

## Interview with the General Manager of Cape Panwa

# Claude Sauter

Whilst staying at the Kantary Bay Hotel over the Easter Weekend I had the chance to meet with the general manager of the Cape Panwa, Claude Sauter, and to find out why this Swiss national is happy to settle in Phuket with his family and call the Cape Panwa Hotel home. To meet Claude, I first had to catch the shuttle bus which runs at regular intervals throughout the day and evening between the two resorts. In a matter of minutes I had arrived and was shaking hands with a distinguished looking man in his mid 30s who welcomed me to the Otter's Bar in the Top of the Reef Restaurant. Before we started the interview I could not resist stepping out on to the restaurant terrace in the warm afternoon sun to enjoy the spectacular view of the Andaman Sea. The beauty of Kantary Bay Hotel and Cape Panwa Resort is that they are flanked on nearly all sides by the sea—the setting for both is perfect.

I find Claude jovial and very friendly—it is obvious from the reaction of his staff in the bar that his management style is popular and I am instantly interested to learn more about the man who seemed pleased by the second chance to work and live at Cape Panwa. He explained that after leaving school at 16 years of age he started a 3-year apprenticeship in a famous Swiss hotel school where he quickly learnt all aspects of hotel management. After qualifying he worked in hotels in France and Germany, as well as on cruise ships but always had a yearning to work in the Far East. So, in 1994, when he was 24 years of age, he sent off his CV to hotels around the region and was pleased, if not somewhat surprised, to receive a call very early one December morning from the Australian general manager of the Cape Panwa Hotel.

"It was 4am in the morning and I wondered who on earth was calling when the phone ringing next to my bed finally woke me up" he reflects "but I quickly pulled myself together once I realised who it was". In an age before emails and the internet, Claude was interviewed by phone and fax and, a few days later, was offered a position at Cape Panwa as the Food and Beverage Manager responsible for 5 restaurants, 5 bars and 180 staff. "I couldn't believe my good luck and was so excited about the appointment" says a smiling Claude. He went on to tell me that he was asked to fly out to Thailand as soon as possible as December and January are peak months for tourists escaping the bleak winter months of Europe. To his slight dismay he learnt that his flight had been arranged on 31<sup>st</sup> December—so no partying that year with his friends—but the adventure ahead of him more than compensated for that. However, a glitch at the airport resulted in the flight being cancelled and Claude was asked to wait at Zurich airport for the next available flight. He was less than happy about this—thinking then he could slip back to join his friends and family as they celebrated the arrival of 1995. But the airline would not allow him to leave in case an early flight could be arranged and he ended up spending a rather long, sober and lonely New Year's Eve at the airport—as luck (or rather lack of luck this time) would have it, his flight wasn't until the following afternoon.

I asked Claude if he found it difficult adjusting to his new life when he arrived to work in Thailand. This time his reflections made him laugh as he recalled first having to get used to the dramatic change in climate—having left behind temperatures in Switzerland of minus 50 degrees and arriving to work in Thailand in temperatures in the 30s. He describes himself in the first month as a "hot headed young man" (quite literally) rushing around at break-neck speed trying to get things done in the European hotel work pace he was used to. He admits that he struggled to stop himself being *Jai Ron* in those early days but, thankfully under the friendly guidance of the Australian General Manager who had appointed him and who had worked in Thailand for many years, he soon realised that he must adjust himself to the rhythm and culture of his new home or he would burn himself out very quickly. He told me that one of the qualities he is pleased he has learnt in Thailand, is patience and the ability to accept that great things can be achieved in a slower, more gentle and less stressful way.

During this first spell at Cape Panwa he stayed for two and half years until June 1996 and then returned to Switzerland with his French girlfriend who had joined him shortly after his arrival and also worked at the hotel and whom he had married a year earlier in 1995.



At first they enjoyed being back in Switzerland and spent their first winter skiing in the Swiss Alps. But, when the second winter approached they longed for the sunny beaches of Phuket and decided to return in November 1997 for a holiday. Meeting up with their friends and having an amazing and genuine welcome from the Thai staff at Cape Panwa, they soon were asking themselves why on earth had they ever left. Back in Switzerland at the end of November they decided to act quickly and immediately quit their jobs and found a post office open on a Sunday so that they could give a month's notice to terminate the tenancy on their apartment in order to leave for Thailand at the end of December. They then set about selling all their furniture and telling their family and friends of the new direction their life was taking.

Celine, Claude's wife, who had been offered a job at a hotel during their holiday, started work as soon as they arrived in Phuket whilst Claude started looking for a job. He was quickly snapped up by the newly renovated boutique style hotel—the Phuket Cabana (previously the Impiana Hotel) in Patong where he worked as the resident manager for the next 5 years.

