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APRIL 2016



THE LAND OF SMILES

LEAVE THE RUCKSACK AT HOME AND EXPERIENCE THE REAL THAILAND - WITH A SLICE OF LUXURY

Thailand is a unique jewel in the crown of Southeast Asia. The perfect brew of ancient culture, stunning mountains and paradisiacal coastline makes visiting a must for almost every perpetual traveller. However, it's not just for backpackers and those in search of a spiritual awakening. In a travel special, we show you the best Chiang Mai and Phuket has to offer (like the pictured bird's nest villa at Koemala resort), along with a few handy tips on how to avoid the tourist-traps and plan an authentic Thai adventure.

VIOLENTLY HAPPY

Phuket may be Thailand's biggest and busiest island, but it's also home to the country's swankiest hotels and hideaways. **Graeme Green** uncovers three of the finest on this island, and perhaps any other



“You're a fighter,” says kickboxing instructor Sompetch Jumpatong (or 'Petch'), spurring me on. “Harder. Kick harder.” Down in the gym of the new Keemala resort in Phuket, the two of us circle the room, Petch calling out moves: left punch, right punch, left knee, right knee, kick. Five final swinging kicks into Petch's pads and my one-to-

MAIN IMAGE
Point Yamu by COMO

CIRCLES, FROM LEFT
La Siraha Kaban Restaurant at Point Yamu by COMO, Panna Resort Phuket, The Spa by Panna, The breakfast buffet at Keemala

surrounding forest create a gentle start to the day, which gets more energetic with my morning Muay Thai session. Not just a national sport, Muay Thai is a form of self-defence, which is learnt by young Thai boys and girls across the country, Petch tells me. “We learn Thai boxing to protect ourselves. I learnt from my dad, to protect myself, because I'm small. But it's also very good for your body, for fitness, for strength.”

The rest of my stay couldn't be less energetic. I make good use of the Mala spa, with a Harmonizing Massage on the day after my flight, a full-body massage with ginger and lemongrass oil that's so calming I almost fall asleep, and a firm, decidedly non-sleeping traditional Thai Massage the following day. Dinner's served in ☺

Islamic morning prayers and birdsong from the surrounding forest create a gentle start to the day

one session is done. I'm covered in sweat; training in Thailand's national sport, Muay Thai kickboxing, is a tough workout.

No one in their right mind would come to Phuket to pick a fight. Beyond the gym, the island's sweltering heat and abundance of beaches keeps things decidedly laid-back. But this is also the biggest and busiest island in Thailand; with so many people getting away from it all, it can seem difficult to actually get away from it all. Unless, of course, you know where to look...

I'd come to stay at the Keemala Resort and Spa, one of the most talked about new openings in Thailand. That's largely due to the eye-catching design; with bird's nest villas, safari-style tents and onion-shaped treehouse towers, the inland resort, around ten minutes from Kamala beach, has a playful 'enchanted forest' feel. There's nothing else like it on Phuket.

I stay in a bird's nest villa, a vast, quiet space with a massive bed, a huge bathroom with a gold-coloured mosaic floor and its own private ten-metre long infinity pool overlooking Kamala Bay. Islamic morning prayers and birdsong from the





Architectural pool villa at Anantara Resort and Spa



View at Anantara Resort Phuket, Greece. Pool villa with beach view



the Su Tha restaurant, which plays laid-back pre-club bar-style music and offers Thai classics on the menu, like Phad Thai, peanutty Massaman curry and fiery Tom Yam soup.

In the morning, I head out with Tatchakarn Thanadechapasn (or Karn) from the hotel for a Heritage Walk of Old Phuket Town. "Phuket's always been a big trading point, on the Spice Route and also for tin," Karn tells me, as we drive into town. She's also seen Phuket change over her lifetime, from the early days when backpackers started visiting this island paradise, through to the big resorts and five-star hotels: "When I was young, it was very green everywhere. You could count the number of cars on the island. Now, it's so busy."

We stroll around the Old Town, exploring Buddhist and Taoist shrines where incense fills the air. On the edge of town, there's a statue of a golden dragon. "That is Hai Leng Ong, king of the south seas," Karn tells me. "People from Phuket think the island itself is the dragon rising from the sea. If you look at a map, it can look like that."

We continue on to Wat Mongkol Nimit, the 'Royal Temple', next to Soi Rommanee, where Karn points to the street sign: "Rommanee means 'pleasure' or 'happy ending', so you can guess what used to happen here? It was the red light district during the tin-trading period, where merchants and traders would go to release their energy."

I move on from Keemala to Paresa, a luxury hotel high up on the coastal cliffs along from Kamala beach. "This area's known as Millionaire's Mile," operations manager Mirko Corbello tells me, as he shows me to my villa. "The price of property is outrageous."

The hotel makes the most of its sunset-facing, west coast location, with every villa, pool, restaurant and spa looking out over the Andaman Sea. I spend the afternoon swimming in the sleek pool, even though my villa has its own private one (both looking out to sea). The rooms are minimalist but spacious, with large ocean-view windows. In the evenings, after dark, I watch the lights of fishing boats come on across the Andaman Sea.

