

Phuket is surrounded by an archipelago of jungle-clad uninhabited islands

Eastern. promise

For those wishing to explore beyond the popular cruising grounds of the Mediterranean and Caribbean, turn east to the hauntingly beautiful waters of Southeast Asia and the South China Seas.

BY MIRIAM CAIN

Phuket

Pristine beaches, turquoise waters, amazing underwater life, uninhabited islands and well-protected anchorages make the Andaman Sea the reigning maritime jewel of Southeast Asia. The island of Phuket acts as a hub for the region. It has long been a well-established travel hot spot and yet it still retains its appeal. Known as the Pearl of the Andaman, the island was once famed for its rubber plantations and tin mines, but today its most valuable asset is its scenery. It has rustic villages where locals still live in the traditional old-Thai- style manner, but it also has some of the world's most luxurious hotels and spas.

What to do

Phuket is the ideal base from which to explore the largely uninhabited surrounding islands, famous for their stunning topography and underwater marine life. The area of Phang Nga Bay is made up of over 100 islands. The area is most famous for its steep karst outcrops towering out of the sea that were immortalized by the James Bond film *The Man With The Golden Gun*.

Head to local legend John Gray for a starlit canoe discovery—a private kayak expedition of the waters and ancient caves around Phuket. John is an authority on the area and will personally guide you around the bays and Phang Nga Caves. *Contact: Ling Yai (aka John Gray), +66 84 844 1807, www.johngray-seacano.com.*

Visit the Had Nai Yang National Park, a long stretch of shoreline known for its annual release of protected hatchling sea turtles into the Andaman Sea. Protected from fishermen and poachers by a conservation program, the numbers of turtles are dwindling and would probably be extinct without this conservation effort. The annual release takes place in April during the Songkran holiday. The national park is also where you will find Phuket's largest coral reef in shallow water just 1,400 meters from the shore. The best time to snorkel here is from November to April before the annual monsoon makes the sea too choppy.

There are a few Buddhist temples on Phuket that are worth visiting. The most famous is Wat Chalong, whilst the most unique is Wat Phra Thong.

For golf fans, Phuket has a number of international-standard golf courses. The Blue Canyon Country Club is ranked amongst the finest courses in Asia and offers two championship layouts—the Lakes Course and the Canyon Course. The Phuket Country Club is an all-round course with excellent facilities. The Laguna Gold Club is a relaxed, resort-style, 18-hole course with wide fairways, while the Red Mountain Golf Club is the newest 18-hole course on the island, integrated into the lush hills of Kathu.

Where to stay

Phuket has a choice of elegant and stylish resorts for weary sea legs where guests can expect superlative facilities with ultra-high service standards. A number offer private villas and pools. The Banyan Tree, located on the shores of Bang Tao Bay on the northwest of Phuket, and part of Laguna Phuket, is an integrated resort that consists of five luxury hotels, six lagoons, 600 acres of parkland, over two miles of beach and an array of recreational and dining facilities. The resort has earned accolades from leading magazines the world over, and was recently included in the *Condé Nast Traveler* Gold List 2011, and the *Condé Nast Traveler* 20th Annual Readers' Choice Awards.

On the eastern side of the island the Evason Phuket is a family-friendly resort and popular spa retreat. Set amongst 64 acres of tropical parklands and gardens, the resort's selection of pool villas includes a honeymoon villa on its own island Koh Bon. The resort is also where you will find the Six Senses Spa with its comprehensive menu of signature treatments and specialist programs for holistic wellness and rejuvenation. *Contact: General Manager Frank Grassmann, frankg@sixsenses.com; Spa Manager Linda Overman, dir-thailand-spa@sixsenses.com.*

The Amanpuri Hotel is the epitome of elegance. It easily lives up to its name, meaning place of peace, as its luxury teak pavilions are scattered over a coconut plantation,

beautifully decorated and complete with private terraces and sea views. The resort was the first Aman resort to open and remains a flagship for the company. The on-site Aman Spa has six Thai-style pavilions where therapists offer an extensive menu of treatments tailored to the individual. *Contact: General Manager Fred Varnier, +66 76 324 333.*

The villas at Sri Panwa have glass-walled bedrooms with uninterrupted views over the Andaman Sea, which open out onto their own private infinity pool. The Sai Spa menu includes Thai massage, facials and therapy baths.

Areas like Patong are better avoided when looking for accommodation as over-development caters for budget tour groups from around the world. That said, some new landscaping has improved a few parts of town, which were badly hit by the tsunami of 2004, and a few upscale bars and restaurants are beginning to change the scene.

Where to eat

Phuket boasts some of the best seafood in Thailand and the restaurants are akin to those found in the five-star hotels of Bangkok. This means that the prices are overblown, but they attract well-heeled fun-seekers rather than the backpackers for which Thailand is better known. Most are located in the boutique-style resorts that are dotted around the island, such as The Banyan

Phang Nga Bay is famous for its steep outcrops



Tree and Amanpuri, but there are a few stand-alone culinary establishments worth visiting.

