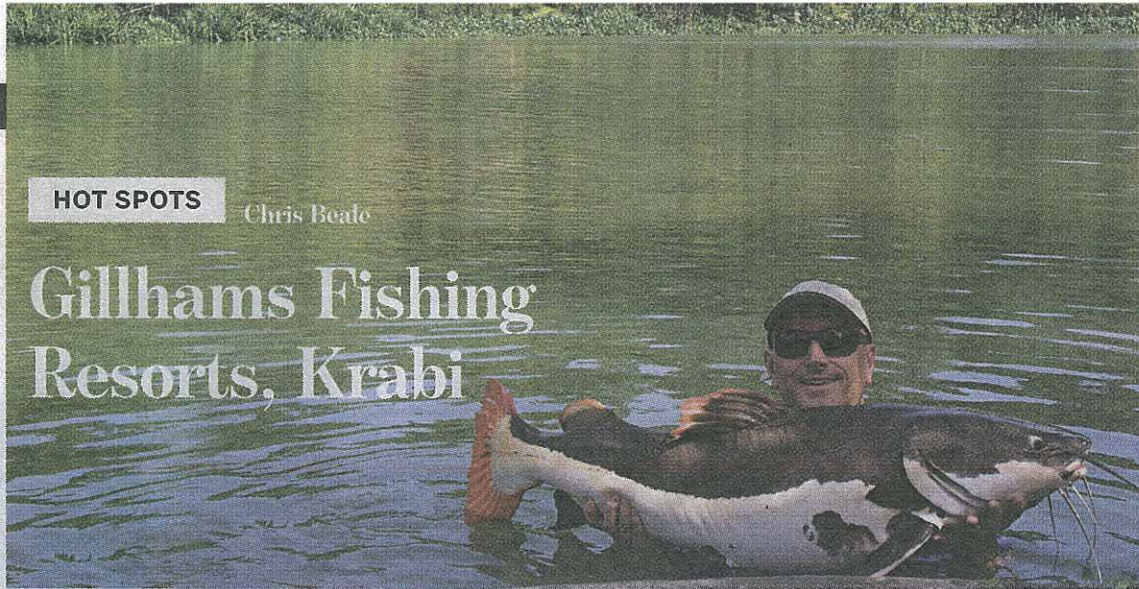


HOT SPOTS

Chris Beale

Gillhams Fishing Resorts, Krabi



What is it? Gillhams is the brainchild of Stuart Gillham and his son Sean. Stuart sold his construction business in Britain a few years ago and, like many of us, wanted to “live the dream”, which, in his case, meant creating a world-class fishery that would be his livelihood. He bought land, excavated a lake and built a restaurant and administrative area along with a house for himself and bungalows and a swimming pool for guests.

Tell us more: Gillhams is surrounded by the limestone karst scenery that is common in southern Thailand, and the immaculate grounds are maintained by cheerful and friendly staff.

What are the accommodation and food like? The bungalows are surprisingly plush – on a par with rooms in a decent hotel. Stuart’s daughter, Becky, is chief chef, specialising in European food, while Sean’s partner, Noi, is in charge of Thai cuisine. Whether it’s pad thai or shepherd’s pie, the food is top-class, and while you may order a fish dish, you won’t be eating a stingray or an arapaima from the lake outside.

Arapaima? Isn’t that a South American fish? Gillham Snr is a legend in the world of the arapaima. A living fossil, the fish originates from Brazil, Guyana and the Amazon basin and, over the centuries,

has become an air-breather, a legacy of living in flood basins that dry up for part of the year. It is one of the oldest – and largest-scaled – freshwater fish in the world. Thailand’s climate mirrors that of its place of origin, so it is well suited to the environment. But even though these are colossal fish – they can grow up to 275kg (605 pounds) and are reputed to have reached 450kg in days gone by – they are extremely delicate. If they overstrain their jaw muscles they can drown and if not handled properly their spines can snap. Stuart is one of only a few people to have bred a sustainable stock of these fish. He is currently working on a programme to cross-strain fish from Guyana with his local specimens, the arapaima in Thailand having been bred from an original import, in 1950, from Brazil. The plan is to grow the fish to the gigantic proportions not seen for decades.

And the other fish? The lake holds Mekong giant catfish of up to 150kg, freshwater stingrays and Siamese carp both up to 70kg, and Amazonian redbtail catfish of up to 40kg. It also holds the world records for the biggest Mekong catfish, Chao Phraya catfish and Mrigal carp caught. There are six species of fish here that exceed 45kg, and a total of 48 species in residence, many in the 6kg to 22kg bracket.

With all those monsters about, it sounds as though catching one would be a piece of cake. Actually, it’s not. You have to work for your catch. And when caught, there is a strict handling code. Fish are netted and kept in the water to avoid abrasions, and you have to wade in for the trophy shot before that trophy is released. Gillhams uses a pellet that took four years to research and produce, which gives the fish all their dietary requirements and also contains medication to keep them healthy.

So what did you catch, Chris? Well, I particularly wanted an arapaima, but on my first trip I caught a Siamese carp and an Amazonian redbtail catfish (above left), both 30kg, a Mekong giant catfish of 63kg and a Chinese seer fish. However, I lost a

freshwater stingray after a 45-minute war of attrition, and four arapaimas ... so I had to return. Second time around, I did what I set out to do and caught an arapaima (above right), weighing 127kg.

Anything else? The beach is close by and the swimming pool is large, so it’s a good spot for families, even the members who are not interested in rods and reels. Plus there is a fabulous bar on site.

What’s the bottom line? Prices start at HK\$1,900 for one night’s accommodation and one day’s fishing for one angler, with bait, tackle and guides.

Gillhams Fishing Resorts is at 74 Moo 2, Tumbol Khothong, Amper Muang, Krabi, Thailand, tel: 66 861 644 554; www.gillhamsfishingresorts.com.

