



# Thai

## THE KNOT

**After years of writing about other people getting married, veteran wedding mag editor Shihab Salim decides it's time to get hitched. The setting, like the girl, is perfect. But where among Thailand's cities, seas and jungles will he take the plunge?**

### BANGKOK

**L**ounging at the bar, watching a very different world pass me by, I soak up the bright lights of Bangkok through the eyes of a single man. The single me would have by now figured out the best hotspot to party at, the likely lads to party with, and gladly raise many a glass with the never-ending array of beautiful women (or boom girls as they are known) who casually sidle over to sit beside me, giving every indication that they want to hang out with me because I'm so damn fabulous.

And, like the countless other fat, old men all around me who allow themselves to be charmed by the boom girls' effortless enchantment, the single me would buy them as many drinks as it took to keep the illusion going, easily done, considering the most expensive cocktail on the menu is just over two pounds...

But I'm not a single man. In fact, I'm planning to be the exact opposite. Twelve years to the day I edited the first ever issue of Asian Bride magazine, I'm finally ready to take the plunge. You'd think after listening to the romantic tales of proposals by the many, many brides and grooms I've featured over the years across several wedding publications, I'd have it all figured out. But here I am, in a bar in Soi Cowboy (the less seedier red-light version of the notorious Patpong and Nana districts), on my own, no ring in pocket, no scripted proclamation of undying love to rehearse, no idea.

I've come to Bangkok a day earlier, (she's at a conference in China), and the plan today was to buy her a ring from Thailand, her favourite country in the world, which is what brings us here today. I was bound to find the perfect rock in one of the many jewellery shops a stone's throw away from our hotel near the bustling Khao San Road, but alas, they stock exclusively silver and, in any case, only open their doors to wholesalers who buy in bulk. Not to worry. We have two whole weeks ahead of us. I'll find something.

Nor has it been a wasted day. In fact, it's

impossible to be in this city and have an unremarkable time. Around every corner, there's something colourful to see, exciting to hear, intriguing to work out, fascinating to sift through, and heavenly to smell.

I drink up, politely refusing the offer of company from a boom girl, and retire to my hotel. Another big reminder I am not a single man. Had I been, I'd be strapped to a backpack, a typically Thai hard bed waiting for me at one of the city's many ten pounds a night hotels. Instead, I find myself at the ultra chic Riva Surya, a newly opened boutique hotel that looks like it's made out of musical reeds, instantly charming its way into my heart thanks to its refreshing lack of showiness (swish little hotels that boast this level of luxury generally like to make a point of how hip and happening they are). In fact, despite being the most stylish venue on this side of the Chao Phraya River, it seems quite content to have its six-floored façade all but obscured by an enormous tree.

That sense of feeling sheltered under its gigantic shadow courses through the entire hotel, from the spacious rooms that never feel cold, to the sense of satisfaction that hangs in

the air from fellow guests, to the temperament of the staff permanently set to warm. I sit on the balcony, watching the colourful barges line up in preparation for the royal river procession, feeling quite the king of the world.

My queen arrives, and it's clear she knows she's with a man of exquisite taste for picking a place as sleek and sweet as Riva Surya. I recount my day's adventure (leaving out any mention of my failed ring hunting), and it quickly transpires I've paid above the odds for just about everything, from the taxi fare (just ask them to turn on the meter and they politely do so), to the headphones I bought (she later bought an identical pair for a whole 800 baht less), this is a place where haggling and shopping around gets you everything you want at a price you wouldn't believe.

Only, unlike my inner single man, who would've learned to barter his way around to find the best deals (you can feast on a yen ta pho, sticky rice and a drink for as little as 70 baht, just under £1.50), but I'm here on the luxury tip, as you as a honeymooner will also be, so let's leave the divine street food trail, must-have accessory bartering and ballsy tuk tuk negotiations to our former single selves, and join me in lapping up the luxe end of this weird and wonderful metropolis.

