

A vibrant tropical beach scene. In the foreground, clear turquoise water meets a white sandy beach. A person is swimming in the water. Along the beach, there are several thatched-roof huts, some built on a rocky shore. In the background, a dense line of palm trees and other tropical vegetation stretches across the horizon under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds.

DROP IT LIKE IT'S HOT

THE MOST KNOCK-OUT ADDRESSES ON THAILAND'S BEACHES



PHOTOGRAPHS: ANAIS + DAX/AUGUST, CHRIS WISE

Villa Siam at Injala Beach House in Phuket. *Opposite*, the turquoise waters of Koh Racha Yai

BEST SPIRITUAL HIGH

Scattered through dense bird-filled jungle on the edge of a boulder-strewn beach, Thai wellness institution Kamalaya changed the spa scene when it opened 10 years ago. This results-driven holistic hotspot on the island of Koh Samui is built around an ancient monk's cave, and its therapists are some of the best in the world. Recharge your physical and emotional batteries on one of three different stress- and burnout-therapy programmes, which include invigorating yoga, Chinese acupuncture, Ayurvedic medicine and Thai massage. www.kamalaya.com. Doubles from about £140



BEST TREEHOUSES

All eyes are on Phuket this month, when the fantastical Keemala finally opens its recycled wooden doors. The hotel looks like a cross between *Avatar's* Pandora and *The Hobbit's* Middle-earth, and you can choose to stay in mushroom-shaped clay cottages, billowing tented suites, bird's-nest villas or bamboo houses looped into the palm trees like massive Christmas baubles. Vegetables in the restaurants will come straight from the kitchen gardens and fruit will be plucked from the surrounding orchards. The spa has therapies including vibrational attunement and Tibetan singing bowls. Expectations couldn't be higher. www.keemala.com. Doubles from about £355

BEST-SMELLING BOLTHOLE

Koh Samui meets colonial Indochina at The Scent Hotel on Bang Rak beach, where Provençal-style armchairs sit beside apothecary dressers. Choose your room fragrance on arrival. www.thescenthotel.com. Doubles from about £65



BEST INTERIORS

Ella Phuket, *right*, in Patong Beach, is a temple to urban industrial minimalism with bare bulbs, polished concrete, iced mochas and guestrooms upstairs. At the opposite end of the style spectrum is China Inn Café in Phuket Town. A hundred years ago the shophouse was used as a money brokerage firm; now its beautifully restored rooms are filled with colourful textiles, lacquered antiques and vintage Chinese advertising posters, and there's a great courtyard restaurant. www.theellagroup.org; *China Inn* (+66 76 356239)

BEST PEOPLE-WATCHING

For some, a perfect evening in Thailand is a great cocktail and a mean green curry, preferably while wearing just flip-flops and a kaftan. But for others, it's a much more raucous event. The European-style beach clubs here include bottle service and a glammed-up crowd. At Koh Samui's Nikki Beach, for example, sushi, Champagne and international DJs are the draw (the more low-key Wednesday film nights are pretty popular too), and at Phuket's Catch Beach Club on Surin Beach (one of the island's better stretches of sand) the parties turn into a rave as the night goes on. www.nikkibeach.com; www.catchbeachclub.com

BEST SLICE OF HISTORY

Thai Hua Museum is one of the finest examples of Sino-Portuguese architecture in Phuket. Formerly a Chinese-language school, the building in the Old Town now holds exhibitions of local history, which is influenced by the Chinese diaspora who came to the island for tin mining. The displays are informative, using original artefacts as props and mini mock-ups to show what life was like in the 19th century. +66 76 211224



BEST NEW VILLAS

Koh Samui is heaving with heavyweight hotels – Banyan Tree, Four Seasons, W, Belmond Napasai – but giving them a run for their money are a new breed of houses to rent with vast amounts of space, spectacular design and privacy. Check out the modernist cubes of Samujana, *pictured*, cleaved into the hillside above Choeng Mon beach. Each comes with its own butlers, chefs, drivers and swimming pools, as well as Muay Thai boxers for personal training. Or try the Panacea's Praana Residence, which sprawls over 50,000sq ft and needs a staff of 20 to keep its six suites, cinema room, two infinity pools, gym, spa, nursery and nightclub ticking over. www.samujana.com; www.panaceasamui.com

BEST BOAT RIDE

Phang Nga Bay is hard to beat. Get here in a traditional longtail fishing boat to explore transparent waters, white-sand coves that are great for a lunch stop or a quick swim, and limestone islands that provide an epic setting (they featured in the 1974 James Bond film *The Man With The Golden Gun*: the fiendish Scaramanga was a resident in these parts).

BEST STREET FOOD

Blending Indian, Malaysian and Chinese influences, the food of southern Thailand is intense, hyper-fragrant and the spiciest of the country's already spicy regional cuisines. Get your fix in Phuket Old Town, a former enclave of 19th-century Chinese and Portuguese traders, where umbrella-covered stalls sizzle outside pastel-coloured shophouses strung with red lanterns. Lunch might come in plastic bags but it is the most authentic you'll find on the island. It's also the cheapest. Feast on local specialities – soupy seafood *hokkien* noodles, skewers of sizzling sausages, oyster omelettes, piping-hot roti and velvety curries – for less than £1 a dish.







