

## Dream of an island

*On Nang Yuan each rock, tree and mountain is aesthetically placed, as if on purpose, and the bungalows, restaurant, piers, and bars blend in perfectly with nature*

Story and pictures by Jaratsri Jirawongsapan and Joe Andrews

On a quiet, deserted, fine-sand beach that treads through the middle of a dark sea, a light brown-haired woman stripped out of her black evening dress, wearing only her black bra and panties. The lady shook her hair and gathered up her clothes and black shoes. She clutched them tight and with her right hand and arm held them close to her body.



At the same time, a tall, dark brown haired man took off his shoes and pants. The man folded his pants over his arm, picked up his shoes and held them against his chest. He then looked at the white foam waves dancing against the light brown sand both lit only by starlight.

Reading on the beach at Ko Nang Yuan. Nature did her job very well. The developers of the resort followed her lead.

"We're ready," said the man to Chai, a dark brown skinned Thai man. Chai began to guide them into the sea with his hand-held flashlight shining through the darkness enabling them to distinguish the sand bar and the path it once held which was now imaginary. Just a few hours ago, there was a large strip of sandy beach connecting these two islands.

The couple grasped each other's hands tightly, followed Chai's expert guidance, and stepped into the water. On this moonless night in this far away place, the only guiding natural light was from the Milky Way and that was clearly etched into the inky night sky, which revealed billions and billions of stars.

As they moved further out into the surf, the water was above their knees. They stretched out their arms and balanced themselves against big rocks to stabilise and counteract the forces of the waves and the current against them. They meandered for about 100 feet. They reached the point where nature met architecture. There, well-placed concrete steps greeted them.

The path now was secure, well lit, and blissful. When Chai was certain that the couple was safe and correctly orientated toward their bungalow, he left them and quickly waded back through the water to his lookout point and waited for the next group of Nang Yuan Dive Resort guests wanting to make their way back to their lodging.



Can you name another place on earth where you must walk through ocean surf in order to return to your room after a wonderful gourmet dinner? Nang Yuan Island Dive Resort, the only hotel on the island, is the only one that we know of that has this distinction.

Nang Yuan Island is located in the Gulf of Thailand. It is a group of three distinct islands, which are interconnected by strips of beautiful sandy beach. It is a royal estate, which the Ministry of Finance has leased and licensed to a private owner and his associates. They are the caretakers and provide all services to visitors that come here to dive and snorkel.

Clockwise from top left : Welcome to Ko Nang Yuan reads the signboard on arrival; as guests walk along the gateway pier, they have their first encounter with the island; the amazingly curious fish come right up to the shore as if to greet visitors; a quiet cove offers a great view. Ko Tao, or Turtle Island, is in the distant background; the sun sets behind the ocean bar at Nang Yuan 22; divers prepare themselves for underwater fun right off the beach.

There are many different ways to get to Ko (the Thai word for island) Nang Yuan. We chose an adventurous approach. On a sweltering hot Friday night in August, our

friends and fellow adventurers met us at Hua Lumphong Railway Station bound for Chumphon, a small city in the southern part of Thailand. The train was scheduled to leave at 10:50pm.

Ten minutes after the departure time and still standing at the station platform, we were told that the train had a mechanical malfunction and needed repair before they could let us board. After a two-hour wait at the station platform, we were finally on our way.

Even though we purchased air-condition class coach, it was not a comfortable train ride. The airline-type seats would not recline back enough for comfortable snoozing. On top of that, it was very cold inside the train. Most of the passengers were very tired. The exception was our friends' eleven-month-old daughter. It took her parents an hour to get her settled, and then the whole trainload of passengers fell right to sleep.



The arrival time in Chumphon was to be 5:50am. The train crew did their best to make up for lost time after that late start, but we still arrived more than one and a half hours late. We booked a fast-boat to take us to Ko Nang Yuan from Tung Makham Noi pier.

