

Royal Retreat

A low-key seaside city with a laid-back atmosphere, Hua Hin is a foodie's paradise. It's situated on five kilometres of beach and has a charm all of its own.

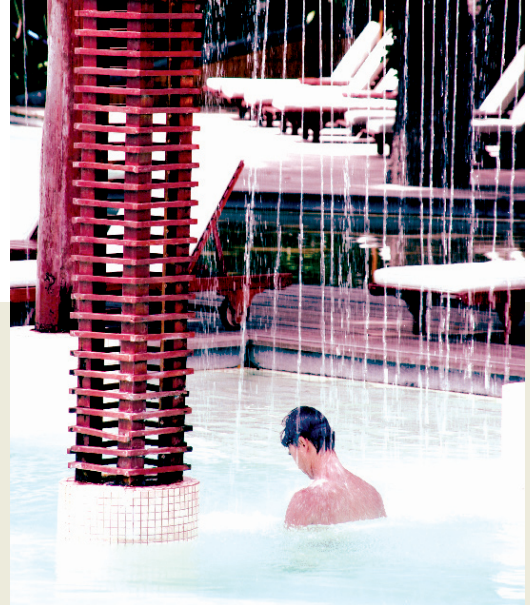
by Verne Maree



Main picture: Part of the Marukhathayuan (or Summer) Palace

Right: The pool at the Verandah Resort and Spa

Below: The resort's delightful Rabian-lay restaurant



The Veranda Resort and Spa is 17km north of the low-key city of Hua Hin, about a three-hour drive from Bangkok. The two-hour Tiger Airways flight from Changi Airport's Budget Terminal was a breeze, but getting through immigration on the other side was murderous; we stood in line for a full hour, and by the time we got through, we had to search for our luggage because it had already been removed from the carousel – exactly which one, none of the staff seemed to know.

So it was a relief to be met by the hotel's patiently waiting driver and whisked away in a comfortable new Camry. The drive is through mainly urban and peri-urban areas, not particularly pretty, but our destination was the closest beach to Bangkok. We did an abrupt left turn off the main road and there we were at the hotel, situated right on the beach.

The popularity of Hua Hin as a weekend getaway for rich Bangkokians goes back to the 1920s when it was used as a summer retreat for the royal family. The glorious Summer Palace is just a few kilometres south of the Veranda Resort, and well worth visiting. (More on this later.)

The Hotel

The Veranda is an interesting place – though boutique in style and feel, it's by no means small. We arrived on a Thursday, and the place was blissfully quiet (although about 40 percent full, we were told) until Saturday morning, when it filled up for the weekend with families from Bangkok. We were told that all the hotels along this stretch of beach have 100-percent occupancy every weekend.



Our ground-level, pool-view room had sliding doors onto a patio and was a hop, a skip and a jump from the lovely infinity pool, itself very close to the pleasant beach with hotel sun-beds and clean, raked sand. You can choose from a variety of accommodation options; my favourite, I think, would be one of the beachfront villa suites with their own infinity pools, perfect for honeymooners. The hotel is around three years old, but its new Sky Wing with its Jacuzzi rooms – their two double beds and extra daybeds that convert into sleep-space for children make them a good choice for families – opened just six months ago.

Though a Thai, general manager Panit Boonyaratvej was educated in England and speaks beautifully accent-free English. More importantly for us, he has a strong F&B background, which means the food at the Veranda is consistently excellent.

On our first night, we had a casual dinner at the all-day restaurant. The pad Thai wrapped in an egg-net was just like the ones my colleague Philippa and I learnt to make at the cooking school at the Four Seasons in Chiang Mai (see the March 2007 issue of **Expat Living**), and the southern-style fish curry was equally authentic – no watering-down of flavours for foreigners here! We discovered at lunch on the last day that the Western food is excellent, too: I've never had a better cheeseburger. And the buffet breakfast each day was splendid, to say the least.

Spa

Some hotels have spas that seem like an afterthought; this is not one of them. It's centrally located near the pool, and its discreet entrance next to the small gym belies the spaciousness of what lies within: a well-thought-out series of peaceful treatment rooms; each with one of those big marble baths that cry out for milky water and pink petals, and a rain shower cubicle big enough to accommodate you and at least half a rugby team.



Near the Hotel

The appeal of the long beach grew on me; it doesn't have the obvious splendour of those on Phuket or Koh Samui, for example, but I took a long walk at low tide past fishing boats, the odd dog and 99 million hermit crabs, and came back with a treasure hoard of exotic and delicate pansy shells that I plan to frame.

Jar Water Sports company is set up on the beach to hire out jet-skis, banana boats, windsurfers and kayaks; there's a Hobie Bravo, too, and they arrange speedboat and fishing trips. You can even ride horses on the beach – I suggest you don't do this in your bikini.

