

Thailand

Ko Samui & Lower Gulf (Chapter)

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Coverage includes: Gulf Islands, Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan, Ko Tao, Ang Thong Marine National Park, Surat Thani Province, Surat Thani, Ao Khanom, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Songkhla & Around, Hat Yai, Deep South, Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat and Sungai Kolok.

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Why Go?

The Lower Gulf features Thailand's ultimate island trifecta: Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Tao. This family of spectacular islands lures millions of tourists every year with their powder-soft sands and emerald waters. Ko Samui is the oldest brother, with a business-minded attitude towards vacation. High-class resorts operate with Swiss efficiency as uniformed butlers cater to every whim. Ko Pha-Ngan is the slacker middle child with tangled dreadlocks and a penchant for hammock-lazing and all-night parties. Baby Ko Tao has plenty of spirit and spunk – offering high-adrenaline activities, including world-class diving and snorkelling.

Travellers seeking something a bit more off the radar than these island brethren will find a thin archipelago of pin-sized islets just beyond. Known as Ang Thong Marine National Park, this ethereal realm of greens and blues offers some of the most picture-perfect moments in the entire kingdom.

When To Go

From February to April celebrate endless sunshine after the monsoon rains have cleared. From June to August – which conveniently coincides with the Northern Hemisphere's summer holidays – are some of the most inviting months in the region, with relatively short drizzle spells.

From October to December torrential monsoon rains rattle hot-tin roofs like anxious fingernails, as room rates drop significantly to lure a few optimistic beach-goers

Ko Samui & the Lower Gulf Highlights

- 1 Find Nemo in the technicolour kingdom off the coast of **Ko Tao** (p571).
- 2 Dimple virgin sands on the hidden beach-blonde beaches of **Ang Thong Marine National Park** (p586).
- 3 String up a cotton hammock and toe the curline tide along a secluded beach on **Ko Pha-Ngan** (p556).
- 4 Purr like a kitten during a five-star massage session on **Ko Samui** (p538).
- 5 Join the masses of party pilgrims and trace the night away at the **Full Moon Party** (see boxed text, p558) in Hat Rin on Ko Pha-Ngan





6 Savour steaming street-stall seafood on the sands of **Songkhia** (p593)

7 Spot elusive pink dolphins gliding along the shores of **Ao Khanom** (p589)

GULF ISLANDS

Ko Samui

เกาะสมุย

POP 40,230

At first glance, Ko Samui could be mistaken for a giant golf course floating in the Gulf of Thailand. The greens are perfectly manicured, sand traps are plentiful, and there's a water hazard or two thrown in for good measure. Middle-aged men strut about donning white polo shirts that contrast with their cherry-red faces, while hired lackeys carry around their stuff. But Samui is far from being an adults-only country club – a closer look reveals steaming street-side food stalls, 2am jetsetter parties, secreted Buddhist temples, and backpacker shanties plunked down on a quiet stretch of sand.

Ko Samui is very much a choose-your-own-adventure kinda place that strives, like a genie, to grant every visitor their ultimate holiday wish. You want ocean views, daily massages and personal butlers? Poof – here are the keys to your private poolside villa. It's a holistic aura-cleansing vacation you're after? Shazam – take a seat on your yoga mat before your afternoon colonic. Wanna party like a rockstar? Pow – trance your way down the beach with the throngs of whisky-bucket-toting tourists.

Beyond the merry-making machine, the island also offers interested visitors a glimpse into local life. Chinese merchants

from Hainan Island initially settled Samui and today these unique roots have blossomed into a small community that remains hidden beneath the glossy holiday veneer.

Sights

Ko Samui is quite large – the island's ring road is almost 100km total.

Chaweng

BEACH

(Map p540) This is Ko Samui's most popular spot – it's the longest and most beautiful beach on the island. The sand is powder soft, and the water is surprisingly clear, considering the number of boats and bathers. Picture ops are best from the southern part of the beach, with stunning views of the hilly headland to the north.

Hin-Ta & Hin-Yai

LANDMARK

At the south end of **Lamai**, the second-largest beach, you'll find these infamous stone formations (also known as Grandfather and Grandmother Rocks). These rocks, shaped like genitalia provide endless mirth to giggling Thai tourists.

Hua Thanon

NEIGHBOURHOOD

Just beyond Lamai, Hua Thanon is home to a vibrant Muslim community, and its anchorage of high-bowed fishing vessels is a veritable gallery of intricate designs.

Bo Phut

NEIGHBOURHOOD

(Map p542) Although the **northern beaches** have coarser sand and aren't as striking as

GULF ISLANDS IN...

ONE WEEK

First, shed a single tear that you have but one week to explore these idyllic islands. Then start on one of Ko Pha-Ngan's secluded beaches in the west or east to live out your ultimate castaway fantasies. For the second half of the week choose between partying in Hat Rin, pampering over on Ko Samui, or diving on li'l Ko Tao.

TWO WEEKS

Start on Ko Tao with a 3½-day Open Water certification course (or, if you already have your diving licence, sign up for a few fun dives). Slide over to Ko Pha-Ngan and soak up the sociable vibe in party-prone Hat Rin. Then, grab a long-tail and your luggage and make your way to one of the island's hidden coves for a few days of detoxing and quiet contemplation. Ko Samui is next on the agenda. Try Bo Phut for boutique sleeps, or live it up like a rock star on Chaweng or Choeng Mon beach. And, if you have time, do a day trip to Ang Thong Marine National Park.

ONE MONTH

Follow the two-week itinerary at a more relaxed pace, infusing many extra beach-book-and-blanket days on all three islands. Be sure to plan your schedule around the Full Moon Party, which takes place at Hat Rin's Sunrise Beach on Ko Pha-Ngan.

Ko Samui



the beaches in the east, they have a laid-back vibe and stellar views of Ko Pha-Ngan. Bo Phut stands out with its charming Fisherman's Village; a collection of narrow Chinese shophouses that have been transformed into trendy resorts and boutique hotels.

Nam Tok Na Muang

WATERFALL

(Map p539) At 30m, this is the tallest waterfall on Samui and lies in the centre of the island about 12km from Na Thon. The water cascades over ethereal purple rocks, and there's a great pool for swimming at the base. This is the most scenic – and somewhat less frequented – of Samui's falls. There are two other waterfalls in the vicinity: a smaller waterfall called **Na Muang 2**, and, thanks to recently improved road conditions, the high drop at **Nam Tok Wang Saotong** (Map p539). These chutes are situated just north of the ring road near Hua Thanon.

Wat Hin Lat

TEMPLE

(Map p539; ☎0 7742 3146) On the western part of Samui, near the waterfalls of the same name, is a meditation temple that teaches daily *vipassana* courses.

Nam Tok Hin Lat

WATERFALL

(Map p539) Near Na Thon, this is worth visiting if you have an afternoon to kill before taking a boat back to the mainland. After a mildly strenuous hike over streams and boulders, reward yourself with a dip in the pool at the bottom of the falls. Keep an eye out for the Buddhist temple that posts signs with spiritual words of moral guidance and enlightenment. Sturdy shoes are recommended.

Wat Laem Saw

TEMPLE

(Map p539) For temple enthusiasts, Wat Laem Saw, at the southern end of Samui near Ban Phang Ka, has an interesting, highly venerated old Srivijaya-style stupa.

Hat Chaweng



Wat Phra Yai

TEMPLE

(Temple of the Big Buddha; Map p539) At Samui's northern end, on a small rocky island linked by a causeway, is Wat Phra Yai. Erected in 1972, the modern Buddha (sitting in the Mara posture) stands 15m high and makes an alluring silhouette against the tropical sky and sea. Nearby, a new temple, **Wat Plai Laem** (Map p539), features an enormous 18-armed Buddha.

Wat Khunaram

TEMPLE

(Map p539) Several temples have the mummified remains of pious monks, including

Wak Khunaram, which is south of Rte 4169 between Th Ban Thurian and Th Ban Hua. Its monk, Luang Phaw Daeng, has been dead for over two decades but his corpse is preserved sitting in a meditative pose and sporting a pair of sunglasses.

Wat Samret

TEMPLE

(Map p539) At Wat Samret, near Th Ban Hua, you can see a typical Mandalay sitting Buddha carved from solid marble – a common sight in India and northern Thailand, but not so common in the south.

Hat Chaweng

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 1 Blue Stars B3
- 2 Diveversity C2
- 3 Samui Institute of Thai
Culinary Arts B4
- 4 Samui Planet Scuba B3

Sleeping

- 5 Akwa B5
- 6 Ark Bar C3
- 7 Baan Chaweng Beach
Resort B3
- 8 Baan Haad Ngam D2
- 9 Baan Samui B3
- 10 Centara Grand B4
- 11 Chaweng Garden Beach B3
- 12 Kirikayan Boutique
Resort B5
- 13 Library B3
- 14 Loft Samui B4
- 15 Lucky Mother C3
- 16 Muang Kulay Pan Hotel C2
- 17 Nora Chaweng C2
- 18 P Chaweng B4
- 19 Pandora Boutique Hotel D2
- 20 Queen Boutique Resort B4
- 21 Samui Hostel B4

- 22 Tango Beach Resort D2

Eating

- 23 Betelnut@Buri Rasa B4
- 24 Gringo's Cantina B3
- 25 Khaosan Restaurant &
Bakery B3
- 26 Laem Din Market B4
Page (see 13)
- 27 Prego C2
Samui Institute of Thai
Culinary Arts (see 3)
- 28 Wave Samui B4
- 29 Zico's B4

Drinking

- Ark Bar (see 6)
- 30 Bar Solo C3
- 31 Good Karma B5
- 32 Tropical Murphy's B3

Entertainment

- 33 Christy's Cabaret C2
- 34 Green Mango B3
- 35 Mint B3
- 36 Q-Bar B2
- 37 Reggae Pub B3



Activities

Diving

If you're serious about diving, head to Ko Tao and base yourself there for the duration of your diving adventure. If you're short on time and don't want to leave Samui, there are plenty of operators who will take you to the same dive sites (at a greater fee, of course). Try to book with a company that has its own boat (or leases a boat) – it's slightly more expensive, but you'll be glad you did it. Companies without boats often shuttle divers on the passenger catamaran to Ko Tao, where you board a second boat to reach your dive site. These trips are arduous, meal-less and rather impersonal.

Certification courses tend to be twice as expensive on Ko Samui as they are on Ko Tao, this is largely due to use of extra petrol, since tiny Tao is significantly closer to the preferred diving locations. You'll drop between 16,000B and 22,000B on an Open Water certification, and figure between 3200B and 6200B for a diving day trip depending on the location of the site.

Ko Samui's hyperbaric chamber is at Big Buddha Beach (Hat Bang Rak).

100 Degrees East

DIVING

(☎0 7742 5936; www.100degreeseast.com; Bang Rak) Highly recommended.

Diveversity

DIVING

(Map p540; ☎0 7741 3196; www.diveversity.nl; Hat Chaweng) Based at the Amari Hotel.

Samui Planet Scuba

DIVING

(SIDS; Map p540; ☎0 7723 1606; samuiplanet.scuba@planetsscuba.net; Hat Chaweng)

Other Activities

Blue Stars

KAYAKING, SNORKELLING

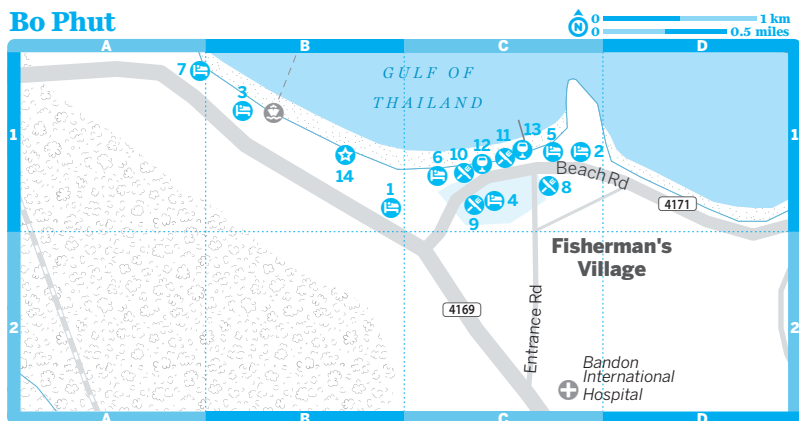
(Map p540; ☎0 7741 3231; www.bluestars.info; trips 2600B) For those interested in snorkelling and kayaking, book a day trip to the stunning Ang Thong Marine Park. Blue Stars, based in Hat Chaweng on Ko Samui, offers guided sea-kayak trips in the park.

Football Golf

SPORT

(☎08 9771 7498; ☎9am-6.30pm) At Choeng Mon there's a strange combustion called 'football golf' where you 'putt' your football

Bo Phut



Bo Phut

Sleeping

- 1 Anantara B1
 2 B1 Villa Spa C1
 3 Ibis Bo Phut B1
 4 Khuntai C1
 5 L'Hacienda C1
 6 Lodge C1
 7 Zazen A1

Eating

- 8 Karma Sutra C1

- 9 Shack Bar & Grill C1
 10 Starfish & Coffee C1
 11 Villa Bianca C1
 Zazen (see 7)

Drinking

- 12 Billabong Surf Club C1
 13 Pier C1

Entertainment

- 14 Gecko Village B1

into a rubbish-bin-sized hole. It's great for the kids and each game (300B) comes with a complimentary soft drink. It's a par 66.

Namuang Safari Park

THEME PARK

(Map p539; ☎ 0 7742 4098) Located near Na Muang Falls, Namuang has safari options and packages galore. Adventure tours (from 900B) vary in length and can include elephant trekking, monkey shows, 4WD rides and even a visit to a rubber plantation to drain the trees (now that's excitement). Prices include hotel transfer.

Samui Aquarium & Tiger Zoo

THEME PARK

(Map p539; ☎ 0 7742 4017; adult/child 750/450B; ☀ 9am-6pm) The Samui Aquarium & Tiger Zoo features the standard array aquariums and tigers, as well as a large aviary. It's a pleasant diversion for the kids, though some of the cages and tanks are noticeably rundown. The tiger show is at 2.30pm and the sea lion spectacle starts at 1.30pm. The

admission includes the use of the large on-site swimming pool.

Spas & Yoga

Competition for Samui's five-star accommodation is fierce, which means that the spas are of the highest calibre. For top-notch pampering, try the spa at Anantara Bo Phut, or the Hideaway Spa at the Six Senses Samui. The Spa Resort in Lamai is the island's original health destination, and is still known for its effective 'clean me out' fasting regime.

Yoga Thailand

YOGA & SPA

(☎ 0 7792 0090; www.yoga-thailand.com; Phang Ka; retreats from €680; ✿@☎) Secreted away along the southern shores, Yoga Thailand is ushering in a new era of therapeutic holidaying with its state-of-the-art facilities and dedicated team of trainers. Accommodation is located in a comfy apartment block up the street while yoga studios, wellness centres and a breezy cafe sit calmly along the shore.

Tamarind Retreat

THAI MASSAGE

(☎ 07723 0571; www.tamarindretreat.com) Tucked far away from the beach within a silent coconut-palm plantation, Tamarind's small collection of villas and massage studios is seamlessly incorporated into nature: some have granite boulders built into walls and floors, others offer private ponds or creative outdoor baths.

