

TRAVEL

16

SATURDAY, MARCH 20, 2010



KOH KOOD

BY LAURA BARTON

It's not that I don't like other people — indeed I would go so far as to lay claim to a rich and varied social life. It's just that, as I have grown older, I have found that I increasingly like spending holidays in a place where I can guarantee that I won't have to talk to anyone. Not splendid isolation exactly, no far-flung mountain huts or Buddhist retreats, rather something we might class as “minimal interaction”: no small talk by the pool, late-night karaoke or group safari outings, thank you very much.

For this, I blame the holidays of my childhood: invariably two weeks in a remote cottage in Anglesey — the island off the northwest coast of Wales. There were long walks, damsons to pick, fields of cows and sheep to admire and occasional trips to the beach but, crucially, also plenty of time to read, eat, sleep and row about in the creek at the bottom of the garden. I would holiday there still, were it not for the flat gray skies and the viciously cold Irish Sea. For the past few years I have been trying to find somewhere that, while warmer than north Wales in August, is still just as quiet and still and lovely.

And so it may puzzle you to learn that I recently took a holiday to Thailand. Some 14 million people flock here each year, drawn by the natural beauty and myriad delights: elephant rides and jungle adventures, temples, beaches, romantic idylls and, of course, phenomenal food. As I stood on the streets of Bangkok, breathing in the canteen smells and the diesel smoke, listening to the calls of the market vendors selling everything from Viagra to coconut water, and wind-up toy dogs to neatly threaded garlands of flowers, I began to fear that visiting Thailand to escape the world might have been a giant mistake.

But Bangkok was not my ultimate destination. Three hundred kilometers east of this giddy street, near the Cambodian border, lies the small island of Koh Kood, home to rainforest, coconut and rubber plantations, sleepy fishing villages, and fewer than 2,000 people.

Koh Kood's great advantage is its relative remoteness. Getting there requires an internal flight or train journey from Bangkok, followed by an hour's boat ride from the mainland. This sounds more of an expedition than it actually is. It's about an hour from Bangkok to the small airport at Trat, with its manicured lawns and string of topiary elephants along the runway. The car ride to the ferry port took me through lush green countryside, past villages and temples and fruit stalls. And there are, I thought to myself as I watched the land disappear and the surf ride up behind our speedboat, surely worse ways to spend an hour than sailing the clear blue waters of the Gulf of Thailand, especially if you care to use the time for a bit of dolphin-spotting.

Accommodation on Koh Kood is varied. There are homestays and budget hotels, as well as a handful of luxury resorts, but even these promote a barefoot, relaxed approach. There are no landlines, little Internet access, and few cars. Electricity is minimal — homes and hotels rely on generators or solar power. All is slow, warm tranquility.

I disembarked at the jetty of Away, a quietly luxurious resort with a cluster of bungalows overlooking a bay. There's plenty of warm and graceful hospitality here, as well as a spa and

Thailand

off the tourist map

Despite the millions visiting Thailand each year, there are still islands untouched by mass tourism. Laura Barton and Gemma Bowes each find a perfect example

BY LAURA BARTON AND GEMMA BOWES
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON



Around 14 million people visit Thailand each year, drawn by its natural beauty and attractions such as elephant rides, spas and resorts, temples, beaches and the kingdom's world-famous cuisine.

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG AND EPA

KOH YAO NOI

BY GEMMA BOWES

Finding the perfect unspoiled Thai island is not as easy as it once was. Many have allowed their pristine worlds to be eaten away by flash resorts, watersports and nightlife. Now you have to search a little bit harder, venture a little bit further to find footprint-free sand.

There is a smattering of still-magical islands towards the Cambodian or Burmese borders, but others lie where you'd least expect, such as slap-bang in the middle of the country's most developed bay. Phang Nga is home to ritzy Phuket in the west and busy Krabi to the east, but at its watery heart the sister islands of Koh Yao Noi and Koh Yao Yai pull in just a trickle of travelers, with a few basic beach-hut complexes, bars and cafes, and the odd barefoot-chic resort.

After a rather wearing three-day kayaking and camping trip around Phang Nga's tinier limestone islands, my boyfriend and I were dropped by long-tail boat into the milky blue shallows in front of the east coast's Koyao Island Resort. Sandy and damp, we carted our grubby rucksacks across the hotel's neat garden, passing a group of women lazily stretching their limbs into yoga poses, to be greeted by staff wearing beautiful silk dresses and bearing passion fruit juice.

Accommodation here is spoiling but relaxed, with 18 thatched-roof bungalows with open-air showers in private courtyards and a front wall made from bamboo blinds that roll up for uninterrupted

views of the bay's iconic limestone stacks.

“Don't forget — 6:30 cocktail hour!” was repeated so frequently we didn't dare miss it, but after a few sickly mojitos in the company of couples slumped on giant floor cushions on the lawn, we set off across the pitch-black beach, crabs scuttling from under our bare feet. A 30-minute wander along the island's one road brought us to one of the only bars, the Pyramid, a thatched place that could have been the fictional invention of any of the cult backpacker thrillers of the 1990s, mainly on account of its two other patrons, obviously regulars — a wild-eyed, long-haired American who was teaching English locally, and a Scouser who had set off to see the world for the first time several months ago, and got stuck here, the first place he came to. “You can't get better than this,” he said. “Why bother chasing the rainbow?”

