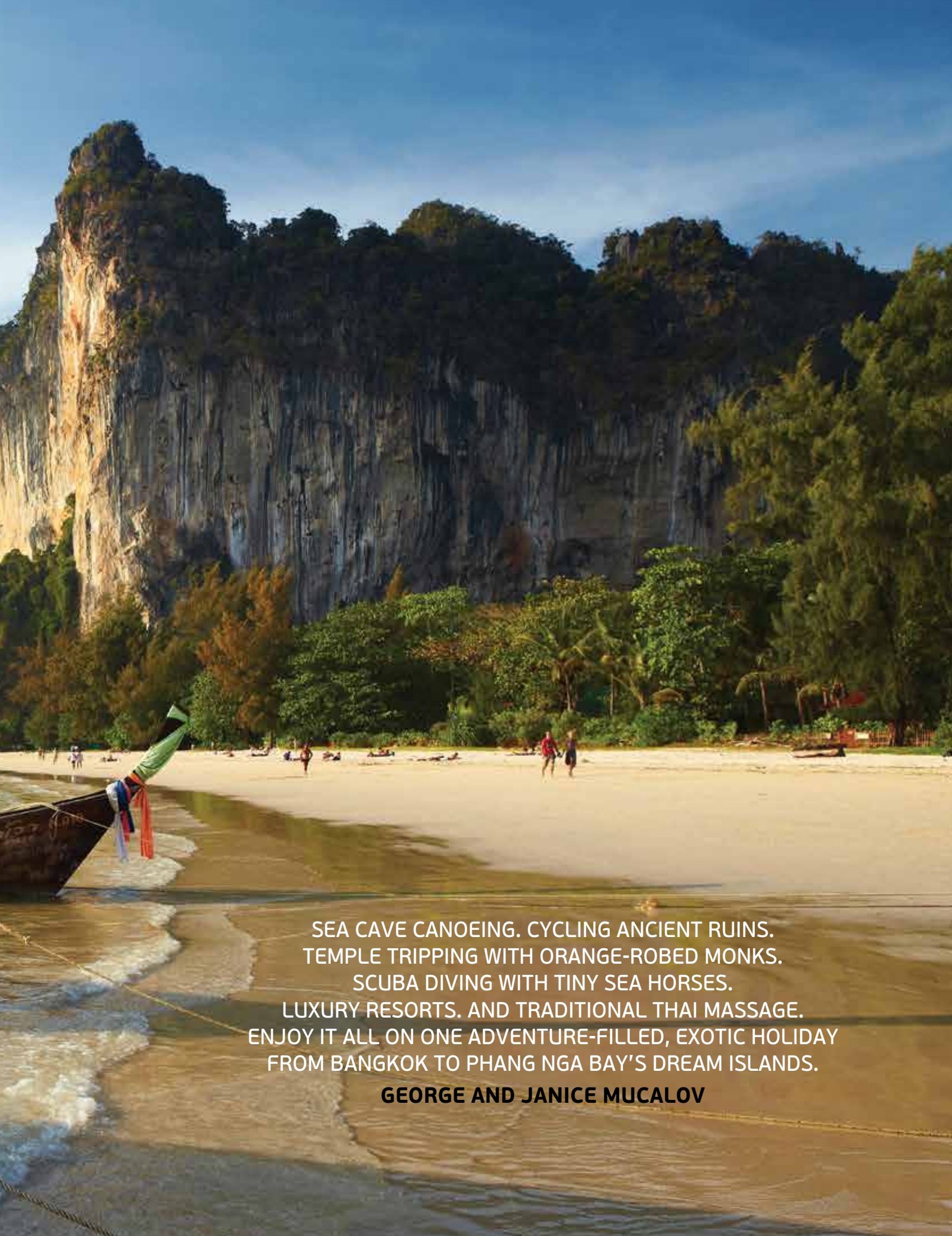


EXOTIC Thailand





SEA CAVE CANOEING. CYCLING ANCIENT RUINS.
TEMPLE TRIPPING WITH ORANGE-ROBED MONKS.
SCUBA DIVING WITH TINY SEA HORSES.
LUXURY RESORTS. AND TRADITIONAL THAI MASSAGE.
ENJOY IT ALL ON ONE ADVENTURE-FILLED, EXOTIC HOLIDAY
FROM BANGKOK TO PHANG NGA BAY'S DREAM ISLANDS.

