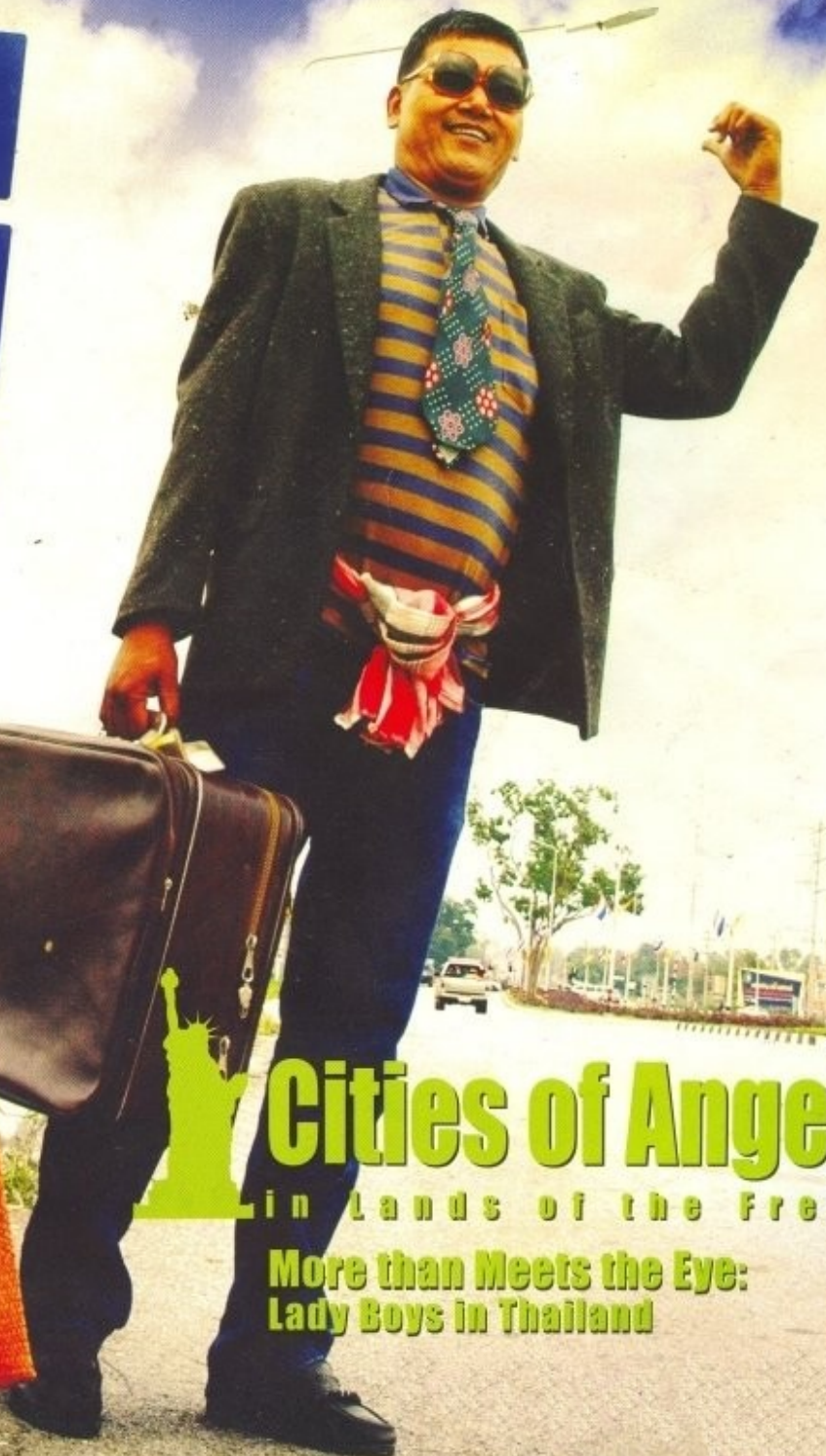


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In Lands of the Free

More than Meets the Eye:
Lady Boys in Thailand

Free

ISSN 1686-297X

VOL. 15 No 5 May 2006



Koh Jum: Oh, the Possibilities

by Julie Seibt

Imagine, or recall those glorious days of backpacking in Thailand's newly discovered islands. Listen to the tall palms, gently swaying over thatched roofs on secluded beaches. Taste the seafood, fresh out of the net, prepared over hot coals and served by candlelight. Experience the simplicity of living without electricity; the tranquility that accompanies the absence of paved roads. Warm up to the locals without feeling like a tourist.

It sounds wonderful, but can we add a king-size bed, a sparkling Western style bathroom, easy access from an international airport and maybe a little kir with white wine?

It's all possible on the island of Koh Jum.

With 1500 inhabitants and very little tourism Jum rests, like a modest sister, between her lively siblings of Lanta, Phi Phi and Krabi town. The three points mark the Andaman Triangle or Turquoise Triangle. So subdued is Jum, that the SuperConcorde ferry from Krabi to Lanta does not pull in, but will slow down long enough to transfer passengers to and from awaiting longtails.

Also known as Koh Pu, after the 400-metre mountain in the island's rugged North, dense jungle eases into a flatbed of rubber plantations, cashew nut trees, casuarinas with characteristic needle shaped leaves and screw palms in the South. On the map, three tiny fishing villages beckon a dot-dot game from top to bottom, as do a string of ah, yes, beaches.