Bang Tao Bay is home to a number of high-end properties all with their own fine-dining eateries. The Banyan Tree tops the bill with pan-Asian delicacies on the menu at Saffron, and Mediterranean seafood cuisine at Watercourt.

There are three restaurants at the Amanpuri resort: The Terrace, a casual setting, with a Thai and European all-day dining menu; The Restaurant, which serves Italian cuisine; and Naoki, which serves Chef Naoki Okumura’s original French Kaiseki, combining the best of French techniques with a Japanese flair. *Contact: General Manager Fred Varnier, +66 76 324 333.*

Patong is crammed with small cafés and restaurants, but the arrival of the new JungCeylon shopping mall has attracted a number of high-end dining venues. To the south of the island, Chalong Bay’s Kan Eang Seafood is well known for its lobster dishes straight from the ocean.

Located on the water with views over Kalim Bay, the beachfront bar at Joe’s Downstairs is a favorite for local expats who come for cocktails at sunset, but it also serves appetizers, Asian-style tapas, and seafood dishes, including Maine lobster for lunch and dinner, and boasts a *Wine Spectator* award-winning wine list. *Contact: Executive Chef Aaron Hooper, +66 76 618 245.* Joe’s Downstairs is also a popular hangout for late-night drinks, but for those who want to continue into the early hours, Catch Beach Club is the favorite haunt with live music and DJs.



The Evason Phuket is set amid lush surroundings

Where to board

At the northeast end of Phuket, the Yacht Haven Marina is the ideal launch pad for a charter through the stunning cruising grounds of Phang Nga Bay. Just minutes from Phuket International Airport, you can step aboard your yacht and cruise across the bay. *Contact: Marina Manager Nick Wyatt, +66 76 206 704.*

Recommended

Dusit is the headquarters of the Elephant Help Project, a mobile clinic that invites guests to join the vets as they tend to sick elephants across the island. Driving in a hardtop Land Rover, this is a wonderful opportunity to travel around Phuket, meet the elephants and get involved with the worthy work of the clinic.

Yachting events on the horizon

The annual King’s Cup Regatta takes place each December in the waters surrounding Phuket. This is one

of Asia’s leading regattas and enjoys the royal patronage of the King of Thailand. Competitors from around the world, from world-class sailors to weekend yachting enthusiasts, race off Phuket’s major beaches and also make a big run to the Phi Phi Islands. The King’s Cup Regatta will be hosted from 4-11 December 2011.

Celebrating its 11th year, the Asia Superyacht Rendezvous takes place from 16-18 December 2011 in Phuket. The diverse fleet has grown year on year, and this year it welcomes both sailing and motoryachts, classic and new, to cruise the waters of the Andaman Sea and enjoy Thai hospitality in a relaxed and sociable setting.

Langkawi

One of 99 largely uninhabited islands scattered off the west coast of the Malaysian peninsula, Langkawi is today what Bali was like three decades ago—an idyllic



Pansea Beach is just a short hop from The Amanpuri Hotel, Phuket

hideaway embraced by nature's wonders, framed within a breathtaking backdrop of dramatic mountain landscapes. The island is the largest in the archipelago. The calm and pleasant moderate winds off Langkawi make for perfect sailing conditions, and the island is the ideal base from which to explore the surrounding archipelago of islands and islets with their thick jungle foliage, mountains and national parks.

What to do

Take a trip inland and discover the island's lush landscape of rainforest. Jump into the fresh waters of Seven Wells, one of Langkawi's seven spectacular waterfalls; take the zip-line across the rainforest canopy for a bird's-eye view over the interior; or simply hike and discover various local wildlife including rare and exotic bird species in one of the largest mangrove forests in Southeast Asia.

Uncover some of the most intriguing geological gems etched in the sea cliff landscapes of Langkawi. The UNESCO World Geopark is rated 52nd in the world for its unique geological heritage—with sites said to date back to 550 million years. The Pulau Payar Marine Park lying just off Langkawi is surrounded by well-protected coral reefs that are home to numerous species of marine life best discovered with an underwater dive.

Pedal around rustic wooden houses amid stretches of green paddy fields on a guided biking trip through Langkawi's rural scopes and local villages. Visiting Kuah is a must for some great duty-free shopping, including a number of designer labels.

