

Phuket Old Town is a fabulous culinary melting-pot, as VERNE MAREE discovered.

Culture Vultures *in Phuket*

After a break of some years, Roy and I were itching to get back to Phuket. Thailand is one of our favourite Southeast Asian destinations, and Phuket our favourite Thai island. This time, though, I was hankering after something different from a beach getaway – something with a smidgen of Sino-Portuguese-Thai history and culture.

Here for the food

What's more, we both wanted to tuck into some authentic green papaya salad and other Southern Thai food. Travel doesn't have to be all about food – but for us it often turns out that way.



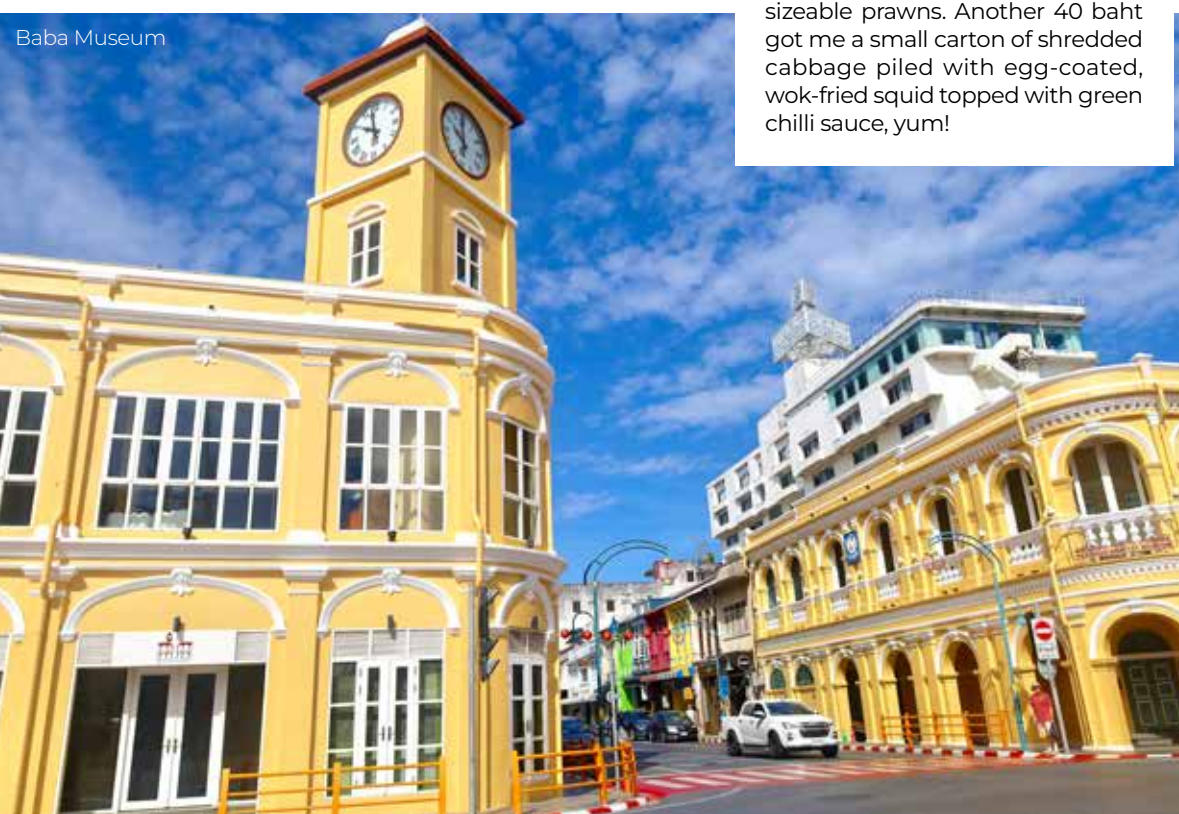
Southern Thai cuisine is a melting pot of Thai, Malay, Burmese and Chinese influences, and Phuket was named "Thailand City of Gastronomy" by UNESCO in 2017. To get a handle on the food culture, it helps to take a look at the island's history.

A brief history

Negritos were the first known inhabitants of Phuket – a dark-skinned people from what is now the Philippines, mostly Malay in origin. Then came the Mons from central Thailand, Dravidians from India, and Muslim fishing communities from Malaya.

What about the Burmese? Well, they originally invaded Phuket in 1785 – but a much more recent wave of immigrants is simply looking for a better future. Most Thais are Buddhist, and that goes for Phuket, too; just 20 percent of the population is Muslim.

Always a lucrative stop on the trade routes, European and Chinese communities arrived here from the 16th to 18th centuries and exerted a strong influence. Tin and rubber were important commodities.



