

Three Under Three!

Three destinations you can reach in three hours or less. Words and pictures by Michael Franco.

KRABI

The Vibe

Unlike its boisterous cousin to the west, Krabi still retains a sleepy frontier-town feel. Most of the activity takes place in the areas close to the long, cave-pitted coastline although a few attractions can be found inland. If you've heard people refer to places that used to be like Phuket 30 years ago, Krabi would be a good candidate. There isn't a lot of flash here, but there are lovely white beaches, yummy and affordable Thai food, and—best of all—stunning waters that have karst cliffs rising up out of them like the spines of ancient sea monsters. Sun-worshippers, rock-climbers and off-the-beaten-path types will be quite happy here.

The Action

If you have only a few days in Krabi, you're most certainly going to want to head to the coast. Those more interested in nesting in luxurious surroundings than in exploring should check out Klong Mung Beach. Here you'll find posh hotels like the Sheraton, Phulay Bay, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve; and the Sofitel Phokeethra Krabi Resort & Spa, all strung like charms on the necklace of sand that they front—which also happens to host one of the area's best sunsets.

For a more active vacation, Railay and Ao Nang deliver best. Railay is internationally famous for its rock-climbing opportunities. It's a great place to give the sport a go if you've never climbed anything more than the stairs to your flat, yet also provides advanced climbers highly technical challenges. Both spots are THE places to be for the thing that really makes Krabi shine as a holiday destination—trips to the stunning nearby islands. You can book half-day jaunts to close islands like Poda and Chicken or all-day excursions to the revered island sanctuaries that are Koh Phi Phi and Koh Lanta. Tour operators are located practically anywhere you can toss a coconut.

If you need a day out of the sun, the hot springs at Klong Thom are one of those touristy spots that are actually worth checking out. The water flows down the hillside at a surprising 35-40°C and passes over a series of natural smooth rock "bath tubs" where you can soak your stress away. The minerals in the water leave you feeling extra refreshed, even hours after you towel off. Another option for landlubbers is to check out Tiger Cave Temple, near Krabi Town. Don't worry, there aren't any drugged tigers in here, the name comes from a tiger that used to live with a monk on the mountain. The true attraction is making the sometimes pretty hairy climb up the 1,237 steps to the top of the peak where a big gold Buddha and better-than-IMAX views reward your efforts. Just watch out for the monkeys sliding down the banisters!

The Scene

Nightlife in Krabi pretty much consists of watching the sky show: Act I, sunset; Act II, moonrise; Act III, bed. This is especially true if you're staying in West Railay. But if you must get your groove on, take the paths that lead over the peninsula to East Railay and check out the strip of funky shacks that run along the coast and up into the jungle—especially the reggae-soaked **Chock's D**

Bar or the **Bamboo Bar**, which hosts live Muai Thai matches as well as regular parties. Alternatively, head to Ao Nang where you can work on your brogue while listening to the live music (sometimes just a guy with a guitar—a drunk guy at that) at **The Irish Rover** or hop in a tuk tuk and ask the driver to take you to **Luna Bar**—a late-night, oceanfront joint that plays kicking dance tunes, has wooden pedestals on which the ladies (and lady boys) can dance, and offers a pool table that should confound anyone with a Western sense of the game. It's the closest thing this area has to a Patong (Phuket's notorious nightlife center), but the vibe is friendly, the drinks are cheap and the view out to sea? Priceless.