Health Oasis Resort

YOGA & SPA

(☎ 07742 0124; www.healthoasisresort.com) If you're lookin' to get 'cleansed', whether it's your aura or your colon, then you've happened upon the right place. New Age is all the rage at the Health Oasis. Guests can choose from a variety of healing packages involving everything from meditation to fasting. Bungalows are modern and receive plenty of sunshine. There's also a vegetarian restaurant on site, of course.

Absolute Sanctuary

YOGA & SPA

(☎ 07760 1190; www.absoluteyogasamui.com) What was once a friendly yoga studio has blossomed into a gargantuan wellness complex featuring plenty of accommodation and an exhaustive menu of detox and wellness programs.



Courses

Samui Institute of Thai Culinary Arts

COOKING

(SITCA; Map p540; ☎ 07741 3434; www.sitca.net; Hat Chaweng) If you're contemplating a Thai cooking course, SITCA is the place to do it. It has daily Thai-cooking classes and courses in the aristocratic Thai art of carving fruits and vegetables into intricate floral designs. Lunchtime classes begin at 11am, while dinner starts at 4pm (both cost 1950B for a three-hour course with three or more dishes). Included is an excellent tutorial about procuring ingredients in your home country. Of course you get to eat your projects, and even invite a friend along for the meal. Complimentary DVDs with Thai cooking instruction are also available so you can practise at home.



Sleeping

'Superior', 'standard', 'deluxe', 'standard deluxe', 'deluxe superior', 'superior standard' – what does it all mean? Trying to decode Samui's obnoxious hotel lingo is like trying to decipher the ancient Maya language. The island's array of sleeping options is overwhelming – we've compiled a list of our fa-

vourites, but the following inventory is by no means exhaustive.

If you're looking to splurge, there is definitely no shortage of top-end resorts sporting extravagant bungalows, charming spas, private infinity pools, and first-class dining. Bo Phut, on the island's northern coast, has a charming collection of boutique lodging – the perfect choice for midrange travellers. Backpack-toting tourists will have to look a little harder, but budget digs do pop up once in a while along all of the island's beaches.

Private villa services have become quite popular in recent years. Rental companies often advertise in the various tourist booklets that circulate on the island.

This large section is organised as follows: we start on the popular east coast with Chaweng and Lamai, then move anticlockwise around the island covering the smaller beaches.

CHAWENG



Jungle Club

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(Map p540; ☎ 08 1894 2327; www.jungleclubsamui.com; bungalows 800-4500B; 📍📞📺) The perilous drive up the slithering dirt road is totally worthwhile once you get a load of the incredible views from the top. This isolated mountain getaway is a huge hit among locals and tourists alike. There's a relaxed back-to-nature vibe – guests chill around the stunning horizon pool or tuck themselves away for a catnap under the canopied roofs of an open-air *sāh-lah* (often spelt *sala*; hall). Call ahead for a pick-up – you don't want to spend your precious jungle vacation in a body cast. Taxis from the main road cost 50B; it's 100B from central Chaweng.



Library

RESORT \$\$\$

(Map p540; ☎ 07742 2767; www.thelibrary.name; r from 13,300B; 📍📞📺) This place is too cool for school, which is ironic since it's called 'The Library'. The entire resort is a sparkling white mirage accented with black trimming and slatted curtains. Besides the futuristic iMac computer in each page (rooms are called 'pages' here), our favourite feature is the large monochromatic wall art – it glows brightly in the evening and you can adjust the colour depending on your mood. Life-size statues are engaged in the act of reading, and if you too feel inclined to pick up a book, the on-site library houses an impressive assortment of colourful art and design books. The large rectangular pool is not to

be missed – it's tiled in piercing shades of red, making the term 'bloodbath' suddenly seem appealing.

Tango Beach Resort

RESORT \$\$

(Map p540; ☎ 07742 2470; www.tango beachsamui.com; r 1600-4600B; 🍷🍷🍷) A midrange all-star, Tango features a string of bungalows arranged along a teak boardwalk that meanders away from the beach.

Centara Grand

RESORT \$\$\$

(Map p540; ☎ 07723 0500; www.centralhotelsresorts.com; r 8900-19,500B; 🍷🍷🍷) Centara is a massive, manicured compound in the heart of Chaweng, but the palm-filled property is so large that you can safely escape the streetside bustle. Rooms are found in a hotel-like building that is conspicuously Western in theme and decor. Grown-ups can escape to the spa, or one of the four restaurants, and leave the children at the labyrinth of swimming pools under the watchful eye of an in-house babysitter.

Baan Chaweng Beach Resort

RESORT \$\$\$

(Map p540; ☎ 07742 2403; www.baan chaweng beachresort.com; bungalows 3500-7000B; 🍷🍷🍷) A pleasant option for those who want top-end luxury without the hefty bill, Baan Chaweng is one of the new kids on the block and is keeping the prices relatively low. The immaculate rooms are painted in various shades of peach and pear, with teak furnishings that feel both modern and traditional.

Muang Kulay Pan Hotel

RESORT \$\$\$

(Map p540; ☎ 07723 0849-51; www.kulaypan.com; r 4200-15,000B; 🍷🍷🍷) No, that's not a rip in the wallpaper – it's all part of the design concept. The architect cites a fusion between Zen and Thai concepts, but we think the decor is completely random. The seaside grounds have been purposefully neglected to lend an additional sense of chaos to this unique resort.

Baan Haad Ngam

RESORT \$\$\$

(Map p540; ☎ 07723 1500; www.baanhaadngam.com; bungalows 6400-14,000B; 🍷🍷🍷) Vibrant Baan Haad Ngam shuns the usual teak and tan – every exterior is painted an interesting shade of green – like radioactive celery. It's sassy, classy and a great choice if you've got the dime.

Pandora Boutique Hotel

RESORT \$\$

(Map p540; ☎ 07741 3801; www.pandora-samui.com; r 2700-4900B; 🍷🍷) As adorable as it

is memorable, Pandora looks like it just fell out of a comic book – maybe *Tintin and the Mystery of Surprisingly Cheap Accommodation in Chaweng?* Rooms are outfitted with cheerful pastels, wooden moulding, and the occasional stone feature.

Kirikayan Boutique Resort

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 07733 2299; www.kirikayan.com; r from 5295B; 🍷🍷🍷) Simple whites, lacquered teak and blazing red accents set the colour scheme at this hip address along Chaweng's southern sands. Wander past thick palm trunks and sky-scraping foliage to find the relaxing pool deck at the back.

Ark Bar

RESORT \$\$

(Map p540; ☎ 07742 2047; www.ark-bar.com; bungalows 1500B; 🍷🍷🍷) You'll find two of every creature at Ark Bar – hardcore partiers, chilled out hippies, teenagers, forty-somethings, even Canadians. Lately, the perennially popular resort has started to shift gears – higher-end digs is now the name of the game.

Chaweng Garden Beach

RESORT \$\$

(Map p540; ☎ 07796 0394; www.chaweng garden.com; r from 1850-8500B; 🍷🍷🍷) A popular 'flashpacker' choice, this campus of accommodation has a large variety of room types serviced by an extra-smiley staff.

Nora Chaweng

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p540; ☎ 07791 3666; www.norachawenghotel.com; r from 2100B; 🍷🍷🍷) Nora Chaweng is not on the beach, but this newer addition to the Chaweng bustle has swankily designed rooms, an inviting on-site pool and a relaxing spa studio.

Loft Samui

HOSTEL \$

(Map p540; ☎ 07741 3420; www.theloftsmaui.com; r from 590B; 🍷🍷) A newer budget operation in Chaweng, the Loft is giving has-beens such as the Wave a run for their money with cheap digs furnished by a couple of quirky details – adobe styling and savvy built-ins. It seems to be quite popular with travelling Israelis.

Akwa

GUEST HOUSE \$

(Map p540; ☎ 08 4660 0551; www.akwaguesthouse.com; r from 700B; 🍷🍷) A charming B&B-style sleeping spot, Akwa has a few funky rooms decorated with bright colours. Expect teddy bears adorning each bed, quirky bookshelves stocked with DVDs and cartoon paintings all over.

Queen Boutique Resort

HOTEL \$
(Map p540; ☎ 0 7741 3148; queensamui@yahoo.com; r from 800-1200B; 🍷🍴📺) Despite the less-than-friendly staff, Queen offers up boutique sleeps for backpacker prices. Make sure, however, that you get a room with tiled floors; the ones with scuffed linoleum are far less appealing.

Baan Samui

RESORT \$\$\$
(Map p540; ☎ 0 7723 0965; www.see2sea.com; r from 8240B; 🍷🍴📺) In sharp contrast to the austere Library next door, Baan Samui is a campus of colourful beachside units. If the Flintstones had a holiday ranch house, it would probably look something like this.

Samui Hostel

HOTEL \$
(Map p540; ☎ 08 9874 3737; dm 180B; 🍷🍴) It doesn't look like much from the front, but the dorm rooms here are surprisingly spic and span. It's a great place for solo travellers on a tight budget, although couples should know that a private double room can be scouted in Chaweng for around 400B.

P Chaweng

HOTEL \$
(Map p540; ☎ 0 7723 0684; r 400-600B, ste 1000B; 🍷🍴) This vine-covered cheapie doesn't even pretend to be close to the beach, but the pink-tiled rooms are spacious and squeaky clean (minus a couple of bumps and bruises on the wooden furniture). Pick a room facing away from the street – it seems a tad too easy for someone to slip through an open window and pilfer your stuff.

LAMAI**Rocky Resort**

RESORT \$\$\$
(☎ 0 7741 8367; www.rockyresort.com; Hua Thanon; r 4890-17,000B; 🍷🍴📺) Our favourite spot in Lamai (well, actually just south of Lamai), Rocky finds the right balance between an upmarket ambience and an unpretentious, sociable atmosphere. During the quieter months the prices are a steal, since ocean views abound, and each room has been furnished with beautiful Thai-inspired furniture that seamlessly incorporates a modern twist. The pool has been carved in between a collection of boulders mimicking the rocky beach nearby (hence the name).

Banyan Tree Koh Samui

RESORT \$\$\$
(☎ 0 7791 5333; www.banyantree.com/en/samui/overview; villas from 23,000B; 🍷🍴📺) Phuket's most prestigious address has set up a sister property along the secluded northern sands of Lamai. Occupying an entire bay,

this sprawling homage to over-the-top luxury sports dozens of villas hoisted above the foliage by spider-like stilts. Golf carts zip around the grounds carrying jetsetters between the myriad dining venues and the gargantuan spa (which sports a relaxing rainforest simulator, no less).

Samui Jasmine Resort

RESORT \$\$\$
(☎ 0 7723 2446; 131/8 Moo 3; r & bungalows 3800-5000B; 🍷🍴📺) Smack dab in the middle of Lamai beach, pleasant Samui Jasmine is a great deal. Go for the lower-priced rooms – most have excellent views of the ocean and the crystal-coloured lap pool. The design scheme features plenty of varnished teak and also frilly accessories such as lavender pillows.

Spa Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$
(☎ 0 7723 0855; www.spasamui.com; Lamai North; bungalows 800-2800B; 🍷🍴) This health spa has a bevy of therapeutic programs on offer, and no one seems to mind that the lodging is cheap by Lamai's standards. Programs include colonics, massage, aqua detox, hypnotherapy and yoga, just to name a few. The bathrooms leave a bit to be desired, but who needs a toilet when you're doing a week-long fast? Accommodation tends to book up quickly, so it's best to reserve in advance (via email). Nonguests are welcome to partake in the programs.

iBed

HOTEL \$
(☎ 0 7745 8760; www.ibedsamui.com; dm/s 550/1100B) The sleekest hostel on the island (if not all of Thailand), iBed has all the accoutrements of an Apple-sponsored space station: personal TVs at each bed, smooth coats of paint, bleach-white linens, and plenty of polished concrete. The wide verandahs, ample common space and mod kitchen foster a sociable vibe during the busier months.

Lamai Wanta

RESORT \$\$
(☎ 0 7742 4550, 0 7742 4218; www.lamaiwanta.com; r & bungalows 1954-4800B; 🍷🍴📺) The pool area feels a bit retro, with its swatch book of beige- and blue-toned tiles, but in the back there are modern motel rooms and bungalows that have fresh coats of white paint. On the inside, rooms tread a fine line between being minimal and sparse. Lamai Wanta is located towards the south end of Lamai – be on the look out for the resort's small sign; it's located down a small beachside soi.

Amarina Residence

GUEST HOUSE \$

(www.amarinaresidence.com; r 900-1200B) Although the lobby is unusually dark compared to most tropical foyers, the rooms upstairs are sun-drenched and sport tasteful light-wood furnishing.

Beer's House

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 7723 0467; 161/4 Moo 4 Lamai North; bungalows 200-550B) These tiny shade-covered bungalows are lined up right along the sand. Some huts have a communal toilet, but all have plenty of room to sling a hammock and laze the day away.

New Hut

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 7723 0437; newhut@hotmail.com; Lamai North; huts 200-500B) New Hut is a rare beachfront cheapie with tiny-but-charming A-frame huts.

NORTHERN BEACHES

Ko Samui's northern beaches have the largest range of accommodation. Choeng Mon has some of the most opulent resorts in the world, while Mae Nam and Bang Po cling to their backpacker roots despite the recent construction of several flash pads. Bo Phut, in the middle, is the shining star in Samui's constellation of beaches.

Choeng Mon**Six Senses Samui**

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 7724 5678; www.sixsenses.com/hideaway-samui/index.php; bungalows from 18,000B; 🍷@🍷) This hidden bamboo paradise is worth the once-in-a-lifetime splurge. Set along a rugged promontory, Six Senses strikes the perfect balance between opulence and rustic charm, and defines the term 'barefoot elegance'. Most of the villas have stunning concrete plunge pools and offer magnificent views of the silent bay below. The regal, semi-outdoor bathrooms give the phrase 'royal flush' a whole new meaning. Beige golf buggies move guests between their hidden cottages and the stunning amenities strewn around the property – including a world-class spa and two excellent restaurants.

Tongsai Bay

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 7724 5480-5500; www.tongsai.com.th; ste 11,000-30,000B; 🍷🍷) For serious pampering, head to this secluded luxury gem. Expansive and impeccably maintained, the hilly grounds make the cluster of bungalows look more like a small village. Golf carts whiz around the vast landscape transporting guests to various activities (such as

massages) or dinner. All the extra-swanky split-level suites have day-bed rest areas, gorgeous romantic decor, stunning views, large terraces and creatively placed bathtubs (you'll see). Facilities include salt- and freshwater pools, a tennis court, the requisite spa, a dessert shop and also several restaurants.

Sala Samui

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 7724 5888; www.salasamui.com; bungalows US\$360-1100; 🍷@🍷) Look out folks, these guys mean business – they quote their room rates in US dollars instead of baht. Is the hefty price tag worth it? Definitely. The design scheme is undeniably exquisite – regal whites and lacquered teaks are generously lavished throughout, while subtle turquoise accents draw on the colour of each villa's private plunge pool.

