

A DAY IN KHAO LAK

DECEMBER 2006 ISSUE



I visited Khao Lak in mid-December to follow up on a few construction sites - and promises made in a previous report. Since my last Khao Lak Report of April I visited the destination 4 times, twice in September alone. The title of this report should thus rather be "A Few Days In Khao Lak". It is a summary of the most recent visits.

Visibly a lot more work had been done in between these visits - and high season should have been in full swing. However, only a few selected properties are happy with the number of tourists who have so far put faith into Khao Lak.



Most hotels that are back in business find that the number of clients visiting is still far below those that had made Khao Lak such a huge success.

A large part of tourists staying here are divers who are enthusiastic about the fact that the Similan and Surin Islands are still top dive sites. Golfers are excited that it only takes about 20 minutes to hit the links at the 18 hole Thap Lamru golf course, just south of Khao Lak. And I am happy to report that the times of me complaining about missing lights and sidewalk leading from Khao Lak Sunset Resort to the Sawasdee Plaza are finally over. Tourists can now walk in safety and with sufficient illumination from Baan Krathing Khao Lak Resort to Nangthong Beach.

There are still construction sites. To be fair, there was loads of building work before the December 2004 - and there will always be. Khao Lak continues the development of started years ago.

It will come to many as a surprise that the title picture was taken in September 2006. A low season month. It shows that this destination can look good throughout the year. It's not only diving, golfing and relaxing that made Khao Lak popular - it's proximity with natural and cultural treasures within Phang Nga province and as far (or close) as Khao Sok national park could make it an exciting place to visit all year-round. It is now up to the hotels and businesses in Khao Lak to ensure that the quiet months offer visiting tourists the same variety of shopping, dining and entertainment during the quiet season as their counterparts in Krabi do. The last three Khao Lak visits are here summarized with hotels and beaches mentioned in a North-to-South-order.

The **Haadson Beach Resort** re-opened their doors 1st October 2006. The property's 39 rooms have been rebuilt in almost the same way as they had been before. 10 villas are located on a small island in a lagoon near the beach (though not offering sea view), 9 lakeside villas are facing the aforementioned island villas and the remaining 20 Coconut Rooms are located in 5 double-storey Coconut Villas (each with 4 guest rooms). The villas are bigger (55 sq.m.) than the Coconut Villa Rooms (45 sq.m) and have separate shower/bathtub while the Coconut Rooms have indoor shower only. All rooms are air-conditioned, feature safety box, satellite TV, tea and coffee maker, safety box, hair dryer and bathrobes. DVD players are available on request. Each room/villa has a balcony and the Island/Lakeside Villas have a day bed. The resort has a swimming pool, massage service and a restaurant overlooking Bangsak Beach. This is a resort with a tranquil natural setting most suitable for those seeking a quiet and undisturbed escape from busy life. Those, however, who like to have outside dining and a variety of shopping nearby are happier in a resort a bit further south.



Driving further down south you soon pass the grounds on which the former **Anantara Royal Coco Palm Resort & Spa** had stood. For a little while it was rumored that the owners plan on rebuilding. However, there is now a signboard advertising the sale of the land.

The **Le Meridien Khao Lak Beach & Spa Resort**

reopened quite a while ago and was operational throughout the 2005/6 season. It was one of the properties visited in early September (when the pictures were taken). All the resort's rooms are fully operational and look as good, if not better, as ever before. Landscaping has meanwhile matured very nicely and offers an excellent and colorful contrast with the shoreline. This is a great hotel for those seeking luxury, a variety of outlets and activities. Parents with kids will love the resort's kids club and offers.





Just south of the Le Meridien is the **Similana Resort**. One of Khao Lak's oldest resorts, opinions on the property have always been split. The rustic design an hilly setting has seen a loyal following over the years. The property lives quite up to its slogan "luxury of nature", yet, there should be a bit enrichment added by human intervention by way of cleaning, clearing, gardening and perhaps maintenance. I don't wish to imply that the hotel is dirty; but vast grounds require the constant attention of a gardening team so as to ensure that only living flora is seen. The beach is as good as the Le Meridien's front and the one of nearby The Sarojin, and guests can enjoy it here at a lesser cost. Some of the resort's beach front tree houses had been put out of commission 2 years ago. All rooms have meanwhile been rebuilt and are fully operational. The 12 Deluxe Chalets (30 sq.m., photo below left) are set on the hill and overlook the Andaman Sea (though trees may block some of the view). There are 19 Jungle Tree Houses and the 20 Beach Front Tree Houses are basically identical with Deluxe Chalets with the difference that the tree houses are built on sea level with bedrooms 3-3.50 meters off ground. All 3 room types are air-conditioned, feature additional ceiling fan, hot and cold shower, mini-bar/fridge, private balcony, IDD phone, tea and coffee making facilities, satellite TV and hair dryer.