GEORGE AND JANICE MUCALOV



WHYMEPHOTO / SHUTTERSTOCK

The dark cave tunnel gets smaller and smaller. Lying on our backs in a yellow inflatable sea canoe, we will ourselves not to move. Shining our flashlights, we can see the craggy roof bearing down to barely an inch above our noses. But before claustrophobia takes hold, we suddenly pop out into a light-filled hong (hole or room), thick with mangroves reaching for the sky above.

Then our guide, deftly paddling behind us, has a second surprise. He manoeuvres us through another larger, more beautiful cave tunnel – this one draped with glistening rose-colored stalactites, shaped like scallop shells and fans – into a second peaceful inner lagoon.

We're exploring Phang Nga Bay with Sea Canoe, which pioneered sea canoeing in Thailand. Made famous by the James Bond flick *The Man With the Golden Gun*, the pea-green bay between Phuket and Krabi is peppered with hundreds of limestone outcroppings rising dramatically out of the sea. Several are shaped like doughnuts, with an open hole in the middle. When the tide is right, you can canoe through cave tunnels to the inner hong.

It's not just stalactite-filled caves that you encounter. The day trip is an explosion of *National Geographic* moments. Canoeing



DINODIA PHOTOS / ALAMY

Above: Cruising the emerald waters and dramatic limestone islands of Phang Nga Bay between Phuket and Krabi.

Left: Kayakers explore a dramatic light-filled room or "hong" in one of Phang Na Bay's numerous sea caves.

Opposite page: Guardian temple figure at the Grand Palace in Bangkok

around another island, we spy monitor lizards (almost a meter long) flick out their blue tongues to eat crabs, monkeys swinging in treetops – even nest collectors climbing bamboo ladders to gather swallows' nests from cliffs for bird's nest soup, a prized delicacy.

Thailand offers an amazing variety of exotic experiences. One of us had already visited the north (riding elephants in Chiang Mai and the Golden Triangle, lucky girl). So this time we venture south from Bangkok to Phang Nga Bay. As well as sea canoeing, we try everything from biking around ancient temples to scuba diving to getting twisted into countless pretzel shapes (*aka* traditional Thai massage).

Flying into Bangkok, we shake off jet lag at the elegant Shangri-La Hotel, ideally set on the Chao Praya River. If you've never visited the go-go city of 12 million, prepare to be mesmerized. It's fascinating.

Topping the must-do list is the glittering Grand Palace complex. Built in 1782, the palace was home for four kings, including Rama IV, whose son was tutored by Anna of *The King and I*. Its soaring golden spires, inlaid mother-of-pearl frescoes, jewel-encrusted winged sculptures and gold leaf murals all dazzle the eye.





STEVE ALLEN TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY / ALAMY



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STEVE VIDLER / ESTOCK PHOTO

The adjoining Wat Pho Temple houses the giant reclining all-golden Buddha, which extends 46 meters from head to toe. If you're game, try a traditional Thai massage. The temple's massage school is renowned for teaching trainee therapists the 2,500-year old practice, considered a medicinal treatment in Thailand. Changing into baggy cotton pyjamas, you lie down on one of 40 beds in an air-conditioned pavilion (in view of other tourists also getting a massage). Then a therapist (a trained one!) pokes, pulls and pushes your limbs until you're as limber as can be. It feels a little like yoga, but without the

work, and after a hot day of temple tripping, it's a great way to cool off and put the spring back into your step.

