



# Upmarket in Phuket

Bryan Matthews on how to avoid the sleazy side of the Thai island, Phuket.

I've met a lot of Australians who've been to Phuket; and quite a lot who reckon 'been there, done that, hated it'.

I'm not an expert on too many places but I do know this particular Thai island. We've been there many times; have friends living there and almost bought property there (changed our minds, saw the money dwindle in our superfund, watched said villa triple in value; but that's the story of my life as an investment guru).

The problem with the 'been there/hated it' view of Phuket is that most people go to touristy, grubby Patong. And, even if they do venture elsewhere on the island or offshore (e.g. the obligatory – but actually quite nice – speedboat trip to 'James Bond' island), Patong's sleaziness still seeps into their holiday memories.

Phuket – like other south east Asian destinations – draws some odd types. A lot of Brits live there but I'm not sure what most of them do. Many may have had previous careers as extras in *Eastenders*; some I suspect are blurring the line between retiree and fugitive.

Other expats of various professional backgrounds are either based there or use the island as a weekend or holiday retreat. Whatever the reason for calling Phuket home, they've pushed up property prices. It's not surprising because pick the right spot and the living there is idyllic.

Just 20 minutes south of the airport – rather than the hour to Patong – is the string of resorts along Bangtao beach in the Laguna area. Bangtao is a

six kilometre crescent-shaped stretch of beach which, hotels aside, is populated by a few cool bars and restaurants. (The Reggae Bar is one of the best though all the beach bars have one great thing in common i.e. the short stroll from your hotel sunlounger saves you about 60 per cent on a beer.)

Among the Laguna properties, the Laguna Holiday Club is arguably the best for families. Couples may prefer the Dusit or the distinctly calmer environment of the Banyan Tree.

Surin Beach is also the antithesis of Patong and home to some of the island's most luxurious hotels. The Amanpuri and Trisara hotels will appeal to cashed-up couples who enjoy gazing at sunsets and staring wistfully into each other's eyes; both are beautiful but a little too zen and lovey-dovey for my liking. Something similar but not quite so soppy is Twin Palms. It's beautifully designed and the service is terrific; and while it's generally nuts to pay hotel prices for Thai food in Thailand, one of its restaurants really does the business if you want high-end indigenous grub.

Another option is to get a villa – with staff – for anything from a few days to a few months. Sai Taan at Laguna has beautiful homes for rent; each one built around the pool as the central feature.

Wherever they stay, most people who go to Phuket come back raving about the spa treatments. Sure you get tinkling Thai music, a beautifully clad masseuse and, afterwards, as much hot tea as you like (served in those daft handle-less cups guaranteed to scorch your mitts); but for a fraction

of the price you get a much better massage at the gnarled hands of a local granny on the beach. I've only once tried a posh massage in Phuket – opting for the 'mango scrub'. It cost far too much – though by licking my forearms at dinner that night I saved on the price of a dessert.

There are other things everyone seems to do when they go to Phuket. One is to watch the Fantasea cabaret. Go if you must – if only to avoid being told over and over again that you should have done so. Frankly, it didn't do much for me but I'm not all that into dancing elephants.

An elephant ride is another popular excursion I don't recommend. I simply can't believe – as we're told – that it doesn't hurt when their handlers whack them with a hooked metal bar and holler what I assume to be Thai for 'giddy up, Dumbo'. Elephants are supposed to have quite large brains so can't they simply be taught to understand things like 'take a left at the next rubber tree'?

If your souvenir ambitions are somewhat more invasive then try what is discreetly called 'medical tourism'. What this means is that you go on holiday with one nose and come back with a completely different (usually straighter or smaller) one. Also popular among female visitors are those rather appealing larger items available for purchase in pairs. Don't feel left out guys; in Thailand you have the option of going on holiday as a 50-year-old man and surprising your friends by returning as a 50-year-old woman.

See – the possibilities in Phuket are endless. >>



**NEED TO KNOW:**

**WHEN TO GO:**

Thailand enjoys a tropical climate. As a guide, this ranges from hot (Mar-May) 25-43°C, tropical (Jun-Oct) 23-33°C and cool (Nov-Feb) 22-31°C

The best time to visit Phuket is during the cooler months when there is less rainfall.

**WHERE TO STAY:**

**LAGUNA:** Dusit Thani; Banyan Tree; Laguna Holiday Club.

**SURIN:** Twin Palms; Amanpuri; Trisara

**EAT:**

Having bagged the area as a whole, I'm obliged to say that Baan Rim Pa (Thai), Da Maurizio (Italian) and Joe's Downstairs (for cocktails and fusion cuisine) form an upmarket enclave of Patong worth visiting for sunsets and dinner.

In Phuket Town, try Kajoksee where the night begins in its guise as a very laid-back Thai restaurant (with a European feel) but then morphs into music and dancing among (and possibly on) the tables.

Just outside the Laguna area are some splendid restaurants in Tinlay Place. The Siam Supper Club is fine dining and one of the most appealing eateries I've been to anywhere in Asia. Just next

door is Tapas Tree – which is much better than its naff name suggests. Across the road are Tawai (Thai) and BBs, a pub with a very cosmopolitan menu. On the beach at Laguna, pick your fresh seafood out of the tanks at Lotus restaurant.

Finally, if you've had enough of the green curry then try The Green Man – a remarkably authentic English pub sitting incongruously in Chalong in the middle of the island. Nearby, there's a place where you can rent an AK47 and fire off a few rounds; you should probably go there before, rather than after, the pub.

**SHOP:**

I'd recommend original and knock-off artwork (knock-offs of top modern Thai artists are great because no-one back here will know) or the fantastic cutlery sets (believe me, I rarely get excited about cutlery). In Thailand you also can buy real antique Buddhist icons; yes, even better than those available in Gold Coast garden centres.

**GOLF:**

Most Phuket golf courses accept walk-on guests and there are dozens of great courses. If you stay in the Laguna area then the Laguna Golf Club is an obvious place to play. Otherwise, as you're spoiled for choice, I'll help out by recommending two of the best.

Blue Canyon has won numerous accolades as the best golf course in Asia (the professional record is held by Greg Norman and the amateur record by a bloke called Tiger Woods; I don't know what happened to the latter – I hope he's not misbehaving in one of those Patong bars).

Lochpalm & Red Mountain Golf Club boasts sister courses – one of which claims to be Phuket's most challenging, the other its most relaxing; don't ask which is which – they both annoyed the hell out of me.

The best thing about golf in Thailand is the luxury of a caddy. She'll run and get you beers as well as read your putts for you – giving you two excuses for missing them.

**HOW TO GET THERE:** There are direct flights to Phuket from Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth. ●

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