

Old dame keeps her decorum

Who'd want to be Paris Hilton's pooch? The number of times that minuscule mutt gets its privates squashed whenever she picks it up is nobody's business.

Ms Hilton, it seems, thinks she's above the law as she's been known to drive while sozzled.

She should take a leaf out of a real movie star's book: act regal, at all times welcome strangers and have a refined taste in food and wine.

The star in question? Panwa House in Cape Panwa Hotel, of course.

The house is chock-a-bloc full of antique furniture, turn-of-the-century literature, ancient board games and even has real Bakelite light switches – it's a living time warp where movie-makers sporadically shoot soapy love affairs, period pieces and even a thriller or two.

Just approaching this grand old dame of the celluloid is in-it-

self a captivating experience.

The gentle sound of *kim* music drifts along the breeze and the mansion's lights are a luminous magnet in the gathering dusk.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The tram ride down the hill to the beach perfectly sets the tone for the evening with its eccentric squeaks, belches and electrical fartings, and the stroll along the strand itself through the palms is just about as romantic as it gets.

Panwa House serves up Thai cuisine with aplomb. The silk-clad staff adds a nice touch as do brass cutlery and carpets along with a wide wooden stairway and clunky Chinese furniture.

It all lends to the sense that you're dining at your great aunt's place. You know the one... She moved to Phuket in her early twenties, married a rich tin-mine mogul and bought a mansion on the beach after he moved on up



to the Great Tin Mine in the Sky.

She's not here tonight but left a message for us to make ourselves at home and we do, sitting

outside in rattan chairs on the checkered-tiled terrace.

A waiter aims an industrial-sized fan at us and the temperature drops to a pleasantly cool level, albeit with a wind factor akin to sitting atop a 747 at 15,000 feet.

This place sails as close to the rocks of decadence as one can safely get and the atmosphere – probably due to the décor – is best described as elegantly wasted.

Comparing a restaurant with an INXS song may appear a wee bit shallow but, hey, it's just that sitting in such elegant surroundings, getting wasted on vodka martinis is remarkably evocative.

After aperitifs we order a NZ Pinotage Matua 2003 and while the food arrives, swap banter about the house's history. Apparently it played the part of the British Embassy in Bangkok in a TV mini-series called *Tsunami: The Aftermath* and was nominated for an Emmy. Or was it the mini-series that was nominated?

No-one's quite sure but I hope there were no shots out of the front windows as the embassy would then have had rather incongruous views over southern Phang Nga Bay, not Wireless Rd.

The little fella gets himself a *khao phad gai* with a fried egg over the top, *sans* French fries... (140 baht), while we kick off with *yam talay* and *yam nua* (150 baht each) along with deep-fried crab legs (160 baht) that are so good we immediately order another batch while the chef is hot.

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The salads are fine with a hint of spiciness, but the star of the evening ascends in the form of an oh-my-God-just-great beef *massaman* curry (180 baht).

I'd love to know how the chef made the beef that soft and yielding. Does he bash it with a rolling pin or what?

Any way that he does it, the *massaman* at Panwa is a veritable explosion of tastes, as is the crab meat in black pepper; so spicy it makes us thankful for the fan's wind tunnel effect.

The wine has been an affable companion and as it's finished there are no two ways about it; ice cream and Irish coffee it is to finish off.

It's been, well, an experience dining at Panwa House. However, the ride up to the hotel brings us back to the Real World.

Rather disappointingly, the Nissan pickup hasn't morphed into a 1930 Silver Phantom and Patong hasn't reverted to a banana plantation.

Still, if you want a genuine whiff of Phuket's more aristocratic past, there's no better place than Panwa House. Remember to give my love to great aunt.

Panwa House at the Cape Panwa Hotel, Sakdidet Rd, Cape Panwa. Open 6:30pm to 11pm, closed Mondays. Tel: 076-391123.

