



Sand, Sea, Sun and Fun



Amazing Thailand

Text & Images By Mike Smith



SAMUI

Mike Smith flew to Ko Samui to see if it really was the perfect place for sand, sea, sun and fun.

Landing in Koh Samui after royal treatment on a 1.5 hour flight on Bangkok Airways we were soon comfortably at home in the excellent Ozo Hotel on Chaweng Beach and ready to explore.

Koh Samui is the third largest island in Thailand at 280 square kms. It has a population of 50,000 but welcomes approximately 1 million visitors a year looking for sun and fun primarily on the long eastern beaches. The interior is tropical jungle and hills covered by millions of well-established coconut trees.

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CHAWENG

Chaweng is the longest and one of the most beautiful beaches on Samui. Lined by coconut trees it's quiet in the morning and fills up with sun worshippers as the day progresses. In the evening beach parties with music ranging from contemporary to reggae are plentiful. There are numerous beach activities including parasailing, jet skiing and the Aqua Park with its assorted floating slides and jumps to keep everyone amused.

It's easy to get distracted people watching, taking a massage or having an ice cold beer in Chaweng but for a break I wandered from the beach to the main street with its abundance of souvenir shops, pubs and restaurants. Chaweng Street has been rather thrown up but amidst the chaos are international standard resorts and good bars and restaurants. My two favourite restaurants are Tropical Murphy's and Wine Connection. Tropical Murphy's Irish Pub serves a wide selection local and international beers and food and caters to sports fans with large screen TV's. Wine Connection at the edge of Central Festival, the large new shopping mall, has great food and wine at very affordable prices.





Lamai

HUA THA- NON

HELLO MUMMY

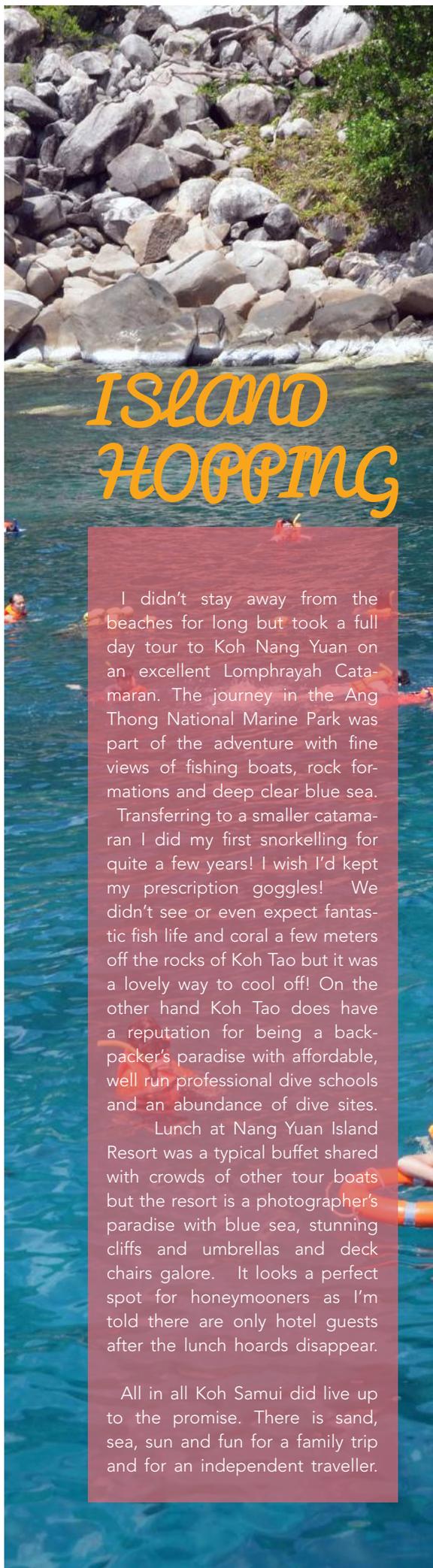
I started my tour of Lamai at the southern end. You don't need a fertile imagination to know why Hin Ta and Hin Yai or grandfather and grandmother rocks are so called. Hin Ta stands tall and proud in the morning light much to the amusement of admiring tourists, many of whom pose for creative photographs! Hi Yai is rather more subtle and nestles in the rocks at the water line. There is quite a collection of market stalls at the rocks selling souvenirs and snacks including the delicious caramel Thai sweet galamae.

I like Lamai Beach and walked the whole length from Hin Ta and Hin Yai but stopped first at Beluga Boutique Hotel for the best coffee on Samui and a fantastic view of the Ocean.

Lamai is less crowded than Chaweng but still has plenty to do, lots of accommodation, dining facilities and of course massage, bars and an abundance of eye candy.

There is much more to Koh Samui than the beaches if you have the time and inclination to explore. I took a cheap songthaew, or red mini bus, to Hua Thanon Muslim Village, one of the areas least affected by tourism. Do not believe the guide books that say it is a clean, beautiful, seaside fishing village. It isn't! It is a scruffy, run down, rural village with a dirty beach, a laid back fresh food market, a photogenic, colourfully painted fishing fleet, houses on stilts and a smell of drying fish which is full of character and well worth the visit! Buffalos, goats and chickens roam around the rural area at the end of the village and naturally there is a very attractive mosque, the only one on Samui, to cater to the residents.

For something that's totally off the wall continue south of Hua Thanon to Wat Khunaram. It's nothing special visually except that it contains the body of Samui's most famous mummified monk (yes there are others on the island!). He sits 40 years after his death in his orange robe and sun glasses in a specially built glass case and display room. Although a rather surprising memorial to me the mummified body of Luong Pordang is revered and a source of reflection for Thais on Buddha's teachings.



ISLAND HOPPING

I didn't stay away from the beaches for long but took a full day tour to Koh Nang Yuan on an excellent Lomphrayah Catamaran. The journey in the Ang Thong National Marine Park was part of the adventure with fine views of fishing boats, rock formations and deep clear blue sea.

Transferring to a smaller catamaran I did my first snorkelling for quite a few years! I wish I'd kept my prescription goggles! We didn't see or even expect fantastic fish life and coral a few meters off the rocks of Koh Tao but it was a lovely way to cool off! On the other hand Koh Tao does have a reputation for being a backpacker's paradise with affordable, well run professional dive schools and an abundance of dive sites.

Lunch at Nang Yuan Island Resort was a typical buffet shared with crowds of other tour boats but the resort is a photographer's paradise with blue sea, stunning cliffs and umbrellas and deck chairs galore. It looks a perfect spot for honeymooners as I'm told there are only hotel guests after the lunch hoards disappear.

All in all Koh Samui did live up to the promise. There is sand, sea, sun and fun for a family trip and for an independent traveller.



BIG BUDDHA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Singapore resident Mike Smith is a full time freelancer writer and photographer. He owns AsiaPhotoStock, a stock library featuring images of people, places and nature of Asia. His travel articles and photographs have appeared in numerous local and international magazines and his blog is widely read

As expected for a Buddhist country Samui has its fair share of temples and Buddha images. The Big Buddha on Koh Faan, reached by a causeway, is the most prominent. It is rather commercialised but enjoyable with good photo opportunities, particularly in the mornings. The nearby colourful Wat Plai Laem merits a visit too with an 18 armed Guanyin the Goddess of Mercy and a large, fat laughing Buddha.

To the east of Big Buddha is Bophut which has a great market on Friday nights at the Fisherman's Village and excellent places to wine and dine everyday too. The atmosphere is more refined than Chaweng and Lamai but expect to pay higher prices.

