

EASY DOES IT

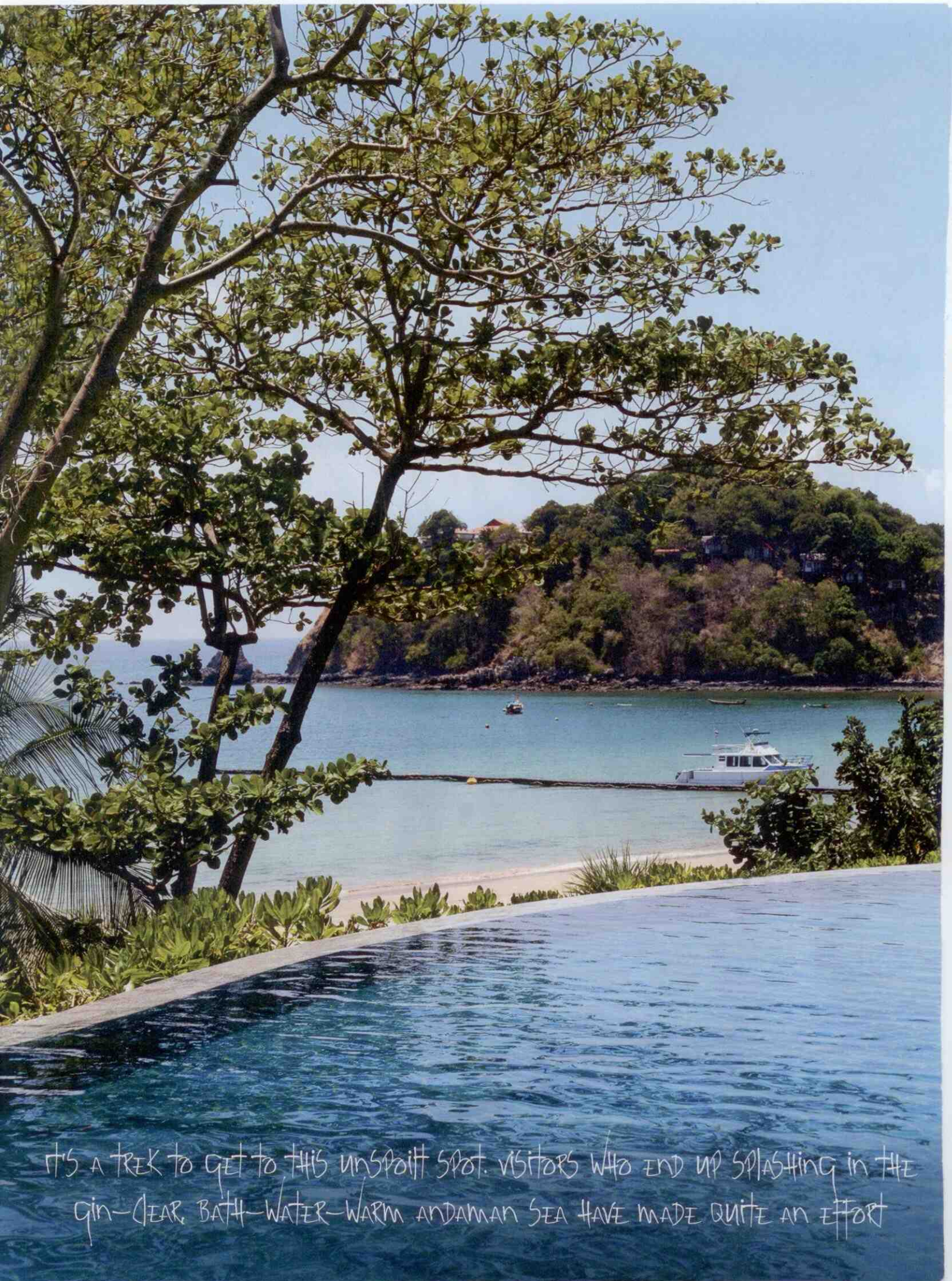
KICK BACK ON KOH LANTA, THE COLOURFUL THAI ISLAND THAT HASN'T LOST ITS LOW-KEY GROOVE FREE OF BIG HOTEL NAMES AND NEON LIGHTS, IT'S A BAREFOOT BEAUTY WITH A HINT OF HIPPIE. BY ISSU VAN SIMSON



