

Solitude, with a side dish of style

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Welcome distractions ... restaurant 26th Degree.

Once a backpacker haunt, these days Koh Samui is about much more than fun, sun and sand, writes Winsor Dobbin.

One of Asia's hottest new restaurants, a mummified monk who wears Ray-Ban sunglasses, monkeys that fetch your food, affordable world-class spas, a tropical retreat off the beaten track and a beach dinner that may be interrupted by water buffalo are just a few highlights of a trip to Koh Samui. It's a place where it pays to expect the unexpected.

In the Gulf of Siam off the east coast of Thailand, the island has gone from backpacker destination to a place of high-end resorts - think Anantara, Six Senses, Mercure and Renaissance - yet it remains charmingly rough around the edges.

It's the third-largest island in Thailand but takes only a couple of hours to circumnavigate. It has a population estimated at just 40,000 but attracts more than 1 million visitors a year.

Tourists are likely to be lured by the beautiful beaches, the Ang Thong Marine Park, water sports and off-the-beaten track resorts such as luxurious Baan Taling Ngam on the little-visited Virgin Coast, which is the perfect spot to get away from it all.

Sitting atop a cliff and surrounded by coconut plantations, the hotel has infinity and beachfront pools and just 70 guest rooms featuring private balconies with sea or garden views, wooden furnishings and traditional Thai decor. All rooms have satellite TVs along with DVD/CD players and the service is friendly, slick and unobtrusive.

There is still solitude to be found here; the beaches are all but deserted outside of high season and the lounge is the perfect spot to relax with a cocktail while taking in the magnificent sunsets overlooking the unspoiled and uninhabited Five Islands. Later, sample dishes such as local rock shrimp tempura and five-spice duck breast at the beachfront Sea Chi at The Promenade restaurant.

Just a short drive away is the Five Islands restaurant, casually chic right on the waterfront and specialising in local seafood (think baked crab meat and herb curry served in the shell). Long-tail boats leave from here to explore the surrounding waters. Nikki Beach Club, a haunt of the jetset with its daybeds and spa pools, is another great place for a leisurely drink.

In contrast to all this luxury, Samui is home to not one, but two, mummified monks displayed in glass cases in full view of the public.

The body of Samui's most famous mummified monk, Loung Pordaeng, is on display in a specially constructed case at Wat Khunaram. He's wearing orange robes and much of his face is shaded by his sunglasses. When he died 30 years ago, he was sitting in a meditation position - and he remains in that position today with his body still remarkably preserved. Another mummified monk, Luang Por Ruam, who died in 1966, is at Wat Kiri Wongkaram, near Baan Taling Ngam.

There are also reminders of Samui's agricultural past if you visit the coconut plantations, where monkeys are trained to climb the trees and dislodge coconuts, which are then chopped up and sold to tourists. There are plenty of diversions here, too: from elephant trekking to an extremely large Big Buddha and three impressive waterfalls deep in the jungle. However, the major attractions are rapidly becoming the international-class restaurants, spas, cocktail bars and wine lounges that now dot the island.

Chaweng and Lamai, two bustling beach strips, are home to most of the bars and restaurants. The shining new star is The Page restaurant at the funky, casually elegant, The Library resort. The Page serves contemporary dishes such as stir-fried soft shell crab with yellow curry powder and golden fried sea bass topped with chilli and hot basil.

Choose from a range of cocktails, a Californian cabernet or Chilean sauvignon blanc as you take in the jet skis on the beach and the confronting, red pool.

Nearby is long-time fusion cuisine favourite betel nut, now on the beachfront at the boutique Buri Rasa resort. American chef/owner Jeffrey Lord and his team cook up dishes such as roast snowfish with crispy rice salad and mild Thai chilli, with accompanying wines from France and Italy.

Other Samui standouts for wining and dining in style include long-time favourite Poppies, the Melati Beach resort, the tapas and cocktails at Beach Republic, 26th Degree at the spectacular Kala Samui and Bandara Resort and Spa, where a fusion dish of red snapper with mashed potato/jasmine rice, braised artichoke, fresh carrot and a green curry jus is outstanding.

There are several independently owned resorts offering impressive value for money across Samui, none more so than the dramatic Kala Samui, on a hilltop overlooking the ocean beach. Its spa, the Agarin, is superb value. My back had not felt this good in years after staffer Khun Pim gave me an exquisite pummeling. Silavadee Pool Spa Resort, down a remote track and high above the ocean, and Pavilion Samui Boutique Resort, in the heart of action on Lamai Beach, are other affordable resorts worth checking out.

The writer was a guest of Tourism Authority of Thailand, Thai Airways and Bangkok Airways.

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE

Thai Airways flies from Sydney to Bangkok, with connecting flights to Koh Samui. See thaairways.com.au.

WHERE TO STAY

Baan Taling Ngam Resort & Spa has rooms from THB 10,400 (\$350) a night. Phone +66 7742 9100, see www.baan-taling-ngam.com.

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