

WORLD TRAVEL

MAGAZINE

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Marvels

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Soak in Asia's Magic

Mumbai, Bangkok, Singapore,
Koh Samui, Phuket & Hong Kong

FANTASY ISLAND

Simon N. Ostheimer discovers how Samui has become Asia's destination of choice when it comes to romance and luxury, from snorkelling in crystal clear waters, to a sunset cruise enjoying cocktails – this boutique isle in Thailand really offers it all.

Clockwise from above, lush green islands west of Samui; cute trolley car at Samui Airport; the amazing Air Bar at the InterCon; Koh Thai Kitchen at the Four Seasons



SAMUI IS THE BOUTIQUE ISLAND OF CHOICE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

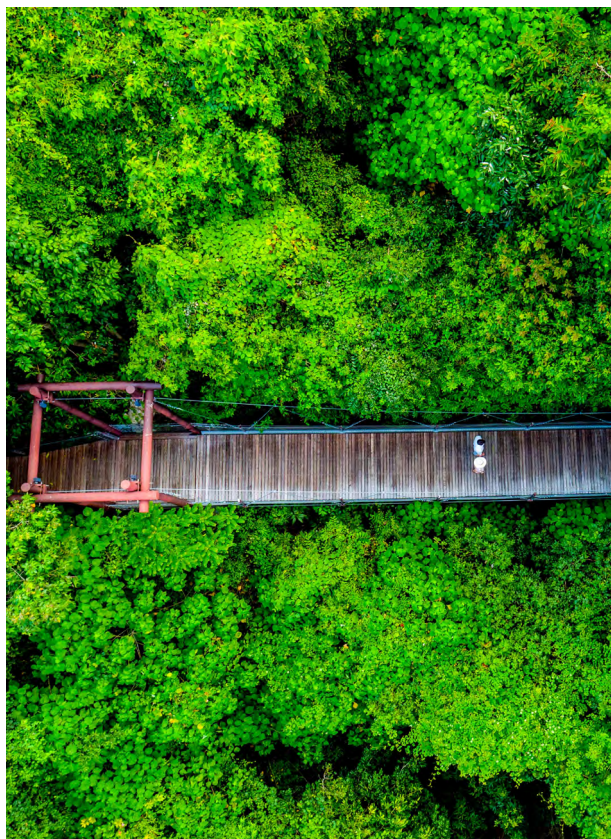


Unlike most airports, landing in **Koh Samui** is an experience in itself. Flying high above the clouds, you slowly descend through the mist, catching glimpses of green mountains ringed by rocky shores and sandy beaches. As you spy the odd fishing boat and sailing yacht, you pass low over a patchwork of houses and pool villas, before finally coming to a stop – but the fun doesn't end there. After walking down a movable staircase, you board what must be the cutest airport 'buses' in existence. A fleet of colourful trolley cars transport you to an open-air terminal that welcomes you to the tropics: huge tree trunk-shaped pillars hold up a vast wooden roof, as you casually walk through immigration and baggage claim.

It may all seem rather nonchalant, but this relaxed sense of arrival is part of the reason that Samui is rapidly becoming the boutique island of choice in Southeast Asia – as soon as you land, you feel warmly welcomed. Of course, there are other factors at play as well: an emerging upmarket dining scene, chic cocktail bars, amazing diving and snorkelling, and – perhaps most importantly – a raft of luxury hotels to cater to visitors' every need, including the likes of the Four Seasons, InterContinental, Samujana, W and Vana Belle.



A HIDDEN STONE PATH LEADS YOU INTO A MAGICAL MINI-VALLEY





Opened a decade ago, the **Four Seasons Resort Koh Samui**, to give it its proper name, occupies a small headland on the northwest corner of the island. Designed by iconic Bangkok-based hotel designer Bill Bensley, the all-pool villa property has taken the idea of a traditional Thai village – thatched roofs, plentiful vegetation, use of indoor-outdoor areas – and given it an ultra-luxe twist. Interestingly, the resort was built on the site of a former coconut plantation (Samui is said to grow the best coconuts in Thailand), with more than 800 of the trees being retained after construction. I was once fortunate to stay here on a ‘babymoon’ with my pregnant wife, and the two night stay has remained long in the mind.

