

Views to thrill



A JEWEL-LIKE PENDANT OF SHEER LIMESTONE CLIFFS TOWERING OVER THE TURQUOISE WATERS OF THAILAND'S ANDAMAN SEA, RAILAY IS ONE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA'S MOST DRAMATIC LOCATIONS. THOSE LOOKING TO BLEND A LITTLE THAI-STYLE HEDONISM WITH HIGH-ENERGY PURSUITS WILL FIND AN UNFORGETTABLE RESORT ISLAND THAT TONES AND TANS IN EQUAL MEASURE

WORDS & IMAGES | DANIEL ALLEN

Embracing a gnarled rock face 50 metres above East Railay's sandy beach, American climber Kevin Cleary is flooded with a sense of splendid isolation. Adrenaline gives the landscape's pristine colours an extra vivid hue, as small puffs of cotton-wool cloud chug lethargically across the sky. In the distance, streams of longtails ferry cargoes of tourists across the unruffled Andaman Sea. "Nothing beats that feeling of making it to the top," Cleary enthuses afterwards. "Aching arms burn with an overdose of lactic acid, but you've earned

the right to stop and take in the view for a few minutes. Then it's time to descend, drink in the adulation of fellow climbers, and see if you've got the strength for another climb."

Stationed on Thailand's southwestern coast a stone's throw from Krabi, Railay is Asia's ultimate climbing destination. Its soaring geology, part of the world's largest exposed coral reef stretching from China down to Papua New Guinea, pulls in thousands of climbers from around the world every year. Climbers may vary in experience, but all share a desire to push themselves to the limit in this staggeringly beautiful setting. For first-timers particularly, learning to rock climb here is an unforgettable experience.

Although Railay's climbing scene suffered a setback with the 2004 tsunami, overwhelming support from the international climbing community fostered a quick recovery. Today, climbing routes and infrastructure are better – and safer – than ever. "Nearly all steel bolts in the rock face have been replaced by superior titanium pegs," explains Cleary. "This ⇒





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is reassuring when you’re hanging on to a rock by your fingertips 200 metres above the beach.”

Over 1,000 bolted routes crisscross Railay’s lofty limestone faces, providing panoramic jungle and ocean vistas. The French grading system is used to classify routes, which range from novice 5a runs through to punishing inverted 8c pitches. “The rock quality here is superb,” says Cleary, “but climbers new to the scene should be wary of the famed Railay stalactites. These have been known to break off at inopportune moments. But everyone here is very safety conscious – it’s a totally professional set-up.”

PREVIOUS PAGE: Railay offers climbers spectacular ocean and jungle views
 FROM ABOVE: High-tech titanium bolts keep climbers safe; freshly barbecued seafood rewards the energetic; kayaking through *hong*s



Railay’s most reputable outfit for climbing guidance and gear is King Climbers. “Climbing in Railay is a must,” says Robin King, co-manager of the popular beachfront shop. “It doesn’t matter if you’re experienced or a total beginner. Just get on the rock and have a go. There’s no competition here – it’s all about testing yourself in your own way, and enjoying this incredible scenery at the same time.”

Gazing out the window to the azure waters glittering in the morning sun, King warns: “Climbers should always wear sunscreen, as the cliff faces are exposed to the full heat of the sun. Drink plenty of water between climbs. You’re going to be perspiring a lot out there.”

Back at the palm-shaded resort, a rank of expert masseurs is on hand to revive tight muscles after a day’s exercise. Afterwards, athletic appetites are sated on freshly barbecued seafood and fragrant Thai curries in an outdoor restaurant illuminated by tiki lamps. Dotted between the beachfront climbing outfits are a tropical assortment of boutique bars and cafés, where piña colodas are the order of the day. Come sundown, climbers of all backgrounds congregate, swapping tales of heroic feats, and picking up tips from instructors in exchange for the occasional protein milkshake. While low-key parties keep night owls busy, most of Railay’s energetic visitors find that a good night’s sleep is all they crave as the full moon rises.

