



IN WINTER, Utah likes to lay claim to the 'greatest snow on earth'. In summer, however, Deer Valley resort at Park City has some of the best mountain bike trails in America.

The region around Park City is a haven for riders with hundreds of kilometres of trails. It's also the International Mountain Bicycling Association's first Gold Level Ride Centre in the world.

Just a 40-minute shuttle ride from Salt Lake City — you can actually ride all the way to SLC on mountain bike trails if you like — Park City boasts a diverse range of cross-country and downhill trails.

For a total mountain-biking beginner like me, it has been a huge treat to spend time here learning from the pros. It has also been a combination of comfort and discomfort — the comfort of staying at the classically beautiful Stein Eriksen Lodge, which takes its name from the legendary Norwegian ski champion, coupled with the discomfort of being back in the beginner zone and the fear that comes with learning any new adventure sport.

As an ardent skier, I always thought I'd enjoy the thrills of downhill mountain biking, which shares many similarities with skiing. I take an interest in Irish mountain bikers like Enduro champion Greg Callaghan and junior world champion Oisín O'Callaghan, as well as international riders like Killian Bron and Danny MacAskill.

However, following a few cycling mishaps over the years, I parked my interest in the sport.

It has been brilliant to learn the basics and be given a solid set of skills from Park City's top instructors. I started out with White Pine Touring instructor Julie Salmi, who demonstrated the patience of a saint as she taught me basic skills like stance, 'even pedals' and 'even brakes' for stability and mobility. She took me to Round Valley, a popular and safe spot for families, beginners and cruisers with 65km of trails to choose from.

Next up, I took a three-hour



Endless cycle: Catherine gets her balance and, main, Park City in Utah

A wheelie thrilling experience in Utah

A SENSE OF ADVENTURE

CATHERINE MURPHY

TRAVEL EXTRA TRAVEL JOURNALIST OF THE YEAR



lesson with Doug Gormley, one of Deer Valley's top instructors. Doug got me to work on basic control and checked how I was riding my Specialised Stump-jumper Pro bike. I loved this bike, which had a dropper post to allow me move the saddle up or down, an easy gear switch and a smooth braking system.

He taught me the key basic of 'control and roll' — riding with momentum and control — and honed in on the micro adjustments that I need to make as I ride trails. He also showed me how to get rid of my handle bar death grip by 'going heavy on the feet and light on the hands'.

Finally, he took me to the skills park with its little rollers and berms to see if I was ready to ride the resort's green trail, Holy Roller.

It's fair to say that I wasn't prepared to hit this 7km long flow trail so instead, I opted

for another lesson, this time with instructor Dan Grolley, who got me doing downhill controlled rolls and cornering in the 'ready' even pedals stance to prepare to ride easier trails like Royal Street and Tour De Homes.

When I wasn't learning how to mountain bike, I learned how to fly fish on Provo river and how to make gin at the Alpine Distillery on Park City's iconic main street. I hiked the Uintas mountain range and ate fantastic food in restaurants like Firewood, River Horse, Butcher's Chop House, Salt Box, Hearth and Hill, and Tupelo.

I got to meet Park City pro-rider Eric Porter and his son Milo, who rides like a dream and gave me a few beginner tips. Most importantly, I came away from Park City with a solid skill set, far more confidence and a desire to hit some trails whenever I get the chance.

TRAVEL FACTS

See mountainbikingparkcity.com, whitepinetouring.com, steinlodge.com, visit parkcity.com and deervalley.com

THE sleepy collection of beaches that stretch around Khao Lak are slowly beginning to wake up. The tourists have started to come back, at last.

The revival in tourism hasn't been evenly felt across a country that is heavily dependent on the influx of foreign visitors each year. While the popular large island of Phuket in southern Thailand bounced back quickly, other areas have yet to see the tourists return, leading to high vacancy rates and, in turn, competitive pricing for luxurious getaways.

Phuket has a direct flight to London Heathrow and is connected to the mainland by a short bridge crossing. From Phuket I make the 80km hour-long journey by car to Khao Lak. I'm staying at the newly-opened Avani+ five-star resort. It's expansive with modern stylings.

