



## BEACH BREAKS

# Koh Samui

Story and  
photography  
by Verne Maree

It took me more than nine years to get to Koh Samui. Our first Thailand getaway was Phuket, a birthday gift from me to Roy; we fell in love with the place and returned again and again. Would Samui measure up?

After checking in at our Chaweng Beach hotel around 9.30pm on a Thursday, dumping our weekend bags and slipping into flip flops, we head for the beach – past the pool, turn left – and find a pleasant bar with a Filipino duo playing “California Dreamin’”. We’re just in time for the 10-11pm happy hour: two cocktails for the price of one. Now *that’s* a good start to a beach break.

### Chaweng Beach

This is a seriously good 4km stretch of silky white sand, the longest in Samui. The southern strip has a merry shore-break to add some excitement to your dip. The northern part is dead calm. It’s protected by a breakwater that runs from Koh Matlang, a tiny island a couple of hundred metres out to sea. That’s where you’d snorkel on a good day, explains the boatman I accost for information, but he says the storm that came through yesterday has turned the water cloudy for the next few days.

On our first morning, a Friday, I am one of a couple of dozen people walking or jogging along the firm sand, mainly leathery septuagenarians in fetching Lycra a size too small, and twenty-something women. The next morning, I’m the only one working up a sweat. I wonder why, until it hits me: all the party animals are sleeping off Friday night. Oh dear – final proof that I’m officially past it!

Chaweng Beach road, running behind the resorts and bungalows, is a hive of restaurants, bars, tourism offices, bars, massage parlours, bike-hire joints, bars, gift-shops, internet cafes – and tailors. (Ah, a charcoal-grey worsted suit; *just* what I need!)

Do stop at the beautiful **Poppies Resort** for a drink at the seaside bar; this gorgeous little hotel is home to a top-notch restaurant, and would be perfect for a honeymoon. We also enjoyed **Caffe Uno**, in front of the market just south of our hotel – outstanding cocktails (THB 170) and great barmaids.



## Amari Palm Reef Koh Samui

Unlike Phuket, where it can take anything up to an hour to get from the airport to your location, it's just a five-minute drive to our hotel. A very popular four-star hotel, the Amari is 100-percent full.

The property straddles two sides of Chaweng Beach road. On the ocean side, you'll find one of the two swimming pools and the reception areas, including a bar and the huge, open, upper-level dining room where you breakfast with a view of Koh Matlang. Apart from half-a-dozen rooms right near the beach, however, most of the accommodation is on the other side of the road. This means we have to traipse back and forth from our room to the main hotel over a faded zebra-crossing, under the eye of a duo of lollipop-men.

Ours is the upper room in a cluster of Thai-style double villas that surround the second swimming pool. It's spacious enough, with a sofa, a balcony overlooking the pool, and a

bathroom with shower and tub. Having a mini-bar is useful, but who except the terminally lazy would pay 160 Thai baht (\$\$7) for a can of Heineken that costs a mere THB 30 from the 7-11 across the road?

The Amari's breakfast buffet is outstanding, and so varied that I could have sushi, sashimi and miso soup one morning and a chilli-cheese omelette with a huge mixed salad the next. And the hotel's Prego Restaurant is one of Samui's most popular eateries. Full every night of the week, it has two seatings: 7pm and 9pm. The service is good, and all menu items come in starters or main course sizes: the boys had smoking-hot pizzas (from THB 210 for a big 'un), and I had a magnificent arugula salad with gorgonzola dressing followed by something off the chef's special menu: panzarotti stuffed with lobster and asparagus and finished with a cream sauce (THB 450).



### Bo Phut Beach

Home to a traditional fishing village, this beach at the north of the island is very different from Chaweng. It's shorter, narrower, punctuated with rickety piers and dotted with boats moored both offshore and onto the sand. You can swim here, but the sea-bottom has that muddy, sticky feeling that you find in a dam or lake – probably because the sea is so still, except for the occasional series of swells caused by the coming and going of the big ferry from a pier at the eastern end.

