



North, South, East, West

By Verne Maree

In the course of at least eight trips to the Thai island of Phuket, we'd never stayed north of Patong Beach. This time we discovered that Surin Beach, between Kamala to the south and Laguna Bangao to the north, is one of the island's prettiest stretches of white sand, and there's a lot to be said for being just 20 minutes from the airport—especially on a three-night weekend jaunt.

Them and Us

Through a group of Phuket expats we met, we picked up a “them and us” vibe between those who live in the south and those who live in the north of the island.

“It gets very busy down there,” say the northerners. “The Scandinavians have taken over.”

“We prefer it down here,” say the southerners. “There's nothing but Russians in the north.”

For us, this means great aquavit and herring dishes at Swedish-Norwegian-owned Two Chefs on Kata Beach; we haven't yet managed to find a borscht joint in the north, but it can only be a matter of time.



Twinpalms

It's wonderful to revisit resorts you've enjoyed before – we're longtime fans of the Boathouse on Kata Beach and Mom Tri's Villa Royale on Kata Noi on the south-western coast – but staying at the five-star Twinpalms on Surin Beach in the north-west this time was a refreshing change.

The architecture and design of Twinpalms is simply gorgeous. You're not right on the beach, but the sea is close enough – just a short walk away across a small public park. And that's where you find the resort's own Catch Beach Club, hugely popular with both guests and non-guests.

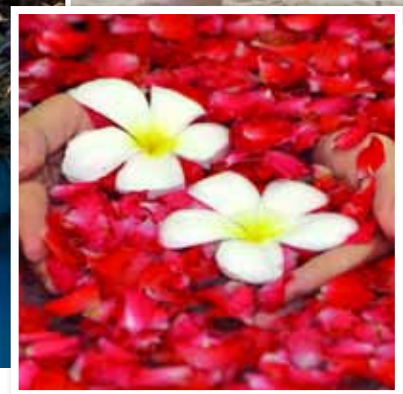
The trellised patio of our beautifully appointed and spacious room was just a few steps away from one of the longest and loveliest hotel pools I'd ever seen – it took a full two minutes to do a leisurely lap. That means plenty of space for the sun-loungers, some of which are placed in the shallows so you're lying just a couple of inches above the water, close enough to trail one languid foot in it.

General manager Olivier Gibaud heads up an impeccably trained team; the service is just about flawless.

6 & 7

It was a smart F&B marketing move to serve a free drink to Twinpalms hotel guests every evening at the Catch Beach Club, during the sunset and cocktail hour – 6pm to 7pm. What a wonderful place from which to watch the sun drop into the Andaman Sea! And once there, why would you want to leave?





On Friday night, the place was heaving with an assortment of French, Italian, British and – of course – Russian revellers, exposing acres of suntanned flesh and generous amounts of bosom. Protected from subtropical rainstorms by gigantic white umbrellas, entertained by laser lights and chill music provided by the resident DJ, all we had to do to get our cocktails was to present our 6 & 7 card. And that was only on the first night, we found: the bar staff remembered us after that.

And what cocktails! It made my head spin just to see how much vodka, rum and Cointreau the barman glugged into our ferocious Long Island iced teas, topping them up with barely enough Coke to impart a hint of colour.

After a couple of these mule-stunners, staying put for the excellent Friday night seafood barbecue (THB 1,100 each; about \$48) was a no-brainer. I mean that literally. It was so good that we returned to the Club the next night for an a la carte meal, which was truly superb: Mediterranean tapas and salad Niçoise, followed by linguine with pesto, spinach, cream and lobster so wonderfully fresh it must have come straight from the tank to the

skillet. A reasonable THB 2,800 included a couple of glasses of wine.

Sunday brunch at the hotel's main restaurant, the Oriental Spoon, is hugely popular, too. We'd already had the generous buffet breakfast, but enjoyed wandering through to observe the jollity exuded by the local expats doing what expats do best: washing down eat-all-you-can crustaceans with a free flow of champagne.

Spa

I love a bargain, so I snapped up the promotional offer of a 55-minute scrub and massage at the world-class Palm Spa for just THB 1,500. You get it at this price if you have it within 24 hours of checking in.

Having used up my in-house bargain on Day One, I didn't have far to go for my next massage fix. Among Surin Beach's handful of upmarket hotels, nice-enough guesthouses, restaurants and the ubiquitous tailors was a local joint that did a creditable hour-long rub-down for THB 350. For that not to be good value, it would have to be a really, *really* bad massage.



Perth Reat

We hired one of the hotel's cute cars for a day; don't be put off by the bright pink lips plastered all over them – the windows are deeply tinted, so no-one will see who's driving.

Kamala Beach seemed a good place to stop for lunch at one of a long string of casual restaurants offering shaded tables, reggae music, ice-cold Singha beer and yummy local food served with a smile.

For youngsters, backpackers or anyone looking for a cheap week or two on the beach, there are worse options than one of the many little hotels along this stretch. Days would flit by in a pleasant haze of sun-lounging, beer, spring rolls, green curries, dips in the warm sea, cocktails and massages.

Thinking I knew the beach massage-bed repertoire – Thai massage, oil massage, aloe vera massage, each costing around THB 300 – I was stumped for a while by the term “Perth reat 150 baht” at the end of the menu of services. Not something new from Western Australia, I eventually realised, but the price of hair-braiding, calculated “per thread”.

In the end

No matter how often you've been there, as we discovered, there's probably a lot more to the island than “your Phuket”. Next time, why stay somewhere else? Try a different beach, or even cross over to the other side – you'll get a new perspective on one of the world's favourite beach destinations. 📍

Getting There: Though our packed 1.30pm SilkAir flight's departure was delayed by an hour, and we stood in an interminable queue at Immigration, we made it to the hotel by 4.30pm – it helps that Thailand is an hour behind Singapore and that Twinpalms on Surin Beach is only a short hop from the airport.

www.twinpalms-phuket.com
www.clubyamu.com

Club Yamu

Phuket's eastern coast is less popular as it doesn't have the white-sand beaches for which the west coast is famous, but a place like Club Yamu is well worth considering as an option, especially for bigger groups and families.

Its brilliant, open design has the wow-factor of its sister the Twinpalms resort, but on a more sweeping and expansive scale – various styles and sizes of residences tastefully spread out over a vast, landscaped area. Many of the villas have their own pools; the apartments are all around an enormous aqua pool.

Staying in a two-bedroom garden residence, for example, full board for adults is THB 5,000 a night; it's half that for children. That includes soft drinks and juices all day, and beer and house wine at lunch and dinner – not bad! There are a couple of restaurants, a stylish bar and a kids' club. And when you long to feel sand between your toes, a boat will take you to a nearby island that does have a white-sand beach.

Though privately owned, Club Yamu is managed as a hotel. It's a new development, and some of the units are still available for sale.