Imperial Boat House Hotel

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 7742 5041-52; www.imperialhotels.com; Hat Choeng Mon; r 4000-5500B, boat ste 6000-6700B; 🍷🍷) This sophisticated retreat has a three-storey hotel and several free-standing bungalows made from imported-teak rice barges whose bows have been transformed into stunning patios. Oxidised copper cannons blast streams of water into the boat-shaped swimming pool.

Ô Soleil

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 7742 5232; r & bungalows from 400B; 🍷) One of the cheaper beachfront properties on the island, old Ô Soleil offers a scatter of bungalows and semidetached rooms extending inland from the sand. It's a very casual affair, so be sure to safely store your valuables.

Big Buddha Beach (Bang Rak)

This area gets its moniker from the huge golden Buddha that acts as overlord from the small nearby quasi-island of Ko Fan. Its proximity to the airport means lower prices at the resorts.

Samui Mermaid

RESORT \$

(☎ 7742 7547; www.samui-mermaid.info; r 400-2500B; 🍷@🍷) Samui Mermaid is a great choice in the budget category because it feels like a full-fledged resort. There are two large swimming pools, copious beach chairs, two lively restaurants and every room has cable TV. The landing strip at Samui's airport is only a couple of kilometres away, so sometimes there's noise, but free airport transfers sweeten the deal.

Shambala

BUNGALOWS \$

(Map 7742 5330; www.samui-shambala.com; bungalows 600-1000B; 🏠🏠) While surrounding establishments answer the call of upmarket travellers, this laid-back, English-run place is a backpacking stalwart with a subtle hippy feel. There's plenty of communal cushion seating, a great wooden sun-deck, and the bungalows are bright and roomy. Staff doles out travel tips and smiles in equal measure.

Ocean 11

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(Map 7741 7118; www.o11s.com; bungalows 1900-3200B; 🏠🏠) A little slice of luxury at a very reasonable price, Ocean 11's apartments are a steal (get it?!). Silly film references aside, this mellow spot with cottagey, Med-style decor is a great midrange getaway along a relatively quiet patch of sand.

Bo Phut

The beach isn't breathtaking, but Bo Phut has the most dynamic lodging in all of Samui. A string of vibrant boutique cottages starts deep within the clutter of Fisherman's Village and radiates outward along the sand.

**Anantara**

RESORT \$\$\$

(Map p542; Map 7742 8300; www.anantara.com; r 4000-18,000B; 🏠🏠🏠) Anantara's stunning palanquin entrance satisfies every fantasy of a far-flung oriental kingdom. Low-slung torches spurt plumes of unwavering fire, and the residual smoke creates a light fog around the fanned palm fronds higher up. Clay and copper statues of grinning jungle creatures abound on the property's wild acreage, while guests savour wild teas in an open-air pagoda, swim in the lagoon-like infinity-edged swimming pool, or indulge in a relaxing spa treatment. The new wing of adjacent white-washed villas brings the resort up to another level of opulence.

**L'Hacienda**

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(Map p542; Map 7724 5943; www.samui-hacienda.com; r 1400-3500B; 🏠🏠) Polished terracotta and rounded archways give the entrance a Spanish mission motif. Similar decor permeates the eight adorable rooms, which sport loads of personal touches such as pebbled bathroom walls and translucent bamboo lamps. There's a charming surprise waiting for you on the roof, and we're pretty sure you'll love it as much as we did.

Zazen

RESORT \$\$\$

(Map p542; Map 7742 5085; www.samuizazen.com; r 6010-17,200B; 🏠🏠🏠) What was once a simple place has now transformed into the boutique-iest boutique resort on Samui – every inch of this charming getaway has been thoughtfully and creatively designed. It's 'Asian minimalism meets modern Rococo' with a scarlet accent wall, terracotta goddesses, a dash of feng shui, and a generous smattering of good taste. Guests relax poolside on comfy beach chairs gently shaded by canvas parasols. The walk-in prices are scary, so it's best to book in advance.

Lodge

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p542; Map 7742 5337; www.apartmentsamui.com; r 1400-2500B; 🏠🏠🏠) Another great choice in Bo Phut, the Lodge feels like a colonial hunting chalet with pale walls and dark wooden beams jutting across the ceiling. Every room has scores of wall hangings and a private balcony overlooking the beach. The 'pent-huts' on the top floor are very spacious. Reservations are a must – this place always seems to be full.

Ibis Bo Phut

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p542; Map 7791 4800; www.ibishotel.com/thailand; r from 1600B; 🏠🏠🏠) The biggest resort on the island, the brand new Ibis still has that new car smell in its shiny, efficient rooms. Families will love the children's bunk beds and the grassy grounds perfect for a game of tag. If you're looking for a resort with traces of Thai character, this is not the place for you.

B1 Villa Spa

APARTMENTS \$\$\$

(Map p542; Map 7742 7268; www.b1villa.com; ste 2800-7000B; 🏠🏠🏠) There's a refreshing burst of character at this inn-style option along the beach in Fisherman's Village. Each room displays a unique collection of wall art, and has been given a special moniker – the 2nd-storey spaces are named after the stars in Orion's belt. Oh, and it's B1 as in 'B1 with yourself', get it?

Khuntai

GUEST HOUSE \$

(Map p542; Map 7724 5118; r 400-850B; 🏠) This clunky orange guest house is as cheap as decent rooms get on Samui. A block away from the beach, on the outskirts of Fisherman's Village, Khuntai's 2nd-floor rooms are drenched in afternoon sunshine and feature outdoor lounging spots.

Mae Nam & Bang Po**W Retreat Koh Samui**

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 0791 5999; www.starwoodhotels.com/whotels; r from 23,000B; 🍷@🍷) A bejewelled 'W' welcomes guests as they drive up the curling road to the lobby, and upon arrival jaws immediate drop whilst staring out over the glittering infinity pools and endless horizon. The trademark 'W glam' is palpable throughout the resort, which does its darnedest to fuse an urban vibe with tropical serenity. It'll be a while before this new resort finds its groove, so until then we recommend coming by for the Sunday brunch (2500B) or a sunset cocktail at Woo Bar.

Napasai By Orient Express

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 0742 9200; www.napasai.com; r from 9200B; 🍷@🍷) Gorgeously manicured grounds welcome weary travellers as they glide past grazing water buffalo and groundsmen donning cream-coloured pith helmets. A generous smattering of villas dot the expansive landscape – all sport traditional Thai-style decorations, from the intricately carved wooden ornamentation to streamers of luscious local silks.

Maenam Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎ 0742 5116; www.maenamresort.com; bungalows 1400-3000B; 🍷@🍷) Palm-bark cottages are set in several rows amid a private, jungle-like garden. They're decked out in a mix of wicker and wooden furnishings, and vary in price according to their distance from the beach. Suites are a steal for families.

Harry's

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎ 0742 5447; www.harrys-samui.com; bungalows 1200-3000B; 🍷) Arriving at Harry's feels like entering sacred temple grounds. Polished teak wood abounds in the lobby and the classic pitched roofing reaches skyward. The concrete bungalows, stashed in a verdant garden, do not retain the flamboyant architectural theme out front, but they're cute and comfortable nonetheless.

Coco Palm Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎ 0742 5095; bungalows 1200B; 🍷) The bungalows at Coco Palm have been crafted with tonnes of rattan. A rectangular pool is the centrepiece along the beach – and the price is right for a resort-like atmosphere.

Shangri-la

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 0742 5189; bungalows 300-2000B; 🍷) A back-packer's Shangri La indeed – these are some

of the cheapest huts around and they're in decent condition.

WEST COAST

Largely the domain of Thai tourists, Samui's west coast doesn't have the most picturesque beaches, but it's a welcome escape from the east-side bustle.

InterContinental Samui Baan**Taling Ngam Resort**

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 0742 9100; www.ichotelsgroup.com/intercontinental; r from 6300B; 🍷@🍷) Unlike most of Samui's five-star digs, Baan Taling Ngam has been designed in a 'classic Thai' theme. Luxuriously appointed guest accommodation contains custom-made Thai-style furnishings and the service here is impeccable. As it's not right on the beach, a shuttle service transports guests back and forth; airport and ferry transfers are also provided.

Am Samui

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎ 0723 5165; www.amsamuiresort.com; bungalows from 1100B; 🍷@🍷) Cast modesty aside, spread your curtains wide, and welcome sunshine and sea views in through your floor-to-ceiling windows. Lounge-worthy porch furniture further contributes to the comfy, casual vibe established at the open-air restaurant and pool.

SOUTH COAST

The southern end of Ko Samui is spotted with rocky headlands and smaller sandy coves. The following options are all well worth the baht, in fact, these resorts represent some of our favourite places to stay on the island.

Easy Time

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎ 0792 0110; www.easytimesamui.com; Phang Ka; r from 1950B; 🍷@🍷) Safely tucked away from the throngs of tourists, this little haven – nestled inland around a serene swimming pool – is a great place to unwind. Duplex villa units and a chic dining space create an elegant mood that is refreshingly unpretentious.

Elements

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 0791 4678; www.elements-koh-samui.com; Phang Ka; r 5540-21,500B; 🍷@🍷) A refreshing twist on the modern boutique sleep, Elements occupies a lonely strand of palm-studded sand. Rooms are arranged in condo-like blocks, each one featuring an eye-pleasing blend of Thai and West styling. Hidden villas dot the path down to the fire-coloured restaurant and ocean-side lounge area.

Eating

If you thought it was hard to pick a place to sleep, the island has even more options when it comes to dining. From roasted crickets to beluga caviar – Samui's got it and is not afraid to flaunt it.

Influenced by the mainland, Samui is peppered with *kôw gaang* (rice and curry) shops, usually just a wooden shack displaying large metal pots of southern Thai-style curries. Folks pull up on their motorcycles, lift up the lids to survey the vibrantly coloured contents, and pick one for lunch. *Kôw gaang* shops are easily found along the Ring Rd (Rte 4169) and sell out of the good stuff by 1pm. Any build-up of local motorcycles is usually a sign of a good meal in progress.

The upmarket choices are even more numerous and although Samui's swank dining scene is laden with Italian options, visitors will have no problem finding flavours from around the globe. Lured by high salaries and spectacular weather, world-class chefs regularly make an appearance on the island.

CHAWENG

Dozens of the restaurants on the 'strip' serve a mixed bag of local bites, international cuisine, and greasy fast food. For the best ambience, get off the road and head to the beach, where many bungalow operators set up tables on the sand and have glittery fairy lights at night.



Samui Institute of Thai

Culinary Arts

THAI \$\$\$

(SITCA; Map p540; ☑ 0 7741 3434; course 1950B; ☺lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Go one better than savouring a traditional Thai meal: cook it yourself!

Laem Din Market

MARKET \$

(Map p540; dishes from 30B; ☺4am-6pm, night market 6pm-2am) A busy day market, Laem Din is packed with stalls that sell fresh fruits, vegetables and meats and stock local Thai kitchens. Pick up a kilo of sweet green oranges or wander the stalls trying to spot the ingredients in last night's curry. For dinner, come to the adjacent night market and sample the tasty southern-style fried chicken and curries.

Gringo's Cantina

MEXICAN \$\$

(Map p540; dishes 140-280B; ☺dinner) Wash down a Tex-Mex classic with a jug of sangria or a frozen margarita. We liked the *chimichangas* (mostly because we like say-

ing *chimichanga*). There are burgers, pizzas and veggie options too, for those who don't want to go 'south of the border'.

Page

ASIAN FUSION \$\$\$

(Map p540; dishes 180-850B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) If you can't afford to stay at the ultra-swanky Library, have a meal at its beachside restaurant. The food is expensive (of course) but you'll receive glances from the beach bums on the beach as they try to figure out if you're a jetsetter or movie star. Lunch is a bit more casual and affordable, but you'll miss the designer lighting effects in the evening.

Prego

ITALIAN \$\$\$

(Map p540; www.prego-samui.com; mains 200-700B; ☺dinner) This smart ministry of culinary style serves up fine Italian cuisine in a barely-there dining room of cool marble and modern geometry. Reservations are accepted for seatings at 7pm and 9pm.

Dr Frogs

STEAKHOUSE \$\$\$

(off Map p540; mains 380-790B; ☺lunch & dinner) Perched atop a rocky overlook, Dr Frogs combines incredible ocean vistas with delicious international flavours (namely Italian and Thai favourites). Delectable steaks and crab cakes, and friendly owners, put this spot near the top of our dining list.

Betelnut@Buri Rasa

ASIAN FUSION \$\$\$

(Map p540; mains 600-800B; ☺dinner) Fusion can be confusing, and often disappointing, but Betelnut will set you straight. Chef Jeffrey Lords claims an American upbringing and European culinary training, but most importantly he spent time in San Francisco, where all good food is born. The menu is a pan-Pacific mix of curries and chowder, papaya and pancetta.

Zico's

BRAZILIAN \$\$\$

(Map p540; menu 790B; ☺dinner) This palatial *churrascaria* puts the *carne* in Carnival. Vegetarians beware – Zico's is an all-you-can-eat Brazilian meat-fest complete with saucy dancers sporting peacock-like outfits.

Khaosan Restaurant & Bakery

INTERNATIONAL \$

(Map p540; dishes from 60B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) From *filet mignon* to flapjacks and everything in between, this chow house is popular with those looking for a cheap nosh. Hang around after your meal and catch a newly released movie on the big TV. It's everything you'd expect from a place called 'Khaosan'.

Wave Samui

(Map p540; dishes from 60B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Everyone says that Samui is going upmarket, but the most crowded restaurants at dinnertime are still the old-fashioned budget spots, like this one. This jack-of-all trades (guest house-bar-restaurant) serves honest food at honest prices and fosters a travellers' ambience with an in-house library and a popular happy hour (3pm to 7pm).

LAMAI

As Samui's second-most populated beach, Lamai has a surprisingly limited assortment of decent eateries when compared to Chaweng next door. The Tesco Lotus is a great place to pick up snacks for a beachside picnic. Most visitors, however, dine wherever they're staying.

Rocky's

(dishes 300-800B; ☺lunch & dinner) Easily the top dining spot on Lamai, Rocky's gourmet dishes are actually a bargain when you convert the baht into your native currency. Try the signature beef tenderloin with blue cheese – it's like sending your tastebuds on a Parisian vacation. On Tuesday evenings, diners enjoy a special Thai-themed evening with a prepared menu of local delicacies. Rocky's is located at the like-named resort just south of Lamai.

Lamai Day Market

(dishes from 30B; ☺6am-8pm) The Thai equivalent of a grocery store, Lamai's market is a hive of activity, selling food necessities and takeaway food. Visit the covered area to pick up fresh fruit or to see vendors shredding coconuts to make coconut milk. Or hunt down the ice-cream seller for homemade coconut ice cream. It's next door to a petrol station.

Hua Thanon Market

(dishes from 30B; ☺6am-6pm) Slip into the rhythm of this village market slightly south of Lamai; a window into the food ways of southern Thailand. Vendors shoo away the flies from the freshly butchered meat and housewives load bundles of vegetables into their baby-filled motorcycle baskets. Follow the market road to the row of food shops delivering edible Muslim culture: chicken biryani, fiery curries or toasted rice with coconut, bean sprouts, lemongrass and dried shrimp.

INTERNATIONAL \$

NORTHERN BEACHES

Some of Samui's finest establishments are located on the northern coast. Boho Bo Phut has several trendy eateries to match the string of yuppie boutique hotels.