BEST HOTEL SHOP

What stands out most at Phuket's Point Yamu by COMO, *this picture and below*, are the impeccable details, from the antique Buddha hands repurposed as door handles to the vintage cart serving organic ice cream. At the hotel's boutique, masterminded by owner Christina Ong, the edit is small but flawless. The shop's version of Thai trousers favoured by gap-year travellers comes cut in dashing silk, and the swimsuit selection includes pin-up numbers by London-based Prism. Other must-buys include gold bangles, which look great stacked on a tanned arm. www.comohotels.com

BEST AFTERPARTY

As soon as the plates of curries and green-mango salad have been cleared at Ka Jok See, a restaurant and cabaret bar in Phuket Old Town, a ladyboy in glittery platforms and a sequined dress belts out 'It's Raining Men'. Everyone joins in, banging on bongos and tambourines, putting on cowboy hats and pink, plastic, heart-shaped sunglasses. It's eccentric to say the least, and dancing on tabletops is absolutely encouraged, as is initiating a conga line with the rest of the guests. Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell have been spotted kicking up their heels here. +66 76 217903

BEST CHEAP MASSAGE

Forget the brightly lit storefront massage parlours that are a dime a dozen in Thailand. Tanaporn Massage House on Koh Phangan somehow combines an authentic atmosphere (flowering gardens, gentle music, hushed surroundings) with bargain prices (less than £10 an hour) and therapists who make your body as limber as your 18-year-old best again. If you're lucky with your timing (in the earlier months of the year), the owner's mother-in-law might be in town; the deceptively slight lady can make men cry - her hands are that strong. www.tanaporn.com

BEST CLIFFSIDE COCKTAILS

At sunset everyone heads to Baba Nest, *below*, for a rum-drenched My Thai Lady. Suspended up high, cut into the rocks of Phuket's Cape Panwa peninsula, the rooftop bar of the Baba Poolclub at Sri Panwa has knock-your-socks-off views over the Andaman Sea. The vibe is low-key, with sunken seats for flopping onto after a swim in the infinity pool. Come earlier in the day for lunch and order the sake-sashimi salad, salt-and-pepper calamari and tiger prawns, alongside a Piña Colada or the non-alcoholic Baba Punch with fresh orange, hibiscus juice and lime. www.sripanwa.com





BEST FOR HIGH ROLLERS

If you spy a frenzy of paparazzi and a private jet when you land at Phuket International, chances are its passengers are heading to Iniala Beach House, *above and above right*. A mix of modern architecture, MoMA-worthy art and a white-sand beach has made it one of Asia's most talked-about openings in the past few years. If it's a stretch to pay £10,000 a night to rent it all out, dip into the jetset life at the restaurant. The dishes by Eneko Atxa (of three-Michelin-starred Azurmendi in Bilbao) include cherry tomatoes served on bonsai trees, truffled egg yolks, seashell-shaped strawberry and rose petits fours. Maybe this is your chance for a selfie with a Kardashian. www.iniala.com. Tasting menu about £80. Suites from about £700

BEST BEATS

When Koh Samui's beachside Gecko Village was destroyed by fire, the owners relocated to Bophut Hills. Gone are the Bali-style interiors: the Gecko Bar & Supper Club, as it's now known, is slick with polished concrete, soaring ceilings and an infinity pool. By night, it's a different creature. Techno and house fans spill in for the Sunday sessions that are now legendary thanks to the famous names that play, including Dirty Vegas.

BEST ART

Known for his industrial-leaning designs, John Underwood creates copper ceiling fans, ornate steel screens and stone-carved bathtubs that can be seen in some of Asia's slickest hotels, including Indigo Pearl in Phuket and Hotel de la Paix in Cambodia. Find his furniture and sculptures at the Underwood Art Factory under Phuket's Mu Ban bypass. www.underwood-phuket.com



BEST GREAT ESCAPE

Thailand's fourth-largest – but least-visited – island, Ko Kood, sits in a pristine marine sanctuary near the Cambodian border. Largely mountainous, with thick jungle ringed by immaculate sandy bays, it feels totally off-grid. Stay in a straw hut at Neverland, the little beach houses at Shantaa Resort or in one of the largest hotel villas in the world at sybaritic Soneva Kiri, *this picture and previous page bottom right*, a beautiful spot with environmentally friendly design and authentic Thai touches. www.neverlandresort.com; from about £30 per night. www.shantaakohkood.com; from about £50 per night. www.soneva.com; doubles from about £595



BEST HIDEAWAY

Ask any Bangkok insider where to escape the city's chaos and totally unwind and Railei Beach Club in Krabi is bound to come up.

