

TAKE ² IN thailand

Some travelers seek a spiritual experience by going on religious tours, such as following in the footsteps of St. Paul to Greece. Others follow a literary path, perhaps hiking the stormy moors where Heathcliff and Catherine rambled as children in *Wuthering Heights*.

My husband and I had no such theme in mind as we headed to Thailand — we were just thrilled to visit this exotic country that had long been at the top of our bucket list. Somehow we accidentally ended up on *The Hangover II* tour.

We didn't plan to follow in the ill-fated steps of Phil, Stu, Alan and Doug, yet on our recent trip to this Southeast Asian country where tourism is once again on the rise after last year's coup, we found ourselves at two of the major locales featured in the 2011 film.

BY JAN SCHRODER

Guests at Phulay Bay can cruise on a longtail boat to picnic on Hong Island.

>travel far: thailand

Our first stop was the capital city of Bangkok, the most visited city in the world. Luckily, we were not in a filthy room at a no-star motel with a chain-smoking, drug-dealing monkey, a shaved head or tattooed face. No, we were guests in the monkey-free Tower Club at Lebua, where a few scenes with the villain played by Paul Giamatti were filmed.

Because of the favorable exchange rate, five-star hotels in this exotic city of 8.5 million are affordable for Americans, so we took advantage of the luxurious accommodations at Lebua.

For the next five days, we had a balancing act to perform — exploring the many enchanting, chaotic, crowded and intense sights of Bangkok, then returning to the calm respite and wonderful dining and relaxation opportunities at Lebua.

Our introduction to the city came in the form of a breakfast boat ride on the Chao Phraya River, where our well-informed guide pointed out sights such as the pagoda of the Temple of Dawn and the ramshackle houses barely clinging to the edges of the banks along the narrow channels.

Every age group and nationality seemed to be represented in the crowds at the aptly named Grand Palace, one of the official homes of the King of Siam, hidden behind four walls. I kept my camera in my hands the entire time, wanting to capture the beautiful landscaping, exotic varieties of architecture and gold *everything*. But one of my favorite sights was the woman who knelt down by herself, held out her selfie stick, and said, “Say cheese!”

A major must-see is the Chatachak Weekend Market, (also known as JJ’s), 35 acres with more than 10,000 stalls, one of the largest in the world. With no agenda and no compulsion to buy anything, a somewhat foreign feeling for me, I enjoyed wandering through the themed sections with everything from antiques to pets to plants and clothing.

A bit more manageable in size and number of tourists, a trip to a spice market was its equal in exotic fare, with pink eggs, unidentifiable bags of spices and rows of freshly caught seafood of every variety.

As somewhat of a rooftop bar aficionado and lover of al fresco dining, I found my ultimate location that night with the Sky Bar and Sirocco restaurant, the highest al fresco restaurant in the world, located on the 63rd floor.

The circular bar seems to hang on the edge of the roof, as several bartenders perform well-rehearsed choreography to create concoctions. We had to try the signature Hangoverini, made with green apple juice, green tea liquor, rosemary-infused honey and Martini Rosso.

As the sun slowly set over the city, the bar began to glow, the patio lights came on and the towering gold dome lit up as well, casting an enchanting light as we made our way to internationally recognized Sirocco next door for dinner.

The Chef’s Tasting Menu, always my favorite way to dine, included Atlantic Scallop, Goose Rilette Capelletti and Atlantic Hake Fish. It helped that we didn’t have to focus on the menu, as the waiter was making flaming cocktails that briefly lit up the sky.

A culinary highlight on another night was the indoor dining at Mezzaluna, where we still had views of the skyline through the expanse of windows on the 65th floor. As we dined on an



elegant seasonally inspired menu and listened to the melodic sounds of a quartet, I positively wallowed in the quiet and sophisticated elegance, a sharp contrast to our eventful days of sightseeing.

FROM THE CITY TO THE SEA

After a short plane ride approximately 500 miles south, we landed in Krabi, where the relaxed and scenic 50-mile drive through small villages and the Thai jungle was a vivid contrast to the crowded, noisy streets of Bangkok.

Our destination was Phulay Bay, the first Ritz-Carlton Reserve property opened in 2010 with just 54 villas on 50 meticulously landscaped acres, and a staff to guest ratio of 3 to 1.

While I am not, nor ever will be, a movie star or member of a royal family, from the moment we entered the mystical confines of Phulay Bay, I felt like I was playing the role I most aspire to: pampered, spoiled guest in paradise.

Guests enter an enclosed courtyard with 20-foot-high purple walls by stepping along a path of submerged stones to a large open Thai pavilion where we were greeted, checked in and driven to our villa by golf cart. I had to stop myself from giddily skipping along the stones as I was so delighted to be there.

The giddy feeling only increased when I saw our Royal Villa, simply the most spectacular hotel suite I’d ever seen. We had a giant bed with a view of the Andaman Sea, our own private infinity pool and verandah with daybed, private gardens, indoor and outdoor showers, and two walk-in closets. Various connecting chambers could be walled off with sliding doors. On a romance scale of 1 to 10, this room was about an 87.

Oh, and there was the added bonus that Bradley Cooper was naked in my shower. While I can’t claim that I was there at the time, he had been there four years earlier during the filming of *Hangover II*, when the cast spent 45 days at Phulay Bay while filming multiple scenes. And while I couldn’t confirm that he

PHOTO BY CHRIS SCHROEDER

L-R: PHOTOS COURTESY OF TOWER CLUB AT LEBUA; RITZ-CARLTON PHULAY BAY

actually stayed in our room, it’s hard to imagine a better space for a movie star to bed down after a tough day of filming scenes, like the one when Stu finally gets married. The guests release glowing sky lanterns into the darkening sky against the backdrop of limestone cliffs rising out of the Andaman Sea.

We spent three enchanting days here, lounging by the large pool and enjoying drinks at sunset with our feet in the sand at Chomtawan Bar. One day we took a longtail boat to Hong Island, where our captain motored us inside a shallow lagoon.

We lounged on the beach, snorkeled and hiked on the island, observing wreckage of boats that had washed up on the island, left there in memory of the catastrophic 2004 tsunami.

Other off-resort activities for guests include fishing, diving, snorkeling and kayaking among the limestone cliff formations. Land activities include hiking through mangroves, caves and the jungle, visiting temples, helicopter tours and even elephant trekking.

On the reserve, guests can learn how to make banana leaf animals and decorative garlands, take a variety of yoga classes, participate in a “singing bowl” meditation, take a meditation class led by local monks or a Thai massage class.

We opted for a Thai couples massage at the spa where we laid down on grass mats in the supplied cotton pajamas and were twisted and stretched all kinds of ways I’d never been stretched before.

One evening we enjoyed a private seafood dinner in the Lae Lay Pavilion, surrounded by water and romantically illuminated by traditional hanging lamps. Once again, I felt like we’d fallen through some magical hole in the universe and emerged as movie stars.

If I ever had movie star money, I’d be sure to book this place for an extended stay for its unparalleled quiet elegance, beauty and privacy.

While the movie *Hangover II* might not have been a favorite of the critics (it was in fact nominated for a Golden Raspberry Award for Worst Sequel), the two properties where it was filmed earn an enthusiastic two thumbs up and a standing ovation from this travelgirl.

LEBUA AND STATE TOWER: lebua.com/state-tower
PHULAY BAY: www.phulay-bay.com
THAILAND TOURISM: www.tourismthailand.org

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ILLUSTRATION BY KARLA TRAPP

Opposite page: View from a boat ride on Chao Phraya River; This page: the Sky Bar at Lebua; the lobby at Phulay Bay Spa.