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There are also 16 Similana Lodge Rooms (28 sq.m., photo right) set in a 2 storey building set on the hill. These rooms are quite spacious and, of all the resort's rooms, resemble most the "normal" hotel room touch. These rooms share most of the aforementioned features with the exception of the ceiling fan but with the addition of a bathtub (combined bathtub/shower). It's unfortunate, though, that the concrete building has the appeal of a bunker that is overgrown with wild nature. The resort has 2 restaurants and 3 bars/lounges, a swimming pool, a children pool and a health club with massage service.

The Sarojin has been mentioned in all previous reports and updates from Khao Lak. There is not much to add here, others than that this report's title picture was taken on its beach front in early September 2006 (and the shot on the right side on the very same day). Like the Le Meridien Khao Lak, this property has dedicated itself to the upper market; it's perhaps more a couple's resort rather than a family property. And due to the property's rather small number of rooms (only some fifty six residences), Lady Sarojin can be a hostess with a good ear and individual advice to every guest. Their hotel-operated activity programs are said to be very varied and classy. Beyond that, the Sarojin has somehow proven that a property in Khao Lak can enjoy good occupancy (with happy guests) in low season, too.



Further south is the Pakarang Cape. I remember having visited the new Bamboo Orchid Resort on the northern tip of the cape almost two years earlier. There is now nothing that reminds us that the resort ever existed. This side of the cape has been cleared and loads of trees and bushes planted - it appears as though the area is now used as one big nursery.

South Sea Pakarang Resort as well as the **Pakarang Resort** now appear to be in the re-construction stages. I could only see the former resort and would estimate that work could only be completed towards the end of 2007. **Best Western Palm Galleria Resort** is the only property on the cape that is fully operational. However, I would warn any customer interested to stay in this hotel of the construction works that are carried out along the long southern end of the Cape. Adjacent Takola Buri (which is set right between South Sea Pakarang and Best Western Palm Galleria) is still far from completion.

A few minutes drive south of the Pakarang Cape is the resort that was formerly known as **Sofitel Magic Lagoon Khao Lak Resort & Spa**. Finally, there is some movement - and change - visible. Even without having the opportunity of getting past the entrance I could see that some parts had been cleared and cleaned and that there are a few construction vehicles. Throughout the day I could hear the persistent rumor that **Kempinski** is taking over the hotel. A quick check with Google later confirmed that Kempinski indeed has plans to open the first phase of the luxurious 320 room property in autumn 2007. The second phase will consist of 40 pool villas, due for completion sometime in 2009.

Bang Niang Beach was one of Khao Lak's main centers; and has been working hard to reclaim this status after the Tsunami. Here was where 7-Eleven deemed it right to open their first (and thus far only) outlet years ago. Bang Niang's flatlands became home to many small and medium sized resorts and guest houses, restaurants, dive centers and even residential projects. The navy ship that was flushed hundreds of meters into the land by the waves is still anchored on its landing site and has become an attraction and reminder of some sort. A mini-golf course has reopened nearby, offering a bit more family entertainment the destination can certainly use.

The **Ramada Khao Lak Resort** is ready for opening very soon - the official opening date is set to 10th January 2007. This used to be where the Palm Andaman Resort was found. The successor property is owned by the same individual and marks a totally different concept, though still with the same family friendliness in mind. Out of 84 rooms, 76 are located in various 2-3 storey buildings built in a u-shape around large garden and pool area. These rooms are split into 3 types that are all identical in size (50 sq.m including balcony), decoration and facilities and only vary in view and one or the other feature. Deluxe Rooms of any type feature either one king size bed or two queen size beds, latter arrangement eliminating the need of an added extra bed. Each room has tiled floor, air-conditioning, tea and coffee making facilities, mini-bar/fridge, safety box, bathrobes and slippers, golf-sized umbrellas (made for two). All in all, 42 Deluxe Rooms are connected.



