

# marie claire

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Limestone formations in the picturesque Phang Nga Bay



Hot pink taxis, the blue-green ocean, endless orchids and bustling night bazaars... The exotic land that we know as Thailand effortlessly blends hedonism with colourful cultural ethos. **By Pallavi Shankar**



## THE THAI THERAPY



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A MASSAGE  
AFTER WORK IS AS  
COMMONPLACE  
IN THAILAND AS  
BUYING A CUP OF  
COFFEE



Clockwise from top: Yachts and boats at the luxe Royal Phuket Marina (RPM); the spa culture is integral to Thailand; a ladyboy in glitter bra; poolside massage at Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit

**S**ettling down in my Thai Airways seat on my virgin voyage to Bangkok and Phuket, my mind was abuzz with images of turquoise beaches and other clichés sold aggressively by holiday planners. But no matter how many travel brochures you have seen, there are always some quaint discoveries that a personal experience provides. I, for one, couldn't help but notice that no woman seemed to have a bad hair day. Little wonder that the country has a booming beauty and cosmetics market.

The hour-long connecting flight to Phuket from Bangkok was tiring but for the lovely natural beauty one could gape at from the airplane. Surrounded by 30 outlying islands, Phuket is a red-hot destination thanks to its picture-postcard beauty. And what awaited me there were

more than regular beaches – I was on my way to Royal Phuket Marina (RPM), the yachting haven of Asia.

## ON HIGH SEA IN PHUKET

Located in the centre of Phuket's East Coast, on the doorstep of the Phang Nga Bay, RPM is marina lifestyle at its best, with luxury waterfront living. Adding to the luxe factor are residential apartments and holiday homes, both for sale, though holiday homes can be rented as well. So besides yachts of the who's who of the world, there are restaurants, tennis courts, swimming pools, a gymnasium, shopping complex, art gallery and spa. Even Louis Vuitton is going to open its boutique here. I took a long walk in the sprawling area before enjoying an authentic Thai lunch in the restaurant. I gorged on the hot and spicy food, particularly *prick kepi* – shrimp paste and chilli sauce, a speciality of the region.

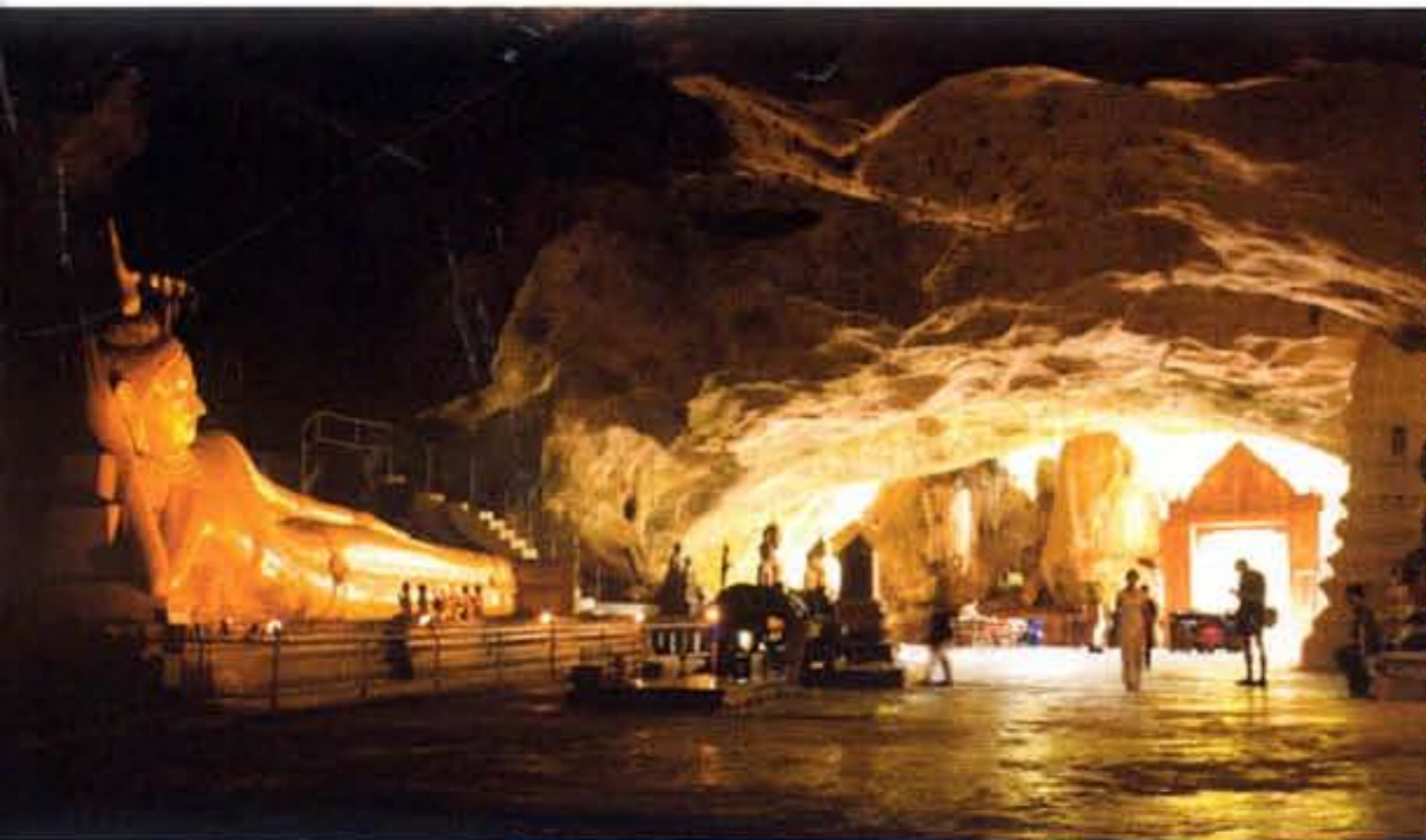
Phuket's nightlife kept me wide awake. Sleep is not on your mind when the destination is Patong, famous for its live-music clubs, beer bars, go-go bars (where scantily clad girls pole dance in the open), restaurant-lounges, pubs and discos!

