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NOVEMBER 2020

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WHERE TO STAY

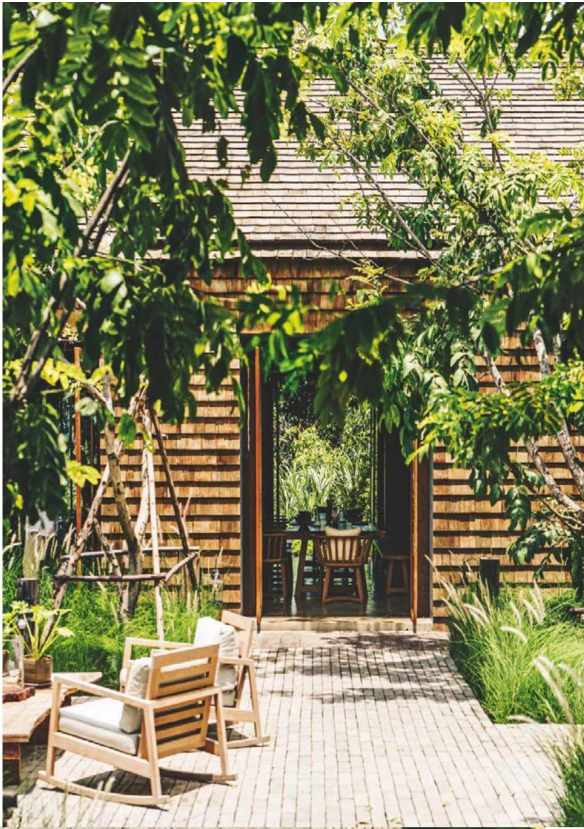
INSIDER REPORTS ON THE BEST PLACES TO BED DOWN. EDITED BY ISSY VON SIMSON

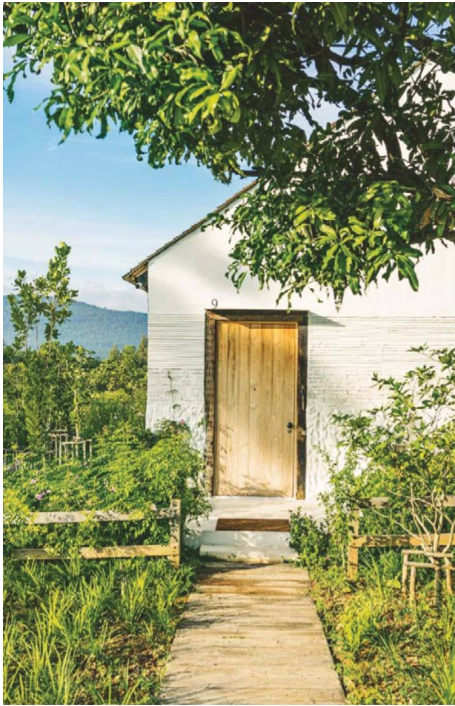
THE ROUND-UP: THAILAND

PLAYFUL INDIE SPACES GO BIG ON
HERITAGE TO EVOLVE THE COUNTRY'S
BEACH-HEAVY NARRATIVE

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS SCHALKX

OPEN-AIR LIVING ROOM AT ROUKH KIRI, KHAO YAI





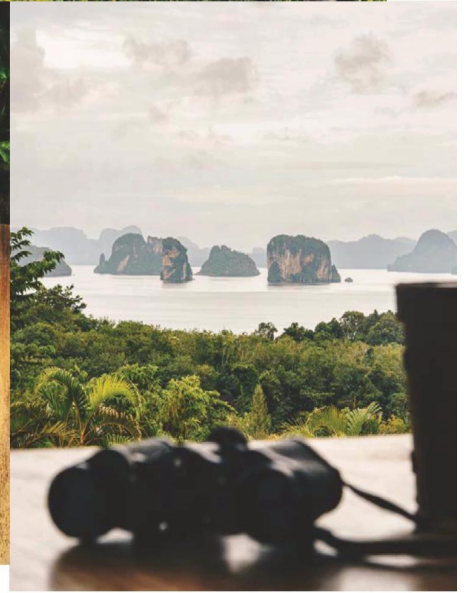
ROUKH KIRI, KHAO YAI

Don't be surprised to see a Porsche or Ferrari rolling through the hills of Thailand's emerald-green answer to the Cotswolds, three hours north of Bangkok. This is where city dwellers swap their apartments for weekend villas and a rural tonic of fresh air, vineyards and elephant-spotting in the jungles of Khao Yai National Park. The sloping valleys are dotted with little hotels, but this new property is one of the smartest options to book. Spread out over a hill surrounded by mango trees, it's made up of 12 villas that riff on barn houses, with old doors repurposed as window shutters and whitewashed cobblestone walls in the bathrooms. All have semi-outdoor bathtubs under stargazing windows – the skies are beautifully illuminated on cloudless nights – and most open up to private saltwater pools looking out towards temple-topped mountains. Interiors balance rustic rattan details with leather and steel fixtures. From the front doors, walkways wind past flowerbeds and vegetable patches to the restaurant, a reclaimed-wood outhouse flanked by knee-high whispery feather grass. Here, linen-clad waiters serve dishes drawing on ingredients from the Roukh Kiri's own farm, often flipping the script on traditional recipes. The chef's take on *krapow*, a spicy rice dish with meat, swaps the ubiquitous Thai basil for sprigs of rosemary, while farmers' salads and stir-fries are made with organic produce grown on site.

The sitting area overlooking a pool is especially cosy at night when the fireplace is lit up, bats zoom overhead and jazz mingles with the humming of cicadas from the jungle.

BOOK IT Doubles from about £155. roukh.com





9 HORNBILLS TENTED CAMP, KOH YAO NOI

This go-slow island, with its stilted fishermen's villages and deserted beaches, is reminiscent of Koh Samui or Koh Phi Phi before the big-brand developments swooped in. On a moped drive around its criss-crossing dirt tracks, visitors are more likely to bump into grazing water buffaloes than sunbathing *farang* (foreigners), and most of the sand remains blissfully quiet. It feels a world away from buzzy Phuket, a 30-minute speedboat trip across the strait, which was the main reason for Swiss entrepreneur Jean-Michel Germing and his business partner setting