Choeng Mon & Big Buddha Beach (Bang Rak)

TOP CHOICE Dining On The Rocks ASIAN FUSION \$\$\$
(☎0 7724 5678; reservations-samui@sixsenses.com; Choeng Mon; menus from 2200B; ☺dinner) Samui's ultimate dining experience takes place on nine cantilevered verandahs of weathered teak and bamboo that yawn over the gulf. After sunset (and a glass of wine), guests feel like they're dining on a wooden barge set adrift on a starlit sea. Each dish on the six-course prix-fixe menu is the brainchild of the experimental cooks who regularly experiment with taste, texture and temperature. If you're celebrating a special occasion, you'll have to book well in advance if you want to sit at 'table 99' – the honeymooners' table – positioned on a private terrace. Dining On The Rocks is located at the isolated Six Senses Samui.

BBC

(Big Buddha Beach; dishes 60-200B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) No, this place has nothing to do with *Dr Who* – BBC stands for Big Buddha Café. It's popular with the local expats, the international menu is large, and there are exquisite ocean views from the patio.

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

Antica Locanda

(www.anticasamui.com; dishes 170-280B; ☺dinner) This friendly trattoria has pressed white tablecloths and caskets of Italian wine. Try the *vongole alla marinara* (clams in white wine) and don't forget to check out the succulent specials of the day.

ITALIAN \$\$

If you're waiting for a ferry in Bang Rak consider stopping by one of the following:

Catcantoo

(http://catcantoo.net; mains 90-350B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Enjoy bargain-basement breakfast (99B) in the morning, succulent ribs at noon, or shooting some pool later in the day.

BBQ \$\$

Pae Chuan Chim

(mains 30-40B; ☺breakfast & lunch) Without an ounce of atmosphere to speak of, this open-air noodle-scooping haunt is popular with locals who break for lunch to reenergise. Located next to the hyperbaric chamber.

THAI \$

Bo Phut**Shack Bar & Grill**

STEAKHOUSE \$\$\$

(Map p542; www.theshackgrillsamui.com; mains 480-780B; ☺dinner) With hands down the best steaks on the island, the Shack imports the finest cuts of meat from Australia and slathers them in a rainbow of tasty sauces from red wine to blue cheese. Booth seating and jazz over the speakers give the joint a distinctly Western vibe, though you'll find all types of diners come here to splurge.

Zazen

ASIAN FUSION \$\$\$

(Map p542; dishes 550-850B, set menu from 1300B; ☺lunch & dinner) The chef describes the food as 'organic and orgasmic', and the ambient 'yums' from elated diners definitely confirm the latter. This romantic dining experience comes complete with ocean views, dim candle lighting and soft music. Reservations recommended.

Starfish & Coffee

THAI \$\$

(Map p542; mains 130-180B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) This streamer-clad eatery was probably named after the Prince song, since we couldn't find any starfish on the menu (there's loads of coffee though). Evenings feature standard Thai fare and sunset views of rugged Ko Pha-Ngan.

Villa Bianca

ITALIAN \$\$

(Map p542; dishes from 200B; ☺lunch & dinner) Another fantastic Italian spot on Samui, Villa Bianca is a sea of crisp white tablecloths and woven lounge chairs. Who knew wicker could be so sexy?

Karma Sutra

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(Map p542; mains 130-260B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) A haze of purples and pillows, this charming chow spot in the heart of Bo Phut's Fisherman's Village serves up international and Thai eats listed on colourful chalkboards. Karma Sutra doubles as a clothing boutique.

Mae Nam & Bang Po**Angela's Bakery**

BAKERY, INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(Mae Nam; dishes 80-200B; ☺breakfast & lunch) Duck through the screen of hanging plants into this beloved bakery, smelling of fresh bread and hospitality. Angela's sandwiches and cakes have kept many Western expats from wasting away in the land of rice.

Bang Po Seafood

SEAFOOD \$\$

(Bang Po; dishes from 100B; ☺dinner) A meal at Bang Po Seafood is a test for the tastebuds. It's one of the only restaurants that serves

traditional Ko Samui fare (think of it as island roadkill, well, actually it's more like local sea-kill): recipes call for ingredients such as raw sea urchin roe, baby octopus, sea water, coconut, and local turmeric.

WEST COAST

The quiet west coast features some of the best seafood on Samui. Na Thon has a giant **day market** on Th Thawi Ratchaphakdi – it's worth stopping by to grab some snacks before your ferry ride.

**Five Islands**

SEAFOOD \$\$\$

(www.thefiveislands.com; Taling Ngam; dishes 150-500B, tours 3000-6500B; ☺lunch & dinner) Five Islands defines the term 'destination dining' and offers the most unique eating experience on the island. Before your meal, a traditional longtail boat will take you out into the turquoise sea to visit the haunting Five Sister Islands where you'll learn about the ancient and little-known art of harvesting bird nests to make bird's-nest soup, a Chinese delicacy. This perilous task is rewarded with large sums of cash – a kilo of nests is usually sold for 100,000B to restaurants in Hong Kong (yup, that's five zeros). The lunch tour departs around 10am, and the dinner program leaves around 3pm. Customers are also welcome to dine without going on the tour and vice versa.

About Art & Craft Café

VEGETARIAN \$\$

(Na Thon; dishes 80-180B; ☺breakfast & lunch) An artistic oasis in the midst of hurried Na Thon, this cafe serves an eclectic assortment of healthy and wholesome food, gourmet coffee and, as the name states, art and craft, made by the owner and her friends. Relaxed and friendly, this is also a gathering place for Samui's dwindling population of bohemians and artists.

**Drinking & Entertainment**

Samui's biggest party spot is, without a doubt, noisy Chaweng. Lamai and Bo Phut come in second and third respectively, while the rest of the island is generally quiet, as the drinking is usually focused around self-contained resort bars.

CHAWENG & LAMAI

Making merry in Chaweng is a piece of cake. Most places are open until 2am and there are a few places that go strong all night long. Soi Green Mango has loads of girly bars. Soi Colibri and Soi Reggae Pub are raucous as well.

POP'S CULTURE: LIFE AS A LADYBOY

Pop, age 45, is what Thais call a *gà-teu-i*, usually referred to as a 'ladyboy' in English. Thailand's transgender population is the subject of many debates and conversations, especially among tourists. Although tolerance is widespread in Buddhist Thailand, concealed homophobia prevails – for *gà-teu-i*, this can be a challenging life, with the entertainment and sex industries the only lucrative career avenues open. We spent the day with Pop and got the skinny on what life was really like as a member of Thailand's oft-talked-about 'third sex'.

LET'S START WITH A QUESTION THAT MANY TOURISTS IN THAILAND WOULD LIKE TO ASK: WHY DOES THERE SEEM TO BE SO MANY GÀ-TEU-I IN THAILAND?

Well, that's like asking me why I am a ladyboy! I have no idea. I didn't ask to have these feelings. I think the more important thing to notice is why there are so many ladyboys in the cabaret or sex industry. First, however, let me start by stating that the word *gà-teu-i* is the informal way of saying 'person with two sexes'; the term *pôo ying kâhm pêt* is generally more polite. Also, *gà-teu-i* is strictly reserved for people who still have male body parts but dress as female, so I am not technically *gà-teu-i* anymore.

Most tourists think that there are tonnes of ladyboys in Thailand because they are in places that many tourists visit. Yes, some ladyboys want to be cabaret dancers, just like some women want to be cabaret dancers, but most of them don't. These types of jobs are the only ones available to ladyboys, and the pay is lousy. Life is not as 'Hollywood' for a ladyboy as it may seem on stage. Most ladyboys don't have the chance to have a job that is respected by the community. We are not allowed to become doctors or psychologists and most corporations do not allow ladyboy employees because they don't want *gà-teu-i* to be associated with their company's image. Since many of us cannot have proper jobs, many ladyboys drop out of school at a young age, and lately this educational gap in the culture has become huge. Ladyboys work in the sex industry because they aren't given the opportunity to make a lot of money doing something else. I feel like a second-class citizen; we are not allowed to use male or female bathrooms! I used to have to climb 14 flights of stairs to use the special ladyboys' bathroom at my old job! Also, Thai law states that my ID cards and passport must always have an 'M' for male because the definition of a female in Thailand is someone who can bear children. It's hard for me to leave the country because my passport says 'male' but I look like a female. They will never let me through security because it looks like a fraudulent passport.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST REALISE THAT YOU MIGHT BE A TRANSGENDER PERSON?

I realised that I was different when I was about six years old. I always wanted to dress up like my sister and would get upset when my parents dressed me in boy's clothing. It felt wrong being in boy's clothes. I felt good in my sister's outfits.

HOW DOES ONE TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A LADYBOY AND A WOMAN ON THE STREET?

Sometimes it's really hard to tell...sometimes a ladyboy can be more beautiful than a woman! There is no set way to figure it out, unless you ask them for their ID card. These days, doctors are really starting to perfect the operations, and the operations are expensive – mine was 150,000B! I had the 'snip', then I had breast implants, my Adam's apple was shaved off, and I also had a nose job (I didn't like my old nose anyways). Other operations available include silicone implants in the hips, jaw narrowing, cheekbone shaving and chin sculpting – to make it rounder. But before anyone can have an operation, you have to have a psych evaluation. The operation was extremely painful. I spent seven days in the hospital

Beach Republic

(www.beachrepublic.com; 176/34 Moo 4 Hat Lamai)
Recognised by its yawning thatch-patched awnings, Beach Republic would be the perfect spot to shoot one of those MTV Spring Break episodes. There's an inviting wading

LOUNGE

pool, comfy lounge chairs and an endless cocktail list.

Q-Bar

(Map p540; www.qbarsamui.com; Hat Chaweng)
Overlooking Chaweng Lake, Q-Bar is a little piece of Bangkok nightlife planted among the

LOUNGE

and it took me about two months to fully recover. Younger patients tend to heal faster – I was about 40 years old when I had the operation.

WHY DIDN'T YOU HAVE THE OPERATION EARLIER? AND HOW HAVE YOU HANDLED THE TRANSITION?

I didn't 'change' earlier because I didn't want to give up my job, and I knew that after the operation I would be forced to quit. I was working as a software instructor at a university, and university teachers are not allowed to be transgender. I also waited until my father passed away so that it would be easier on my family when I made the transition.

Well, contrary to what some tourists believe, no family particularly *wants* a transgender child, even a family with only boys. Some of my close friends no longer speak to their families. My mother was always very comforting. A month before my operation she told me 'you will always be my child, but never lie to anyone about who you are – accept who you are'. I have two adopted sons who are now quite grown-up, and after I made the change, they bought me presents on Mother's Day instead of Father's Day – I thought that was very sweet. My father, on the other hand, was never very supportive. When he found I was sleeping with men, he...well...let's put it this way, he practised his *moo-ay thai* [also spelt *muay thai*] boxing on me.

HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN YOU WOKE UP AFTER THE OPERATION? HOW HAS LIFE BEEN SINCE THE OPERATION?

I woke up with a big smile. Life is great. I am happy that I can be on the outside what I am on the inside – I can stop feeling sad every time I look down! Finding a job after my surgery was hard. I wrote on my CV 'transgender post-op' so that there would be no surprises in the interview, but I never heard back from any companies. Oh, actually one company asked me to come for an interview, but they spent the meeting asking me inappropriate questions about my personal life. It was very disheartening. I finally found a queer-friendly company, where I am employed as a hospitality software implementer, meaning that I go around to hotels around Thailand and teach front-desk staff how to use the hotel's computer system. I adore my job.

Now that my surgery is far behind me, I have to take female hormones regularly until I die. I take a pill twice per week, but some male-to-females take one injection per month (I hate needles). Some people have a bad reaction to the medication at first. I have had friends that got a lot of pimples and got really fat. Sometimes it takes a while before you find the right amount of hormones. Besides the hormones, there is a certain amount of... maintenance...that needs to take place in order to keep my new parts working. Put it this way, when you get your ears pierced, if you don't regularly wear earrings...well... Anyway, my aunt, who moved to the United States, asked me if I wanted to move too, but I am happy in Thailand. Even though transgender individuals don't have a lot of rights, I'm not convinced that it is that much better anywhere else.

AND FINALLY, WHAT DO YOU FEEL IS THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION ABOUT GÀ-TEU-I IN THAILAND?

This is an easy question. The biggest misconception is that we are all promiscuous whores and liars. Like any human being, we are just looking for love. It is true that many ladyboys do try to trick the people around them, but this is because they are afraid of being rejected for who they really are. Also, many of them lie because they desperately want to be real women, but they will never be real women. I know that – that's why I always show the real me – I am comfortable with who I am. I wish everyone else would be too.

As told to Brandon Presser.

coconut trees. The upstairs lounge opens just before sunset, treating cocktail connoisseurs to various highbrow tipples and a drinkable view of southern Chaweng – mountains, sea and sky. After 10pm, the night-crawlers descend upon the downstairs club where DJs

spin the crowd into a techno amoeba. A taxi there will cost between 200B and 300B.

Ark Bar

(Map p540; www.ark-bar.com; Hat Chaweng) The 'it' destination for a Wednesday-night romp on Samui. Drinks are dispensed from the

BAR

multicoloured bar draped in paper lanterns, and guests lounge on pyramidal pillows strewn down the beach. The party usually starts around 4pm.

Christy's Cabaret

CABARET

(Map p540; Hat Chaweng) This flashy joint offers free *gà-teu-i* (ladyboys, also spelt *kàthoey*) cabaret every night at 11pm and attracts a mixed clientele of both sexes. Other ladyboys loiter out front and try to drag customers in, so to speak.

Good Karma

BAR

(Map p540; Hat Chaweng) Open all day, this snazzy lounge lures the hip 'hi-so' (Thai high society) crowd with canopied daybeds and a hidden pond.

Bar Solo

BAR

(Map p540; Hat Chaweng) A sign of things to come, Bar Solo has future-fitted Chaweng's outdoor beer halls into an urban setting with sleek cubist decor and a cocktail list that doesn't scream holiday hayseed. The evening drink specials lure in the front-loaders preparing for a late, late night at the dance clubs on Soi Solo and Soi Green Mango.

Tropical Murphy's

IRISH BAR

(Map p540; Hat Chaweng) A popular *faràng* (foreigner) joint, Tropical Murphy's dishes out steak-and-kidney pie, fish and chips, lamb chops and Irish stew (mains 50B to 300B). Come night-time, the live music kicks on and this place turns into the most popular Irish bar on Samui (yes, there are a few).

Green Mango

BAR

(Map p540; Hat Chaweng) This place is so popular it has an entire soi named after it. Samui's favourite power drinking house is very big, very loud and very *faràng*. Green Mango has blazing lights, expensive drinks and masses of sweaty bodies swaying to dance music.

Reggae Pub

BAR

(Map p540; Hat Chaweng) This fortress of fun sports an open-air dance floor with music spun by foreign DJs. It's a towering two-storey affair with long bars, pool tables and a live-music stage. The whole place doubles as a shrine to Bob Marley.

