

# Sawasdee

The best of Thailand

November 2006

THAI'S  
New Route:  
Johannesburg

## South Africa

THAI's newest route  
offers great views of  
a whole continent

[www.thaiairways.com](http://www.thaiairways.com)

 **THAI**  
Smooth as silk

# The quiet life

Koh Yao Noi proves to be a serene break from everywhere else, even Southern Thailand's more popular resort islands

By Michael Spencer



**AWE-INSPIRING SCENERY HAS ALWAYS** resulted in a rich tapestry of myths and legends. Thailand's Phang Nga Bay, where dozens of pristine islands rise sheer from the water, dripping with tropical forest and pocked with caves and vertiginous cliffs, is no exception.

Old people on the bay tell the tale of a giant sea serpent that once used its magical powers to help a woman give birth to a baby girl. In return, the serpent demanded that his son be allowed to marry the girl when she was of age. When the time came however, the woman forgot her promise and arranged for her daughter to marry a local prince instead. Learning of the woman's treachery, the sea serpent swam towards the Krabi shore in a rage splitting in half the largest island in the bay on the way.

The pandemonium caused by the arrival of the sea serpent at the wedding ceremony disturbed a powerful hermit who was meditating in a nearby cave. The hermit, who apparently had a low tolerance for noise, transformed the warring families and the sea serpent into the oddly shaped mountains that are now so prominent around Krabi's picturesque Phra Nang peninsula.

I was mulling over this story on my way to Yao Noi, the smaller of the two islands allegedly created by the sea serpent's headlong dash for Krabi. I had heard that Yao Noi was a tranquil paradise where the locals still lived a traditional life based around fishing and farming. I was

**Days on Koh Yao Noi, even on a brief visit, are dedicated to the pursuit of doing little.**



Local homes blend in with the laid-back atmosphere. *Below: Another day at sea.*

frankly sceptical that such a thing could be possible just an hour's ferry ride from Phuket's booming property and popular tourism scene, but I was interested to find out for myself.

**THE FERRY TO YAO NOI LEAVES HALF A** dozen times a day from Bang Rong pier on Phuket's east coast. On this crossing, a couple of passengers had taken their motorbikes with them and the others were laden with miscellaneous provisions necessary for existence on the relatively remote bay islands.

It was a fine, sunny day and although



there was a good breeze, the sea was quite smooth as the boat took us deep into the heart of Phang Nga Bay. Storms can blow through here, but generally, the waters of the bay are far calmer and more sheltered than the open sea. There was a magical quality about the surrounding seascape. In every direction limestone islands and outcrops studded the bay, and off in the far distance I could just make out the jagged outline of the mountains lining the Krabi shore.

As the ferry entered the narrow strait separating Yao Noi and Yao Yai islands, I spotted a solitary rock in the middle of the channel that locals believe is a scale that fell off the sea serpent as it crashed through on its way to the ill-fated wedding.

First impressions of Yao Noi seemed to confirm what I had been told. Brightly painted fishing boats were moored outside wooden houses on stilts and I glimpsed a heron stalking about in the shallow waters by the shore. A group of fishermen sat quietly mending their nets and talking in low voices. There was an indefinable air of serenity that hung over the scene.

One of the largest islands in Phang Nga Bay, Yao Noi is nearly 10 kilometres

long and is quite narrow except in the south where it widens out. A slender concrete-topped road wends its way around the periphery of the island and the locals either walk or get around on motorbikes and bicycles. Cars are a rarity. I only saw three on the island but there are probably a few more that are only used on special occasions. The other rarity is dogs. I didn't see any at all; apparently the predominantly Muslim islanders are all cat lovers.

Over the next couple of days I discovered Yao Noi to be an idyllic place where the pace of life is still slow and unhurried. The island's four thousand inhabitants live to a rhythm dictated by the weather and the seasons, underpinned by an evident sense of community.

The best way to explore the island is by bicycle or motorbike and I spent a leisurely day peddling through rubber-tree plantations and emerald green rice paddies absorbing the vignettes of island life. I discovered there are simple pleasures to be enjoyed like watching the fishing boats unload their catch or browsing through the fresh fruit and vegetables in a tiny village market.

