



# Treasure Island

THANKS TO A SLEW OF NEW OPENINGS AND A COMMUNITY THAT EMBRACES ITS RICH ENVIRONMENT, KOH SAMUI IS ENJOYING A BUMP IN POPULARITY. **JENINNE LEE-ST. JOHN** VISITS THE TOP NEW SPOTS AND MAKES A FEW FRIENDS ALONG THE WAY.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY **THANET KAEWDUANGDEE**

Morning on the manicured sands of Sala Choengmon.



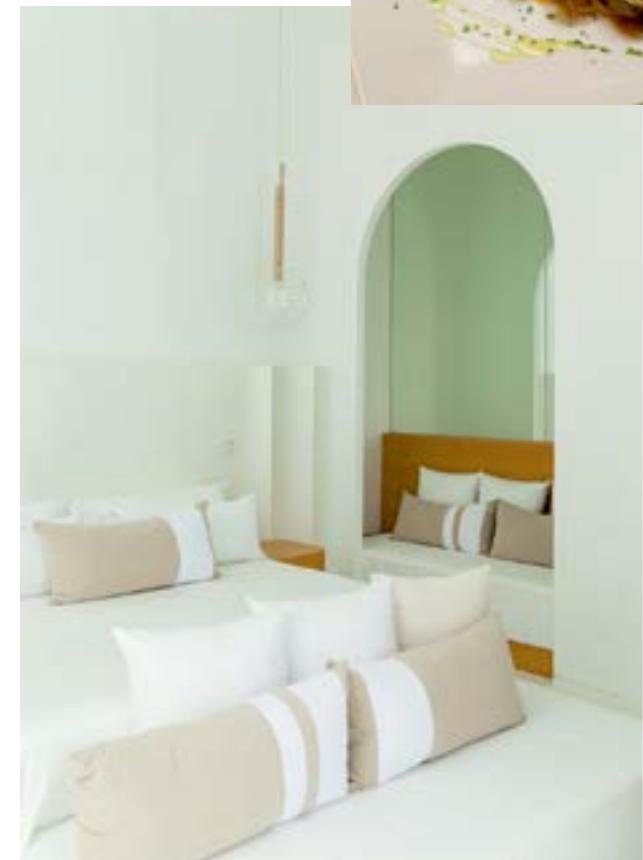
## PLA PAKEENUYA, WHOSE FIRST NAME MEANS “FISH” IN THAI, IS THE NEW MARINE BIOLOGIST AT

**Four Seasons Koh Samui.** Before you get all excited about her fulfilling her destiny, take note: “My dad loved fishing. But my mom thought he fished too much. She thought if he had his own little fish at home, he’d do it less...” she says laughing. “It didn’t work.” The ploy might not have saved any bighead carp, but the little fish is now dedicated to protecting other marine life, particularly coral. Pla along with Benji Sansittisakunlird, for the resort actually has hired two in-house marine biologists, has helped launch a coral regeneration project under the aegis of Thailand’s Department of Marine and Coastal Resources. It’s great to snorkel the natural reef just offshore with a scientist, especially because afterwards Pla goes through all the photos she took with you, identifying different species. (Highlights for me: kidney coral that she estimated was 20 years old, and a tube worm.) If you find any broken coral, they will remove it to the new-growth fields next door for rehabilitation. When I visited there were already seven transplant nursery platforms blooming.

