

# Get luxe for less at Outrigger in Thailand

Located in Koh Samui, Khao Lak and Phuket, the hotel chain's resorts are at the top end of the four-star range

Wong Ah Yoke

THAILAND – In these inflationary times, one would not think that a luxurious holiday can come at low prices.

But that is what I discover on a recent tour of three Outrigger resorts in southern Thailand.

Located in the beach holiday destinations of Koh Samui, Khao Lak and Phuket, all three were existing properties that Outrigger (outrigger.com), a hotel chain with roots in Hawaii, bought over and reopened after extensive renovations.

Outrigger Surin Beach Resort Phuket was the first to open in December 2021, followed by Outrigger Khao Lak Beach Resort in February 2022 and Outrigger Koh Samui Beach Resort in August 2022.

They are different in sizes and looks, eschewing the cookie-cutter approach of many hotel chains. But they also share some traits.

All have access to sandy beaches and possess a strong sense of design.

They pitch themselves as four-star resorts, but are definitely at the top end of the range. Unless you are expecting a huge pool villa, exten-

sive grounds and personalised toiletries, you will find little to distinguish them from five-star resorts.

A feature I find very useful is the Outrigger app. On checking in, guests can scan a QR code via the app which connects them to the resort's facilities and activities schedule.

The feature I appreciate most is a chat function where I can ask for information or make requests, much like butler service. And it works with multiple languages, as the system has an automatic translation feature.

Despite these perks, the room rates are very much in the four-star bracket. Depending on the season, they range from below \$100 a night to under \$300 during the December peak, though the Christmas and New Year period will see a bigger jump.

Each destination offers something different, whether it is for honeymoon couples or families with young children. Activities available in the vicinity also differ, but you will likely find a sense of paradise in one of them.

This may be chilling on the beach or by the pool, island-hopping in the Gulf of Thailand or getting into the crazy nightlife of Phuket.

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• Wong Ah Yoke, the former Straits Times food critic, now spends his time travelling and dining around Singapore and abroad.

• The writer was hosted by Outrigger Resorts.



Colonial-style architecture at Outrigger Koh Samui Beach Resort. PHOTOS: OUTRIGGER RESORTS, WONG AH YOKÉ



(Above) The rooms at Outrigger Koh Samui Beach Resort come with balconies.



(Right) The Elephant Haven Sanctuary.

## 1. OUTRIGGER KOH SAMUI BEACH RESORT

This resort on Lamar Beach comes as a surprise as it has none of the thatched roofs and cottage villas that people associate with a tropical island holiday.

Instead, the airport transfer drops me in front of an elegant building that is best described as colonial style.

That is another anomaly because Thailand has never been colonised, but the architecture introduced by the Western powers that ruled its neighbours in the 19th century nonetheless left an impression on the resort's builders.

Outrigger took over the former Manathai Koh Samui hotel and, while keeping the original structure of the buildings, made it more contemporary with a lighter palette and also updated the interior design and furnishings.

There are 146 rooms and suites, all with a balcony. The Club Garden Rooms and suites will fit a couple

### OUTRIGGER KOH SAMUI BEACH RESORT

WHERE 173/41 Moo 4, Taweeratpakdee Road, Lamar Beach, Maret, Koh Samui, Surat Thani 83410, Thailand  
ROOMS 146  
RATES From 2,147 baht (\$\$83) to 4,289 baht a night, depending on the season  
INFO outrigger.com

with one or two kids.

Guests in these rooms can make use of the Voyager 47 Club Lounge on the second floor, where cocktails and snacks are served before dinner. The lounge also offers one of the best views of the beach.

To get to the beach, you have to cross the main road. That is also where the resort's main swimming pools and its Edgewater restaurant, which serves Thai and Western dishes, are located.



## 2. OUTRIGGER KHAO LAK BEACH RESORT

Khao Lak in the southern part of Phang Nga province is not known to many Singaporeans. But it boasts many resorts along expansive stretches of sandy beaches by the Andaman Sea.

Outrigger Khao Lak Beach Resort, which took over the Manathai Khao Lak, is one of the newest. The best way to get there is to fly to Phuket, which is linked to the mainland by a bridge. From there, it is less than two hours by car.

Its 151 rooms and suites flank a beautifully landscaped garden that stretches from the lobby to the beach.

The rooms come in different configurations and include seven villas with either a plunge pool or an outdoor terrace.