While groups of climbers swarm across Railay’s twisted rock faces, a compact flotilla of kayaks lifts and drops on the billowing Andaman swell. One by

As the harsh glare of the midday sun recedes, a subterranean world of exotic geology is revealed in Phra Nang’s cave systems, as forests of dripping stalactites give way to myriad tunnels, pools and lagoons that could have been penned by JRR Tolkien



one, the procession of yellow boats and orange helmets slides from view, paddlers nosing their boats gently into the mouths of well-disguised caves. Many of the limestone islets off Phra Nang beach are home to extensive cave systems, known collectively as *hong*s (which means “rooms” in Thai). Eroded into their present form over millions of years, many are large enough to beach kayaks and investigate on foot. Exploring *hong*s is a thrilling experience. As the harsh glare of the midday sun recedes, a subterranean world of exotic geology is revealed, as forests of dripping stalactites give way to myriad tunnels, pools and lagoons that could have been penned by JRR Tolkien.

Beneath the tight canopy, hikers explore Phanom Bencha’s lower slopes, occasionally coming face-to-face with trekkers mounted on elephants, periodically breaking out along ridges, sunny meadows, streams and waterfalls

American Paul Murray, an experienced Railay kayaker, offers some insider’s knowledge. “If you’re after a little workout, the open-water crossing that leads to the islands of Koh Poda and Koh Kai [also known as Chicken Island] is perfect,” he advises. “The white sand beaches, clear water and coral reef around Koh Poda make it an awesome place to hang out for a whole day. Be sure to bring plenty of water and a hat.”

Meanwhile, as the fiery sun submits to the horizon igniting a cobalt sky, three puffed hikers enjoy Railay’s best view in the house. Hundreds of metres above the resort’s twin sandy crescents, on the limestone tower that soars over Phra Nang beach, the small group is justly rewarded for their breathless ascent. With dusk falling rapidly, troops of monkeys chatter in the canopy overhead, as if they too appreciate nature’s majestic show.

While trekking enthusiasts will find a few demanding trails on Railay, veteran hikers requiring sustained exertion should head farther afield. “For longer hikes simply take a boat from West Railay beach to Krabi,” advises Patty Pranee Suebsuk, a local tour operator. “Here you’ll find a selection of shops offering luxury car and jeep rentals. Take the Talat Kao-Ban Huai To Road and head to Phanom Bencha National Park.”

