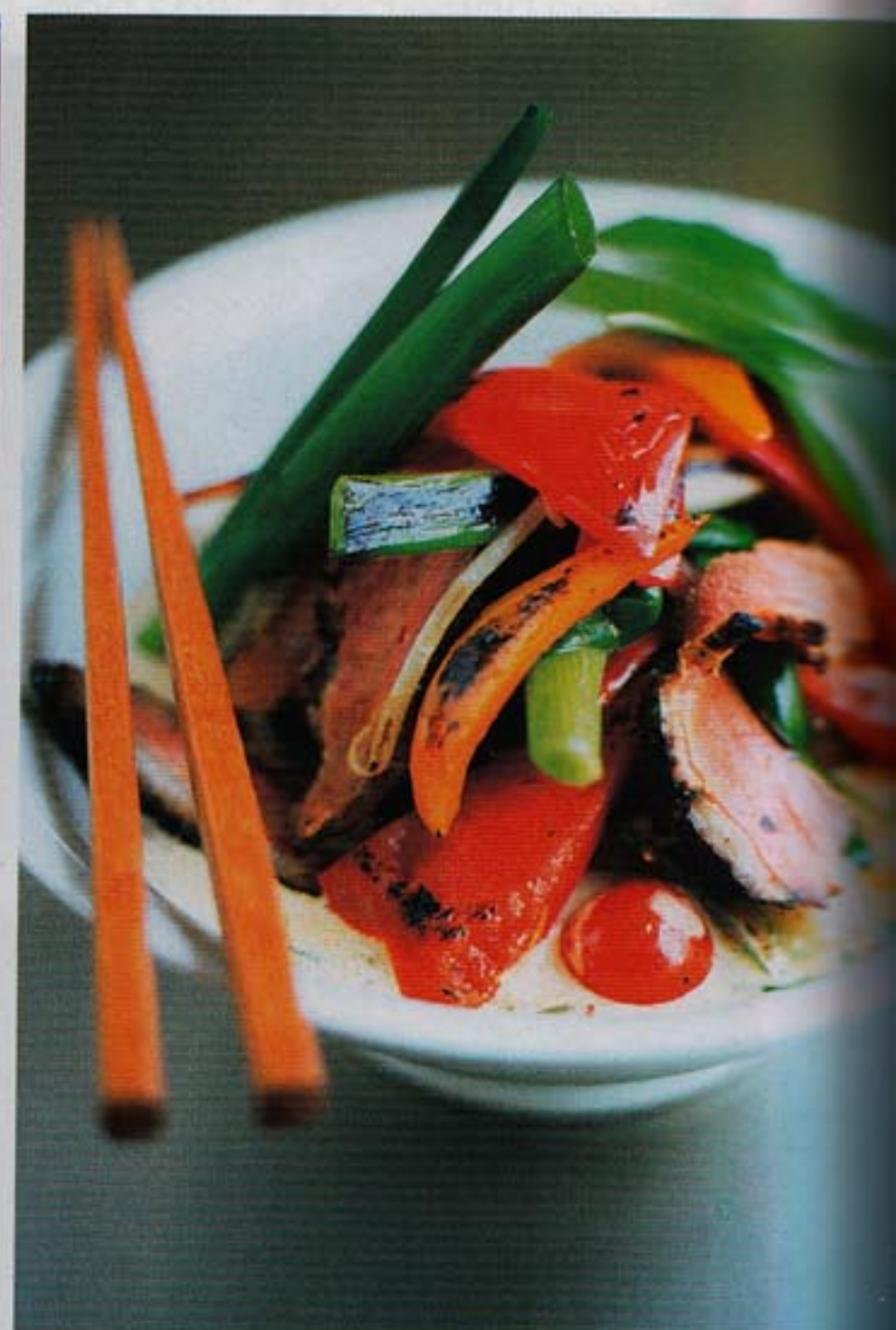


# CLASSY KO SAMUI



## WHERE TO STAY

**See Daeng** (140 Moo 1, Maenam Beach; 00 66 81 537 0302; info@seedaengsamui.com). With polished-wood interiors, sundecks and elephant frescoes on walls, these tiny weatherboard cottages are as simple as it gets, yet classy for the cash. Unbeatable beach location, too. Doubles from £8, room only.