Over lazy days, we wandered down to the beach (well actually, the excellent golf cart chauffeur service gave us a ride), hung out in the pool, and enjoyed a breakfast of fresh chocolate croissants, hand served by the pastry chef. We hear that their Sunday brunch is equally as amazing, held atop a palm-tree clad hill in their Koh Thai Kitchen. However, what we can vouch for is the rather amazing spa, accessed by a hidden stone path, that leads you into a magical mini-valley that is rather aptly called: The Secret Garden Spa. Here, you savour treatments such as the ‘Earth Energy Four Hands’, a rhythmic massage performed by two therapists using crystals, or the soothing ‘Siam Lovers’ couples ritual.

With its lush landscape and hilly interior, it’s no surprise that many of Samui’s high-end hotels can claim to have the best views on the island, through those at the **InterContinental Samui Baan Taling Ngam Resort** have to be a contender. You arrive at the InterCon, as its guests fondly call it, via a steep, twisty road that emerges at the back of the lobby. As the bellboy fetches your luggage, you’re ushered into a vast lobby filled with ornate, traditional furnishings. But those aren’t what catch the eye – that would be the floor-to-ceiling views of the endless blue ocean, only interrupted by small green outcrops, and the wake of passing boats. However, if you can manage to tear yourself away from the view, the resort’s Amber restaurant holds one of the best cooking classes in Samui. Running from mid-morning to mid-afternoon, it’s one of the most pleasurable ways to understand Thai culture. You begin with a shopping trip to the lively local market, where the hotel chef introduces some of the distinctive vegetables, fruits and spices that make up the menu of the – often quite spicy – southern Thai cuisine, followed by a stop at the fish market, full of local seafood such as lobster, barracuda, and crab. Pay close attention to the tutorials, as you’ll need to pick up your own ingredients for the cooking lesson back at the InterCon, where you’re taught to make classic Thai favourites such as Pad Thai and Tom Yum Goong.



Clockwise from top left, the stars come out over Samujana; one of the spectacular villas at Samujana; cooking class underway at the InterCon’s Amber restaurant; footbridge at the InterCon; Four Seasons’ private beach



BOBBLING ON THE OCEAN WAVES AS THE SKY TURNS TO ORANGE

Lunch is served!

Back on the north shore is a relative newcomer to the island, the **W Retreat Koh Samui**. With the hip, brightly coloured vibe that has come to define the brand, a giant 'W' marks the spot on the beach that faces out to the neighbouring party island of Koh Phangan. That lively spirit continues up the hillside to the 74 private pool villas, and the resort's six bars and restaurants. However, the most famous has to be Woo Bar, where a series of sunken lounges, lined by neon green cushions, dot a clear infinity pool that blends into the Gulf of Thailand. While open all day long, in the evening it becomes a destination for the young and cool from all across the island, drawn by daily drinks specials, live DJs – check out the classic funk and disco played on Tuesday nights – and, of course, the sunsets. If that's not enough, they also hold monthly events, including pool parties with names like 'Wild Wild Wet', international DJ sets, such as the Back Stage Festival, and Monday movie nights.

Of course, a trip to Samui wouldn't be complete without getting out on the water, and they don't come much more luxuriously appointed than the Kindred Spirit. Part of **Samujana**, a group of 27 luxury residences on the island's northeast coast that are available to book (or buy, if you decide you never want to leave, a distinct likelihood) this is one of the grandest boats to sail in the island's waters: a fully kitted out 13-metre long catamaran, including three staterooms, air-conditioning, and a full kitchen. Depending on your schedule, they run half day and full day cruises, that can include sailing to the remarkable Ang Thong Marine Park – Thailand's most visited marine park consists of 42 uninhabited islands covering some 100 square kilometres – for a day of fun snorkelling, cruising over to Koh Phangan for lunch on the beach, or exploring around Samui, searching for secret coves.

The boat comfortably accommodates up to 15 guests, though you might want to pare down that number for their signature sunset cruise, which only allows a maximum of ten. If you do plump for their evening sail – and we recommend you do – you may find yourself bobbling on the ocean waves, enjoying good company, the breeze gently blowing past, champagne in hand, as the sky turns from blue to purple to orange. On evenings like this, it's all-too-easy to forget that there's another world beyond this – Asia's fantasy island. ✦



From top, Woo Bar at the W Samui is a stylish place to watch the sunset; fun on the water with Samujana's luxury Kindred Spirit catamaran