OF AMERICAN EXPRESS AWARD 2005  
 MY FAVORITE RESTAURANT™  
 NEW RESTAURANT BY BK MAGAZINE  
 DINING VENUE BY THAILAND TATLER  
 BEST BANGKOK RESTAURANTS BY  
 BOK POST RESTAURANT MAGAZINE



ME INDULGE YOUR SENSES  
 EXPERIENCE THE FINEST IN  
 TEMPORARY JAPANESE CUISINE  
 WITH CALIFORNIAN TWIST



DUNGE - ONE OF THE HIPPEST  
 PLACES TO BE SEEN IN BANGKOK  
 AND HOME  
 FOR ALL FASHION MODELS



I R E S T A U R A N T  
 LOS ANGELES NEW YORK BANGKOK  
 COMING SOON : LAS VEGAS MIAMI LONDON  
 DAILY EXCEPT MONDAY  
 11:00 AM - 12:00 MIDNIGHT



Three scenes typical of Koh Yao Noi, which is a serene stop even by local standards.

Village houses hark back to an earlier era when wood was the only construction material and their owners seemed to take great pride in stocking their gardens with a bright profusion of flowers. And everywhere, the ubiquitous island cats lie lazily on the balconies, seemingly asleep but with one eye on the songbirds hanging from the eaves in ornate cages.

Most of the villagers live on the south as the rugged north of the island is completely undeveloped. There are some excellent trails that run through the forest in this part of the island with a chance to see some wildlife and the added reward of stunning panoramas of Phang Nga Bay and its islands from the hilltops.

The islanders are comparatively dark skinned compared to most Thais, a legacy perhaps of the *chao leh*, sea gypsies of the Andaman Sea, who were the original inhabitants of the bay. But like most people in Southern Thailand they are also a mix of Thai, Burmese, Chinese and Malay ancestry. This is reflected in their distinct dialect that has its roots in all these cultures especially Malay. Of course everyone also speaks standard Thai and sometimes English now that a few visitors are beginning to discover the charms of Yao Noi.

For the moment, accommodation is limited to the delightful KoYao Island resort with its Thai/Balinese-style villas set in palm gardens by the sea and a scattering of bungalow operations and homestays catering to more intrepid travellers to the island.

Gavin Pereira, the ebullient general manager of the KoYao Island resort, is not surprisingly an ardent fan of the place.

He is also a mine of information about everything from how many species of crab are found on the island — four — and anecdotes about its most famous visitor, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, who apparently has a soft spot for Yao Noi and its inhabitants.

"This is definitely not a party island," he warned me, "it's very quiet here." He was right, but that is absolutely the charm of Yao Noi. The absence of anything to do except relax is a wonderful encouragement to do exactly that, and I gave in without a struggle.

For the more active visitors there actually are a few things to do, like snorkelling, paddling along the coast by kayak or hiring a long-tail boat to explore some of the 44 other islands in the bay. Most of these are uninhabited and rarely visited by anyone but fishermen and bird-nest collectors. Wildlife thrives as a result and it is not uncommon to see monkeys and monitor lizards as well as hornbills, giant fruit bats and the ever-present sea eagles that hover over this pristine domain.

There are signs that Yao Noi is beginning to attract more interest from

the outside world, and an upscale resort property, the Evason Hideaway, will open here next year. Managed by the Six Senses Group, well known for its sensitivity to environmental issues, the resort is designed to integrate with its surroundings rather than alter them.

Sensitivity is crucial if Yao Noi is to retain its special charm in the face of development. As on most islands, water resources are limited, and given its size, it will obviously never compete with the mass market appeal of Phuket, its much-bigger neighbour.

