

signature luxury

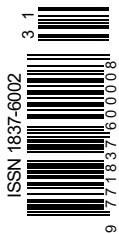
# TRAVEL & style



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# ROMANCING THE STONE

The emerald islands and bijoux beach resorts of Thailand's Krabi Province are made for romantic escapes, as Lee Mylne discovers.

It's dusk, and the lanterns are being lit, their soft glow bouncing off the gleaming rock walls of the grotto. Timber tables are adorned with soft greenery and elegant place settings, and in the trees above, a family of monkeys is chattering and playing.

We've taken a speedboat from Krabi's Ao Nam Mao Pier to Railay Beach, arriving in time for a sunset dinner at Rayavadee, a five-star resort surrounded by beaches and accessible only by water, giving it the feel of an island that's perfect for a romantic getaway.

Rayavadee is set on the edge of Krabi's National Marine Park on the beautiful Phranang Peninsula. Nearby attractions include the Phi Phi Islands (just 35 minutes by speedboat) and a number of smaller islands – Poda, Chicken, Thap (also called Tub) and Hong – with their unusual limestone rock formations and lovely beaches.

Rayavadee is just one of the many luxury resorts in Krabi Province, making it a dream destination for couples seeking natural beauty, top-class service and all the five-star trimmings.

The town of Krabi is on the edge of the Andaman Sea, about 800 kilometres south of Bangkok, and is served by numerous daily flights from the Thai capital to Krabi International Airport. The region is memorable for its romantic scenery: long sweeps of white sandy beaches, emerald water, coconut palms and craggy, towering rock faces.

Rayavadee sits behind Phra Nang Beach, which, although busy with day-trippers, becomes blissfully peaceful in the early morning, late afternoon and evening. Choose from the 96 two-storey circular pavilions and five sprawling villas, artfully built between the trees (none were removed when the resort was built more than 20 years ago), and then





relax on the beach or admire the sands from the infinity pool. Dining under the limestone cliffs is one option; others include two indoor/outdoor restaurants, both with views of the sea and islands.

### Jewels of Krabi

One of Krabi's newest resorts is The ShellSea Krabi, which overlooks the sea, a short walk from Fossil Shell Beach. Everywhere there are subtle nods to shells, marine life and the environment, from the cute cushions in the rooms to the fish motifs and the name of the signature restaurant, Cerulean, which perfectly describes the blue of the sky. The lobby features a large bamboo shell-shaped chair, big enough for two, that seems an irresistible cocoon for guests.

The 85 spacious rooms include pool-access rooms, 12 villas with private pools and a grand pool villa with room for a family or group of friends. Otium Spa has suites for singles or couples, with Jacuzzis and a steam room. Other facilities include a lap pool, children's pool and kids' club, and a spectacular beachfront bar.

In contrast to the contemporary cool of The ShellSea is the colonial-inspired grandeur of Sofitel Krabi Phokeethra Golf & Spa Resort. This sprawling five-star property set on Klong Muang Beach, near the township of Ao Nang, has 276 rooms and suites, each with its own balcony or terrace with views of the Andaman Sea, surrounding limestone cliffs or jungle. Fine dining is assured, with a choice of Thai, Italian or Indian cuisines and a poolside bar and restaurant.

### Explore further: Koh Lanta

Just off the coast of mainland Krabi, the island of Koh Lanta is home to beaches considered among the world's finest. Its opposing coasts are separated by mountain ranges of dense rainforest, the west marked by sandy stretches, and the east populated by mangroves. Restaurants and cafes are relaxed and reflect the island's eclectic collision of ChaoLay (Sea Gypsy), Thai-Muslim and Thai-Chinese cultures, while the crystalline waters have made it a coveted destination for snorkelling and scuba diving. Visitors arrive by ferry, speedboat or car, via the Koh Lanta bridge.

Within this popular destination, Pimalai Resort & Spa, a member of The Small Luxury Hotels of the World, is an untouched nature retreat where serenity and solitude are the primary attractions. The 40-hectare estate is home to monkeys and eagles, as well as 121 rooms, suites and villas, characterised by natural timber accents, crisp white linen and Andaman Sea views. Take part in a Mangrove Discovery Tour, a private beach dinner or a complimentary massage class. [pimalai.com](http://pimalai.com)

As well as being home to the luxe So SPA with L'Occitane, the resort also offers one of Krabi's best nine-hole golf courses and a range of other outdoor activities, and is a popular venue for weddings and meetings.

Don't leave Krabi without dining at the wonderfully atmospheric Ruen Mai restaurant. The name, I'm told, means old wooden house, but, to me, it felt like dining under an enormous bamboo hat, the open sides of the restaurant sheltered by a soaring pitched roof.

Surrounded by a gorgeous garden with a bamboo boardwalk through it, Ruen Mai is acclaimed for its authentic southern Thai food with dishes such as massaman curries, fried pork (*moo daek diao*) and seafood dishes. Levels of spice will be adjusted to your taste, and the vegetables and herbs are all grown on the property.

### Heart of Chinatown

Coming in and out of Thailand, a few nights in Bangkok beckon and I look for somewhere to provide both peace and a taste of the exotic. In the centre of Chinatown, the elegant and artistic Shanghai Mansion fits the bill perfectly.

A former trading house built in 1892 and later the city's first Chinese opera house – a favourite with the Thai royal family and members of the aristocracy – it has been a hotel since 2005, beautifully restored in 1930s' style by the Burasari Group. A red bridge leads to interiors featuring carved dragons, red chandeliers and rich tapestries. The centrepiece is a "lucky" fish pond in the atrium, and the rooms



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02 Stunning island panoramas from The Rayavadee Villa © Manoo Studio 03 Turquoise waters surround the Phi Phi Islands © Nakares Teerakhamsri/Tourism Authority of Thailand 04 The villas and pavilions of Rayavadee are nestled among original trees and lush gardens

have four-poster beds, armchairs and decorative bird cages. It's lush and lovely, and even offers a butler service.

Sampaeng Lane, the heart of Chinatown, is a 10-minute walk away and Wat Traimit, the temple that holds the world's largest solid gold Buddha, is even closer.

From the relaxed beach lifestyle of Krabi to the dynamic throbbing heart of Bangkok, Thailand's culture and heritage offers a beguiling and romantic setting for couples seeking romance and seclusion. ♦

### Travel file

**Accommodation**  
[rayavadee.com](http://rayavadee.com) [theshellseakrabi.com](http://theshellseakrabi.com)  
[sofitelkrabiphokeethra.com](http://sofitelkrabiphokeethra.com) [shanghaimansion.com](http://shanghaimansion.com)

**Getting there**  
 Thai Airways flies from Australia to Bangkok with connections to Krabi. [thaiairways.com](http://thaiairways.com)

**Dining**  
 Ruen Mai [tourismthailand.org](http://tourismthailand.org)

**Info**  
[tourismthailand.org](http://tourismthailand.org)