

Island Dreams in the Coconut Kingdom

A charming Indochine-themed lodge opens in My Tho

TEXT BY JAMES PHAM IMAGES PROVIDED BY ISLAND LODGE



ONE OF MY Tho's most famous personages is Vietnamese scholar Nguyen Thanh Nam, more commonly known as the Coconut Monk for allegedly subsisting solely on the watery fruit for three years during a meditative quest for peace. Peace has indeed come to My Tho in the Mekong Delta but in the decidedly more luxurious form of the newly-opened The Island Lodge, a 12-room lodge set on Unicorn Island (Thoi Son), a stone's throw away from Nam's floating "Coconut Kingdom" pagoda on nearby Phoenix Island.

The Indochine-themed lodge is a labor of love for owners Michel and Francoise Scour. "My grandparents lived in Hong Gai (in front of Ha Long Bay) for 25 years working

for a French coal company. Because of all the stories they told of Indochine, when I first visited Vietnam 50 years later in 1999, I remember thinking as I was walking on the tarmac at Tan Son Nhat that it felt like coming home," says Michel.

Michel's connection to Vietnam includes a successful chicken slaughterhouse in Bien Hoa in the early 2000s as well as an adopted Vietnamese daughter. However, back in France, his dreams always reverted back to the country from the stories of his childhood. So it was that Michel and Francoise sold their food supply business and returned 16 months ago to make their dream a reality. "We could have chosen anywhere to open the lodge," Michel says. "But Hong Gai is cold

like France in the winter. We decided on the Mekong Delta because it has good weather all year round. My Tho is also just an hour and a half from the center of Saigon, so we can serve tourists, the expat community, local Vietnamese and businesses based in Ben Tre and My Tho. Also, for the French, just hearing the word 'Mekong' is mystical, dream-like."

The result is a stunning oasis of refined charm on Unicorn Island, one of the many river islets in the area. Set five kilometer off the main road, an unremarkably pretty country lane edged by coconut palms and banana trees suddenly opens onto a ridiculously gorgeous property with fastidiously manicured gardens featuring lotus ponds, gazebos and a waterfall. A few



bungalows are scattered around the grounds, but the jewel of the lodge is the open air restaurant/lounge fronting 50 meters of riverfront.

Home, But More Than Home

In The Island Lodge, Michel has built an homage to his roots, sparing no expense to recreate a corner of fabled Indochine marrying 5-star luxury with the intimacy of a guesthouse. Touches of French flair, unexpected for such a small property, are felt in the welcome drink and amuse-bouche, the high staff to guest ratio (30 staff caring for 12 rooms: eight Mekong River View rooms overlooking what Michel calls the "permanent theater" of life on the Mekong and four slightly larger Pavilions Garden View rooms), the same 100% Natural Rendez-Vous bath products found in many of Vietnam's luxe hotels, the branded amenities from bottled water to sugar packets to bar coasters, the Jacuzzi and steam room off the picturesque swimming pool overlooking the Mekong, the custom Indochine-themed fabrics and the list goes on.

"We want the Lodge to feel like more than home," say the first-time hoteliers of their favorite amenities. "We love having a long, leisurely breakfast, so we've included an unlimited a la carte breakfast. We like swimming, so we built a large 24 meter swimming pool. We like to linger, so we put in really comfortable chairs throughout." The concept of "home, but more than home" reveals itself in family mementos spread throughout the breezy La Manufacture d'Opium Lounge including vintage family photos and an upright piano that belonged to Michel's maternal grandmother. Le Comptoir de Marthe et Edouard Restaurant (named after Michel's paternal grandparents) has its own bakery where croissants and breads are freshly baked, including a batch of heavenly madeleines that Francoise whips up for the day, just because. The kitchen is presided over by Chef Patrick Berenger who's worked in the kitchens of Joël Robuchon and Hôtel



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Seafood Linguini; Appetizers; Francoise and Michel

Matignon, the official residence of a former Prime Minister of France.

I amble down to breakfast on a lazy Tuesday morning and scan the menu, deciding on Eggs Benedict, followed by a freshly baked croissant slathered with a homemade pomelo and mandarin jam sweetened with honey from a nearby farm and a cappuccino (the first of many, as it would turn out). Michel encourages me to try the Swiss muesli with homemade yoghurt, but I'm already stuffed. At the table next to me is a Irish-German couple who've now extended their stay twice already, reluctant to leave this tiny oasis devoted to the art of *joie de vivre*. The day is set aside for simply reading by the pool while watching the occasional barge pass on by. Dinnertime comes quickly and the Cap Saint Jacques fish and shellfish sour cream soup (VND110,000) is hearty and flavorful thanks to a stock of shrimp heads and fish, begging to be sopped up with a basketful of beautiful homemade bread. My main for the evening is Roasted yellow chicken with forest mushroom and

truffle sauce (VND320,000), meaty and earthy served with gratinated potatoes. *Quelle surprise* to have such sophisticated, French cuisine when the lodge feels so secluded with the lights of My Tho twinkling across the river seemingly a million miles away.

I spend day two exploring the nearby area, including fruit orchards, bee farms and little coconut candy factories. The Mekong Delta's intricate labyrinths of waterways are perfect for short jaunts by canoe, through natural tunnels created by water palms. In the afternoon, we take the local ferry just minutes from the lodge over to Ben Tre and explore the little markets and endless laneways dotted with French-era houses and filled with smiling country folk, not yet jaded by visitors. It feels like I'm inhabiting multiple worlds: in the country but so close to the city, in a little corner of France in Vietnam.

Just over an hour's drive from south Saigon, doubles at the The Island Lodge are USD170 with unlimited a la carte breakfast. Visit www.theislandlodge.com.vn for more. ■