



# Treasured Islands

Discover hidden gems on an eco-friendly journey of Thailand's isles. BY KRISTY ALPERT

**AS I FLOATED** just above the water in a three-person sea canoe, I found myself grinning with every ripple and splash from the Andaman Sea. All around us rose clusters of towering karst islands lined with soft, sandy beaches and stacked high in dense jungle terrain. Each island was surrounded by a gently swelling sea of sapphire water that would act as the passageway for my excursion on John Gray's Sea Canoe guided tour through Thailand's most famous islands.

The scene was straight out of a movie, the rugged outcroppings reminding me of my favorite scenes from movies like *The*

*Man with the Golden Gun* and *Cutthroat Island*. I was drifting off into a daydream of shootouts and pirate chases when my guide yelled, "Get down!"

The command shook me awake just in time to realize we were heading straight for a hole no bigger than a manhole cover. I collapsed backward into the canoe seconds before the bow entered the small crevice. My breath echoed off the jagged rocks pointing only inches above my face as we glided through the narrow passageway, heading for a tiny emerald light that glimmered at the end of the tunnel. The cave opened up to an emerald lagoon where I spent the day swimming in chest-deep water, warming myself on a private beach and drifting back into my island fantasies.

It's no wonder the landscape of this part of Thailand inspired so many thrillers and action films. The islands teem with secret lagoons, clandestine caves and remote beaches begging to be discovered. Environmentalist and entrepreneur John Gray found many of the tidal rapids and hongs back in 1989, and today he leads

SERENITY AT SEA:  
*Canoeing in the waters  
off the Thai islands*

PHOTO: © KRISTY ALPERT

visitors on an eco-friendly journey that explores the hidden gems of the islands. His tours launch from one of the largest and most famous of the Thai islands, Phuket, just miles from the luxurious Sri Panwa resort.

Like many of the lagoons and private beaches that make the Thai islands unique, Sri Panwa is a treasure for kicking back in luxury. Despite the 52 villas, the hillside location and discreet white-glove service make guests feel they are the only residents on this perch overlooking the Andaman Sea. The resort spreads across 40 acres, and most villas offer uninterrupted sunset or sunrise views over the sea. A 40-foot infinity-edge swimming pool wraps around glass-enclosed bedrooms with sliding glass doors for easy access to the seductive waters.

With 10 restaurant experiences, guests can sample traditional Thai recipes at Baba Soul Food, dine hibachi-side on Japanese food at Baba Iki or try their hand at making Southern Thai recipes at the Baba Cooking School. The resort's crown jewel is the exclusive Baba Nest rooftop bar, featuring 360-degree panoramic views of the island and the surrounding sea and lined by an infinity-edge pool that magnifies the sunset for even more stunning views and pictures. The bar offers top-shelf spirits, wines and Champagnes; and with only 12 tables available per night, it's best to make a reservation at least one month in advance.

Phuket is the first pick for yachters or anyone looking to explore the other islands in the area, as it offers some of the best resorts and nightlife along with multitudes of boats ready to jettison visitors to the nearby islands of Racha, Maiton, Phi Phi, Coral, Lone and more in just 15–40 minutes.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand remains committed to social and environmental sustainability in long-term planning of hospitality and tourism development throughout the country. In the southern region, the Green Island Project seeks the active involvement of all tourism stakeholders to maintain the beauty and nature of this tropical paradise.

Thailand boasts more than 503 islands, each offering its own adventures and flavor. While the coconut tree-lined island of Koh Samui is famous for its coconut curries and cocktails (mixed with local rum from the Magic Alambic Rum Distillery), the fisherman-friendly shores of the Phi Phi Islands supply the ingredients for local dishes like *gaeng som pla*, a spicy and sour soup locals



make with fish fresh from the sea.

Fresh is an understatement when eating in Thailand, especially in the islands where most of the ingredients are grown locally or caught just hours before they wind up on the plate. Fresh fruit is abundant, and the islands are famous for tropical fruits like rambutan, custard apples, langsat and mangosteen. Mangos are a treat when in season, January to June, when they appear in everything

*Locals of the Thai islands like their dishes served two ways: spicy or really spicy. To opt for a more palatable version, order dishes 'mai phet,' meaning 'not spicy.'*

## LODGING

FOUR SEASONS RESORT  
KOH SAMUI THAILAND

This dreamy resort overlooks the Gulf of Siam, where guests spend the day adventuring around the waters before returning to luxuriate in the hotel's Secret Garden Spa.

