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Holidays TIME AND THAI

Khao Lak is back and ready for anything after killer tsunami

By FRANCESCA COOKNEY

STAND on the edge of any ocean and you can't help but be awed by its beauty and power. Stand on the edge of the Indian Ocean in Khao Lak in Thailand and that feeling of awe is laced with the terrifying reality of what happened here on Boxing Day five years ago.

More than 8,000 died in Thailand when the tsunami struck its shores on Boxing Day 2004 - half of them in Khao Lak.

Five years on few clues remain to the devastation. Khao Lak, around 50 miles north of Phuket, is back in business and thriving.

Yet it is still a sombre moment when on the way from the airport our driver points to the "tsunami boat" - a police patrol vessel, carried more than a mile inland before being dumped among trees and bushes, far from the shore.

Barely two months ago the brand new JW Marriott opened its doors close to the beach on the very site where the previous hotel was all but destroyed.

And wandering through the lavish grounds, you can't fail but to be impressed.

The hotel pool is the largest of its kind in South East Asia. Its lagoon-like waterways lead under bridges and around the bars and restaurants, in and out of quiet corners and, in some cases, right up to your very door.

All ground-floor rooms have pool access from their private balconies, which means you never have to worry about where you've left your towel. Just don't forget which room is yours!

A stone's throw away is the hotel's palm-tree lined private beach with soft white sand and crystal-clear waters. Nothing with an engine is allowed anywhere near.

The food at the Marriott's eight bars and restaurants is just as spectacular, ranging from authentic Thai cuisine at the Ta-Krai, to more Euro-centric delights at the pizzeria and deli. Seafood choices are just as appealing, from barbecued lobster to the freshest sushi.

By the end of the week, I was glad only my luggage was being weighed in at the airport.

For those who tire of sun beds, swimming and snacking there's plenty to do around Khao Lak. There are three national parks for hiking as well as spectacular waterfalls to see and swim in. My first taste of white-water

rafting (from £55) hardly appeared to be a walk on the wild side as what I thought would be a raging torrent turned out to be a babbling brook.

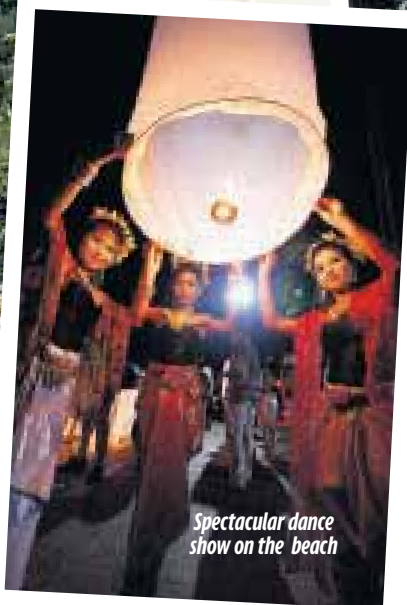
"Looks pretty wild," I smirked as we were handed helmets and life jackets. "I don't think we will be needing these."

I soon regretted those words. The owners of the activity centre, about an hour's drive inland from our hotel, have dammed the river so they can control exactly how much water is released.

Suddenly "the brook" was transformed into three miles of foaming rapids as the floodgates opened.

Navigating the twists and turns armed only with a paddle, turned out to be a real battle,

Golden sands and crystal-clear water on Khao Lak beach



Spectacular dance show on the beach



Francesca gets in the swing of beach life

even with two seasoned instructors on board each dinghy.

By the time I reached dry land I was glad I had booked in for a massage back at the hotel.

The Quan Spa is almost on the beach and offers everything from 20-minute manicures to five-day slimming packages.

You can even get your hair cut, legs waxed, enjoy a yoga class and spend a morning sweating it out in the sauna and steam rooms before enjoying a fruit juice or herbal tea.

Inside, the pagoda-like building

two-hour journey by speedboat can be a stomach-churning experience.

But it is worth it to swim with what seemed to be the entire cast of Finding Nemo. Sea turtles passed by close enough to touch while fish in every colour of the rainbow darted in and out of the corals.

After sprawling out for lunch on the impossibly white sandy beach it was time to scramble up the cliffs. The short climb looked fairly straightforward and the number of people we could see at the top suggested a leisurely scramble up a well-trodden path.

Instead it turned into a gruelling barefoot stomp through muddy undergrowth with toe-stubbing moments courtesy of some unexpected rocks. Thankfully, the view from the



What's the deal?

● JW Marriott Khao Lak is offering a special introductory rate of £60pp per night when you book three nights or more until April 18, 2010. This is based on two sharing and includes airport transfer, breakfast for two, and two 60-minute massages at the onsite Quan Spa. Call 0800 221 222 or go to www.marriott.co.uk

● Thai Airways will fly you from London to Phuket (via Bangkok) from £651.80 return, including taxes. Check out www.thaialways.co.uk

One of the stunning beaches in Phang Nga Bay

Great UK days out

ENGLAND

TODAY: Trot along the Broadwalk of Richmond's Kew Gardens, London, in a carriage drawn by shire horses. The 20-minute rides start outside the Orangery (adults £2.50, children £1.50). Or join the Winter Evergreens Guided Tour through the Gardens' Pinetum (free of charge, from Victoria Plaza at 11.45am). Admission £13 adults, concessions £11, children free. For more info go to www.kew.org

TODAY: Last chance to see the Victorian Christmas Celebrations at Beaulieu's Palace House in Brockenhurst, Hants. Discover what life was like Upstairs and Downstairs and warm yourself up in front of the great fireplace as you sip a glass of fruit punch. Kids can delve into a "box of delights" and dress up in period costumes. Admission covers entrance to house and gardens, the motor museum, Beaulieu Abbey and World of Top Gear (www.beaulieu.co.uk); £15.75 adults, children from £8.50 (under-fives free), family ticket £43.

SCOTLAND

UNTIL JANUARY 10: Roll up, roll up to the Im-Bru carnival at the SECC in Glasgow. With more than 60 attractions from Superbowl, Waltzer and Ghost Train and Dodgems to adrenaline-fuelled rides like Mega Mix, Speed Buzz



Beaulieu Motor Museum

and brand new Extreme, there won't be a dull moment. Entrance cost £10 for 10 vouchers which can be exchanged for rides (£1) or at game stalls (£2). Free for under-fours. For more info go to www.winterfestglasgow.com

JANUARY 23: Scotland's greatest poet will prove his kiddie appeal in Burns for Bairs. Suitable for six to 11-year-olds, storyteller Alastair McIver will be in charge at Edinburgh's Blackwell Bookshop between 2-3pm. Admission free. More info: www.blackwell.co.uk

WALES

TODAY: Fun and laughter is on the menu when you take the kids to see family favourite Mother Goose. Wrexham's Theatr Stiwt promises plenty of comedy, and music to keep everyone entertained. Performances at 1pm and 4pm. Tickets £9.50 adults and £7.50 concessions. Book online at www.stiwt.co.uk

JANUARY 9: Venue Cymru in Llandudno is hosting an activity-packed Family Fun Day. Learning circus skills, storytelling, music workshops, puppet making, pebble art, dance classes, Punch and Judy, face painting and treasure hunts are just some of the highlights - and it's all free. From 11am-4pm. For more info visit www.venuecymru.co.uk or call 01492 872000.

MARJORIE YUE

PICTURES: ALAMY/TOURISM THAILAND