By definition, any room on second or third floor offering view of the sea - even if 'only' from the balcony - is categorized as one of the 50 Deluxe Ocean View Room. The 13 Deluxe Rooms offer only garden and pool view.

13 Deluxe Lanai Ocean View Rooms are located on the ground floor and have a wooden deck that extends from the balcony. Some the Lanai's bathrooms have a wooden barrel bathtub while the others have one that resembles those found at The Sarojin (see picture in "Greetings from Khao Lak", April 2006 issue, page 4). The 8 Ocean Front Villas (64 sq.m), however, won't be completed by the said opening date. Construction may take 2-3 weeks longer. This room type has separate shower and indoor Jacuzzi, large wardrobes, king size bed, balcony overlooking the beach and sea. There are only two rooms of this type inter-connected.



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The resort has a variety of outlets: The Kitchen serving international cuisine and The Ocean Grill serves hamburgers, pasta and gourmet sandwiches during lunch time and fresh local seafood for dinner. Mama's Thai introduces the four regions of Thailand to culinary interested guests. Sansibar serves like snacks and the Café and Bakery is soon serving the items that lent the outlet its names.

The resort has a rather large pool with kids pool. There is also a spa, a fitness room, and a kids club will also be added.

The Ramada Khao Lak Resort is a welcome and classy addition to the Bang Niang Area. With the Ramada, the La Flora and the Mukdara there are now 3 very good and nice resorts.



Across the small street, the **La Flora Resort & Spa** is in the final stages of completing the 68 additional rooms that are now standing on the grounds where The Beach Resort once stood. The new rooms are located in numerous 2-storey buildings surrounding a new pool. There are 26 Pool Access Rooms and 42 Deluxe Rooms. All new rooms should be fully operational by 1st January 2007.

You will certainly read more about this property and the extension in upcoming reports.



Meanwhile Mukdara Resort & Spa's lower-category sister property in Bang Niang, the **Sudala Beach Resort**, postponed their opening to October 2006.

The **Khao Lak Andaburi Resort** has been operating as normal throughout the past 2-3 years. Despite being a bit away from the beach, the 68 rooms property has found a considerable and loyal following. Shuttle bus services to beaches like Nangthong and Bang Niang are offered twice daily but it appears that most guests enjoy the quiet and natural setting of the pool-side. The 68 rooms hotels (39 Superior Rooms, 5 Deluxe Rooms, 24 Villas) is popular with families and couples who not necessarily make beach front location a must but enjoy being close to some shopping, dining and entertainment.

I moved a bit further south towards the Sawasdee Plaza area, to Nangthong Beach, where the **Khao Lak Bhandari Resort & Spa** has been rebuilt and in operation since mid-November 2006. The resort is a short walk from the beach and has 77 rooms. Each room is decorated in Thai style with wooden furnishing and features air-conditioning, IDD phone, satellite TV, in-room safety box, living area, tea and coffee making facility, bathrobes and slippers, balcony and bathroom with separate shower and bathtub.

The 45 Thai Style Chalet Rooms (45 sq.m.) are located in a row of 2-storey buildings in the back of the property. The design of these buildings resembles the second phase chalets of the former Khao Lak Laguna Resort (no surprise, since same owner and architect), but the interior is quite different. The rooms can accommodate 2 extra beds.

The 29 Thai Style Bungalows (50 sq.m.) are set around the pool area. Some of this room type's bathtubs are set outdoors.

There are also 3 Thai Style Suites (85 sq.m.)

The Khao Lak Bhandari has the Bhandari Restaurant, and Italian Restaurant, the Big Tree Bar and a Poolside Bar. There's a 260 sq.m. swimming pool with Jacuzzi and children pool and the Bhandari Wellness Spa.

While many loyal guests of the former Bhandari Resort will like its reincarnation without any doubt, I could not help but feel that construction may have been a bit too hurried and that the excessive use of wood will add to the (maintenance) worries in the future. A bit more decoration could add color and life.



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A few hundred meters further south is the **Baan Khao Lak Resort**. Although the immediate neighborhood is still in development (growing), it is very quickly evident that you are looking at a winner. The resort looked attractive already during construction in April, but the finished product is really easy on the eye. Gardens within the resort have been laid and growing nicely

The hotel opened a few weeks ago and has a bit less than 70 rooms. All rooms are air-conditioned, have mini-bar, tea and coffee making facilities, in-room safe and satellite TV. All rooms except Beach Front and Seaview Villas have tiled floor; the resort's two top room categories feature wooden floor. Rooms of the higher categories feature unique and colorful artwork that lend the resort and even more attractive look.

