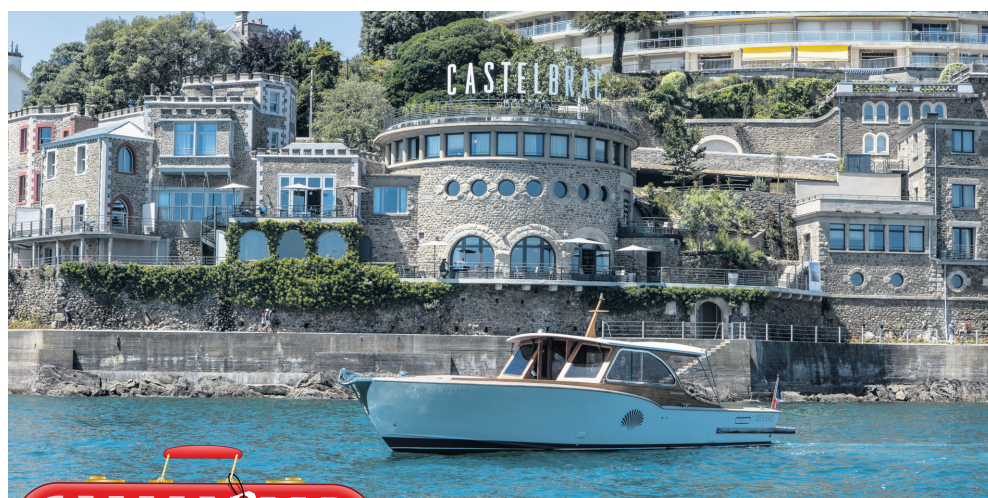




NEED TO KNOW

Accommodation at **Sri Panwa** starts from £325 per room per night in the new Habita suite, and £495 per villa per night for a Garden View Pool Villa. To find out more and to book visit sripanwa.com or call +66 7637 1000

EVA Air, a Star Alliance member and SKYTRAX 5-star carrier, flies daily from Heathrow to Bangkok. Return fares start from £465pp inclusive of taxes. To find out more and to book visit evaair.com



THE LONG WEEKEND

HÔTEL CASTLEBRAC DINARD, BRITTANY

Simon Thomson heads to France in search of salvation and seafood



live the long nights and lazy days when you get home.

It's a good idea to steer clear of the extensive cocktail menu occasionally though, as there is plenty worth keeping a clear head for. I tried sunrise yoga on a floating deck and an exhilarating Thai boxing class in the resort's own boxing ring, as well as a swim in the Olympic sized and nearly empty waterfall pool tucked away in the heart of the forest. I even (sort of) learned to cook tom yum ghoong (lemongrass and shrimp soup) and Laab Ped (spicy duck salad) in a laid-back cooking class worth it for the panoramic views alone.

If that all sounds like too much hard work – or if the late-night lychee martinis prove too hard to resist – a boat trip round Phuket's famous islands should certainly not be missed. The hotel can arrange excursions

with local operators or has its own speed boat to cater for a clientele that has included everyone from Gordon Ramsay to Kofi Annan. My trip took me through echoing limestone caves and past the famous 'James Bond Island' where parts of 'The Man with the Golden Gun' were filmed.

After a quick stop for snorkelling at the Khai islands, we returned via the incredible Ko Panyi, a floating village built entirely on stilts which incorporates a school, mosque, small market and a floating football pitch originally built by local children from old wood and fishing rafts.

It's yet another unexpected discovery on a trip full of surprises. Sri Panwa – and indeed Phuket itself – is a place where you really can believe that anything might happen. And with an entire nightclub at your disposal, it probably will...

THE WEEKEND: Hop the Channel to north-western France, and summon up the old world romance of a seaside getaway on Brittany's Côte d'Émeraude, at the quirky but luxurious Castlebrac hotel.

WHERE? The "Cannes of the North", Dinard is a traditional resort, first popularised by British tourists in the 19th century. There are grandiose Belle Époque mansions, boutique stores, recherché eateries, a salt-water spa, and a casino which takes pride of place on the beachfront esplanade. Even today it feels like a place where Hercule Poirot might investigate a society murder. Unmistakeably French, but unapologetically anglophile, it hosts an annual British film festival. Indeed, Alfred Hitchcock – who is honoured with a statue on the waterfront – was a former visitor, and it is rumoured that the Bates house from Psycho was inspired by a local mansion. Best of all, it is just minutes from the regional airport, so holiday-makers can be collected in the hotel's Tesla, checked in and sipping cocktails on the balcony within half an hour of landing.

THE STAY: Built into a cliff, overlooking the mouth of the river Rance, Castlebrac is a unique agglomeration of buildings, among them an old British aristocratic holiday home, and a former national marine research centre which included a public aquarium; a distinctive round structure with portal windows, which has now been converted into an elegant bar with just a hint of the life aquatic. There are a range of suites, in different shapes and sizes, reflecting the eclectic architecture, and retaining many unusual vestiges of the buildings' previous lives; a fire-surround featuring tiles inspired by Jean de la



TOP TIP
Fou de Bassan, Castlebrac's handmade, 12-metre, wooden motor-launch, can be hired by the day or half-day and comes with an experienced captain.

Fontaine's retelling of Aesop's fables is particularly delightful, and the monkey gleefully thrusting a horrified cat's paw into a fire is a ghoulish highlight. The hotel is decorated with irreverent panache, as well as statues of penguins that evoke the memory of the aquarium's founder Jean-Baptiste Charcot (an Antarctic explorer, rugby champion, and Olympic sailing silver medallist). Castlebrac styles itself a "soul haven", and has the unconsecrated chapel, eastern-influenced spa, and bedside collections of positive aphorisms to back up the claim. But the surroundings are so pleasant that even the bitterest sceptic will find themselves refreshed and rejuvenated.

THE FOOD: Castlebrac's restaurant, Pourquoi Pas, offers refined, sustainably produced, regional cuisine. The braised asparagus spears served with a wine, bone marrow and black truffle reduction, and a golden egg yolk raviole, was stupendous. In Dinard itself, locally caught lobster is prominent on many menus. Wander the market on a Saturday morning for all kinds of cheese, seafood, pastries, deli meats, and glorious Breton cider. Buy a galette – a buckwheat crêpe, best enjoyed wrapped around a grilled garlic sausage with mustard – then retire to the nearby bar, La Marché des Anges, for bonhomie and several glasses of chilled rosé. Head back to the hotel via Maison Moreau, for a box of delicious macarons, in more than a dozen flavours.

NEED TO KNOW: To find out more about **Hôtel Castlebrac** or to book a room, visit their website castlebrac.com. **Ryanair** flies daily from Stansted to Dinard, with tickets available for around £20.