The pier is located just beyond the outskirts of Chumphon. The fast-boat booking included the ground transportation from the train station to the pier. Arriving late in Chumphon, we were concerned that the van that was to meet us there may have departed without us. A song-taw truck with two rows of seats that had been converted to accommodate passengers was waiting for us. The driver said that he had been waiting for us since 4.30am. He thought we were coming on an earlier train.

We have constant reminders here that Thailand is known as the Land of Smiles. In this case, the driver just laughed about the time he spent hanging around for us. Then he asked us to hurry and board the song-taw because the fast boat to Ko Nang Yuan was waiting for us.

It is about 20 kilometres (12 miles) from the train station to the boat dock. After arriving at the pier, we rushed to exit the song-taw. We found more than 30 other tourists there. Each one of them was very anxious to leave this remote territory and begin their adventure.

Ko Nang Yuan is about 66km (40 miles) from this dock. The boat trip from Chumphon to Ko Nang Yuan took almost two hours. It was an excellent time to nap. The gentle rocking motion of the sea provided a very relaxing beginning to our island adventure. Today, rows of dark blue seats were packed mainly with Europeans. Not all of them were going to Ko Nang Yuan.



In fact, most of them headed for a larger island named Ko Tao (the Thai word for turtle), a Mecca for scuba-diving enthusiasts. It is only a 15-minute boat ride from Ko Nang Yuan. Ko Tao is a little more commercially developed and large enough to accommodate automobiles and motorcycles including 7-11 convenience store. You will find none of those reminders of civilisation at Ko Nang Yuan.



**From top : Ko Nang Yuan: Once here the meaning of paradise is revealed; A bedroom of one of the bungalows at Ko Nang Yuan; Each bungalow has air conditioning**

When we arrived, the sun was gently shining on a blue-green, but yet crystal clear sea. There were schools of fish, tightly packed together, performing underwater swimming acrobatics. The wooden pier where we docked became a bridge leading us to the gateway of the island. It was a beautiful sight where big brown rocks met white sandy beaches and ocean waters.

As we stepped on the island, a big sign reading "Welcome" was also in plain sight. Besides, in big sign it proclaimed, "Do not bring any plastic containers or cans of any description to use in Ko Nang Yuan". The caretakers are very sensitive to the fragility of the ecology here. This policy was instituted to protect the natural environment from garbage carelessly tossed away in an unguarded moment. It makes perfect sense. That discarded trash may take centuries for nature to reclaim if disposed of improperly.

The resort staff hurried out to meet us and carry our luggage to our bungalows. It is a fact that only a very few people at a time can be accommodated on this group of three islands so far away from civilisation. However, the comforts of civilisation are not sacrificed. White sand paths lead us around the island to where we found a small easy concrete stair way and there we climbed up to our elevated bungalows.

The wooden bungalows are strategically situated among the trees to provide a perfect blend of charm and privacy. They are immaculately clean and offer all the amenities expected. We found comfortable beds, showers, electricity, air-conditioning, and our own private deck facing the sea. Looking out from our large porch is a magnificent view of the island covered in trees bathed in bright sun and surrounded by clear ocean water where coral reefs and marine life live in the transparent blue seas.

After a quick survey of our bungalow, we changed into our swimming suits and took our place swimming next to the fish. We enjoyed seeing them dance in circles around us while we were standing in only knee-deep water. We felt them touching our legs. The fish are a must see for the underwater enthusiast. When we snorkelled, parrotfish seemed to enjoy our company as much as we enjoyed theirs.



When we went further out, we found many black sea cucumbers. "Did you see that?," came the enthusiastic sound of a young voice with a French accent. She told us about this long and skinny pointed blue look as blue needlefish that she found swimming close by her. The eight-year old girl came here with her family for two weeks of fun in the sand and scuba diving.



Each afternoon, day visitors gather on the beach. Mostly they are tourists from surrounding islands or scuba buffs who come here to unwind and dine after a morning dive. There is a 100 baht fee for the day users of the facilities. We noticed that in the late afternoon that day trip visitors started to leave the island.

