

KOH LANTA, ISLAND OF DREAMS

by Chacko Vadaketh



image taken from thai-tour

An invitation to stay at a boutique beach resort as the guest of the hot Resort Manager was too good to refuse. And with Air Asia, everyone, even impecunious actors, can fly indeed! There are sadly no flights from K.L. to Krabi, the nearest airport to Koh Lanta. Tiger flies from Singapore though. I trust you are reading this Tony, discerning reader that you are!

One can either fly to Bangkok and then to Krabi (still a lot cheaper than buying a round of drinks at Zeta bar, no wonder actors are impoverished...), or fly to Phuket and take a 3 hour ferry ride direct to Koh Lanta, including a surreal mid-sea transfer off Phi Phi. Either way the travel strain melts on seeing the elegant soaring roofs of the Thai style cottages of Royal Lanta Resort. If tiredness remains, a visit to their dainty spa for a massage should do the trick. I just watched the glorious sunset with a pina colada from a padded deck chair on the serene 3km long Klong Dao beach followed by a tasty meal at the resort's Sala Thai restaurant: succulent shrimps in tamarind sauce and a tangy, fresh off the boat, sea food salad, under the charming guidance of Sharon Dhillon, the said Resort Manager.

The island is gentle, a few bars here and there, lots of pretty places to eat of all kinds, great barracuda curry in a beach hut, yummy squid fried with garlic and pepper at Mango, a century old shophouse on stilts in the old town, even a European deli. But no frenzy of touts and tourists. One walks into the shops and looks at baskets or jewellery without being harassed. A perfect place to daydream or make a dream come true; if that dream is to dive.

I had checked out the dive centre websites that Sharon had helpfully emailed me and signed up for my Open Water PADI course with Lanta Divers. Pick up was at an unearthly 7.40am in the back of, what else, a pick-up truck full of flaxen haired Swedes. My instructor, Julie, was also blonde, but comfortingly English and a fellow former lawyer. And wonderfully patient, as I unsuccessfully tried to not breathe through my nose but only through my mouth via the regulator attached to my tank. My nose proved more problematic being too big for the centre's masks!

A second day of training with a purchased mask for large proboscises, in a stunning infinity pool on the beach, and an exam, and I was ready for a real dive. One had to initially work at suppressing the panic on suddenly being in the deep blue, and having to equalize air pressure in the ears and sinuses, but then it was magic! Being up close and personal with the corals and its denizens was an amazingly superior experience to viewing them from the surface while snorkeling. The Andaman Sea is warm, sunlight filled, crystal clear and teeming with improbably hued and shaped fish: Damsel (bright blue clouds of them that vanish instantly into the crevices of the coral as you approach and reappear equally surprisingly once you pass), Lion, Scorpion, Frog, tapestries of silver Barracuda and vivid Yellow Tailed Fusilier, Parrot that could not be called anything else, large ungainly Trigger looking like canvases of some manic modern artist; Sea Turtles, Lobsters, lilac Starfish and evil looking Moray Eels. With 3 more dives up to 18m recorded in my log book, and various skills mastered, I was duly certified!

To celebrate, Sharon introduced me to the zen Sri Lanta resort, Galle meets Ubud, for an elegant beach dinner followed by dancing the night away to cool house music at I-Bark, in the hills, the stars above us, the lights of the fishing boats below. If this is a dream, I don't want to wake up!

Royal Lanta Resort and Spa: <http://royallanta.com/>

Lanta Diver : <http://www.lantadiver.com/english/>

Club I-bark: <http://www.ibarkkrabi.com/>

Sri Lanta: www.srilanta.com

Mango Bar + Bistro:

<http://www.kolanta.net/SOUTHERNLANTARESORT.htm>