of other tourists, which means more contact with traditional local Thai life. On one walk we stumble upon a parade of school children presenting their gifts to the local Buddhist temple and are invited to tag along. The word is out on this stretch of coastline, though, and there is limited time to experience its beauty before the big developers step in. Real estate moguls have already pushed the prices per rai (1,600 square metres) from 5,000 baht (\$160) to 10 million baht (\$320,000) in the past 15 years.

Venturing outside of this region can be a shock. Best to go north, they say. We learn our lesson when we go south to nearby Phang Nga Bay, where tourists multiply with every breath. What is to be a relaxing kayak jaunt across the bay to limestone cave formations turns into central station: guides paddle the inflatable craft from the pontoon on one side of the limestone formation through a tunnel, to reveal boatloads of tourists from Phuket fighting for water space. There is nothing five-star or relaxing about this sojourn, and I long for the comfort of my hotel room (and spa menu). Because really, what luxury holiday is complete without a Sabai Sabai, a serenity bath of jasmine and lemongrass, preceded by a Samunprai (Thai herbal heat) massage, I ask myself while reaching for the phone. I struggle to decide between the Chum Chou (green tea and bamboo), Yothai (pandan leaf and pink lotus) or Na (tropical fruit and flower) facials.

The Thais are known as 'the smiling people', and if you have ever had a Thai massage or experienced fresh Thai cooking, you would smile too.

The heart of Thai cooking is in the nation's capital, Bangkok, a city that divides travellers into those who love it and those who do not. It's a city of extremes, with Buddhist temples alongside a thriving sex industry. Economically, Bangkok experienced a double-digit boom during the 1980s, only to be hit hard by the Asian financial crisis of 1997. Seven years later it is attracting a strong mix of Asians and western ex-pats and is re-establishing itself as an Asian business hub.

It's an exciting city for food fans: market stalls line the streets nightly and cooking takes place on open gas fires, filling the air with aromas of coriander, lemongrass and ginger. Thai gastronomy, once reserved for patrons of the Oriental Hotel on the banks of the Chao Praya River, is gradually finding a place in world cuisine, but its complex flavours have been inspiring leading Australian chefs for more than a decade, in particular David Thompson, Neil Perry and Kylie Kwong.

Australian chef Andrew Jacka made his name at the Chiva Som destination spa in Thailand, where the world's elite detox and rejuvenate. He has combined the desire for quality food with the desire for health in his latest Bangkok venture, Amaranth—Fine Dining For Life. Thailand's first organic fine-dining experience sits in the advertising district of Bangkok, close to Emporium, where shopping is of the Chanel, Fendi and Ferragamo variety.

The Duchess of York was booked for lunch the day I dined, though her chopper was late and we missed air kissing by minutes. The menu features European polenta, Indian paprika, Caribbean cajun and

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traditional Asian flavours, and comes complete with calorie and fat content breakdown. Symbols alert diners to egg, vegetarian and dairy content. It's an innovative concept for travellers watching their waistlines and an oasis from the heat of the Bangkok streets.

After all that healthy food, I needed a drink, a crisp glass of sauvignon blanc would do. Wine in Asia has always been expensive to consume, with a 400 percent tax in Thailand alone (the local Mekong whiskey was always my choice during my backpacking days) and even with a wallet full of baht, the wine prices threaten to break my budget.

V9, on the 37th floor of the Sofitel Bangkok, is the city's first wine bar, bottle shop and restaurant in one. The theory is, purchase the wine from the extensive selection on offer (more than 80 imported labels) at the bottle shop and the restaurant will serve it during your meal. Owned by French company Wine Connection, V9 provides 'tasting trees' of cuisine appropriate to your chosen wine. Just for the record, this restaurant also has the world's most comfortable silver cutlery.

Bangkok has a healthy cocktail scene, and I am not talking the seedy girlie joints of Patpong or the more fashionable lap-dancing Soi Cowboy. Distil is on the 64th floor of The Dome at the State Tower, the city's tallest building. Outside on the terrace is the Sky Bar, with a view halfway to heaven. Sirocco is the neighbouring fine-dining restaurant open to the stars, with a grand sweeping staircase. It is a favourite of the Thai royal family—apparently table 21 is the table of choice.

Despite the exquisite cuisines on offer, I still ate some of the finest food of my journey at roadside markets. There is something about a simple piece of chicken, skewered on bamboo and roasted on an open flame that evokes the essence of travel. Chilli dipped squid is a delight, especially served in minute plastic bags to catch the drips, and eaten while being jostled by Bangkok shoppers.

Regardless of the class you travel or whether your luggage is on your back or on wheels, the emotions that travel provokes will always be the same. Anticipation first, then exhilaration and, for me, melancholy on the runway as I prepare to leave a destination that has got under my skin, inspired and moved me. The only difference is the quality of tissue used at the front of the plane to wipe those moist eyes, and the brand of bubbles drunk to drown the wanderlust blues. ■

### KHAO LAK

#### How to get there:

Thai Airways International flies direct to Phuket from Sydney, Melbourne and Perth. Khao Lak is an hour's drive from Phuket International Airport

#### Where to stay:

Sofitel Magic Lagoon Resort

### BANGKOK

#### How to get there:

Thai Airways International flies direct to Bangkok from Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth

#### Where to stay:

Sofitel Silom, 188 Silom Road, Bangkok

#### Where to eat:

Amaranth, 545 Sukhumvit 31, Klong Toey, Bangkok

V9, 37th floor, 188 Silom Rd, Bangkok

Distil, Sirocco and Sky Bar, 64th floor, State Tower, 1055 Silom Road, Bangkok, Bangkok



Above: Sirocco, fine dining under the stars, and the neighbouring Sky Bar both on the 64th floor of The Dome at Bangkok's State Tower.