



Bird's Nest Villa.

NOMAD'S LAND

Keemala takes holistic travel to new heights

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Sun, sand and sea are no longer the only features that Phuket has to offer. Pristine beaches and clear blue skies are usually the images we conjure up with every mention of the famed Southern island province, but the recent trend in Phuket's hospitality scene has seen some of the most stunning resorts moving away from beachfront and inland, toward lush verdant valleys.

One of the most anticipated hotel openings of last year was Keemala, which launched in December. The architectural beauty of the resort is breathtaking, with all credit going to Thailand-based Architect Space and Pisit Aongkultong from Pisud Design Company. Together, they conceived a unique vision that celebrates the best of modernism and traditional craftsmanship. This, combined with the natural topography of the surrounding area and five-star service, have set a new benchmark for hoteliers.

Meet the clans

Everybody loves a good story, and the fictitious tale of how Keemala came about is inspired by the landscape and reflected in the intricate details of the resort's interior and decor.

After losing their ships at sea in rough waters, four clans settled on this tranquil piece of paradise. Since each clan led very different lifestyles, the cottages they resided in were uniquely constructed.

The Clay Pool Cottages were built by the Pa-Ta-Pea clan, which felt a deep connection to the earth. Khon-Jorn, the wanderer clan, was made up of foragers, performers and traders. Their nomadic nature meant they enjoyed living in the safari-like Tent Pool Villas. The We-Ha clan worshipped the universe, so its two-floor Tree Pool Houses are designed to look as though they are suspended from trees. The Rung-

Nok clan lived in Bird's Nest Villas, which is where we stayed. Our host explained that this particular clan was made up of opulent individuals, hence the pool villas being the largest of the resort, fully equipped with a soaking bathtub, lounge deck and a 30m² private pool.

Eclectic luxury

The harmonious mix-and-matching of contrasting materials, nature-inspired and conceptual pieces, monochromatic colours and bright hues, raw and refined surfaces make Keemala incredibly distinctive. This is man-made brilliance nestled perfectly in the heart of nature.

With the jungle-like terrain as Keemala's back garden, mosquito nets – and repellent – are a must in every villa. Those missing the sight of a fireplace will find they can turn on a mock TV one featuring a realistic wood-crackling soundtrack. We couldn't compliment the service enough – this was hospitality at its finest.

Speaking of luxury, the bathroom products were a big hit with me. The hotel collaborates with Siam Botanical to customise everything from shampoo to bath salts, guaranteeing everything is 100% natural, cruelty-free and kind to the skin.

Holistic hedonism

I asked my 30-something sibling to come along with me on this trip. Overworked, extremely grouchy (at times), with either her face or her ears glued to her smartphone, I thought if anyone needed a weekend getaway, it was her.

We headed straight for the spa, both opting for the Deep Tissue Massage (B3,200++ for 60 mins). The therapists at Mala Spa knew exactly how to knead the knots out of our backs, exercising the right amount of pressure and lymphatic drainage techniques with an all-natural aroma oil made from moringa, juniper berries and grapefruit. To make things even better, the massage also has a detoxifying effect for the body.

Keemala also hosts visiting practitioners with expertise in holistic wellness. Until Feb 2, guests can book appointments with Lisa Levine, a specialist in Arvigo Therapy and acupuncture. If you have abdominal issues such as digestive disorders, this is highly recommended.

The next day, we decided to try out the Movement Meditation class given by Dr Cherrise Yang, which was both enlightening and relaxing. Contrary to my preconceived idea of



Movement meditation with Dr Cherrise Yang.

meditation, one needn't be sitting down cross-legged with their eyes closed. We practised our breathing rhythm while learning to relax our joints and be fully aware of how our bodies function and move. If you're a regular gym-goer, attending this class as a warm-down session will do your muscles and spine a big favour.

The fitness room here is well-equipped and open 24-hours. But frankly, when you have a stunning pool within arm's reach, the treadmill will be the last thing on your mind.

Endless indulgences

It was a pleasant surprise when our crab and wing bean salad arrived on our table for lunch. The presentation was fine-dining material, but more impressive was neither dish was drenched in creamy, overpowering sauces; the flavours of every dish we ate at Keemala were fresh, clean and spot on – minus the calories.

Indian specialities have just been added to its extensive menu [which also includes Western classics and southern Phuket- and Jung Ceylon-inspired dishes], and let me tell you, there's no skimping on spices. The Butter chicken and garlic nan were a sumptuous and satisfying affair. If you're a seafood fan, make sure you order the Tandoori Jhinga [marinated tiger prawns with Indian spices, yoghurt and mint chutney].

Health nuts will be glad to know that despite my irreconcilable differences with fruits, the freshly pressed fruit beverages – referred to here as "energy boosters" – won me over. The aloe vera, green apple, grapes and organic honey combo is a real winner.



Su Tha Restaurant & Bar.



Mala spa.

Further afield

After spending two nights here, I realised going to the beach hadn't crossed my mind. I was too busy not being busy to notice that my feet hadn't once touched the sea. The hotel does offer transfer to and from Kamala Beach, which is only a few minutes away by car, upon request.

If the #saltintheair #sandinmyhair isn't on your Instagram to-do list, make sure you check out the heritage walk. Hosted by Karn, one of the hotel's most charming and knowledgeable members of staff. Born and bred in Phuket, her passion for local history has allowed her to create personalised tours like no other. On our visit, she took us to Phuket Old Town to see the incredibly well-preserved Chino-Portuguese buildings, as well as several hidden gems known only to a select few.

Keemala is located at 10/88 Moo 6, Nakasud Road, Kamala, Kathu District, Phuket. Visit www.keemala.com or call 076-358-777.

HIDDEN GEMS

The photogenic kopitiam and hipster galleries are worth the snaps, but we were after something a little more authentic. Here are the four best-kept secret spots in Phuket's Old Town which Karn took us to.



Cafe' In

So the cafe itself isn't all that interesting, but the menu is. Try the traditional Phuketian dessert, O'giou, served with shaved ice, honey and lemon.



Limpanon House

With no public entrances, Karn took us through the back room of a coffee shop's kitchen, whereupon we were blown away by this 127-year-old building.



Joo Huck Printing Works

One of the few places left in Phuket to use traditional printing machines – Heidelberg Cylinder Presses, to be precise. The rhythmic printing sound is strangely euphoric, compared with mouse-clicks and that annoying "out of paper" alert from your office ink-jet.



Is Am Are

We loved the traditional bowls, kitchen utensils and colourful tiffins. They make perfect gifts [for others or for yourself]. Vintage is in, remember?