Mint

BAR

(Map p540; Hat Chaweng) The scene on Green Mango Soi is too entertaining to keep the crowds corralled in this stylish club on or-

dinary nights. But the Mint is able to lure a few DJ heavyweights for a Samui spin on extraordinary nights. Watch the entertainment listings for special events.

NORTHERN & WEST COAST BEACHES

Woo Bar

LOUNGE

(Mae Nam) The W Retreat's signature lobby bar gives the word 'swish' a whole new meaning with cushion-clad pods of seating plunked in the middle of an expansive infinity pool that stretches out over the infinite horizon. This is, without a doubt, the best place on Samui for a sunset cocktail.

Nikki Beach

LOUNGE

(www.nikkibeach.com/kohsamui; Lipa Noi) The acclaimed luxury brand has brought its international *savoir faire* to the secluded west coast of Ko Samui. Expect everything you would find from a chic address in St Barts or St Tropez: haute cuisine, chic decor and gaggles of jetsetters. Themed brunch and dinner specials keep the masses coming throughout the week, and sleek bungalow accommodation is also on offer.

Pier

LOUNGE

(Map p542; Bo Phut) This sleek black box sticks out among Bo Phut's narrow Chinese tenements. It's the hippest address in Fisherman's Village, sporting multilevel terraces, a lively bar, and plenty of wide furniture to lounge around on and watch the rickety fishing vessels pull into the harbour.

Gecko Village

CLUB

(Map p542; Bo Phut) For electronica fans, Gecko Village is the original maven of beats. It's a beachfront bar and resort that has used its London connections to lure international DJs to Samui paradise. The New Year's Eve parties and Sunday sessions are now legendary thanks to the big names that grace the turntables.

Billabong Surf Club

BAR

(Map p542; Bo Phut) Billabong's all about Aussie Rules football – it's playing on the TV and the walls are smothered with memorabilia from Down Undah. There are great views of Ko Pha-Ngan and hearty portions of ribs and chops to go with your draught beer.

i Information

Dangers & Annoyances

As on Phuket, the rate of road accident fatalities on Samui is quite high. This is mainly due to the

large number of tourists who rent motorcycles only to find out that the winding roads, sudden tropical rains and frenzied traffic can be lethal. If you decide to rent a motorcycle, protect yourself by wearing a helmet, and ask for one that has a plastic visor. Even if you escape unscathed from a riding experience, we've heard reports that some shops will claim that you damaged your rental and will try to extort you for some serious cash.

Beach vendors are registered with the government and should all be wearing a numbered jacket. No peddler should cause an incessant disturbance – seek assistance if this occurs.

Emergency

Tourist police (Map p539; ☎0 7742 1281, emergency 1155) Based at the south of Na Thon.

Immigration Offices & Visas

Located about 2km south of Na Thon is Ko Samui's **Immigration Office** (Map p539; ☎0 7742 1069; ☉8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri). Officials here tend to issue the minimum rather than maximum visa extensions. During our visits here we've watched dozens of tourists wait through exhausting lines only to get curtly denied an extension for no particular reason. On a particularly bad day expect extensions to take the entire afternoon. See p766 for more details on visas.

Internet Access

There are countless places all over the island for internet access, even at the less popular beaches. Prices range from 1B to 2B per minute. Keep an eye out for restaurants that offer complimentary wi-fi service. Most accommodation offers a wi-fi connection; ironically you'll pay extra for it at high-end hotels.

Media & Maps

The Siam Map Company puts out quarterly booklets including a *Spa Guide*, *Dining Guide*, and an annual directory, which lists thousands of companies and hotels on the island. Its *Siam Map Company Samui Guide Map* is fantastic, free, and easily found throughout the island. Also worth a look is the *Samui Navigator* pamphlet. **Essential** (www.essential-samui) is a pocket-sized pamphlet focused on promoting Samui's diverse activities. *Samui Guide* looks more like a magazine and features mostly restaurants and attractions.

Medical Services

Ko Samui has four private hospitals, all near Chaweng's Tesco-Lotus supermarket on the east coast (where most of the tourists tend to gather). The government hospital in Na Thon has seen significant improvements in the last couple of years but the service is still a bit grim because

funding is based on the number of Samui's legal residents (which doesn't take into account the many illegal Burmese workers).

Bandon International Hospital (Map p542; ☎0 7742 5840, emergency 0 7742 5748)

Bangkok Samui Hospital (Map p540; ☎0 7742 9500, emergency 0 7742 9555) Your best bet for just about any medical problem.

Hyperbaric Chamber (Map p539; ☎0 7742 7427; Big Buddha Beach) The island's dive medicine specialists.

Samui International Hospital (Map p540; ☎0 7742 2272; www.sih.co.th; Hat Chaweng) Emergency ambulance service is available 24 hours and credit cards are accepted. Near the Amari Resort in Chaweng.

Money

Changing money isn't a problem on the east and north coasts, and in Na Thon. Multiple banks and foreign-exchange booths offer daily services and there's an ATM every couple of hundred metres. You should not have to pay credit card fees as you do on neighbouring Ko Tao.

Post

In several parts of the island there are privately run post-office branches charging a small commission. You can almost always leave your stamped mail with your accommodation.

Main post office (Map p539; Na Thon) Near the TAT office; not always reliable.

Tourist information

Essential (www.essential-samui) A pocket-sized pamphlet focused on promoting Samui's diverse activities.

Samui Guide (www.samuiguide.com) This guide looks more like a magazine and features mostly restaurants and attractions.

Samui Navigator (www.samuinavigaot.com) This pamphlet is also worth a look.

Siam Map Company (www.siammap.com) Puts out quarterly booklets including guides to spas and dining spots, and an annual directory, which lists thousands of companies and hotels on the island. Its *Siam Map Company Samui Guide Map* is fantastic, free and easily found throughout the island.

TAT office (Map p539; ☎0 7742 0504; Na Thon; ☉8.30am-4.30pm) At the northern end of Na Thon; this office is friendly, helpful and has handy brochures and maps – although travel agents throughout the island can provide similar information.

Getting There & Away

Air

Samui's airport is located in the northeast of the island near Big Buddha Beach. **Bangkok**

Airways (www.bangkokair.com) operates flights roughly every 30 minutes between Samui and Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport (50 minutes). Bangkok Air also flies direct from Samui to Phuket, Pattaya, Chiang Mai, Singapore and Hong Kong. **Firefly** (www.fireflyz.com.my) operates direct flights from Samui to Kuala Lumpur's Subang airport.

There is a **Bangkok Airways Office** (Map p540; ☎ 0 7742 0512-9) in Chaweng and another at the **airport** (☎ 0 7742 5011). The first (at 6am) and last (10pm) flights of the day are always the cheapest.

During the high season, make your flight reservations far in advance as seats often sell out. If the Samui flights are full, try flying into Surat Thani from Bangkok and taking a short ferry ride to Samui instead. Flights to Surat Thani are generally cheaper than a direct flight to the island, although they are much more of a hassle.

Boat

To reach Samui, the four main piers on the mainland are Ao Ban Don, Tha Thong, Don Sak and Khanom – Tha Thong (in central Surat) and Don Sak being the most common. On Samui, the three oft-used ports are Na Thon, Mae Nam and Big Buddha. Expect complimentary taxi transfers with high-speed ferry services.

There are frequent boat departures between Samui and Surat Thani. The hourly Seatran ferry is a common option. Ferries take one to five hours, depending on the boat. A couple of these departures can connect with the train station in Phun Phin (for a nominal extra fee). The slow night boat to Samui leaves from central Surat Thani each night at 11pm, reaching Na Thon around 5am. It returns from Na Thon at 9pm, arriving at around 3am. Watch your bags on this boat.

There are almost a dozen daily departures between Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan. These leave from the Na Thon, Mae Nam or Big Buddha pier and take from 20 minutes to one hour. The boats departing from Big Buddha service Hat Rin, and the other boats alight at Thong Sala. From the same piers, there are also around six daily departures between Samui and Ko Tao. These take 1¼ to 2½ hours.

Bus & Train

A bus-ferry combo is more convenient than a train-ferry package for getting to Ko Samui because you don't have to switch transportation in Phun Phin. However, the trains are much more comfortable and spacious – especially at night. If you prefer the train, you can get off at Chumphon and catch the Lomprayah catamaran service the rest of the way.

i Getting Around

Motorbikes You can rent motorcycles (and bicycles) from almost every resort on the island. The going rate is 200B per day, but for longer periods try to negotiate a better rate.

Söng-tää-ou Drivers of *söng-tää-ou* love to try to overcharge you, so it's always best to ask a third party for current rates, as they can change with the season. These vehicles run regularly during daylight hours. It's about 50B to travel between beaches, and no more than 100B to travel halfway across the island. Figure about 20B for a five-minute ride on a motorcycle taxi.

Taxis On Samui service is quite chaotic due to the plethora of cabs. In the past taxi fares were unwieldy; these days prices are more standardised across the islands (though fares are still ridiculously inflated compared to Bangkok). Taxis typically charge around 500B for an airport transfer. Some Chaweng travel agencies can arrange minibus taxis for less.

Ko Pha-Ngan

เกาะพินัน

POP 11,000

In the family of southern Gulf islands, Ko Pha-Ngan sits in the crystal sea between Ko Samui, its business-savvy older brother, and little Ko Tao, the spunky younger brother full of dive-centric energy. Ko Pha-Ngan is a chilled out middle child who is a beach bum with tattered dreadlocks, a tattoo of a Chinese serenity symbol, and a penchant for white nights and bikini-clad pool parties.

The scenic cape of Hat Rin has long been the darling destination of this laid-back paradise. Sunrise Beach started hosting the world-famous Full Moon parties long before Alex Garland's *The Beach* inspired many to strap on a rucksack. Today, thousands of visitors still flock to the island's sands for an epic trance-a-thon fuelled by adrenaline and a couple of other substances...

But like any textbook teenager, this angst-ridden island can't decide what it wants to be when it grows up. Should the party personality persist or will the stunning and secluded northern beaches finally come out from under Hat Rin's shadow?

While Pha-Ngan's slacker vibe and reputation will no doubt dominate for years to come, the island is secretly starting to creep upmarket. Every year, tired old shacks are being replaced by crisp modern abodes. In Hat Rin, you will be hard-pressed to find a room on Sunrise Beach for less than 1000B. Soon, the phrase 'private infinity pool' and 'personal butler' will find a permanent place

Ko Pha-Ngan



in the island's lexicon, replacing 'pass the dutch' and 'another whiskey bucket please'. But don't fret just yet – the vast inland jungle continues to feel undiscovered, and there are still plenty of secluded bays in which you can string up a hammock and watch the tide roll in.

Sights

For those who tire of beach-bumming, this large jungle island has many natural features to explore including mountains, waterfalls and, most importantly, some of the most spectacular beaches in all of Thailand.

Beaches & Waterfalls

There are many waterfalls throughout the island's interior, four of which gush throughout the year.

Nam Tok Than Sadet

WATERFALL

These falls feature boulders carved with the royal insignia of Rama V, Rama VII and

Rama IX. King Rama V enjoyed this hidden spot so much that he returned over a dozen times between 1888 and 1909. The river waters of Khlong Than Sadet are now considered sacred and used in royal ceremonies. Also near the eastern coast, **Than Prawet** is a series of chutes that snake inland for approximately 2km.

Nam Tok Phaeng

WATERFALL

In the centre of the island, Nam Tok Phaeng is protected by a national park; this waterfall is a pleasant reward after a short, but rough, hike. Continue the adventure and head up to **Khao Ra**, the highest mountain on the island at 625m. Those with eagle-eyes will spot wild crocodiles, monkeys, snakes, deer and boar along the way, and the **viewpoint** from the top is spectacular – on a clear day you can see Ko Tao. Although the trek isn't arduous, it is very easy to lose one's way, and we *highly* recommend hiring an escort in Ban

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF FULL MOON FUN

No one knows exactly when or how these crazy parties got started – many believe it began in 1987 or 1988 as someone's 'going away party', but none of that is relevant now. Today, thousands of bodies converge monthly on the kerosene-soaked sands of Sunrise Beach for an epic trance-a-thon. Crowds can reach an outrageous 40,000 partiers during high season, while the low season still sees a respectable 5000 pilgrims.

If you can't make your trip coincide with a full moon but still want to cover yourself in fluorescent paint, fear not – enterprising locals have organised a slew of other reasons to get sloshed. There are Black Moon Parties (at Ban Khai), Half Moon Parties (at Ban Tai) and Moon-set Parties (at Hat Chaophao) just to name a few.

Some critics claim that the party is starting to lose its carefree flavour, especially since the island's government is trying to charge a 100B entrance fee to partygoers. Despite the disheartening schemes hatched by money-hungry locals, the night of the Full Moon is still the ultimate partying experience, so long as one follows the unofficial Ten Commandments of Full Moon fun:

- » Thou shalt arrive in Hat Rin at least three days early to nail down accommodation during the pre-Full Moon rush of backpackers (see p561).
- » Thou shalt double-check the party dates as sometimes they coincide with Buddhist holidays and are rescheduled.
- » Thou shalt secure all valuables, especially when staying in budget bungalows.
- » Thou shalt savour some delicious fried fare in Chicken Corner before the revelry begins.
- » Thou shalt wear protective shoes during the sandy celebration, unless thou want a tetanus shot.
- » Thou shalt cover thyself with swirling patterns of neon body paint.
- » Thou shalt visit Magic Mountain or the Rock for killer views of the heathens below.
- » Thou shalt not sample the drug buffet, nor shalt thou swim in the ocean under the influence of alcohol.
- » Thou shalt stay in a group of two or more people, especially if thou art a woman, and especially when returning home at the end of the evening.
- » Thou shalt party until the sun comes up and have a great time.

Madeua Wan (near the falls). The local guides have crude signs posted in front of their homes, and, if they're around, they'll take you up to the top for 500B. Most of them only speak Thai.

Hat Khuat

BEACH

Also called Bottle Beach, Hat Khuat is a classic fave. Visitors flock to this shore for a relaxing day of swimming and snorkelling – some opt to stay the night at one of the several bungalow operations along the beach. For additional seclusion, try the isolated beaches on the east coast, which include **Than Sadet**, **Hat Yuan**, **Hat Thian** and the teeny **Ao Thong Reng**. For additional enchanting beaches, consider doing a day trip to the stunning **Ang Thong Marine National Park** (p586).

Wát

Remember to change out of your beach clothes when visiting one of the 20 wát on Ko Pha-Ngan. Most temples are open during daylight hours.

The oldest temple on the island is **Wat Phu Khao Noi**, near the hospital in Thong Sala. While the site is open to visitors throughout the day, the monks are only around in the morning. **Wat Pho**, near Ban Tai, has a **herbal sauna** (admission 50B; 12:3-6pm) accented with natural lemongrass. The **Chinese Temple** is believed to give visitors good luck. It was constructed about 20 years ago after a visiting woman had a vision of the Chinese Buddha, who instructed her to build a fire-light for the island. **Wat Khao Tham**, also near Ban Tai, sits high on a hill and has resident female monks. At the temple there is a bulletin

board detailing a meditation retreat taught by an American-Australian couple. For additional information, write in advance to Wat Khao Tham, PO Box 8, Ko Pha-Ngan, Surat Thani 84280.