The Dish

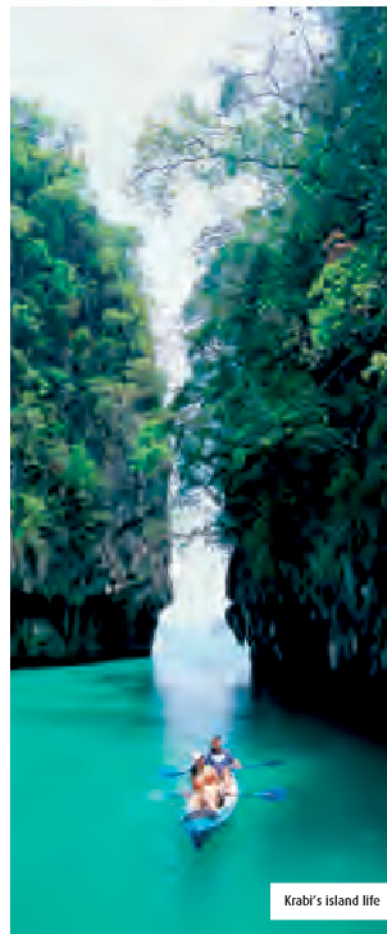
This is Thailand, so your palate should be pleased with practically any grub at any price. All of the hotel-affiliated joints in Railay serve up decent well-priced and nearly identical grub. In Ao Nang, a great spot is **Del Rocks Restaurant** on Route 4203 (the road that runs up from the beach) where you can start with great nightly happy hour drink prices (they specialize in mojitos, caiporoscas and margaritas, but we liked the tom yum cocktail the best) and then move on to dinner where the filet steak with red onion salsa is a particular favorite. All ingredients are super fresh with many shipped in daily from a hydrofarm in Krabi Town.

The Local

Jittima Chaisuan, the owner of chic, downtempo-soothed Del Rocks Restaurant says: "The expansion toward more high-end hotels such as Sofitel and Ritz Carlton has opened up a new segmentation of guests. I have noticed that we get more and more high-end guests that are clearly looking for a new destination after Phuket. They're quality-minded and we've definitely seen an increase in wine sales!" But she adds that Krabi is still for everyone saying that people come for "the nature and fantastic sea areas with islands to visit and with cliff formations you do not find anywhere else."

The Digs

Sheraton Krabi Beach Resort (www.starwoodhotels.com). This hotel has one big four-letter word going for it: P-O-O-L. Actually, there are two dazzling pools on the sprawling oceanfront property, but the one we're talking about is called the Malati



Krabi's island life





Sheraton Krabi Beach Resort

Pool. It's an infinity-edged dream where you can carry your drink from the in-pool bar over to the edge and gaze through the casuarina pines to the ocean. The rooms are comfortable and classic Sheraton, and with a variety of restaurants, a great fitness center and one sweet beach, this is a destination in and of itself. Special package rates start at \$250; stay three nights, get the fourth night free.

Aonang Cliff Beach (www.aonangcliffbeach.com). Recently opened, this is a solid choice if you want to stay in Ao Nang town. Set on the hillside above the bustling street, it offers a beautiful view of one of Krabi's famous karst cliffs. Modern décor and an inviting pool offer a great respite from the dusty streets below. Generous balconies provide the perfect place to have your own personal happy hour before heading out on the town. From \$200 including breakfast.

Railay Village Resort and Spa (www.railayvillagekrabi.com). Also fairly

recently opened, this beauty is set on a narrow strip of land that stretches away from the West Railay beach. Huge rooms are housed in individual villas that stand on either side of a pool that undulates with the well-conceived landscaping. Large verandahs make it tough to head out for the day, but you won't want to miss the sunsets that splash up buckets of pigment into the sky each night. The hotel's restaurant offers solid food—and a hawker-style cart in the corner makes great banana crepes each evening. Special "Really Shock Price Promotion" of \$260 for a pool villa during high season (see website), \$156 during green season (May 1–Oct 31 2010).

The Carrier

Tiger Airways. Return tickets from \$79 from www.tigerairways.com.

CHIANG MAI

The Vibe

You've been blindfolded and dropped off in the middle of a town. The blindfold has been removed. "Oh," you think. "Bangkok, right?" But then you think ... "is that an organic café over there? And, that looks sort of like a hippy boutique. And, are those mountains in the distance? Boy, the traffic really doesn't seem that bad". The thing about Chiang Mai is that on the surface, it feels very much like a mini Bangkok. There are the requisite massage parlors, "pool" halls, food stalls, tuk tuks and general grime to make it feel much like the City of Angels. But spend any amount of time walking around and you begin to feel a more laidback, entrepreneurial and artistic vibe than you'll encounter down south. Plus, with cooler temperatures, access to great wilderness and a thriving university that dominates life in a major part of town, Chiang Mai really is a different from Bangkok as tom yum goong is from som dum.