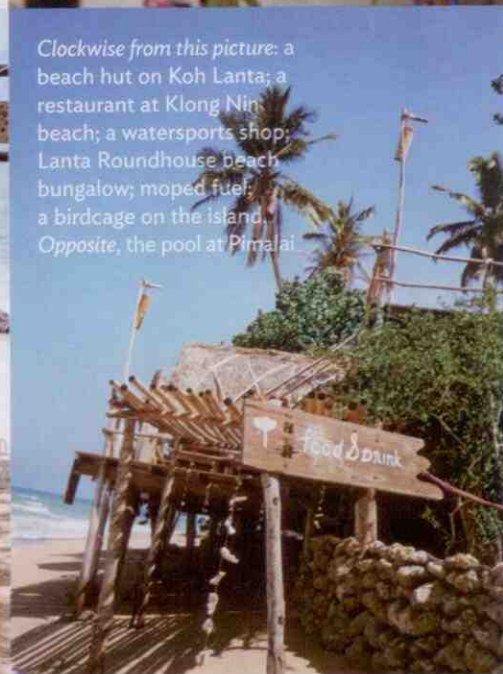
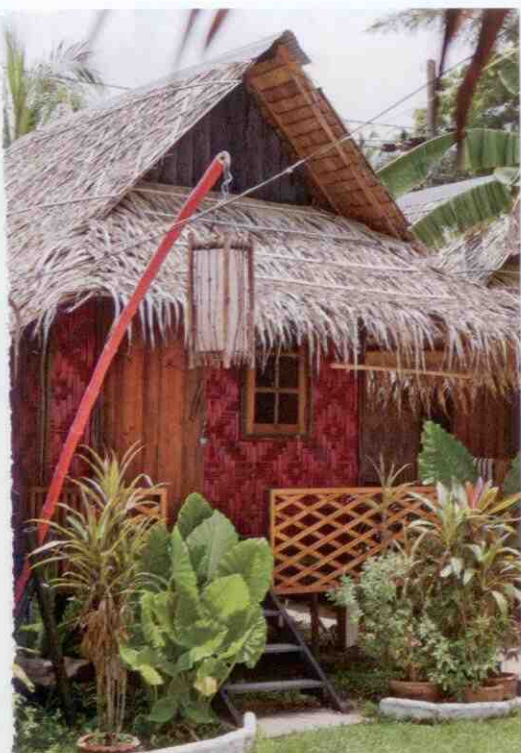


PHOTOGRAPH BY MIRIAM BLEEKER

Kantiang beach on Koh Lanta, Thailand. *Opposite, Same Same But Different bar*



IT'S A TREK TO GET TO THIS UNSPOILT SPOT. VISITORS WHO END UP SPLASHING IN THE
GIN-CLEAR, BATH-WATER-WARM ANDAMAN SEA HAVE MADE QUITE AN EFFORT



Clockwise from this picture: a beach hut on Koh Lanta; a restaurant at Klong Nin beach; a watersports shop; Lanta Roundhouse beach bungalow; moped fuel; a birdcage on the island. Opposite, the pool at Pimalai

NO ONE IN BANGKOK will believe you are going to Koh Lanta. 'Oooh,' taxi drivers will shake their heads, 'why you wanna go there for?' Hotel doormen will doff their caps and smile. 'Have good time Samui.' Porters on the shiny concourse at Suvarnabhumi Airport will wink. 'You go party Phuket?' At Krabi Airport, still a long way from the final destination, you're likely to be the only *farangs* taking the road south rather than west to the limestone-cragged postcard beaches of Railay and Ao Nang. Onwards you'll trundle down dual carriageways, past trucks piled high with spiky pineapples and knobby jackfruit, onto car ferries – heaving, lumbering, diesel-choking car ferries. Then the island itself, a single-track road, driving through low, shrubby palm groves, getting further and further away from the noise and the bright lights with every twist and curve. And that, there, is precisely the point.

It's not as if Lanta is some hidden secret paradise, an untouched spot where no one but the most intrepid backpacker has ever set foot. In fact, it's quite big. Lanta Yai, the main island

(there are more than 50 marine-park-protected little ones in the archipelago), is 30km from top to bottom, with a sandy fringe all along the west coast, a jungly spine down its middle and dramatic rockery to the east. But it is, in the grand scheme of Thai islands, deliciously unspoilt. And there are reasons for this. Firstly, it's a trek to get here. Krabi only has international flights from Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Hong Kong is on the cards, but still. Your average journey looks like this: long-haul flight, short-haul flight, taxi, car ferries (plural), more taxiing, perhaps a speedboat straight to the sand in high season. So those visitors who do finally end up splashing in the gin-clear, bath-water-warm Andaman Sea have made quite an effort. Secondly, this southern part of Thailand is mostly Muslim, which means a culture that develops slowly, methodically, with thought and care (overt displays of wealth and power are not the done thing). Consequently, Lanta has a very mellow, softly tuned vibe. It's a low-rise, go-slow kind of place, the rustle of the breeze through the rubber-tree plantations interrupted only by a



muezzin call to prayer. In four or five years it may be on the turn but for now, it's just hunky-dory.