**Sand Sea Resort and Spa** (155 Moo 4, North Lamai; 00 66 77 231127, www.samuisandsea.com). With unfussy sea-view chalets on the beach, a small, shaded pool and a bijou bar serving cocktails, this mini-resort is a taste of old backpacker Ko Samui – albeit upgraded. Doubles from £32, B&B.

**Tamarind Springs** (205/7 Thong Takian; 00 66 77 424221, www.tamarindsprings.com). Set in a steep, shady garden and built around granite boulders and rainforest trees, these Zen-meets-Frank Lloyd Wright serviced villas (all with kitchens) will hit the spot if you're looking for a real home from home. Doubles from £99, B&B.



**Poppies** (Chaweng; 00 66 77 422419, www.poppiessamui.com).

For a beachside-boutique retreat from chaotic Chaweng, step inside one of these plush, peaceful wooden chalets, all with Thai dragon roofs and open-air bathrooms. There's relaxation away from the beach, too, in orchid-filled gardens threaded with a burbling stream. Doubles from £111, room only.

**W Retreat** (Maenam; 00 66 77 915999, www.starwoodhotels.com). Gloriously garish rooms are decorated with sparkly scatter cushions, glaring colour schemes and softly-glowing plunge pools. Add fashionable eating, a neon-lit infinity pool bar, an after-hours beach lounge and you have the sort of hotel to arrive at single, and depart attached. Doubles from £342, B&B.



**Conrad Koh Samui** (Hillcrest Rd, Tambon Taling-Ngam; 00 66 77 915888, www.conradhotels.com). Clinging to lush forest-covered slopes, each villa at this glamorous recent arrival has a roomy plunge pool. Wallow in front of swoon-inducing views over a bay of islands – and you'll be convinced these are the most romantic rooms in Samui, if not Southeast Asia. Doubles from £342, room only.



## WHERE TO EAT

**Mitra Samui Restaurant** (Moo 2, Chaweng Yai Soi 2). With its strip-lights and plastic tables, it doesn't look much. But the seafood is 10 times better than elsewhere, at a 10th of the price. Plates of crustaceans are plonked down before ravenous diners, locals slurp house speciality Hoi Lai Paht Prik Phao (chilli and basil-fried clams). Dishes around £2.

**Coco Tam's** (99/1 Moo 1, Bophut; 00 66 81 712333). Chefs from the resorts eat at this laid-back kitchen. The seafood is catch of the day, the spices and veg are fresh from Bophut market and the cooking is elegant Thai.

Come at dusk for a beer on the beachside scatter cushions. Mains around £5.

**Sa Bieng Lae** (438/82 Moo 1, Maret, near Lamai; 00 66 77 233083). You'll see as many locals as tourists eating the southern Thai curries and seafood at this nicely hectic, open-sided haunt on the beach near Lamai. Mains around £7.

**Lan Tania** (Four Seasons Samui, 219 Moo 5, Ang Thong; 00 66 77 243000, www.fourseasons.com). Fancy a break from Asian? Enter this chain hotel's flagship kitchen, a breezy outpost in delicate teak. Dine open-air with an ocean view and the chance to get your chops around Italian – seafood linguine, say – or roast lamb. Mains around £17.

**Jahn** (Conrad Koh Samui – see Where to Stay). This is the honeymoon table of choice on the island, where lovers cosy up against a fiery sunset. Impressive Thai and Asian cooking is by ex-Quaglino's chef Joe Diaz – most memorable is the Wagyu beef massaman. Mains around £20.

**Dining on the Rocks** (Six Senses Samui, 9/10 Moo 5, Baan Plai Laem, Bophut; 00 66 77 245671, www.sixsenses.com). This medal-winning restaurant pioneered Samui's journey into super-modern gastronomy. Dishes are ostentatious reconstructions of classic Thai recipes. Tangy Tom Yam soup is retextured as foam, and served with ginger scallops and parmesan crackers. Set menu £98.