219 Moo 5, Angthong, Koh Samui  
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SIX SENSES YAO NOI

Eco-friendly meets luxury at this retreat where the breakfast buffet features farm-fresh eggs from, quite possibly, Thailand's happiest chickens (the resort plays jazz to lighten the mood and improve their yolks).

56 Moo 5 Tambol, Koh Yao Noi, Amphur Koh Yao, Phang Nga  
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SRI PANWA

This family-owned and -managed resort features 52 villas and is home to the world-famous Baba Nest rooftop bar.

88 Moo 8, Sakdidej Road, Vichit, Muang, Phuket  
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COLORS OF NATURE:

*Thai cuisine (top); a coral reef, Racha Noi (middle); and an incredible violet sunset, Koh Samui*

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ISLAND LIFE:  
*Viking Cave with birds' nests, Koh Phi Phi Leh (top), and a hammock on Ko Yao Noi (bottom)*

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## INFO TO GO

International and domestic flights enter Krabi International Airport (KBV), Phuket International Airport (HKT) and Samui International Airport (USM). From there visitors can take small domestic charter planes, charter boats or resort shuttle boats to the smaller islands.

## DINING

### ACQUA RESTAURANT

European and Thai flavors fuse at this fine-dining restaurant on Ko Phi Phi Don. Try salmon steak served with lemongrass sauce.

125/18 Moo 7, Ao Nang, Krabi, Koh Phi Phi Don  
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### BABA SOUL FOOD

Enjoy traditional home-cooked Thai dishes served family-style in this relaxed yet chic setting inside the Sri Panwa resort.

Sri Panwa, 88 Moo 8, Sakdidej Road, Vichit, Muang, Phuket  
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### SILK RESTAURANT & BAR

This award-winning resort restaurant serves traditional Thai dishes and upscale Western staples in an elegant, modern setting.

Andara Resort and Villas, 15 Moo 6, Kamala Beach, Kathu, Phuket  
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from fresh mango smoothies to mango sticky rice desserts.

Although it's still open to debate as to which island produces the best *tom yam gung* (spicy prawn soup), what unites all the islands is an undying love for spicy food. Southern Thailand, especially the islands, is famous for its fiery curries and fresh fish dishes. The warm waters swim with multiple varieties of fish along with giant lobsters; plump crabs; fresh mussels; and an abundance of squid, prawns and scallops. Each takes its turn in the starring role in the aromatic and spicy dishes of the South.

Fishing is big business in the islands, where big game fishing trips depart regularly from the stocked shores of Phuket and anglers have free reign in the waters around Koh Samui. There record catches include a giant Mekong catfish weighting 210 pounds and an arapaima weighing 380 pounds. Koh Samui is also home to Fisherman's Village in Bophu and two of the most famous waterfalls in Thailand: Na Muang and Hin Lad.

Koh Chang, Thailand's second-largest island, incorporates more than 48 smaller islands off the east coast of the country in the Sea of Trat. Visitors flock to the western portion for easy access to shops, nightclubs and restaurants, but clued-in travelers know the island's true charm lives in the east, in the pristine shores and secluded coves of Zion Beach. But even these beaches can't compare with the stunning shoreline surrounding the Phi Phi Islands. Many films were born on this chain of six islands, using the famous Maya Bay Koh Phi Phi Leh as the setting for movies like *The Beach*, *Stealth* and *Cutthroat Island*. Phi Phi also features some of Thailand's most amazing caves, such as Viking Cave, a



popular swiftlet nest hunting ground (used in bird's nest soup, the nests fetch \$2,500 per kilo). On the walls of the cave you can see authentic drawings and markings of what resembles a Viking ship.

Anyone looking for a more immersive experience with the smaller islands can opt for a luxurious stay on a hideout like Ko Yao Noi, where the Six Senses Resort created a paradise on the hills of this petite island. This sustainability-focused resort not only re-mineralizes and purifies its own water on site (it recently opened a water bar), but it also grows produce for its restaurants and in-villa dining menus. It is working toward a zero waste rating.

The warmth of the Thai islands doesn't stop with its sunny beaches and balmy waters. The spicy food, hot nightlife and warm smiles from locals make this region of Thailand perfect for kicking back during a much-needed work vacation.