



# BEACHES AND BEYOND

Phuket's new groove

SUSAN SKELLY

It might be southern Thailand, not New York, but there's Broadway-like nervous energy in the air as technicians at Twinpalms MontAzure conduct a sound-check for its grand opening. Against the backdrop of Kamala Beach, one of Phuket's luxe west-coast playgrounds, the guitarist tunes his pink Fender Stratocaster, the saxophonist riffs on Dream a Little Dream of Me, and the exquisite voice of Thai mezzo-soprano Duangpon "Pui" Pongphasuk dances on the late-afternoon breeze.

Each of the three balconies of the Martin Palleros-designed Azure Seaview Penthouse provides a bird's-eye view of guests who arrive at the same time as the streaky pink sunset, inspired by the dress code Tropical Chic (think: heels and eyelashes on steroids). Among the dignitaries are the Vice-Governor of Phuket province and a posse of VIPs.

Twinpalms MontAzure, named for jungle-clad mountains behind and blue sea in front, is first cab off the rank in a 72ha, \$100m development. It includes a beach club, upmarket retirement living and posh low-rise lakeside apartments designed by Bangkok architects SODA, plus another top-drawer hotel, all snuggling up to a 200-year-old tropical mountain forest.

It's a coveted stretch of beach, part of the so-called Millionaire's Mile. Sand-sweepers in gleaming white shorts and polo shirts make things nice before breakfast. During my late-June visit, the breakers are bouncing ashore under a brooding sky. The wet season is May to November and the surf's up. From November to April, the seas are glassy calm and more suited to snorkelling and swimming.

Within half an hour of checking in, staff have asked whether my guestroom should be scented with lemongrass, ylang ylang or sandalwood incense, and is my preference for lotus, jasmine or white orchids on the coffee table? A member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World portfolio, Twinpalms MontAzure features 46 suites, ranging in size from 70 to 300sq m, many with terraces, a private lap pool and day beds shaded by frangipani.

It shares the spacious and airy ambience of its established sibling property, Twinpalms Phuket at Surin Beach, five minutes away. The consistent look is all pale veneers, raw concrete and treated pine that will age to the silver sheen of casuarinas. An imposing entranceway has walls of pebbled rock, slate tiles and dove-grey pavers. Apart from the many private lap pools, the new resort has two larger options, one an infinity-edge style with daybeds to wade to; there's also a library,



fitness studio and boutique. The hub is Shimmer, a beachfront gathering place that serves elegant Thai-centric cuisine, cocktails, fresh juices and fine wines.

The new property feeds into a kind of Twinpalms diaspora. Shuttle vans connect both properties to Bang Tao Beach, where guests have the choice of several playgrounds, from the newly relocated Catch Beach Club, with its abundant buffet and pumping nightlife, plus the action-packed family hang-out Catch Junior, to the theatrical Palm Seaside Restaurant, with marble walkways, water and fire features, and sunken tables. But you can still find plenty of old-style Phuket romance. A round of muay thai boxing, yoga on the beach, cooking class, personal trainer workout, secluded beach drop-off, or a day cruise around the emerald islands of Phang Nga Bay? Just ask the front desk insiders.

Out and about? Guests are encouraged to

Clockwise from main: Twinpalms MontAzure, Phuket; Grand Azure private pool suite; Phuket Elephant Sanctuary; Phang Nga Bay

## MORE TO THE STORY

Phuket is on a roll. The international airport has undergone a multi-billion-baht expansion and renovation, boosting capacity to 12.5 million passengers a year. The 45-minute drive south from the terminal reveals much felling, clearing and building and evidence of long-overdue infrastructure, such as roads being widened, concrete barriers, the shoring up of riverbanks and new street drainage. There's another airport under development beyond the Sarasin Bridge to the north, due to be completed by 2025, and an estimated 33 hotels are slated to open in Phuket between now and 2023.

look for ethical tourism enterprises that do not exploit captive animals such as elephants, tigers, crocodiles or dolphins. One of the island's most impressive is the Phuket Elephant Sanctuary, which rescues animals that have been overworked or injured in riding camps, circuses or while lugging logs. Essentially, it's rehab for elephants.