The sea is too rough for swimming when I visit in June, but guests can sunbathe on beach chairs or frolic in the swimming pool nearby. Or just soak in the view while cooling down with a drink at the Edgewater beachfront restaurant, which serves good Thai and Western dishes.

Another great way to relax is to book a massage, which is done in salas on the beach.

I also sign up for a cooking class conducted by the resort's chef and have fun whipping up three dishes – pad thai noodles,

Outrigger Khao Lak Beach Resort (right) has 151 rooms and suites (above) with different configurations.



## 3. OUTRIGGER SURIN BEACH RESORT PHUKET

WHERE 2/4 Moo 8, Petchkasem Road, Bangsar Beach, Bang Muang, Takua Pa, Phang Nga 82190, Thailand  
ROOMS 151  
RATES From 1,661 baht (\$\$65) to about 5,000 baht, depending on the season

tom kha gai (chicken soup with coconut milk) and a dessert of bananas cooked in coconut milk.

The herbs come from the resort's herb garden, which is the lushest I have seen. I pass the rows of lemongrass, lime, chilli, butterfly pea and winged bean several times before the class and think they are part of the landscaping until the chef takes us to tour the plot.

The little ones have their own programme at the Coral Kids Club and Games Room, where minders think up handicraft sessions to keep them occupied.

Day trips outside the resort can be relaxing or adventurous.

My first experience with bamboo rafting (right above) is a lot of fun. You sail down a narrow and shallow river on a bamboo raft, and while it is nowhere as exciting as white-water rafting, it is also extremely safe.

All you get is a wet bottom when the water rushes in as the raft hits a rocky patch and gains speed.

A visit to the old town of Takua Pa is quite educational. Many young folk have left for the cities and the place looks very sleepy



Outrigger Surin Beach Resort Phuket (above) is designed for young couples. Some of its rooms have plunge pools (right above).

## 3. OUTRIGGER SURIN BEACH RESORT PHUKET

This is the smallest of the three Outrigger resorts in Thailand, but is also the hippest as it is designed more for young couples than families.

Housing 60 rooms and suites in compact three-storey blocks, it offers eight configurations – the most among the three Thailand Outrigger properties.

These include suites with balconies as well as those that come with attached plunge pools and duplexes.

Some rooms overlook the resort's two swimming pools, which are a few steps away.

But a three-minute walk across the road also takes you to Surin Beach, a long stretch of sand by the Andaman Sea where there are food stands selling Thai seafood dishes.

But it is probably safer to dine at the resort's Nalu Bar and Grill, which specialises in barbecue with a global influence and a section of authentic Thai classics.

is good, go to the loft bar above the restaurant to catch the sun sinking into the sea.

There is no kids club here and activities such as spa treatments are geared towards adults.

I decide to take a half-hour drive to Patong Beach after dinner and am glad to find that Phuket's main night strip has fully recovered from the pandemic.

June is supposed to be low season in Phuket, but one will not know that while squeezing through the crowd in the popular Bangla Road that is lined with bars

### OUTRIGGER SURIN BEACH RESORT PHUKET

WHERE 12/1 Moo 3, Srisoonthorn Road, Surin Beach, Chergatlay, Phuket 83101, Thailand  
ROOMS 60  
RATES From 1,882 baht (\$\$70) to more than 5,000 baht, depending on the season

The beach is not very long, but it serves its purpose as non-hotel guests seldom wander to this part of the island.

Those who are too lazy to cross the road can soak in the sun at another pool nestled in the main building, next to the Mala Kitchen restaurant where breakfast is served.

The kids can be parked at the Coral Kids Club, where minders keep them occupied with games and handicraft sessions.

The resort also houses an Illusion Theatre where witty magician Ed Clarke mesmerises with two shows from Mondays to Saturdays.

The 7pm show is designed as family entertainment while the 9pm show, for adults only, includes mind-reading feats. But the shows are not free – each ticket costs 1,200 baht (\$\$47).

Sea-lovers can sign up for a full-day excursion to the Angthong National Marine Park, where they can hop among islets, as well as do some snorkelling and kayaking.

Some islands offer elevated points for panoramic views, but be prepared to get a stiff workout climbing to the peaks.

Many agencies offer the tour with English-speaking guides and lunch is included. The resort should be able to guide you to some of them.

You should visit the Elephant Haven Sanctuary, which is home to about 20 rescued elephants and two babies.

