

Travel

PLACES TO GO, NEAR AND FAR NOVEMBER 2014



SPICE WORLD

Take your taste buds on a tour
across Thailand. PAGE 132

GOOD TASTE

Journey across Thailand to try the salty, sour and sweet fare

BY BECCA HENSLEY

Thai food lovers, listen carefully: Do not use chopsticks unless you're eating noodles. That's rule No. 1 when eating in Thailand. I find this out at **Six Senses Yao Noi**, a far-flung resort on the shore of the **Andaman Sea** in Southern Thailand. A 45-minute boat ride from **Phuket**, this soulful, all-villa hotel looks like it might be composed of polished driftwood and palm leaves. With suspension bridges, winding forest-flanked trails and a yoga platform that crowns the top of a mountain, Six Senses Yao Noi sits within its own enclave, rubber trees included.

Defined by an extreme allegiance to sustainability, the resort has its own organic garden, which grows cilantro, basil, lemon grass, chiles and other basics of Thai cookery, and a mushroom hut, not to mention fraternal relationships with local fishermen. At its organic chicken farm, workers play jazz tunes to free-roaming hens—cadences sworn to enhance the quality of the eggs you'll choose from nests for your own breakfast. Classical arrangements, especially opera, can be heard in the water distillery, where collected rainwater gains its molecular composition and extreme filtration from the scientifically proven buzz of song.

Here, I take a cooking class that teaches me to never substitute ginger for galangal (a monster-like, indigenous tuber) in Thai recipes, but that an exchange of coriander for lemon grass won't bat a Thai chef's eye. What else do I learn as I bruise a bird's-eye chili with the back of a knife and use smashed cilantro's root to infuse flavor into my Tom Yum soup? The key to Thai food is simultaneous impact: salty, sour and sweet in one sensory-packed kaboom. And also that most recipes will include kaffir lime leaf, galangal and lemon grass.

I find out a bit more about the local flavor when I roam the buzzing streets of urbane **Bangkok**. I clamber from a tuk-tuk and join the throngs of people along **Khao San Road**. Neon lights illuminate the action,



FROM THE TOP:
Baked goods at the pastry shop at Six Senses Yao Noi; Thai silk at the Jim Thompson House

and vendors work fast to feed the hungry as they traipse home from work and school. I discover **Thip Samai** and decide the long lines bode well for its version of pad thai, which is the bellwether of any Thai eatery. Not like anything I've had before, this plate holds wider than usual noodles enveloping gooey, eggy shrimp.

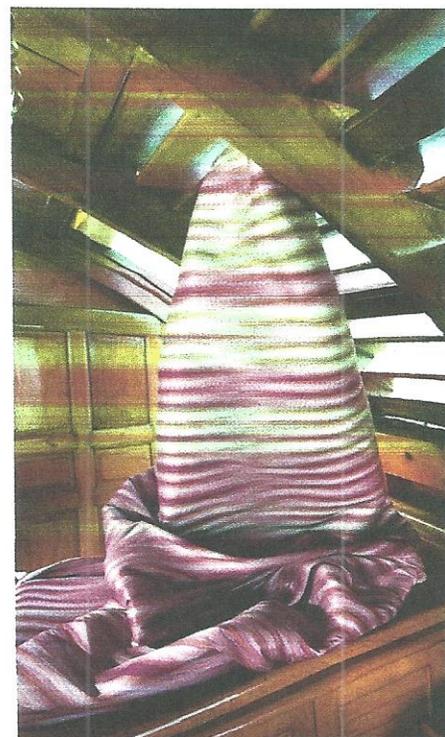
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Insider Tips

