

One of Phuket’s finest luxury hotels is now offering families a different way to connect and explore the island together.  
*By Lindy Alexander*

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E’VE BEEN TOLD – NO UMBRELLAS.  
“Put your umbrellas down,” insists Hayden Rhodes to our group of parents and children in Thailand. We’re standing at the entrance of Khao Phra Thaeo National Park in Phuket, and the rain is really coming down. What started as occasional flicks on the leaves of the towering trees has grown into an incessant drumming of fat droplets streaming down the sides of our umbrellas.  
“We’re in a rainforest, we’re going to a waterfall and we’re going to get wet,” Hayden says. “Leave any bags, towels, phones, water bottles and umbrellas here.”  
I look down at my seven-year-old son, Arlo, whose arms are wrapped around my waist. He beams up at me. “Let’s go,” he urges. I close the umbrella. In the steamy humidity, the cool splatters of rain almost sizzle as they hit my skin.  
It’s the rainy season and we’re on a half-day excursion to visit the Bangpae waterfall having set off from our nearby base at the JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa. The outing is an optional extra as part of Family by JW; a program for children aged five to 12 years. From check-in, where children receive special welcome packs, to family walks, cooking classes with the resort’s chefs and bike rides exploring the local area, the emphasis is on families being together, being active, creative, and experiencing the local culture. Hayden, a high-performance coach, works







with JW Marriott to find activities that invigorate, inspire and energise families.

Our group definitely has a different energy now that we’ve abandoned any hope of staying dry. As we scamper along the damp path towards the waterfall, I find myself whooping. I can’t remember the last time I walked in heavy rain without an umbrella.

A river glitters and glimmers beside us, with tiny dimples appearing as the rain hits the water’s surface. All around is the steady tap of rain hitting the deep green foliage of the canopy. Nearby the calls of gibbons accelerate and echo through the forest like sirens. This park is the only virgin rainforest of significant size

swim towards the waterfall only to be propelled backwards by the force of the water. He looks up to the sky. “I can’t even feel the rain now,” he says, grinning.

The sky clears later that day and we hire kayaks and a guide at the Tha Chat Chai Phuket Marine National Park. We glide through the emerald-green waters of the mangrove forest where the only sounds are birdcalls and the gentle slide of oars breaking the surface of the water. Arlo lies back, listening to the water lapping at the side of the kayak and watching vibrantly coloured butterflies flutter overhead.

Part of the Family by JW ethos is to instill mindfulness in kids, but watching Arlo soak up the tranquility,

is a smiley, charming woman. Under her soft hands, Arlo’s stance changes. He emerges, hair disheveled, a convert. “That was awesome,” he says.

The focus on entrancing and delighting children continues throughout the resort, where a new creature conjured from fresh towels awaits us each evening – an elephant, a dog, a dinosaur and a gibbon. In our deluxe garden view room, Arlo sleeps in the plush, oversized king bed with me, but during the day he lounges on the cosy cushions in the nook overlooking the verdant gardens and one of the resort’s three swimming pools.

The pools are a highlight, especially a masterclass with Olympic gold medalist

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left on Phuket and is home to a gibbon rehabilitation sanctuary. It’s a refuge where hunted and mistreated apes can recuperate before being released back into the wild.

Soon the sounds of the gibbons are replaced by rushing water. Ahead is the 10-metre waterfall thundering down a steep, narrow gorge, cascading into rock-hewn plunge pools, the mist rising into the forest. Before I’ve even taken off my shoes, Arlo and the other kids are in the water with Hayden who guides them through the clear, shallow water, over the slick grey rocks into the pool closest to the waterfall. Their excited calls to one another ring throughout the forest.

Arlo’s eyes are shining as I swim to him. “This is the best thing ever!” he exclaims. He holds onto me as we try to

it strikes me that slowing down and being exposed to nature in this way also makes me breathe a little deeper.

It’s easy to maintain this calm and relaxation over the following days. We take a guided family mindfulness walk through some of the hotel’s 10 hectares of lush tropical gardens (conceived by renowned designer Bill Bensley) listening to the waves breaking on Mai Khao beach. We ride bikes around the nearby Phu Jae San Lake and vow to reduce our use of plastic as we fill a bag with rubbish as part of the resort’s regular family beach clean-up.

At the Mandara Spa I spend an hour enveloped in the heavenly scent of grapefruit, Thai bergamot, lavender and orange, while Arlo reluctantly agrees to have his first massage. His therapist

Stephanie Rice, which is part of a special package and program created especially for Marriott Bonvoy members. “I would have loved an opportunity to swim with an Olympian when I was a young swimmer,” Stephanie tells me after the session. She’s a natural with the kids and Arlo can’t wait to go back to school to tell his friends about his new swimming buddy.

As we ready ourselves to leave, I reflect on a transformation in my little boy. Each day as we pass staff members they put their palms together and greet us in Thai. Usually timid and shy around strangers, Arlo has surprised me. From the first day, his hands are clasped, his head bowed as he greets everyone. “Sawadee,” he says. It’s a small moment of mindfulness as we pass by. 🙏



OPENING PAGE: Walk from Bang Pae waterfall. OPPOSITE PAGE: The JW Marriott Resort & Spa in Phuket. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Arlo, (in red) the writer’s son, on a guided bike ride with Hayden (in yellow); balloon sword fights; swimming master class with Stephanie Rice; child taking part in a lighting offering.

### TRAVEL FACTS

**GETTING THERE**  
Australian travellers can fly to Phuket, Thailand via Singapore with Singapore Airlines from Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra and Adelaide.

**singaporeair.com**  
**STAYING THERE**  
JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa caters beautifully for families, with a free kids’ club, kids’ menus in all six of its restaurants and extensive swimming pools.

**marriott.com.au**  
**WHEN TO VISIT**  
The tropical climate in Phuket means mid-May to October is usually humid and rainy, while November to February tends to be cooler and dry.