The Action

In town, spend a morning wandering through the flower and fruit market on the west bank of the river between the Naowarat and Nakomping bridges to add some color to your day. Next, head west of the old city (the square section in the heart of town that's surrounded by a canal and the remnants of an old brick wall) to take a stroll down Nimmanhaemin Road. Start at the top where it intersects with Huay Kaew Road, and walk south, toward Chiang Mai University. Along



The Four Seasons Resort, Chiang Mai



Maesa Elephant Camp



Animals run free
in Chiang Mai

the way, you'll pass a variety of interesting cafes and restaurants where a long, leisurely lunch is possible. Smoothie Blues lets you choose the obvious and also serves an all-day breakfast, while La Genoise is a cozy elegant French patisserie where you'll want to make your coffee (and sugary delight) last as long as possible.

If you're ready to head to the hills, follow your nose to the Maesa Elephant Camp (www.maesaelephantcamp.com). It might sound touristy, but hey—you are a tourist. And when's the last time you saw an elephant play dead or make a painting that could foster jealousy in Van Gogh's heart? There are plenty of these places that are kind of dodgy, but this outfit is well done, being the first camp in the world to receive the ISO 9001:2000 (a quality standards measurement) as well as The Thailand Standard Camp Award. Show times are at 8am, 9:40am and 1:30pm and if you get there about a half hour before each performance, you can see the gentle giants getting bathed in the rushing river that runs through camp. You can also participate in either the one-day or overnight mahout training programs. (Hint: When you exit the camp, make a left and stop at the first restaurant on the left. You'll get completely authentic, insanely cheap Thai grub on the banks of a roaring river.)

If you'd rather act like wildlife instead of watching it, check out the Flight of The Gibbon (www.treetopasia.com) where you can explore the upper reaches of the rainforest canopy from platforms, sky bridges and 2 kilometers of zip lines. The experience takes about three hours and includes lunch and a river walk or waterfall trek.

The Scene

Chiang Mai may not have the boisterous nightlife of Bangkok, but that means there are no sad-looking elephants roaming the streets, no dodgy men offering you menus of the strange things women can do in even dodgier bars, and generally nothing to fear. A good meal followed by a nice stroll and perhaps a little live music would be a satisfying evening here. To hear some strumming and singing, check out Charoenrat Road on the east side of the Ping River. **The Riverside** (#9-11, www.theriversidechiangmai.com) gets things started every night with live piano at 7pm followed by a revolving cast of musicians that play everything from rock to reggae. Nearby **Brasserie** (#37) is renowned for its live music and regularly hosts hot local blues act Tuk. In town, **Shaky Bar** (30/7 Huay Kaew Rd.) entertains by spinning vinyl from its extensive library.

Beyond the pubs and clubs, an absolute must-do nighttime activity here is the Sunday night market. OK, we know what you're thinking: "Not another damn market!" But this one's different. Trust us. Instead of the usual "Same Same But Different" T-shirts and Red Bull singlets, you'll find hand-painted and custom-designed tees. Instead of mass-produced trinkets, you'll discover handmade delights. Instead of hawkers pleading with you to buy their wares, you'll find a more dignified grouping of artisans who are happy if you look, but happy to let you have your peace as well. It'll restore your market faith in minutes.



The Datai, Langkawi

The Dish

Considering that it's set outside of town in a somewhat odd, Universal Studios-like idea of a rainforest (the subhead on their menu says "Imaginary Jungle"), the totally authentic Thai food served up at the **Khaomao-Khaofang Restaurant** (181 Moo 7 Ratchaphruek Rd., khaomaokhaofang.com) comes as quite a surprise. Don't miss the fragrant leaf snack (a northern Thailand specialty), or chicken curry with roti. Back in town, the **House Restaurant complex** (199 Moonmuang Rd., www.thehousethailand.com) is well worth a visit. The main restaurant itself dishes out creative continental fare while the more interesting Ginger & Kafe lets you choose from mod Thai either in outside mini-pavilions complete with chandeliers, or inside in a room that would make Alice in Wonderland feel completely at home. To work off your meal, visit the two on-site boutiques: Nomad and Ginger (yes, again).

The Local

Lola du Jardin, partner in **Sop Moei Arts** (www.sopmoeiarts.com), a non-profit organization that helps the isolated Pwo Karen tribe earn a living through the teaching of skills like weaving and basket making (and winds up with some stunning objects to sell), had this to say about why she has chosen to move from France to Chiang Mai: "When I first came to Chiang Mai, I felt instantly at home and I suppose that's the attraction for visitors too. It was like the place I had been looking for all my life without realizing it. There's such a can-do spirit here and, of course, everything is permeated by that wonderful Thai peacefulness. I love it!"

