

A magical mystery voyage in Thailand

A boat trip stirs **Stan Denham** from his lethargy.

A GOOD holiday depends on what you want. In my case, it means 50 per cent lying down and 50 per cent immersed in water.

The idea of two weeks horizontal has infinitely more appeal than waltzing in and out of shops ('cause us blokes just love retail therapy), doing the cultural thing or looking at scenery through the window of a bus or car.

But the bow of a boat... well, that's a different kettle of fish altogether. Which is kind of how I ended up on the front deck of the Andaman Wave Master heading out of Phuket Town in my boardies, new brand-name T-shirt and best going-out thongs, having decided island-hopping was a better way to get to Krabi.

I must say I didn't really want to. We'd been staying for a week at the beautiful Cape Panwa Hotel on the southern tip of the island, away from the madness of Patong, and a favoured haunt of a Thai princess.

The Cape Panwa does "nothing" well. Literally. Thais reckon it's one of the best places you can find for doing nothing, unless lazing on the beach or floating in the Andaman Sea counts as an activity.

So here we are, recovering from that, dragging the baggage around on a sparkling morning, heading for Krabi and Koh Lanta via Phi Phi island.

My daughter and I dangle our legs over the side of the boat, our feet splashed by the bow wave, watching dolphins and flying fish frolicking alongside.

COVER STORY

Myriad pinpricks of sunlight dance on the sea and beautiful, lonely little islands slip past.

My wife is snoring in the air-conditioned comfort of the cabin, sleeping off two shop-a-thons of epic proportions and her gruelling ordeal at Cape Panwa.

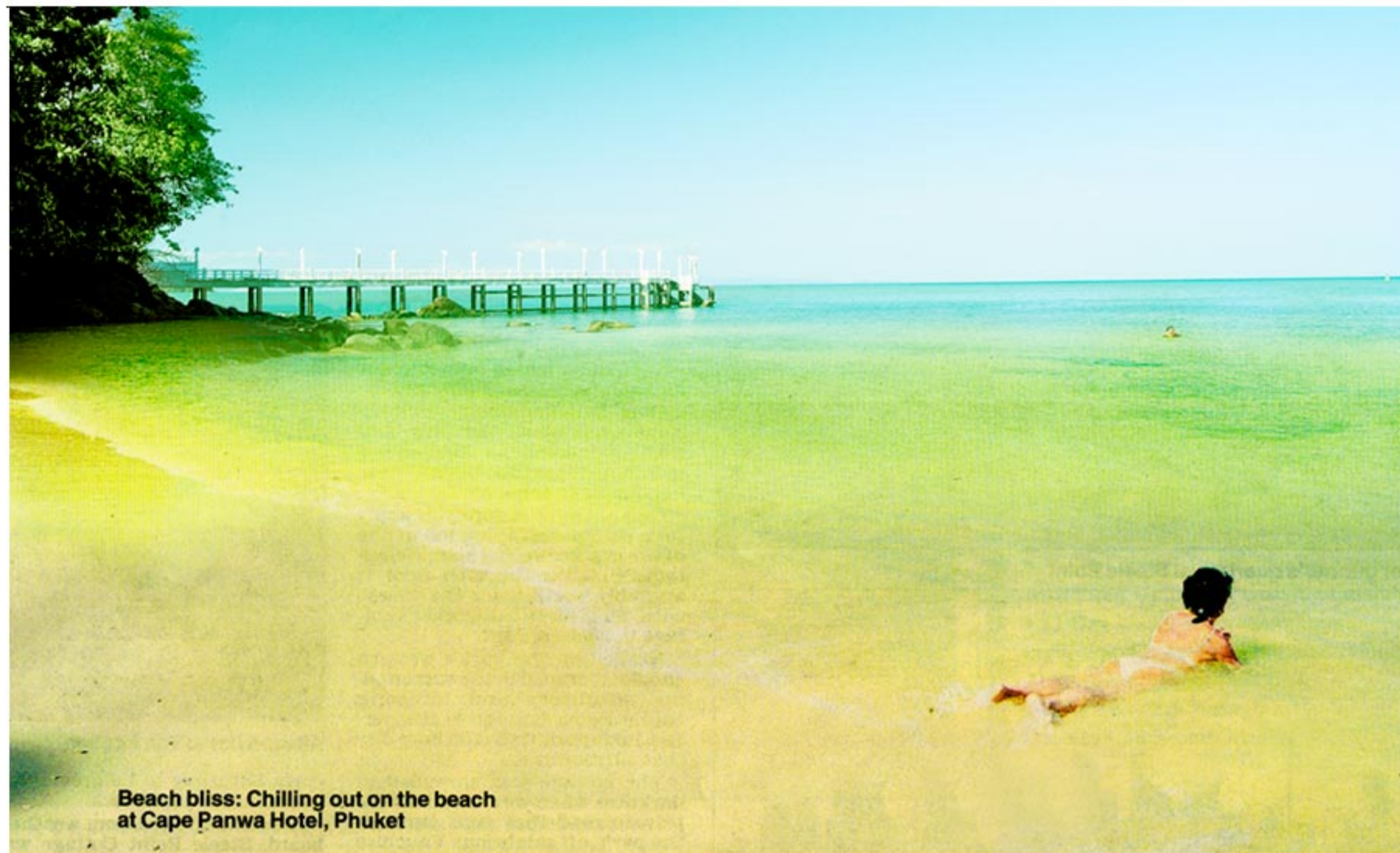
On deck, the two-hour journey is taking on a magical quality. Phi Phi is actually two islands, and can just be seen from the tip of Phuket like a mirage. Up close, they're something else.