Activities

Diving & Snorkelling

With Ko Tao, the high-energy diving behemoth, just a few kilometres away, Ko Pha-Ngan enjoys a much quieter, more laid-back diving scene focused on fun diving rather than certifications. A recent drop in Open Water certification prices has made local prices competitive with Ko Tao next door. Group sizes tend to be smaller on Ko Pha-Ngan since the island has less divers in general.

Like the other islands in the Samui Archipelago, Pha-Ngan has several small reefs dispersed around the island. The clear favourite snorkelling spot is **Ko Ma**, a small island in the northwest connected to Ko Pha-Ngan by a charming sandbar. There are also some rock reefs of interest on the eastern side of the island.

A major perk of diving from Ko Pha-Ngan is the proximity to **Sail Rock** (Hin Bai), the best dive site in the Gulf of Thailand and a veritable beacon for whale sharks. This large pinnacle lies about 14km north of the island. An abundance of corals and large tropical fish can be seen at depths of 10m to 30m, and there's a rocky vertical swim-through called 'The Chimney'.

Dive shops on Ko Tao sometimes visit Sail Rock, however the focus tends to be more on swallow reefs (for newbie divers) and the shark-infested waters at Chumphon Pinnacle. The most popular trips departing from Ko Pha-Ngan are three-site day trips which stop at **Chumphon Pinnacle**, Sail Rock and one of the other premiere sites in the area (see boxed text p573). These three-stop trips cost from around 3650B to 3800B and include a full lunch. Two-dive trips to Sail Rock will set you back around 2350B to 2500B.

The following list includes the main operators on the island with a solid reputation.

Reefers

DIVING

(☎08 6471 4045; www.reefersdiving.com) Based at Shiralea (p564), this is one of the newer outfits on the island. Vic, the owner, and his gaggle of instructors are chilled and professional. Recommended.

Lotus Diving

DIVING

(☎0 7737 4142; www.lotusdiving.net) This dive centre has top-notch instructors, and owns not one, but two beautiful boats (that's two more vessels than most of the other operations on Ko Pha-Ngan). Trips can be booked at their office in Chalok Lam, or at the Backpackers Information Centre (p570). Recommended.

Haad Yao Divers

DIVING

(☎08 6279 3085; www.haadyaodivers.com) Established in 1997, this dive operator has garnered a strong reputation by maintaining European standards of safety and customer service.

Other Activities

Hiking and snorkelling day trips to **Ang Thong Marine National Park** (p586) generally depart from Ko Samui, but recently tour operators are starting to shuttle tourists from Ko Pha-Ngan as well. Ask at your accommodation for details about boat trips as companies often come and go due to unstable petrol prices.

Many of the larger accommodation options can hook you up with a variety of aquatic equipment such as jet skis and kayaks, and the friendly staff at Backpackers Information Centre (p570) can attend to any of your other water-sports needs.

Wake Up

WAKEBOARDING

(☎08 7283 6755; www.wakeupwakeboarding.com; ☺Jan-Oct) Jamie passes along his infinite wakeboarding wisdom to eager wannabes at his small water sports school in Chalok Lam. Fifteen minutes of 'air time' will set you back 1500B (2500B for 30 minutes), which is excellent value considering you get one-on-one instruction. Kite-boarding, wake-skating and waterskiing sessions are also available, as are round-the-island day trips (2000B per person; a six-person quorum needed).

Eco Nature Tour

TOUR

(☎08 4850 6273) This exceedingly popular outfit offers a 'best of' island trip, which includes elephant trekking, snorkelling and a visit to the Chinese temple, a stunning viewpoint and Phang waterfall. The day trip, which costs 1500B, departs at 9am and returns around 3pm. Bookings can be made at its office in Thong Sala or at the Backpackers Information Centre. **Pha-Ngan Safari** (☎0 7737 4159, 08 1895 3783) offers a similar trip for 1900B.

Sleeping

Ko Pha-Ngan's legendary history of laid-back revelry has solidified its reputation as *the* stomping ground for the gritty backpacker lifestyle. Recently, however, the island is starting to see a shift towards a more upmarket clientele. Many local mainstays have collapsed their bamboo huts and constructed newer, sleeker accommodation aimed at the ever-growing legion of 'flashpackers'.

On other parts of the island, new tracts of land are being cleared for Samui-esque five-star resorts. But backpackers fear not; it'll still be many years before the castaway lifestyle goes the way of the dodo. For now, Ko Pha-Ngan can revel in its three distinct classes of lodging: pinch-a-penny shacks, trendy midrange hang-outs, and blow-the-bank luxury.

Hat Rin sees a huge number of visitors compared to the rest of the island. Party pilgrims flock to this picturesque peninsula for the legendary festivities, and although most of them sleep through the daylight hours, the setting remains quite picturesque despite the errant beer bottle in the sand. The southern part of Sunrise Beach is starting to reek of kerosene due to the nightly fire-related shenanigans at Drop-In Bar – needless to say it's best to sunbathe at the quieter northern part of the sand.

Hat Rin also caters to a subculture of seclusion-seekers who crave a deserted slice of sand. The northern and eastern coasts offer just that – a place to escape.

The following sleeping options are organised into five sections: we start in Hat Rin, move along the southern coast, head up the west side, across the northern beaches and down the quiet eastern shore.

HAT RIN

The thin peninsula of Hat Rin features three separate beaches. Hat Rin Nok (Sunrise Beach) is the epicentre of Full Moon tomfoolery, Hat Rin Nai (Sunset Beach) is the less impressive stretch of sand on the far side of the tiny promontory, and Hat Seekantang (also known as Hat Leela), just south of Hat Rin Nai, is a smaller, more private beach. The three beaches are linked by Ban Hat Rin (Hat Rin Town) – a small inland collection of restaurants and bars.

Needless to say, the prices listed here are meaningless during periods of maximum lunar orbicularity. Also, during Full Moon events, bungalow operations expect you to

stay for a minimum number of days (around four or five). If you plan to arrive the day of the party (or even the day before), we strongly suggest booking a room in advance, or else you'll probably have to sleep on the beach (which you might end up doing anyway). Full Mooners can also stay on Samui and take one of the hourly speedboat shuttles (from 550B) to access the festivities.

Sarikantang

RESORT \$\$\$

(Map p560; ☎ 0 7737 5055; www.sarikantang.com; Hat Seekantang; bungalows 1400-6200B; 🍷🍴🍷) Don't get too strung out over trying to pronounce the resort's name – you can simply call this place 'heaven'. Cream-coloured cabins, framed with teak posts and lintels, are sprinkled among swaying palms and crumbling winged statuettes. Inside, the rooms look like the set of a photo shoot for an interior design magazine.

Pha-Ngan Bayshore Resort

RESORT \$\$

(Map p560; ☎ 0 7737 5227; www.phanganbayshore.com; Hat Rin Nok; r 1700-3200B; 🍷🍴🍷) After a much-needed overhaul in 2009, this hotel-style operation has primed itself for the ever-increasing influx of flashpackers in Hat Rin. Sweeping beach views and a giant swimming pool make Pha-Ngan Bayshore one of the top addresses on Sunrise Beach.

Seaview Sunrise

BUNGALOWS \$

(Map p560; www.seaviewsunrise.com; Hat Rin Nok; r 500-800; 🍷🍴) As far as budget digs are concerned, this is the only solid option for Full Moon revellers who want a sleeping spot within inches of the tide. Huts are sturdy and perfectly utilitarian. The polished wooden interiors are splashed with the occasional burst of neon paint from the ghosts of parties past. Try for a bungalow away from the small canal to avoid the mosquitos.

Palita Lodge

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(Map p560; ☎ 0 7737 5172; www.palitalodge.com; Hat Rin Nok; bungalows 1800-5900B; 🍷🍴🍷) Smack in the heart of the action, Palita is a tribute to the never-ending party that is Hat Rin's Sunrise Beach. Spacious concrete bungalows, with wooden accents and modern design elements, are neatly pressed together on this beachy wedge of sand and shrubs. Week-long bookings are a must during Full Moon revelry.

Delight

GUEST HOUSE \$

(Map p560; ☎ 0 7737 5527; www.delightresort.com; Ban Hat Rin; r 700-2200B; 🍷🍴🍷) Tucked behind the bright yellow Kodak sign in

Hat Rin



Hat Rin

Sleeping

- | | |
|------------------------------------|----|
| 1 Blue Marine..... | B2 |
| 2 Cocohut Village..... | C3 |
| 3 Coral Bungalows..... | A1 |
| 4 Delight..... | B2 |
| 5 Friendly Resort..... | B2 |
| 6 Neptune's Villa..... | B2 |
| 7 Palita Lodge..... | C1 |
| 8 Paradise Bungalows..... | C2 |
| 9 Pha-Ngan Bayshore
Resort..... | B1 |
| 10 Rin Beach Resort..... | B2 |
| 11 Same Same..... | B2 |
| 12 Sarikantang..... | C3 |
| 13 Sea Breeze Bungalow..... | B3 |
| 14 Seaview Sunrise..... | C1 |
| 15 Tommy Resort..... | C1 |

Eating

- | | |
|--------------------|----|
| 16 Lazy House..... | B2 |
|--------------------|----|

- | | |
|-----------------------|----------|
| 17 Little Home..... | B2 |
| 18 Lucky Crab..... | B2 |
| Mama Schnitzel..... | (see 20) |
| 19 Monna Lisa..... | B2 |
| 20 Mr K..... | B2 |
| 21 Nic's..... | B2 |
| 22 Om Ganesh..... | B2 |
| Same Same Burger..... | (see 11) |

Drinking

- | | |
|-------------------------|----|
| 23 Cactus Bar..... | C2 |
| 24 Drop-In Bar..... | C2 |
| 25 Mellow Mountain..... | C1 |
| 26 Rock..... | C2 |
| 27 Sunrise..... | C1 |
| 28 Zoom/Vinyl..... | C2 |

Entertainment

- | | |
|--------------------|----------|
| Club Paradise..... | (see 8) |
| Tommy..... | (see 15) |

the centre of Hat Rin, Delight offers some of the best lodging around. Spic-and-span hotel rooms come with subtle designer details (such as peacock murals) and are sandwiched between an inviting swimming pool and a lazy lagoon peppered with lily pads.

Cocohut Village

RESORT \$\$\$

(Map p560; ☎ 0 7737 5368; www.cocohut.com; Hat Seekantang; bungalows 2800-12,000B; *@☎) This super-social place is the unofficial gathering spot for vacationing Israelis. In fact, Cocohut is so happenin' that guests might

forget that they are just up the street from the brouhaha on Sunrise Beach. The priciest lodging options, such as the cliff villas and beachfront bungalows, are some of the best bets in Hat Rin.

Tommy Resort

RESORT \$\$
(Map p560; ☎ 0 7737 5215; www.phangantommyresort.com; Hat Rin Nok; r 1490-8000B; 🏠🍷🍹) Tommy is a trendy address in the heart of Hat Rin, striking a balance between chic boutique and carefree backpacker hang-out. The rectangular swimming pool charges things up, since every other man-made body of water on the island looks like it was manufactured at the kidney-shaped pool factory.

Sea Breeze Bungalow

BUNGALOWS \$\$
(Map p560; ☎ 0 7737 5162; Ban Hat Rin; bungalows 500-8000B; 🏠🍷) Sea Breeze gets a good report card from our readers, and we agree; the labyrinth of secluded hillside cottages is an ideal hammocked retreat for any type of traveller. Several bungalows, poised high on stilts, deliver stunning views of Hat Rin and the sea.

Lighthouse Bungalows

BUNGALOWS \$
(off Map p560; ☎ 0 7737 5075; www.lighthousebungalows.com; Hat Seekantang; bungalows 300-1200B) Hidden at the far end of Hat Rin, this low-key collection of humble huts gathers along a sloping terrain punctuated by towering palms. To access this secluded resort, walk through Leela Beach Bungalows (don't bother stopping) and follow the wooden boardwalk as it curves to the left (southeast) around the sea-swept boulders.

Coral Bungalows

RESORT \$
(Map p560; ☎ 0 7737 5023; www.coralhaadrin.com; Hat Rin Nai; bungalows 500-1000B; 🏠🍷🍹) This party-centric paradise has firmly planted its flag in 'Backpackerland' as the go-to spot for a booze-addled rompfest. By day, sun-worshippers straddle beachside chaises. Then, by night, like a vampire, Coral transforms into a sinister pool-party machine fuelled by one too many vodka Red Bulls.

Same Same

GUEST HOUSE \$
(Map p560; ☎ 0 7737 5200; www.same-same.com; Ban Hat Rin; r 500-800B; 🏠🍷) Although still a super-sociable spot for Scandinavians during the Full Moon madness, Same Same is but a faint flicker of what it used to be – especially during the quieter parts of the month.

Paradise Bungalows

BUNGALOWS \$
(Map p560; ☎ 0 7737 5244; Hat Rin Nok; bungalows 300-1200B; 🏠) The world-famous Full Moon Party was hatched at this scruffy batch of bungalows, and the place has been living on its name fame ever since. The backpackers keep on coming to wax nostalgic, although the grounds are starting to look more like a junkyard now that the family has divvied up to land into several small 'resorts'. Paradise lost.

Stroll down Sunset Rd to find the following:

Neptune's Villa

RESORT \$\$
(Map p560; ☎ 0 7737 5251; http://heptunesvilla.net; Hat Rin Nai; r from 2000B; 🏠) An old favourite among travellers, Neptune's is an ever-expanding spot with a mixed bag of accommodation spread across several motel-style units.

Rin Beach Resort

RESORT \$\$
(Map p560; ☎ 0 7737 5112; www.rinbeachresort.com; Hat Rin Nai; bungalows 1200-10,000B; 🏠🍷🍹) Giant amphorae, spewing forth gushes of water, welcome weary travellers as they tumble off the wooden ferry. Cottages are bright and airy with dark cherry-wood accents and colourful sutra paintings.

Friendly Resort

RESORT \$\$
(Map p560; ☎ 0 7737 5167; friendly_resort@hotmail.com; Hat Rin Nai; r from 1000B; 🏠🍷🍹) Looking out over the pier, Friendly has a tangle of accommodation wrapped around a small central pool.

Blue Marine

BUNGALOWS \$
(Map p560; ☎ 0 7737 5079; www.blumarinephanagan.com; Hat Rin Nai; bungalows 600-1200B; 🏠🍷) Prim concrete bungalows topped by shimmering blue-tiled roofs.

SOUTHERN BEACHES

The accommodation along the southern coast is the best bang for your baht on Ko Pha-Ngan. There are fleeting views of the islands in the Ang Thong Marine National Park; however, the southern beaches don't have the postcard-worthy turquoise waters you might be longing for. This section starts at the port in Thong Sala and follows the coast east towards Hat Rin.

Ban Tai

The waters at Ban Tai tend to be shallow and opaque, especially during low season, but lodging options are well-priced compared to

other parts of the island, and you're not too far from Hat Rin.



Coco Garden

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎0 7737 7721, 08 6073 1147; www.cocogardens.com; bungalows 450-1250B; 🏠🚰🚰) The best budget spot along the southern coast, Coco Garden one-ups the nearby resorts with well-manicured grounds and sparkling bungalows that are almost pathologically clean.

