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This aerial photo shows empty swimming pools in a row of hotels on Patong beach in Phuket.



Women sit in front of a sign on Patong beach in Phuket.



This aerial photo shows a near-empty main road along Patong beach in Phuket. A private infinity pool, gourmet meals... and round-the-clock surveillance from a 'war room'—the first foreigners to arrive in Thailand will be ensconced in luxury conditions under some of the strictest quarantine rules in the world. — AFP photos

'Gilded cage': Private pools, fancy meals in Thai luxury quarantine

A private infinity pool, gourmet meals and two temperature checks a day. Welcome to five-star quarantine in Thailand, where well-heeled tourists can live in luxury while obeying some of the world's strictest anti-coronavirus measures. After barring visitors for six months, the tourism-reliant country is reopening to a small number of holiday-makers, with the first batch arriving in Phuket, a popular resort island, in the coming weeks.

But before enjoying the beaches, the 300 tourists from China and Scandinavia will have to complete 14 days of compulsory quarantine, including two coronavirus tests, overseen by a "war room" of doctors and security guards. "It will be comfortable but I am afraid I might be anxious because of the confinement," said Jean-François, a French retiree living in Sweden who hopes to escape the winter in the kingdom.

"I do wonder if Thailand is doing a bit too much," he said. At The Senses Resort overlooking Phuket's Patong Bay, 16 villas have been specially prepared for quarantine guests. The villas, which are up to 220 square meters were redesigned, getting rid of cushioned surfaces to make disinfecting easier, while CCTV security cameras have been installed at the entrances. Employees



Photo shows a villa that has been converted for use as an alternative state quarantine (ASQ) room for incoming overseas tourists at The Senses Resort on Patong beach in Phuket.

have also received training at a hospital in how to spot infections, and given personal protective equipment to deliver room-service meals.

'Not much profit'

"We won't make much profit from these special clients because of the expenses involved," says hotel owner Suppachoke Laongphet. But "we had to

find other sources of income to support our staff and the local economy". His resort is one of nine properties in Phuket - mostly luxury hotels - with government approval for quarantining guests.

Upmarket quarantine does not come cheap: confinement at The Senses runs to a hefty \$5,300, or \$18,700 for a family of four. If the Phuket model proves successful, the government will attempt to

replicate it in the rest of the country. Once visitors finish quarantine, they can stay and travel freely for three to nine months on a special visa created to revive tourism. Expectations for a record 40 million visitors this year were dashed after the coronavirus put global travel on hold, sending Thailand's economy into free-fall.

Border closures in April meant an immediate freeze to the incomes of millions of Thais working in the sector - with knock-on effects on the service and restaurant industries. Before the pandemic, tourism generated 93 percent of Phuket's income. Today, nearly all hotels and more than 70 percent of the island's businesses are shuttered, officials say. But Thailand has emerged relatively unscathed from the virus with just 59 deaths, and authorities are hoping travellers can be lured back despite having to abide by strict — and costly — quarantine measures.

Police on call

The number of visitors under the new visa scheme will likely be limited - "just those with the means and who wish to stay several months in our country", says Kongsak Khoopongsakorn, president of the Thai Hotel Association's southern chapter. But a tourism revival - however

small - is sorely needed, he says. "This is not what will sustainably improve the economy of the country but it allows us to be patient."

At The Senses resort, visitors will wake up to a view of the island's lush sloping mountains and can swim laps in each villa's infinity pool. But attempting to leave the room could bring police at a guest's door within 15 minutes, said Thanchanok Pramkull, the hotel's deputy commercial director, while an infected guest can be taken to hospital within half-an-hour.

Completing quarantine does not ensure unfettered freedom - Thai premier Prayut Chan-O-cha has said visitors' whereabouts will continue to be tracked via mobile phone apps. But the strict rules have not deterred interest. About 20 people from India and Europe have already contacted the hotel since it got approval for the program. "It is effectively a gilded cage," says a 50-year-old Danish visitor planning a stay at The Senses, who declined to be named. "But it's worth it. After the quarantine we will be able to enjoy beautiful sunsets in one of the safest places in the world for COVID." — AFP



Passers-by shelter from the rain under an umbrella, walk past a cineworld cinema in Leicester Square in central London. Cineworld is set to close its 128 UK sites in the coming weeks. — AFP

Cineworld brings down curtain on US, UK theatres

Cineworld, the world's second-biggest cinema chain, will close its UK and US movie theatres this week, leaving as many as 45,000 workers unemployed, as it fights a coronavirus-related collapse in film releases and cinema-going. The company said the reluctance of studios to go ahead with major releases such as the new James Bond film had left it no choice but to close all 536 Regal theatres in the US and its 127 Cineworld and Picturehouse theatres in the UK from Oct 8.