Where to stay

Langkawi has a wide selection of luxury resorts and spas. The Four Seasons Resort Langkawi is located on Tanjung Rhu, one of the island's best beaches on the northeastern shore. Guest pavilions and villas of indigenous architecture are dotted around the resort amid landscaped gardens in the style of a native village, reflecting Langkawi's melting-pot history of Balinese, Chinese and Indian settlers. The beach villas are palatial, with plunge pools and verandas. There are two restaurants including Ikan-Ikan on the beach and the Rhu bar. The spa is housed in six spa pavilions, and provides Thai and Malay treatments and yoga classes. *Contact: General Manager Greg Pirkle, +604 950 8888.*

The rainforest retreat of The Datai has long been a favorite of well-heeled Asians, and has built a reputation as one of the most desirable hotels in Malaysia. The resort emerges from the rainforest floor and cascades down to the sea and a private beach. With two swimming pool areas, three restaurants, an 18-hole golf course, and an indulgent spa and wellness center, the Datai is the perfect antidote to city life. Villas are hidden amongst the jungle terrain, and



The Royal Langkawi Yacht Club makes a good base when visiting by yacht



Dine by candlelight at the Datai's Thai Pavilion Restaurant

the sounds of the rainforest echo throughout, with bird calls and monkey chatter from dusk till dawn. *Contact: Acting General Manager Guido Farina, +604 959 2500, or Spa Director Angeline Lim, +604 959 2500.*

Where to eat

Cuisine in Malaysia is a fantastic combination of Chinese, Indian and, as such, Malaysian, and Langkawi is a culinary haven for foodies. Savor local flavors and colorful sights at the Pasar Malam Night Market. The streets are abuzz with vendors peddling their wares. The Nam at the Bon Ton Resort is one of the most popular dining spots. Serving a mixture of Malay and Western dishes, the setting amidst an old coconut grove is idyllic and the perfect place for a sunset dinner. Try the signature dish

Nyonoya Platter. *Contact: General Manager Alison Fraser, +604 955 6787.*

The chilled-out lounge bar Chin Chin, annexed to Nam restaurant, is just the ticket for those looking for a quiet place to indulge in a few cocktails. Set in an antique shop and decked out with Malay antiques, it is a unique spot and, as with Nam, the sunsets are spectacular. The beachfront setting of the Lighthouse Restaurant on Pantai Tengan Beach is also hard to beat. The first-floor veranda is ideal for those looking for formal dining, whilst those looking for something slightly less dressy can eat at an outside table on the beach. Either way, the Malay and Mediterranean menu comes highly recommended by expats and visitors. For those wishing to learn a little more



about Malay cuisine, head chef Shukri hosts a hands-on cooking program in his home where guests can learn how to cook with local ingredients and enjoy the dishes with Shukri. *Contact: General Manager Sudirman, +604 955 2586, or to make bookings for Cook with Shukri, email Chef Shukri, shucor@steamyx.com.*

The Pavilion restaurant at the aforementioned Datai is located in a thatched terrace high in the forest canopy and serves fantastic Thai and Asian cuisine. *Contact: Restaurant Manager Kenneth Nicholas, +604 959 2500.*

You should also dine at the Hole in the Wall Fish Farm & Restaurant on the Kilim River, where the menu is

mainly based around the daily catch. For those looking for somewhere to carry on the evening, the most popular nightspot is the hip SunBa.

Where to board

The Royal Langkawi Yacht Club is a 200-berth marina for yachts of up to 60 meters. Superbly located on the southeast corner of Langkawi, the marina is ideally based for access to the duty-free shops and is just a short journey to Kuah, the island's main town. The yacht club hosts many events throughout the year, including the annual Royal Langkawi Regatta, and welcomes visiting yachts. *Contact: Marina Manager Ahmad Zailani, +604 966 4078 (office) and VHF Channel 69.*



Unwind and enjoy the view at the Four Seasons Resort Langkawi

Recommended

Take a ride on the Langkawi Cable Car to the summit of Mount Macinchang for a panoramic view over Langkawi. The dramatic, near-vertical ride lifts you high above the rainforest canopy to a 706-meter rocky summit.

Hainan

China has recently been attracting attention from the yachting crowd as the country's economy booms and the yacht market develops fast. This year saw the second Hainan Rendezvous, which was well attended by those wishing to sail the island's coasts on the South China Sea and the Gulf of Tonkin.

Referred to as the Chinese Hawaii, Hainan Island is the only tropical beach destination in China. Lying southwest of Hong Kong, the island is close to the Vietnamese coast and has roughly the same latitude and a similar land mass as Hawaii. Though it is only a 90-minute flight from Hong Kong, Hainan has everything you could wish for, including palm-fringed beaches and warm temperatures year-round. The tropical island has drawn vacationers from the mainland for a number of years, but with all the dramatic economic changes in China, there has been a boom in tourism which is today attracting many more mainland travelers to experience what has predominantly been a foreign beach culture. It won't be long before the Chinese start exploring other beach holiday destinations.

The interior of Hainan is clad with lush tropical rainforests inhabited by tigers, ancient buildings and cultural remains. The coastline is made up of miles of white, sandy beaches that remain largely untouched, and the surrounding waters have some great locations for scuba diving and snorkeling.