B52

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(www.b52-beach-resort-phangan.info; bungalows 1650-4000B; 🏠🚰🚰) Find your very own love shack at B52's campus of Thai-styled bungalows sporting plenty of thatch, polished concrete floors and rustic tropical tree trunks.

Milky Bay Resort

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎0 7723 8566; http://milkybaythailand.com; bungalows 2300-13,200B; 🏠🚰🚰) Milky white walls, which permeate the grounds, are peppered with large black stones resembling the spots on a cow. These bovine bulwarks snake through the resort linking the airy, thatched bungalows to the sea.

Ban Khai

Like Ban Tai, the beaches aren't the most stunning, but the accommodation is cheap and there are beautiful views of Ang Thong Marine National Park in the distance.

Boom's Cafe Bungalows

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎0 7723 8318; www.boomscafe.com; bungalows 400-1000B; 🏠) Staying at Boom's is like visiting the Thai family you never knew you had. The friendly owners lovingly tend their sandy acreage and dote on the contented clientele. No one seems to mind that there's no swimming pool, since the curling tide rolls right up to your doorstep. Boom's is located at the far eastern corner of Ban Khai, near Hat Rin.

Mac Bay

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎0 7723 8443; bungalows 500-1500B; 🏠🚰) Home to the Black Moon Party (another lunar excuse for Ko Pha-Ngan to go wild), Mac Bay is a sandy slice of Ban Khai where even the cheaper bungalows are spic and span. At beer o'clock, grab a shaded spot on the sand and watch the sun dance amorphous shadows over the distant islands of Ang Thong Marine Park.

Morning Star

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎0 7737 7756; www.morningstar-resort.info; bungalows 1600-5390B; 🏠🚰🚰) This collection of

wooden and concrete jungle cottages has spotless interiors; some rooms are furnished with noticeably ornate dressers and vanities, others have subtle dark-wood trimming. A dozen white wooden beach chairs orbit the adorable kidney-bean-shaped pool.

WEST COAST BEACHES

Now that there are two smooth roads between Thong Sala and Chalok Lam, the west coast has seen a lot of development. The atmosphere is a pleasant mix between the east coast's quiet seclusion and Hat Rin's sociable vibe, although some of the beaches along the western shores (particularly towards the south) aren't as picturesque as the other parts of the island.

Ao Nai Wok to Si Thanu

Close to Thong Sala, the resorts peppered along this breezy strip mingle with patches of gnarled mangroves. Despite the lack of appealing beaches, the prices are cheap and the sunsets are memorable.



Chills Resort

RESORT \$\$

(☎08 9875 2100; www.chillsresort.com; Ao Srithanu; r from 1200B; 🏠🚰🚰) Set along a stunning and secluded stretch of stony outcrops, Chills' cluster of delightfully simple-but-modern rooms all have peaceful ocean views letting in plenty of sunlight and sea breezes. The natural rock-pool perched along the breakers is the perfect place to swig an afternoon cocktail while watching the sunset.



Shambhala Bungalow Village

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎08 9875 2100; www.shambhala-phangan.com; Ao Nai Wok; bungalows 600-1200B; 🏠🚰) Rather than bulldozing tired old beachside bungalows, the owners of Shambhala have lovingly restored a batch of huts and added loads of personal touches that make this not only a memorable place to stay, but also a very comfortable one for those with small coffers. Expect fresh linen, carved wood, artistic lighting and neatly designed bathrooms.

Loy Fa

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎0 7737 7319; loyfabungalow@yahoo.com; Ao Srithanu; bungalows 300-800B; 🏠🚰) Loy Fa scores high marks for its friendly, French-speaking Thai staff, charming gardens and sturdy huts guarding sweeping ocean views. Modern bungalows tumble down the promontory onto an uberprivate sliver of ash-coloured sand.

Grand Sea Resort

RESORT \$\$

(☎ 7737 7777; www.grandsearesort.com; Ao Nai Wok; bungalows 1200-3000B; 🍷🍷🍷) A good choice for those wanting a bit of sand close to Thong Sala, Grand Sea feels like a collection of wooden Thai spirit houses.

Hat Chaophao

Like Hat Yao up the coast, this rounded beach is lined with a variety of bungalow operations. There's an inland lake further south, and a 7-Eleven to cure your midnight munchies.

Sunset Cove

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎ 7734 9211; www.thaisunsetcove.com; bungalows 1200-3580B; 🍷🍷🍷) There's a feeling of Zen symmetry among the forested assortment of boutique bungalows; the towering bamboo shoots are evenly spaced along the cobbled paths weaving through brush and boulders. The beachside abodes are particularly elegant, sporting slatted rectangular windows and barrel-basined bathtubs.

Pha-Ngan Paragon

BUNGALOWS \$\$\$

(☎ 08 4728 6064; www.phanganparagon.com; bungalows 2250-13,100B; 🍷🍷🍷) A tiny hide-away with seven rooms, the Paragon has decor that incorporates stylistic elements from ancient Khmer, India and Thailand, without forfeiting any modern amenities. The 'royal bedroom' deserves a special mention – apparently the canopied bed has been imported from Kashmir.

Hat Yao & Hat Son

One of the busier beaches along the west coast, Hat Yao sports a swimmable beach, numerous resorts and a few extra services such as ATMs and convenience stores.

Shiralea

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 08 0719 9256; www.shiralea.com; Hat Yao; bungalows 500B; 🍷🍷🍷) Although this batch of fresh-faced poolside bungalows is not right on the beach (about 100m away), you'll be hard-pressed to find a better deal on the island. Reefers, the on-site dive outfit offers world-class diving at your doorstep, and don't forget to ask the friendly owner where the name Shiralea comes from – we're pretty sure you'll be quite surprised.

Haad Yao Bay View Resort

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 7734 9193; www.haadyao-bayviewresort.com; Hat Yao; r & bungalows 1500-7000B; 🍷🍷🍷) Still sparkling after a facelift in 2008, this conglomeration of bungalows and hotel-

style accommodation looks like a tropical mirage on Hat Yao's northern headland. Vacationers, in various states of undress, linger around the large turquoise swimming pool catching rays and Zs. Others nest in their private suites amid polished hardwood floors and wicker daybeds.

Haad Son Resort

RESORT \$\$

(☎ 7734 9104; www.haadson.info; Hat Son; bungalows 1000-8000B; 🍷🍷🍷) The word 'complex' has a double meaning at this vast resort; we suggest leaving a trail of breadcrumbs along the serpentine paths if you ever want to find the way back to your room. The poshest rooms aren't worth the baht, so go for the budget digs; they're simple, but you'll have access to all of the on-site amenities.

Tantawan Bungalows

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 7734 9108; www.tantawanbungalow.com; Hat Son; bungalows 450-550B; 🍷) This charming teak nest, tucked among jungle fronds, is dripping with clinking chandeliers made from peach coral and khaki-coloured seashells. Guests can take a dip in the trapezoidal swimming pool or enjoy the sunrise on their small bamboo porches. Don't forget to try the tasty on-site restaurant. Diners sit in a sea of geometric cushions while gobbling up some of the tastiest Thai and French-inspired dishes on the island.

High Life

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 7734 9114; www.highlifebungalow.com; Hat Yao; bungalows 500-2000B; 🍷🍷🍷) We can't decide what's more conspicuous: the dramatic ocean views from the infinity-edged swimming pool, or the blatant double entendre in the resort's name. True to its moniker, the 25 bungalows, of various shapes and sizes, sit on a palmed outcropping of granite soaring high above the cerulean sea. Advance bookings will set you back an extra 200B.

Haad Yao See Through Boutique Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 7734 9315; www.haadyao.net; Hat Yao; r from 1750B; 🍷🍷) After a slice of Hat Yao beach was cut up among brothers, 'See Through' came into existence along a thin tract of land. Rooms are decorated with a vibrant swatchbook of yellows, greens and reds, however the exterior – an imposing block of polished concrete – looks more construction site than boutique chic.

Hat Salad

Hat Salad is our favourite beach on the west coast, and it isn't short on quality digs set along the inviting sand.

Cookies Salad

RESORT \$\$

(☎ 7734 9125, 08 3181 7125; www.cookies-phangan.com; bungalows 1500-3000B; ☹) The resort with a tasty name has delicious Balinese-styled bungalows orbiting a two-tiered lap pool tiled in various shades of blue. Shaggy thatching and dense tropical foliage gives the realm a certain rustic quality, although you won't want for creature comforts.

Green Papaya

BUNGALOWS \$\$\$

(☎ 7737 4182; www.greenpapayaresort.com; bungalows 3600-8500B; ☹@☹☹) The polished wooden bungalows at Green Papaya are a clear standout along the lovely beach at Hat Salad, however they come at quite a hefty price.

Salad Hut

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎ 7734 9246; www.saladhut.com; bungalows 1400-4000B; ☹@☹☹) Wholly unpretentious yet sharing a beach with some distinctly upscale options, this small clutch of Thai-style bungalows sits but a stone's throw from the rolling tide. Watch the sun gently set below the waves from your lacquered teak porch.

Salad Beach Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎ 7734 9149; www.phangan-saladbeachresort.com; bungalows 1900-4900B; ☹@☹☹) A full-service retreat along the sands of Salad. Room decor employs an unusual palette of colours, but the grounds are tasteful and understated – especially around the pool.

Ao Mae Hat

The northwest tip of the island has excellent ocean vistas, and little Ko Ma is connected to Pha-Ngan by a stunning sandbar.

Royal Orchid

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 7737 4182; royal_orchid_maehead@hotmail.com; bungalows 300-800B; ☹@) Handsome backpacker bungalows are arranged like a zipper along a slender garden path – most have fleeting views of the serene beach and idyllic sandbar that extends to scenic Ko Ma offshore.

NORTHERN BEACHES

Stretching from Chalok Lam to Thong Nai Pan, the dramatic northern coast is a wild jungle with several stunning and secluded beaches – it's the most scenic coast on the island.

Chalok Lam (Chaloklum) & Hat Khom

The cramped fishing village at Chalok Lam is like no other place on Ko Pha-Ngan. The conglomeration of teak shanties and huts is a palpable reminder that the wide-reaching hand of globalisation has yet to touch some parts of the world. *Sörng-tāa-ou* ply the route from here to Thong Sala for around 100B per person. There's a dirt road leading from Chalok Lam to Hat Khom, and water taxis are available as well (50B to 100B).

Malibu

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 7737 4013; Chalok Lam; bungalows 300-1300B; ☹) The casual vibe around the large backyard beach (over the lagoon bridge) sets Malibu apart from the other budget bungalows around Chalok Lam. A drink-wielding hut, stationed on the private sandbar, lures guests of every ilk. The cheapest huts are a bit rough around the edges, although the new round bungalow-like concoctions are overpriced.

Mandalai

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 7737 4316; www.mymandalai.com; Chalok Lam; r 2750-5600B; ☹@☹) Like an ash-white Riyadh from a distant Arabian land, this small boutique hotel quietly towers over the surrounding shantytown of fishermen's huts. Floor-to-ceiling windows command views of tangerine-coloured fishing boats in the bay, and there's an intimate wading pool hidden in the inner cloister.

Bottle Beach (Hat Khuat)

This isolated dune has garnered a reputation as a low-key getaway, and has thus become quite popular. During high season, places can fill up fast so it's best to try to arrive early. Grab a long-tail taxi boat from Chalok Lam for 50B to 120B (depending on the boat's occupancy).

Bottle Beach II

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 7744 5156; bungalows 350-500B) At the far eastern corner of the beach, this is the spot where penny pinchers can live out their castaway fantasies.

Smile

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 08 1956 3133; smilebeach@hotmail.com; bungalows 400-700B) At the far western corner of the beach, Smile features an assortment of wooden huts that climb up a forested hill. The two-storey bungalows (700B) are our favourite.

Thong Nai Pan

The pair of rounded bays at Thong Nai Pan looks a bit like buttocks; Ao Thong Nai Pan Yai (*yai* means 'big') is the southern half, and Ao Thong Nai Pan Noi (*noi* means 'little') curves just above. These beaches have been increasing in popularity over the last few years, as bamboo bungalows are being razed to make room for elaborate resorts.

Anantara Rasananda

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 7723 9555; www.rasananda.com; villas from 5000B; 🍷🍷🍷) Rasananda represents the future of Ko Pha-Ngan. This attempt at five-star luxury is a sweeping sand-side property with a smattering of semi-detached villas – many bedecked with private plunge pools. A savvy mix of modern and traditional *sāh-lah* styling prevails, and new Anantara management means that this high-end stalwart is here to stay.

Dolphin

BUNGALOWS \$

(bungalows 500-1400B; 🍷🍷) This hidden retreat gives yuppie travellers a chance to rough it in style, while granola-types will soak up every inch of the laid-back charm. Quiet afternoons are spent lounging on the comfy cushions in one of the small pagodas hidden throughout the jungle. Lodging is only available on a first-come basis.

Longtail Beach Resort

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 7744 5018; www.longtailbeachresort.com; bungalows 390-1150B; 🍷🍷) Effortlessly adorable, and one of the last remaining batches of beach bungalows in the area, Longtail offers backpackers a taste of Pha-Ngan's past with its charming thatch-and-bamboo abodes.

EAST COAST BEACHES

Robinson Crusoe, eat your heart out. The east coast is the ultimate hermit hang-out. For the most part you'll have to hire a boat to get to these beaches, but water taxis are available in Thong Sala and Hat Rin.

Than Sadet & Thong Reng

Mai Pen Rai

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 7744 5090; www.thansadet.com; bungalows 600B; @) *Mai pen rai* is the Thai equivalent of 'don't worry, be happy', which isn't too surprising since this bay elicits nothing but sedate smiles. Bungalows mingle with Plaa's next door on the hilly headland, and sport panels of straw weaving with gabled roofs.

Treehouse

BUNGALOWS \$

(treehouse.kp@googlemail.com; bungalows from 200B) The legendary backpacker hang-out of

Ko Chang (the big Ko Chang) has recently set up shop along the secluded waters of Thong Reng. Follow the cheery plastic flowers over the hill from Than Sadet to find uberbasic digs drenched in bright shades of paint.

Hat Thian

The Sanctuary

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎ 08 1271 3614; www.thesanctuarythailand.com; dm 200B, bungalows 450-5450B) If you're looking for Alex Garland's mythical beach, this is about as close as it gets. A friendly enclave promoting relaxation, the Sanctuary is an inviting haven offering splendid lodgings while also functioning as a holistic retreat (think yoga classes and detox sessions). Accommodation, in various manifestations of twigs, is scattered around the resort, married to the natural surroundings. You'll want to Nama-stay forever.

Beam Bungalows

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 07 7927 2854; bungalows 300-700B) Beam is set back from the beach and tucked behind a coconut palm grove. Charming wooden huts have dangling hammocks out front, and big bay windows face the ocean through the swaying palms.

Hat Yuan

Hat Yuan has a few bungalow operations, and is quite secluded as there are no roads connecting this little beach to Hat Rin down the coast.

Barcelona

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 07 7737 5113; bungalows 300-700B) Solid wood huts come in two shades: natural wood or creamy white. They climb up the hill on stilts behind a palm garden and have good vistas and jovial staff.

Eating

Ko Pha-Ngan is no culinary capital, especially since most visitors quickly absorb the lazy lifestyle and wind up eating at their accommodation. Those with an adventurous appetite should check out the island's centre of local commerce, Thong Sala.

