

DADS ON TOUR • THE ULTIMATE COOK-OFF • AROUND THE WORLD WITH THE FAMILY • TWINS ON A TANDEM • BYE BYE BABY

The New Review

THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

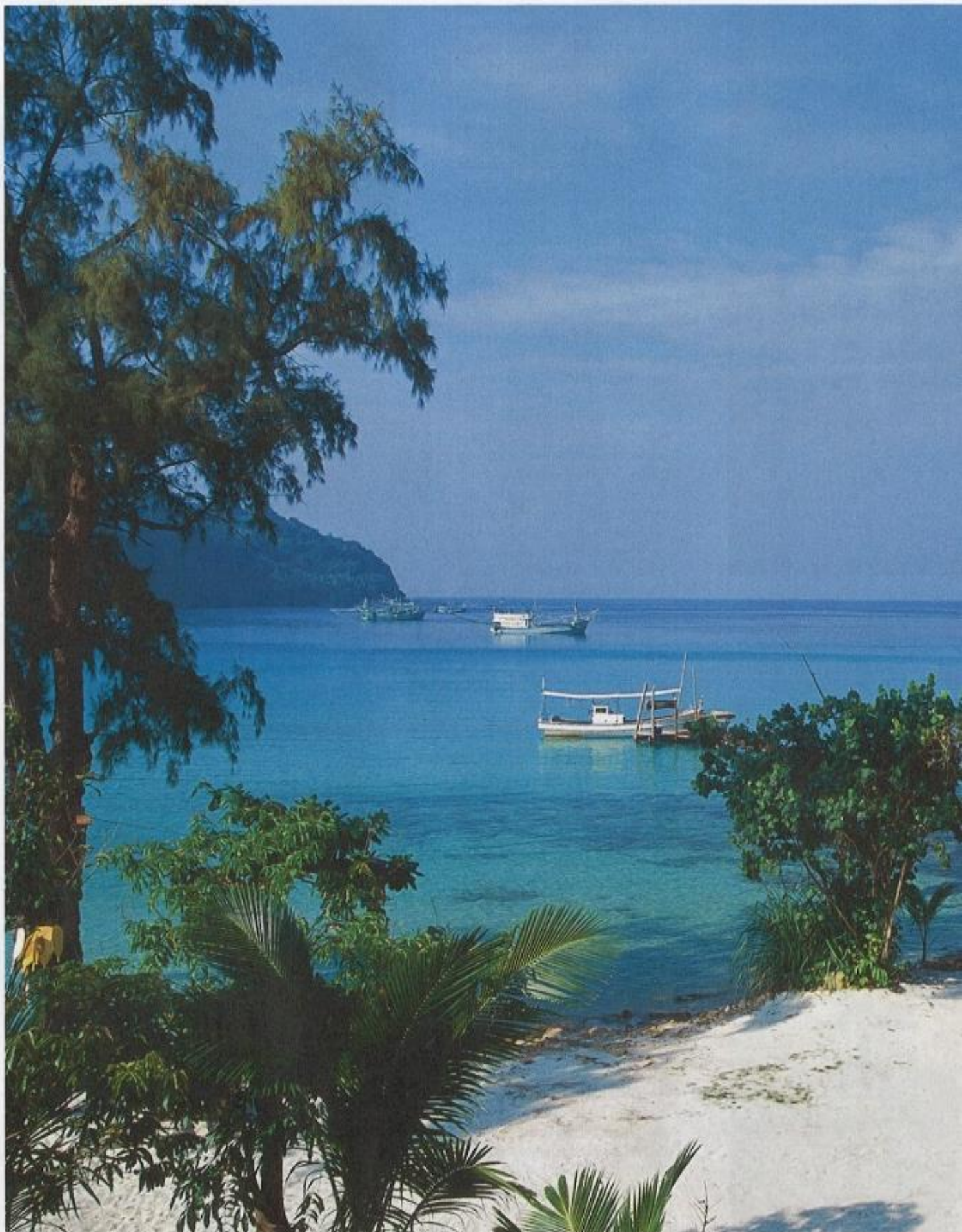
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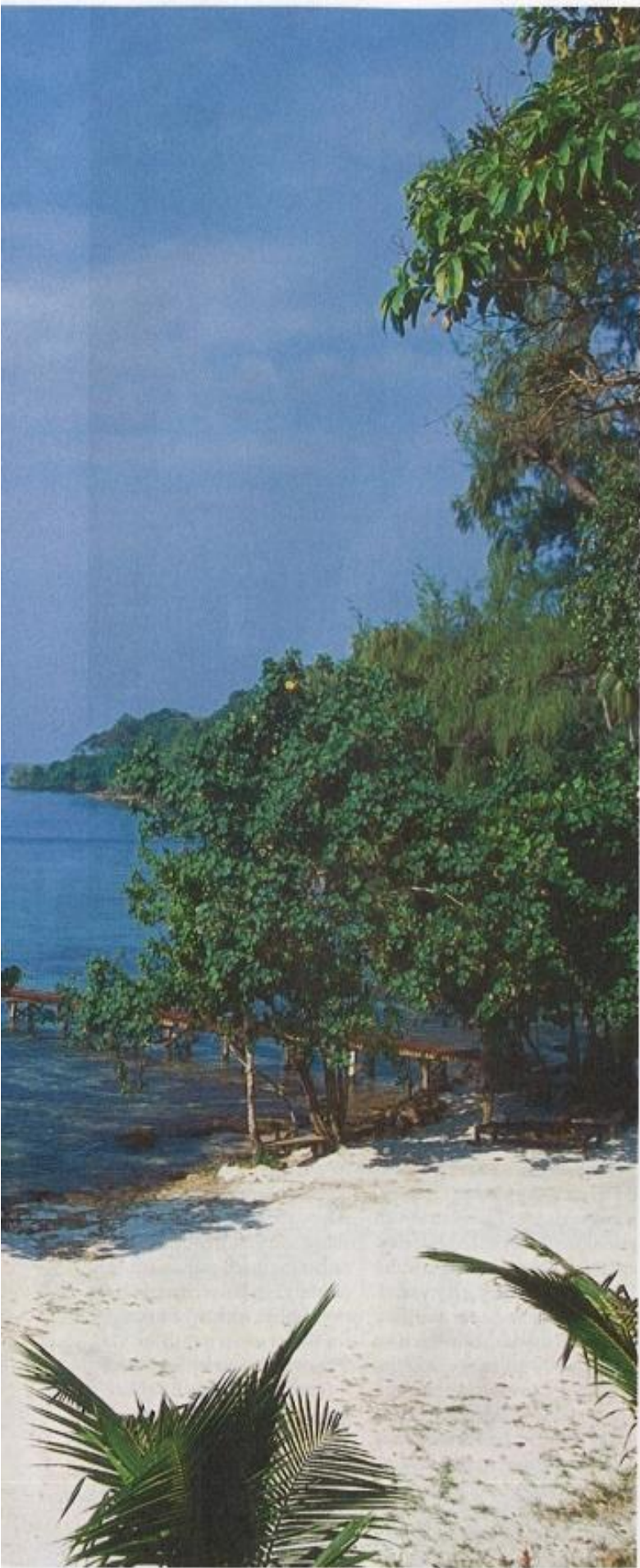


