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CARALYN CAMPBELL (EDITOR) • 604-605-2784 • cacampbell@sunprovince.com | SUNDAY, MARCH 20, 2011

SECTION C

TRANQUILLITY, DRAMA AND ADVENTURE

**FOUR WEEKS
IN HEAVEN**

Southern Thailand is a majestic and diverse paradise that promises travellers an unforgettable experience

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**Rick Cropp and
Barbara Braidwood**

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... visit Brussels' Royal Greenhouses in Laeken (www.opt.be/informations/evenements/EN/B/E/19305.html) between Apr. 15 and May 8. The greenhouses, on 2.42 hectares, were designed in 1873 for King Leopold II and some plants from his collection still exist. Tended by 20 gardeners, highlights include the Azalea House and bird colony.

\$399

... mellow at Harrison Hot Springs Resort & Spa (www.harrisonresort.com) with the School Break Family Package. The offer, valid Sunday through Thursday until Apr. 14, includes two nights' accommodation, breakfast for four each morning plus in-room pizza and a movie one evening.

\$825

... explore the wonder that is spring during the 26th Explorations at Yellow Point Lodge (www.yellowpointlodge.com) with the University of Victoria's Continuing Studies (www.uvcs.uvic.ca/aspnet/Course), Apr. 25 to 29. It includes meals, snacks, accommodation, tuition and more (transportation is not included).

\$2,229

... join Cuba Travel and Turner Music (www.authenticubatours.com) for the 27th International Jazz Festival of Havana. The Dec. 14 to 21 tour includes all access passes for activities and concerts, premium seats at the opening and closing ceremonies and more. Airfare is extra.

\$5,495

... The Cariboo's Echo Valley Ranch & Spa and Rocky Mountaineer are offering a Ranch by Rail package (1-800-253-8831, www.evranch.com). Along with a three night ranch stay where you can relax at the spa, hike or ride the gorgeous Tennessee Walkers, are two days of Rocky Mountaineer GoldLeaf Service between Vancouver and Banff, one night each in Vancouver, Banff and Kamloops and more.

Barbara Braidwood and Rick Cropp are Vancouver-based writers.

Prices and availability subject to change

A month spent in heaven

THAILAND: Diverse landscape offers something for everyone

MHAIRRI CUTHBERT
SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE

Thailand is a majestic and geographically diverse paradise that tops the bucket list of many travellers. Our four weeks in heaven took place in Southern Thailand, exploring the beach holiday hot spot of Phuket Island and ecologically diverse Krabi province, famous for its dramatic landscape and endless natural attractions. Thailand is a special and unforgettable place and, after some internal debate, we have narrowed down our list of experiences to the following which really must be enjoyed while in Southern Thailand.

Discover the hidden world of Hongs

The mysterious Hongs are collapsed, open air caves found within the dramatic limestone islands of the emerald green Andaman Sea. Scattered throughout Phang Nga Bay and Krabi Province, these island Hongs can only be reached at low tide by canoe or long tail boat. Each Hong is distinct with an ecosystem of jungle flora and fauna, including birds, fish, monkeys and everyone's favourite — bats. We booked the John Gray's Seacanoes 'Starlight Hong Trip,' which is a once in a lifetime adventure everyone should experience. This nine-hour excursion includes a round trip boat ride to Phang Nga Bay, delicious lunch and seafood dinner, and friendly paddle guide to regale you with local legends, and laugh away any fear of bats, or monkeys, you might have. The real magic happens when the sun sets and you paddle in silence, under a blanket of stars, through the Hongs to play with the glittering phos fluorescent.

Get cooking

There is no better way to experience Thai cuisine than rolling up your sleeves, donning an apron and hammering spices with a mortar and pestle. While Thai food has gained popularity throughout North America and made its way to the pour-and-stir world of grocers, absolutely nothing compares to the taste of traditionally-prepared curry chicken with freshly made chili paste. Taking a cooking class is one of our favourite ways to experience a destination, as there is so much to learn about a country's history through its cuisine. Thai food beautifully blends the Eastern and Western worlds. Stir frying cooking methods came from China, curries from India and the infamous Thai chili was introduced in the late 1600s by Portuguese missionar-



Ko Rok is known for its secluded and unspoiled white sand beaches and crystal clear waters; it's the ideal spot to soak up some sun. PHOTOS BY CURT WOODHALL — SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE

ies who brought them from South America. Our amateur chef event took place at the beachside cooking school "Time for Lime" in Ko Lanta, where we prepared and devoured a Thai feast of Chicken Satay, Seafood Curry and Spicy Lime Soup with Prawns; all washed down with far too many mojitos. Most tourist destinations in Thailand offer cooking classes, which are easy to find through travel guides or your hotel concierge.