We dine at the finest eateries, the best being Seafood Heaven on Sukhumvit Road, where a lady with a trolley leads you round a giant market helping you load up on an ocean of entrees including live Phuket lobsters and Alaska King crabs, before being led to your table where you can decide how you'd like your catch cooked and served. We ride the river in a luxury boat to take in the golden temples and floating markets (they don't sell diamond rings). And, to spell out luxury with a capital L, on top of our countless fabulous head, back and foot massages we take advantage of during our stay (for as little as a pound for a blissful hour of being kneaded and stroked by the always laughing, always talking tiny but strong masseurs), I've arranged five-star spa treatments for my lady at every hotel we'll be staying in.

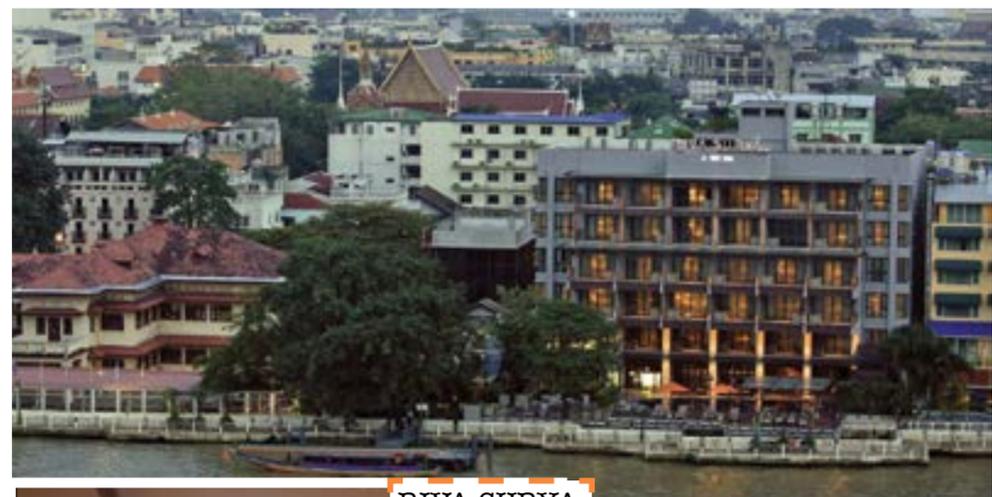
She's also surprised I keep suggesting we go shopping (ladies, you will *love* the MBK centre – all your favourite shopping complexes rolled into one giant version, only cheaper). During a moment of distraction where she spots a Mulberry for a fraction of the cost, I slip away. I take too long. Just as I'm about



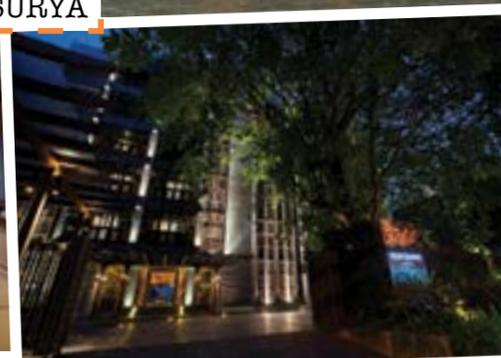
THE SUKHOTHAI



*“Around every corner, there’s something colourful to see, exciting to hear, intriguing to work out, fascinating to sift through, and heavenly to smell”*



RIVA SURYA



to buy the perfect rock, she appears, bearing spring rolls.

Mistaking my disappointment for tiring of shopping, she shows her gratitude by first taking me to me to see men kick the living crap out of each other at a Thaiboxing arena, then past the red lights to see boom girls in action – a live ping pong show, no less. You can see why I want to marry this woman...

Two weeks later, I'm back in Bangkok... alone. But it's hard to complain lying in my minispa of a bathroom in the Queen's suite at the Sukhothai hotel, the kind of luxury five-star boutique hotels where the fabulously rich feel at home, while the not so rich are *made* to feel at home. With the surroundings refreshingly free of the ostentatious gilt and pomp hotels of this calibre can't help but revel in, and the dining experience truly world-class (it's worth noting that after two weeks of feasting on food from the actual streets, the best authentic Thai street food I've ever tasted is to be found at the hotel's Celadon restaurant), the Sukhothai is the perfect pit-stop for lovers and honeymooners who want to spend quality time together in the lap of luxury, hardly noticing that beyond the gentle grounds lies the craziest city in the world.

My other half has flown off a day early to attend a conference. But the million baht question is: did she leave a soon-to-be married woman, or did Thailand have other ideas for my not exactly perfect plan?