BAGGAGE LIMIT

What are you prepared to put up with in a holiday companion?

THE TRAVEL ISSUE: A BONDING TRIP SPECIAL





THE THAI THAT BINDS

For one young couple, there has always been a simmering tension in the kitchen. Would the knives be out on Koh Kood?

Travelling companion

My boyfriend – and kitchen foe

Trip 10 days cooking in Thailand

WHEN I moved in with my boyfriend, Sam, two years ago, one division of labour was easy to agree on: we would take turns to cook. There would, under no circumstances, be any attempt to make dinner together.

As a couple, we're usually soppy, much given to hand-holding; we feel like a team. But teamwork falls apart entirely in the kitchen: we bicker about everything, and practically end up turning the knives on each other. I go for a more-the-merrier, sling-it-all-in approach; he prefers few ingredients, correctly chosen and chopped. My cooking style is all speed and instinct – Sam would say it's slapdash; he's precise and orderly – I'd argue maddeningly, tediously so. Suddenly, the exact size of tomato chunks seems like grounds for calling the whole thing off.

So though we both love cooking, the idea of a break that involves slaving over a hob together never crossed my mind. Still, when we hear of a Thai island where local chefs teach you to whip up a tasty banquet, the idea suddenly doesn't sound *so* bad.

It is apparent from the moment we arrive at the Soneva Kiri resort that if we can't cook harmoniously here, we never will. The villas are nestled amid tropical rainforest around a curve of Koh Kood, one of the least-developed Thai islands, off the west coast of Cambodia, and it really is paradise. Clear, warm turquoise water gently laps at soft white sand, above which palm trees sway obligingly. And Soneva Kiri is uber-luxurious, enabling guests to glide around with effortless ease. We're whisked to the island from Bangkok via dinky private plane and speedboat; I squeeze Sam's hand in-transit: there's no way we'll fly privately again in this lifetime.

Every villa is assigned a Man or Ms Friday, who arranges everything for you, from dinner reservations →



to snorkelling classes. Ours is the wonderful Chompoo, who seems to know exactly what we want before we do. One evening, she gently tells me the aftersun has been put in the fridge; she wouldn't want me to be unable to enjoy my scheduled massage. To call this good service is like calling a diamond a rock.

As for the villa, it boasts a private pool, a mini beach on to that warm ocean, and a bathroom the size of our London flat: cavernous tubs, monsoon showers and day beds—in case all that bathing tires you out—surrounded by tropical palms. I spend most of the first day swooning, and not from the heat. Sam and I canoodle over cocktails as the sun sets, nauseatingly loved up—thankfully, the villas are secluded, privacy a must for mega-rich or celebrity guests. (These villas, by the way, are available to buy, should you happen to have a small fortune down the back of the sofa.)

