

Beaches, Adventure and Massages by the Shore in Krabi

By Kirsten Raccuia

The thing I love about Thailand is that the locals try to make everything beautiful. Even with the little money they might have, the details are always looked after. The petrol stations have gardens with picturesque wrought iron benches to sit on. No detail goes unnoticed. The Thais can create ambience in a shoebox and can make you feel welcome with a smile.

I've seen some amazing places in my life; travelled to 35 countries, trekked mountains searching for gorillas in Uganda, surfed in Costa Rica, abseiled into temple caves in Vietnam, but I've never seen a landscape like that of the Krabi province of Thailand. Especially near the coastal town of Ao Nang, the province's most well-known resort town and expat haven.

By boat, car or plane, no matter how you get there, the backdrop is absolutely mesmerising. The water is an emerald greenish-blue that is so clear you can see the fish darting around your toes in the water. Instead of high-rises, the skyline is full of petrified coral reefs that were formed hundreds of millions of years ago and over the years have turned to limestone karsts. These karsts thrust out of the water reaching for the sky everywhere you look. Some have green trees sprouting out of the top. Some look like they defy gravity and are about to tip over. Ao Nang is a photographer's dream; no ugly apartment projects on the beach, just small massage huts, a boardwalk with a huge marlin sculpture and jungle.

Krabi is a province on the west coast of southern Thailand bordering the Andaman Sea, that is known for its incredible beaches and outdoor lifestyle. A few thousand expats make this area their home, and it's obvious why. In fact, since we left four months ago, I haven't stopped thinking about making it mine one day.

Ao Nang is a small town but is a perfect place to call home. Whether you're looking to retire or just want to start life over in a new exotic location, Ao Nang could be a perfect fit. While we were there, we met both young people that have started their own businesses and plenty of retirees enjoying a beach lifestyle on a budget.

Ao Nang has the best of many worlds. It is touristy enough to have all the conveniences that I'd want in a place to retire; good infrastructure, excellent internet, heaps of cool bars, lounges and restaurants and outdoor activities galore. With tourism comes infrastructure that is necessary to live comfortably in a place. A holiday can be in a remote place with nothing going on, but to live there is another story. Just ask Kim Shields, a retired Aussie expat, who said, "The only thing I miss from Australia is my family; I have everything else I need here!"

There always seems to be something happening in Ao Nang,



A couple can live well on tropical Krabi for \$2,500 a month.

which makes it very easy to meet other people. There is a great live music scene with what seems like every other bar supporting a local band. [Boogie Bar](#) is the place to be. While we were there the band was kicking and had everyone dancing at their tables, some even on top of them. If that's altogether too crazy for you, a few doors down is a trendy shisha bar and probably a few girly bars as well; after all, this is Thailand.

A couple can live well for \$2,500. Expat Michael Shields says, "My whole life is 40% off, I could never live for that little back in Australia." For \$30 you get super-fast internet, and some landlords include it in the rent. A no-contract 3G or 4G phone is under \$15 a month, and depending on your AC usage your electricity bill might be around \$50. That means you'll have plenty of fun money left over for the \$11.50 massage or the \$14-a-day maid.

There are no beachfront apartments or single family homes here. The law prohibits any permanent developments on the beach. However, you can rent some ocean view properties. One I saw is a 37-square-metre apartment, fully furnished just 15 minutes from Ao Nang Beach. The monthly rent of \$700 includes access to a gym, pool and your apartment's WiFi. The best and most economical way to find a place to rent is to get there and walk around the neighbourhoods. What you find online through an agent is at least double what you'd pay if you find a place on your own. Another place to check keep an eye on is the [Krabi/Ao Nang Real Estate](#) page.

May through November is the rainy season, which means fewer tourists and a lush green countryside that appears where the once super-dry and dusty landscape was. Some days it might rain all day while others just an hour at night. Krabi has tropical weather, so it is always hot and humid with an average temperature of 27 C with

"The emerald water is so clear you can see the fish."

80% humidity. We were there in the dry season when everything, including me, was coated with light brown dust. After a few days, you get used to it. I thought the landscape was beautiful in the dry season; I can only imagine how amplified the natural beauty gets after a few weeks of rain quenching the earth's thirst. Jim, a retiree who has been there for a few years prefers the rainy season. He says, "The green season is gorgeous here and makes life a little more peaceful. There is less traffic and it cools down the area a bit which is always welcome."

