

ISLAND OF DREAMS

The diary of an insomniac's jaunt though Phuket in search of a relaxing night's sleep. By Bill Barnett



“**W**ho are you sleeping with?” were the first words out of the mouth of my pleasant but somewhat stern looking doctor who was sitting across from me at her immaculately organised desk. Intimidated, dazed and a bit stunned, all I could respond with was, “Well I sleep around.” My mind raced to my wife who was waiting outside. I quickly backtracked. “Err, my work takes me on numerous business trips... almost every week. Travel is my life or perhaps more accurately my life is travel.”

You see, I have always had a problem sleeping. Even as a child, my parents would come into the living room at 3 am, startled to find me watching television. I've tried everything down the years—from counting sheep to listening to whale music—but to actually get a good night's sleep remains a rare event for me.

To cut a long story short, the doctor said, “I have exactly the thing for you. Get out of the city immediately. Find a place where you mind can be free, some sort of hideaway from all the stress, madness and chaos of day-to-day life.” Bingo, my moment of

LAP OF LUXURY
*Rosewood Phuket,
reputed to be the most
expensive resort ever
built on the island*



clarity. Time to head to Thailand's premier island getaway. Would I get a good night's sleep in Phuket?

Landing at the new Phuket International Airport is a considerable improvement on days gone by. Not only is there a spanking new terminal for overseas flights but the older domestic facility has also been remodelled, upgraded and modernised. Certainly there are teething problems but the bigger, better and larger version is very welcoming.

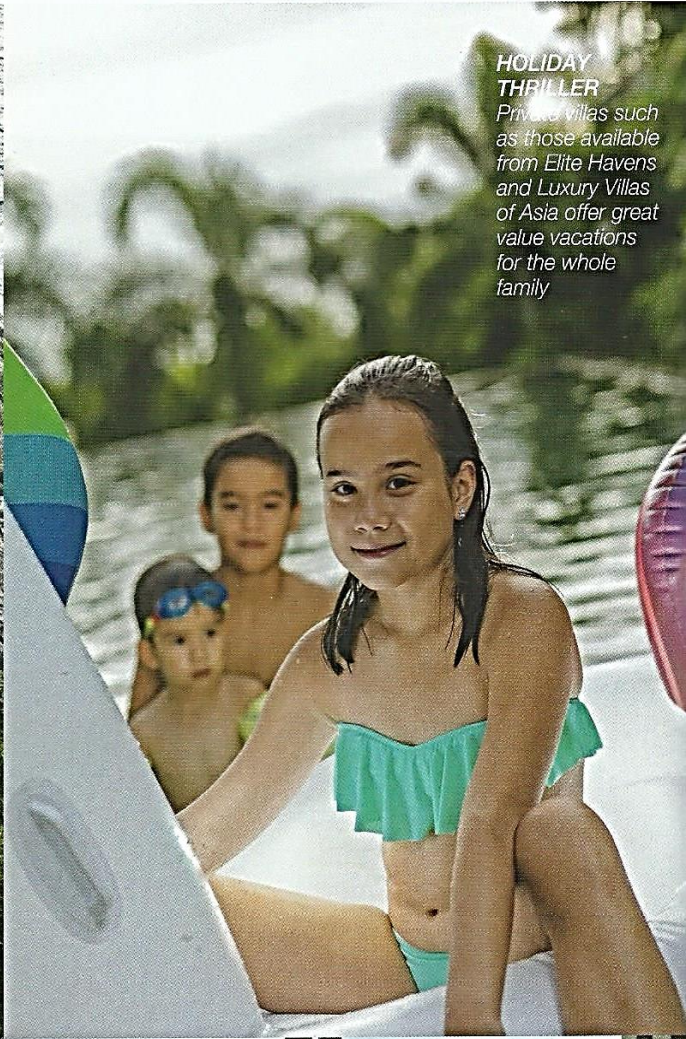
My quest for sleep first takes me down the island's west coast to the latest entry in the luxury

sweepstakes, the Rosewood Phuket. Reputed to be the most expensive resort ever built on the island and situated on an expansive white beach at Emerald bay, this 71-key property features a series of spectacular pool pavilions and villas. One of the impressive things about the resort's non-hotel approach to the interiors is that it gives the elegant feel of a home on one of those rich and famous shows from the Travel Channel. Creative design guru Steward Robinson of Melbourne-based BAR Studio poetically describes his inspiration for the Rosewood. "I hope guests will be impressed



**HOLIDAY
THRILLER**

Private villas such as those available from Elite Havens and Luxury Villas of Asia offer great value vacations for the whole family





PASTURES GREEN
*The scenic surroundings at
Ani Villas on Koh Yao Noi*

by the grandeur and scale of the resort but also feel a very personal connection to it through the sense of romance, sense of place and sense of the unexpected that intermingle in the design.”

Rosewood delivers me from my sleep demons for one night at least. Back on the road we stop for coffee in the Laguna area at one of the new offerings, Table Top Coffee, which serves up brews made with Chiang Mai beans from northern Thailand in a funky setting. Somehow crossing the panoramic Sarasin bridge to Phuket island and tracking the coast to Natai beach gives one a feeling of relaxation that no mantra or guru ever could. Over the years Natai has been described as the Hampton’s in a Phuket context with a number of million-dollar mega villas dotting the coast and a scattering of boutique hotels. Despite a Phang Nga address, the reality is that the area is closer to the gateway Phuket airport than the far tip of the island to the south.