Baba Museum

The yellow building to the right is the Baba Museum, one of many examples of the Sino-Portuguese architecture that typifies Phuket Old Town. Rooftops are curved in Chinese fashion; pillars and walls reflect European neoclassicism.

Sunday Walking Market

Every Sunday, atmospheric Thalong Road hosts its weekly Walking Market. Food stalls run down the centre of a temporarily pedestrianised thoroughfare that's lined on either side with restaurants, bars and shops selling clothing, pottery, knick-knacks and more.

After dark, it's a vibrant night market, complete with live music and thronged with both locals and tourists. Amazing street food included delicious boiled dumplings: 40 baht (around S\$1.50) for five fat ones stuffed with chicken; 50 baht for three stuffed with sizeable prawns. Another 40 baht got me a small carton of shredded cabbage piled with egg-coated, wok-fried squid topped with green chilli sauce, yum!



Charm Dining Gallery

Located in a traditionally restored century-old shophouse at 93 Dibuk Road, Charm lived up to its reputation as one of Phuket's best Southern Thai restaurants. Here, we feasted on green mango salad, Grandma-style fish fumet (grouper soup), assam prawns, and pork belly cooked in shallots, chilli and dark soy sauce. It cost about \$70 for a generous meal for two.

Fine dining at Blue Elephant

You need to book for the three-Michelin-starred Blue Elephant Cookery School and Restaurant (96 Soi Krabi). An exquisitely restored example of Sino-Portuguese architecture, it was once the Governor's house.

The seven-course Peranakan set meal (about \$70) is a good way to try a variety of high-end, classic Thai dishes. Think swimmer crab dumpling, creamy coconut chicken soup topped with seared foie gras, and king mackerel fillet with red curry sauce, to name just three.

A Chef's Tour in Phuket Old Town

A great introduction to Phuket food, this 4.5-hour walking tour kicks off at 10am on the steps of Phuket Old Town market. It's described as a food journey through the various cultural influences that have shaped the cuisine of Phuket. Bring an empty stomach, warned our outstanding tour guide Nam's WhatsApp message the day before.

Highlights included:

1 Pork noodle broth for breakfast at Kuay Jab Pa Mai, a food stall at the back of Old Town Market. Adventurous eaters can ask for the traditional version, complete with snippets of pig ear, heart, liver, intestines and more.



Blue Elephant Cookery School and Restaurant



2 Representing Indian cuisine in Phuket, the local Roti King at Arun Pochana restaurant serves up fragrant roti stuffed with spicy veggies, plus the local rice salad and Massaman curry, all washed down with iced teh tarik (pulled tea).

3 Lock Tian local food court's chicken satay and fresh spring rolls, the wraps made from wheat and not rice.

4 Apong Mea Sunee, a stall making scrumptiously crispy pancake rolls that's been on this street corner for more than half a century. It has a well-deserved "Bib Gourmand" Michelin Award.

5 Burmese cuisine at Mingalar Coffee Shop, where they slap dough to the inside of a clay tandoor for bubbly naan to serve with dahl, chicken curry and raw veggies including whole garlic cloves. (That's right: raw garlic cloves.)

6 Ko Yoon Hokkien Noodle, much like our famous Singapore noodles, but more intensely flavourful and chockfull of ingredients.

7 A confection of local honeycomb dripping over a bowl of delicately flavoured jelly at Prem Dessert Bar. Fortunately, everyone has a pudding pouch.

Miscellaneous temptations

- Can you think of a more delicious breakfast than these young coconut cakes served straight from a street stall griddle?
- Cannabis and proper coffee in Phuket were also new to us. We're not into the former, but Roy was delighted to discover the island's thriving independent coffee culture.
- Finding Keto Phuket Café was a surprise, too. In fact, it's not difficult to eat low-carb diet in Thailand, with all its seafood, satay and salads. As long as you can resist the siren song of cocktails, Singha beer and mango sticky rice, that is.



- John Donuts shop could convert even the staunchest health nut. Imagine doughnuts in flavours of Strawberry Cream Cheese, Boston Cream Bomboloni, Lemon Meringue or Cointreau Cream Brûlée. Forget about cannabis – this should be illegal!



Fact File

Getting there: You're spoilt for choice – Scoot, Jetstar, Thai AirAsia, Singapore Airlines and others offer regular flights.

Where to stay:

Hotel Verdigris (hotelverdigris.com) is the real deal if you want to continue the feel of Phuket Old Town. Aptly described as "contemporary Eurasian with hints of old-world opulence", this newly restored gem of a hotel is centrally located in a restored four-storey city mansion at 154 Yaowarat Road, and was great value at about \$210 per night, including a fabulous breakfast. 