The 3 Beach Front Villas (pictured right) are not only spacious and offer great view of the beach and sea, they have an equally impressive bathroom with outside rain shower, indoor shower and Jacuzzi tub. A DVD player, a larger dressing area and a separate outdoor relaxation sala are just some of the added benefits one gets when staying in a room of this type.

The 7 Seaview Villas (pic right) offer either pool/garden or sea view. The room is slightly smaller and has a day bed that can be used as extra bed. The bathroom features a round sunken bathtub with rainshower and handset shower.

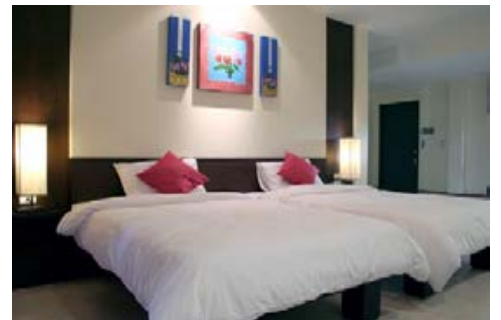
The 18 Cottage Rooms (bottom row left) are located in 9 houses of 2 inter-connected rooms each. This room-type, too, has a daybed, a balcony and a bathtub with shower.

On the hillside of the property is the only remnant of the old Baan Khao Lak Resort: a two storey building with newly renovated 22 large Superior Rooms (bottom row right) and 2 Superior Suites. All rooms have shower only and 10 of the Superior Rooms are designed for wheelchair use. Some Superior Rooms are connected. The Superior Suites are even bigger and have a second (smaller) room that can either be living room or a kids bedroom. Superior Suites have a bathtub.

Finally, 'the back of the house' consists of 16 Cottage Rooms set in four two-storey buildings of 4 rooms each. Cottage Rooms on the ground floor are connected (with one side featuring king size bed while the other has twin beds). Each room features a day bed.

The resort has a beach front swimming pool, 2 restaurants, and a bar. The layout of the resort is very attractive. The houses are arranged cleverly to ensure utmost privacy and to offer sea view to as many guests as possible. Most rooms are decorated in a very colorful and attractive way. There is only one point to note, though: Khao Lak Laguna Resort is being rebuilt on the adjacent piece of land (on the southern side). There is still heavy construction work taking place - however, I only found this work disturbing (visibly and audibly) in the back area at the Cottage Rooms.

Although construction on the above-mentioned **Khao Lak Laguna Resort** is in full swing I was told that the resort is not expected to be opening before August 2007.



Khao Lak Resort quietly rebuilt their 95 rooms and opened in November 2006. Although the exterior of each villa very much resembles those of the original version, there are some changes in the interior as well as in the way most villas are aligned. The property still provides this very unique combination of beach front and 'jungle' There is now no villa (except a Senior Suite Villa) in beach front. In the long space stretching from the main restaurant towards the Khao Lak Wanaburi Resort, there is now a compound consisting of two rows of villas (Suite Villas in the front and Deluxe Villas in second row) with various long adult and kids pools in between. Most of the front row villas offer pool access through the houses back door. All rooms are air-conditioned and feature satellite TV, mini-bar, tea and coffee making facilities.



The resort still has the 46 Superior Rooms (41-52 sq.m. including balcony, pictures right) located in the hillside buildings.

There are 40 Bungalows - 10 Superior Bungalows (approx. 34 sq.m.) and 30 Deluxe Bungalows (approx. 45 sq.m.)

In addition to the above-mentioned room types, there are 7 Junior Suite Villas (approx 95 sq.m.) with free form outdoor Jacuzzi and 2 Senior Suite Villas (approx. 103 sq.m.) with a private 3x6m pool.

Khao Lak Resort has two restaurants - the Kumpun and the Chaba and 2 bars. The hotel also has 5 swimming pools and a spa.

This resort has a very nice "where jungle meets the sea" kind of setting. Decoration of the rooms is more or less of the same rustic type as had before. The only negative comment I could make was that the Superior Room Buildings on the hillside should have been washed or repainted as they look worn and dirty on the outside.

But all in all, the Khao Lak Resort is on the right way to remain one of the destination's more popular resorts.

