

The White Lotus Season 3: A good deal goes on, but what does it add up to?

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Among the most streamed television episodes of 2025 was the finale of *The White Lotus* Season 3—a dark comedy following guests and staff at an exclusive resort—with 6.2 million viewers. The popular response reflects a hunger for more incisive television programming and generally more complex situations characteristic of the show’s previous seasons.

Season 3 takes place at the White Lotus resort on an island off the coast of Thailand (Seasons 1 and 2 took place in Hawaii and Sicily, respectively). Here again, a small group of guests arrives at a lavish location for a week of relaxation, daily “wellness treatments,” gourmet meals and live entertainment.

Thailand as a setting has no special significance in Season 3 beyond the images of lush scenery, a cultural reference here or there and the presence of certain secondary figures. The vast social inequality, hemorrhaging of jobs through factory closures, extreme political instability and ever-present danger of a military coup—these elements of Thai social and political life find almost no expression in *The White Lotus*.

The eight-part season, written and directed by Mike White, consists of several narrative strands, each of which has something of an autonomous character, associated with different groups of visitors to the resort. This sort of genre has a “time-honored” tradition: a number of individuals or couples, generally facing life-changing circumstances, find themselves thrown together at a hotel, a resort or another locale (*Grand Hotel*, *Idiot’s Delight*, *Hotel*, *The VIPs* and so forth).

One such set of guests is the five-member Ratliff family from North Carolina. The Ratliffs’ middle child, Piper (Sarah Catherine Hook), has just graduated from college and initially has the notion of living at a nearby Buddhist temple for a year. In fact, she has somewhat selfishly maneuvered her family into the Thai trip, without mentioning this ulterior motive.

Her father Tim (Jason Isaacs) is a wealthy financier. Shortly after arrival at the resort, he learns that an illegal deal he made years ago is being investigated. The authorities and the press are hounding his associates and he starts to break down under the pressure. To conceal the scandal from his family, he goes along with a hotel guideline suggesting cellphones and laptops should be put aside for the week.

Three childhood friends—television star Jaclyn (Michelle Monaghan), corporate lawyer and divorcee Laurie (Carrie Coon) and affluent Texas housewife Kate (Leslie Bibb)—have come to reconnect and compare notes on their different paths in life.

Jealousies, overt and covert, frustrations and personal judgments define their week together.

Then there is the unlikely couple: American Rick Hatchett (Walton Goggins), a former criminal of some sort, and his attractive, young British girlfriend, Chelsea (Aimee Lou Wood). Rick is in a state of psychic torment because he believes that decades earlier the co-owner of the Thai White Lotus, Jim Hollinger (Scott Glenn), killed his father. Rick is intent on confronting and possibly murdering Hollinger.

Belinda Lindsey (Natasha Rothwell) is at the Thai resort on some sort of “spa exchange program,” and expects her business-majoring son Zion (Nicholas Duvernay) to arrive any day. She tumbles into an affair with a Thai wellness expert and thinks she recognizes someone responsible for a previous murder.

The security guard Gaitok (Tayme Thapthimthong) is attempting to romance fellow hotel employee Mook (Lalisa Manobal), while a Russian health mentor Valentin (Arnas Fedaravicius), flirts with various female hotel guests. His two Russian compatriots may not be up to any good.

The viewer has good reason to believe, based on the experience of the first two *White Lotus* seasons, that there will be a death (or deaths) at the hotel, and this sets an ominous tone, encouraged by the eerie soundtrack. Over the course of seven hour-long episodes, complete with cliff-hangers, and an hour-and-a-half finale, the guests’ (and to a lesser extent, the staff members’) various storylines escalate and at times intertwine. (The mini-series format is not the brainchild of White or any of the other *White Lotus* creators, but it results here in a season that is far too lengthy, at 594 minutes, with much repetition, numerous dead ends and red herrings, for the relatively insubstantial material.)

A good deal of commotion goes on in Season 3, as well as countless glimpses of gorgeous vegetation and wildlife, but what does it all add up to? Have the creators succeeded in pursuing their dramas and themes in a satisfying manner?

To a remarkable extent, the plot consists of uncomfortable encounters of one sort or another: between Rick and the Ratliffs, between Rick and Hollinger, between Victoria Ratliff (Parker Posey) and Kate (the latter is so odd that it has created its own hubbub on social media), between Belinda and Greg (Jon Gries)—or Gary, as he now calls himself, between Frank (Sam Rockwell), Rick’s old associate, and the Hollingers, between Laurie and Jaclyn, between Laurie and Kate, between the Ratliff siblings, between Gaitok and his employer, between Gaitok and

Mook. ... One could go on.

