

Koh Samui Goes Gourmet

Hana R. Alberts eats her way through the island paradise.



Namu at the W Retreat



Pla Pla at the Four Seasons



Le Salon de Ti at Zazen



Beach Republic



The Dining Room at Rocky's Resort



H Bistro at the Hansar Samui



Pla Pla at the Four Seasons



The Page at The Library

Travelers to Thai islands tend to either stick to the confines of their resorts or head straight for street-side food stalls, loading up on dirt-cheap pad Thai and chicken satay. No offense to these folks (because that nosh is delicious), but times are changing. For one, a world of international (and internationally renowned) cuisine is springing up in Koh Samui. From luring chefs who've worked at elite places around the world to making traditional institutions like high tea a realistic beachfront dining option, the eating here is excellent—and it's getting better all the time. Koh Samui has long been known as a destination for honeymooners and European families, but now it's foodies who should start putting some of these island haunts on their to-eat lists.

Royal Fare

At H Bistro, the restaurant at the one-year-old Hansar Samui, Chef Stephen Dion brings sterling credentials to the table. After studying French cuisine and apprenticing in his native Canada, he worked throughout Southeast Asia before serving as the personal chef to the Jordanian royal family. After working for five years at Bangkok's Sirocco restaurant atop the State Tower, Hansar tapped him for the executive chef post. (He also works at their Bangkok outpost.) Dion's dishes contain surprising combinations that work, such as foie gras and peach, wagyu beef and oxtail, and lobster and smoked paprika. Dion imports ingredients from all over to get the highest-quality raw materials: lobsters from Maine; scallops from Hokkaido; oysters from France. Along with other French-Mediterranean offerings, H Bistro also has an extensive Thai menu, highlights of which include tom yum soup and duck curry. The restaurant also features a selection of handcrafted boutique wines from 10 different countries. Critics agree: H Bistro has earned accolades from TripAdvisor and Thailand Tatler. The setting isn't anything to

sniff at, with an expansive terrace overlooking a quiet section of the beach and sleek wooden tables illuminated by candlelight. **H Bistro, Hansar Samui, 101/28 Moo 1, Bophut, Koh Samui, Surat Thani 84320, (077) 245-511, www.hansarsamui.com.**

Minimalist Chic

Book lovers and fans of minimalist décor, this place is for you. The Library is a gorgeous beachside boutique hotel with a blood-red-tiled swimming pool and statues of white silhouettes in various literary poses scattered about. Its restaurant, The Page, is stylish and romantic, with a breezy indoor space with tall slatted windows, red ribbons blowing in the wind along the seaside terrace and matching cushions under umbrellas for those who prefer to lounge while they dine. Chef Nikveedz, who hails from Thailand but attended cooking school in London, returned home three years ago to combine her Asian heritage with international culinary techniques—especially in The Library's tapas menu. I tried the innovative afternoon tea set, which comes beautifully presented in a horizontal tray lined with sand (no, it doesn't touch the food) and garnished with a little plot of grass. The set, served from 1-3pm, includes mini-burgers, cheese, daily fresh pastries, cookies and cakes, as well as the essential scones and clotted cream. For heartier meals, The Page serves up both western and Thai dishes, as well as nighttime cocktails and a special breakfast menu served on a mattress dragged out onto the sand. **The Page, The Library, 14/1 Moo 2, Chaweng Beach, Koh Samui, Surat Thani 84320, (077) 422-767-8, www.thelibrary.co.th.**

Decadent Afternoon Tea

Opened in November, Le Salon de Ti infuses a beachfront balcony with old-world grandeur. Right above Zazen Restaurant, Le Salon de Ti serves 23 varieties of Dilmah tea

(fine, whole-leaf tea from Sri Lanka) and well as lavish and delicious high tea sets. By night, at the Chef's Table, French Executive Chef Cyrille Keyser serves up two special set menus, one of which uses teas in each dish, in the cozy, European-style space. Only 12 people can dine there at once. Downstairs, Zazen Restaurant is a casual oceanfront joint serving tapas, light Mediterranean food and Thai cuisine by day, after which it turns into a candle-lit, intimate outlet for Keyser's fine Mediterranean cuisine. Zazen also has the only underground wine cellar on the island—it's blissfully cool. **Le Salon de Ti, Zazen Boutique Hotel and Spa, 177 Moo 1, Tambon Bophut, Koh Samui, Surat Thani 84320, (077) 425-085, www.samuizazen.com.**

