



The mangroves of Klong Yai Kee



Dining in the trees at Soneva Kiri



## Unspoiled Island

Thailand, one of the most exotic destinations in the world, has turned into the most-visited country in Asia over time. Can travellers still find solitude and unspoiled



Photography: Max Haensel

**G**USHED ABOUT IN guidebooks and beloved by the backpacker set, thousands of travellers flock to Thailand's sandy beaches, towering limestones cliffs, jungles and temples every day. With more than 30 million visitors a year, Thailand is no longer the region's most-adventurous destination, and the damaging effects of tourism are almost everywhere.

As one would expect, over many trips I slowly grew tired of navigating Thailand's countless resorts and souvenir stands among

the constant crush of other tourists. But I never gave up on the idea of discovering a pristine island or a remote jungle where I could still chase that feeling of being in the Thailand of the last century. And being the stubborn and curious person that I am, my Thai dream paradise eventually came true.

I take a flight to Bangkok, and from there, I travel 200 miles east to the Cambodian border. I land on the small island

of Koh Kood, home to rain forests, coconut plantations, sleepy fishing villages and fewer than 2,000 people.

In a country where almost all destinations are reachable via direct flights, Koh Kood's great advantage is its relative remoteness. There are no landlines, little Internet access and few cars. Electricity access is minimal—homes and hotels rely on generators or solar power. All is slow, warm tranquillity.

Koh Kood is Thailand's fourth-largest but least-populated island. I hear from locals it's what Koh Samui and Phuket were like when tourism was just beginning in the 1970s. It's breathtaking. There are a couple of waterfalls with Klong Chao, in the centre of the west coast, the most famous. There are also long beaches with powdery white sand and a mountainous landscape covered by a large thick jungle.

I stay at Soneva Kiri, considered by many one of the most exclusive beachfront escapes in the country. The resort can be reached by a 70-minute flight on Soneva's private plane directly from Suvarnabhumi International Airport, or by domestic flight from Bangkok to Trat, followed by a boat ride to Koh Kood. Soneva Kiri, wedged between the jungle

and the ocean, features just 36 villas made from sustainably sourced wood and recycled materials, which gives a Robinson Crusoe feel to the whole place. What I like the most about Soneva, however, is the emphasis on decompressing from all aspects of modern life. Shoes, for example, are immediately left behind from the moment you step out of the plane.

I'll hold Koh Kood up as evidence for my theory that the harder a place is to reach, the better it is. Unlike some of the most obvious Thai destinations, such as Koh Phi Phi, Krabi or Phuket, Koh Kood still has the fishing-village charm that drew people to Thailand in the first place. It's for nature lovers rather than those who need a wide choice of shops, bars and restaurants. Remote islands often lack ATMs; Wi-Fi is non-functional or non-existent. It's a small price to pay for a trip off the well-trodden grid, and it's absolutely worth it. ●

*Nanda Haensel travelled to Koh Kood from April 29 to May 2 and stayed at Soneva Kiri resort ([www.soneva.com/soneva-kiri](http://www.soneva.com/soneva-kiri)). She flew with Thai Airways from Singapore to Bangkok, and from there she took Soneva's private plane to Koh Kood. For more information, visit [weloveitwild.com](http://weloveitwild.com).*