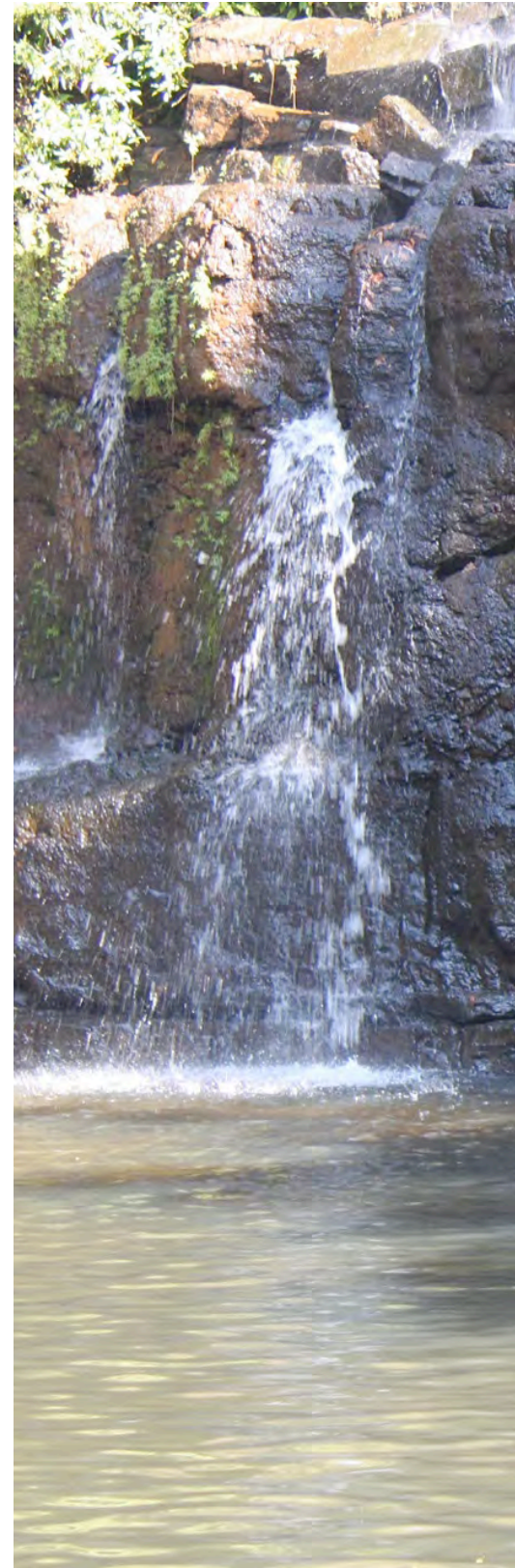


# The Blue Life of an Aquatic Nomad

By Kenneth Zak

For me, life is about water: pools, puddles, rain, lakes, rivers, and oceans. I have swum, surfed, and free-dived around the world. So, when a Thai American friend mentioned two of her favorite secret spots on a remote island in the Gulf of Thailand, I was intrigued. But when she guaranteed both the ultimate swim and seafood experience in all of Thailand, I was absolutely hooked.

The island is named Koh Kut, also spelled Koh Kood (Koh translates in Thai to island). Even with two previous trips to Thailand, I had never heard of the island. A little research revealed that while Koh Kut is the fourth largest (and easternmost) island in Thailand. It



is remarkably undeveloped with virtually no towns, banks, convenient stores, and absolutely no nightlife. But what Koh Kut promised was two idyllic, remote island resorts: Shantaa and Bann Makok.

First I had to get there, which beckoned the question, how remote is remote? In Bangkok I hired a private car and driver. Four hours later an air conditioned BMW dropped me at a nondescript,





but clean, hotel in Trat to spend the night before the morning boat left for Koh Kut. Trat is no tourist town. Instead, it's a gritty port city to the nearby islands. Still I was charmed by its authentic night market and relieved that some finger pointing and a few smiles scored some decent fish curry.

Yet I was on a quest for the ultimate swimming and seafood experience in all of Thailand. I needed to remind

myself of this as I bounced on the wooden bench of a song thew the next morning. Song thew translates to public transportation, but "pick-up truck without shock absorbers" is probably closer. That bumpy ride was followed by a 90-minute speedboat ride. Once I arrived at Shantaa Resort though, all was forgotten.

