

The beautiful south

Be surprised by empty beaches and friendly faces in Thailand's southern provinces, Ranong and Chumphon, writes Ellie Fazan

Too long overlooked in favour of Thailand's glittering islands and sultry northern mountains, the provinces of Ranong and Chumphon receive only a handful of western tourists each year. But, with the Andaman Sea to the west and the Gulf of Thailand gently lapping the eastern shores, what they lack in fame they more than make up for in good fortune.

Here powdery white beaches lie empty and the water is so clean that whale sharks live on the reef. Within an hour's drive of the coast, you can be exploring mountains and rainforests resplendent with wildlife. Plus there are hot springs, rivers

and waterfalls, as well as a rich seafaring heritage that has left a unique cultural mix evident in everything from the sumptuous seafood to the language and dress.

Best of all are the people, unwearied by overtourism, who are delighted to welcome visitors to their homeland: whether you're sharing a hot spring with Thai ladies in shower caps, or they are teaching you how to make a local dish.

It's no secret that in Thailand there is a problem with overtourism. Airports are being built in Chiang Mai and Phuket to cope with the ever-increasing influx of tourists. Meanwhile – following an example set by

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the Philippines in Boracay – the government has closed Maya Beach (of Leonardo DiCaprio's *The Beach* fame) to tourists. But these southern provinces reminded me of the

Thailand my parents took me to more than 30 years ago; life seems different here.

ON THE WATER

Pause: Take in the sweeping views of the surrounding ocean, mountains and rainforest from the top of Ranong's lighthouse. Such is the proximity to Myanmar that it also doubles as the local customs and immigration office.

Step down onto the jetty below to board the *Royal Andaman*, a traditional wooden junk, where a refreshing lychee cocktail awaits. Lined with mangrove forests bowing to the ocean, we take a route once travelled by the king in



5 OF THE BEST HOTELS

On Thung Wua
Laen Beach,
**Chumphon
Cabana
Resort's**

dive centre
prides itself
on its green
credentials.

Surrounded by
mountains and
forest, **Numsai
Khaosuay
Resort** offers
air-conditioned
villas and
an excellent
restaurant.

The family-
friendly **Sara
Resort** is the
only hotel on
this stretch
of beach.

**Tusita Wellness
Resort**

encourages
a sense of
balance by
following
traditional
Thai beliefs in
its approach
to food and
design.

**Quirky Loft
Mania** is a
boutique hotel
with individually
designed
rooms, a spa
and pool.



LEFT: Lang
Suan River

RIGHT:
Raksawarin
Public Park

BELOW:
Ranong
lighthouse



→ the golden era of mining that made Ranong wealthy, and each guest is given a traditional Baba-Nyonya costume to wear for the evening cruise and sunset dinner.

The evening ends with a Loy Prok Prao ceremony, a tradition among the local sea gypsies to thank the water goddess for good fortune. As each guest floats a coconut shell filled with marigold petals and lit with a candle, we watch them bob into the distance and reflect on this magical sight. The cruise can be organised through the Royal Andaman Facebook page, and costs about £29 per person.

Play: Head east towards Chumphon on a road that follows the gentle curves of the Lang Suan River. It's testament to the chilled nature of life here that we simply pull up on the side of the road and clamber down to the waiting rafts



As guests float coconut shells filled with marigold petals and lit with a candle, we watch them bob into the distance

below. This isn't white-water rafting by any stretch of the imagination, but rather a gentle 90-minute drift downstream, with a stop halfway for a cooling dip in the milky, mineral-rich water. The journey ends at the home of P'lek, a woman whose delicate beauty belies her age. She's been running the rafting trips for five years, and also offers guests the chance to learn how

to cook local dishes in her kitchen – all made with ingredients from her garden.

We eat vegetable fern with coconut cream, omelette cooked in banana leaves, and crispy mackerel straight from the river. It's a simple meal, but among the best we had. Rafting plus lunch costs £14 per person, and can be arranged through Malin Rafting.

▶ TREKKING AND HOT SPRINGS

Pause: Research has found that the water bubbling up from the ground in Raksawarin Public Park in Thailand contains more minerals than any other hot spring so the government plans to turn this in to the country's top wellness destination.

For now, it's a sleepy town on the outskirts of Ranong. Outside there's a free hot spring set among landscaped gardens, and across the road is →





→ Namnong Hot Spa, offering hot and cold pools, lounge chairs and a shower.

We share our baths with a handful of friendly Thai ladies bathing in sarongs and plastic shower caps. It's not comparable with the luxurious spa therapies elsewhere in the world, but it's an authentic experience and worth exploring for the vigorous Thai massage alone. The spa opens from 10.30am to 7.30pm, and costs less than £1.

Play: There are two relatively easy walks up to the 1,500-metre waterfall that crashes down the mountainside in the Ngao Waterfall National Park, but the humidity means that all but the fittest hikers will work up a sweat. Although we only see butterflies and birds on our visit, our guide says that monkeys and even elephants live here. This is a protected area, and while you do need a guide to enter,

there is no extra charge for this service, and it doesn't need to be arranged in advance. Entrance fee, just under £5.

It's a little-known fact that you can stay overnight in all of Thailand's 127 national parks, and adventurous types can even camp in treehouses. These can be booked online for £18 per night.

► BEACH LIFE AND SNORKELLING

Pause: Vast stretches of soft, white sand slink into the distance both in and around Chumphon, proof that you don't need to go to Thailand's more famous – and overcrowded – islands for downtime on the beach.

We don't see a single other western tourist, though at weekends, the seafood shacks that line the shores become crowded with local families. Krua Junjira is one of the best, and we feast on stir-fried shrimp, seabass



LEFT: Mu Koh Chumphon National Park

FAR LEFT: Ngao Waterfall National Park

with tamarind sauce and soft-shell crab with garlic.

The seafood is spectacularly fresh. On the other side of the city at Haad Thung Wua Laen

beach, coconut trees bend towards the ocean and the sparkling blue water is shallow for a long distance offshore, making it a perfect place

for families to splash about.

At Haad Sairee – hop on a songthaew (public taxi) for added adventure – there's a battleship shrine to Prince Chumphon, and the beach itself faces west for perfect pink sunsets.

Play: At Chumphon Pier, board a converted fishing boat for a day on the high seas. An early start to avoid afternoon rain means passing squid fishermen on their way home from a night on the ocean, and bigger fishing trawlers unloading their catches; Chumphon is famous for the quality of its fish. On our way to Koh Ngam Yai for a day snorkelling on a pristine reef, we pass limestone karsts rising dramatically from the ocean. With an imposing cliff face shaped like the right hand of Buddha, the island is considered sacred. In the crystal-clear water below, a treasure trove of colourful marine life darts

about the reef, including blue starfish, angel fish and parrot fish. Chumphon Cabana Resort has a popular diving and snorkelling centre that runs trips from £24, including lunch. [TW](#)

Getting there

Thai Airways flies twice-daily direct from Heathrow to Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi airport, with return fares from £543 in economy, using an Airbus A380 and Boeing 777. [thaiairways.co.uk](#)

There are regular onward connections from Don Muang airport in Bangkok to Ranong and Chumphon airports with Thai AirAsia and Nok Air.

Find out more from the Tourism Authority of Thailand. [tourismthailand.co.uk](#)

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