

Island fever: discovered by backpackers many years ago, Koh Samui is fast finding favour with discriminating travellers for refusing to give up its pristine charms and leisurely pace. Margie T Logarta profiles a destination in transition.....

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It's always a pain being the little sister, especially when the older sibling is a popular gal named Phuket. But youngsters have a way of growing up, and in the case of Koh Samui, this one looks like it's slowly but surely developing into a beautiful swan.

Peter Pollmeier, general manager of InterContinental Grand Stanford Hongkong, who boasts a stunning holiday home on the island, says: "I fell in love with the place when my wife and I first visited in 2003. Landing at that airport (editor's note: a facility opened in 1989 by Bangkok Airways and since then built up--see our flight check in Tried and Tested, page 28) is truly an experience; it's like stepping into an entirely different world."

Pollmeier and his wife, who were veterans of Phuket getaways, were hopelessly hooked that in a few days, they purchased a four-bedroom house. Villa Malee, a minimalist dream with an abundance of glass walls looking out to the Big Buddha, is the couple's labour of love, one they share by renting it out during certain periods of the year (www.samuiholidayhomes.com/villa-malee.htm)--except when they themselves want to luxuriate in this sanctuary of their own making.

Long before the Pollmeiers, immigrants from Hainan Island (today also an emerging escape option) settled in Koh Samui some 150 years ago to farm coconut. Evidence of their journey is a map of Hainan on the Chinese spirit shrine in Nathon, the area's oldest settlement.

But it has only been since the late 80's that Koh Samui genuinely came to the attention of the world. The opening of Don Sak Ferry and the international airport were definite catalysts, creating peak seasons (late December to February, followed by July and August) when accommodation is hard to come by if reservations haven't been made months earlier. Bangkok Airways newly expanded airport facilities is clear proof of escalating tourism activities.

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Like most destinations discovered by backpackers, lodging in Koh Samui evolved, starting out as basic, by-the-beach standards of bungalows with thatched roofs and easily replaced walls of local material, followed by more permanent structures made of concrete, boasting fans and air-con. The latest wave is a brace of branded and stand-alone boutique properties with all the wow factors of their predecessors in other resort enclaves, and then some more. (Refer to Where to Stay, page 80.) And that's not going to be the end of fresh room inventory.

Seasoned hotelier Peter Pollmeier observes: "Koh Samui will change in a big way in a few years, but for now, it's more relaxed than Phuket." He thinks it is moving in a different direction, not so eager to adapt a certain phase of development that its more established relative has opted for. Which is not to say Koh Samui has no pockets of swing, sleaze and in-your-face commerce--look at Lamai and Chaweng where pubs, beachwear shops, cafes and discos stand cheek by jowl.

Traditionally, the tourists have come from Australia, the UK, Germany, Scandinavia, New

Zealand and Japan, and due to increased air links, an influx of other nationalities such as South Africans, South Americans, Israelis, Koreans, Russians, Americans, Canadians and French have been noticed. In addition, stepped up promotion campaigns by the Tourism Authority of Thailand has enticed Indian and Middle Eastern tourists to start considering the island in their vacation plans.

Like the Pollmeiers, there are always visitors who have succumbed to island fever and purchased homes, and their ranks are swelling. Buyers from the UK have always dominated the local property market, but recently there has been a significant shift in the profile. Well-known agent Koh Samui Land & Homes reports that early this year, they sold properties to clients from Ireland, Italy, Norway and Russia, signifying a growing cosmopolitan market. "And it is increasing," a top executive with the company says.

Incentives from the new government encouraging foreign investment, especially in the real-estate field, are likely catalysts for these developments. These include the Bank of Thailand removing 30 percent capital controls on foreign inflows; reduction of the transfer and business taxes to 0.01 percent from 2 percent and 3 percent respectively, and the latest announcement regarding positive changes to the Foreign Business Act, making property purchases easier and clarify issues of work permits, visas and organisational set ups.

WHERE TO STAY

[ILLUSTRATIONS OMITTED]

SO BOUTIQUE, SO BREATHTAKING

ANANTARA KOH SAMUI

Thanks to a low-rise horseshoe shape design, guestrooms and restaurants at this 106-room boutique property are made to look out to the azure waters of Bophut Bay and beyond to charming Koh Phangan. Master landscape architect Bill Bensley is responsible for the drama in Anantara's gardens, swimming pool and spa. Interiors by Bangkok-based Pia Wanglee of P Interior & Associates echo southern Thai motifs of batik fabrics, warm red and ochre hues, wind bells and open spaces allowing sea breezes to circulate. Each accommodation features a "made for two" terrazzo bathtub which can open up into the bedroom via sliding fluted glass doors, balcony with inbuilt spacious sofa and as a quirky touch--in room pets: a trio of vividly coloured Siamese fighting fish.