A Little Romance

Rocky's Resort is a little farther afield than most hotels, located along the island's eastern shore. The Dining Room is worth the trip for an atmospheric dinner; its thatched pavilion has open sides and is dotted with red lanterns, candles and gold Buddha statues. A scenic beachside (and poolside) location sets the stage for the innovative French-Mediterranean fare cooked up Executive Chef Azizkander Awang (though those in the know call him Aziz). Highlights include seared foie gras with caramelized strawberry and a fillet of snow fish in a curry and saffron broth. Diners can opt for a seat inside the romantic pavilion, outside on the pool deck or along the beach. **The Dining Room, Rocky's Boutique Resort, 438/1 Moo 1, Tambon Maret Amphur, Koh Samui, Surat Thani 84310, (077) 233-020, www.rockyresort.com.**

Beachside Seafood

The Four Seasons is undoubtedly the most stunning resort in Koh Samui, with an entry lobby that seems suspended in thin air, overlooking lush green cliffs and a vast expanse of blue sea 800 feet below. Take a chauffeured buggy all the way down to the beach—past villas with private infinity pools and breathtaking views—and grab a seat at Pla Pla, a casual seafood restaurant that serves up deliciously fresh fare in picturesque surrounds. The wooden tables and aquamarine accents highlight the real star of the show—the Gulf of Siam, whose cool water beckons invitingly as diners gobble down grilled seafood, curries, calamari and more. Pla Pla may not be the fanciest restaurant around, but it's the Four Seasons—they can make a crab curry taste like it deserves four Michelin stars. **Pla Pla, Four Seasons Koh Samui, 219 Moo 5, Angthong, Koh Samui, Surat Thani 84140, (077) 243-000, www.fourseasons.com/kohsamui.**

Ocean Club

Beach Republic is essentially the playground of some swanky rental apartments on the premises. But visitors can pay THB 500—or buy the same amount in food and drink—in order to swim in the oceanfront infinity pool or relax on huge outdoor beds and comfy lounge chairs to tunes spun by an impossibly cool DJ at the turntables. Peaceful Lamai Beach is further south on Koh Samui's eastern shore than touristy enclaves like Chaweng, giving this hangout a more relaxed, exclusive vibe. Executive Chef Martin Selby, a round, jolly fellow, has put together a solid menu for all-day dining: I tried the tapas and can safely say they're excellent. Highlights include a wagyu beef and foie gras satay, a tuna tartare taco with avocado salad and blue crab dumplings. On weekends, Beach Republic hosts

Soulful Saturdays (with a live DJ, buy-one-get-one-free pizzas and free-flow house wine) and Sunday Sessions (a decadent brunch accompanied by live DJs). **Beach Republic, 176/34 Moo 4, Tambon Maret, Koh Samui, Surat Thani 84310, (077) 458-100, www.thebeachrepublic.com.**

Innovative Japanese

The W Hotels are known for cutting-edge, category-defying restaurants, and Namu is no exception. (Though it shares a name with a W restaurant in Seoul, the menus are different.) Though there are influences from other Asian cuisines, Namu's menu is essentially a creative take on Japanese food. A standout dish is the hamachi sashimi with leeks and chili mint dressing; the flavors mix together perfectly and provide just the right amount of kick. The sushi roll with soft-shell crab tempura, avocado and fish roe and the twice-cooked pork belly are other signatures; each dish is at once complex and simple. Seemingly contradictory ingredients are thrown together, such as Maine lobster and udon noodles, or fried rice, foie gras and prawns. The amazing thing? It all works. Veteran chef Matthew Woolford is the brains behind the menu, an Australian who's worked extensively across Europe and Asia. An open kitchen means that it's all too tempting to gape at the chefs' flying hands as they stir-fry, grill and roll everything fresh. The cocktails and desserts are unbelievable, too. Without a doubt, Namu served up the most mind-boggling meal I had in Koh Samui. **Namu, W Retreat Koh Samui, 4/1 Moo 1, Tambol Maenam, Koh Samui, Surat Thani 84330, (077) 915-999, www.whotels.com/kohsamui.**

Where To Stay: Hansar Samui

This beautiful hotel has 74 rooms that all boast a view of tranquil, turquoise Bophut Bay. With an infinity pool, a beachside bar and balconies with sea views attached to each room, Hansar is an ideal home base for exploring the rest of Koh Samui. It's just a short walk to Fisherman's Village, which contains the requisite DVD and clothing boutiques as well as restaurants. Bophut is located on the northern shore of Samui, and is much quieter than backpacker and resort haven Chaweng to the east. The hotel's Luxsa Spa has a warm wood décor and offers massages, facials and other treatments using natural Thai products and pure Thai essential oils, spices and aromas. Rates per night start at HK\$2,000 and include breakfast for two and airport transfers. **101/28 Moo 1, Bophut, Koh Samui, Surat Thani 84320, (077) 245-511, www.hansarsamui.com.**

Getting There

Bangkok Airways has one direct flight a day to and from Koh Samui. August round-trips are about HK\$5,000. (Flying through Bangkok on Thai Airways can be cheaper.) The other alternative is to take a bus or a train from Bangkok to Surat Thani and hop a boat to the island.