

Two Faces of Thailand

By Suzanne Wright

I'm sharing my room with a fast-moving green lizard; he's figured out how to navigate the ingenious sliding wooden doors that separate the indoors from the outdoors at Amanpuri in Phuket, Thailand. I toast the lizard: it's my birthday and I'm in Thailand—alone—and loving it. Let's call it a Zen celebration.

In Sanskrit, Amanpuri means “place of peace.” The peaceful resort overlooks the sparkling Andaman Sea with 80 suites tucked into a coconut plantation. Since opening in 1988, this world-class getaway has drawn travelers from around the globe who seek to recharge. I later learn that there are “Aman groupies” who hopscotch from one resort to the next and I can see why: the low-key elegance entices one to stay on perpetual holiday. There are no clocks—literally—in Aman time.

From my private sala—the outdoor sundeck attached to my suite—I catch a glimpse of the ocean. Earlier in the day, I had gone scuba diving in those clear blue waters, seeing a profusion of brightly colored fish. Treading the elevated wooden pathways that connect the pavilions to the rest of the resort, a young female security guard flashes a shy smile as I pass by; every time I see her she is studying English in a large workbook. It's exactly 81 stone steps down from the resort to the crescent-shaped, golden sand beach—but it's light years away from home. I feel cradled in this gentle culture.

It's deliciously tempting to seal off the bright afternoon sun in my wood-paneled suite, sinking into the soft taupe silks and cottons of my bed with a book. But today I'm off to Phang Nga Bay for a half day cruise on the *Aman I*. Amanpuri boasts the largest hotel charter fleet in all of Southeast Asia and the vessels are sleek and luxuriously well appointed. The James Bond film *Man With the Golden Gun* was filmed in this spectacular bay. We pass by forested limestone pillars rising from the sea and raft into caves that hue from red to green to cream. I swim in the warm waters, close my eyes and try to imprint this exotic beauty in my mind.

I continue my idyll at the spa. Look Pra Kob treatment begins with a Thai herbal steam bath, then a full body massage using a poultice of Thai herbs and plai oil. While the wind rustles the palms outside, my therapist stretches, kneads and climbs atop the table and straddles me to work out travel kinks. On the way out, I bypass the tempting afternoon tea service, instead snatching a rose apple to munch on.

Under the I've dined on such delicacies as Goong Chae Nam Pla, fresh shrimp ceviche with lime and fish sauce and Yaan Poo Nim Thod, soft shell crab with green mango salad; I've enjoyed a sumptuous beach barbecue. But tonight I opt for dinner at the Italian restaurant. There's a lovely breeze, candlelight twinkles and a young girl plays a lilting stringed instrument. As I tuck into my succulent snapper, I celebrate my good fortune. Lucky me, lucky lizard.

Visit www.amanresorts.com or 1-800-477-9180 for information and reservations.

I sip a lemongrass sunrise and raise my head from the infinity pool that overlooks the working rice paddy at The Regent, Chiang Mai: yep, those are water buffalo I see. If you're a working buffalo—or a traveler seeking refuge—this is indeed the place to be.

Chiang Mai is located in the cool, northern mountains of Thailand. Forty gardeners tend the grounds, beautifully landscaped with 300 varieties of plants and trees. The stunning Lanna (“land of a million rice fields”) style architecture received a heritage preservation award from Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn in 1996. Everywhere I look there is a graceful touch: fresh flowers float in urns and bowls, a shrine is decorated with malia, the lovely flower garlands offered to Buddha. Paradise found.

After a full day of touring the remote village of Mae Hong Son (arranged by masterful concierge Thirapham) with its colorfully garbed long-necked and big-eared women, I retire to my opulent, yet understated teakwood—all 1,200 square feet of it. There's a bowl of fresh fruit waiting: prickly rambutan and ripe mangoes along with kaffir limes. The bathroom features an outdoor shower and a huge marble tub overlooking a private rock garden, but my favorite space is the sala, with its huge rattan and silk couch and bamboo shades that can be let down on all four sides for privacy. I indulge in a four-course dinner culminating with mandarin orange cheesecake, dining by candlelight with the low buzz of an insect symphony.

The musical voice of the spa's receptionist greets me the next morning. The three-story building resembles a Thai temple; the rich gold and maroon accents and the sunlight, filtered through rice paper shades, is soothing. Using rituals and secrets from centuries past, Sommit gives me honey seed rub, followed by an aloe and lavender wrap and, finally, a rainshower massage. It's effortless bliss, like everything in this land.

I lunch on delectable yum hua plee, banana blossom salad, and kaow soi kai, curry noodle soup with chicken. Then I buy a couple of pen and ink drawings at the gift shop, before ducking into the library and logging onto the Internet to check email. As I type away, it's comforting to know the water buffalo will be there when I am done.

The Regent Chiang Mai, www.regenthotels.com or 1-800-301-5723.