CONTACT: 99/9 Bophut Bay, Koh Samui, Surat Thani 84320, tel 66 77 428 300, www.anantara.com

FOUR SEASONS KOH SAMUI

The high-end chain's fourth property in Thailand nicely rounds up a range of experiences that cover city (Four Seasons Bangkok) to countryside (Four Seasons Chiangmai), jungle (Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle) to now beach (Four Seasons Koh Samui). Introduced by a driveway up a very steep hill leading to the reception, whose doors open to reveal a jaw-dropping view of the surrounding peninsula and neighbouring islands--350 feet above sea level--this 60-villa complex is truly special. Respecting the environment, the majority of accommodation, each with its own infinity pool, is tucked into the hillsides, built on stilts surrounded by coconut, jackfruit and mango trees. Buggies, the practical way to get around the place, are always available, although one of the two beach villas is only accessible through the pristine beach.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

CONTACT: 219 Moo 5, Angthong, Koh Samui, SuratThani 84140, tel 66 7 7 243 000, www.fourseasons.com

RENAISSANCE KOH SAMUI RESORT & SPA

Designed along the lines of a Thai village, the resort blends traditional architectural styles with the comforts of modern living. Its location on a gentle rise facing Lamai Bay affords front-seat views of the ocean's many moods as well as the lush gardens. All villas feature an expansive

sala and a large outdoor terrace with private plunge pool helping to create a sense of exclusivity and escape, while the Deluxe Rooms are just as indulgent with their own balcony and whirlpool. The Quart Spa also provides tranquil experiences, offering traditional healing therapies aimed at restoring a sense of well being. Tastebuds are pleased by the selection served up by TawaNN, which focuses on fresh herbs, Tapas for Spanish and Thai treats and Banana Leaf for an all-day dining experience.

CONTACT: 208/1 Moo 4, T Maret, Laem Nan Beach, Koh Samui, Surat Thani 84310, tel 66 77 429 300, www.renaissancehotels.com

SAMUI PALM BEACH RESORT

Even without a name designer to boost its image, this sprawling, picturesque resort has a loyal following of long-haul travellers, who book accommodation around the same time each year. It's also popular with the domestic market, which finds its cosy and well-maintained facilities appealing. Recently, the Samui Royal Wing was added, featuring Twin and Double Rooms as well as triple beds, furnished with rattan furniture and doors showing handpainted scenes from Chiangmai, balconies for the higher floors and a dedicated swimming pool Thai traditional performances go on nightly at the Thai Gazebo.

CONTACT: 175/3 Thaveerat-Pakdee Road, Bophut, Koh Samui, Surat Thani 84320, tel 66 77 425 494, www.samuipalmbeach.com

SIX SENSES HIDEAWAY SAMUI

Located on a headland at the northern tip of Koh Samui, this 66-villa complex takes inspiration from a Thai fishing village with accommodation set among the natural vegetation and gently sloping terrain. Butler service, available for all types of accommodation, starts from the guest's arrival to departure. Restaurants here are also meant to wow. This includes Dining on the Hill offering stunning sea views, Dining on the Rocks with unique seating on the rooftop or secluded alcoves and a Chef's Table on Saturdays and the Wine Cellar with 250 labels from 17 countries. CONTACT: 9/10 Moo 5, Baan Plai Laem, Bophut, Koh Samui, Surat Thani 84320, tel 66 77 245 678, www.sixsenses.com

While lying on the beach--there are too many to choose from: Chaweng, Lamai, Big Buddha Beach, Laem Saw, Ban Taling Ngam, Bang Po, Laem Yai, Bophut to name a few--is the obvious pasttime, dining out, whatever time of day, is filled with innumerable choices. Noodles in a shack has given way to five-star grazing and epicurean experiences such as wine tasting at Six Senses Hideaway Samui's glass encased wine cellar, presided over by its affable sommelier.

Local publisher Siam Map Company produces a nicely-bound booklet available for free at most resorts and endorsed by the Samui Culinary Circle. The group is headed by Chef Don Lawson of Anantara Koh Samui, who wrote in his introduction: "We've recently been fortunate in having exceptional chefs arrive on Samui, sharing their extraordinary culinary skills.

"Happily for us, the vast range of high-quality, fresh ingredients available here has attracted these gastronomic masters. Tropical fruits and vegetables, free-range meats and poultry, boundless varieties of fish, seafood and crustaceans, Thai herbs and seasonings, plus a liberal supply of ancient secrets combine to make Samui a culinary treasure chest for the creative chef."

Entries in the guide are written in a breezy but direct manner that includes recommended dishes, although it is a bit unclear, who is the "I" doing the suggesting--Lawson or the editorial staff? Anyhow, it is still a very informative read for the first timer to the island.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Koh Samui's attraction lies in the casual do-as-you-please attitude that colours the lifestyle, its sense of freedom from the urgency of having to catch up with more developed neighbours; its joy at living one day at a time. Now that's something cool we can all learn from.

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