Jungle trekking

While it is sometimes difficult to trade an afternoon on the beloved beach chair for more taxing activities, Thailand's countless unspoiled national parks offer a pretty compelling reason to try. Our grand excursion, which took place north of Phuket in Khao Lak, started with a jungle hike to a secluded waterfall. After surviving the somewhat precarious trail, wearing highly inappropriate footwear and not an ounce of sunscreen, we floated down a peaceful stream aboard a bamboo raft and stared in awe at the tropical birds, hand-sized spiders and mildly-poisonous mangrove snakes resting in the treetops. Following a beachfront Thai lunch and swim in the sea, we got up close and personal with nature once again and 'boarded' an elephant to trek through the lush jungle and a rubber tree plantation. If you want to plan your tour in advance we recommend using internationally recognized Diethelm Travel as they provide exceptional service and are extremely professional.



A cooking class is one way to experience the Thai culture and learn how to prepare authentic cuisine.

Island hopping and swimming with sharks

Exploring the small uninhabited islands sprinkled throughout the Andaman Sea was a definite highlight for us. From Ko Lanta in Krabi we travelled 30 km by boat to the unspoiled white sand beach and crystal clear waters of Ko Rok. Our day was spent lounging on the secluded beach and snorkelling in the offshore coral reefs where we spotted barracuda and countless clown, parrot and leopard fish. Perhaps our most memorable snorkelling trip was a one day tour around Phi Phi Island. Throughout the day we stopped at numerous bays and

reefs, including Maya Bay where *The Beach* was filmed, Monkey Island, which is home to a family of mischievous apes, and the rather intimidating Shark Point. Upon arriving at the ominous 'Point' we were instructed to hop out of the boat and swim 100 metres to a large rock face. It was there that we came nose to nose with the black-tip reef sharks. These 'harmless' sharks were over a metre in length, and although we were somewhat petrified it was incredible. The popular snorkelling points around Phi Phi Island tend to be quite congested, so if you hope to encounter these shy creatures your best bet is before 9 a.m. or after 5 p.m.

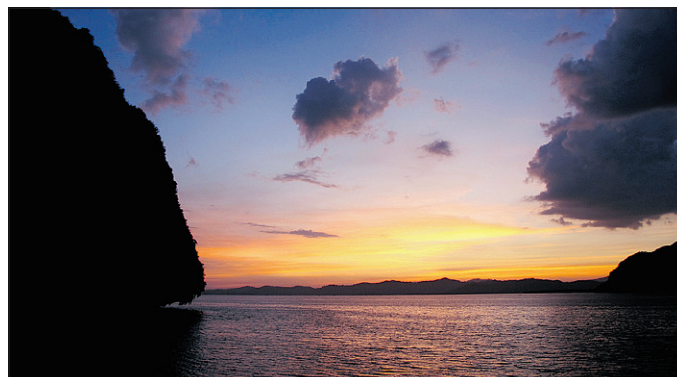
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 Amari Vogue in Aonang, Krabi: www.amari.com/vogue/index.aspx
General Information
 Thailand Tourism: www.tourismthailand.org



The beaches of Southern Thailand are among the most breathtaking in the world. Kata beach in particular is serene and stunning — perfect for lounging.
 PHOTOS BY CURT WOODHALL— SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE



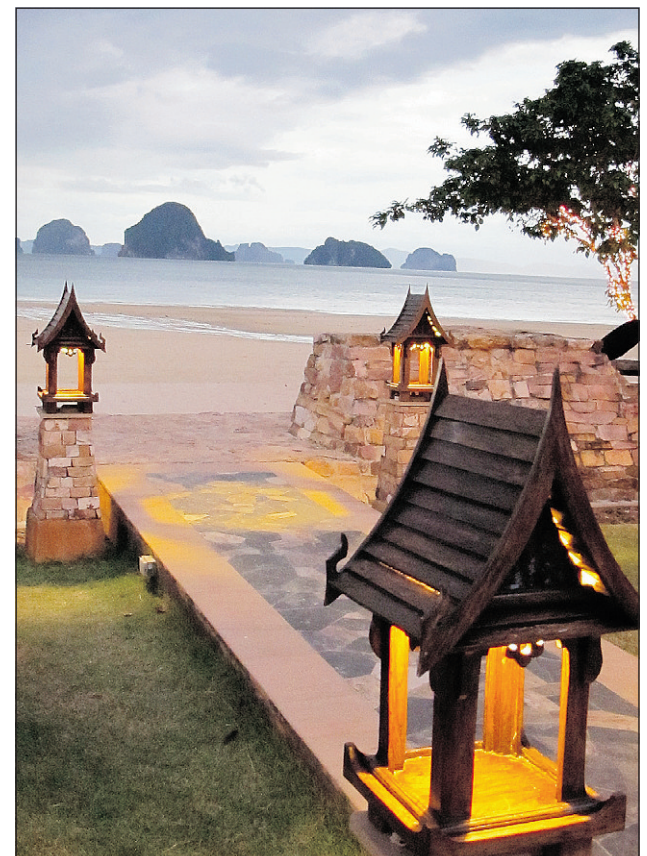
Each Hong is distinct with an ecosystem of jungle flora and fauna and wildlife.



The real magic happens when the sun sets and you paddle in silence, under a blanket of stars, through the Hongs.



Gray's Seacanoes 'Starlight Hong Trip,' is a once-in-a-lifetime adventure.



View of the mist-shrouded Hongs from the luxurious Amari Vogue Hotel in Krabi.