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Better than Bali?

Why Koh Samui is the hot
new holiday option



I-S DOES SAMUI

With new flight routes making a weekend away easier than ever, we check out the top resorts, restaurants, day trips and nightspots. By **Ric Stockfis, Andrew Hiransomboon and Top Koaysomboon**

The exact meaning of the word Samui is lost to the sands of time, but as good a linguistics guess as any is that it means “safe haven.” That’s entirely fitting for a Thai island best enjoyed from the seclusion of a high-end hotel or resort. And, while taking a plane to go do not very much at all might not jive with our hyperactive, always-on society here in Singapore, that’s Samui’s great strength these days—luxury resort brands (many of them newly arrived) offering comfort, convenience, and every excuse not to leave the property. In other words, the perfect weekend escape.

Indeed, somewhere on Samui there’s a genius who, 10 years ago, had the foresight to get the exclusive franchise for golf carts on the island. Because the best spots are sprawled across steep hillsides or remote peninsulas, now that flat, more centrally located beachfront plots are so hard to come by (with Hansar an impressive exception). The type of properties being built there also reflect the more upscale travellers who visit; folks with “luggage” as opposed to backpacks and duffels, who don’t mind being five miles from the nearest town, because they have no plans to go anywhere until it’s time to return to the airport.

And, if you only have a weekend, that’s by far the best way to spend it. Quit worrying about ticking some arbitrary list, don’t waste time trying to get back across the island and just relax. (Easier said than done, isn’t it?) What to do, though, if you have a little more time?

EVENING ACTIVITIES

Samui is officially obsessed with **walking streets**—evening affairs where cars are banned and the roads are filled with stalls of all kinds. There’s one somewhere on the island almost every day of the week, and by far the best is in **Bophut**, where cool restaurants, cafes, shops and hostels are housed in old wooden shophouses. On Fridays, street vendors take over the tiny Fisherman’s Village Street and sell everything from food and cooking ingredients to souvenirs made from coconut shells. Foodies can sample local snacks at **Kanom Chine Pa Somchai** (66 (0)87-265-4111) and **Pad Mii Pa Paichit** (66 (0)80-147-4680) and refresh themselves with the street-mixed mojitos. At the mid-point of the road (where The Pier is) there’s a small space where local artists do traditional music and performances, which vary every week.

NIGHTLIFE

With the dishonorable exception of the main town of **Chaweng** (it really is pretty grim), Samui isn’t a place to party. The scene is still to outgrow the bucket and beer brigade, and there are precious few venues worth venturing out for. In fact, if you’re after a change of scene, then spending an evening at another hotel or resort is probably your best bet. The bar at **Hansar** runs a happy hour several times a day, and **W** attracts a hipper crowd than most (even though it’s a bit of a trek).



Angthong Marine National Park

BOPHUT BOUTIQUES

One independent spot worthy of mention is **9 Gems** (141/190 Moo 6, Bophut, 66 (0)77-256-125, 66 (0)80-692-0520. Open Tue-Thu 4pm-midnight, Fri-Sun 4pm-2am. www.9gemssamui.com). Hidden away on one of the island's many hilltops it's a place to sip Champagne from the rooftop beds while taking in breathtaking views.

If it's a bigger night you're after, then you really only have two choices: getting down and dirty at **Green Mango** (Soi Green Mango, Chaweng Beach Rd. Open daily 9pm till late. www.thegreenmangoclub.com) in Chaweng or jumping on a boat and heading for neighboring **Koh Pha Ngan**.

EXCURSIONS

Although the views from Samui are spectacular, it's not an island itself blessed with natural wonders. The small **Na Muang waterfalls** are pretty enough, but if you're going to leave your resort it's worth leaving the island.

Angthong Marine National Park, which covers an area of 102 sq km, is spectacular. It's just 20 km away and, since you can only set foot

on a handful of the 40 small islands, is really just a day trip. Countless travel agents sell this trip but the cheapest option we could find that doesn't

involve compromising too much on quality is with **Samui Leisure** (+66 (0)83-434-1882, +66 (0)86-883-3219, www.samuileisure.com). They offer a day trip for 750 baht (\$30), inclusive of a roundtrip transfer from your hotel to the port (pick up around 7:30am), one meal, soft drinks throughout the trip, snorkeling goggles and the national park fee. Note that Angthong Marine National Park is closed Nov 1-30 every year.