The Digs

dusitD2 Chiang Mai (www.dusit.com/d2cm). From the moment you're picked up at the airport in the authentic (though orange-and-white-painted) London Taxi cab, to watching the entire staff do a campy shift-change dance while strains of Gershwin's "Swonderful" play in the background, you know that you're in for a different—and very good—time at the dusitD2. Located in town, the entire operation here is fresh, hip, lively and comfortable. Members of the staff all have titles that begin with "D" like the Drink and Dine Agents, Desk Agents and Décor Agents (housekeepers). In keeping with "d" theme, your room comes complete with a transparent "Delight Box" that is replenished every day with a new Thai sweet. The hotel just became the only in Chiang Mai to make it into *Travel + Leisure's* "Top 40 City Hotels in Asia" and with its mod approach to hospitality, it's easy to see why. Rooms are super-stylish, the pool is very welcome after a day spent with the elephants, and the uber-cool bar Mix does a mean tom yum cocktail which you can enjoy to the groovy soundtrack spun out by the resident DJ. The house restaurant Moxie is as impressive as everything else here. From \$108 per night; "Delightful Studio Suite" package: 3D/2N in Studio Suite including transfers, bottle of wine, breakfast, pre-dinner beverages in club lounge and other perks for \$665 net.

The Four Seasons Resort Chiang Mai (www.fourseasons.com/chiangmai). Nobody does it quite like The Four Seasons and if you're ready to splash out on a retreat you'll remember for decades, this is the spot. Situated in the mountains

outside of town, and oriented around a pond and series of rice paddies (the harvest from which is donated to nearby villagers), using the word "hotel" or "resort" to describe this place is truly inadequate. "Experiential lodging" might work better. As you walk around the grounds, a hushed sense of reverence seems to hang in the air. Waterfalls cascade from the hillsides and, every afternoon, two water buffaloes—one pink and one white—wander through the paths with their keepers to the lobby where you can have your picture taken with them. All rooms come with balconies that would be enough of a pleasure even if there wasn't a room attached to them. But when you see the palatial digs, you'll be happy there is. The spa itself is reason enough to stay here; it's won countless awards and it would simply be impossible to not leave with a dreamy smile on your face after a treatment. A must-do is the Chef's Table where you join no more than 12 guests for a cooking demo by the resort's master chef followed by a tasting of 12 of his delish dishes and three desserts. Just when you thought things couldn't get any better! From \$811 per night; stay two nights, get the third for free until December 19.

The Carriers

SilkAir. Return tickets from \$472 from www.silkair.com.

LANGKAWI

The Vibe

Jungle boys and their Janes are bound to feel at home in this tropical Eden located just up the western Malaysian coast. Bookended by Phuket to the north and Penang to the south, the island is distinctly different from both. The focus here is decidedly on all things natural, and for having taken such good care of their earthly treasures, the people of Langkawi were rewarded when the island was granted UNESCO geopark status in June, 2007. Beautiful beaches, mysterious mangroves, gushing waterfalls and monkey-filled forests await the explorations of anyone willing to leave the party scene so prevalent on lots of local islands behind to experience a different kind of wildlife.

The Action

Get outside! With so much of the island undeveloped, you can think of the place as your own private nature reserve. To get a good overview of your new wild kingdom, take a ride on the **Langkawi Cable Car** (Oriental Village, Burau Bay), a swooping trip that'll let you take in views of islands, mountains, jungle and that dazzling blue sea all at once. When you're ready to come down to earth, consider hiring a guide for some jungle trekking. Check with Irshad (012-584-6184), Bidin (012-476-2055) or Dev (012-489-2392). Alternatively, phone up the Datai (604-959-2500) or The Four Season (604-950-8888) hotels and inquire about their guided nature programs.