It is designed to educate visitors on the cruel treatment suffered by many elephants when they are trained for menial labour or to perform for entertainment.

You can help feed and observe the behaviour of the animals, but you do not ride them.

**Hot tip:** If you are looking to dine outside the resort, check out The Jungle Club (www.jungleclubsamui.com), which is 6.5km or a 15-minute drive from the Outrigger resort.

It is perched on a mountain and you take the resort's truck at a pickup point on the foothill to get there, driving up a narrow road so steep that the journey itself is an adventure.

The restaurant is a chill spot, with low tables surrounded by bean bags laid out on tiers of wooden decks that offer an amazing view of the sea.

Lunch is a good time to enjoy the scenery.

The menu is a mix of Western and Thai dishes. While my crab-meat fried rice and deep-fried spring roll pass muster, the papaya salad needs more chilli heat.



Samet Nangshe (above) offers views of Phang Nga Bay.



Samet Nangshe (above) offers views of Phang Nga Bay.

and eateries blasting music.

Other activities outside the resort include visits to the Phuket Elephant Sanctuary, but since I have already seen the one in Koh Samui, I give this a miss.

Stand-up paddle-boarding is also popular on Surin Beach. But I am staying one night and my schedule is too tight to fit that in. Perhaps on the next trip.

**Hot tip:** If your schedule permits, it is worth taking a 30-minute drive for lunch at Samet Nangshe (9 Khlong Khian, Takua Thung District, Phang-nga 82130, tel: +66-81-894-1159).

It is a boutique hotel with a restaurant and cafe located on a hilltop.

The place has a stunning view of the limestone formations dotting the waters of Phang Nga Bay, including one that looks like a shark's fin.

The restaurant specialises in southern Thai food and dishes like crab curry. Nam prik, a spicy sauce served with raw vegetables, is also excellent. Most items cost between 200 and 500 baht (\$\$8 and \$\$20).



Actors Lim Kay Siu (far left) and Neo Sweet Lin, who have been married for 31 years, play husband and wife in Checkpoint Theatre's Tender Submission. ST PHOTOS: GIN TAY

# Long marriage tested by religious faith

In Tender Submission, a couple find their marriage unravelling as they await the outcome of a pivotal vote in a church

Shawn Ho

The place of religion in a secular society may be a delicate topic to broach in multicultural Singapore, but a new script by playwright Lucas Ho will wade cautiously into the territory.

Tender Submission takes place entirely in a church's cry room, a sound-proof area tucked at the back of a worship hall for parents to care for their crying infants while they follow the service through a large window.

Catherine and David – played by real-life married couple and veteran actors Neo Sweet Lin and Lim Kay Siu – seek refuge in this cordoned-off space as they nervously await the outcome of a vote that Catherine has put into motion in the church.

As time ticks by, their 30-year marriage begins to unravel.

Tender Submission, which plays at the Drama Centre Black Box from Aug 17 to 27, is sold out.

Ho became fascinated by the cry room after he became a father seven years ago and spent more time with his wife in this "liminal space" on Sundays, overhearing the conversations of other parents, but caution about how a secular theatre company is going to do a

his third full-length play. But the Checkpoint Theatre associate artist hints that the couple in this intimate two-hander are conservatives who "have strengths, but are also incredibly flawed".

The 39-year-old Christian says: "I'm trying to peel back the curtain on who these conservative people are, who think that the way to influence the government and society is by writing letters to specific individuals."

He wonders: "If our country is secular, does that diminish religious practice or do religions have to find other ways to carve out their space?"

While writing the play, several real-life controversies which revealed the tensions between religious freedom and the secular state came to Ho's mind.

There was the hostile takeover of secular gender equality group Aware by a Christian faction in 2009, for example, and the overwhelming Christian opposition to Swedish black metal band Watain's concert that led to its cancellation in 2019.

Cognisant of how the themes of his play might be sensitive, Ho admits: "From the start, there was always – I wouldn't say hesitation, but caution about how a secular theatre company is going to do a



(From left) Playwright Lucas Ho's third full-length play will be co-directed by Checkpoint Theatre's joint artistic director Huzir Sulaiman and the latter's frequent collaborator Chen Yingxuan.

play that is set in a religious institution."

Over the course of the script's development, Checkpoint's joint artistic director Huzir Sulaiman cautioned Ho against turning his script into a historical drama.

