

36 Hours Phuket, Thailand



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN MOTT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

At the exclusive Amanpuri resort at Pansea Beach; elephant trekking near Khao Phra Thaeo Wildlife Sanctuary with Bang Pae Safari; on Viset Road in Rawai, a minibus outfitted with a bar.

By INGRID K. WILLIAMS

THE teardrop-shaped island of Phuket has long been known for its dazzling beaches and naughty night life. But for many, it was the catastrophic Asian tsunami in 2004 that finally placed Phuket on the map. Recovery has been swift, and in recent years the island has firmly reasserted itself as a premier beach resort in southern Thailand, with a growing crop of luxury hotels, top-notch restaurants and even a thriving art community.

Friday

4 p.m.

1 Paradise Lost

The beach town of Kamala was hit hard by the tsunami, but today the town has sprung back to life with renovated cottages that dot the hillside and beach bars along the promenade. Grab a crepe-like roti — this Thai version is filled with egg and fruit and topped with condensed milk — from the Chef Roti stand (near the Coconut Garden bungalows; banana roti, 30 baht, or 95 cents at 32 baht to the dollar), and stroll along Kamala's wide crescent of sandy beach, dipping your toes in the mesmerizingly clear water.

5:30 p.m.

2 Big Buddha Is Watching

Seek nirvana at the top of Mount Nagakerd, where an enormous, white jade marble-covered Buddha is close to completion. Follow the red-and-white signs from the town of Chalong pointing the way to the 147-foot-tall Big Buddha, officially known as Phraphutthamingmongkhon-akenagakhiri Buddha (mingmongkolphuket.com). Workers are still finishing the Buddha's big lotus seat, but already it's an impressive sight, with magnificent views of the Andaman Sea.

7 p.m.

3 Stall Tactics

Skip the tourist-filled beach restaurants and instead follow the locals inland to Phuket town and the night food market on Ong Sim Phai Road near the Robinson Department Store. A food market by day, it's a lively food court at night. Portable stalls and carts pull up to the curb, and a sea of plastic tables and chairs spills onto the street. Tasty Thai and Chinese dishes include spicy papaya salad, barbecued pork buns, coconut curry, grilled fish balls and, for dessert, sticky rice with mango. Having trouble deciding what to eat? Look for the stall with the longest line and join it. The whole meal, plus a couple of beers, shouldn't cost more than 200 baht.

9 p.m.

4 Kick Face, Win Prize

Thailand's national sport is brutal. In the ancient martial art of muay Thai, fighters pummel each other with fists, feet, elbows and knees. An authentic place to catch a fight is Suwit Stadium (15 Moo 1, Chaofa Road; 66-76-374-313; bestmuaythai.com), where ceremonial prefight dances and traditional music are reminders that this is more than just violent entertainment. Friday night fights start with a few pipsqueak bouts, so if you're opposed to watching oiled-up 10-year-olds duking it out in the ring, plan to arrive an hour late, around 9:30. Itching to get into the ring yourself? The stadium doubles as a gym and runs a training camp for aspiring fighters. Fight tickets start at 900 baht and include free transportation to and from the stadium.

Saturday

9 a.m.

5 Elephant Express

Start the day precariously perched on a pachyderm. Bang Pae Safari (12/3 Moo 5, T. Srisoonthorn Road; 66-76-311-163; phukettoday.com/bangpaesafari) offers elephant trekking excursions through shallow streams and groves of rubber trees. Midway through the trip, you can scramble down from your seat and take a turn in the mahout's spot, riding on the elephant's head. A 30-minute trek costs 900 baht per person, or 1,300 baht for an hour.

10:30 a.m.

6 Welcome to the Jungle

Next door is the Khao Phra Thaeo Wildlife Sanctuary (entry, 200 baht), where singsong gibbon calls lead you to the Gibbon Rehabilitation Project (gibbonproject.org), a nonprofit organization that works to return captured gibbons to their natural habitat. If you can pull yourself away from the adorable, acrobatic apes, hoof it a few minutes into the rain forest to Bang Pae



Waterfall and take a refreshing dip in the pool below.

1 p.m.

7 Mom's Cooking

Mom Luang Tridhosyut Devakul, better known as Mom Tri, is a local architect and entrepreneur who runs a growing empire of respected hotels and restaurants on Phuket. His latest restaurant, Mom Tri's Boathouse Regatta (63/302 Moo 2, Thepkasattri Road; 66-76-360-855; momtriphuket.com), is a breezy spot on the boardwalk of the