The next day we discovered the real joy of the island, following the circular road on hotel bikes. Rather than the trinket stalls, neon and magic-mushroom bars of Koh Samui, Koh Pha-Ngan and Phi Phi, here the details that caught the eye were refreshingly traditional: rubber farms (with tapping buckets hanging from trunks and square sheets of rubber drying on the ground beneath), water buffalo, cockerels, farmers. People waved or ignored us. No one tried to sell us anything, not even in the island's one village, a huddle of grocery stores, markets and the Je t'aime Koh Yao cafe, serving fantastic banana milkshakes.

We happily spotted kids aged 10 or 12 riding motorbikes; women exercising to pop music at a community center; boxing schools; bored masseurs waiting for customers in roadside shacks ... in the best possible way, there wasn't much going on. We ended up back at the Pyramid, where two young honeymooners from Florida invited us to drink margaritas while they recounted how they'd joined the mile-high club on their way over, and kept us laughing at their terrible impressions of our English accents until we retreated to the hotel for coconut curry.

After kayaking along the deserted coast, snorkeling around the rocks, playing badminton on the lawn, we'd exhausted most of Koh Yao Noi's obvious activities, but if we'd had a few more days we would have cycled to find the secret beaches we'd heard lay down bumpy tracks off the “main road,” and caught a ferry to the larger but even less developed neighboring island of Koh Yao Yai. Then what? There would be nothing to do but slide into that zoned-out state where filling hours becomes less important than soaking up the surrounding beauty.

Instead we left by ferry to Krabi (they also run to Phuket), then visited the most obvious beauty spot in Phang Nga bay — Railay beach, the rock-climbing mecca. It was stunning, but also horribly busy with European backpackers, all unaware of the peace and perfection to be found just across the water. Perhaps in their case it would have been worth chasing that rainbow.

one of Koh Kood's best diving centers, but no one jostles you into a hike or a snorkeling excursion.

Mostly this makes for a fine place to do nothing, slow and calm and unruffled, you can feel Koh Kood subtly working its way into your bones. On an average day here I did little beyond loll about in the hammocks and deckchairs along the boardwalk, beneath the palm trees, and strategically positioned on the jetty to take in the sunset. I took a kayak across the clear blue sea to a small golden curve of beach; I took a quiet boat ride over to it the next bay. I swam, I slept, I read some Per Petterson, and amid the cool rooms and quiet corners, I felt my mind gently unwinding.

Most evenings, when the sun was low but the air was still heavy and damp, I strolled into the nearby village, for dinner or a beer. The road is a dusty strip, tan-colored and warm underfoot, and at night the jungle grows inky black, full of twitching, chirruping, wild sounds — the calls of birds and frogs and monkeys. The restaurants here are simple but fantastic, and after even a short walk through the thick evening air you are pleased to find a cold bottle of Chang beer and a bowl of yellow curry.

A short jeep drive from Away, Shantaa is an undeniable step up in luxury. The 10 private villas sit on a hillside, amid lush gardens, with a simple stylish bedroom, a balcony and an open-air bathroom, home to exotic flowers, passing geckos and, to my great excitement, even the occasional iguana. There is a village nearby where you could venture for dinner, but it would be hard to leave the resort's restaurant. Family-owned and staffed by students, it is one of the island's best. The menu offers traditional Thai dishes plus some twists, such as raw sea bass salad with peanut sauce, and mango parfait with coconut ice cream.

I can think of few places I have enjoyed staying more. Flipping open the doors of my villa to lie in bed and watch the sun rise over the palms each morning, I would cross over the wooden pier to walk along the long stretch of soft, pale sand. Afternoons would be spent swimming in the warm turquoise sea, sipping limeade at the beachside cafe, and taking an open-air Thai massage, all feet and breath and tiger balm, to the sound of birdsong and the steady hush of the waves.

For a treat I spent my last night at Soneva Kiri, which was a bit of a trip from the sublime to the ridiculous. Imagine an uber-swanky Center Parcs, an enclosed resort amid acres of forest and organic vegetable gardens, where guests fly in by private plane, and spend their days in a kind of ludicrous Hollywood luxury; where you have your own personal valet, and everyone hums about on golf buggies and retro bicycles, shuttling between the spa and the library and the giant inflatable cinema screen (available for private hire, should the mood strike you).

I can think of few places less like the remote Welsh cottage of my childhood holidays, and even if you can't afford to stay there, the resort's Benz's restaurant is worth seeking out, for an exquisite, Thai feast, from leaf-wrapped *mieng kam* to sweet tapioca in coconut milk and perfectly ripe mango and dragon fruit, served as you watch the sun dip below the water and the fireflies begin to blink.

Later, as I took a midnight swim beneath a clear sky and a full moon, I thought how finally, after all this time, I had found an island every bit as quiet and still and lovely as a rainy Anglesey in August.