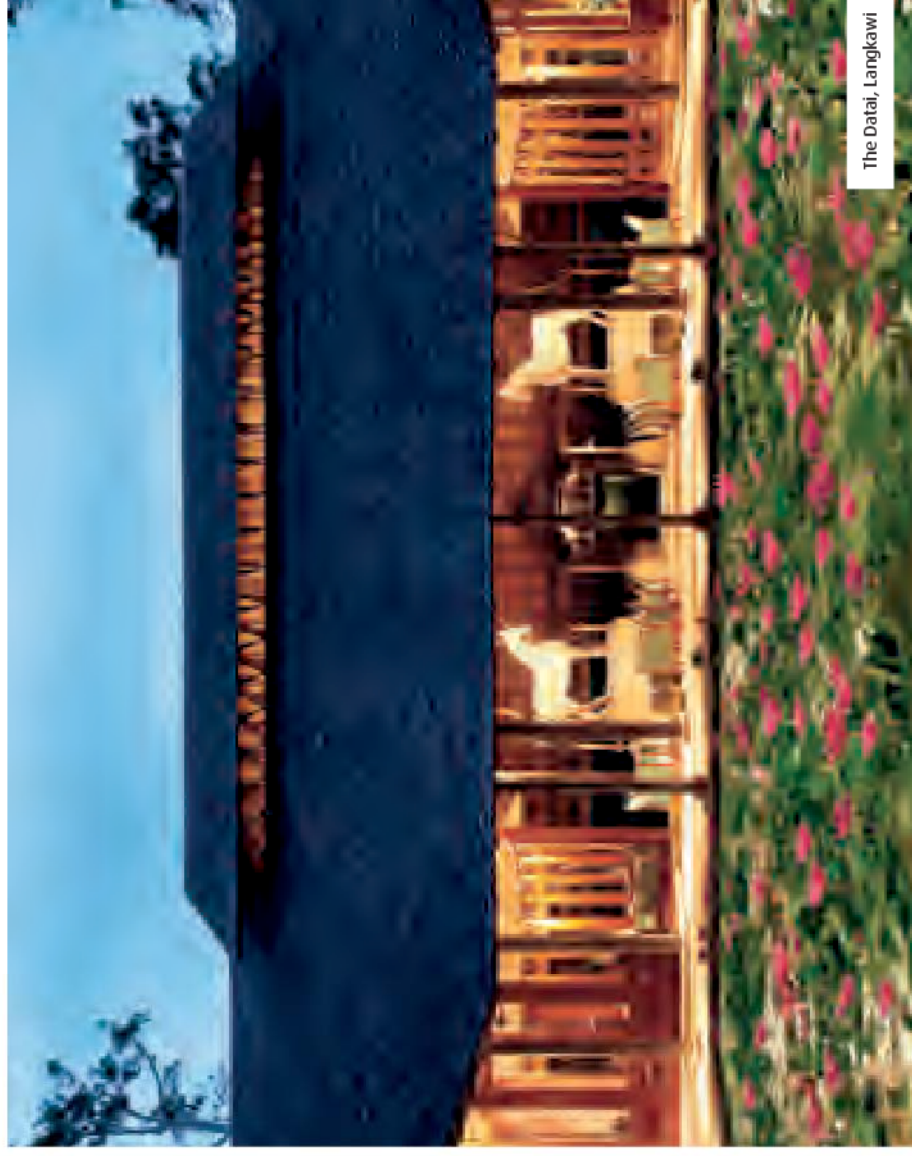
Along the way you'll see lots of the rascally macaques, but try to keep your eyes out for the more shy dusky leaf monkeys that'll melt your heart with their innocent looking faces—complete with two white circles around each eye. Also watch the sky

for a variety of powerful birds including the brahmini kite after which the island is named ("lang" means eagle and "kawi" means rock), and enjoy the kaleidoscopic effects of peering up through the upper boughs of the towering 100-year-old-plus meranti trees.

One of the reasons Langkawi got geopark status is because it is home to the oldest mountain range in Southeast Asia. But another reason is its extensive mangrove system. To spend an afternoon among these "walking trees," hire a driver (or rent a car as it's a really easy driving island and takes only about 90 minutes to circle the whole thing) and go to the Kilim Karst Geoforest Park in the northeast. You can take a trip along the substantial river that includes a cave exploration in addition to a "wild eagle feeding" where the boat captain tosses chicken skin into the water and beautiful birds of prey swoop down to pick up their prizes.