Cineworld Chief Executive Mooky Greidinger told Sky News that the operations might resume in "two months, or a bit longer". Movies including the superhero sequel "Wonder Woman 1984" are

slated for a Christmas Day release. "From a liquidity point of view, we were bleeding much bigger amounts when we are open than when we were closed," Greidinger said. Cineworld's statement yesterday, confirming leaks over the weekend, spelt out the scale of job losses from its move, which affects thousands of ancillary staff including cleaners and security as well as its own employees. Shares fell as much as 60% to an all-time low within ten minutes of the opening bell yesterday as the group, which is carrying heavy debt due in part to its acquisition of Regal in 2018, said it was looking at all ways of raising additional funds.

By 0915 GMT, they were 30% lower, taking their loss this year to more than 90%. Cineworld's statement follows a grim evaluation by ratings agency S&P on Friday of rival AMC Entertainment, owner of the Odeon chain, which said the US-based group may run out of liquidity in six months unless it can raise more capital. The entertainment industry has been among the heaviest hit by social distancing and other restrictions, with Walt Disney last week announcing plans to lay off roughly 28,000 employees, mostly at its US theme parks. —Reuters

KENZO, FIRST JAPANESE DESIGNER TO CONQUER PARIS FASHION, DIES

Japan's most famous fashion designer Kenzo Takada, founder of the global Kenzo brand, died in the French capital on Sunday aged 81 after contracting coronavirus. Tributes have poured in for Takada, the first Japanese designer to decamp to Paris and known especially for his signature floral prints. "Today, his optimism, zest for life and generosity continue to be pillars of our Maison (House). He will be greatly missed and always remembered," the Kenzo fashion house he founded wrote on Twitter.

He "helped to write a new page in fashion, at the confluence of the East and the West", said Ralph Toledano of



File photo shows Paris-based Japanese designer Kenzo (left) posing with a model at the end of his Fall-Winter 1995-96 ready-to-wear collection show. — AFP photos

the Haute Couture Federation. His death comes 50 years after he launched his first collection in Paris, which he adopted as his home. "Every wall, every sky and every passer-by helps me build my collections," he once said of the city. He retired from fashion in 1999, six years after selling his brand to luxury conglomerate LVMH, and dedicated his time to one-off projects including a design collection at the start of this year.

Dreamt of Paris

Born in 1939 into a family of hoteliers, he chose to study art not catering, becoming a star pupil at Toyko's Bunka Gakuen college, where he carried off the top prize. He went on to work for Sanai, a major chain of fashion shops, but dreamt of Paris. The 1964 Olympic Games finally gave him his opportunity to come to Europe. The block of flats in which he was renting an apartment was to be demolished to make way for a stadium. Like all the tenants, he was paid compensation and decided to blow the money on a one-way ticket on a cargo boat to Marseille.

Arriving in Paris in the winter of 1965, hardly speaking any French, the only job he could get was in a poodle parlor. In 1970, however, he took the lease of premises in the Galerie Vivienne, then a rather down-at-heel shopping arcade. "With a few friends for three months we painted the walls with jungle scenes like Le Douanier Rousseau's Snake Charmer and baptized it Jungle Jap," he recalled later. His first show using amateur models to save money was held there. One of only 20 people invited included the editor-in-chief of Elle magazine, who liked the collection so much she ran it on the front cover.

He became a name almost overnight, and went on to revitalize the knitwear industry with his contemporary interpre-

tations. By the early 1980s, when other Japanese designers were making their way in Paris, Takada was already well established on the French fashion scene. His first men's collection was presented in 1983 and his first perfume, Kenzo Kenzo, in 1988. From the early 1980s boutiques opened all over the world in New York, London, Milan, Tokyo and Rome, followed later by Hong Kong, Munich, Venice, Bangkok and Singapore.



A man walks outside a Kenzo fashion store in Tokyo yesterday - a day after Japanese fashion designer Kenzo Takada died in Paris aged 81.

Kenzo's romantic style, with its eclectic mix of color, touches of exoticism, ethnic prints and folksy embroidery, suited the mood of the 1970s but adapted well to the sharper-looking 1980s and 1990s. He drew inspiration from his travels as well as Japanese work clothes, such as his favorite military tunics and coats. Peruvian striped blanket throws, colorful shawls, oriental blouses, peasant smocks, printed velvet, were all part of his signature. —AFP