# CLASSY KO SAMUI

Now more boutique than beatnik, the Thai party isle's added high-end spas, food – and sexy hotels



**B**urn your backpack: in the last 10 years Thailand's original hippy beach island has gone up in the world. You'll still find the same sands, swaying palms and waterfall-drenched rainforest that once drew the gap-year crowd. But old shacks are now boutique hotels, and chic spas and restaurants have arrived – making Samui Southeast Asia's smartest resort.

By Alex Robinson



#### WHAT TO SEE & DO

● For posing, don a sarong and strut along cheeky Chaweng: a long half-moon of coral sand, it's all beach bums by day. **Miami-style hedonism by night.** Take things down a notch and nip round its southern cove for a sunlounger at Samui Yacht Club (00 66 77 448 4867, [www.samuiyachtclub.com](http://www.samuiyachtclub.com)), on the island's crowd-free secret bay, Thong Takian.

● Spas are as common as ladyboys on Samui – and the choice can be overwhelming. Post-flight, try a Steam and Dream in the rainforest at Tamarind Springs (Thong Takian; 00 66 77 424221, [www.tamarindsprings.com](http://www.tamarindsprings.com); from £90). **Mineral-water plunge-pools are filled by a mountain stream**, and the steam room is built into a boulder covered with ferns and orchids.

● Golden, 12m tall and in a state of constant contemplative calm, **Buddha watches over**





**Samui from a temple on a promontory** at Big Buddha Beach. Claim a cushion at Rubik's cube-shaped bar The Pier ([www.thepier-samui.com](http://www.thepier-samui.com)), order a Mai Tai and survey the holy site, with a backdrop of bobbing fishing boats and the distant indigo mountains of Ko Phangan.

● Explore the untouched islets of the Ang Thong Marine Park archipelago, just west of Samui. Spread like jewels on blue cloth, they're **trimmed with rice-white beaches and halos of kaleidoscopic coral**. The highlight is the vivid green lake on Ko Mae Ko, so protected you're not allowed to swim here. Grand Sea Tours (00 66 77 427001, [www.grandseatours.com](http://www.grandseatours.com)) runs day trips from £42pp.

● Dive with fish as big as buses. Every March-April and August-October, **seven-metre-long whale sharks sweep in** from the Indian Ocean to feed on plankton around the submerged

mountain peak Chumphon Pinnacle. It's off the dive site of Ko Tao, an island still in a state of backpacker infancy. Keep it classy and commute from Ko Samui with Coral Grand Divers (00 66 77 430531, [www.samui.coralgranddivers.com](http://www.samui.coralgranddivers.com)); day trips from £92pp.

● Explore Samui the glam-romantic way: **on a boho-chic motor scooter, with the breeze in your hair** (00 66 77 256060, [www.locationautomotosamui.com](http://www.locationautomotosamui.com); from £3 a day). A web of little roads covers the mountainous interior; every turn brings a view over tropical hills to the shimmering Gulf of Thailand. Side roads uncover waterfalls, including Na Muang, where you can cool off in the rocky pool and get a vigorous massage from the falling water.

● Marvel at the statue of Guanyin, **the many-armed goddess of mercy and compassion**, at Wat Plai Laem. She's said to protect sailors



**High and Thai: from left, a lone longtail boat at dawn; masseuses at Chaweng beach; cool off at Tamarind Springs; so that's why it's called the Big Buddha**

and ensure healthy births; you'll see fishermen and couples making offerings at her feet, or casting corn to the fat fish that idle in her lake. Zazen (00 66 77 425085, [www.samuizazen.com](http://www.samuizazen.com)), on nearby Bophut Beach, overlooks the statue and is the spot for a cosy supper on the sand. Reserve the private pavilion on the beach in advance.