Not that Soneva Kiri is ritzy or glitzy: their “thing” is barefoot luxury. Our shoes come off on arrival, and stay off till we leave. It could have been built by Robinson Crusoe, with endless winding wooden walkways through natural rainforest; the dress code is more cut-offs than Chanel. The resort also has its own enormous garden,

which provides organic produce for Soneva Kiri's three restaurants. Much more, I'm told by Chumphorn Jaorn, the restaurant manager, is gathered from Koh Kood's forest, from wild mushrooms to stir-fryable greens.

We join him on a visit to the local fish market at the brightly busy village of Ao Salad; produce bursts out of buildings tottering on stilts along the waterfront, where colourful boats bob. It's pretty hands-on: crabs snap as Chumphorn hands them to me. A long-time veggie, I turned pescatarian a year ago, and must come face to face with the living reality of that choice...

Still, if there was ever a place to make eating seafood seem an excellent choice, it's Koh Kood. Soneva Kiri's food offering is impressive, from Western grub and fusion fine dining to an ice-cream parlour and chocolate room (bang goes the bikini diet!); we even enjoy afternoon tea amid the rainforest canopy, after being winched up via a wooden tree pod, with Darjeeling and macarons delivered by zip wire. But my absolute favourite is the proper Thai food, heavy on seafood, served at Benz's Restaurant.

An atmospheric spot a boat ride away, its wooden structure seems to float over a mangrove-laced river. An exceptional dinner wipes away



Chef Lek makes approving comments about Sam's swift knife work. I'm told to be 'careful', by Ting, who hovers with sweet concern for my fingertips



memories of Tesco-bought green curry paste and gluey phad Thais. The menus drawn up daily, according to what looks good at Ao Salad's fish market; we tuck into a super tangy soup with fresh sea bass, and goong phad prik Thai dam, a peppery stir fry with prawns quite literally the size of my fists.

It is here that we have our cookery lessons. Our teacher, Chef Lek, is a no-nonsense Thai woman with a twinkling smile and ability to chop at lightning speed. We begin with a Thai classic: som tam, a spicy salad. Sam and I each have our own giant pestle and mortar, with which we mash chilli, garlic, dried shrimps, tomatoes and cashew nuts into a zinging sauce with lime juice, palm sugar and fish sauce. Shredded carrot and green papaya is added, before a taste test commences. Chef Lek's choice is swift: Sam wins. Somehow, his bashed salad even looks prettier than mine. Humph.

Maybe his precise approach is more effective after all.

Next is a tom yum goong soup, made with coconut water and prawns, and fragrant with fresh lemon grass, kaffir lime leaves and galangal. We watch Chef Lek prepare a pot; then it's our turn, cooking together this time. This should be a doddle: a lot of the prep has actually been done for us. Still, my sloppy approach proves perilous: I sling prawns into the hot broth with rather too much enthusiasm, and pick up a handful of chopped bird's eye chillies with my fingers—to the horror of our translator, Ting. The soup tastes terrific, however—almost as good as Chef Lek's. A joint triumph! And one cooked without any sniping—although I suspect it might be a different story when we have to finely slice all those shallots in our own kitchen.

The final dish is pla neung manao, sea bass with spicy, sour

sauce. The fish steams for 20 minutes while we finely dice garlic and red chilli. Chef Lek makes approving comments about Sam's swift, neat knife work. I'm told to be "careful", however, by Ting, who hovers with sweet concern for my fingertips. My dicing is artistic, shall we say, but will evidently do after being mixed with lime juice and fish sauce, the chilli-garlic is spooned over the fish, and served.

There is one principle that has always united my and Sam's diverse approach to cooking: there's no such thing as too much garlic. You would have thought that this dish, which used 10 cloves in a meal for two, might test that, but it's actually wonderful - although definitely one to share with the person you'll be kissing later.

We return to our villa honking and happy. All the dishes turned out roughly as they were meant to, and we didn't stab each other accidentally-on-purpose. We determine to make a Thai feast

for friends when we get home - together. Sam even suggests we go on another cooking holiday in the future. I'm game, as long as the garlic chopping is set against a relaxing backdrop of palm trees and luxury villas. They do say the key to cooking is in the preparation - it just turns out that the preparation I need is a few days on a sun-lounger in paradise. •

Stay for seven nights at Soneva Kiri for the price of five when booking with ITC Luxury Travel. Prices from £2,715 a person for two adults sharing a Bayview Pool View Suite on a half-board basis, including economy flights and shared air transfers. This special offer represents a saving of up to £1,620 per person and is valid between 3 April and 19 December, excluding 21 October to 9 November. Book 90 days or more in advance to receive complimentary half-board. For more: 01244 355 527, itcluxurytravel.co.uk



Holly and Sam mash chilli, garlic, dried shrimps, tomatoes and cashew nuts for a som tam salad, above; a crab from Ao Salad, right

Opposite, Holly and Sam making a tom yun goong soup; Holly by her private pool, bottom left



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