A little further out, both **Koh Tao** and **Koh Nangyuan** lie north of Samui. Normally, most tours will take you to Koh Tao in the morning for sunbathing and snorkeling and to Koh Nang Yuan, where you can catch views of a beach that connects three small islands, in the afternoon. Prices are inclusive of a roundtrip transfer, soft drinks and one meal. Try **Samui Leisure** (1,700 baht, www.samuileisure.com) or **Lomprayah** (1,800 baht, www.lomprayah.com).

Further afield **Koh Taen** and **Koh Matsum** are two small islands located southwest of Samui best known for their untamed forests and beautiful corals. A day trip runs from 9am to 3pm. Try **Thai Tour Group** (1,700 baht (\$69), www.thaitourgroup.com) or **Magic Samui** (1,300 baht (\$53), www.magicsamui.net).



W Retreat Koh Samui

"Cute!" and "Fun!", W is the hip kid of the Starwood family. Free ice cream and soft drinks, cool as phunk music everywhere piped out of rock speakers, purple tennis court. Not the best beach for swimming, but you have your own pool.

Rooms: 75 pool villas; basic is 233sqm, steps away from the beach, with 11m pool in a walled garden plus all mod cons (46" TV, wireless dock for your iPhone, Bliss hair/skin products).

F&B: The Kitchen Table (where you get breakfast), does all-day dining with a view, but the venue that gets all the hype is Namu, the cozy dinner-only eatery (see Where to Dine, page 9). For our money, we like the awesome beach bar Sip, for its cool design and expertly mixed cocktails.

Rates: Starting at 17,000 baht (\$688) per night for their Retreat and Surrender package, which includes airport transfers; through Mar 31.

4/1 Moo 1, Maenam, 66 (0)77-915-999.
www.whotels.com/kohsamui

Hansar Samui

A beachfront boutique gem at the end of Bophut's Fisherman's Village centered around a 30m saltwater infinity pool. Rooms follow open floor plans, with nothing blocking your view from the door to the terrace (even from the toilet). It's probably your best bet on the island if you don't want to be marooned at a resort.

Rooms: 74 rooms and all of them impressively spacious. Six of them are beachfront, but we found the SeaView (toward the back) to be better value.

F&B: Chef Stephen Jean Dion serves both Thai and French Mediterranean tasting menus at the beachside H Bistro.

Rates: Starting at 9,000 baht (\$360) per night for a SeaView Room, including breakfast for 2, through end Apr. Beachfront goes for 14,500 baht (\$585).

101/28 Moo 1, Bophut Beach, 66 (0)77-245-511.
www.hansarsamui.com

Suralai

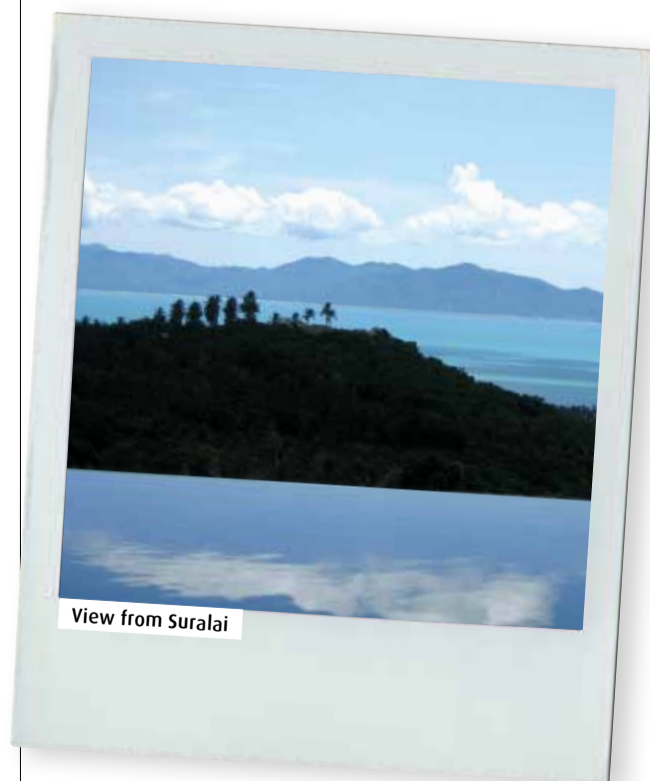
If *Entourage's* Vinnie Chase came to Samui, this is where he'd stay. It's an exclusive private villa set high in the hills above Bophut Bay, sleeping up to 12 and with on-site manager, housekeepers and private chef. It boasts a 20m infinity pool and incredible views across to Koh Pha Ngan. It's pretty remote and only worth it with three or more couples, but it's slick. Real slick. (See this issue's front cover.)

