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Chaweng Beach early in the morning

Koh Samui: Thai Island Escape

Frequently described as an island resembling Phuket 30 years ago, Koh Samui has grown significantly in popularity over the last decade. Join **David Bowden** as he enjoys a weekend getaway to the nearby Thai island and finds it offering plenty of appeal and charm of its own.

One of the great advantages of living in Malaysia is that it's an easy country to escape from as and when necessary. I mean this in the nicest way, because when you come from another country like I do - Australia - that is thousands of miles from anywhere, the ability to jump on a plane and be in numerous other countries in less than three hours (and often less than two) makes Malaysia all the more appealing. More air routes, especially those of low-cost

carriers, have contributed to the ease in which one can head off on an 'overseas' escapade.

So with a long weekend looming, a quick online trawl of the possibilities revealed Koh Samui as a contender for a few days of island rest and relaxation. For me, Thailand is a perfect country to slow down, enjoy some tantalising food, a sufficiency of chilled beverages, and a few little indulgences like affordable massages.



Walking street, Fisherman's Village, Bo Phut

The knowledge that the direct flight would take less than 90 minutes and then a short limo transfer to my resort clinched the deal as it meant I could leave KL at a reasonable morning hour and be in Samui for breakfast on the beach. (As Thailand is one hour behind Malaysia, it meant that I arrived almost before I left, if you see what I mean!)

While Koh Samui Airport technically has international status, it almost takes on the appearance of a rural airstrip. I

was informed that it was intentional to have passengers alight down steps onto the tarmac and to be transferred in open-sided carts to the arrival hall and immigration counters. Sadly, the Thai immigration authorities haven't adjusted staffing numbers to cater to the influx of tourists and passport validation here – much like Bangkok, though to a lesser extent – can be tedious. Departing Koh Samui involves a little walking, too, as passengers have pass through an open-air shopping precinct that includes a rather distracting Irish pub.

A RESORT HOME

Finally, after immigration, I was on my way to the Outrigger Koh Samui Beach Resort, which offered me all the weekend indulgences of Thai food, cool beverages, spa services, and seaside relaxation that I was seeking. I have to admit that narrowing my



Sunbaking NE

choice down to the Outrigger was difficult as it could well have been any number of 20 luxurious resorts that have put Koh Samui in the sights of tourists. Now, the island is home to many luxurious international resorts as well as some very smart locally-managed properties.

My resort was just a 10-minute drive from the airport (as are many on the island's northeast coast). The appeal of



Women preparing food, Fisherman's Village Bo Phut



Santiburi Samui view towards Koh Phangan



the resort was tremendous, as the 55 villas are all free-standing, each with its own private plunge pool located on an expansive wooden deck. It also has direct beach access to a small private bay and no villa is more than a two-minute walk through the forested and landscaped property.

The Outrigger successfully caters to couples or small families, and on Samui, it's a good idea to choose your accommodation to match your requirements - Chaweng (partying, nightlife, and shopping), Lamai (more relaxed than Chaweng but with many bars and restaurants), and Bophut (beachfront lined with resorts and the famous Friday night walking street).

TO MARKET, TO MARKET

My plan was to basically stay at the resort and relax, but I soon discovered there were several distractions to lure me out. The Outrigger operates a few shuttles per day to and from Chaweng, which has a main street lined with every retail opportunity from tattoo artists to the mall called Central Festival. Every fifth shop seems to offer massage, and in between, there are bars and cafés delivering great happy hour deals to the best steaks



Fisherman's Village Market

west of Bondi Beach... and more live football action than you'd likely find in England itself.

Currency exchanges line the street, but rates tend to be more favourable in Malaysia than on Koh Samui and if you change ringgit into Thai baht before your departure from Malaysia, you should save some valuable spending money. The floundering ringgit means that the exchange rate is now approximately RM1: THB8 - a notable decline, as a few years, you'd get THB10 for your ringgit.

A must-visit market for those travelling at the weekend is the popular Fisherman's Village 'Walking Street' held every Friday night from 5pm till around midnight. 'Walking street' markets are what Malaysians would know as night markets, as a section of the road is closed off and vendors set up temporary stalls to sell mostly food and beverages but also some fresh produce, souvenirs, clothes, music, and jewellery. Provided it doesn't rain, this market is atmospheric and cooled by refreshing onshore winds from the ocean which is just metres away.

Permanent restaurants and shops along the kilometer-long stretch join in the fun with excellent happy hour drinks and tasty snacks. Liberal Thai licensing laws ensure that temporary cocktail lounges are established in front of a few stalls and a converted VW Kombi with an enticing range of cocktails starting from just THB99.

PAR FOR THE COURSE

Golf is a luxury for many of us in our



Streetside bar, walking street
Fisherman's Village, Bo Phut



Driving 2nd fairway, Santiburi

normally busy lives and often reserved for holidays. After an early morning beachside breakfast I was whisked off to Koh Samui's only 18-hole championship golf course, Santiburi Golf and Country Club. Many golfers consider this one of Asia's great courses, especially island courses, and Santiburi is definitely one of the



Wat Plai Laem



Edgewater + pool at Santiburi Club



Sunset, Big Buddha

region's most scenic courses with uninterrupted views over the northern side of island and off to Koh Phangan in the distance.

Located on rolling hills, the highest point on the 6,930-yard long course is 290 metres above sea level but drops down to just 30 metres so it's the undulations that often surprise those playing for the first time. Winds and the dramatic rises and falls add to the challenge of a round here. With such an undulating course, it's no surprise that buggies and caddies are mandatory.

ISLAND ATTRACTIONS

Koh Samui is an island of just 250 sq km in size, but to circumnavigate it and take in most of the sights consumes most of the day. The small towns, villages, and resort precincts grip the sandy fringes, with most of the resorts vying for the best beachfront locations on the northern and eastern coastlines. Colourful Buddhist temples are found all over the island with Big Buddha and Wat Plai Laem the temples most tourists visit. If you're mobile, and you need to be to see many of the attractions, I suggest you also visit Wat Kho Hua Jook, perched high above

Chaweng Beach as it has good views of the island's east coast and the aircraft landing at the airport.

Plan to end in Big Buddha late in the afternoon or early evening so that you can enjoy the liquid beverages served at the adjoining Sunset Bar. Not surprisingly, the sunset on most afternoons is as impressive as the drinks and snacks that are served here. This open-sided thatched 'hut' overlooks Bophut Bay and is a regular for many locals as well as tourists. ■

TRAVEL FILE

Getting There

Weekend escapes to destinations like Koh Samui require quick access and direct daily flights to Koh Samui ensure this happens as well as cheaper, low-cost carriers alternatives via Surit Thani (on the mainland and then a ferry journey to the island).

Contacts

Outrigger Koh Samui Beach Resort (outrigger.com) and Santiburi Samui Country Club (santiburi.com).