I was welcomed to Shantaa by a lovely receptionist who floated through an

exquisite, open-air teak roofed restaurant, and then led me along the hillside path to one of only 20 private, freestanding villas in the resort. The villa was anchored by a Thai platform bed leading out onto a deck overlooking the Gulf of Thailand. Behind two sliding teak doors was a lush, open-air garden bathroom, featuring an outdoor shower, full tub, and all of the amenities.

In a few minutes I was swimming and

diving in the warm gulf waters, just steps from my villa. The water was so pristine that its depth was deceptive. Shells seemingly just beneath my feet were actually twenty to thirty feet below me. I was giddy; not just in that first moment, but every time I submerged that week. Fish, crab, octopus, and turtles abounded. I even swam alongside a teal-striped eel one morning. That abundance transitioned right onto the table.

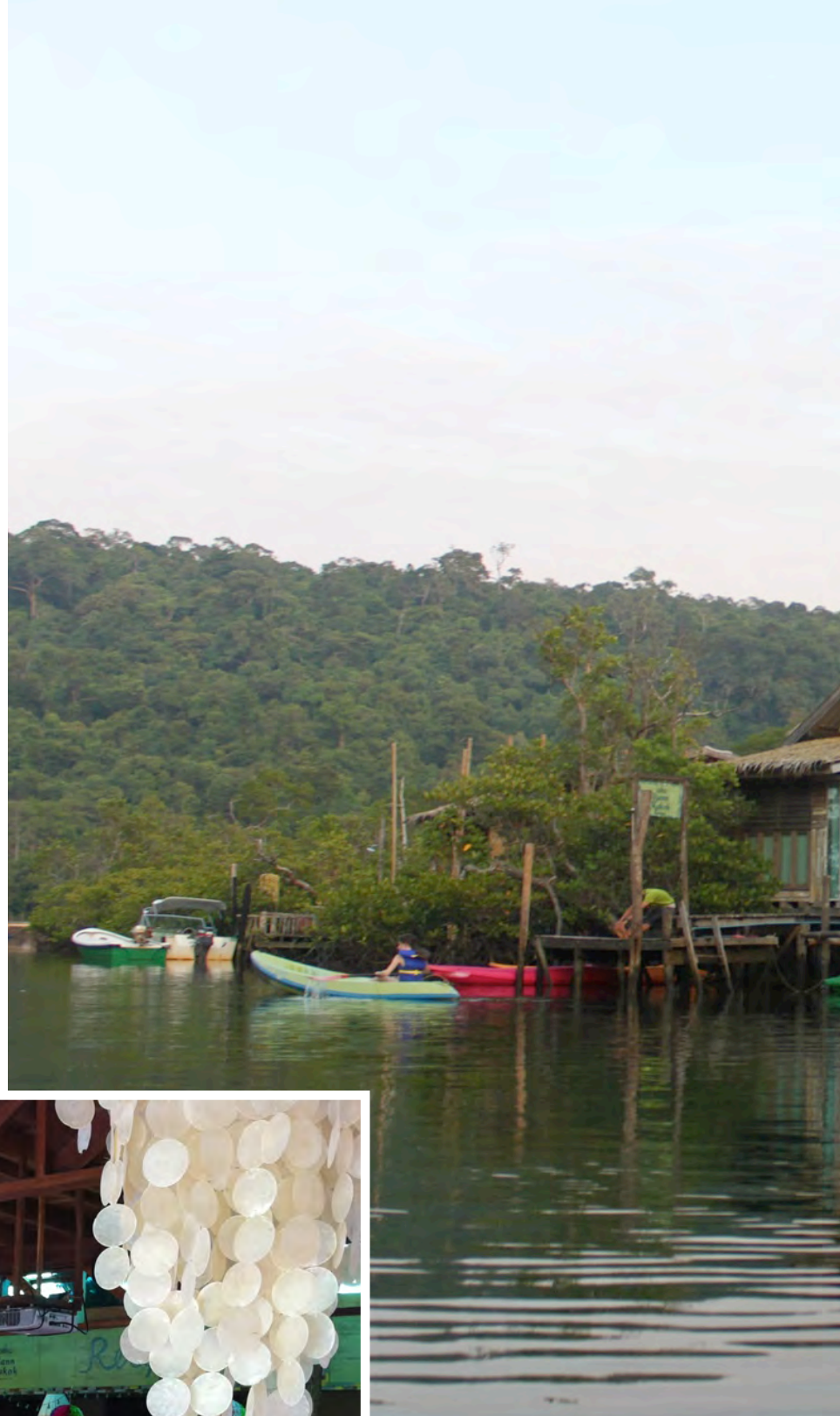




Each meal at Shantaa was like dining in a church of worshipping seafoodies. Every dish had been caught that day, if not that hour, and was served alongside locally harvested greens prepared to Michelin Star standards.

Shantaa in Hindi means tranquility, but the terms oasis, nirvana, nectar, and divine splendor equally describe Shantaa. My expectations had already been surpassed. Next stop: Bann Makok.

Bann Makok is about 30 minutes away from Shantaa by speedboat and tucked up a languid canal on Koh Kut. Even before stepping off the boat I could tell this would be a very different experience. Bann Makok is built on low wooden poled platforms above the water and nestled into a bank of mangrove trees. Eight guestrooms connect via wooden paths. Several have outdoor terraces. All have outdoor showers. The décor is colorful and funky with a Dwell Magazine-worthy quirky aesthetic.



Bann Makok had been described to me as a place where Thais go to get away (and it is in fact known as “The Getaway”). The food was wonderful – still very sea-inspired, but with more curries and authentic dishes to be expected of the region. I was still hovering in foodie heaven, upon a particularly Thai cloud.

Every meal at Bann Makok was served on a two-tiered deck overlooking the canal. Just off that very deck is where I also had the most magical swim of my life. Except for the deck lights, once the sun goes down the area is pitch black with a sea of stars overhead. One night I asked the manager to shut off all the deck lights. I climbed down the dock’s wooden ladder and slipped