On an idyllic bay bookended by limestone cliffs and fronted by a crystal sea with bobbing fishing boats, the Robinson Crusoe-styled wooden bungalows are set just back from the water and are a refuge for expat and well-heeled locals who happily rent them out to visitors when they're not in residence. The beach bar is not to be missed (try the passion-fruit Margarita) and the chefs adopt a market-to-table approach when they come and cook for you. The only drawback? The word is out, so book early in high season, especially for Christmas and New Year, when a seven-night minimum is required. www.raileibeachclub.com.

From about £65 per night

BEST PICTURE-PERFECT BEACH

You'll need to get here early or hang late to get the postcard-worthy photo-op at Nangyuan near Koh Tao, a silvery sliver of a sandbar that connects three small islands linked by thigh-deep, crystal-clear water and a fishbowl-effect of tropical marine life.

BEST UNDISCOVERED CORNER

A land of free-diving sea gypsies, leafy cashew farms, Champagne-coloured sand and mint-green water: it is actually still possible to find unspoilt parts of Thailand. Until recently, almost no one had heard of the mellow island of Koh Phayam, on the Thai border with Burma – and those who had were unlikely to want to make the nine-hour slog on the night bus from Bangkok to get there. But Koh Phayam's fortunes are set to change (for better or worse) now the low-cost Thai airline Nok Air has started direct 90-minute flights from the capital. Get there before every hippy and hipster worth their pink Himalayan salt finds out about it. www.nokair.com

BEST REST

Getting a good night's sleep is serious business at the dreamy Six Senses Yao Noi. Tucked away on a sparsely populated island sandwiched between Krabi and Phuket, this do-gooding, eco-luxe hotel has always been a den of tranquility, but its Yogic Sleep programme takes snoozing to new levels. Guided meditation sessions, calming *qi gong* classes, *yoga nidra* – learning how to achieve a kind of conscious dream state – are combined with dream-catcher head massages, *pandan*-scented steams and detoxing scrubs, all under the guidance of doe-eyed yoga master Dorelal Singh from India. www.sixsenses.com. *Doubles from about £280*



BEST BAREFOOT BEACH BAR

The Flip Flop Pharmacy in Koh Phangan, *above*, exemplifies the hidden side of the island's north-east with its chilled-out vibe a million miles from the Full Moon parties this place has become known for. Here, instead, is a pavilion with worn-smooth floorboards, a drinks menu that would make any mixologist proud and a mellow soundtrack. But the best bits are the slouchy pillows, low tables and candlelit lanterns beneath a sky that changes from pink to starlit in the time it takes to sip a cocktail. +66 77 445081

BEST WATERFRONT CAFE

Casa Lapin x Samui has just opened at Fisherman's Village, right on fashionable Bophut Beach. The brainchild of architect-owner Surapan Tanta, one of Thailand's niche coffee pioneers, it continues the industrial-chic style of the Bangkok original – exposed brick walls with bare floorboards and a decked terrace. Here you'll find skilled baristas serving the best coffee on the island, as well as a range of smoothies, detox juices and punchy cocktails, alongside seafood platters piled high with lobster, prawns, oysters and scallops.

BEST BATHROOMS

On Mai Khao beach in the quiet north-west of the island, Sala Phuket, *right*, is peaceful and private, and completely removed from the party scene. The design is contemporary and sleek: lots of lime-washed wood, pale grey and taupe linen, and daybeds piled high with cushions. Most of the 79 suites and villas come with their own swimming pool but all of them have an open-air shower and a huge, egg-shaped marble bath outside for breezy evening bathing. www.salaresorts.com. Doubles from about £80





BEST REINVENTION

Pattaya is cleaning up its act. Forget the sleazy girlie bars, ear-splitting music and seedy massage parlours, it now has chic cafés, bars and restaurants. Check out A' La Campagne, *left and opposite top right*, with its French-style interiors, modern European food and amazing coffee. Pop next door to Somtum Villa for a cracking green-papaya salad and end the day with sunset drinks at Silver Lining on the beach. For healthy smoothies, head to the Spa Café, *above*, in nearby Chon Buri, and the funky Conpanno Café has delicious ice cream.

BEST SEAFOOD

It may be off the beaten track but the pier at Bang Bao, a village in southern Koh Chang, has the most fantastic fish. It doesn't matter which restaurant you pick, though if you want to choose your seafood specifically, Lom Talay and Chow Lay have large tanks teeming with various knobbly crustaceans. Local specialities include grilled mantis shrimp (*kung pao*) and stir-fried spider crab in red curry sauce (*boo paht pong karee*).

BEST SNORKEL STOP

Grab a mask and head to the Similan Islands, a national park west of Khao Lak that's well worth its designation as one of the world's best diving sites. After discovering the shoals of rich coral reefs and the spectacular limestone islands, the squeaky soft beaches are just the spot for a picnic.

GETTING THERE

For bespoke itineraries to Thailand and personalised service, contact **Cleveland Collection** (+44 20 3111 0805; www.clevelandcollection.co.uk)

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