But the reason Huzir, who is co-directing the show with frequent collaborator Chen Yingxuan, gave had less to do with avoiding controversy, and more with the fact that "the story is much richer than that".

Ho also emphasises that the play, while ostensibly about the role of religion in contemporary Singapore life, "is also about a married couple just trying to come to terms with who they have become individually and as a couple".

Neo and Lim, who have been married for 31 years and are popularly known online as The NeoKeLeLims, were the perfect actors to tackle the roles with a certain "frisson".

Lim says: "(Sweet Lin and I) have also been through the deepest despair, (asking) how can we be put through this and can we take any more of this? From that point of view, we quite understand what is going on in Tender Submission."

Central to the play, he says, is "the idea of shocking each other in a long-term relationship like a marriage" and how "there are certain surprises from which you don't know when you will recover from, which you don't know whether you can take and how you would react".

Even as the religious context frames this play, Tender Submission will attend to the intimate human drama of middle-class Singaporean life and relationships that has become something of a signature for Checkpoint's productions.

Distilling the essence of this provocative play into a more universal point, Ho says Tender Submission poses the question: "How do you accept people who fundamentally have a different world view from you?"

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• The show is sold out. Those who wish to support Checkpoint Theatre in telling original Singapore stories can go to str.sg/i85

# Worthy wartime pioneer stories constrained by musical genre

## THEATRE UNFORGOTTEN THE MUSICAL

Musical Theatre Limited  
Drama Centre Theatre  
Last Friday

Shawn Ho

It was always going to be a challenge to tell the story of a therapy group through a musical.

The setting is either too meek for the genre's extravagance, or the trauma is too serious for song and dance.

Both are true in Unforgotten The Musical, which is a pity because



## UNFORGOTTEN THE MUSICAL

WHERE Drama Centre Theatre, 03-01, 100 Victoria Street  
WHEN Till Aug 5, 7:30pm (excluding Sundays and Mondays)  
ADMISSION \$45, \$60 and \$80  
INFO www.sistic.com.sg/events/unforgotten0823

Unforgotten The Musical features a doctor who tries to get six seniors to open up about their experiences of the Japanese Occupation. PHOTO: NUR AIN ADILAH SULAIMI

circle. His companions, too, do not just sit and listen but actively participate in his storytelling.

At other moments, the music distracts from the intimacy of the storytelling – although there are exceptions, such as Time Is A Jukebox, a medley of wartime melodies that shows how music can serve as a mnemonic device.

With a sextet, the stories sprawl, segue and sidetrack – offering the audience a wide range of perspectives but fewer moments to truly stay with a character's inner turmoil and motivations.

The more interesting characters are the ones who are tight-lipped at the beginning – Ali and Seng Huat. These characters grow and endear with their capacity for change, and their inner conflict feels more convincing.

The strength of this musical is in how it uses the language and physicality of trauma and applies them to Singapore's survivors of the Japanese Occupation, something that has hardly been done in the stories told about this historical period. In this regard, it is a thought-provoking story.

But Unforgotten is ultimately constrained by the musical genre and sits too uncomfortably between intimacy and spectacle.

In the end, these worthy stories leave one craving for more, although it satisfies the itch for neither.

Jonathan Lim's script does construct a compelling drama about the reverberations of trauma on the psyche of Singapore's wartime pioneers decades after the Japanese surrender.

An adaptation of a novel by geriatric psychiatrist Kua Ee Heok, Unforgotten follows a young Dr Weng (Timothy Kua) in 1988 as he tries to convince six senior citizens at Kranji Home to open up about their war experiences.

Directed by Jeremiah Choy, the characterisation of these seniors is strong and distinct enough to make them an interesting bunch for an

intimate therapy group. There is the feisty Li Mei (Audrey Luo); the hot-and-cold Ali (Amin Alifin); the joker of the group, Joe de Souza (Rai Kanna); the reclusive and stuttering Seng Huat (Sugie Phua); the forgetful Lim (Leslie Tay); and the lively Rani (Rebekah Sangeetha Dorai).

The play is essentially an exploration of talk therapy. Encouraged by a wide-eyed doctor, theatregoers see the seniors embark on a transformative journey from silence to a hope that they can finally share their stories with the country.

The scene, set on top of Bukit Chandu itself, is powerful because it is one of the few scenes set away from the relatively static therapy