Rooms: Two master suites, three king bed rooms, one twin bed room. The open-plan living area, complete with 50-inch plasma and wrap-around glass veranda, is where the magic really happens.

F&B: Breakfast is either continental or full international-style—the only downer being that you have to commit to timing the night before. For other meals, the house chef can tailor Thai and Western cuisine to your preference.

Rates: From US\$1,400-2,500 (\$1,795-3,205) per night, depending on the season.

Monkey Theatre Road, Bophut, 66 (0)77-427-648.
www.suralai.com



LAMAI RESORTS



Le Meridien Koh Samui Resort & Spa

Le Meridien Koh Samui Resort & Spa

This Sino-Thai gem is truly unique in its design, art and architecture, with the owner's slightly eccentric concept (tycoon builds museum-like replica of his childhood fishing village) matching perfectly with Le Meridien's every-pebble-has-a-story-for-you-to-discover spin. It's arguably four-star (food and service were nothing to write home about when we visited), but we love it. Another plus is the location, on a quiet beach (Lamai) but within walking distance of the real world.

Rooms: 14 villas, 63 suites, from the 50sqm Plunge Pool (basically a huge tub in your bathroom) Suite to 145sqm Ocean Front Pool Suite.

Check out: The grounds, the "Hub" (courtyard lobby) and the cavern-like spa. You won't find a more photogenic resort of this size anywhere.

Rates: Unbeatable Thailand offer starts at 5,625 baht (\$226) per night for Verandah Suite; through Mar 31. Villa Special offer starts at 9,999 baht (\$403) for Pavilion Pool Villa; through Dec 20.

146/24 Moo 4, Lamai Beach, Maret, 66 (0)77-960-888. www.lemeridienkohsamui.com

Banyan Tree Samui

Just coming up the driveway of this gorgeous resort, tucked away at the south-eastern coast of the island, is an impressive sight, but it's the property's stunning views of Lamai Bay, a "private" beach cove (where you can laze or do water sports) and cheerful staff that'll win you over. All in all, ideal for those who want to spoil themselves thoroughly.

Rooms: 88 luxe and spacious hilltop villas (including a very exclusive 316sqm Presidential Pool Villa which is really two villas joined by a sala), each with a living room, a large patio complete with sunbeds and its own private infinity pool (which your plush king-size bed looks out on).

F&B: All-day dining and international buffet breakfasts at The Edge, fresh char-grilled seafood at Sands by the beach and the real star: their signature restaurant, Saffron, perched on the very top of the property, featuring contemporary Thai cuisine (complete with spectacular views).

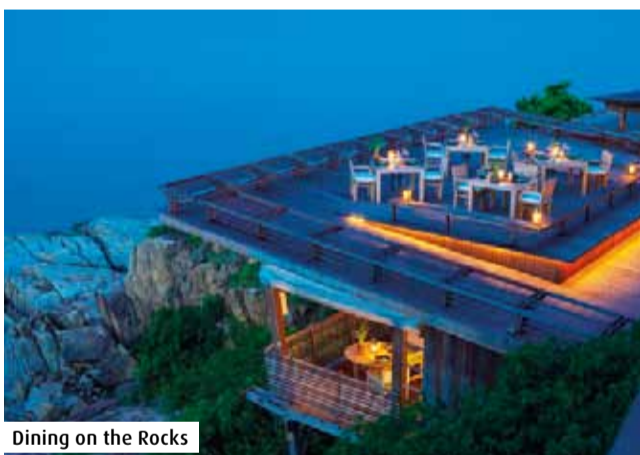
Rates: From 34,780 baht (\$1,397) per night for a Deluxe Pool Villa, including daily breakfast for two through Mar 31.