In bloom is an equally apt way to describe Koh Samui these days. The second-largest island in Thailand continues to see increases in visitor arrivals, with new international flights, especially from China, landing on the island and a bump in arrivals to Surat Thani airport, on the mainland, from which you can take a boat across the channel. Also landing here are popular Bangkok restaurants such as El Gaucho Steakhouse and Peppina Neapolitan pizza, whose outposts join local sophisticates such as Italian-chic Salefino and everyone’s favorite beach club, Coco Tam’s. New hotels are going up; others are upping their game. For example, next month, contempo-tropical resort **Anantara Lawana** reopens after a full overhaul, with brighter rooms, bigger terraces and pools, and new sprinklings of fun like overwater swings. And down the road, Thai boutique darling **Sala** is opening their second Samui spot in January: a 52-room, sun-and-moon-themed grassy enclave where everyone gets their own pool. This is all the more impressive considering most rooms are within a low-rise



FROM TOP: Pla Pakeenuya, a marine biologist at Four Seasons Koh Samui; seafood pasta at Salefino; a Sala Pool villa in the soon-to-open Sala Chaweng. OPPOSITE: The magic hour at Four Seasons.

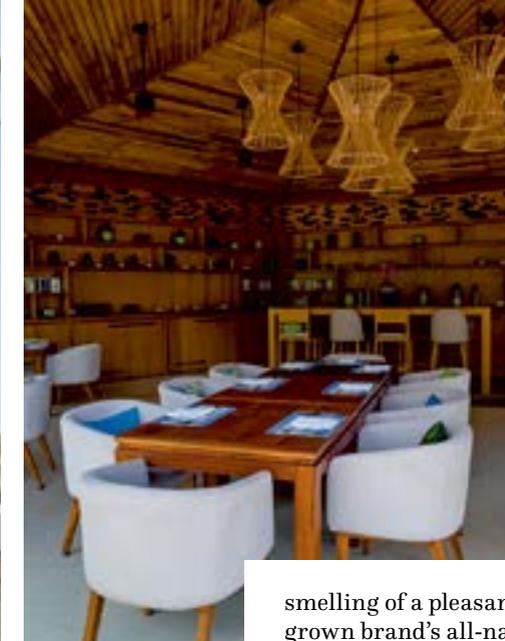




hotel-style building, in the heart of Chaweng Beach—in Sala’s signature all-white color, it’ll be like the coolest yacht party ever.

Since Sala’s not open yet, though, the first vessel I boarded on this trip to Samui was the **InterContinental Samui Baan Taling Ngam’s** house speedboat, from their long dock just outside my villa. There are perhaps 150 pink dolphins in the Gulf of Thailand; a 45-minute ride from the resort can get you to one of their playgrounds. Not albinos, they’re Indo-Pacific Humpback dolphins that are born grey and change cotton candy-colored with age. As with any endangered species, going to spy on them presents a moral conundrum. But, when we get out there, all the tour guides we see abide by the law and, it seems, a gentlemen’s agreement not to crowd the animals, not to feed the animals, and not to crowd each other. I notice at least one motorboat approach the bay and hover, waiting for another to leave. We spend half an hour gawking at four grey guys and a pink one jumping and weaving in a wide circle; sometimes they swim close enough to our bow to touch. Then we sail back, stopping for a satisfying snorkel off an island 15 minutes from the resort. The day just gets better at Baan Thai Spa by Harnn, modeled on a classic Thai stilt house. The jewel-box reception

## I WONDER IF EDITH PIAF COULD’VE CONCOCTED A SWEETER VIE EN ROSE



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Sala Choengmon; at Outrigger’s Edgewater restaurant; welcome drinks at Sala Choengmon; the private garden of a Club Beachfront Pool villa, InterContinental; a wet treatment room at Spa Village, in The Ritz-Carlton; scallop ceviche at The Ritz-Carlton; in the ring at The Ritz-Carlton; evening festivities at Coco Tam’s beach bar.

smelling of a pleasant mélange of the home-grown brand’s all-natural products is just the first clue that this place is special. The “master bedroom” treatment suite has a private steam room out of which I have to be unwillingly removed—though I should’ve known that the massage was going to be stellar, especially after 20 minutes of muscle-loosening.