In the meantime Yao Noi seems destined to continue to appeal to those who appreciate peace, serenity and some of the best views in the world. ☸



# Landscapes of Spain

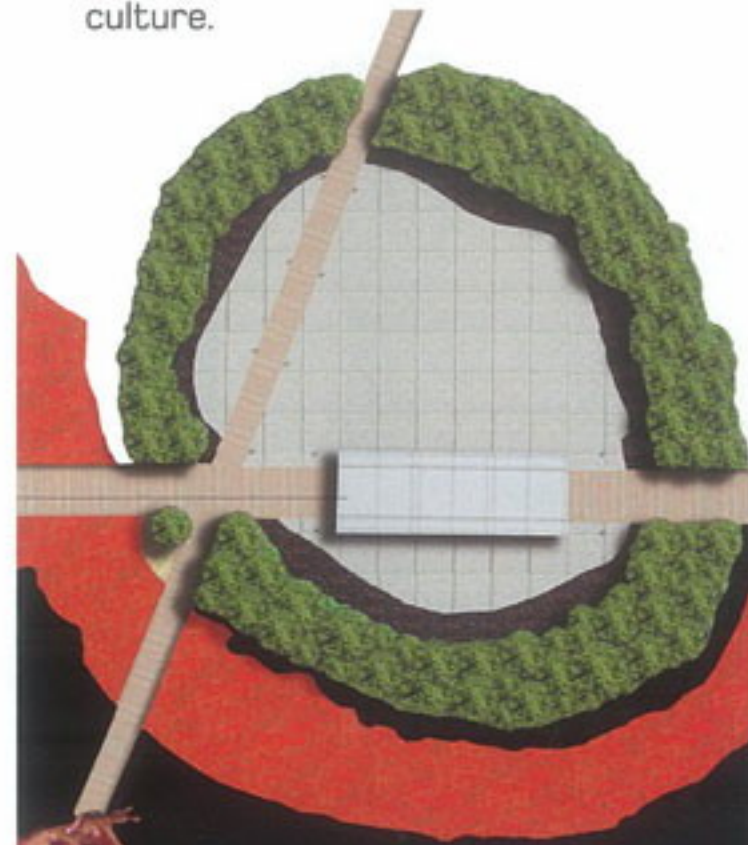
at **Royal Flora Ratchaphruek 2006**

**Chiang Mai**

1<sup>st</sup> Nov. '06 – 31<sup>st</sup> Jan. '07

**Spain** takes part in **Royal Flora** with a cultural programme, a pavilion and a garden that will be a gift to the Kingdom of Thailand.

This will be a great opportunity to enjoy the diversity of Spanish culture.



## Cultural activities Spain Week

**Chiang Mai and Bangkok**  
26<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> January '07

Eva Yerbabuena's  
Flamenco Dance Company

Flamenco performances  
and workshops

Llorenç Barber  
Bell Concerts

Street Theatre

Spanish food:  
tasting and classes



ROYAL ORCHID HOLIDAYS

THAI



### ROYAL ORCHID HOLIDAYS TOURS

Exploring "Amazing Thailand" and other countries has never been easier than with the 2006 series of Royal Orchid Holidays programmes that cover Thailand and beyond. They offer a wonderful array of travel programmes for every taste and style, a great diversity of choice, flexibility in itinerary, planning and economy. There are all sorts of variations — from brief pocketbook-friendly Minibreaks or Stopovers, to longer single or multi-destination itineraries, as well as many Extension and Option plans. You can choose from packages covering adventure, special interest or sporting travel.

Royal Orchid Holidays are sold in conjunction with Thai First, Executive and Economy Class tickets. You do not have to travel and stay with the same group throughout a multideestination itinerary.

Interested? Royal Orchid Holidays, Mini-breaks and Stopovers are arranged through accredited travel agents, or any THAI office. For more information visit the website [www.thaiairways.com](http://www.thaiairways.com).

### SOFT ADVENTURES

**Yao Noi Island: Two days, one night. Daily.**

Kick back on the beach on a roundtrip from Phuket, including one night's accommodation and breakfast. ROHE25

**Yao Noi Island Sightseeing: Daily.**

Visit rice fields, a rubber plantation and a fresh-food market. PY10P2



Royal Flora Ratchaphruek 2006

นิทรรศการสเปน