The Scene

Um, pretty much, there isn't one. Aside from dinner (usually at your hotel) it's best to turn in early here so that you can get going the next morning before the day heats up too much. What's that you say? Every place has a disco, right? OK. If you really can't keep your inner John Travolta still, you can check out the **Chime club** in the Sheraton (www.starwoodhotels.com). For a less "formal" party scene, you can look for some friends along the main street in Pantai Cenang. This coastal town in the southwestern part of the island features a variety of funky pubs, restaurants and shops; it's a bit grungy but feels plenty safe and is a lot more exciting



The Datai, Langkawi



A dish served at
Bon Ton, Langkawi



Bon Ton Hotel

for tourists than the main town of Kuah.

The Dish

The top restaurant on the island (and maybe even in all of northern Malaysia) would have to be **Nam** at the Bon Ton Hotel (see The Digs). The outdoor setting on the edge of a rice paddy is divine. The menu features super-fresh creations that let your palate wander the planet. Get started with the great pita bread and accompanying selection of Middle Eastern dips then, if you're a meat-eater, check out the lamb with roasted vegetable, chick peas, mashed pumpkin and mint salsa. If you're a veggie-lover, try the vegetable platter, with (ready for this?): Lemon rice, eggplant with basil, sweet and sour capsicum, guava salad, roast

vegetables, buttered spinach, rocket tomato pomegranate salad and pappadams—all drizzled with a coconut and lemon sauce.

Another restaurant certainly worth visiting (if you can avoid going back to Nam for a second—or third—visit) would be the Gulai House (book through The Datai; see The Digs), situated in the jungle just off the beach between The Datai and The Andaman restaurants. Here you dine in the woods by lantern light in an authentic Malaysian royal home. Ask to be shown to the table on the left where you can dine while seated on the floor. The menu here fuses Malay and Indian specialties, so you'll find rendang and otak sharing the menu with aloo gobi masala and chicken tandoori. Everything is well-prepared and the service is charming, so—order away!

The Local

In a recent issue of *Tiger Tales* magazine, Bon Ton Hotel owner Narelle McMurtrie said: "It's so easy to be a tourist in Langkawi ... (it) doesn't change much year to year so it feels like a second home."

The Digs

The Datai and The Andaman (www.ghmhotels.com). These sister properties are the grand old dames of lodging on the island. Situated in the northwestern part of the island, both of these hotels—and only these hotels—have access to the stunning Datai beach, a beautiful half-moon of sugary sand hemmed in by dramatic rocky outcroppings on either end. The Datai is built into the side of the mountain fronting the beach. The rooms are set at the top along with one of the pretty pools while a path leads down, down, down through the forest, past the spa and over a stream to the lower complex that holds another pool and a restaurant. The Datai has a more refined, grown-up air to it versus the neighboring Andaman, which seems a bit more built for families as evidenced by the pool which is a stunner, but has a water slide in the middle for the kiddies. Both offer astoundingly good service, luxurious rooms and amenities and the chance to enjoy the best man-made pleasures amid Mother Nature's masterpiece that is the rainforest. Closing your windows and doors at night is highly recommended. The monkeys WILL come in, open your minibar and get up to the business for which they're famous! Datai rates from \$628; Andaman from \$406.

The Bon Ton and Temple Tree hotels (www.bontonresort.com.my). You've never seen a pair of hotels like this before. The two properties neighbor one another along the edge of bird-filled wetlands just at the top of Pantai Cenang (don't worry, peace abounds here). Both properties have been developed not only as a sanctuary for people, but as a no-kill haven for dogs and cats as well, in keeping with owner Narelle McMurtrie's passion for our four-legged friends. And while you can visit with the furry critters if you want to while you're here, they're definitely in the background and no problem to avoid if you're not inclined to elicit purrs and wagging tails. What you can do here though is luxuriate in the amazing lodgings. The Bon Ton features eight antique kampung houses imported from the state of Kedah that are kitted out with all mod cons—including aircon and flat screen TVs. Temple Tree continues the tradition of making old new again by craftily carving out 14 luxury suites from five imported 70-110-year-old villas from around Malaysia, including a stunner of a black and white. Love abounds! Rates from \$200 including in-room breakfast treats.

The Carrier

Air Asia and Tiger Airways. Return tickets from \$120 from www.airasia.com and \$130 from www.tigerairways.com. ■