I head out early in the morning with the hotel's Adventure Team guides Patrick and Alif, driving up to the northern tip of Phuket and into Phang Nga province to Lampi Forest, an area of greenery so quiet that dogs are sleeping in the road. We hike a circuit around Lanpi Waterfall, the park's ranger Mi Aiganiyapon Chaanyannua leading us up into the humid forest on leafy,

moist pathways scattered with mushrooms, some of them of the 'magic' variety.

At Tonprai Falls, a quick drive away, we take a cooling dip in a rock pool, before a banquet lunch set up under the shade of a wide lukmai tree: shrimp, tuna, salmon, salads, cakes... Apart from a few locals and a colourful cockerel strutting across the grass, it's empty here. Of the many thousands of tourists on Phuket, it seems no one knows about this place.

From Paresa, I travel across to the east side of the island, to Point Yamu by COMO hotel, overlooking Phang Nga Bay. The hotel also has an impressive coastal location, with views out across the Andaman Sea. The giant lobby is filled with colourful flowers, while suites are decorated in cooling white

People from Phuket think the island itself is the dragon rising from the sea

and blue. There's also one of the coolest-looking swimming pools I've come across in Asia here – three sections totalling 100 metres, with cool blue-white tiles that match the sky, so it feels like you're half-swimming, half-flying.

After a day by the pool, a signature shambhala oil and hot-towel massage in the spa, and a blue crab and coconut curry in the Thai restaurant Nahmyaa, I head off the following morning from the pier at Yamu village on a wooden motorboat, sailing out across the ocean to COMO's new, exclusive beach club. The strip of beach on Nakayai Island is decked out with sun-loungers, a bar and restaurant, cabanas, with kayaks and stand-up paddleboards (SUPs) to borrow. The small, uncrowded beach is far away, physically and mentally, from the crowds and busy bars of Phuket's tourist epicentre Patong.

"You know the James Bond movie *The Man With The Golden Gun*?" one of the waiters asks me. "Over there," he points to a cluster of limestone islands across the open ocean, "is where they filmed it. James Bond Island is just over there."

I borrow a SUP board and head out in their general direction, but they're too far to try to reach. It feels good, though, to be standing upright on the Andaman Sea, the sun beating down, looking over towards the islands. The sea's calm and it's easy to make progress, until overconfidence, or the swell from a passing motorboat, topples me from the board into the water. I get back on and paddle out further, but I'm shaky and tumble again. It doesn't matter, though; not only is the water warm, but out here there's no one around to see me fall. ●

NEED TO KNOW

Keemala

Cottages, houses and villas start from £358 (19,050THB) to £480 (25,500 THB) per night, including breakfast, but excluding VAT and tax. One-hour spa treatments start from £58. City tours and Muay Thai kickboxing sessions can also be arranged with the hotel.

keemala.com, or call +66 (0) 76 358 777

Point Yamu by COMO

Rooms, suites and villas cost from £169 (9000THB) to £2,216 (118,000THB) per night, including breakfast, plus 18.7 per cent tax and service charge per suite per night. One-hour spa treatments start from £77 (4,125 THB).

comohotels.com/pointyamu or call +66 (2) 625 3322

Paresa Resort

Villas and suites cost from £311 (16500THB) to £1,782 (94,500THB) per night. One-hour spa treatments start from £42 (2200THB). Paresa's Adventure Team can also arrange excursions, including the Jungle Trekking Expedition and Waterfall Picnic.

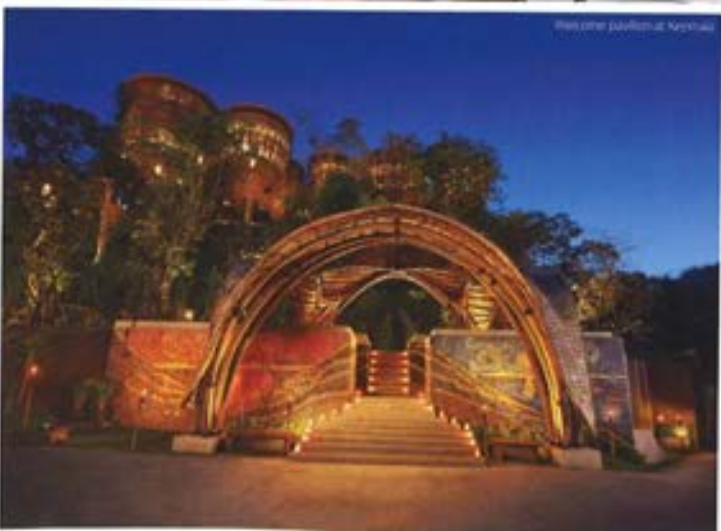
paresaresorts.com or call +66 (0)76 302 000

Thai Airways (thaiairways.co.uk, 0330 400 4022) has return flights from London Heathrow to Phuket, via Bangkok, starting from £530.

For more on Thailand, see tourismthailand.org



So The Bar at Keemala



Walk over pavilion at Keemala