

TRAVELAGE

EXPLORING TRAVEL FAVORITES AND FRONTIERS

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on his majesty's sea canoe service

By Ed Rampell

Only Online

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The swashbuckling John Gray is to sea canoeing what James Bond is to secret service thrillers. However, instead of an Aston Martin and Beretta, the six-foot-four Gray "drives" a kayak and wields a double-bladed paddle. And, in contrast to the debonair Englishman, the bearded, ponytailed Gray is nicknamed "Caveman" and "Ling Yai" (Thai for "Big Monkey").



John Gray (right) helps a sea-fari out on the open sea amidst the limestone islands at Phang Nga Bay.

In the early 1990s, Gray relocated his then-Hawaii-based sea canoe operation to Phuket Island in Thailand. There, the fearless waterman explored and charted the 120 or so exquisite limestone isles that dot Phang Nga Bay, the location where part of "The Man With the Golden Gun" was filmed. The 1974 Bond film starred Roger Moore as 007 and Christopher Lee as hit man Scaramanga and was set at Koh Ping-gan, now known as James Bond Island.

The transplanted Yank became legendary in Phuket for introducing professional paddling, now a popular multimillion-dollar industry for which Gray's outfit remains the gold standard.

Peggy Peterka, Los Angeles-based marketing manager for the Tourism Authority of Thailand, raved about John Gray's Sea Canoe as Phuket's "best" kayaking operation. She stressed its itineraries (longer trips than those in-and-out quickies offered by rivals), well-trained, English-speaking staff, gracious treatment of passengers and presentation of excellent food.

Korakrit Sudsanguan, a 20-something butler at Six Senses' Destination Spa Phuket, which has panoramic views of Phuket and Phang Nga Bay, gushed about the operation, saying, "John Gray is very eco-friendly; he preserves nature. I went on a tour and it was very wonderful and interesting. John was kind and friendly. The food was very delicious. It was good, excellent — the best trip I've ever been on."

Destination Spa Phuket's resident manager Melida Weber added, "I've been kayaking twice. It's fantastic, so peaceful, so natural. John puts a limit on the number of boats."

Indeed, consistent with Gray's true-blue green convictions, John Gray's Sea Canoe expeditions now eschew more touristy, crowded spots — like James Bond Island and Phi Phi, where Leonardo DiCaprio shot "The Beach" in 2000 — in favor of more pristine eco-topias. During a June sea trek, we shined flashlights, did the limbo and paddled low to avoid stalactites as our small flotilla flowed through darkened sea caves at remote limestone islets. On the other side of the caverns, we emerged in dazzling tropical sunlight into hong (Thai for "room") where we floated on blue lagoons and witnessed long-tail Macaque monkeys, white-belly sea eagles, kingfishers, mudskippers (amphibious walking fish), butterflies, etc. At each hong, Gray, an avid naturalist, regaled rapt listeners with geological and other information about the serene

surroundings, explaining the mangrove forest at Koh Roi and the creation of Koh Hong's big lagoon.

Caveman excursions include the Gray-designed Hong By Starlight, which begins midday with a kayak jaunt at Phang Nga's stunning isles, followed by a sumptuous sunset Thai seafood feast. The real fun begins afterwards: Passengers and crew create traditional Thai floats bearing flowers, incense and candles for release them upon bio-luminescent waters beneath a starry, starry Van Gogh-worthy sky, rendering what the U.K.'s Guardian calls "a spiritual experience."

Other expeditions range from two to three days spent paddling out at the hong, where adventurers who don't mind roughing it can camp out at limestone isles. Others craving post-creating creature comforts can sleep aboard escort boats.

Another option is "glamping"—glamorous camping—in style by being dropped off at one of Phang Nga's luxurious retreats, such as the stellar Six Senses or Koyao Island resorts, where clients can be pampered after a hard day's kayaking, and picked up in the morning for more seafaring adventures.

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of his kayaking operation, Gray is launching sea-faris far and wide, at Vietnam's Halong Bay, the Philippines' Puerto Princesa, in Fiji, in French Polynesia, in

Reunion and back to the Aloha State, where it all began in 1983. And in between all of those overseas jaunts, John Gray's Sea Canoe will continue to kayak from Phuket, with love.

www.johngray-seacanoes.com

The Details

Where to Stay in Phang Nga Bay

Koyao Island Resort

www.koyao.com

Six Senses Destination Spa and Six Senses Hideaway Yao Noi

www.sixsenses.com

Where to Stay in Phuket

Cape Panwa Hotel and Spa

www.capepanwa.com

Evason Phuket & Six Senses Spa Phuket

www.sixsenses.com/evason-phuket

Hotel Novotel Phuket

www.novotelphuket.com