



The Ones
That Got Away

Bronwen Evans

THAILAND

Eco-resort owner and PR strategist

It was meant to be only a small penthouse built on the top floor to rent out to guests. But the plans mushroomed, and soon Bronwen Evans and her Thai husband Surin Laopha found themselves owners of Faasai Resort and Spa, a 1.2ha, 15-room eco-retreat.

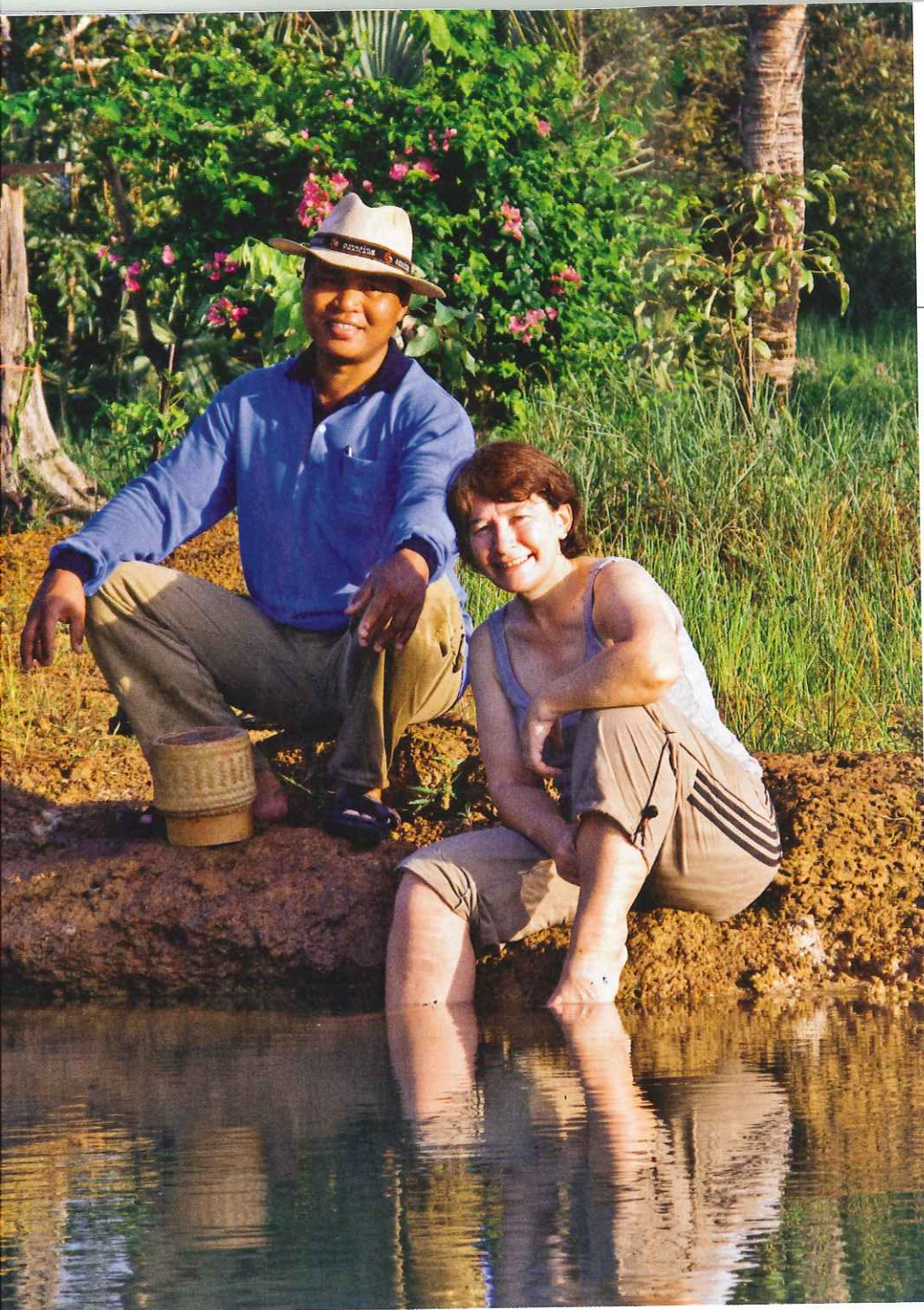
The couple wanted to create an oasis for guests because of the resort's remote location, nestled near a quiet fishing village and forest-clad hills at Kung Wiman, Chanthaburi, 220km south-east of Bangkok. A spa was a must too, as they envisaged providing employment for Laopha and his family, who were practitioners at Bangkok's Wat Pho Temple – the birthplace of Thai massage.

ANDREW DALZIEL

The tourist magnet is where the couple first met in 1999, one month after Evans moved to Thailand.

Marrying Laopha was unexpected, says the 53-year-old – as was building their “hobby” resort, which boasts sparrow-sized butterflies, fragrant tropical plants and excellent bird-watching.

The couple have been able to further indulge their passion for organic gardening and sustainable travel by developing a nature sanctuary on four hectares they bought nearby, and were delighted when the resort was a finalist in the 2008 Wild Asia Responsible Tourism Awards.



Bronwen Evans and husband Surin Laopha spend their weekends enjoying the tranquillity of their retreat at Kung Wiman, 220km from Bangkok, then return to the Thai capital to work.