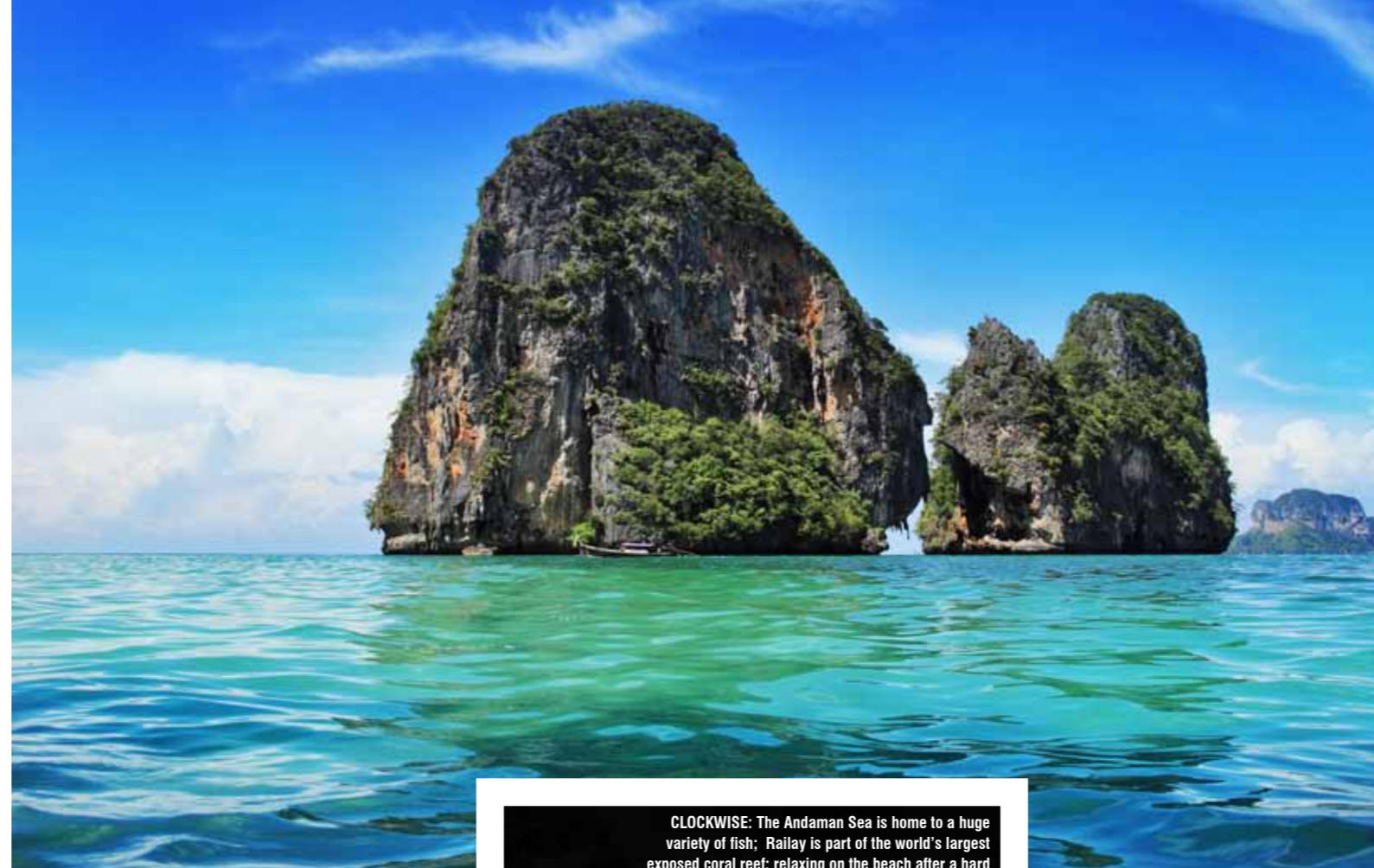
Twenty kilometers from Krabi lies a 50 sq km swatch of pristine lush forest, pierced by



a distinctive range of flat-topped mountains. The wilderness is lorded over by Phanom Bencha Mountain, a 1,400-metre peak that takes at least three days to climb. Laced with rushing streams, roaring cascades and exotic wildlife, the place would be gold for a *National Geographic* team. Beneath ⇒



FROM ABOVE: Take the boat to Krabi for challenging hikes at Phanom Bencha; elephants wander trails; cool off in turquoise pools



Beneath the Andaman's tepid waters lies an aquatic paradise; snorkel groups are buzzed by inquisitive schools of tiger fish and parrot fish, swarming over hyper-colour coral formations

the tight canopy, hikers explore the lower slopes, occasionally coming face-to-face with trekkers mounted on elephants, and periodically breaking out along ridges, sunny meadows, streams and waterfalls. Patient visitors are usually rewarded with sightings of the park's monkeys and dazzling birds at home in their natural forest environment.

"The waterfalls of Namtok Huai To and Namtok Khlong Haeng are breathtaking, especially from the back of an elephant," says Patty Pranee Suebsuk. "The animals like to take a bath and scrub in this place, although the *mahouts* (elephant trainers) usually get wetter than their rides. They always say that once you've given an elephant a bath, he's your friend for life."

The elephants that ply the trails of Phanom Bencha are old logging animals. "It costs approximately US\$500 per month to take care of them," says Patty Pranee Suebsuk, "so the treks are a great way to support their upkeep.

The elephants are all well-trained, and offer a special experience for both children and adults. Once you've steered an elephant, driving a car doesn't seem exciting!"

Back at Railay, a late afternoon snorkel party patrols one of the colourful coral reefs, with their flippers kicking rhythmically. Beneath the Andaman's tepid waters lies an aquatic paradise, and the snorkel group is buzzed by inquisitive schools of tiger fish and parrot fish swarming over hyper-colour coral formations. A spotted three-metre leopard shark swims lazily below, its two-tone body blending perfectly with the dappled light filtering through to the sandy sea bed.