**From top: The dining area is very romantic as the sun sets on Ko Nang Yuan; A gazebo offers shade and a great view of a cove and a beach at Ko Nang Yuan.**

We decided to go shower in our room but found out the tap wasn't running. The bungalows have water service beginning at 5.00 pm to 10am. Because this is a tiny island cluster in the middle of nowhere with not a lot of resources, it is necessary for the resort to cut the water and sometimes electricity supply to the bungalows during the day.

So we went up a hill to see a truly stunning panoramic view of the island. There is a lookout at the top of one island that is easily reached by a gentle climb up a 50-metre staircase just above the bungalows. It was an enjoyable change of pace after an afternoon of water fun. It is an easy climb. Our friends did it carrying their 11-month-old baby. From the lookout point you can see the other islands connected to the beach. It is a wonderful sight. The beaches, rocks, and massive expanse of the tropical ocean can be seen all at the same

time.

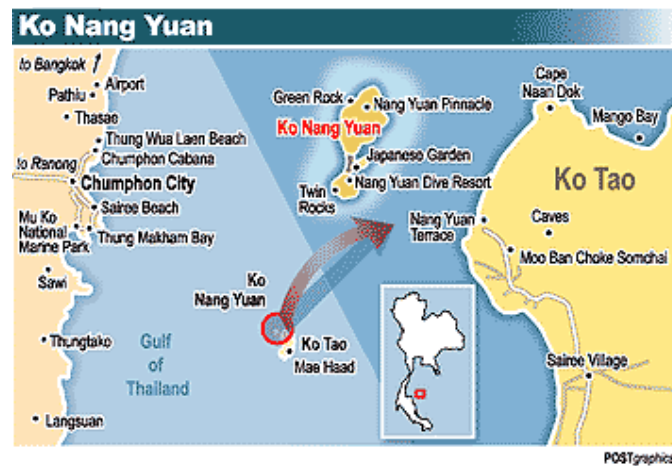
At night, everything is quiet. It is only on nights of extreme high tide that the beaches are covered with surf. Our bungalow was on the south side of the island. The tide seldom gets high enough to cover the beach leading east.

A couple from Italy stayed on the north side. It was there where they and others had to wade into the surf to get to their rooms. Nello and his girlfriend, like almost all the other guests, came to this out-of-the-way place for once-in-a-lifetime scuba diving experience.

Nello said smiling in his lovely Italian accent, "It's our fourth night here. We did not know that we would have to walk through the ocean to return back to our room."

The idea of crossing a tide-covered sandbar in the late evening while getting immersed in salty water before bedtime is not the ideal impression of an island adventure to everyone. "We do not mind. It is not like this every night. Tonight the tide is much higher than usual. This is quite a different experience but only a small bother. Nang Yuan is a paradise. We love it here," Nello said.

Nang Yuan Island is not just another pre-packaged Disneyland type of vacation but a truly natural beauty. It is embedded fondly in our memory as a designer island.



## Travel tips

**Getting there by air:** Air Andaman offers regular flights from Bangkok to Chumphon. For flight schedule telephone: 02-229-9555

By train: Trains leave daily from Bangkok's Hua Lumphong Railway Station for Chumphon. For more information and reservation call SRT at 02-233-7010, 02-223-7020. Book a sleeping car. Prices range from 390 baht to 600 baht.

**By bus:** Several state and privately-run buses ply Bangkok-Chumphon route. For bus service call 02-435-1919, Chokanun Tours 02-433-0723, and Suwannee Tours 02-435-5026.

**Ferry services:** Lomlakh high-speed ferries operate from Tung Makham Noi Bay, Chumphon, to Ko Tao and Ko Nang Yuan; tel: 077-558-212-4

Lomprayah high-speed catamaran service is available from Ko Samui to Ko Tao and Ko Nang Yuan; tel: 077-247-401-2, 077-247-146.