In September 2004 he returned to Cape Panwa as the resident manager and he has been there ever since with his wife Celine and they now have a 22-month-old daughter. With the mention of September 2004 I was prompted to ask a question that I suspect Claude was expecting—"How did the Cape Panwa and the Kantary Bay Hotel cope during the December 26th Tsunami that devastated so much of the area?" Claude informed me that they had been extremely fortunate as the Tsunami wave did not hit the east side of Phuket island—they were almost unaware of what had happened. As news broke later that morning they quickly became involved in the tragedy and the logistical aftermath as surviving guests from affected hotels, who were not due to leave Phuket before the end of their holiday, were transferred to available hotel rooms on the east side of the island.

"Obviously it was a very difficult time for everyone in Phuket and the surrounding islands and everyone had a part to play in the following period" reflects



Claude "We had an emergency meeting at the hotel on 27<sup>th</sup> December when the owner of the Kantary Group came from Bangkok to assess the situation. His immediate decision was that although business was bound to be affected for several years the two hotels would not lay off any of the staff. He knew that in the long run tourists would return again and he valued his staff and wanted to keep all 400 employees working so they could support their families until the situation improved. I think this was a very wise move and it helped to create a love and loyalty that is so strong amongst our staff".

Claude went on to say that both hotels were deserted for some time but tour operators started returning again in the winter of the 2005/2006 season and some of their regular guests who had been coming for years came back out of support. Winter 2007/2008 has seen both back at full capacity once more.

I asked him if the hotel trade in Phuket is seasonal and he explained that there never really is a low season at Cape Panwa—in the winter months Europeans, Scandinavians and Russians arrive to enjoy the beautiful beaches and constant sunshine and in the summer months many Australians come when it is their winter, plus Spanish and Italians tourists and expats and Thai families from Bangkok come to enjoy the peaceful setting which the Cape Panwa resort is famous for. He commented that in recent years he has noticed an increasing trend of 3 generation families coming to stay and believes that in the ever expanding global world these holidays may be the only time that some families can get together and enjoy each other's company.

I asked Claude why he felt people returned to Cape Panwa and the Kantary Bay Hotel year after year—what makes them so different to other hotels in Phuket. Having looked around both resorts myself, it was no surprise to me that Claude mentioned the words "timeless, classic and elegance" when referring to the facilities but he also believes what really makes them stand apart is the *software* rather than the hardware—in other words the exceptional service that is provided to each and everyone of their 500 guests by his staff. Obviously, in-house and outside training set the standards that both hotels aspire to but he believes it is the consistency of his staff that ensures the exceptional service year after year that is expected and enjoyed by his guests and it is this that makes both hotels so different. He also mentioned that he personally has ensured that the restaurants under his care provide the very best of traditional Thai cuisine retaining the authentic taste of a particular dish and not compromising it for the western palate. His chefs prepare each dish as it has been prepared

for generations—using secret recipes. This is appreciated as many guests have tasted *real* Thai food in their own country and expect a spicy dish such as Tom Yum Gung to be spicy. For guests who cannot tolerate spicy food, Claude's staff are trained to recommend a less spicy alternative dish such as Penang Curry if someone orders a Green Curry dish. Again, this comes down to the personal touch which Claude believes is one of their greatest strengths.

I asked if the Cape Panwa and Kantary Bay Hotels are involved at all in protecting the environment or any social responsibility projects. He assured me that both are high on his agenda. The hotels only recommend the John Gray Eco-friendly Sea Canoes adventures, which are run in a responsible way so as not to interfere with and damage the delicate ecological environment in the Paeng Na islands. His staff regularly gets involved in community projects such as cleaning the roads and areas surrounding the hotels. He has encouraged local crafts people to come and sell their products in small stalls either inside the hotel complex or on the street outside and guests appreciate shopping in these locations rather than travelling to the crowded markets of Patong Beach. He has noticed that increasing numbers of his guests are interested in the environment and in experiencing Thai culture first hand. A couple of years ago he organised a visit to Wat Chalong Temple on Songkran Day (Thai New Year) to observe the Thai custom of the gentle pouring of scented water over the statues of Buddha. Despite the 5am early morning start he was surprised that 15 people booked to go and even more surprised when over 50 guests went in the second year. He believes that the world is now in an era of *responsible tourism* where visitors feel guilty about the adverse effects that mass tourism has had in previous years and they want to give something back to the local economy and preserve the environment.

As the sun began its picturesque descent behind us I asked Claude two final questions—what makes him want to stay in Thailand? and where does he go for his holidays? The smile returns. "I enjoy the location and have a beautiful on-site apartment but I love the staff the most. They are a great team and having mentioned Songkran earlier, it reminds me that I shall soon be subjected to ice cold water being poured (and not as gently as in the temple) down my back by the staff. We have great water games on the beach between the staff and the guests. For holidays, Celine and I usually spend these back home in Europe with family in Switzerland, the South of France, Brittany and Spain. As beautiful as all these places are, we are always glad to return to our *home* here at Cape Panwa."