up low-key escape Koyao here nearly 20 years ago. Now it's joined by a new property just up the hill, named after the nine hornbills Germing encountered during his first site inspection. Ten safari tents fan out across a former rubber plantation with their own pools and large gardens, plus four-poster beds and outdoor rain showers clad in salvaged wood – just one of a number of eco-smart design details borrowed from the Six Senses one hill over, which Germing also directed. The bar at the top of the estate is a lovely spot for sundowners, and the sister hotel offers an excellent restaurant and semi-private beach, connected to the camp by a buggy service. At-the-ready butlers can fix everything from candlelit dinners to island picnics and floating breakfasts served in Thai tiffin boxes. But the biggest draw here is the gigantic, moss-covered karst formations immersed in the ocean – quite possibly the best view in the whole country.

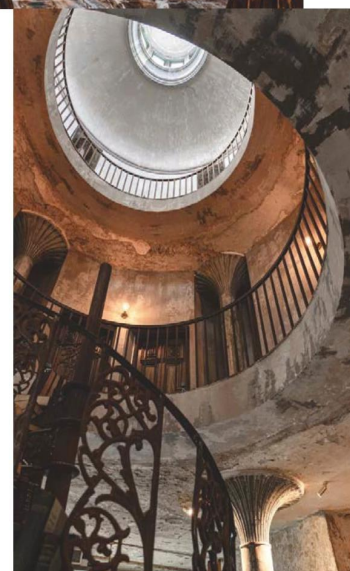
BOOK IT Doubles from about £300. 9hornbills.com

WHERE TO STAY

THE MUSTANG BLU, BANGKOK

Only a small sign above the door of this crumbling 19th-century building on the fringe of the capital's dizzying Chinatown reveals that it's no longer the run-down former bank turned massage parlour it once was known as. Following a slew of young creatives setting up shop in this former spice-trading district, stylist Ananda 'Joy' Chalardcharoen took over the lease last year for her second project, following The Mustang Nero in the Phra Khanong suburb. In just five months, she and her team transformed this dilapidated late-night spot into the area's most photographed stay. They renovated only what was needed, keeping relics such as the original vault door intact; the atrium, spanning three floors, was opened up again after being closed for decades. Chalardcharoen shows off her design skill in paint-peeled hallways filled with her signature taxidermy mix – a horse and a glass-encased ostrich skeleton greet guests in the lobby – next to artfully arranged books and European antiques. It's a style that is continued in the 10 rooms, all of which have marble-tiled bathrooms, freestanding roll-top tubs and velvet curtains. On the ground floor, the café dishes up treats such as upside-down banana cake and epic breakfasts of herb-rubbed chicken or baked salmon, accompanied by fruit and pastries on ceramics bearing the owner's illustrations of The Mustang Blu. It closes at night, but finding a top-notch feast in this street-food-dense area is hardly a challenge. For after-dark fun, Soi Nana, home to some of the city's best cocktail joints – Asia Today and Teens of Thailand among them – is just a short stroll away. If Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* had been set in Bangkok, it would surely have been filmed here.

