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## Faasai Resort and Spa: Authenticity in Simplicity on the Eastern Thai Coast

A finalist for Wild Asia's 2008 Responsible Tourism Awards, RICK GREGORY relaxes at Faasai Resort and Spa nestled in Thailand's east coast, just hours from Bangkok, that exudes the essence of a tropical vacation without the glitz.



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Thailand offers so many tourist choices that it's difficult to settle down. After running the gauntlet of Bangkok's buzz, floating market traffic jams and excursions to historical relics, it's tough for travelers to find community along the mainstream tour path.

Chanthaburi Province is a good place to start. An easy bus ride from Bangkok, Thailand's lesser-visited east coast remains a calm presence in the storm of whirlwind travel. And Faasai Resort and Spa, situated on the unspoiled cove of Kung Wiman beach, serves up a satisfying menu of Thai authenticity between overexposed Pattaya and overdeveloped Ko Chang.

Tucked behind a forested hill that abuts the Gulf of Thailand, Faasai appears like an unmarked oasis for worn out travelers and stressed-out city dwellers. All the hustle and bustle of late nights out, full moon party festivals or temple tours ceases in this quiet village enclave. Instead you get to recharge, relax and savour a sense of community even as a stranger.

Walk to the beach and watch fishermen scoop up schools of tiny, pink

crustaceans for making the local shrimp paste. Get a hot serving of fresh squid with tangy chili sauce for a local treat. Tour the nearby fishing village or kayak the bay for scenes of living off the sea. And visit the nature park where students plop seedlings in low-tide mud to protect the mangrove habitat for dugongs.

The operative word is local. Previous visitors summed up the ambience as "feels a world away from more populated beaches" and "what made it special was the family environment". Owned by a Thai-New Zealand couple, Faasai's daily operations are run by staff from the community. And they treat you as one of the family with garden grown meals, hot herbal massages and strolls to shop in the street side markets.

A refreshing change from the hard sell of normal tourist trails, locals go about their own business and let you do the same. But if you're curious how to make shrimp paste or see how to use native plants for spices and elixirs, then it's no problem to ask.

Gardens dominate the landscape at Faasai that bring wild birds, flower blooms and infuse the resort with homespun appeal. A small swimming pool keeps residents cool beside the spa where aromatic spices ooze from hot packs for a soothing massage treatment. Most herbs and spices are plucked right out of the gardens and into the cooking pot.

For nature adventure explore the jungles and waterfalls of the Cardamon Mountain foothills on day trips or arrange for whitewater rafting. Chanthaburi remains a haven for many wildlife species including gibbons and forest birds. Or spend a day at the marine sanctuary on Kung Kraben to see how local conservation efforts support coastal resources.

As a responsible tourism destination, Faasai Resort is responsible to the community first and foremost. Surin Laopha and Bronwen Evans, the owners, are not disinterested outsiders; they are respected for their commitment to the village. They've already bought old orchards and swamps to save these habitats from Bangkok buyers.

"It's important for people to feel relaxed and get in touch with nature to soothe their spirits," said Bronwen. "We get lots of Thai people and foreigners from the city with no chance to experience nature."

The real Thailand evades most tourists because the country is so good at seducing you. Trips to bustling city markets, island beach scenes and wild nightlife are all part of modern travel lore. Finding a place to revel in the simple pleasures of community - where developers have yet to strip away all the Thai-ness to placate foreigner fetishes - is a perfect place to call home for a few days.

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