

Romancing the stone

THAILAND'S SOUTHWEST COAST IS THE COUNTRY'S LAST FRONTIER AND POSSIBLY THE WORLD'S LAST UNDISCOVERED FILM SET. GET LOST ON JEWEL-LIKE ISLANDS AND PARADISE BEACHES ON A HIGH OCTANE, HIGH SEAS ADVENTURE

WORDS | MIKE MACEACHERAN

The Lady Sarojin speedboat hits full speed. It crosses the Andaman Sea like a spinning cue ball across a cloth of turquoise velvet. Ferrying out from a mandarin-coloured jetty, we're heading westward from Khao Lak deep into the crystal clear waters off the southwest coast of Thailand. The twin Yamaha engines hit 50 knots as though we're preparing to speed off the rim of a cascading waterfall into an abyss below. We could be on the hunt for King Solomon's Mines, the Lost City of Gold or an ancient Burmese idol crafted from jade. I imagine the pursuit of the El Corazon emerald in *Romancing the Stone*, except the exotic locales of Colombia and Mexico have traded places with the tropical jungles and waterfalls of Phang-Nga. I am Michael Douglas's swashbuckling Jack T Colton – without the career-ending plastic surgery. My partner in crime is from Australia, blonde-haired Gold Coast twenty-something Josh, who, much to his disgust, can play the role of Kathleen Turner's romance novelist.

In keeping with our adventurous spirit, our local guide Tiger is playing Danny DeVito's comedy sidekick, and he comes equipped in modern-day pirate get-up with an over-sized pair of fake white Christian Dior sunglasses and a builder's hard hat; naturally. Later in the afternoon, he can be seen free diving for starfish with the hat still strapped to the top of his head. Our quest? To seek out the jewels of the Andaman Sea, the untamed Koh Similan Islands. The promise? The best adventure of my life. It's going to be tough.

Earlier this morning, I received a hand delivered package. It didn't include a coffee-stained map with the whereabouts to One Eyed Willie's hidden treasure, but it promised something even better. It was a letter holding me to ransom if I didn't join today's adventure to climb to the Hin Reo Bai stone on Koh Similan Island. How could I resist? Grabbing my leather satchel, I kidnapped a smoked salmon muffin, watermelon and freshly squeezed papaya juice from the breakfast buffet – even movie heroes need sustenance – and hastily raced down to the ocean. ⇒



Onboard and out at sea, and the clock is already ticking: our pursuers are close behind. Hordes of beach-thirsty holidaymakers are hot on our heels, intent on spoiling the serenity and beauty of one of the world's most magical places. Brandishing cutlass smiles and trigger-happy camera fingers, they will not rest until they are upon us.

Thankfully, our exclusive private charter has left them covered in sea-spray and we've already gained a good hour head start. "Don't worry," grins Tiger, detecting my concern. "We can easily outrun them." Thailand may be overrun by boatloads of adventure seekers searching for cinematographic vistas, but it's still possible to get off the beaten track – for the right price.

Ninety minutes later from shore and the Lady Sarojin has safely tamed the seas. Sitting poised on the dagger-shaped hull, I can see dolphins at play and otherworldly corals reflecting in my aviator sunglasses.

Roger Moore's pussy-footed boat cruise around the bayou in *Live and Let Die* looked more like *Driving Miss Daisy* compared to this. The sun has just tipped 30 degrees and the Similan Islands are upon us. It's 10.30am and there's not another boat in sight.

The treasures of the Andaman Sea, the Similan Islands are the stuff of legends. Haven for pirates and buccaneers – think more Sir Henry Morgan, less Jack Sparrow – and survivor of a deadly earth shattering tsunami, the Similans are a Caribbean fantasy that perhaps went wayward after too much coconut rum.

Established in 1982, the Similan Islands National Marine Park is an archipelago of granite rocky islands that lies some 55 nautical miles northeast of the island of Phuket. Discovered by Gallic diving pioneer Jacques Cousteau with the aide of local fishermen, it now attracts divers from all over the world who

come in throngs to explore its kaleidoscopic underwater circus.

Known locally as the pearls of the Andaman, the nine islands rarely make it onto the tourist treasure map. Yet off the coast of Koh Huyong lies a glorious coral reef teeming with angel fish, trumpet fish and turtles. Although damaged by the 2005 tsunami, the Thai government's environmental protectionism has seen the reef regenerate and attract shoals of rainbow-dyed parrotfish, unicorn fish and conga eels. Diving headfirst from the luxurious 38ft boat with snorkel and fins, the transparent blue swallows me whole and acts as the perfect aperitif to the journey ahead. Orange clown fish and red corals appear by magic in the deep blue water: I am Jules Verne and finding Nemo is easy – he comes and finds me instead.

On the horizon, a fleet of chugging fishing boats warn us that our pursuers are closer than we would like them to be; it's time to return to the Lady Sarojin and seek out the other jewel at the heart of the Similans; the Hin Reo Bai stone. Cruising for a further 20 minutes, the speedboat curves around into a perfect horseshoe bay flanked on both sides by towering granite rocks and jungle. The dazzling white sands of the eponymous Koh Similan Island stretch in front of us, mesmerising and beckoning; there is not a single soul around. "This is better than



anything I've ever seen," says Josh, throwing himself overboard. It's impossible to disagree. As the water shallows out for our landing, we have what is quite possibly the world's most perfect beach all to ourselves.