When we checked in, our butler had been demonstrably indignant on our behalf that our room wasn’t ready. This is the kind of butler you want. When we got to our Club Beachfront Pool villa, I immediately understood what he was worked up about. Most of InterContinental Samui sits on a bluff, affording expansive sea views from most every guestroom and suite, many of which are smartly clustered around “neighborhood” pools. But below the main structure—a lobby that is itself worth the price of admission, perched over the southwest coast just begging for the sun to set—near the main pool, are a handful of private-pool villas that open onto the beach. They are utter romance, but being there on a girls’ trip with my sister-in-law doesn’t alter my appreciation. Over sundowners at Air Bar, the executive chef (order his whole-lobster bouillabaisse) tells us how lucky we were to have found dolphins at the first stop, *and* to have seen an elusive pink one, and as the dusky sky eases into magenta, we toast Aperol spritzes and I wonder if Edith Piaf could’ve concocted a sweeter vie en rose.

On the other side of the island, **Outrigger Koh Samui Beach Resort** is on a practically private bay from which you can make out the lights of Chaweng Beach. It’s a 10-minute drive, but from where I’m sitting, on a circular wooden deck built around the trunk of a shady old tree that makes it optimal for any meal of the day, that party-town swathe of Samui is a world away. The transportative feel is embodied in one swoop by the bamboo tunnel leading from the lobby to the shore, like a mini Arashiyama, and when the late-morning sun

shines through just so... well, you and your personal paparazzo could spend the better part of an hour taking advantage of the soft light.

The property—where all suites and villas come with their own pools—feels like a clubhouse, with lots of nooks and daybeds tucked into a relatively small footprint. That vibe is enhanced by the water socks, kayaks and paddleboards at everyone's disposal, and by Serge, wellness guru extraordinaire. The rope-toned, perma-bronzed M.D. teaches mat Pilates lessons on an ocean-view balcony above the sweet and well-done Navasana Spa, and aqua yoga classes in the main pool where even the most reserved guests are tempted to get in on the splash session. (If you want to do *muay Thai*, Outrigger is right around the corner from the well-respected Yodyut Gym. They can book private training for you; ask for adorable mighty mouse Khun First.) The food is stellar, truly, demonstrating that it's possible for a hotel to do both Thai and international with simple authenticity. At Edgewater, we ordered the crab with egg curry, the gyoza, and the Caesar salad with prawns twice each—not for lack of options but because they were so good we couldn't leave without eating them again.

Another thing requiring a double-take: the approach to **The Ritz-Carlton**, which is a bit of an optical illusion. You're funneled up a path to a beautiful welcome pavilion. From here you can see over to the coast of Bophut Bay... but where's this new resort? Above in the jungle? Nope, this is just the staging area. Hop in your buggy, head down a road, around the bend and over a rise, and the view suddenly opens up to a panoramic oceanic Oz, a fiefdom that rolls resplendently down to the shore. Here, the standard accommodation is a 93-square-meter suite with big balconies from which you can survey the entire village—including a central square modeled on a Thai marketplace with street food stalls that you can commandeer for cooking class. Among the townhouse-style pool villas, you can choose a reclusive cliff-side spot, or to be amongst it all closer to the shore. The stunning main pool is the resort's showpiece with good reason: the complex it anchors cleverly holds several restaurants including an oh-so-decadent-in-its-specificity ceviche bar, a man-made snorkeling pool in which a marine biologist teaches kids little and big about fish and coral, and a gym with a *muay Thai* ring where the trainer is a female former champion who helped me correct my spinning back elbow move in 90 seconds.

As if meeting Khun Chi wasn't enough to get me all pumped about girl power, then they took me to the spa. OK, hear me out. Sure, this



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Phuket lobster stir-fried with garlic, at InterContinental; The Ritz-Carlton welcome; the shady dining deck at Outrigger; CoCoRum bar at Four Seasons; Baan Thai Spa by Harnn, at InterContinental.



is a temple to pampering, the girliest of girly activities. But it's run by a team of strong ladies who know their stuff, who can rattle off the health benefits of your butterfly pea flower tea and spend an hour or two wrestling with you in the spa pool for a signature aquatic therapy session. In a bowl between hills, a ring of treatment rooms surrounding tiered ponds cascading into each other, the Spa Village is a real-life Themiscyra—and after a trip to Wonder Woman's home island, you're sure to be feeling like a goddess, too.