**WHERE TO STAY**

**Riva surya**  
Chao Phraya River  
rivasurya.com  
**The Sukhothai**  
South Sathorn Road  
sukhothai.com

**WHERE TO EAT**

**Seafood Market**  
Jim Thompson House  
**Rooftop dining at Vertigo@Banyan Tree**  
(plus any street stall!)

**WHAT TO DO**

Feel spiritual @**Temple of Dawn**; Cruise the rivers and head for **Floating Market**; go wild watching Muay Thai boxing @**Lumphini Stadium**; soak up the seediness @ **Soi Cowboy & Khao San** and feel fabulous with the ladyboys @**Mambo's**.



**KOH SAMUI**

When you announce your plans to visit Koh Samui, I can guarantee you'll hear at least one person wax tedious about how it's no longer the unspoiled paradise it was 15 years ago.

That's so last century. Yes, in the past decade the island has seen its landscape

change to cater for the ever-growing number of tourists, but that doesn't mean it's become a tourist-only destination, like, say, Bodrum, where the locals live solely to serve foreigners. Koh Samui, on the other hand, has very much its own identity, with locals going about their own business, living their own lives, meaning – much like in India – the prices are set to cater for the local community and not marked sky high simply because tourists are stupid enough to cough up.

It makes shopping a joy (and the glorious beaches means it's easy for me to leave her soaking up the sun while I wander off to do just that). Naturally, stall holders offer to talk you through their merchandise, but they are



**BAAN TALING NGAM**



*“The modernisation of Koh Samui doesn’t make any difference to the sceneries of palm pricked mountains and crystal oceans on loan from the galleries of paradise”*



**HANSAR SAMUI**



nowhere near as pushy as your average Indian peddler, or manipulative as the Egyptian hawk.

Backpackers may well yearn for the days when everywhere here was cheap, but it’s good news for honeymooners and those in mood for lording it up like yours truly. Because with modernisation comes luxury. And none of it does anything to spoil the local spirit and certainly makes no difference to the sceneries of palm pricked mountains and crystal oceans on loan from the galleries of paradise.

The idea that Koh Samui is now rammed and no longer off the beaten path, as though it’s become like Blackpool, is nonsense. It’s the middle of the afternoon during the start of the high season, and here we are post-snorkelling at Thongsala Beach. Our boat party make up the only people on this stretch. Later, when we take a kayak on our trip to the full moon party haven Koh Phangan, we see countless little islands along the Ang Thong province, like scenes from *The Beach* or *The Blue Lagoon*, only more secluded.

If that’s how you like your sea, oh you will love the Baan Taling Ngam Resort. High up in the cliffs above Taling Ngam Bay, it has its own one kilometre stretch of beach all to itself. Which means, even at full capacity, the word ‘crowded’ will seem as alien as words like ‘stress’ or ‘bored’. The resort itself is so vast, with villas big enough to rival many homes back in London, we have a little bet trying to guess how many rooms there were in total. I go for 500, she says no way, easily a thousand. The actual number? Just 79 guest rooms.

An Intercontinental hotel, but one that’s been making an active effort to reach out beyond the chain’s stock quota of business-

men, the Baan Taling Ngam is arguably the most ‘honeymooner’ place we stayed in. Naturally, it has all the five-star amenities lovers need to keep them in the mood, not that you’re going anywhere else – it’s so remote, popping out to see local life involves a 45 minute taxi ride...

What separates Koh Samui from a similar idyllic beach destination like, say, Barbados, is that you won’t want to laze away too many hours on the sand. There’s just so much to do. To get a taste of the real Koh Samui, you need to be at the heart of the place, and you won’t find a better place to stay than at the Hansar Samui. Just ten minutes away from the airport, the beach at its doorstep and the sounds and sights of the island mere seconds away, we imagine we’ll only use the Hansar to bed down in at the end of the night. But its welcoming spirit, gorgeous setting and relaxed atmosphere sees us pop back for a cheeky nap and a sneaky cuddle many a time during the daylight hours. And the food here is simply divine. Despite my lifelong code of eating only the local cuisine when abroad, the French feast we treat ourselves to at the H Bistro is up there with anything we’ve savoured in London or Paris’ swankiest gourmet eateries.