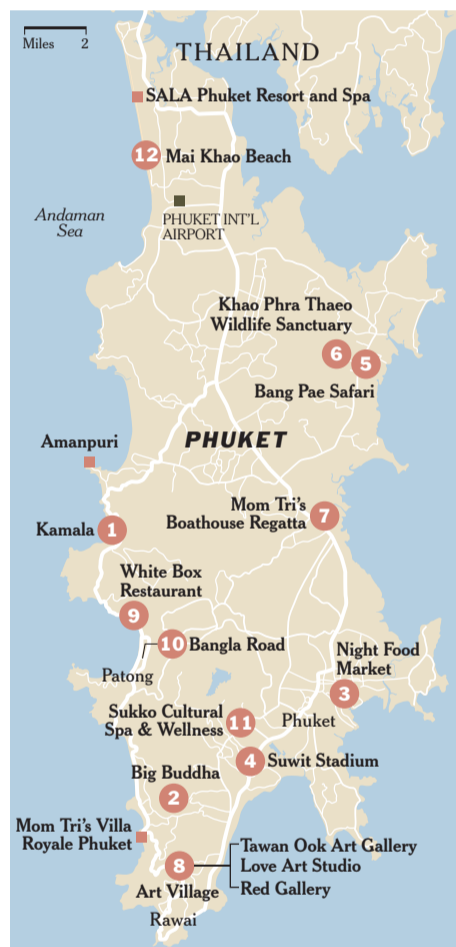
THE BASICS

Flights from the United States to Phuket require a connection. A recent online search for March found a Korean Air flight from Kennedy Airport, with a connection in Seoul, for \$1,179. Flights with two or more stops that connect through Bangkok can often be cheaper.

If you've got baht to burn, the Amanpuri (Pansea Beach; 66-76-324-333; amanresorts.com) is the place to set it aflame. For more than 20 years, the Amanpuri has been one of the most exclusive spots on the island, with 70 pavilions and private villas starting at \$925.

Farther north, the SALA Phuket Resort and Spa (333 Moo 3, Mai Khao; 66-76-338-888; salaresorts.com) opened in 2008 and is a serene hideaway with 79 rooms and villas — most with private pools — that start at 8,900 baht, about \$278 at 32 baht to the dollar.

Situated on the northern edge of Kata Noi beach, Mom Tri's Villa Royale Phuket (12 Kata Noi Road, Kata Noi Beach; 66-76-333-568; villaroyalephuket.com) is a boutique resort with 35 sumptuous, Thai-style suites from 12,500 baht.



THE NEW YORK TIMES

ONLINE: READERS' THOUGHTS

View a slide show of Phuket. Also, share your suggestions on where to stay, where to eat and what to do.

nytimes.com/travel/phuket

ceiling windows and an elegant terrace, White Box Restaurant (245/7 Prabaramee Road; 66-76-346-271; whiteboxphuket.com) has been a foodie favorite since opening two years ago on the rocky beach north of Patong. The menu is a mélange of Thai and Mediterranean flavors, and as the name implies, the design is sleek with white décor. Dinner with drinks for two is about 3,000 baht. After dinner, linger upstairs in the trendy open-air lounge sipping spicy Tom Yum martinis, made with vodka, galangal, lemon grass, kafir lime leaf and chili (280 baht).

11 p.m.

10 Beer on Wheels

Beer-soaked Bangla Road in Patong is Phuket night life at its brashest and seediest — a heaving crush of hostess bars, go-go clubs and "ladyboy" cabaret. But if that's not your thing, head south toward Rawai to the bright orange Volkswagen minibus parked along the right side of Viset Road, just past the Art Village. Customized with a bar, the minibus is a party on wheels that attracts a mix of locals, expatriates and sunburned Swedes sipping ice-cold Chang beers (35 baht).

Sunday

10 a.m.

11 Wake Up, Rub Down

Inexpensive massage parlors staffed by gaggles of young Thai girls are everywhere in Phuket. For a quick foot rub, these places will do just fine. But for a head-to-toe treat, go to the sprawling Sukko Cultural Spa & Wellness (5/10 Moo 3, Chaofa Road; 66-76-263-222; sukkospa.com). Book a traditional Thai massage, a method that incorporates acupressure and yoga-like poses to stretch your aching limbs into glorious submission (1,300 baht for 60 minutes).

Noon

12 Paradise Found

For miles of untouched golden sand all to yourself, head to the blissfully deserted Mai Khao Beach, part of Sirinat National Park, along Phuket's northwestern shore. Between the warm, cerulean water stretching out to the horizon and a backdrop of lush forests filled with palms, a wide swath of powdery sand sits tantalizingly undisturbed. So sling up a hammock and pretend that you're stranded on a deserted island for a few hours.

Royal Phuket Marina. The service is as polished as the colossal yachts docked out front, but the real star is the food. Recommendations include lobster ravioli with morel mushroom velouté (500 baht) and curried fried rice with seafood, pineapple and cashews (300 baht).

3 p.m.

8 Canvas Community

The laid-back village of Rawai, near the island's southern tip, has emerged as an enclave for talented local artists. Leading the way is the Red Gallery (66-8-7890-3722; phuketredgallery.com), where the artist Somrak Maneemai shows trippy paintings imbued with a whimsical dreaminess. The gallery recently relocated to the Art Village (88 Moo 1, Viset Road), joining a cluster of other small studios and galleries, like Tawan Ook Art Gallery (66-8-9471-5653; theloveartstudio.com). On an island inundated with mediocre imitation art, the originality of this bohemian art colony is refreshing.

7 p.m.

9 Box on the Rocks

With sweeping ocean views, floor-to-