Another choice activity is a ride along the Chao Phraya River and its web of canals on a longtail boat – a skinny wooden boat powered by a noisy motor at the end of a long pole. We sputter past monasteries, temples and wooden huts perched on stilts over coffee-colored waterways, where orange-robed monks bathe and children swim. Stopping at the Royal Barge National Museum, we gape at a fleet of magnificent barges with golden prows carved into mythical creatures, each rowed by 50 or more oarsmen during royal ceremonies.

Top left:
Buddha statue in the
ruins of Ayutthaya

Top right:
Elephant tour through
the ancient site of
Ayutthaya

Above:
Visiting monks at the
temple of Wat Pho

An hour's drive away from Bangkok is the ancient capital of Ayutthaya – an easy day trip. Founded in 1350, Ayutthaya enjoyed 417 years of reigning glory. A major trade center, it exported elephants to India and Persia (no less than 300 to 400 at a time) and spices to European merchants, importing luxury goods such as wine, glassware, guns and clothes for the court and aristocracy. Today, what remains are the majestic ruins of more than 500 temples, most of which were built on a small island surrounded by a river moat.

It's possible to see Ayutthaya on a bus tour. But we opt to cycle with Ayutthaya Boat & Travel instead. Not only do we get to ogle the crumbling ruins up close, we also see how the local people live. Our bikes crunch along stony fields, studded with bell-shaped sandstone pagodas. And we thread our way down narrow village lanes, past rickety fruit stands and old women grilling chicken on charcoal braziers. Several stalls sell incense sticks and lotus flowers for praying at nearby Buddhist temples. One also displays cold green coconuts – our cue to stop. The stall owner hacks off the tops with a machete, and we greedily suck up the sweet coconut juice through straws.

The morning ends with a spicy Thai lunch as we cruise around Ayutthaya island on a converted teak rice barge. And then bliss for sore muscles not used to pedaling – a two-hour traditional Thai massage.



The majestic Reclining Buddha at Wat Pho measures 150 feet long and is covered in gold leaf.



SIME / ESTOCK PHOTO

NEXT UP? Blowing bubbles underwater in the southern Andaman Sea, where dive sites are regularly listed in the world's top ten. Our base? Koh Lanta, a large unspoiled island near Krabi. Blessed with miles of pristine white-sand beaches and a national park with hiking trails, Koh Lanta is also a paradise for scuba divers and snorkelers. Stay at Pimalai Resort & Spa (splurge on a private pool villa), and you can book dive and snorkel trips through its gold-member PADI dive centre.

We motor out in a large comfortable boat; it even has an indoor teak salon with cushioned seats, rare for a dive boat. Dropping anchor at the uninhabited limestone islands of Koh Haa, we fin our way through a school of silver barracuda hovering by cathedral-like sea caves and past fluttering lionfish, tiny sea horses and giant moray eels.

More seaside escapes follow, and then Phuket, our final destination. The island has boomed in recent years. A four-lane highway now whisks visitors from the international airport, past new condo and hotel developments, to their beach resort. Cosmopolitan in flavor, Phuket has morphed into the Maui of Thailand.

But that also means you can do as much – or as little – as you like. The sea canoeing tours of Phang Nga Bay depart from the fancy new marina. Evenings may find you in Patong town's lively bars and clubs, shops and Thai food restaurants, or watching Thai wrestling shows. Then there are the island's powdery white beaches.

If it's tranquility you seek, look no further than the Amanpuri (meaning "place of peace"). One of us (guess who?) is most interested in the resort's legendary Aman Spa. She submits to the two-hour "Amanpuri Awakening." It begins with a traditional dry Thai massage. The ancient treatment is next enhanced with modern pleasures – a relaxing herbal steam shower, then another turn on the massage bed, where aromatic oils and hot compresses (infused with lemongrass, kaffir lime and bergamot) are used in an exquisite combination of acupressure and flow massage.

Just when you think you've enjoyed almost everything Thailand has to offer, you discover another exotic and signature Thai experience. ■



WATERFRAME / ALAMY

Top: The warm crystal clear waters of the Andaman Sea are regularly listed in the world's top dive sites

Above: Close encounter with a tiny sea horse.