BOOK IT Doubles from about £110. [instagram.com/themustangblu](https://www.instagram.com/themustangblu)





HOTEL GAHN, KHAO LAK

Opening along the rather lacklustre main road instead of the area's honey-coloured beaches might sound like an ill-informed business move for a boutique hotel, but owner Rabiab Anusasanun felt it was the right thing to do. With a twinkle in her eyes, she explains that she built it as a tribute to her late grandfather who came to Thailand in 1928 aboard a Chinese junk to work in the then-thriving tin-mining industry. Over time, these migrants blended into the local culture and are now known as the Baba Nyonya people, with their offspring still living in Sino-Portuguese settlements dotting the Malay Peninsula all the way to Singapore. With this project, the family aimed to preserve their rich traditions while simultaneously recasting them for the next generation. They tapped into Phuket-based architecture studio Locomotive's expertise to realise their vision, taking inspiration from the ancestral home with its terrazzo floors and arched columns but giving it a fresh spin with exposed-concrete ceilings and vintage desk lamps.

Artworks on each of the five floors offer interesting insights into Baba culture, while the small shop is stocked with colourful batik items.

In the Juumpo restaurant, decorated with heirlooms from the old family kitchen, Anusasanun herself cooks up staples following recipes passed down by her grandfather – the melt-in-the-mouth *moo hong* (stewed sweet pork with herbs) is an undisputed highlight.

The nearest beach is a five-minute taxi ride away, but that's a small concession to make for this endearing departure from the could-be-anywhere hotels more commonly found around town.

BOOK IT Doubles from about £40. [instagram.com/hotelgahn](https://www.instagram.com/hotelgahn)



WHERE TO STAY

PHU CHAISAI, CHIANG RAI

The 45-minute drive from the town's airport to this hilltop hideaway in the Golden Triangle is a fast-blast tour of the countryside: flashes of neon-green rice paddies, ornate orange-golden temple roofs and tea plantations stacked on slopes set the tone for a stay in northern Thailand in its purest form. Between a jumble of swirling vines and swaying bamboo forest, 33 red-clay cottages look out towards the rolling mountains on the horizon. Inside they're bedecked with bamboo and proudly local touches such as cushions made from hill-tribe textiles.

It's back to basics and disarmingly unpretentious – although some cottages have private pools – which makes sense when you meet the venerable owner. After a successful career as an interior designer, with projects in embassies and royal palaces under her belt, she grew tired of the city's bustle and packed up her household – literally, moving her mansion all the way from central Bangkok – to create this slow-paced jungle retreat where traditional crafts and eco-conscious living play leading roles. There's Akha-tribe coffee and jungle honey at the breakfast table, all-natural spa products and marked hiking trails through the surrounding forest. With the help of Aman and Four Seasons veteran Jason Friedman, who zhuzhed up the place five years ago, the hotel has built up a loyal following of insiders and clued-in urbanites who check in multiple times a year. Among them is Bangkok-born British chef and author Kay Plunkett-Hogge, who is due to launch her own cookery school in the building adjoining the restaurant.

