



Phuket's flipside

FORGO THE PARTYING AND BUSY BEACHES – THERE'S AN ALTERNATIVE SIDE TO THIS THAI HOLIDAY IDYL

WORDS PAUL EWART



cycling and Pilates, stand-up paddle boarding or aqua personal training) to leave you feeling and looking like new. The hotel also houses a 2000 square-metre destination spa, which includes the world's first Thai Hamman.

Haute hotels

If you are after a luxury hotel experience, some of the best include seven-bedroom luxury villa The Aquila, with a private chef, its own waterfall and private secluded cove, and the relative newcomer Wyndham Grand Phuket Kalim Bay offering private six or nine-metre infinity pools. And for serious high rollers, five-star hotel, Kata Rocks, hosts the annual Superyacht Rendezvous event.



PHUKET'S COASTLINE of white sand beaches and postcard-perfect craggy rock formations are easily the reason it's referred to as the Pearl of the Andaman Sea.

Thailand's largest island has long lured travellers seeking a dose of sun and sand. But there's more to this isle than golden beaches and a tropical climate. Dig deep and you'll unearth an array of great experiences. Discover street art and history, wildlife encounters and fantastic foodie fare for an alternative Phuket experience.

Island hop

You can still escape the crowds, despite the prolific number of tourists. For deserted coves and palm-fringed beaches, cast off to one of the 200 or so islands off the coastline.

These scarcely populated isles are easily accessed by renting a wooden long-tail or speed boat, or joining a tour.

Most tourists make a beeline for James Bond Island and Phi Phi (the latter became a stop on the backpacker trail after being used as a location for

movie, *The Beach* in 2000), but Phuket Sail Tours avoids the usual haunts and takes guests to hidden lagoons, deserted beaches and stalagmite- and stalactite-filled sea caves.

Be a culture vulture

You can't find many signs of it while blissing out on the beach, but Phuket has a rich and varied history.

Join one of the heritage trails operated by Phuket City Tours to get an introduction into the culturally rich island. The half-day tours guide visitors through colourful Sino-Portuguese architecture, street art, temples and traditional shophouses, and allow them to get up close with locals who embody the country's tourism catchphrase, "the land of smiles".



FROM TOP: Kata Rocks resort, Thai massage at Amatara, Phuket views.

New year, new you

Combat seasonal over-indulgence and welcome in 2018 with a full body detox at Phuket's premium wellness resort, Amatara. Try a tailored healthy holiday experience that includes a personalised eating plan (including rejuvenating juice cleanses), a program of holistic therapies and an exercise plan (think yoga, TRX,

Into the deep

Head north-west by boat and you'll eventually hit the pristine Similan Islands. The clear turquoise waters are consistently ranked in the top 10 diving locations in the world. The most famous is Richelieu Rock, where you can swim with whale sharks and turtles, seahorses, leopard sharks and more. >>

www.aquilaphuket.com



Gentle Thai giants

Roll with the punches

Want a glimpse into local culture and a high-intensity workout in one? Try the ancient martial art of Muay Thai (Thai boxing).

It's the national sport and popular with locals and foreigners alike. Phuket is home to the world's biggest training centre, Tiger Muay Thai. The camp, situated in Chalong, attracts thousands of students from far and wide, catering for the world's elite along with complete novices.

Tempt your tastebuds

After all that detoxing and exercise, you'll be in need of sustenance. Thai food is lauded the world over, but Phuket is a bona fide gourmet capital. UNESCO has labelled it a City of Gastronomy due to its melting pot of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Thai cuisine. Taste the island's unique culinary palette on a walking degustation around the Old Town with Phuket Food Tours.

Best brews

South-east Asia (Thailand included) is an established coffee producer. Taste your way around the many new hip coffee shops that are popping up across Phuket.

Don't miss Phuket Coffee Lab, set up by an expat Australian. This caffeine hub roasts beans in-house and offers barista classes for hardcore caffeine nerds.

TASTY TEACHINGS

TREAT YOURSELF

Taste Royal Thai cuisine in a mansion at Blue Elephant, discover acclaimed Italian dining at Acqua or have a chic Sunday brunch at Breeze at Cape Yamu. You'll never go hungry in Phuket.

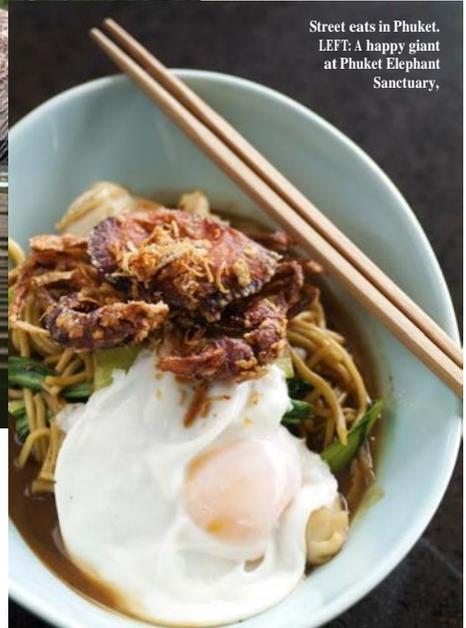
TAKE IT HOME

A Thai cooking class is a lasting souvenir for your taste buds. There are several local cooking schools and many hotels also offer cooking classes.

Into the wild

Elephant-riding has long been synonymous with a Thai holiday experience, but there are new operators who aim to educate visitors, rather than exploiting the gentle giants.

The Phuket Elephant Sanctuary is a refuge for elephants rescued from the tourist and logging industries. It's the first of its kind on the island and no riding is allowed. Instead, travellers can have an ethical encounter watching the animals as they bathe, play and walk in the grounds. A-list visitors have included Coldplay, Britney Spears and Leonardo DiCaprio. ✈



Street eats in Phuket. LEFT: A happy giant at Phuket Elephant Sanctuary,



Service with a smile at The Aquila. ABOVE: Tiger Muay Thai.



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