The sanctuary was established in 2016 by Montri Todtane, impressed by the work of Chiang Mai animal activist Sangduen "Lek" Cahailert, founder of the Elephant Nature Park. When I visit, there are nine elephants; there were a dozen but three have died from natural causes. Often they are quite old, with an average age of 70, when they are taken in.

Todtane negotiates with owners to buy elephants that need rescuing — funds come from the sanctuary entry fee. His lush, landscaped tract of the Khao Phra Thaeo National Park, in Phuket's northeast, is a fine place to

Phuket's most sought-after beaches are on the west coast but Bill Barnett, managing director of C9 Hotelworks consultancy, says Phang Nga Bay on the northeast coast is increasingly on the radar. "The natural beauty of the area is stunning [but] it's niche products such as Thanyapura Health & Sports Resort, with its sport training and wellness offerings, and the upcoming Blue Tree family adventure destination [that indicate] travellers' tastes are changing." He also mentions Central Festival luxury mall, on the Bypass Road in Phuket town, as being "comparable to anything you'd find internationally" and the new Rosewood property at Patong Bay, a multi-million-dollar development "that spans of luxe".

## IN THE KNOW

Suites at Twinpalms MontAzure start from \$762 a night, depending on season and style, including breakfast, 10 per cent service charge and taxes. In advance, request Twinpalms MontAzure to book a VIP Welcome Fast Track Immigration Service at Phuket International Airport. You'll be met just off the air-bridge and whisked through immigration in double-quick time by a customer service agent and into a waiting transfer vehicle. It costs 1250 baht (\$60.60) one way or double for return. Once checked in, banish jetlag with a massage by the pool, or one of the Sun Spa's signature treatments, such as the Cellular Lift Qi Gong Facial or an Energy Rebalance Massage.

■ [twinpalms-montazure.com](http://twinpalms-montazure.com)

■ [slh.com](http://slh.com)

■ [phuketelephantsanctuary.org](http://phuketelephantsanctuary.org)

■ [phuketpearl.com](http://phuketpearl.com)

be pensioned off, with waterfalls, trees, mud to roll in, lakes to swim in, and a healthy diet. Guests don socks and gumboots and watch a film about the genesis of the project before heading off to meet the elephants.

A kilometre off Coconut Island (Maprao) on Phuket's east coast, accessible by long-tail boat from Laem Hin Pier, is a pearl farm that's been operating for 43 years. Take a half-day guided tour of this family enterprise and learn about the growing, seeding, cleaning, harvesting and design processes. Back at the showroom and shop, it becomes clear that the pearls' highest calling is to adorn beauty pageant crowns. In display cases are the exquisitely ornate commissions for four Miss World events, including Miss World Australia 2017, which pays homage to the Sydney Opera House and Harbour Bridge.

I also head east from Kamala in a van, its ceiling glossy with painted cherubs, bound for Phuket city. Notable architecture in the Old Town includes the colourful, century-old Sino-Portuguese shophouses in Soi Romanee. A leisurely stroll beyond yields mansions, museums, cafes, shrines and temples.

The Phuket Walking Market, centred on Thalang Road, transforms the town from 4pm-10pm on Sundays. Look for the dude selling mojitos, pick up a Panama hat, buy a bagful of dim sum, scoop up Phuket porcelain. My group winds up at the Michelin Guide-listed Tu Kab Khao (8 Phang Nga Road) where, beneath portraits of Thailand's Royal Family, we eat crab omelette, slow-cooked pork, satays, prawns and green salads. To drink? A vodka-peach refresher from an extensive cocktail list. It's called Miss Phuket.

Susan Skelly was a guest of Twinpalms MontAzure.