"The Andaman Sea is rich in diversity and abundance," explains local snorkel guide Chai Boonmee, hosing down his equipment. "Depending on the time of year, snorkellers see turtles, dolphins, sharks, coconut crabs and a huge variety of fish. It's also possible to

go scuba diving with manta rays and whale sharks farther offshore, and explore the wreck of a car ferry that sank in 1997."

Chai explains that visitors who prefer to snorkel in private can charter a longtail or cabin cruiser and putter out to a deserted stretch of sea. After some underwater action, they can drop anchor beside a virgin sandbar for a lunch of succulent prawns, swordfish steaks and grilled steak kebabs. One of the most legendary sunset longtail experiences is offered by a young local man named Boy. As he is too unreliable to book online, the best bet is wander into a couple of the dive shops and ask for his services. "Boy's trips consist of snorkelling in a couple of top spots before a sandbar dinner and glorious sunset," says Paul Murray. "On the way back, the boat stops so that passengers can jump out and swim in the phosphorescence. It's a beautifully surreal experience."

Ranged around a hastily erected net, two cosmopolitan teams of locals and tourists jump, kick and dive as they attempt to keep a small rattan ball from hitting the sand. Known as *takraw*, good-natured games of this Thai take on volleyball liven up West Railay's



CLOCKWISE: The Andaman Sea is home to a huge variety of fish; Railay is part of the world's largest exposed coral reef; relaxing on the beach after a hard day's climb

IMAGES | Shutterstock.com

expansive beach every afternoon. Meanwhile, couples take sedate strolls near the surf, as scattered sun worshippers bliss out beneath stands of verdant coconut palms.

A little further down from West Railay, Phra Nang lives up to its reputation as the peninsula's finest beach. Translucent water laps duvet-soft sand, while low tide exposes coral reefs, caves and assorted rock pools ripe for exploration. At the base of Phra Nang's cliffs lies the interesting and deceptively large Princess Cave, or Tham Phra Nang Nok as it's known to the locals. "The cave is dedicated to an ancient fertility goddess," explains Patty Pranee Suebsuk. "Local fishermen leave daily offerings of garlands and burning incense before they sail."

In the luminescent afternoon, as climbers return from the rocks and sunbathers shake sand from their beach towels, a local girl explains that the word Railay means "orchard near the sea". It's a fitting name – offering challenging topography and idyllic landscapes that beg to be explored, after sampling the fruits of this bountiful paradise, most visitors find themselves well and truly hooked on the apple of Thailand's eye. ☺

EXPERIENCE RAILAY

FOR RELAXATION: WAREE SPA

After a day on the rocks, there's no better way to pamper tired muscles than with a luxury massage at the Railay Princess Resort and Spa. Enclosed by dense jungle and limestone cliffs, the resort's new Watee Spa is housed in a traditional wooden building perched above a tranquil lake. Well-trained and ever-courteous staff offer a range of massages and treatments – the only trouble you'll have is waking up when it's all over.

WWW.RAILAYPRINCESS.COM

FOR DINING: KRUA PHRANANG AT RAYAVADEE RESORT

Quite possibly Railay's most romantic restaurant, the excellence of Krua Phranang's Thai cuisine is matched by its stunning setting and stylish décor. After walking along a moonlit path to Phranang Beach, patrons choose from a menu of curries, salads, soups, seafood and fresh fish. After dinner retire to the outdoor deck for coffee, dessert and stargazing.

WWW.RAYAVADEE.COM

FOR SLEEPING: RAILAY BAY RESORT AND SPA

Recently upgraded, Railay Bay is one of Railay's top accommodation choices, with two beautiful beachfront pools and an excellent restaurant. New deluxe cottages come equipped with all the latest amenities, as well as breathtaking views over the sea and picturesque gardens. Guests are a short walk from both West Railay and East Railay beaches – perfect for catching the sunrise and sunset.

WWW.KRABI-RAILAYBAY.COM

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