

THE WEEK

THE BEST OF THE U.S. AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

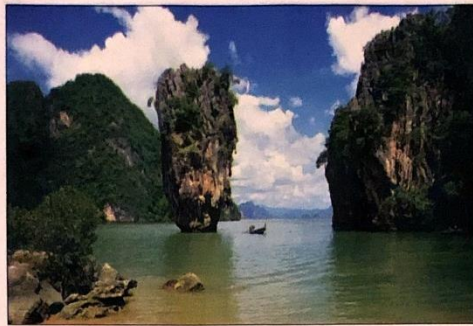
Travel

LEISURE 25

This week's dream: Kayaking into the hidden chambers of Phang Nga Bay

I couldn't resist making a return trip to Phang Nga Bay, said Jeff Greenwald in the *Los Angeles Times*. "It may be the most beautiful place in Thailand"—a 5-mile-wide expanse of sparkling water hemmed by high limestone cliffs and studded with towering islands, or *ko*. A 1974 James Bond movie was filmed in Phang Nga, but only years later did an American naturalist and his wife deduce that, at low tide, a person could paddle a kayak into the middle of a *ko* and be enclosed in a cathedral-like natural stone chamber teeming with wildlife and with sunlight that pours in from above. Now in his 70s, John Gray is still leading kayak tours into these pocket ecosystems, and I was lucky enough to join him once again.

A quarter-century after my original visit to the bay, we entered the first *hong*, or hidden chamber, through a low passageway that Gray calls the Bat Cave. The tide



Ko Ta Pu: James Bond's monolith

gave us just enough room to pass under the entrance's ceiling, and as our guide paddled, "I leaned back in my kayak like an Egyptian mummy," my nose passing just below smooth calcite formations and scores of bats hanging upside down among them. We emerged from darkness into brilliant sunlight and another world. We listened for a few minutes to a giant hornbill and the langur monkeys climbing overhead in the

trees before exiting while the tide still allowed it.

We visited half a dozen *hongs* during our three-day visit, and each had its own character—some webbed with the latticed roots of mangrove trees, some aflutter with butterflies. And with Gray's tour company handling food duties, "every meal was a small miracle"—fresh fish or prawns grilled over a beach fire, pad thai, and vegetable curries. Gray is also busy these days leading a fight against unscrupulous tour operators who threaten the bay's magic waters by bringing crowds in on motorboats and leaving behind floating debris. Only if he wins will others be able to enjoy our after-dinner routine: wading into the warm, shallow surf, "where every movement stirred up glittering trails of luminescent plankton."

John Gray's Sea Canoe Co. (johngrayseacanoecanoe.com) offers all-inclusive, three-day expeditions for \$860.

Hotel of the week



A room in the old farmhouse

Twin Farms

Barnard, Vt.

"Twin Farms is one of those rare hotels that allows its guests to pretend, for a short while, that the world around them is flawless," said Flora Stubbs in *Travel + Leisure*. That wasn't hard when my husband and I visited the Vermont resort and "found it swaddled in a fairy-tale blanket of foot-deep snow." All 20 rooms in the 1795 farmhouse and surrounding cottages are unique, and mine had clear views of nearby Pico Mountain. Though you can ski on the hotel's private slope, "looking out at the chocolate-box scenery from under a furry blanket was far more enjoyable." twinfarms.com; doubles from \$1,600, all-inclusive

Photo: Courtesy of Twin Farms

Getting the flavor of...

Minnesota's winter spirit

Whenever another brutal winter descends on Minnesota, the state's hardy residents "don't just suck it up—they throw a huge party," said Kastalia Medrano in *Thrillist.com*. The Great Northern Festival is "a 10-day spectacle of wintery goodness" that each year draws a quarter-million revelers to Minneapolis and St. Paul. The action begins this year on Jan. 24, "and by action we mean ice-carving contests, cross-country ski races, the U.S. Pond Hockey Championships, a giant snow slide, a snow plow competition, ice bars, fire dancers, live music, enchanted forests, and a cat show." Many of the competitions are open to anyone, including the skijoring races—in which each skier is pulled by one or two dogs. Another highlight is the Luminary Loppet, a nighttime gathering in which the frozen Lake of the Isles is lit by luminaries and visitors encounter fire dancers and live bands as they stroll across the ice sipping beer or hot chocolate.

Florida's Native American heritage

If you think Florida's pre-Columbian history begins with the Seminole, you don't know the half of it, said Bonnie Gross in *Florida Rambler.com*. Before the Seminole arrived, the low-lying peninsula was home to more than half a dozen tribes, and "some wonderful parks and museums" help tell their stories. In southwest Florida, where the Calusa built a thriving civilization based on their mastery of fishing and sailing, I have kayaked past dolphins in Estero Bay to visit Mound Key State Archaeological Park, a Calusan island capital built largely from seashells and fish bones. There are similar seashell middens all over Florida, and at Historic Spanish Point in Osprey, you can walk into one that has been cross-sectioned. The best place to learn about the Calusa is the Randell Research Center on Pine Island Key. On the Calusa Heritage Trail, you'll learn many surprising details, including that the Calusa used shark oil as a mosquito repellent.

Last-minute travel deals

An Ozarks retreat

Through Feb. 28, Big Cedar Lodge in Missouri's Ozark Mountains is slashing prices for cabins and rooms. Rooms at the award-winning Branson-area resort start at \$99, down from \$159, and cabins start at \$149, down from \$205. (800) 225-6343

Indulge in Turks and Caicos

Stay three nights at Bianca Sands, a luxury resort on Grace Bay Beach in Turks and Caicos, and you'll enjoy a 20 percent discount through Feb. 5. With the offer, a one-bedroom suite starts at \$623 a night, down from \$779. biancasandsongracebay.com

Half off in Bermuda

Through Jan. 22, various Bermuda resorts are holding a "Pink Sale"—up to 50 percent off on room rates. For example, Grotto Bay Beach Resort, which offers spa treatments in a unique cave setting, has rooms starting at \$124.50. bigcedar.com