Small resorts, restaurants and bars line the seafront. At night, the roadside livens up somewhat as the terrific heat recedes. Out for a walk to explore what the nightlife of Bo Phut has to offer, we are attracted to the only busy-looking joint. It's full of variously seedy-looking expats who are here for the Saturday-night special: a barbecued pork buffet at THB 100 for all you can eat. It's a delicious spread, but we watch incredulously as our fellow-diners pile up their plates two or three times. One fellow even takes a doggy bag home with him.

### Villa Saboey

Like Chaweng, Bo Phut Beach is just five minutes from the airport. Villa Saboey is a small resort with a lush and colourful garden. It's not glossy, but it is extremely comfortable with a warm, welcoming feel. With a total of only 18 rooms, it's low-key and would never feel crowded. Being in the flight path adds interest, rather than being problematic.

An immaculate bar in the centre of the property presides over an infinity pool with a whirlpool spa, serving a handful of laid-back lizards basking in the heat. The attractive restaurant behind it is hardly used – guests generally prefer to eat at one of the alfresco tables. As is usual in this part of the world, the menu is a mixture of Western and Thai favourites – spring rolls, noodle dishes, Thai curries, burgers, pizzas and sandwiches that average about THB 200 a pop. Your choice of a very good American, Continental or Thai breakfast is cooked to order up to the decadent hour of 11am.

We have one of two beach villas, right in front of the property and divided from the beach only by shady palm trees and a low wall. Apart from a big bedroom and a massive shower-room, the dressing room boasts a huge, Roman bath. It takes a while to fill it up to the second tile, so it's not eco-friendly; but it *is* a truly blissful bathing experience.





## Massage

If I could afford to have a massage every day of my life, I would. In Thailand, one can. My first is in an air-conditioned massage joint on Chaweng Beach road – THB 350 for a Thai oil massage. The next day, it's a foot-scrub plus foot massage on an immaculately clean wooden bed under the shade of palm trees and umbrellas on Bo Phut beach – THB 200. Third is an aromatherapy massage at Saboey Villas; essential oils, soft music and a darkened room put the price up to THB 1,000 plus taxes (\$50). On our last day, I'm back on the beach for a traditional Thai massage – again THB 200. All equally skilful masseuses, but if pressed to choose, I'd go back to the healing hands of the lovely woman under the beach umbrella.

## Around and About

Incapable of relaxing at an island resort until we've surveyed the territory, we hire a Toyota Yaris and do a clockwise drive around Samui: driving non-stop, you could probably do it in just over an hour. A new car in good condition, ordered via the hotel concierge, costs us \$65 for the day.

The roads are in good condition and easy to navigate. South from Chaweng Beach is the equally popular Lamai Beach, then Hua Thanon, Bang Kao and Thong Krut on the southern coast. From here, the settlements are relatively sparse up the western coast until you get to Nathon, the administrative centre and the place where ferries leave for the mainland, for Koh Phangan (famous for its Full Moon parties) and for Koh Tao, said to have the best snorkelling in Thailand.

Having passed Bang Pho, I finally prevail upon Roy – who, once he's on a roll, is genetically indisposed to stop for anything (what's the point of letting all those cars you've beaten get past you again?) – to turn left off the increasingly dreary main road to Maenam Beach. Spitefully, he chooses a particularly unpromising track. But after 200m we're at Silent Bungalows and Restaurant, situated right on an idyllic little beach. At the café, we feast on seafood salad, green chicken curry and pad Thai, washed down with ice-cold Chang. Complete with massage and internet facilities, it's the cutest place with the friendliest owner. A clean, basic bungalow with hot water and air-con goes for THB 800 a night.

## Getting There

Though Samui and Phuket are both a 90-minute flight away, it's cheaper to fly to Phuket. That's because Bangkok Airways has something of a monopoly, being the owner of the cute Koh Samui airport – it does the only direct flight from Singapore to Samui for about \$500 return. There are options, however: if you have more time than money, like our nephew who was on a six-week visit, you can take the 24-hour journey by bus and ferry for about \$135.

## And So?

We like Koh Samui, but we still love Phuket. 🇹🇭



## Recommendations

Amari Palm Reef Spa and Resort

[www.amari.com/samui](http://www.amari.com/samui)

Caffe Uno, Chaweng Beach

Saboey Beach Resort

[www.saboey.com](http://www.saboey.com)

Zico's Brazilian Restaurant