What to do

Take a dip in one of the island's geothermal hot springs that can be found all around the island. The springs have water temperatures of 45°C to 90°C.

There are several high-quality golf courses on the island and the number is growing annually as development increases. Among the best, and one of the top ten courses in China, is the Yalong Bay Golf Club of Sanya. The official golf club of the Asian Tour, the course is a Robert Trent Jones Junior 18-hole par-72. Overlooking the water, the 68 hectares/168 acres are streaked with a winding river and dotted with lakes and coconut trees.

Hainan's cities and towns include the capital Haikou, found on the north of the island, and the town of Sanya. They all boast colonial-style buildings, leafy avenues and open-air markets. Visit Sanya's First Market, where locals barter over live giant seafood, flapping fish, water buffalo



legs and fresh tofu. Here your chef will also find fresh white noodles, dim sum shells and fresh fruit, including custard apple and dragon fruit. Should your palette be up to it, your chef could even prepare a local soup delicacy.

Alternatively, go inland and discover traditional living. The hills are home to 20 tribes, including Li and Miao. Their villages dot the landscape and here you will find many living the traditional way of life to which they are accustomed, working with crops of dragon fruit, mango, papaya and guava, and in the paddy fields. Li women are tattooed all over their bodies, whilst Miao wear elegantly embroidered textiles and detailed jewelry.

Where to stay

The former fishing village of Sanya on the southern tip of Hainan Island has boomed in the past ten years and it is here that you will find two of the island's best beaches, Tianya Haijiao and Dadonghai. There are also a number of resorts, the likes of The Banyan Tree and the Mandarin Oriental, and later this year will see the opening of the new Raffles Sanya and a new Fairmont Resort.

The Mandarin Oriental Sanya is set beneath green hills, and surrounded by a clear sea edged with coral reefs. Every one of the rooms has views over the sea. The beach resort's spa is nestled serenely on the hillside and offers traditional Chinese medicine and a range of other treatments. *Contact: General Manager Paul Jackson, +86 898 8820 9999.*

To the east of Sanya is Yalong Bay with a five-mile beach, the aforementioned championship golf course Yalong Bay Golf Club, and several hotels, including the award-winning Ritz-Carlton Sanya. A vast complex inspired by Beijing's Summer Palace, the Ritz-Carlton has 450 rooms with 33 pool villas, eight dining establishments and bars, countless infinity pools and fountains, numerous sports and watersports facilities, and one of the largest spas in the region with exclusive ESPA therapies and treatments. *Contact: General Manager Michel Goget, +86 898 8858, or Spa Director Kelly Fu, +86 898 8858 ext.6952.*

Where to eat

Hainan cuisine has a wonderful array of ingredients, with a wealth of specialty restaurants serving local, traditional Chinese, Western, Japanese and other dishes. Local cuisine is best known for its "Famous Four": Wenchang Chicken, Jiaji Duck, Dongshan Mutton and Hele Crab, but there are several other specialties including Hainan Chicken, Hainan Noodles and Dongshan Pancakes.

Where to board

The Visun Marina has Hainan's largest quay wall for stern mooring and is capable of berthing yachts of 30 meters

and above. One of China's most modern marinas and yacht clubs, the marina opened at the end of 2009 and is part of a larger development, which includes restaurants, shops, and residential accommodation.

Recommended

Explore Nanshan Mountain, renowned for its inhabitants' longevity, thanks to the superb air quality and legend of the mountain's power and the ancient *Dracaena cambodiana* trees that cover it. This is where the traditional Chinese birthday saying "May you live as long as the pines on Mount Nanshan" originates. At the foot of the mountain is a large Buddhist theme park that has become a popular pilgrimage with its huge statue of the Buddhist goddess Guan Yin standing 50 feet higher than the Statue of Liberty.

Events on the horizon

Now in its third edition, the Hainan Rendezvous will

be held from 5-8 April 2012. The event combines China's largest business jet show, China's largest on-water display of superyachts, luxury property displays, and a showcase of Asia's finest lifestyle products, all in one event.

Yachts for charter

There are only a handful of yachts that are available for charter that venture further afield to cruising grounds such as Southeast Asia. Some are on circumnavigation trips and some base themselves there for the winter. Yachts will usually only be in this part of the world for a limited period which means that charters need to be booked well in advance. The southeast monsoon starts in June and goes on until September and generally brings with it, some good winds for sailing, with a couple of hours of rain in the afternoons to help cool the heat of the day. The northeast monsoon, that runs from November through April, offers sunny and dry weather, with calmer seas and lighter winds. ■

Below and bottom: The vast Summer Palace-inspired Ritz-Carlton Sanya, Hainan, has everything for the perfect Asian summer