● Sunday-brunch pool parties are the latest trend. **DJs spin house music to a Champagne-and oyster-guzzling crowd** at Beach Republic (Lamai Beach; [www.beachrepublic.com](http://www.beachrepublic.com); 11.30am-sunset), where the private cabanas are the most prized on the island. Or hop over to the quieter west coast at swanky Nikki Beach (Lipa Noi; [www.nikkibeach.com](http://www.nikkibeach.com); 11am-sunset): a slice of St Tropez in Southeast Asia. >



## Ask the local



**Simon Foster is a guidebook writer and director of travel specialist Bamboo Trails. He's been around Ko Samui for two decades**

'Airport taxi drivers charge 10 times the usual rate for even the shortest trip. **Request a pick-up through your hotel in advance**, or catch the regular minibus shuttle from outside the terminal to

Lamai or Chaweng, where taxis are cheaper. Choose your base carefully: revellers mass in the east, on Lamai and Chaweng beaches. **For privacy, tranquillity and glimpses of old Thailand, stay west.** The island is small enough for everything to be reachable in less than an hour on a scooter. Ko Samui is massage central, but visitors can be stung by hotel spa prices, so try the numerous outfits behind Chaweng or Lamai beaches. **Choose one where the masseuses are uniformed and they'll be resort-quality.** A Thai massage, based on ayurvedic techniques, will cost less than £5.'



**Hot dip:** from left, the seductive pool at the W Hotel; zingy Thai beef curry mops up boozy excess; Conrad Koh Samui is cool, calm and classy

### BARS & CLUBS

**Q Bar Samui** (147/57 Moo 2, Bophut; [www.qbarsamui.com](http://www.qbarsamui.com)). The mood-lit sister bar to Bangkok's (in)famous Sukhumvit joint is hot for sunset cocktails – served on a terrace with superb sea views. As the night descends, the music shifts gear, with DJs playing Euro beats.



**Ark Bar** (159/89, Moo 2, Chaweng Beach). The king of Ko Samui's beach parties: bronzed young things dance on neon-lantern-lit tables and flirt over the ubiquitous bucket of Thai whisky and Red Bull.

**Green Mango** (9/34 Chaweng Beach Rd, Bophut; [www.thegreenmangoclub.com](http://www.thegreenmangoclub.com)). With a warehouse-walled, open-sided dance area, numerous little bars and pounding techno, this is where Samui parties hardest.



### WHERE TO SHOP

**Bophut Fisherman's Market** (Bophut). With sizzling woks and street stalls selling anything from tiger prawns to T-shirts, this beachside bazaar makes for great browsing.

**Chaweng Strip** (Chaweng). Even the most shopping-averse will be seduced by something on this long street of boutiques and street stalls flogging all sorts: tailor-made suits, Birkenstocks, cheap sunnies and satay... ■

## Get me there

### GO INDEPENDENT

**Thai Airways** (0844 561 0911, [www.thaiairways.co.uk](http://www.thaiairways.co.uk)) flies from Heathrow to Ko Samui, via Bangkok; returns from £915 return. **Singapore Airlines** (0844 800 2380, [www.singaporeair.com](http://www.singaporeair.com)) flies from Heathrow, via Singapore, from £940; and Manchester, via Munich and Singapore, from £915. Or try **Malaysia Airlines** (0871 423 9090, [www.malaysiaairlines.com](http://www.malaysiaairlines.com)).

### GO PACKAGED

**Travelbag** (0871 703 4240, [www.travelbag.co.uk](http://www.travelbag.co.uk)) has eight nights in luxury accommodation from £1,329pp, B&B, including flights from Heathrow. **Trailfinders** (020 7368 1200, [www.trailfinders.com](http://www.trailfinders.com)) has a week in a five-star in the north of the island, from £1,349pp, B&B, with Heathrow or Manchester departures. **Kuoni** (01306

747008, [www.kuoni.co.uk](http://www.kuoni.co.uk)) can organise a week's stay from £1,171pp, B&B, with flights from Heathrow. Or try **Cleveland Collection** (020 7843 3531, [www.clevelandcollection.co.uk](http://www.clevelandcollection.co.uk)) and **Cox & Kings** (020 7873 5000, [www.coxandkings.co.uk](http://www.coxandkings.co.uk)).

**FURTHER INFORMATION**  
**Tourism Authority of Thailand** ([www.tourismthailand.co.uk](http://www.tourismthailand.co.uk)).