Speaking of goddesses, it was tempting to posit that scientist/mermaid Pla has the best gig at Four Seasons Samui, but then I met Mee. The smiley bartender was sent for an intensive rum education to open the resort's new Rum Vault, adjacent to beachfront CoCoRum bar, both designed by fantasist-architect Bill Bensley. They've introduced a Rum Club: bring Mee a bottle off his wish list, and you gain exclusive access to their large-and-growing stash of rums, many of which are not available elsewhere in Thailand. After he guides you expertly through a tasting, stumble on over to the new Beach House, an open-air games room that also hosts pop-up dinners on its cloistered, secret beachfront. Like so much of the best of Samui, it's a treasure hidden in plain sight. ☘

## THE DETAILS

### HOTELS

**Anantara Lawana Koh Samui Resort** Re-opens December 16. *Bophut; lawana-chaweng.anantara.com; doubles from Bt9,280.*  
**Anantara Bophut Koh Samui Resort** *Bophut; samui.anantara.com; doubles from Bt7,250.*  
**Conrad Koh Samui** *Taling Ngam; conradhotels3.hilton.com; doubles from Bt18,500.*  
**Four Seasons Resort Koh Samui** *Anghong; fourseasons.com; doubles from Bt22,950; "Snorkeling with Experts" Bt1,000 per person.*  
**InterContinental Samui Baan Taling Ngam** *Taling Ngam; samui.intercontinental.com; doubles from Bt8,882; "In the Know" dolphins excursion Bt4,000 per adult.*  
**Outrigger Koh Samui Beach Resort** *Bophut; outrigger.com; doubles from Bt6,599.*  
**The Ritz-Carlton, Koh Samui** *Bophut; ritzcarrton.com; doubles from Bt13,875.*  
**Sala Samui Choengmon Beach** (Sala Chaweng slated to open January 2018.) *Choengmon; salahospitality.com; doubles from Bt7,266.*  
**Vana Belle** *Chaweng; vanabellekohsamui.com; doubles from Bt17,300.*

### RESTAURANTS + BARS

**Bar Baguette** Specializes in early breakfast, healthy options and pretty plating. Newest location is on Chaweng Road; original is in Fisherman's Village. *barbaguette-samui.com; meal and coffee for two Bt500.*

**The Beach Bar Samui** The cabanas at this super-chill spot are the place for lazy afternoons; also hosts raucous evening EDM fests. *Chaweng; fb.com/thebeachbarsamui; daily barbecue Bt300 per person.*  
**Café dLe Pier X Samui** Artisanal cocktail bar with French-inflected international fare and Thai staples. *Fisherman's Village; fb.com/cafedepier; meal and drinks for two Bt1,000.*  
**Café 69** Creative, kaleidoscopic Thai fusion food served by an entertaining chef/owner. The green curry pie is revered. *Outside Fisherman's Village; fb.com/cafe69kohsamui; meal for two Bt700.*  
**Clyde Café** Bakers who supply popular spots around the island have opened a homebase with coffee and comfort food. *Chaweng; clydecafe.com; meal for two Bt600.*  
**Coco Tam's** Fun, welcoming beach bar with bean bags in the sand, fire shows at night and Peppina pizza opening in December. *Fisherman's Village; fb.com/cocotams; snacks and drinks for two Bt600.*  
**El Gaucho** Newest location of the Argentinian-style steakhouse popular in Vietnam and Bangkok. *Chaweng; 66-62/593-9668; dinner for two Bt3,000.*  
**Salefino** Oceanfront Italian with a Mediterranean vibe and a great sunset view, right near the Big Buddha. *Bophut; salefinosamui.com; meal for two Bt1,500.*

