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EAT STAY LOVE

S U M P T U O U S L I V I N G



STAY | Check-in

Text: Rod Mackenzie

“Head to the pier for your transfer by speedboat.” Now that had to be one of the sweetest sentences I’d read in a long time, yet the instructions from Rayavadee Resort puzzled me. I like to think that I possess a basic grasp of geography, so why would my trip from Krabi airport to the hotel (both set on the mainland, according to Google Maps) require the services of a boat?

The answer became clear about 20 minutes after I’d jumped aboard Rayavadee’s gleaming white high-speed launch. Powered by massive twin outboard motors, we’d headed north, hugging southern Thailand’s rugged coast while skimming across the turquoise Andaman Sea. Maybe the boat was simply thrown in for the glamour factor, I thought — a James Bond-style adrenaline rush to kick-start my stay. Yet as the skipper cut the throttle and steered into a crescent-shaped bay that had been hidden from view just moments before, reality dawned in breathtaking style. I gazed up at a gigantic amphitheatre formed by a series of vertiginous limestone stacks jutting from sea and jungle like sharp-pointed teeth.

As we edged towards shore I spied a tiny speck of colour on the cliffs — a rock climber dangled precariously, sunlight glinting off his sweaty, sinewy arms while his buddies stood on the beach far, far below. It was like arriving on the set of an action movie — all it needed was the 007 theme tune to start playing.

Rayavadee, Thailand

Licence to Thrill

Getting here is an adrenaline-filled adventure. But it’s not just the isolated location of this resort — in a corner of Krabi in southern Thailand — that has been drawing in A-listers such as Kate Moss and Prince.

Now I understood why we'd arrived by sea; perched on the end of the spindly Phra Nang Peninsula, Rayavadee Resort is cut off from the rest of the mainland by a massive wall of impenetrable karst. Only the bravest mountaineer with a team of sherpas would tackle the land route.

Such exotic seclusion has attracted a steady stream of A-listers to Rayavadee's shores, with the likes of Kate Moss, Gwyneth Paltrow and Prince, all pulling in at some time or other. Yet it's not just the isolated location that appeals, but also the hotel's remarkable attention to detail. If you arrive as I did at low tide for example, forget about paddling ashore through the shallows and getting your feet sandy — you're ferried from the boat via a posh trailer on giant wheels drawn along by a shiny red tractor.

I've never felt so spoilt before actually arriving in a resort — in fact, I'd still to catch my first proper glimpse of Rayavadee. Thanks to environmental sensitivity towards its next-door neighbour, the pristine Krabi Marine National Park, happily no building rises above the tops of the swaying palms. My anticipation reached fever pitch as I got ushered from the landing stage through a narrow gap in the trees, as if being invited into a secret garden.

I had heard that the resort wanted to replicate the atmosphere of a typical southern Thai village, and the effect is refreshing in

often leave guests uncertain whether they're in Bali or Barbados, Rayavadee stands out from the crowd with a distinctive Thai style all its own. Polished wood and richly-coloured fabrics create a sense of indulgence and everywhere you look there's a touch of carefully-crafted material such as rattan, bamboo or stone — all design cues inspired by the resort's natural surroundings. I arrived just as the resort was putting the finishing touches to an extensive refurbishment programme, adding even greater spaciousness and elegance to the accommodation. Not that guests had been demanding improvements — after all, Rayavadee is one of *Condé Nast Traveller* magazine's Reader Choice Awards 2014 'Top 20 Resorts in Asia 2014'.

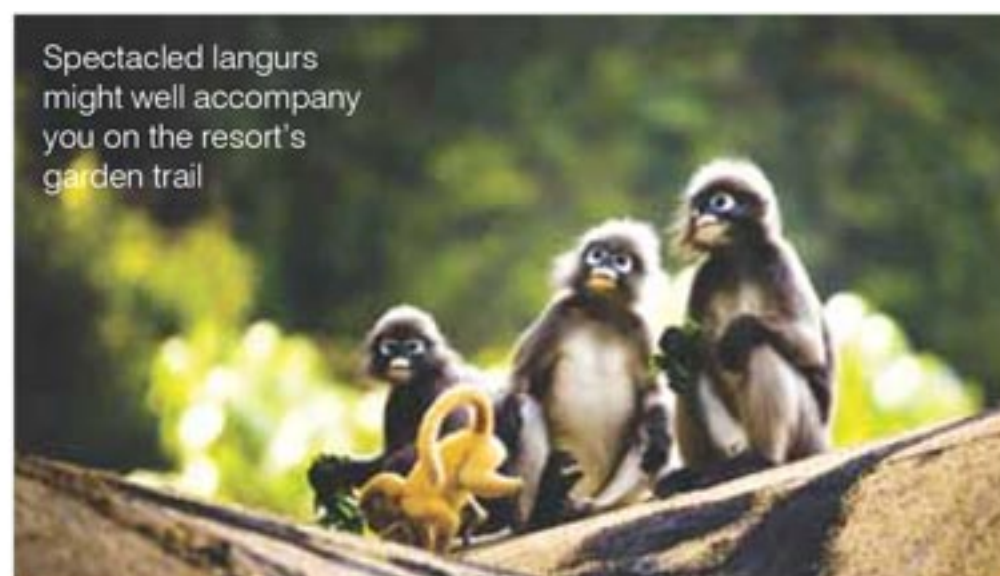
For me, it's Rayavadee's lush outdoor environment that deserves special acclaim. After breakfast I decided to take a closer look by following the resort's marked garden trail. With 120 types of palm and tropical trees and more than 250 types of ferns and herbal plants, my casual morning stroll soon became a major botanical expedition. I wasn't alone on my tour, for I was accompanied by a bold troop of spectacled langurs and some mischievous macaque monkeys, all following my every move from the tree canopy high overhead. Passing a large fish pond, my nose caught a particularly sweet scent on the breeze, so I set off to track down its source. I'd