BOOK IT Doubles from about £85. phu-chaisai.com

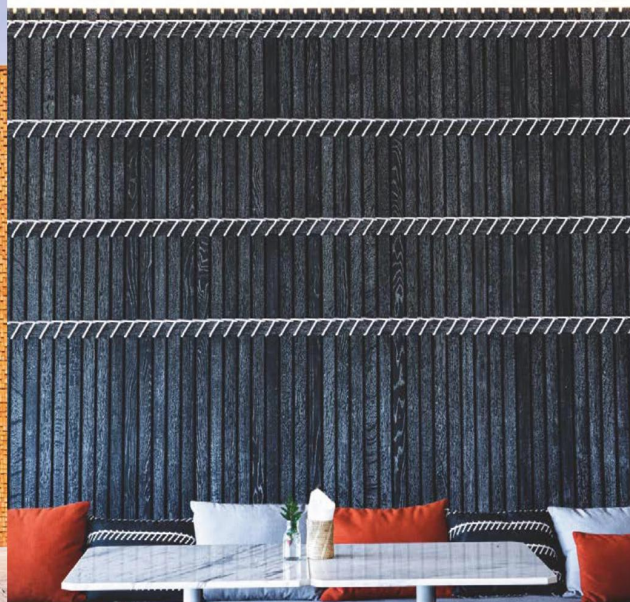
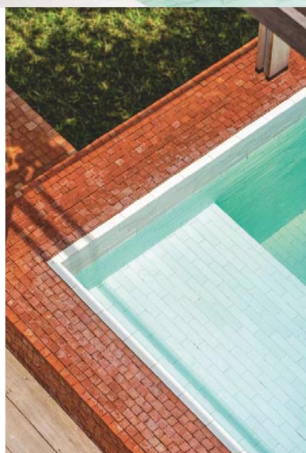


WHERE TO STAY

BAAN POMPHET, AYUTTHAYA

This temple-studded place might be known as Thailand's historic capital, but a flurry of eye-catching cafés, dessert bars and cool stays have given it a contemporary edge over the past few years. The latest scene stealer is this eight-room hotel and restaurant pegged on the T-shaped riverbank where the Chao Phraya and Pasak rivers meet. Taking its name and design cues from the brick-walled Pom Phet fortress next door, Bangkok-based architecture studio Onion has created an MC Escher-esque structure from hand-moulded red brick and salvaged timber, with steps, stairs and roofs each laid out in different patterns. Intricately carved wooden lights from Chiang Mai and doorknobs in the shape of the monkey god Hanuman balance straight lines with a more organic edge. A scaffolding-like contraption connects the two buildings by way of a footbridge and marks the division to the guests-only area, where an ancient bodhi tree shades a swimming pool from the sun.

Contrasting with the tactile exterior, rooms are starkly minimal but snug in jackfruit yellow or leaf green with pod-like beds and black-tiled bathrooms. Those on the ground floor have a small outdoor shower, while the corner room on the second floor is the one to book for its views over the fortress. Day-trippers from Bangkok, which is only 50 miles away, stop in at the restaurant for passion-fruit- and pineapple-placed smoothies and giant river prawns from the grill. Come sunset, the wooden shutters of the rooftop swing open to reveal a well-stocked bar – order a bael-fruit Shakerato or Mojito with roselle and Thai basil to sip while watching the day's last boats sputter by on the hyacinth-covered river below. **BOOK IT** Doubles from about £70. baanpomphet.com



WHERE TO STAY



HOTEL DES ARTISTS PING SILHOUETTE, CHIANG MAI

The glittering temples of Chiang Mai's moated Old Town are enchanting, and the buzzing Nimmanhaemin district is on the pulse when it comes to artisanal coffee and local designer boutiques – but leafy Wat Ket, delivering a bit of both, remains one of the loveliest spots in the city. Here, rootsy art galleries line the streets and restaurants on the banks of the Ping river dish up *khao soi* noodles and cocktails under banyan trees lit up with fairy lights. This is also where some of the most charming boutique stays are found, taking over villas from a bygone era. The Ping Silhouette, however, is inspired by an even earlier time when this part of the city was still a thriving multicultural merchant district dotted with Chinese-style warehouses. Behind a façade of glazed tile roofs and antique French shutters lies a stone-paved courtyard where large glassless windows frame manicured bonsai trees and cosy tea nooks. A long, goldfish-filled pond is a zen antidote to the frenetic markets, while ancient artefacts from China (ornamental doors, stone horses) extend the theme. Rooms are done up in white and teal, and most have terraces overlooking weeping willows and an inky-blue lap pool in the riverside garden. The café, where walls are stacked with chinoiserie teapots and blue-and-white ceramics, prepares breakfasts of Thai rice porridge and sweet treats such as *pa tong go* doughnuts served in bamboo steamer baskets. A striking standout on the teakwood-dominated local scene, and a perfect fit for this curious corner.

BOOK IT Doubles from about £95. hotelartists.com