99/9 Moo 4, Maret, 66 (0)77-915-333. www.banyantree.com/en/samui



Banyan Tree Samui

WHERE TO DINE



Dining on the Rocks



Beach Republic

In culinarily blessed Thailand, Samui doesn't really rate. Save coconuts, any raw ingredients worth their salt reach the island via Bangkok—even much of the seafood that is caught in nearby provinces. But while a distinctive local cuisine has never really developed, five-star resorts are expected to serve five-star food, which means you can enjoy world-class menus at Samui's ever growing list of top properties. There's modern Japanese at the **W's Namu**, where funky rolls share the stage with luxurious dishes like braised pork belly or foie gras-ed fried rice; stunning special occasion meals at **Six Senses'** award-winning outlet **Dining on the Rocks**, with its 270-degree views; or the humble breakfast interpreted and elevated to perfection by the chefs and servers of the **Four Seasons**, just to name three.

We encourage you to go native at least once during your stay, however. Two local restaurants we can recommend wholeheartedly are **Sabeinglae** (438/82 Moo 1, Maret, 66 (0)77-233-082, 66 (0)81-538-7045. www.sabeinglae.9nha.com), where they serve up authentic local dishes like gang kua hed lhoob (mushroom curry), wai kua (squid simmered in coconut milk) and gang som pla grapong yod mapraw (sour curry with seabass and young coconut) at super-affordable prices (two can dine like kings for under \$50), and **Janhom** (7/3 Bang Por Beach, 66 (0)77-236-458), for their fiery Southern dishes like nam prik goong sod (vegetables with fresh shrimp "dip") and kua gling moo (stir-fried pork with spicy herbs) at \$5-8 per dish.

Beach club Sunday brunches, complete with daybeds, DJs, and drinks, are a fairly new thing in Samui. At **Beach Republic** (176/34 Moo 4, Maret, 66 (0)77-458-100. www.beachrepublic.com) on peaceful Lamai Beach, you can lounge on huge outdoor beds or in the oceanfront infinity pool between international



Pla Pla at the Four Seasons

Samui Fine Dining Festival

This inaugural event kicks off **Feb 29** with a gala dinner at Nora Buri Resort. In total 15 participating restaurants (mostly in resorts) will be offering special seven-course dinners with wines at special prices (at Le Meridien and Banyan Tree Samui, for example, the menu is 2,500 baht—\$100+) throughout the month. For a list of venues and dates, go to www.samuifinediningfestival.com.

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Le Salon de Ti at Zazen

» WHERE TO DINE

buffet bites. Another hip hangout is **Nikki Beach** (96/3 Moo 2, Lipa Noi, 66 (0)77-914-500. www.nikkibeach.com), the sister of celeb clubs in Miami, Vegas and St. Tropez.

Finally, little cafés and tea houses are sprouting up all over the island, but the best ones are on Bophut Beach. **Namcha** (Fishermen's Village, 66 (0)77-427-115. www.namchasamui.com) is by far the most charming, with a great open-air vibe and a full selection of teas from around the world. **Le Salon de Ti** (Zazen Boutique Resort, 66 (0)77-425-085. www.samuizazen.com) is an open-air space on the second floor of a teak building and does a mean high tea. **Bakabung** (145/5 Moo 1, 66 (0)84-636-9090. www.facebook.com/bakabung) is another beachside café that, just 5km from the airport, is ideal for relaxing before your flight.



ESSENTIALS

Bangkok Air (www.bangkokair.com) and **SilkAir** (www.silkair.com) run a codeshare on direct flights (1h 50mins) to Samui but, although the latter can be cheaper (from \$440 return, compared to \$500), Bangkok Air's schedule is best if you're looking for a weekend getaway. They fly daily, departing Singapore at 8:10pm, and returning from Samui at 4:35pm. SilkAir flies five times a week (not Mon or Sat) departing Singapore at either 7:55am (ouch!) or 8:10am, and returning from Samui at 9:45am. You can also get there in more roundabout fashion (5-7 hours, including transit) with **Firefly** (www.firefly.com.my) with daily flights via Subang from around \$465.