One is consistently embarrassed for this or that character, who finds him or herself in a quandary. In addition, there are various examples of inappropriate or worse behavior. In their totality, these many awkward or difficult moments, peppered with sex and a certain degree of extreme violence, function as a *substitute* for genuine dramatic confrontations (which inevitably have social significance) and the working through of problems. This, the creators suggest, is how existence is, contradictory, painful, hazardous. But life is not simply a series of arbitrary or accidental moments, to be navigated presumably in some sort of zen-philosophical fashion. It has a social logic, which the series' writers and directors largely miss.

Season 3 suffers from an indecisive and amorphous attitude toward its characters and their stories. Broader social issues *behind* the immediate conflicts—celebrity, wealth, convention and family pressures, careerism, corporate corruption—form only a hazy, unexplored backdrop. The connection of those larger issues to the characters and the narrative foreground, their exertion of definitive pressures and counterpressures on the various personalities or groups, isn't genuinely realized.

In Season 1, writer/producer White made a powerful "first impression" with his cast of entitled resort guests and generally sympathetic staff members. In particular, Molly Shannon as a rich, suffocating mother-in-law and Murray Bartlett as Arnold, the pitiable hotel manager, rang true.

Season 2 also had its moments. The sharpest ones concerned a successful middle-class couple matriculating into an even loftier social layer. The very wealthy couple they vacationed with gave them a crash course in debauchery and in closing one's eyes to the dangers of authoritarianism and nuclear annihilation.

Unfortunately, White seems to have used up his supply of social insights. The actors in general try mightily (Goggins, Posey, Isaacs, Rockwell et al.), but they are working with material too thinly stretched. One consequence of the series' running out of steam is the implausibility of too much of the drama.

For example, the storyline associated with Rick, the man with the mysterious, but evidently brutal history, and Chelsea does not make much plausible sense. When Rick learns that his target, resort co-owner Hollinger, has returned to Bangkok, he all too easily convinces Hollinger's wife, Sritala (Lek Patravadi), a former singer and now also White Lotus co-owner, without providing the least proof, that he is a film producer with connections to a director who would love to meet her.

Rick then enlists Frank to play the role of the director. Neither bothers to come up with a serious cover story for their encounter with the high-powered Hollingers. These supposed hardened professional criminals act like bumbling amateurs. Meanwhile, the Hollingers, extremely rich people (who employ armed guards) in a country with malignant inequality and poverty, let these complete strangers, who can't keep their stories straight, into their home. The confrontation at the Bangkok mansion and its aftermath is largely absurd.

The African American masseuse, Belinda, suffers an abrupt flipping of her character. A hardworking and resilient woman in

Season 1, she contrasted sharply with Tanya McQuoid (unforgettably played by Jennifer Coolidge), the bloated heiress who fumbles through life on a cushion of medication, psychobabble and her massive fortune. In the last interaction between the two (in Season 1), Tanya retreats from her promise to co-own a wellness center with Belinda. Tanya subsequently takes a chance at love with fellow guest Greg. In Season 2, Greg has Tanya killed and takes her fortune. In the latest season, Greg, now "Gary," is evading the authorities, living in a secluded mansion.

After Belinda spots Greg-Gary, he proposes they meet, clearly intending to bribe or intimidate her into not exposing him. Ultimately, her "entrepreneurial" son convinces her to accept hush money from Gary. The lucrative outcome of this negotiation with a murderer is presented as a masterstroke, a legitimate means to getting one's piece of the pie. Mother and son literally ride off into the sunset in the finale on a yacht with \$5 million.

What conclusions are we to draw about the various decisions and choices, some of them damagingly selfish or retrograde, made by the characters? One doesn't feel that the writers and directors know themselves. Perhaps overwhelmed by the present state of things, they often appear unclear about their own attitudes.

And what are we to make of Tim Ratliff's trajectory, as he unravels, facing the possibility of disgrace and even prison? He first turns to his wife's lorazepam and later to his daughter's Buddhism, considers shooting himself, and then, in an unhinged moment, decides to poison himself and most of his family members.

Presumably, the series creators are opposed to his killing himself or his family. But what then? *The White Lotus* treats the immediate circumstances and the characters' ill-chosen or well-chosen reactions, but never the content and dynamic of the circumstances themselves. Why is Ratliff in trouble? What does this say about him and his parasitic social layer, and American society as a whole? Instead of addressing these matters, the series' makers, as it were, evasively turn to the viewer: You be the judge.

At other moments, they hint not very convincingly that the answer might lie in the wisdom of Buddha, that desire and will are the source of all suffering and that, in any case, "the universe is unfolding as it should." The creators, in effect, throw up their hands in the face of complex realities. The most serious artists never take such an easy way out.

The present social world and its ruling layers provide no shortage of opportunities for satire. These will no doubt be explored and pursued further by those farsighted enough to take on the task.



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