I’ve put on a few pounds, the hole in my pocket where a ring should be isn’t getting any heavier, and any dream I had to propose at sunset on Bophut Beach comes and goes. But there’s a light in the horizon. A big molten disco ball of a light in the sky, in fact. It’s time to face the Full Moon and party...



**WHERE TO STAY**

**InterContinental Samui**  
Baan Taling Ngam Resort  
Taling Ngam  
samui.intercontinental.com  
**Hansar Samui**  
Bophut Beach  
sukhothai.com

**WHERE TO EAT**

**H Bistro**  
Wannai  
Shambala

**WHAT TO DO**

Find yourself at the feet of **Big Buddha**; Kayak ride to **Ang Thong National Marine Park**; Drink in the **Ice Bar**; Swim under **Na Muang Waterfall**; go **go carting**; take a trip to **Koh Phangan** (they have parties for full moon, half moon and, of course, honeymoon!)

**CHIANG MAI**

After the chaos of the city, the adventures by the sea, the jungles of Chiang Mai drive home the point – we really are a million miles away from the world we know. This feels like real Thailand.

Everything is less than half the price (the tuk tuk driver taking us to the Wat Prathat Doi Suithep temple even shakes her head when we tell her to keep the change). ‘Ooh, the night market is not far from where we are,’ says my lady, fully expecting me to roll

my eyes, but I still need to get a ring! She loves me for this, but then any lady would fall head over heels for a man who treated her to a stay at The Chedi. At the multi-award winning five-star resort, overlooking the Mae Ping River, our suite at here is so impressive I break my self-imposed no-Facebook rule because I simply have to film it and show off. Remember the suite Richard Gere had in *Pretty Woman*? This one makes it look like a B&B. The Chedi also gives us our first call to chill by the pool and also, intrigued by the Indian dishes on the menu, go for a curry. Best butter chicken ever.

But the very best is yet to come. In all my years reviewing luxe hotels around the world, I can say without a shadow of doubt that 137 Pillars House is the best place I’ve ever stayed at. It’s that place you imagine when you’re having a hard day at the office,

a postcard perfect villa dotted with palm trees, the sweet sound of a live piano drifting in the air, your very own butler. The difference between five-star trained politeness and genuine friendliness is visible in every greeting, every smile. Even when we are laughed at by the Elephant Nature Farm for trying to book a ride today (the places get taken up months in advance), the staff take it upon themselves to pull a few strings and slot us in. After a glorious day befriendng our own elephant and trekking bareback through the deepest jungle, I couldn't be more in love. Tonight I shall propose. At the best hotel in the world. What could go wrong?

She falls asleep, dreaming of elephants.

The story ends on top of the highest treetop in the ancient rainforests of Chiang Mai. We are strapped onto wires as part of the Flight of the Gibbons adventure, where we are ziplining at breakneck speed through the jungle canopy, far too high, far too dizzy.

As we zip down side by side down a 180 meter wire, the world flying past, I pop the question. I have a temporary ring I bought at the Night Market. My hands shake. She screams.

It isn't long before her 'yes' is followed by a long, terrified stream of expletives. I can only hope this is down to the Sky Ranger loosening his grip to send her abseiling down at a terrific speed, and not because of the sudden dawning of what she's just let herself in for...



THE CHEDI



*"This is the place you imagine when having a hard day at work. A postcard perfect villa dotted with palm trees, a live piano playing sweet music, your very own butler"*

**WHERE TO STAY**

**The Chedi Chiang Mai**  
Charoen Prathet Road  
ghmhotels.com

**137 Pillars House**  
Tambon Watgate Muang  
137pillarshouse.com

**WHERE TO EAT**

**The House**  
Just Khao Soy  
Huen Phen

**WHAT TO DO**

Talk to monks @**Wat Suan Dok**; Get mighty fine drunk @ **Roots Rock Reggae**; Spend a wild evening @ **Chiang Mai Night Safari**; Befriend an elephant at the sanctuary and ride bareback @ **elephant-naturepark.org**; zipline your way over the rainforests with **Flight of the Gibbons** (treetopasia.com)



137 PILLARS