Incidentally, Samui Airport bills itself as "The Most Beautiful Airport in The World" and, for once, the PR's not far off the mark. It's not quite Six Senses, but it is rather nice; with an outdoor shopping arcade, open-air departure lounges and free drinks and snacks while you wait to board.



Samui Airport

EXCHANGE RATE:
100 baht = approx. \$4

REMOTE RETREATS



Four Seasons Resort



Six Senses Hideaway

Four Seasons Resort Koh Samui, Thailand

After checking in at the "holy (cow)!" reception area that overlooks the entire 17,000sqm resort located on the island's extreme Northwest tip, you take a rollercoaster buggy ride to your villa that'll make you feel like you might be trapped here. Not that you'd want to leave. An all-inclusive escape for people who "deserve" and appreciate five really big stars, with exemplary service and facilities. Staff-to-guest ratio feels like 20 to 1; even the gardeners greet you.

Rooms: 60 luxurious hillside villas (plus 13 private residence rentals), each with a huge patio, infinity pool, the biggest "minibar" setup we've ever seen (with digital temp fridge, wine cooler, Lavazza pod machine) and sea views (some less obstructed by trees than others).

F&B: Amazing breakfasts (see Where to Dine, previous page). Head to the casual beachside restaurant Pla Pla for simple grilled seafood, then Lan Tania at night for romantic views.

Rates: Starting at 26,550 baht (\$1,071) per night for a One-Bedroom Villa with daily breakfast for two.

219 Moo 5, Anghong, 66 (0)77-243-000.
www.preview.fourseasons.com/kohsamui/

Six Senses Hideaway Samui - A Sala Property

Sprawled across the island's northernmost peninsula, discretion is the name of the game at this celebrity favorite. The beach is nothing to shout about and the private pool decks can be a little buggy, but you're treated like royalty (makes sense: the couple at the next table probably are royalty) and the location is truly stunning. Wait till you see the view from the Spa treatment rooms.

Rooms: 66 villas, 55 of them with private pools; and all adhering to the rustic chic look—think thatched roofs and outdoor showers—so beloved of the jetset. There's also The Retreat—600sqm of exclusive bragging rights.

F&B: There are fewer more dramatic dinner spots (anywhere, not simply Samui) than Dining on the Rocks (see Where to Dine, previous page). And their breakfast buffet is up there with the Four Seasons.

Rates: Starting at 15,000 baht (\$605) per night for a Hideaway Villa. The "Rediscover the Romance" package includes two nights' accommodation and lots of private couple-y stuff; 67,804 baht (\$2,735) for a Pool Villa over a weekend in Mar.

9/10 Moo 5, Baan Plai Laem, Bophut, 66 (0)77-245-678.
www.sixsenses.com/SixSensesSamui

NEW ARRIVALS

CONRAD KOH SAMUI

Opened late last year (and, based on our stay, still several months away from being truly ready), this extraordinary creation sees 80 freestanding villas perched on a sheer cliff, every one of them with its own infinity plunge pool. On-site restaurant Jahn promises much once it gets a bit busier. Nightly rates run from US\$700 (\$890) for an Oceanview Villa to US\$2,000 (\$2,545) for the two-bedroom Royal Ocean, including breakfast.

49/9 Moo 4, Hillcrest Rd., Tambon Taling-Ngam, 66 (0)77-915-888. www.conradkohsamui.com



INTERCONTINENTAL SAMUI BAAN TALING NGAM RESORT

The hottest new property on the island finally opened on Feb 1 having taken over and renovated the old Meredien spot. Hidden away on a West Coast clifftop (like Conrad; both boast great sunsets), there are 79 rooms, suites and beachfront villas, and no less than seven swimming pools. Introductory rates start at 17,195 baht (\$795) per night until end Mar, including breakfast and welcome cocktails.

295 Moo 3, Taling Ngam beach, 66 (0)77-429-100. www.intercontinental.com





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