My husband Mark and I drove from Phuket (an island on Thailand's western coast), three hours east of Krabi. We went straight to Ao Nang, because we knew this beachside town was not only visually stunning, but had a thriving expat community. Krabi Town is about 20 minutes inland and has some expats, but most prefer to live near the beaches.

As it was blazing hot, and the humidity was high, our first stop was the beach. We needed to get into the water that had been taunting us the entire drive. The sea was warm as bath water but still managed to cool us down, we stayed and watched the sun set on the horizon.

After the sun set, we wandered along the walking street portion of the boardwalk—the walking street is a cool little car and scooter free zone that is lined by restaurants, bars and the occasional small hotel. One side is the beach and the other side has dozens of places to watch the sunset with an unobstructed view. Stop at [The Last](#)

[Fisherman Bar](#) and enjoy a fruit shake (\$4), with or without the rum; it's revitalising.

As night fell, we wandered farther along the boardwalk, towards the middle of town where we could see the food stalls starting to draw their nightly crowds of locals, expats and in-the-know tourists. These stalls are the best places for authentic, cheap eats. They cook everything right in front of you, so you have a bird's eye view of the

fresh ingredients as well as the chef and "kitchen." Pad Thai here is \$1.95, but in a restaurant it would be around \$6. After munching down on some spicy Pad Thai, I felt the need for a little dessert, so I went to the next stall and ordered a \$1.15 banana and Nutella roti, the Asian version of a crepe. The cook skilfully poured the batter onto the searing hot griddle and in less than 30 seconds I had my sweet tooth satiated.

Heading back toward the beach, one side of the street is full of shopping stalls for clothes, trinkets and touristy stuff and the other, restaurants and bars all with live music. We happened upon the aptly named [Small Bar](#), which is literally a teeny tiny hut-cum-bar on the sidewalk, like a pop-up bar except permanent. While we were there, Louisa, the bartender, made me my \$3.50 vodka soda with a huge smile on her face.

There is something for everyone here. You can be in the thick of it all or far enough away never to notice the mayhem of the tourist season. ■

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FIVE TOP THINGS TO DO IN KRABI, THAILAND

There is so much more to do during the day besides lounging on the beach and getting a massage, not that anything is wrong with that. But if you're more of an adventure junkie than a beach bum, Ao Nang will win over your heart as it did mine.

Rock climbing: For \$2.25, take a quick 15-minute boat hop to the beaches of Railay and learn to rock climb. There are beginner courses that start around \$40, and you can progress up to a three-day course which includes rescuing and abseiling. Check out [Real Rocks Climbing School](#).

Sea kayaking through a national park: There are a million places to sea kayak around this area, but some of the most interesting sites are within the [Than Bok Khorani National Park](#) where you can glide through caves with glistening stalagmites in search of petroglyphs.

Emerald pool: About an hour-and-a-half south of Ao Nang is a freshwater pool in the middle of the jungle. The colour is an extraordinarily pale teal, completely clear and lovely for swimming. In the same area is the Blue Pool but you can't swim here because it's supposedly surrounded by quicksand but legend has it that if you clap your hands loudly, the sand at the bottom will churn and bubbles will float to the surface.

Nam Tok Rawn hot springs: In the middle of the jungle, not far from the Emerald Pool, are [natural hot springs](#) and waterfalls that heal your aches and pains. The highest pool is the hottest and as you slide down from pool to pool to the river below the water gets cooler. By



Krabi has a lively bar-scene that is not to be missed.

the time you reach the river, it's a quite refreshing 15 C difference.

Krabi town night market: Twenty minutes away from Ao Nang in Krabi town there is a fantastic weekend night market for locals, tourists and expats. Besides all the stalls selling fresh, local and cheap food, there are live bands and a massive bouncy castle for kids. Surrounding the stage are over 100 tables for you to sit back, chow down and watch the entertainment. It's a real Thai experience not to be missed. We walked around looking at all of the clothes, trinkets and art while drinking a \$4.75 cocktail out of a piece of bamboo. For dessert, we tried an assortment of animals made from strangely-coloured artificial jelly.