After recharging over the weekend at Kung Wiman, the couple spend the working week in Bangkok. Laopha manages administration and finance for the business and Evans is an associate manager at the Thai headquarters of international corporate PR firm Baldwin Boyle Group (BBG).

Coincidentally, not long before BBG's offer in 1999 of a job as a senior PR consultant, Evans had been musing about living in Thailand. She'd won a journalism scholarship to

visit the country (as well as the US, China, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia) and was impressed with the calmness of the taxi drivers amid the chaotic Bangkok traffic, and the lush green gardens growing throughout the city's concrete jungle.

Previously, she wouldn't have imagined anything could tempt her away from Radio New Zealand National, where she'd worked for nearly two decades.

Evans says she loved being an econom-

“NEW ZEALAND IS MORE OPEN... IN THAILAND, FOREIGNERS CAN'T OWN LAND, AND THERE'S A FOREIGN BUSINESS ACT THAT PLACES RESTRICTIONS ON CERTAIN ACTIVITIES OF FOREIGN BUSINESSES.”

ics correspondent “during a period of huge change in New Zealand – the Lange-Douglas administration” – as well as reporting daily on the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

She'd joined the national broadcaster in 1980, and her first job was in Invercargill: “Not the most popular place for graduates, but there was a lot of interesting news about the national parks and wildlife down there.”

In 1985, Evans returned to Radio NZ after a three-year OE in London and Italy, first producing then editing the *Checkpoint* and *Morning Report* shows, as well as making *Insight* documentaries.

The Faasai resort isn't Evans' first foray into owning a business. When she completed her bachelor of arts degree, she started a community paper in Rotorua: “It was difficult because I did everything: writing, photography, selling the ads.” After several months, her father got terminal cancer and she “lost heart”, closing down the paper.

Later, while working at Radio NZ in the late nineties, Evans set up an internet business selling and writing about wine. Despite putting in the hard yards, sales were low. However, she's philosophical about those unsuccessful ventures: “I regard them as an education. You have to fail a few times...”



Bronwen Evans was already mulling over a shift to Thailand when she received an offer to work there in public relations.

Why Thailand? Once Surin and I were married, we faced the issue of deciding where to live. Originally we thought we'd come back to New Zealand and Surin could set up a massage centre on Waiheke Island. But I was worried he might not enjoy it. I'd lived overseas before, but he hadn't lived anywhere but Thailand.

How does doing business in Thailand compare to doing business in New Zealand? Thailand is the centre of South-east Asia and there's China's huge market nearby. Business is harder in New Zealand as it's smaller and more remote. But New Zealand does well in areas like design and internet businesses.

Another big difference is the regulations. New Zealand is more open; for example, foreigners can own land. In Thailand, foreigners can't own land, and there's a Foreign Business Act that places restrictions on certain activities of foreign businesses.

What do Thai people think of New Zealand? Most Thai haven't met Kiwis – they only make up a small percentage of tourists in Thailand. Thais who've seen New Zealand on TV say it's a beautiful place, clean, green. They'd love to go there. When I applied for residency the officer asked me a lot of questions about New Zealand as her daughter had gone to live there. She wondered why I wanted to live in Thailand.

What's the first thing that strikes you about New Zealand when you visit? I come back at least once a year and I notice it's very peaceful, very quiet. What also strikes me is I'm back home. I love how New Zealanders are natural, open, creative and friendly, willing to give things a go.

What Kiwiana would you want to import to Thailand? Many things. Vogels bread, Kikorangi cheese, flax bushes, Polynesian art (I think of the rooms in our resorts as fales). I think New Zealand has outstanding tourism businesses, in terms of promoting education and culture and showcasing the environment. When I returned recently I wanted Surin to see some of the projects like they have in my hometown, Rotorua, so we could apply them to the nature sanctuary we're creating at the resort.

What elements of Thailand would you want to bring back to New Zealand? New Zealanders love Thai massage but it's expensive. They love Thai food too. Most important is a state of mind – the ability to chill out and not stress so much. I see similarities between Polynesia and Thailand – I feel the "easygoing" stereotype is quite true. The Maori spiritual aspect of life is similar to Thai Buddhism. I think that's why I adjusted so well to this place, as I grew up in Rotorua with a strong spiritual element in my own whanau.

Bronwen Evans: CV

1970s • Graduated with a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Otago and a diploma in journalism from the University of Canterbury.

1980s • Began working for Radio New Zealand National in Invercargill.

1994 • Became one of the first correspondents (reporting on economics) for Radio New Zealand National.

1999 • Joined the Bangkok office of corporate strategy and public relations firm Baldwin Boyle Group (BBG) as senior consultant.

2005 • Became president of the Thai New Zealand Chamber of Commerce and vice-president of the Bangkok chapter of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC).

2008 • Promoted to associate general manager of BBG. Member of the Interim Asia Pacific Regional Board of the IABC.

Could you be tempted to come back to Aotearoa? Of course – New Zealand is still home. I love it. But when you're married to someone from another country, you have to compromise.

What defines you as a Kiwi? Those characteristics of Kiwis – openness to new ideas, nature-loving, creative, down to earth, seeing everyone as a potential friend, not being concerned about social classes. I wouldn't be doing what I am today if I wasn't a New Zealander.

STACEY ANYAN