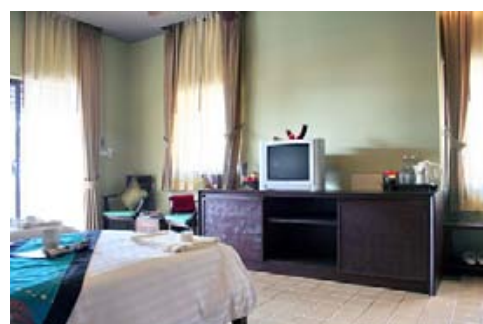


Work on the **Khao Lak Wanaburee Resort** has been delayed and first bookings are now accepted for arrivals 4th January 2007. The resort will look as good - if not better - as the previous version. With only 34 rooms (which is 3 rooms more than had previously), it remains one of the smallest properties in the destination. With a hilltop backdrop covered with dense jungle vegetation, it's nevertheless a stunningly natural setting. The beach front is a bit rockier than the one of Khao Lak Paradise or large parts of Khao Lak Resort.

All rooms of this boutique resort are air-conditioned and feature private terrace or balcony, separate shower and bathtub, hair dryer, tea and coffee making facilities, in-room safe, ceiling fan, satellite TV, IDD phone, bathrobe and slippers and mini-bar/fridge.

There are 12 Estate Rooms (62 sq.m., top row) located in a row of 2 storey buildings. 8 rooms are interconnected.

14 Manor Villas (51 sq.m., bottom row) - of which will be connected. 8 rooms are located in the gardens and the rest has lagoon view/location. Each of these feature a different hand painting on the wall. The 6 Rendez-Vous Beach Front Villas (53 sq.m.) weren't completed - so were the 2 Casuarina Suites (102 sq.m.). I therefore write more on this resort in upcoming reports. There are 2 Wana Swimming Pools. There is the Wana Dalah Restaurant with indoor and outdoor seating; the Wana Prisine or Pool Bar serves light meals while wireless internet access can be enjoyed. Said pool bar is now moved from the beach front away.



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Adjacent **Khao Lak Paradise** has been in operation for a few months now. Its owner and guests certainly appreciate that construction on the Wanaburee Resort soon come to an end and that the neighbor to the south has completed their construction.

Like the Wanaburi this resort, too, is rather small and has a very private and natural setting. The Paradise's design and decoration may be a bit more family friendly, though.

The resort's main restaurant is down by the beach; breakfasting to the sound of waves or dining with view of the sun setting is most likely everybody's idea of vacationing in a true paradise.



Khao Lak Bayfront opened in mid-November 2006, too. It has a totally new look, if one does not include the upper wing with 14 rooms. These rooms have received touchup work and look as new again. All major changes have taken place on sea level. The rows of cottages have gone, in their stead are now two rows of two-storey buildings that are extended by a few bungalows/villas on the beach front. The whole layout somehow looks very open, friendly and natural, perhaps even enhanced by the fact that you see orchids blossoming in all corners of the hotel. The main restaurant on top of the hill overlooking the new resort part and the sea beyond has only received a few changes. So has the lobby building where an internet corner has been added.

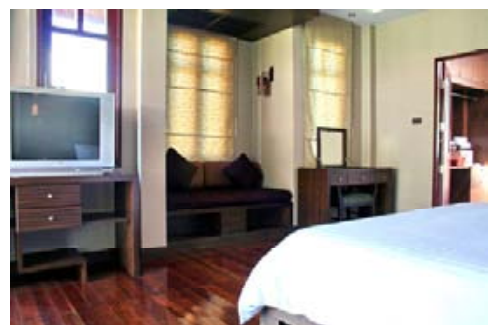


The hotel has now 74 rooms. There are the 'old' 14 Superior Mountain View Rooms, located in a 2-storey building on lobby level.

The 48 Superior Pool View Rooms (30.2 sq.m. excluding balcony, pictures middle row) are located in two rows of 2-storey buildings set around the hotel's two swimming pools. Each room can accommodate 2 adults and 1 child. Rooms feature mini-bar, safety box, satellite TV, IDD phone, tea and coffee maker and hair dryer. 8 rooms of this type are designed for wheelchair access.



Closer to the beach you find 8 Seaview Bungalows (37.2 sq.m. excluding balcony, pictures right), each featuring rain shower, mini-bar, safety box, satellite TV, IDD phone and tea and coffee maker and a hair dryer. Rooms of this type, too, can accommodate 2 adults and a child.