Surfrider’s efforts, I designed a waterfall-bamboo gutter system, rain barrel, and outdoor shower at my San Diego home to recycle greywater for garden use.

Started over a decade ago, 1% For the Planet is a global movement of companies who dedicate 1% of their sales to environmental and sustainability charities across the globe, including the Love Blue initiative. To date, 1% For the Planet has more than 1,200 members in 48 countries that have donated over \$100 million dollars to over 3,300 non-profits.

Thus, in addition to Penju Publishing’s 1% For the Planet commitment, I will donate \$1 to Surfrider for every sale of my upcoming novel, *The Poet’s Secret*. My book is inspired by my blue travels and is a love song to our seas and the creatures that call them home, including yours truly. I hope to do more than simply enjoy the wonders of a blue life – I want to share and preserve them. I’ll see you out there in the blue.

Kenneth Zak’s debut novel, *The Poet’s Secret*, is available October 2015 from Penju Publishing. Until then, the author and poet will be in the waters off of Southern California, France, Kauai, and the Maldives.



into the canal’s warm water. Thousands of lightning bursts flashed around my every stroke, creating a spectacularly illuminated aquatic aura around my body. I was swimming amidst seasonal luminescent plankton. Flipping on my back I gazed up at the stars, laughed out loud, and swam on in bliss.

The euphoria of these blue adventures got me thinking. I had traveled and feasted in the waters of our world. Beyond the Gulf of Thailand, I had surfed in the Indian Ocean, swam in the Mediterranean, and dived in the blue Aegean of the Greek Islands. I wanted to preserve such experiences, so in addition to working with local charities when I traveled, years ago I also joined the

Surfrider Foundation, and last year affiliated my publishing company, Penju Publishing, with 1% For the Planet.

Surfrider is a non-profit organization started 30 years ago by a group of California surfers trying to preserve their favorite surf spot. It has since grown to over 250,000 members who work to promote beach access, clean water, coastal preservation, and ocean protection. In California, Surfrider has helped stop the building of a toll road that would have destroyed our SoCal coastline, combatted plastic pollution, and worked toward implementing OFGs (Ocean Free Gardens), which is particularly important given the California drought. Motivated by