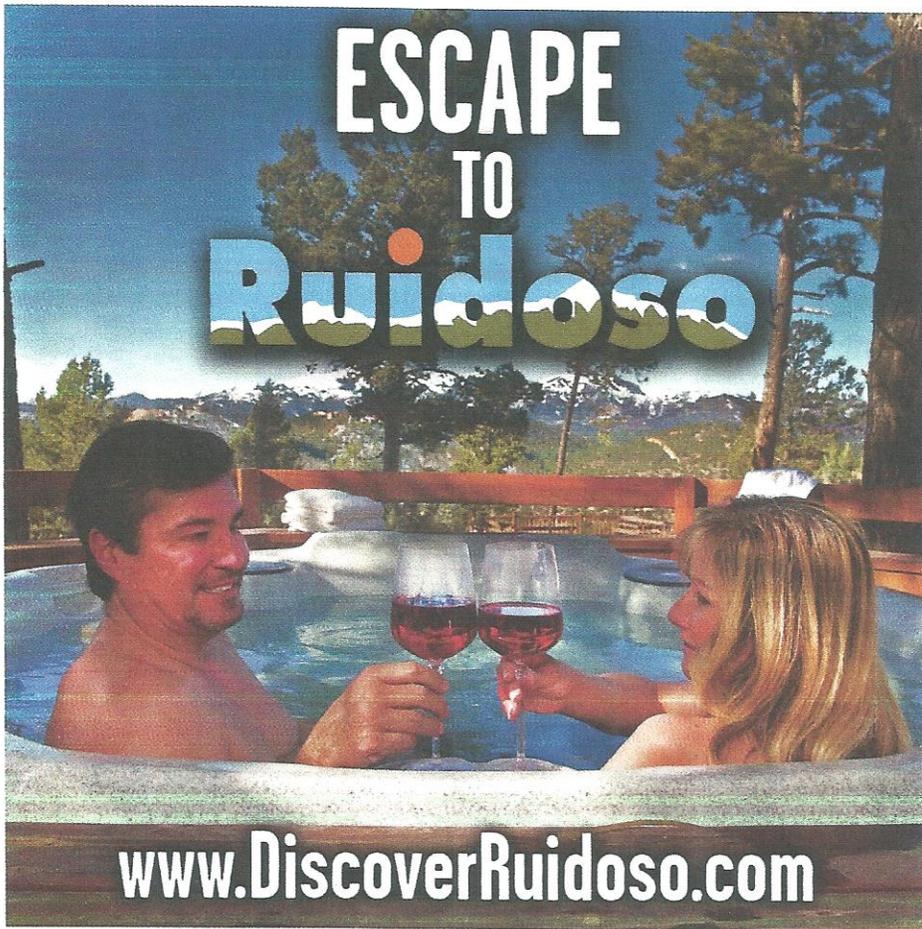
To get here, fly from Austin via United to Newark, then continue on via Scandinavian Airlines to Stockholm and via Thai Airways to Bangkok.

Burn calories by kayaking through the mangrove forests in the calm waters of Tha Lane Bay between Krabi and Phuket, or rock climb the mystical karst formations that dot the sea.

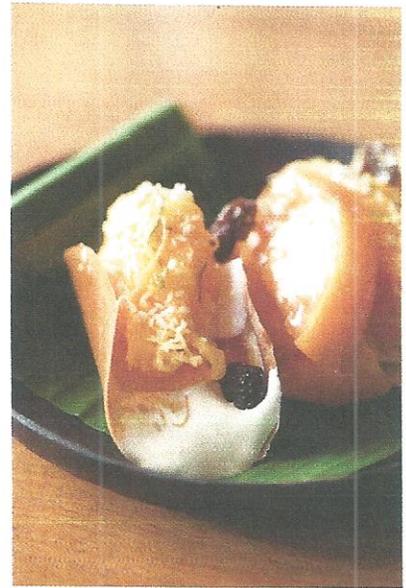
Go to the iconic Jim Thompson House in Bangkok to buy Thai silk. The cocoons of mulberry leaf-eating caterpillars are spun into silk known for the vibrancy of its color and the artistry of its patterns. The house also has a museum and restaurant.



PHOTOS COURTESY: PASTRY SHOP, SIX SENSES YAO NOI; SILK, JIM THOMPSON HOUSE.



TRAVEL
FAR



Sweet Thai wafers at Nahm

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I assume Thai cuisine could not get any better, but I realize it does when I head to **Nahm**, the No. 1-rated restaurant in Asia, a more upscale nosing experience. At downtown's sleek **COMO Metropolitan Hotel**, Nahm is the laboratory of Aussie expat Chef David Thompson, who garnered a Michelin star in London for his original Nahm, which is now closed. Completely retooled, Bangkok's even-better version showcases Thai dishes that haven't been tasted in this century.

Gathering his recipes from ancient funerary papers and word of mouth, Thompson brings authentic but eccentric dishes to his table. Crunchy coconut-rice pockets enfold ginger-infused prawn bits. A salty, sugary salad of garlicky river prawn and pork enwraps strings of broccolini-like pennywort. A golden turmeric and coconut curry, enlivened with calamansi lime, showcases blue swimmer crab. Aromatic basil dances in hot-as-Hades green curry with beef. And deep-fried grouper is as light as falling leaves. Washed down with a Thai Chenin Blanc, this is the sort of meal where diners stop talking, silently digging in with reverence and awe. Tasting Thai food in Thailand ups the ante—it is like gobbling up the rich culture, from sea to silk, in each colorful bite. **AM**

PHOTO COURTESY NAHM.

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