

The First Resort



The experience of staying in a resort hotel is somehow very different from being in a hotel that is *not* a resort. What makes it so different?

We'd visited Phuket five or six times before booking a long weekend at Le Meridien Phuket Beach Resort. I had always wanted to stay there, because I think it has the best beach on the island. It's fronted by its own private bay, a perfect curve of white sand and aquamarine water.

But with that exclusivity comes a sense of separation that's not easy to define. You're separated from the village or town life, so you can't easily wander off and shop, have a local coffee or cop a cheap foot-massage as you might do from a hotel on, for example, Phuket's Patong, Kata or Karon beachfronts.



by Verne Maree



There's also a resort beach bar (great cocktails!) and barbecue, a resort gym, a resort spa, resort water-sport facilities, a resort clinic and even a row of resort boutiques selling everything from Oriental carpets to souvenirs. You don't have to leave the premises, and it's all very comfortable.

On the other hand, it's not as if you're trapped there and can't get away to see the rest of the island. That was the case on my one and only previous experience of a resort hotel, near Mombasa on the east coast of Africa. The nearby town was just too dicey, and the road to it no more than a potholed track.

Water, Water, Everywhere ...

I was surprised to be told that Le Meridien – with its about 470 rooms – was at more than 95 percent occupancy. The facilities are so huge that you never feel crowded. Between the hotel and the beach is the biggest expanse of swimming-pool you've ever seen.

And there's none of that territorial morning scramble for sunbeds; the hotel seems to have twice as many as it could ever need. A few dozen lilos floated on the vast pool, to my mind the best way to get a tan while keeping your cool.

There are beach activities galore: you can learn to sail, windsurf or dive, or go snorkelling from the beach. The first time I swam off this beach was during the monsoon period, and I was so excited to see proper surf that I dived headfirst into the waves and immediately lost my Raybans to the god of the sea – and they weren't a cheap copy pair, unfortunately. Try not to do this.

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You're cocooned in a more rarefied world where – with canny economic pragmatism – the hotel provides everything it thinks you could possibly need. There's a selection of good resort restaurants serving Western and Asian food; we ate at the Wang Warin fine-dining restaurant, which serves Royal Thai cuisine. We chose one of the set meals – we couldn't possibly finish it all, and the food was fabulous.

Out and About

As usual when we visit Phuket, we hired a little Honda Jazz for \$60 a day, but it's really not necessary, and probably better to use taxis or tuk-tuks. And there's a regular Hertz shuttle bus that takes you the ten-minute trip to Patong for just 100 baht (about \$4).

This was our first visit to Phuket in the high season. It was the first week in December and the buzz was revving up. More used to seeing open stretches of almost empty beaches during the off-peak monsoon season, we were surprised by the rows of sunbeds with their gay, purple umbrellas. When we made our usual pilgrimage to the Andaman Girls bar in seedy Soi Blangah off the main Patong strip, I warned our first-timer friends not to make eye-contact with the exotic, table-dancing transvestites, or they would be all over us ("Buy me a drink, otherwise my boss will fire me"); but this time the place was so packed with goggle-eyed revellers that no one paid us any attention.

All in All

It almost goes without saying that the service, the friendliness and the warmth of impeccably trained staff throughout the hotel, is top-notch. When you



pay for five stars in Thailand (or even four or three), you're just about guaranteed outstanding service, and this resort is no exception. It has spoilt us for Western hotels, whose staff simply don't compare.

Le Meridien Beach Resort is a good choice both for families and for a romantic getaway. You can find your own spot in the pool or on the beach to canoodle a bit, or an intimate restaurant table where you can whisper sweet nothings. If you take your children, they can swim safely under the watchful gaze of lifeguards, the Penguin Club will take them under its wing (pun intended), and baby-sitting is easily arranged. 🐧

For more, call (+66) 76 370100 or visit www.lemeridien.com.

Getting There:

Tiger Airways has regular flights to Phuket; with their prices being so low, I can't think why you'd want to fly another airline. You can arrange with the hotel to have you picked up at the airport, which is about 50 minutes' drive from the Le Meridien Beach Resort.