Everyone has a different explanation about the origins of the island's name. Some say their Malay ancestors called it Pulau Satak, meaning long-beach island, which would make perfect sense. Others lean towards the Javanese translation of Lanta – a fish grill. Either way, it has its roots in beaches and fishes, so everyone's happy. The Muslim community is joined in this juicy melting pot by a hefty chunk of Thai Chinese (it was a stop-off point between the trading posts of Phuket and Penang) and the once-nomadic sea gypsies, the Urak Lawoi. Everyone might dance to a slightly different beat, but the general rhythm of Lanta is a groovy one. In the 1980s the first rucksack-carrying travellers trickled over from the mainland, a few beach huts sprang up and a little scene sparked off. What visitors there were (mostly Scandinavians and Germans) cruised around on junkyard mopeds, ate king prawns the size of lobsters at roadside shacks and knocked back not-quite-chilled Singha beer by lantern light. It certainly was unplugged; the island was only hooked up to mains electricity in 1996.

Now the voltage is regular and the lodgings are lovelier. Although if you want to crash out in a basic sandy shack, you still can (check out Fisherman's Cottage or Lanta Roundhouse). But a steady stream of more grown-up west-coast boltholes have emerged in the past 10 years. There's Costa Lanta, an overgrown garden punctuated with fabulous polished-concrete minimalist havens. By far the edgiest design-wise, it's about as Espresso Martini as it gets

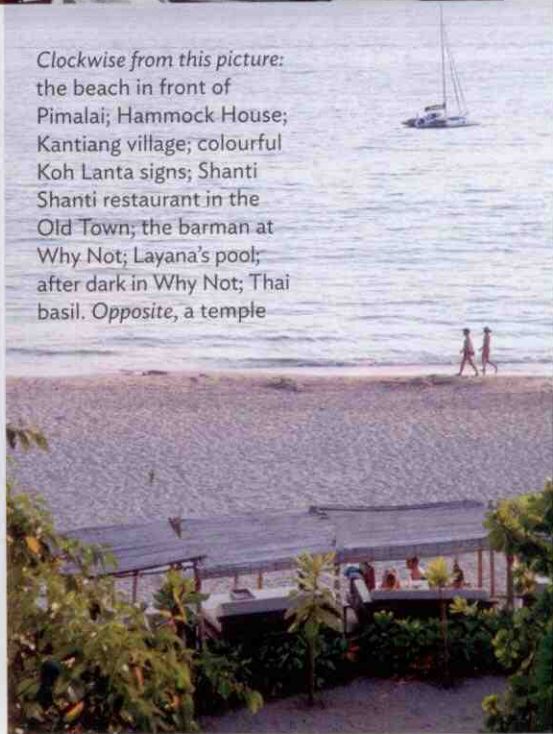
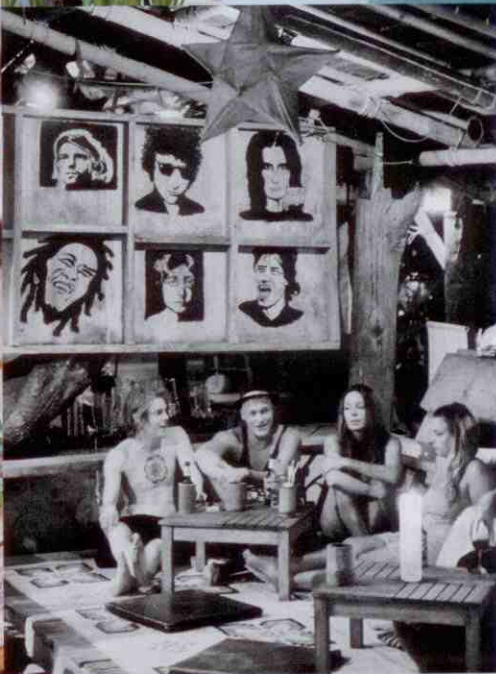
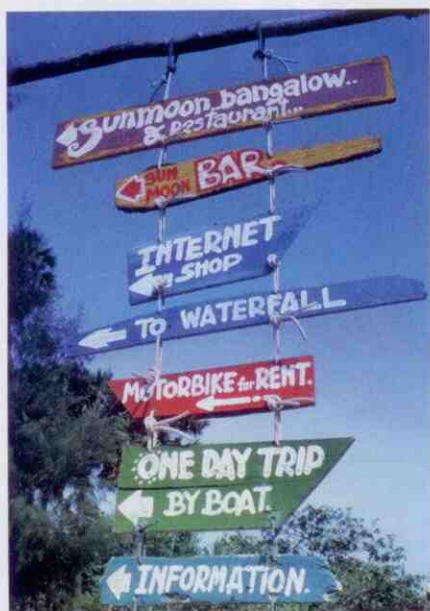
on the island. Sri Lanta, further down the coast, is a little more local, with layers of teak and rattan in its pitched-roof cottages. Then there's Layana, somewhere between the two geographically and the jazziest place to bed down on this stretch. It's right on a wide and deserted beach, with blonde sand gently sloping into the palest blue water. The sunbeds have buzzers to press for service, and there are funny grey beanbags that look like they belong in a teenage boy's bedroom and are actually deeply comfy for a mid-afternoon snooze. There's also a pool: an elegant, sleek oblong one pointing straight out to sea. No fountains, no fuss, no chlorine. Just salt water that's hydrolysed to the same level as human tears. There's a restaurant whipping up the freshest sesame-seed-encrusted seared tuna with fiery mango salsa. Rooms are easy-breezy, effortless, with wide beds, sunken baths and outdoor showers beloved by the many returning guests. And last year saw a smart refurb, with a new spa and top-notch two-bedroom villa called La Maison, sharpening the look.

