

Panwa House is a beautifully restored former coconut plantation owner's home in the grounds of Cape Panwa Hotel and Spa.

TRAVELLING AROUND

Charming Panwa

It was one of those magical nights that stays with you forever.

Directly in front of us, a full moon was rising between the palm trees, shining like a spotlight and leaving a glistening path on the water from the horizon to the golden shore.

Every now and then, a longtail fishing boat would creep into our narrow line of vision, before quickly disappearing once again into darkness.

Across the length and breadth of the secluded beach and park-like lawns, the neat lines of sun lounges lay empty.

The mild night, with barely a hint of breeze, was ideal for dining al-fresco, and we were making the most of it at a long table decked in a white linen tablecloth in the courtyard of an 80-year-old Sino-Portuguese mansion.

Panwa House is a beautifully restored former coconut plantation owner's home in the grounds of Cape Panwa Hotel and Spa in Phuket, Thailand.

The plantation owner had lived here until he was 80 and still climbing palms to collect the coconuts to sell at market.

When the hotel owners bought

Phuket is renowned as an all-year-round location for fun and relaxation, but make sure there's time for the wonderful food, reports **Shirley Sinclair**

the land, they promised to keep the house faithfully intact.

Not only did they keep their word, but they also kept the floor tiles, furniture and decor items of the bygone era to create a heritage site that remains historically and culturally significant.

Hotel guests and other visitors to Phuket can enjoy the ambience of Panwa House, with an unforgettable outlook over the Andaman Sea, while dining by candlelight.

But once you do drag yourself away from the magnificent architecture and old-world charm that you encounter up the staircase, throughout the sitting rooms and on the veranda, you soon realise the main attraction here is really the authentic Thai cuisine.

The Panwa House Restaurant is a favourite among the Thai Royal Family, so if we didn't feel like privileged VIPs sitting down to this resplendent setting, our menu certainly fixed that.

Tom Ka Gai (chicken soup with coconut milk, lemongrass and galangal), was followed by Tod Man Pla (Thai fish cake with red curry and condiments) and Por Pia Tod (spring rolls). Then came a selection of mains fit for a king: Gaeng Kiew Wan Neua (green curry with beef), Gaeng Phet Phed Yang (Roasted duck in red curry with grapes, tomato and pineapple), Pla Pad Sod Makarm (sauteed fish fillet with tamarind sauce) and Choo Chee Goong (fried prawns topped with curry paste), served with steamed rice.

As well as assorted fresh fruits, the dessert was a surprise packet: pumpkin custard with vanilla ice-cream.

Just as well the hotel had its own cable car to haul us back up to the main hotel complex from the beach after devouring all that. Panwa House isn't the hotel's only delight, however.

Hotel guests can also play mil-

lionaire for a day on one of the hotel's two yachts – Panwa Princess and Panwa Princess II – visiting Coral Island or Racha Island.

Snorkel above the coral in emerald green bays surrounded by limestone headlands and make friends with a huge variety of marine creatures from inquisitive sea turtles, families of clams and sea cucumbers, to a who's who of South-East Asian tropical fish.

As well as familiar fluorescent blue tangs, parrotfish, surgeon fish and angelfish, an on-board fish guide helped us identify the long fin bannerfish, red fin butterfly fish, squirrelfish and soldierfish we had seen.

A stay at Cape Panwa certainly has its celebrity moments.

And just like Pierce Brosnan, Leonardo Di Caprio, Oliver Stone and Bryan Adams before you, you're bound to feel like a star, too.

■ The writer was a guest of the Tourism Authority of Thailand.

CAPE PANWA

Cape Panwa Hotel and Spa is on Sakdidej Road, Cape Panwa, Phuket.

Built on a hill with a secluded beach protected from the westerly winds, the hotel complex is at the southern tip of the east coast of Phuket Island, with a panoramic view of the Andaman Sea.

Panwa House is open from 6.30pm-11pm every day except Mondays.

On-site restaurants and bars also include: Top of the Reef (serving international and seafood specialties), Café Andaman (the main, open-air restaurant near the swimming pool, serving breakfast buffet, international and local specialties plus theme buffets), Bamboo Bar Beach Barbecue, The Lighthouse pub with a nautical theme) and Otter's Bar (piano bar and lounge with live entertainment).

Among the many services and facilities on offer for guests and other Phuket visitors, executive chef Khun Phudon hosts Thai cooking classes every Friday, giving instruction about the history, ingredients and preparation of the most popular dishes in Thai cuisine.

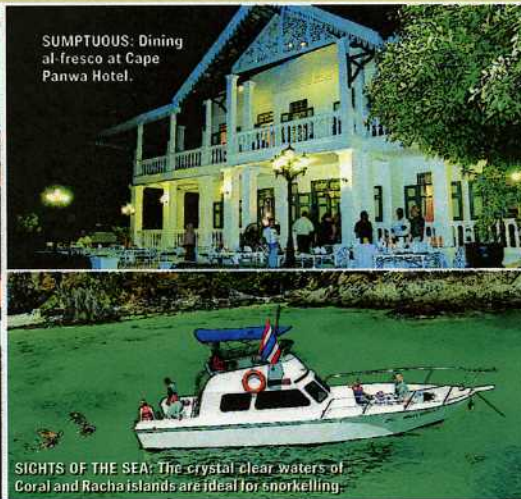
The hands-on classes allow participants to prepare different appetisers, soups, main dishes and desserts. The classes start at 11.30am, followed by lunch at 1.30pm, which is included in the price.

The two-day course is 2200 baht per guest and the one-day course is 1300 baht per guest.

The hotel shuttle bus makes regular trips to Panwa Bay Village (0.5km, every 10 minutes, free), Phuket Town (12km, twice daily, small fee), and Patong (32km, once per night, small fee) and Central Department Store (twice daily, small fee). Visit www.capepanwa.com or www.capecollection.com.



LAVISH LOUNGING: Time to relax and enjoy sunset at Otter's Bar.



SUMPTUOUS: Dining al-fresco at Cape Panwa Hotel.

SIGHTS OF THE SEA: The crystal clear waters of Coral and Racha islands are ideal for snorkelling.

PHOTOS: SHIRLEY SINCLAIR