Ninety-eight two-storey detached cottages are dotted throughout the 26-hectare plot, linked by a network of snaking pathways

its subtlety. Instead of erecting a single large building that would dominate everything all around, the architects decided to make full use of Rayavadee's vast 26-hectare plot. Dotted discreetly throughout this huge coconut grove are 98 luxurious two-storey detached cottages, known as 'pavilions', linked by a network of snaking pathways. These cute, circular Hobbit-like dwellings look totally at home here, as if they've simply sprung from the ground like giant mushrooms.

There's nothing earthy or rustic about the pavilions' stylish interiors though. While many luxury resorts these days opt for a one-size-fits-all, cookie-cutter approach to interior design that can



Spectacled langurs might well accompany you on the resort's garden trail



Clockwise from above: The resort is fringed by three beaches; a thrilling arrival is followed by a welcome drink; the resort has four restaurants with Raitalay Terrace offering international favourites in a beachside setting and Krua Phranang offering Thai flavours and a romantic experience

hoped to discover a rare orchid, but when my path reached the entrance to the spa I realised I'd been duped; it had simply been the aroma of fragrant massage oils wafting out from the treatment rooms. Yet I remained impressed at how easily I'd been transported, in my mind at least, from the grounds of a hotel to a remote tropical wilderness.

There's no shortage of luxurious man-made attractions here, including four outstanding restaurants (with Krua Phranang easily winning my 'most romantic Thai dining experience' award) and a rather gorgeous free-form swimming pool and large jacuzzi. Yet again, there's stiff competition from the natural world — a major bonus of being located on this finger-like peninsula is that Rayavadee is fringed by not just one, but three different beaches — Nammao, Railay and Phra Nang. Best for swimming and water sports is beautiful Phra Nang Beach, an idyllic crescent dominated by giant limestone stacks — the one nearest to shore being dubbed Happy Island. Good vibes are clearly infectious here, with a cave at one end of the beach filled with colourful offerings to an ancient fertility goddess. Come the end of the day, the feel-good factor shifts to another nearby crevice, Rayavadee's very own bar-in-a-cave, The Grotto, where you can feel powder-white sand trickle between your toes as you sip cocktails and watch a glorious sunset unfold.

Inspired by these surroundings, I felt I couldn't leave Rayavadee without one last foray into the wild. If you want to get out of your comfort zone, there's plenty of inspiration on the resort's list of activities, from snorkeling adventures and elephant rides to white-water rafting and rock climbing. While they all sounded thrilling, I had a question for the concierge: "Anything for someone who prefers to remain within their comfort zone?"

So early on my last day I found myself joining a kayak adventure to nearby Tha Lane Bay. Paddling in the wake of my guide across a serene lagoon, we entered a shady and mysterious mangrove forest, weaving along narrow channels before emerging into a magical cavern concealed by vines. The guide aimed a flashlight high into the gloom to reveal a sparkling ceiling adorned with mighty stalactites as tall as a house. Suddenly it all made sense — with out-of-this-world sights like this on its doorstep, Rayavadee has no choice but to pull out all the stops to blend in. A remarkable achievement, it has to be said. **S**

Getting there

The nearest airport is located at Krabi (reached via direct flights from Bangkok or Singapore), 23km from the resort's access pier. Rayavadee Resort arranges free transfers by air-conditioned minibus and speedboat from and to the airport. Private transfers can also be arranged from nearby islands Ko Phi Phi, Ko Lanta and Ko Yao Noi, Phuket or Phang Nga towns.

Approx. price per night: ₹21,000 onwards • www.rayavadee.com