The following day in Phuket was devoted to the ocean ride in RPM's 24-m-long yacht, Divia III. The white yacht with spotless interiors set sail and, on the deck with wind in my face, I felt like a Hollywood star. Our stopover was Gypsy – a small island-village that boasts of a great restaurant. A Muslim village, it has a strict no-alcohol policy but lunch was delectable seafood followed by fresh pineapples.

Come evening and it was time for Simon Cabaret – the transvestite show that features a jazzy musical extravaganza performed by the much-talked-about 'ladyboys' of Thailand. Their two-hour-long performance was about lavish sets

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AVOID SAYING "I WANT COKE" IF YOU DON'T WANT THE WAITRESS TO THINK YOU ARE ASKING FOR DRUGS



Clockwise from above: Monkey cave in North Phuket; trinkets at a Phuket street shop; Bangkok is famous for its colourful taxis; Bangkok's plush Gaysorn Mall



and fabulous costumes. My concept of a cabaret took a beating after watching it – besides the few scantily clad ladyboys there was nothing too erotic about it. The surprise element though were the ladyboys who can give women a complex with their hourglass figures and ultra-feminine body language. Interestingly, they enjoy a respectable status in Thailand and some of them are even qualified professionals from fields like medicine and management. But they continue to perform on stage wearing glitter bras and elaborate head plumes for the love of it.

My Phuket sojourn was rounded off in the best possible way by a relaxing foot massage in RPM's spa. The therapist worked skilfully to soothe my tired feet. The spa culture is an integral part of Thailand and attracts tourists from the world over. In fact, getting a foot or a head massage at a roadside parlour while getting back from work is as commonplace in Thailand as buying a cup of coffee.

## OFF TO THE CITY OF ANGELS

The next day we flew to Bangkok and arrived at Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit hotel. The staff was quick to get updates from me about their favourite Bollywood actors and a girl who barely understood Hindi could not stop gushing about SRK. She was of great help in providing me with a lowdown on the shopping hotspots, and on her advice, I took the skytrain to the crowded Chatuchak weekend market known for its bargains. You can spend your money on cheaply priced garments, lingerie, accessories, fruits like mangosteen and durian, and even purchase a pet python. I continued with my retail therapy at Patpong's night bazaar, which is open till 2 a.m.

Patpong is also Bangkok's infamous red-light district with go-go bars and striptease joints which are frequented by tourists. Keep away from touts promising free sex shows – many are known to present you with a hefty drinks bill at the end of it. If you can keep your wits about you, it's all fun in the carnival-like feel of the city. ■

## Fact File

1 Baht (Thai currency) = Rs 1.20  
Air travel time: India to Bangkok:  
3 hours, 15 minutes; Bangkok to  
Phuket: 1 hour

## STAYING IN PHUKET

Renting a luxury two-bedroom apartment for a week at RPM costs \$2,000 (Rs 84,100) and the price goes up for a Royal Villa with private yacht berths, poolside cabanas and Teppanyaki grill. ([www.royalphuket-marina.com](http://www.royalphuket-marina.com)) Other places are Mom In's Boathouse Phuket Hotel & Resort ([www.villaroyalephuket.com](http://www.villaroyalephuket.com)), Ramada Karon ([www.ramadaphuket.com](http://www.ramadaphuket.com)) and Six Senses Destination Spa ([www.sixsenses.com](http://www.sixsenses.com))

## STAYING IN BANGKOK

Try Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit ([www.sheratongrandesukhumvit.com](http://www.sheratongrandesukhumvit.com)), Conrad Hotel Bangkok ([www.ConradHotels.com](http://www.ConradHotels.com)), Chateau de Bangkok ([www.chateaubangkok.com](http://www.chateaubangkok.com)), Arnoma Hotel Bangkok ([www.arnoma.com](http://www.arnoma.com)), Holiday Inn Silom Bangkok ([www.bangkok-silom.holiday-inn.com](http://www.bangkok-silom.holiday-inn.com)) or Siam City Hotel ([www.siamhotels.com](http://www.siamhotels.com)).