The hotel provides beach activities such as petanque, badminton, volleyball and so on. Mountain bikes are available for hire on the days they're not being used for free cycling-tours of neighbouring villages. There's a kids' club with day nursery services, and daily club events featuring T-shirt painting, candle gel art, paper mask art, kite-making and the like.



Out and About

Historical Highlights

You don't need to hire a car to see the sights, but we like the freedom of being able to get around under our own steam and stop when and where the fancy takes us. Car hire costs from about 1,200 baht (THB) a day: that's about \$50. You can rent one from a host of places in Hua Hin or through the hotel front office.

Either get a taxi or drive yourself a few minutes south of the hotel to the recently restored Marukhathayawan Palace, a delightful summer residence built in the early 1920s during the reign of King Rama VI and now open to the public. It's constructed of teak and painted in pastel colours, and its royal Thai elegance and style made me want to waltz off in the arms of Yul Brunner down the length of its balustraded promenades to the strains of 'Shall We Dance?'

Another architectural gem is the Hua Hin railway station in the town, a red-and-white colonial structure that oozes history and character. Hand-painted

Right: The royal waiting-room at picturesque Hua Hin railway station

Bottom right: Durian-seller near the station

timetables suggest that the schedule hasn't changed since the service began in the 1920s, and the cute royal waiting-room on the platform epitomises an era when travel by train was the preferred way to go. Another time, I'd like to do the trip by rail. One could spend a night or two in Bangkok, then board the 8am train to arrive in Hua Hin just after 11am. To find out more, visit www.thaifocus.com and click on the links.



Hua Hin by Night and Day

From the hotel, you can go into Hua Hin on the hotel shuttle bus: the night market, which is lovely and has plenty of dining-options to choose from, is open every evening from 5.30pm. From the clock tower where you're dropped, you walk back up the main road to find the night market on your left. Otherwise, cut through the temple grounds on the other side of the clock tower and you'll come out near the Hilton Hotel: the road that runs north from it is a picturesque stretch of restaurants and slightly seamy bars.



I couldn't resist the Blue Angel club: THB300 (including a drink) for an hour's mini-cabaret by girlie-boys. Their eclectic assortment of dance numbers included: a quasi-traditional Thai posturing number, a frenetic Latin-American sequence, a rather odd jungle dance, a jingly hill-tribe dance, and a Chinese *wayang* extravaganza, finishing with a 70s-style tribute to disco. As camp as a row of pink tents, it was nowhere near as risqué as anything you'd see on Phuket's Soi Blangah, for example, but fun if you like that sort of thing. I do.

There's plenty to do during the day, too. Looking for a pharmacy, we stopped in at the Tesco Lotus and found it to be a surprisingly good shopping centre; this is probably where Hua Hin expats get their groceries.

You can pay as little as THB150 for an hour's massage on the beach; we paid twice that (still only about \$15) for air-conditioning at the Royal Thai massage centre near the Hilton Hotel, and it was very good.



Views of the atmospheric Summer Palace near Hua Hin



From there, we strolled down the beachfront road, a tourist Mecca that leads north from the Hilton. Eateries abound, including a string of rather bleak-looking seafood restaurants on stilts out over the sand. We discovered later that they're something of a tourist trap, and were glad we had lunched instead at Monsoon (62 Narisdamri Road), an atmospheric place with excellent service and outstanding Vietnamese food – better than anything we'd had in Hanoi just a month earlier. The chicken wings *sui ma*, stuffed with minced pork, shrimp and ginger and served with sweet and sour barbecue sauce (THB150), were out of this world. Well spotted, Roy!

Having checked online for recommended restaurants and being led to Mamma Mia by the site www.huahintoday.net, we were not disappointed. Window seats provide continuous entertainment from the passing parade in Damnoenkasen Road, and Milanese chef Claudio Ceriani serves a variety of outstanding dishes in modern yet authentic Italian style. It's best to book; call 0 3251 2250.

Other Activities

There's a choice of seven golf courses within a 30-minute drive from the resort, from the Royal Hua Hin

Golf Course that dates from 1924 and was designed by a Scottish railway engineer, to the Bangkok Golf Milford Resort, a Robert McFarlane-designed par-72 course hugging the coastline of the Gulf of Thailand; warning: bring extra balls!

Popular excursions include the Sam Roi Yot National Park, Pala U Waterfall and Chopstick Mountain, also known as Monkey Hill.

Getting There

There are loads of regular flights from Singapore to Bangkok and they take just two hours. The budget airline Tiger Airways has a convenient daily flight at 12.10pm. From Bangkok, it's three hours by car to Hua Hin; a little longer by coach or train. 🚗

Useful Links

www.tigerairways.com
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