Golf buggies are on hand to ferry guests throughout the campus if requested, while palm trees offer shade if you opt to walk. My spacious two-bedroom suite has a sprawling lounge sofa and its own secluded private pool.

After being tested for Covid-19 at the airport, I have to isolate in my suite until the results come in. I order a pad thai, with locally sourced prawns, from room service and enjoy my night in isolation with the bottle of prosecco that was waiting for me upon my arrival. No hardship.

This requirement has since ended and fully-vaccinated travellers now only need to show proof of vaccination and an insurance policy with at least €10,000 coverage.

My negative test is confirmed overnight and in the morning I walk to the sleek open-plan Elements restaurant. The breakfast bar is spacious and split between indoor and outdoor seating, overlooking one of the communal pools. Chefs are on hand to make eggs to your desired specification, or the option of an array of stir-fry noodle dishes that would be more associated with later in the day in western culture.

I can't bring myself to have any of the spicier options in the morning, so I stick to an omelette and a selection of fruit. The soft and sweet-tasting dragon fruit is a personal favourite.

Our evening dining is at The Beach House restaurant, which offers a blend of local and international options. I try a Thai white wine, a spring chenin blanc, from the Khao Yai region in the north of the country. Its light, fresh taste offers a nice balance to some of the hotter dishes — the Moo Kua Kling, stir-fried minced kurobuta pork with young pepper corn, was simply too hot to handle for me.

The back entrance to my suite is just 20m from the beach that the resort backs out on to. The warm Andaman Sea is a welcome change from the uninviting Irish Sea. The water is particularly calm this side of the bay. Hammocks hang between the palm trees that offer the

option of shade. The resort also boasts an impressive gym and climbing wall for those feeling the urge to work out while on their travels.

A kids' water play area and indoor kids' club prove that this self-contained resort is ideal for a family holiday.

The jewel in the crown of this new resort is undoubtedly its spa. The tranquil oasis, nestled away in a quiet corner of the site is the perfect place to unwind. I am treated to two full body massages throughout my stay and fall asleep during both.

There is a strong Chinese cultural influence in Khao Lak, which is evident in the ornate temples with prominent dragon statues and, of course, the food, which is spicier than in other parts of the country.

My visit at the start of May marked the start of rainy season but Khao Lak has plenty to offer all year round. Memories Beach is an idyllic setting from which to watch the sun set, but while the light remains, it is a popular hotspot with surfers.

The waves improve during rainy season, drawing a different type of traveller to the area. Electronic beats pulsate from a bar that has been built inside an old boat on the beach that truly is a surfers' paradise. As darkness falls, the surfboards are swapped for skateboards on an illuminated skate park at the edge of the bars.

I didn't have time to brave the surf conditions but I did explore the 'Little Amazon' of Khao Lak on a bamboo raft along the Wang Kiang Ku river. We snake down the winding waterway, which becomes narrowed by natural rock barriers and meanders.

Our captain is keen to point out the — hopefully — sleeping mangrove snakes in the trees above us. 'They only have mild venom,' he says and is surprised when his description offers no reassurance to his passengers.

Our bamboo raft moves slowly and gently for the most part, but occasional dips lead to a brief faster pace on our vessel that seems to inhale and exhale water as it makes quick descents.

In Khao Lak, more so than other areas of the country, you are aware of the devastation caused by the tsunami in December 2004. This was the worst affected area in Thailand.

There are reminders of the tragic day everywhere. There's a tsunami victim cemetery, where unidentified bodies are marked with a stone. Others are still being held in a cooling chamber in the hope relatives will one day come and identify them.

A police patrol boat that was 1.5km out in the Andaman Sea when the tsunami hit was washed 3km inland, where it rests as a memorial to those who perished on the day that has been etched into the psyche.

Leaving Khao Lak, I drive through winding hills on a four-hour drive, followed by a short ferry journey on to the slow paced island of Koh Lanta. The Avani+ Koh Lanta Krabi resort is utterly breathtaking. The Cliff restaurant

I explore the 'Little Amazon' of Khao Lak on a bamboo raft