Those preferring to stay closer to the sea have the chance to book one of the 4 Beach Front Sea View Bungalows (37.2 sq.m. excluding the balcony). This room type features bathtub and separate shower, mini-bar, safety box, satellite TV, IDD phone, tea and coffee maker and hair dryer. As with the other room types mentioned, 2 adults and 1 child can be accommodated.

The resort now has 2 swimming pools with a Jacuzzi and a kids pool, a massage sala and pool bar. There is one restaurant. Room service is offered, too.

It is definitely good to see that one of Khao Lak's first and most popular resorts is back in business. The resort's new layout is definitely an improvement on the previous version. Unfortunately, many hoteliers have used a lot of wood for the rebuilding of their properties. I am not sure if this is the right choice of material, especially wooden flooring in a sandy setting. As for the Khao Lak Bayfront, the rooms, though comfortably and functionally furnished, have now less of a seaside feeling and could do with some more wall-decoration. But these will be minor concerns and details for the resort's loyal clientele which will surely return to this lovely family-run resort in big numbers.



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Neighboring **Khao Lak Palm Beach Resort** opened months before and is fully operational. Now with construction works at the Bayfront gone, there is no disturbance to guests staying in this hotel any more. Their neighbor in the south, **Khao Lak Sunset Resort** (picture right) completed work on their property long ago.

This part of Khao Lak was one of the initial starting point of the destination. It is great to see that the government has finally managed to build proper walkways/sidewalks with sufficient lighting so that tourists staying in one of the resorts in the area can safely walk to/for the Sawasdee Plaza/Khao Lak Center to enjoy a drink, dinner, some shopping or to simply mingle with others.



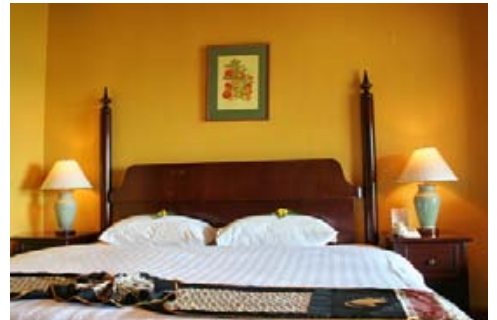
A bit further up the road is the **Baan Krating Khao Lak Resort**. The resort is neatly tucked into the hillside below the road leading down towards the Khao Lak Sunset and thus easy to be missed. This is perhaps not the most family friendly design and topographical layout, and guests having difficulties climbing steep stairs should rather decide to stay elsewhere. But if you like the rustic, natural touch, you enjoy here.

The resort's 25 rooms are rather small and would not allow for an additional bed. The rustic design reminds of the one of the Similana Resort, yet, the Baan Krating's rooms appear more tasteful and comfortable. Each bungalow is air-conditioned and features satellite TV, mini-bar, tea and coffee making facilities, safety box, IDD phone, shower, hair-dryer, private balcony and a bamboo outdoor shower.



The resort has the Sorny Bar and Restaurant, serving both traditional Thai and Western Cuisine and there's a poolside lounge.

The resort has a swimming pool. The rocky beach front doesn't make for good swimming. Most guests are therefore walking towards the Khao Lak Sunset Resort where they find a fine sandy beach.



Some 3 kilometers over the hill and further south you find the **Khao Lak Merlin Resort** (picture right), the only property completely and decently restored, rebuilt and therefore in operation in this part of the destination. There appear to be plans to rebuild some of the villas. No details are available on numbers and style. But I am sure you read more on this property in upcoming reports.

Guests staying in this resort still have to pass the **Khao Lak Emerald Beach Resort**, a property that had never opened and has also never made any attempt to even clean up. Here, too, seem to be plans to get into business - no decision has been made as to whether the original design and concept will be used or whether at least one of the wings is replaced by a couple of pool villas. Meanwhile some construction workers (most likely not belonging to this resort) have made the site their home and turned this part of the beach into one dirty garbage dump. Pity that the government's arm has not reached this area and punished hotel owners for leaving their properties in such a disgusting state. The **Andaman Seagull Khao Lak Resort** has been taken over by nature. This visual improvement hides the fact that you are passing through the ruins and potential health hazards. The neighboring **The Briza Resort** appeared to be in the cleaning/clearing stages months but it seems that the work somehow stopped.