Like every adventure worth its weight in gold, there has to be a smattering of romance. Josh's Kathleen Turner has no need to worry, though, as my attention has been fully captivated by another gorgeous lady who has smitten my heart. Step forward Lady Sarojin, the eldest daughter of a prominent Thai nobleman, and the namesake of the boat and the hotel in which I stayed the previous night. She became mistress of her father's residence upon her mother's accession and was responsible, not only for its upkeep and smooth running, but also for the comfort of her father's guests. So wholeheartedly did she pursue this vocation, that the household became famous for its hospitality, comfort and appeal under her patronage.

Even though the Lady has long since passed away, her namesake, The Sarojin

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Hotel is enough to make anyone fall in love. "It's the perfect place for honeymooners or people still in love after all those years," says resident Paul Counihan, when I met him at the bar the night before. "It's so secluded you feel like you have the entire place to yourself." He is right; with its private villas, lotus ponds and onyx infinity pool – where manicured sun-beds seem to float on the water – this place was made with only one thing in mind: romance.

His colleague Jowell, an ex-Moulin Rouge dancer originally from French Martinique, tells me a story of a couple who stayed recently and wanted something extra-special created



PREVIOUS PAGE: The stunning cliffs of Ko Tapu
LEFT: Scuba diving off the side of the Lady Sarojin
ABOVE: The tranquil beaches of the Similan Islands; a sea turtle, common in these waters



during their stay. "I almost cried when I saw it," he says. He had arranged for 1,000 candles to illuminate a local waterfall deep in the jungle. Each one had been laid out carefully by the Thai staff to lead the way to a clearing where a private dining table waited. "It was incredibly powerful," he recalls.

At the dockside this morning, I meet Jowell again, dressed in a brilliant white linen suit and matching white Panama hat. For this adventure – perhaps donning a costume eye patch – the Frenchman was born to play the local smuggler, helping those in need for few favours, and all with a wink of his eye.

Clambering ashore, in a remake of the James Bond-Honey Ryder pairing from the Bond film *Dr No*, there is not a second to lose. The tug boats are closing in and there will be no prizes for second place. The winners go home with the prom queen; or with Sean Connery in any case.

On the left corner of the crescent moon bay sits what we came for, standing majestically aloft on granite. Running across the burning grains, to avoid pursuit by 18th Century pirates or – heaven forbid – a lost Nazi squadron, we hightail it to the foot of the outcrop and begin our ascent. The rocks are like fresh ⇒



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: the extravagant pool at The Sarojin Hotel; a longtail Thai boat at the breathtaking Ko Phi Phi; seashells on Thailand's picturesque beaches

Behind lies the diamond we really came for – a stunning panorama of white sand and blue sea. It's the kind of view that inspired the great adventurers like Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta to travel halfway around the world

coals underfoot and sure-footed steps are quickly replaced by ginger leaps and bounds – we've come this far and there's going to be no turning back. Romantically, we look like gazelles; practically we look like dishevelled paraplegic mountain goats.

Reaching the top in a sweat worthy of any movie adventurer, it's time to behold our treasure. In Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, Dr Jones hypothesises that the stone he is after may be one of the fabled Adi Shankara Stones. By a large stretch of the imagination, I do the same. But before me is not a gigantic boulder

but a golden Thai idol. It is in the shape of the sail of a traditional Portuguese dhow, casting its shadow onto the beach below. I then see a rickety plank ladder and rope clinging to its side, both hemmed in by a knife-edge drop on its right; the nerves rise in my stomach. Behind lies the diamond we really came for – a stunning panorama of white sand and blue sea. It's the kind of view that inspired the great adventurers like Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta to travel halfway around the world. It really is El Corazon; the heart of the Andaman.

If this was one of the great adventure movies, the villain would appear now from behind the

rock, cut-throat knife in hand, pressing it to the pristine neck of Kathleen Turner or some long forgotten actress. Barter would ensue and the villain would – due to my quick wits, of course – find himself falling off the cliff into the crashing waves below. An animal that has no geographical right whatsoever to be in these waters – take a pick from a crocodile, great white or school of ravenous piranha fish – would eat him whole. On our subsequent speedboat escape from the island, the villain's trademark Fez hat would no doubt float by as a sign of his demise.

But the moment is spared. We have the place to ourselves and – seeing solitary Tiger wave from the beach below, still decked out in his builder's hat, both Mike and Josh – I mean Jack and Joan – are spoilt by the greatest view in South East Asia. In truth, it's fool's gold, but the memories, which I'll keep in my pocket for the years to come, are worth more than a romantic stone ever could be. 🍷



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FOR ADVENTUROUS DINING

Any journey to Thailand will undoubtedly begin and end in Bangkok. Ungodly flight times can wreak havoc on travel plans, so a first or last night stay at the capital's five star Banyan Tree Hotel is a near compulsory experience. Vertigo, the hotel's flagship restaurant, is an experience in itself; somewhat perilously perched on the 61st floor, the sumptuous grill restaurant is the namesake of Alfred Hitchcock's famous thriller. Literally, the views are to die for.

WWW.BANYANTREE.COM/BANGKOK

FOR ROMANTIC ADVENTURE

Secluded on an 11 kilometre white sand beach, The Sarojin is the ideal place for exploring Thailand's remote southern coast. Nestled inland amongst five spectacular national parks, the question is not when should you go, but will you ever want to leave?

WWW.THESAROJIN.COM

FOR JUNGLE ADVENTURE

Covered by the oldest evergreen rainforest in the world – and featuring razor-sharp limestone mountains, deep valleys, breathtaking lakes and exciting caves – Khao Sok National Park is an ideal escape into the lush interior of Thailand. Riding an elephant or bamboo rafting are taken seriously in these parts, so prepare to get either wet or very dirty.

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