BYOND THESE HOTEL hotspots are the kind of beach bars you really do want to find in Thailand, with driftwood, palm fronds, bamboo chairs and tables dotted along the sand. Kantiang beach has two gems: Same Same But Different for drinks as the sun slips down and the Why Not bar for later on. There are full-moon parties (the one at Mong Bar promises happy shakes, bang lassi and electro-trance) but there are also half-moon parties, new-moon parties, beginning-of-season parties, end-of-season parties, mid-season parties, Tuesday-night parties, but all on the smallest scale. Here on Koh Lanta they're not mass-market raves; it's just an excuse to string up the star-shaped paper lanterns and call in a local band that does great renditions of Nirvana and Oasis. The boys behind the bar wear skinny jeans and have shiny black hair down to their elbows, chunky silver rings studded with turquoise, a number of piercings and tattoos, at least two, because one of them runs the ink parlour up the road by day. They serve Sang Som buckets: rum, M-151

WROUGHT-IRON BIRDCAGES SWING IN THE TREES. THE MORE YOU HAVE, THE RICHER YOU ARE – THAT'S AS STATUS CONSCIOUS AS THIS PLACE GETS

(similar to Red Bull), Coca-Cola, a good squeeze of lime, loads of ice and a fistful of straws for 300 baht. This is the scene. It hasn't changed for 15 years – even the music is still the same.

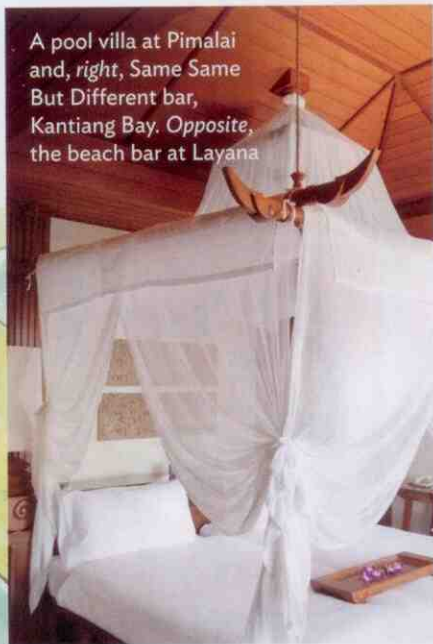
The only problem with Sang Som buckets is the hangover the next day, which is probably less from alcohol and more from a sugar overdose. So it's best to avoid them if you have any urge to get out and get underwater. There's fantastic diving here, incredible visibility, underwater pinnacles, coral outcrops and masses of marine life. Ko Haa, which is an hour and a half out, is a collapsed volcanic island with steep drop-offs to the side and more than a dozen dive sites, caverns and chambers where you'll see turtles, octopus and pointy-nosed barracuda. Dedicated divers won't blanch at the two-hour boat ride to even more impressive Hin Daeng, the red rock, a coral-rich playground for spotting manta ray and maybe even a whale shark. And you don't have to arrange a dive through your hotel: there are dive



