

Reclining to the challenge

Just for once, **Kate Cox** decides to eschew her spirit of adventure and give in to her indolent urge.

THE sun has long gone by the time we arrive at Sri Panwa. Even in the dark, our villa is breathtaking. It sits high on a clifftop, twinkling its spectacular-ness to the faint lights of cruise ships and fishing boats in the vast Andaman Ocean below.

I dangle my legs in the plunge pool that wraps seductively around the villa while I wait for my bag to arrive from check-in. It feels like I am on the very edge of Cape Panwa. Lightning strikes, off in the distance, and it's impossible not to skinny dip.

I've just finished in the steam room when "Porn" ("It means something nice from heaven") arrives with my bag and to tell me I can call her any time, for anything, by dialling 71. Is this heaven, I wonder? Sri Panwa is a hip selection of private, luxurious villas and suites just 40 minutes from Phuket in Thailand's south.

It's run by a Thai family, with Bangkok-born Vorasit "Wan" Issara at its helm – a man who is extremely difficult to dislike, despite being stylish, energetic, annoyingly young (29) and full of big ideas that he actually follows through on. When he set up the resort a few years ago, he began by hiring a dozen of his friends from Swiss hospitality school. A few still remain, blurring the line between work and play successfully and enviously, and increasing the fun-factor for guests.

At the overstaffed resort, people stop whatever they are doing to look you in the eyes and offer a hearty "sawadi ka". Resort tuk-tuks are on call to transport guests from villa to spa to beach to restaurant to pool.

There are tennis lessons with a former champ, a well-equipped gym, a cooking school and a luxurious new day spa. Dozens of day trips can be arranged from the resort's jetty (night fishing, diving, an island picnic, visiting the Phuket



Realm of the senses ... (clockwise from above) Sri Panwa pool villas; Cool Spa has a long list of treatments; a pool villa bedroom.



Aquarium next door) and there is a flotilla of yachts for hire.

I hadn't counted on quite so much choice. To get wet, do I paddle in the plunge pool, jump under one of the three rain showers (under the stars, in the bedroom or in the separate daybed room), sink into the large sunken spa bath or wander down to the Poolclub pool, the beach pool or the beach? On which of the villa's daybeds do I recline: one by the pool over the sea, a larger cushioned version under the shade or an even larger example indoors.

“ I hadn't counted on quite so much choice.

Eating and drinking has me choosing between room service, a couple of bars, an underground club and several restaurants.

I opt to do them all, waddling from

breakfast on the daybed to the Baba Poolclub for fresh sashimi and sushi washed down with a frozen lime and basil martini for lunch, before bouncing to the comfortable rocking chairs for fusion food at Baba Dining Lounge (baba means "melting pot" in Thai – think classical cooking with local ingredients – tom yam pizza, lychee duck, crisp fried morning glory, watermelon salad, papaya salad and wasabi soya rib eye).

It keeps me very busy. For the first time on an overseas

adventure, I am opting not to undertake any adventurous exploration. No shopping, climbing, riding or hiking.

I need some downtime! So the brand-new Cool Spa, with its multistoreys of water features, hidden pools, mood lighting and talented massage and beauty therapists, is to become the nauseatingly self-indulgent focus of my stay. I craft an adventure challenge of my own: seven treatments in four days.

It isn't as easy as it sounds, given

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Trip notes

Where Sri Panwa, 88 Moo Sakdidej Road, Tambon Vichit, Phuket, Thailand, +66 76 371 000, sripanwa.com.
Getting there Jetstar flies direct to Phuket three times a week.
How much One-bedroom pool villa from 13,388 baht (\$470), including breakfast for two daily.
Top marks Relaxed but luxurious vibe, perfect for rest or play.
Black mark The private beach is not amazing (but plenty of idyllic island beaches are less than 15 minutes away by boat).
Don't miss "Magic" massage therapist Vi Wai Nen. With 11 fingers and extensive training in all disciplines, she is renowned for out-of-body treatments.

Indulge ... (above) the Baba Poolclub with its sunken deck; (right) passionfruit sake tiger prawns in the Baba Dining Lounge.

there are six long pages of soul and body-nourishing options. First up, I opt for an hour-long traditional Thai massage for 2900 baht (\$100), a twisty-turny clothed massage, which makes that perfect mix of relaxation and production: a lazy man's yoga workout, if you will. The next morning, I have the Sabai facial (2900 baht) – with oatmeal, honey, yoghurt and milk, all of which smells so good that I have to taste it, which sends Kate, my therapist, into hysterics. (For the record, not much taste going on.)

I then take my gloriously soft-skinned head straight into an Indian head massage – Ayurvedic – for an hour of pure heaven (2500 baht). Next day is a cocoa butter body scrub (2200 baht), which has to be prepared a day in advance and is pure yummy indulgence: a thick scrub then a toasty shower and a wonderful, soothing slathering of buttery goodness. Divine. I get to lie down for the reflexology foot massage (2500 baht), an hour of power that hurts less than I expect and leaves a real spring in my step.

On my last morning, I tick off the Sri Panwa serenity massage (4200 baht for 90 minutes). I'm offered the oils of lemongrass, Asian blend, mood lifting, mint and lavender but as I'm a sucker for a marketing campaign, I opt for "slimming". It smells divine, feels oh-so-wonderful but does nothing for the waistline (the copious cocktails could be to blame, though). There is so much more to try – pedis/manis, haircuts, an after-sun treatment, wraps (but does anyone ever crave a wrap on an

exotic sunny holiday?) and so on. I haven't even scratched the surface. I start getting panicked. What should I try last? Just before I depart, I take the (free) sunset stretching class – and it's to be the highlight of my stay. We move and sway in the wet evening heat to the soothing sounds of birds, crickets, trees and our breathing, and the smells of rain, the distant sea, salt, trees and the new wood on the spa deck. I am well aware that I could wander to Patong beach and get a

Thai massage for a third of the price but Cool Spa is just so sweetly serene and calming. (And not crazy expensive – my seven experiences set me back the equivalent of \$610.) Walking in there – with its pond of lily pads, soothing blue colour scheme, vast views and gentle, welcoming staff – makes me relax. The name "Cool Spa" had initially seemed unsophisticated but, once there, it defined the resort and its laid-back charms just perfectly. The writer was a guest of Sri Panwa.

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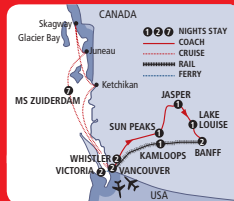
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