Arriving at the Sino-Portuguese-styled Baba Beach Club in Natai, it is impressive to see how the latest creation of Thai hotelier Vorasit Issara has blended into the tropical landscape. Featuring Natai’s audacious long beach that seems to go on forever, Baba is a logical pairing with Vorasit’s other Phuket baby, the top-end chic villa resort of Sri Panwa. For the coming high season Baba offers a very cool beach club and a bespoke set of villas and suites. Here it is

possible to be lulled to sleep by the sound of waves lapping on the Andaman shoreline. It is one of many reasons to be enamored with the Natai experience.

My next sleepover is at the private hotel Ani Villas on Koh Yao Noi. Phang Nga bay is best known for its connection to that James Bond movie. The Ani Villas collection is an impressive set of properties that range from Thailand to Sri Lanka, into the Caribbean and soon the Dominican Republic. It is easy to imagine yourself in a Bond movie at this 10-bedroom exclusive property as you wander around the spacious grounds, indulge in some pampering at the in-house spa and wind down in the highly stylised yoga pavilion. In fact, it doesn’t get any better than a private hotel holiday and Ani Villas certainly provides a boatload of inspiration at every turn. It is a wrench to leave this incredible place and return to the arduous ongoing search for the ultimate sleep.

Of course the reality of Asia’s beach destinations is one of increasing crowds and sprawling development. Phuket’s impressive stable of luxury offerings is world class but how are hoteliers coping with a mass tourism footprint? Expert on the subject is Anthony Lark, general manager of Trisara and president of the recently established Phuket Hotels Association. With over 60 member properties on the island, he shares a mission with beach cleaning and environmental initiatives at the heart of the association’s work.

EASY DOES IT
A stay in a private villa means total privacy, fantastic views and often added services such as a butler and private massage



“One of the most important tasks at the PHA is implementing our environmental strategies. A team of passionate environmental-leaning general managers directs numerous projects including island-wide beach cleanups. We also support member hotels in their efforts to offer guests a plastic-free experience. In

addition, we are hosting a sustainability fair that will introduce hoteliers to companies that produce green products and technologies that reduce energy consumption—biodegradable supplies and even systems to manage mosquitoes without chemicals,” Lark says. It is certainly good to see Phuket hoteliers understand the importance of putting back instead of simply taking from the all-important natural attributes of this island paradise.

With darkness comes the eventual need for sleep, but one of Phuket’s best-selling points is the freedom of getting out of cookie cutter hotels, escaping the confines of the virtual box and taking the bold step into the more personal stylised world of villa rentals. These are properties with a serious wow factor and the man to talk to about them is Ian Macaulay from Luxury Villas of Asia. He has this advice: “Take a villa that comes with a dedicated chef. Amazing meals where you pick the menu is part of the personalised experience offered. While there are exceptions, a villa run by a company [on behalf of its owners] is normally better than an independent as they have more resources and that is what they do for a living. Check reviews before you book. Book a car and driver for your stay if your villa doesn’t have one included. The more bedrooms it has the better value for money. When you have your own luxury home for



HERITAGE HOME
The Sino-Portuguese-style
Baba Beach Club at Natai



CREATIVE TASTES
The restaurant at Baba
Beach Club

a vacation don't forget about all the other services that can be provided: in-villa yoga sessions, learning the basics of scuba diving in the pool, nannies to look after your children and many more." As for an insider's recommendation this season, Macaulay says, "It doesn't get any better than the The Aquila with seven bedrooms and 165 metres of ocean frontage at Kamala's Waterfall Cove Estate."

With the dark side of the moon headed my way, the warm glowing lights of my villa for the night at Malaiwana at Nai Thon beach beckon. There is something to this whole villa experience that has taken me away from the sameness of hotel check-in processes and those tired old toxic welcome drinks and stained cold towels. Wanting to know more about it, I call Jon Stoneham from Elite Havens for his view on the shifting tide of new accommodation models. He starts out by saying, "In some ways nothing has changed, just more people are appreciating and accessing what we at Elite Havens have been doing for nearly 20 years. The luxury of privacy, the luxury of space, the luxury of flexibility and the luxury of personalisation, all at great prices. Ten years ago it was good enough to have a great property—now there are many wow houses available. Five years ago it was enough to have a great property with superb staff—chef, butler, driver, personal concierge

(manager). Now this is a given and people want experiences—to learn to cook with the chef, to visit the local villages with the manager, to find those secret off-the-road experiences not reached by the mass market. That said it is amazing how many people don't leave our villas. Why would you when you have world-class food, facilities any hotel would be proud of and a staff to make sure everyone—mum, dad and the kids—gets a break. When you compare our villas with an equivalent hotel, the value is superb."

Days in paradise tend to blur in a lovely sensation of absolute relaxation. For my final night I have one more treat, a stay at the legendary Phuket hotel The Boathouse in Kata, where once again the peaceful sound of the ocean is audible from my suite. The hotel was purchased by Singapore's HPL Group and its 39 rooms and suites were all upgraded. Now it is managed by HPL's Boutique Collection. Small is beautiful here and with outstanding dining options and a world-class makeover it easy to see why The Boathouse remains an island stalwart.

Waking up on my last day in Phuket I was tempted to call in sick and stay another day or maybe even a week. The big sleep will come soon enough and life is too short to miss those exotic moments that keep getting better on this most restful and luxurious of Thailand's holiday islands. ❶