Clockwise from this picture: the beach in front of Pimalai; Hammock House; Kantiang village; colourful Koh Lanta signs; Shanti Shanti restaurant in the Old Town; the barman at Why Not; Layana's pool; after dark in Why Not; Thai basil. Opposite, a temple

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A pool villa at Pimalai and, right, Same Same But Different bar, Kantiang Bay. Opposite, the beach bar at Layana



shops in almost every village, which tend to be much cheaper and just as good. If scuba isn't your thing, there's brilliant fishing, amazing snorkelling, sea kayaking to the limestone caves at Koh Talabeng and longtail boat trips to the gnarled mangroves around Koh Klang and Koh Lanta Noi.

But to really understand the island, you need to forget the obvious attractions – the sea, the sand – and explore a bit. Hire a moped and head away from the west coast, away from the beaches, through the tangled green interior and out east. Buzz past houses with wrought-iron birdcages swinging between the trees (the more you have, the richer you are – that's as status conscious as this place gets), past lopsided three-wheelers heavy with family members, over the hump of the island and down the other side. From the top there are Jurassic Park-like views, out across the water to Lanta's many uninhabited islets. And there at the bottom of the hill is the Old Town, a time warp of a place, a film set of shuttered century-old teak houses on stilts. There are a few lovely bars, Mango House, Apsara, Caoutchouc, a shop that just sells hammocks (it's called Hammock House, you can't miss it), a mynah bird at the Fresh restaurant that squawks 'hello' and 'good morning', whatever the time of day, a red-and-gold Chinese temple and some kooky dwellings to stay in. There are two over-water rooms at Lanta Pole Houses and three at Mango House. And there's none of that Piña Colada dime-a-dozen sunset feel. Here, facing east, it's strong coffee and a blast of pink dawn with the high tide lapping beneath your floorboards.

For something more unashamedly comfortable, there's no beating Pimalai. Pimalai is the kingpin. But it is charming

too. There's no marble, no glitz, no razzmatazz. It's big, with more than 100 rooms, but so artfully designed and spread out that it doesn't feel it. Gorgeous pool villas are tucked between cashew trees on the hilltop; regular suites trickle towards a powdery swathe of beach. To the left and behind, rugged monkey-filled forest hugs the curve of the bay. The sea is the scene-stealer here. There are no jet-skis, no speedboats, just the swoosh of the waves along the half-mile stretch of shore. Five cabanas and a few rows of parasoled sunbeds are populated by Euro couples: French, Dutch, German, Italian, boys with Ray-Bans, girls in the tiniest black bikinis and panama hats. Families with children stay around the lower pool. If you're lucky you'll see elephants wander down with their mahouts for a bath. More likely, though, is the sight of a London banker heading out to sea in a Hobie Cat only to be rescued by hotel staff an hour later.

Then there's the spa. Such a pretty spa, tumbling down the hill, with rushing water, pools of koi carp, thatched salas and therapists who are thrillingly mean: tiny Thai girls who crunch and knead with no mercy. It is a simple set-up, with facials and massages and no promise of a life-changing, time-altering treatment, just serious therapies to make you feel better. Only somewhere like this is the plinky-plonky music pertinent, the ginger tea appropriate, the foot bath traditional, the stone bowls of concentric pink and white flowers local.

At night, the hotel is lantern-lit. The cicadas roar. Frogs come out, croaking and lolloping by the pools. Inside your room the look is low-key, with dark woods and smooth stone floors, cloud-like beds, floor-to-ceiling windows and curtains made from slices of bamboo. It's chic, but not groundbreaking. But you are not here for that. If you wanted a blast, a buzz, you'd be on Phuket, or Samui. But Pimalai, much like Koh Lanta itself, is in a different zone. It's not cutting-edge. It's not cool. It's at ease in its own skin. People come here over and over again because they know it's not going to change. Not just yet, anyway.

GETTING THERE

Cleveland Collection (+44 20 7843 3531; www.clevelandcollection.co.uk) offers an eight-night trip from £1,590 per person, staying four nights at Pimalai and four nights at Layana, including flights, transfers and breakfast. **Costa Lanta** (www.costalanta.com); doubles from about £65. **Sri Lanta** (www.srilanta.com); doubles from about £45