The west side of the island boasts six fabulous beaches and most of the island's handful of resorts. Each offers sunset views spiked by the silhouette of Koh Phi Phi. Generally, the northern beaches are rocky at low tide but with a little planning they're fine for swimming. Each beach is about as

quiet as the next - so if it's serenity you're seeking, you can't go wrong.

At sunset, activity is limited to a few tourists lingering on the beach but the island seems to tip toward the football pitch as young locals converge for nightly competitions. After the games, all falls quiet again.

You won't find a disco or raucous bar here, but Ray from Woodland Bungalows brings entertainment to a new level with his Fighting Fish Bar, where all it takes is a careful placement of two fish bowls and Koh Jum's entertainment scene unfurls in a flare of fins!

If you can pull yourself out of the hammock, daytime activities include snorkeling, hiking, fishing, botanical tours, canoeing, and exploring the mangrove inlets and nearby islands. There's only one swimming pool on the island (Koh Jum Lodge); the sea beckons.



Toon, a twenty-seven-year-old boatman from the village of Ting Rai, motors us 45 minutes west to Bamboo Island for excellent snorkeling. Another 15 minutes sets us smack dab in the middle of Koh Phi Phi for a quick stop at Cat's Climbing Shop where owner Cathy Beloeil offers attentive instruction and guidance for beginning to advanced climbers. Off we go to scale the limestone cliffs that beckoned us from the beaches of Koh Jum, only 15 km away.

Over several visits to Koh Jum, we came to know Toon and his family. Having lost his first boat to the tsunami, Toon had it replaced by a Canadian grassroots effort, the Build a Boat Relief Fund, and my family are guests at the ceremonial launching. Under the noon sun we squeeze onboard as Toon crowns the stern with garlands of vibrant flowers and fabric as a village elder chants Muslim prayers of safety. A sprinkle of talcum powder paste and a splashing of scented water complete the ritual before Toon's family doles out a feast of sticky rice and curried goat.

Rustic huts from 100 baht per night exist, but it's been 23 years since our backpacking days, so we opt for a little luxury at Koh Jum Lodge where 16 Andaman style bungalows nestle into perfectly manicured tropical gardens.

In the Robinson Crusoe meets Martha Stewart hideaways, bamboo, teak and cotton underscore iridescent organza sheers dancing in the sea breeze, a transparent blue washbasin and quirky stainless steel fixtures. With a loft for the kids, a chaise lounge and a king size bed with perfect pillows; it takes the promise of a fine meal to entice you out.

Hosts Jean-Michel Limandas, from

France, and his Thai wife Jane Suraswadee Sanongkul, bring the best of an East meets West lifestyle to their cherished resort including a menu of Thai and Mediterranean dishes, fine wines and exotic cocktails. The library touts hammock mates in several languages, ranging from Eastern history to pop fiction. With 40 years combined background in the tourism industry, Jean and Jane set their standards according to a demand for "small capacity resorts with natural, individual charm, high level of services, in a rare unspoiled environment."

According to guest, Sharon Pearson of Canada, Jean-Michel and Jane have met their mark. "We've stayed at several of the world's top hideaways as recommended by Conde Nast Magazines, Koh Jum Lodge definitely fits into that category."

Although the 2004 tsunami destroyed many of the Koh Jum's fishing boats, there was no loss of life. Several Koh Jum islanders worked on Koh Phi Phi, where devastation pushed them back home.

New beginnings came in the shape of a restaurant for Somchai and his wife Lee when, thanks to the Build a Boat Fund and help from Chiang Mai's very own Gai Pawitranon of Bake and Bite, they returned to their home village of Ting Rai to establish the Urban Café which now offers easy-on-the-pocket breakfasts, Thai food and sweet endings.

Linger in Ting Rai to get a taste of the local life. Occasional curls of dust from the red dirt road mix with the scent of jasmine and fishing nets. Peek between the hibiscus bushes to catch a possible glimpse of monkeys and most certainly, giggling Ting Rai kids. Listen for the steady tap of pestle on mortar as women pound dried chili peppers into fiery pastes. Walk inland a little to the core of the fishing village, where houses rest on toothpick stilts by the edge of a river that appears and disappears with the tide.

Walk into town before seven in the morning for *kao neow* (sticky rice) with toasted coconut, bundled together in banana leaves, still available for four baht. Head back to the beach, keeping an eye out for sea eagles and then decide which hammock will be your nest.

What does tomorrow look like for Koh Jum? Local rumours say power will run to the island within two to three years and the government has started aerial inspections to plan a



paved ring road. There's promise of an eco-friendly housing estate on Golden Pearl Beach. So far, no high density resorts are in the works. With growth inevitable, let's hope that Koh Jum's tourism grows with grace and respect for the local people and its rich natural environment.



Getting There:

From the airport, a 30 minute taxi ride takes you to Laem Kruek pier. Transfer to a longtail for a 40 minute ride through mangrove islets to Koh Jum. (This is the most convenient way if you're not planning to be in the town of Krabi which is 30 minutes from the airport.)

From Krabi town take the ferry to Koh Lanta. Arrange for your resort to send a longtail to meet the ferry off the shores of Koh Jum. Allow 1 hour by ferry from Krabi to Koh Jum, 30 minutes Koh Jum to Lanta.

If you are looking for an overnight hotel minutes from Krabi airport, check in at the Maritime Park and Spa Resort. You'll keep as busy as you want with 25 acres of gardens including a lagoon with kayaks, enormous swimming pool, jogging track, bicycles and even resident ostriches.

Links:

www.kohjumonline.com

www.kohjumlodge.com

www.maritimeparkandspa.com