At the entrance to tiny Maya Bay, on smaller Phi Phi Lei (where Leonardo DiCaprio filmed *The Beach*), a few boats bob on the bright blue water and half a dozen swimmers play with the fish. It's also really hot, and we need a dip too as we finally pull in to the wharf on Phi Phi Don.

With two hours before the Krabi boat, we cart our luggage along the foreshore and cross a narrow spit of land to a lagoon. Negotiating the suitcases onto the beach is fraught but, geez, that blue lagoon looks enticing.

My wife, who once took a plug-in hair dryer on a camping trip, looks chic in fair-dinkum Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses, but knows all the girls are checking them out because they look like a great set of fakies.

We swim and chill for an hour before repeating the whole ludi-



Beach bliss: Chilling out on the beach at Cape Panwa Hotel, Phuket



Idyllic view: Looking out to sea from Pimalai Resort on Koh Lanta

crous expedition in reverse, this time looking for lunch. Somehow, we end up in a giant hall full of Chinese tourists.

There's a five-course banquet like the ones you used to get for five bucks at the Chinese take-away, and I'm starving.

Just then, the security guards pounce (the suitcases!). They shepherd us to a different area of what is now obviously a hotel, and point us to a restaurant with about 50 staff and two other diners.

Lunch costs a few dollars.

That's still part of the attraction of Thailand. There's always a bit of karma, though: later, an official-looking lady on the boat

to Krabi, which is full of zonked-out, sunburned backpackers, sells me three tickets at 200 baht a go for "a private air-conditioned taxi" from the wharf to the hotel.

She was half-right: it was air-conditioned (flow-through) — one of those trucks with wooden slats and hard wooden benches.

In the middle of all this, while bouncing along a dirt road in a cloud of heat, humidity, dust and diesel, the whole thing descends into high farce.

My 20-year-old son calls from Australia to tell me he's flying to Rockhampton in the morning to visit his granddad, and doesn't have the money to get a cab to the



Nothing doing: A tram takes indolent guests to the beach at Panwa

airport and, "What should I do?" Finally, though, the "taxi" pulls up at the Maritime Park and Spa.

Krabi is famous for its rock formations, and there they are — right outside the window.

We do the sunset cruise in a long-tail boat along the Krabi River. Monkeys hop around the trees and the sky turns orange as we head downriver towards the twinkling lights of the old town.

At a floating fish farm, puffer fish blow up like balloons when you tickle their stomachs.

We feed a couple of gummy sharks, and the owner tells us the whole lot (the fish, too) had been washed away in the tsunami and

had to be replaced. Thai friends take us to the night markets for chocolate and coconut ice cream made by a famous ice-cream lady.

The hotel is also a spa, and white tents flap gently in the breeze over little baths floating on a lily-covered lagoon.

They insist I have a treatment for my sunburn: mashed-up coconut in ice water. The shrieks are still echoing around the hills.

In the afternoon, we go to the nearby hot springs. A sign explains: "20 minutes best for health", but two hours seems a better option until the driver comes looking for us because we have to take a boat to Koh Lanta

DESTINATION >>



Thailand

Getting there: Jetstar from Sydney to Phuket (www.jetstar.com) direct, then taxi or bus to Cape Panwa.

Stay: Cape Panwa Hotel (www.capepanwa.com)
Maritime Park and Spa Hotel, Krabi (www.maritimeparkandspa.com)
Pimalai Resort and Spa, Koh Lanta (www.pimalai.com)

Island hopping:
www.andamanwavemaster.com

More:
www.tourismthailand.org/

at 6pm and the wharf is an hour off. The wisdom of not doing a self-drive is obvious as we negotiate endless rural back roads.

Near the wharf, there's a traffic jam for the vehicular ferry to the island. We just cross to the wrong side of the road (not uncommon in Thailand), dodge a few motorbikes, then pull into a dirt driveway where a little boat waits.

The trip to Pimalai Resort and Spa really is an adventure.

But it's worth it, even with the slow night drive from Lanta town's wharf and the five stops for escaped and wandering cows.

This award-winning resort is set on a vast hillside and everything looks down over the beach.

The villa has a pool, and if you're honeymooning or want a romantic break, this is the place.

It seems like there's a restaurant and pool on every level, but at the beach, my daughter has seen the tsunami-zone warning signs and refuses to venture into the shore break lest she's swept away by the 5cm torrent of swirling water. We settle for the pools.

At breakfast, mist hangs over the mountainside. The view over the hills, headland and bay is one of the most spectacular I've seen.

We don't stay long enough, and depart after two nights for Cape Panwa. And back there it almost feels like home, which isn't a bad way to finish up.