HAT RIN

This bustling 'burb has the largest conglomeration of restaurants and bars on the island, yet most of them are pretty lousy. The infamous Chicken Corner is a popular intersection stocked with several faves such as **Mr K Thai Food** (Map p560; Ban Hat Rin; dishes 30-80B) and **Mama Schnitzel** (Map p560;

Ban Hat Rin; dishes 40-100B), which promise to cure any case of the munchies, be it noon or midnight.

Lazy House

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(Map p560; Hat Rin Nai; dishes 90-270B; ☺lunch & dinner) Back in the day, this joint was the owner's apartment - everyone liked his cooking so much that he decided to turn the place into a restaurant and hang-out spot. Today, Lazy House is easily one of Hat Rin's best places to veg out in front of a movie with a scrumptious shepherd's pie.

Little Home

THAI \$

(Map p560; Ban Hat Rin; mains from 40B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) With no design aesthetic whatsoever, Little Home woos the masses with cheap, flavourful Thai grub that's gobbled up with alacrity among wooden tables and flimsy plastic chairs.

Monna Lisa

ITALIAN \$\$

(Map p560; Hat Rin Nai; pizza & pasta from 200B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) The best spot in Hat Rin for a pizza, Monna Lisa is a relatively new operation run by a team of friendly Italians. The mushroom and ham pizza practically knocked our socks off - as did the homemade truffle pasta.

Nic's

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(Map p560; Ban Hat Rin; mains 80-280B; ☺dinner) A dizzying realm of polished concrete and coloured pillows, Nic's - at the back of Hat Rin's lake - slings tasty pizzas and tapas every evening. Slurp a Singha during the 6pm-to-8pm happy hour.

Lucky Crab

SEAFOOD \$\$

(Map p560; Hat Rin Nai; dishes 100-400B; ☺lunch & dinner) Lucky Crab is your best bet for seafood in Hat Rin. Rows of freshly caught creatures are presented nightly atop miniature longtail boats loaded with ice. Once you've picked your prey, grab a table inside amid dangling plants and charming stone furnishings.

Om Ganesh

INDIAN \$\$

(Map p560; Hat Rin Nai; dishes 70-190B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Customers meditate over curries, biryani rice, roti and lassis though the local expats joke that every dish tastes the same. Platters start at 350B.

Same Same Burger

BURGER \$\$

(Map p560; www.same-same.com; Hat Rin Nai; burgers 180-230B; ☺lunch & dinner) Owned by the folks who run the backpacker digs with

the *same same* name, this bright-red burger joint is the *same same* as McDonald's (except pricier).

SOUTHERN BEACHES

On Saturday evenings from 4pm to 10pm, a side street in the eastern part of Thong Sala becomes **Walking Street** - a bustling pedestrian zone mostly filled with locals hawking their wares to other islanders. There's plenty on offer, from clothing to food. Be sure to try the delicious red prok with gravy (40B) at Lang Tang - you'll find it in glass cases next to a large English sign saying 'Numpanich'.

Night Market

MARKET \$

(Thong Sala; dishes 25-180B; ☺dinner) A heady mix of steam and snacking locals, Thong Sala's night market is a must for those looking for a dose of culture while nibbling on a low-priced snack. The best place to grab some cheap grub is the stall in the far right corner with a large white banner. Hit up the vendor next door for tasty seafood platters, such as red snapper served over a bed of thick noodles. Banana pancakes and fruit smoothies abound for dessert.

Kaito

JAPANESE \$\$

(Thong Sala; dishes from 130B; ☺dinner Thu-Mon) Authentic Japanese imports are the speciality here - slurp an Asahi while savouring your tangy seaweed salad and *tonkatsu* (pork cutlet). The upstairs level has cosy cushion seating while the main sitting area is flanked with *manga* and pocket-sized Japanese novels.

Mason's Arms

BRITISH \$\$

(Thong Sala; mains 160-350B; ☺lunch & dinner) Suddenly, a clunky structure emerges from the swaying palms; it's a Tudor-style manse, plucked directly from Stratford-upon-Avon and plunked down in the steamy jungle. This lodge-like lair is one blood pudding away from being an official British colony. The fish 'n' chips is a local favourite.

Pizza Chiara

ITALIAN \$\$

(Thong Sala; pizzas 180-320B; ☺lunch & dinner) The quintessential chequered tablecloths confirm it (in case you didn't guess from the name): Pizza Chiara is all about tasty Italian fare. Go for the Pizza Cecco smothered with prosciutto, salami, mushrooms and *cotto* cheese.

Ando Loco

MEXICAN \$

(Ban Tai; mains from 59B; ☺dinner) This outdoor Mexican hang-out looks like an animation

cell from a vintage Hanna-Barbera cartoon, with assorted kitschy accoutrements such as papier-mâché cacti. Down a super-sized margarita and show your skills on the beach volleyball court. Ando Loco closes during low season (around September to December).

OTHER BEACHES



Sanctuary

HEALTH FOOD \$\$

(Hat Thian; mains from 130B) Forget what you know about health food: the Sanctuary's restaurant proves that wholesome eats can also be delicious. Enjoy a tasty parade of plates – from Indian pakoras to crunchy Vietnamese spring rolls – as an endless playlist of music (undoubtedly the island's best) wafts overhead. Don't forget to wash it all down with a shot of neon-green wheatgrass. Yum!

Cucina Italiana

ITALIAN \$\$

(Jenny's; Chalok Lam; pizza 180B; ☺dinner) Cucina Italiana has a cult following on Ko Pha-Ngan. The friendly Italian chef is passionate about his food, and creates all of his dishes from scratch. On Thursday and Sunday you can order unlimited toppings on your oven-roasted pizza for only 180B.

Peppercorn

STEAKHOUSE \$\$

(www.peppercornphangan.com; Sri Thanu; mains 160-400; ☺2-10pm Mon-Sat) Escargot and succulent steaks in a rickety jungle cottage? You bet. Peppercorn may be tucked in the brush away from the sea, but that shouldn't detract foodies from seeking out one of Pha-Ngan's best attempts at highbrow international cuisine.

Cookies Salad

THAI \$\$

(Hat Salad; mains from 100B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Worth tracking down if you're staying on the west coast, this casual restaurant, perched atop a cliff on the south side of Hat Salad, offers a stunning assortment of Thai treats (don't miss the Penang curry) and unique smoothies (including a rich nutella swirl). Sadly cookie salads are not on offer.



Drinking

Every month, on the night of the full moon, pilgrims pay tribute to the party gods with trance-like dancing, wild screaming and glow-in-the-dark body paint. The throngs of bucket-sippers and fire twirlers gather on the infamous Sunrise Beach (Hat Rin Nok) and party until the sun replaces the moon in the sky.

A few other noteworthy spots can be found around the island for those seeking something a bit mellower.

HAT RIN

Hat Rin is the beating heart of the legendary Full Moon fun, and the area can get pretty wound up even without the influence of lunar phases. When the moon isn't lighting up the night sky, partygoers flock to other spots on the island's south side. See the boxed text on p558 for details. The following party venues flank Hat Rin's infamous Sunrise Beach from south to north.

Rock

BAR, CLUB

(Map p560) Great views of the party from the elevated terrace on the far south side of the beach.

Club Paradise

BAR, CLUB

(Map p560) Paradise basks in its celebrity status as the genesis of the lunar *loco*-motion.

Drop-In Bar

BAR, CLUB

(Map p560) This dance shack blasts the chart toppers that we all secretly love. The other nights of the year are equally as boisterous.

Zoom/Vinyl

BAR, CLUB

(Map p560) An ear-popping trance venue.

Cactus Bar

BAR, CLUB

(Map p560) Smack in the centre of Hat Rin Nok, Cactus pumps out a healthy mix of old school tunes, hip-hop and R&B.

Sunrise

BAR, CLUB

(Map p560) A newer spot on the sand where trance beats shake the graffiti-ed walls.

Tommy

BAR, CLUB

(Map p560) One of Hat Rin's largest venues lures the masses with black lights and trance music blaring on the sound system. Drinks are dispensed from a large ark-like bar.

Mellow Mountain

BAR, CLUB

(Map p560) Also called 'Mushy Mountain' (you'll know why when you get there), this trippy hang-out sits at the northern edge of Hat Rin Nok delivering stellar views of the shenanigans below.

OTHER BEACHES

Eagle Pub

BAR

(Hat Yao) At the southern end of Hat Yao, this drink-dealing shack, built right into the rock face, is tattooed with the neon graffiti of virtually every person who's passed out on the

lime green patio furniture after too many *caipirinhas*.

Jam

BAR

(Hin Wong; www.thejamphangan.com) It's DIY live music at this friendly nightspot on the west coast. Saturday nights are open mic, and the rest of the week you'll usually catch a few locals jamming on their guitars.

Pirates Bar

BAR

(Hat Chaophao) This wacky drinkery is a replica of a pirate ship built into the cliffs. When you're sitting on the deck and the tide is high (and you've had a couple drinks), you can almost believe you're out at sea. These guys host the well-attended Moon Set parties, three days before Hat Rin gets pumpin' for the Full Moon fun.

Sheesha Bar

BAR

(Chalok Lam) The antithesis of grungy Hat Rin, Sheesha Bar swaps buckets of Samsung for designer drinks. The enticing patchwork of beige sandstone and horizontal slats of mahogany fit right in with the arabesque Mandalai Hotel across the street (owned by the same family).

Flip Flop Pharmacy

BAR

(Thong Nai Pan) This open-air bar on the sands of Thong Nai Pan is the area's preferred hang-out spot.

Amsterdam

BAR

(Ao Plaay Laem) Near Hat Chaophao on the west coast, Amsterdam attracts tourists and locals from all over the island, who are looking for a chill spot to watch the sunset.



Information

Dangers & Annoyances

Some of your fondest vacation memories may be forged on Ko Pha-Ngan; just be mindful of the following situations that can seriously tarnish your experience on this hot-blooded jungle island.

DRUGS You're relaxing on the beach when suddenly a local walks up and offers you some local herb at a ridiculously low price. 'No thanks,' you say, knowing that the penalties for drug use in Thailand are fierce. But the vendor drops his price even more and practically offers you the weed for free. Too good to be true? Obviously. As soon as you take a toke, the seller rats you out to the cops and you're whisked away to the local prison where you must pay a wallet-busting fine. This type of scenario happens all the time on Ko Pha-Ngan so it's best to avoid the call of the ganja.

Here's another important thing to remember: your travel insurance does not cover any drug-related injury or treatment. Drug-related freak-outs *do* happen – we've heard first-hand accounts of partiers slipping into extended periods of delirium. Suan Saranrom (Garden of Joys) Psychiatric Hospital in Surat Thani has to take on extra staff during full-moon periods to handle the number of *fa-ràng* who freak out on magic mushrooms, acid or other abundantly available hallucinogens.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Female travellers should be extra careful when partying on the island. We've received many reports about drug- and alcohol-related rape (and these situations are not limited to Full Moon parties). Another disturbing problem is the unscrupulous behaviour of some of the local motorcycle taxi drivers. Several complaints have been filed about drivers groping female passengers; there are even reports of severe sexual assaults.

MOTORCYCLES

Ko Pha-Ngan has more motorcycle accidents than injuries incurred from Full Moon tomfoolery. Nowadays there's a system of paved roads, but much of it is a labyrinth of ruddy dirt-and-mud paths. The island is also very hilly, and even if the road is paved, it can be too difficult for most to take on. The very steep road to Hat Rin is a perfect case in point. The island now has a special ambulance that trolls the island helping injured bikers.

Emergency

Main police station (Map p557; ☎ 0 7737

7114, 191) Located about 2km north of Thong Sala. The police station in Hat Rin (near Hat Rin school) will not let you file a report; to do so you must go to Thong Sala. Local police have been known to charge 200B to file a report. Do not pay this – it should be free. Note that if you are arrested you do have the right to an embassy phone call; you do not have to agree to accept the 'interpreter' you are offered.

Internet Access

Hat Rin and Thong Sala are the main centres of internet activity, but every beach with development now offers access. Rates are generally 2B per minute, with a 10B to 20B minimum and discounts if you stay on for more than an hour. Places offering a rate of 1B per minute usually have turtle-speed connections.

Laundry

If you got fluorescent body paint on your clothes during your full-moon romp, don't bother sending them to the cleaners – the paint will never come out. Trust us, we tried. For your other washing needs, there are heaps of places that will gladly wash your clothes. Prices hover around 40B per kilo, and express cleanings shouldn't be more than 60B per kilo.

Medical Services

Medical services can be a little crooked in Ko Pha-Ngan – expect unstable prices and under-qualified doctors. Many clinics charge a 3000B entrance fee before treatment. Serious medical issues should be dealt with on nearby Ko Samui.

Ko Pha-Ngan Hospital (Map p557; ☏ 0 7737 7034; Thong Sala; ☎ 24hr) About 2.5km north of Thong Sala; offers 24-hour emergency services.

Money

Thong Sala, Ko Pha-Ngan's financial 'capital', has plenty of banks, currency converters and several Western Union offices. Hat Rin has numerous ATMs and a couple of banks at the pier. There are also ATMs in Hat Yao, Chaloklum and Thong Nai Pan.

Post

Main post office (Map p560; ☎ 8.30am–4.30pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon Sat) In Thong Sala; there's a smaller office right near the pier in Hat Rin.

Tourist information

There are no government-run Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT) offices on Ko Pha-Ngan, instead tourists get their information from local travel agencies and brochures. Most agencies are clumped around Hat Rin and Thong Sala. Agents take a small commission on each sale, but collusion keeps prices relatively stable and standardised. Choose an agent you trust if you are spending a lot of money – faulty bookings do happen on Ko Pha-Ngan, especially since the island does not have a unit of tourist police.

Several mini-magazines also offer comprehensive information about the island's accommodation, restaurants, activities and Full Moon Parties. Our favourite option is the pocket-sized **Phangan Info** (www.phangan.info).

Backpackers Information Centre (Map p560; ☏ 0 7737 5535; www.backpackersthailand.com; Hat Rin) A must for travellers looking to book high-quality tours (diving, live-aboards, jungle safaris etc) and transport. Not just for backpackers, it's an expat-run travel agency that offers peace of mind with every purchase – travellers are provided with the mobile phone number of the owners should any problems arise. It also runs the Crystal Dive shop next door.

Websites

Backpackers Thailand (www.backpackersthailand.com) Everything you need to know about Ko Pha-Ngan, from booking accommodation to finding out the Full Moon schedule. Doubles as a vast resource for the whole country as well.

i Getting There & Away

As always, the cost and departure times are subject to change. Rough waves are known to cancel ferries between the months of October and December.

Bangkok, Hua Hin & Chumphon

The Lomprayah and Seatran Discovery service has bus-boat combination packages that depart from Bangkok and pass through Hua Hin and Chumphon. It is also quite hassle-free to take the train from Bangkok to Chumphon and switch to a ferry service (it works out to be about the same price and the train is comfier if you get a couchette). Travellers can also opt for the slightly cheaper government bus to Bangkok. For additional information about travelling through Chumphon see p533.

Ko Samui

There are around a dozen daily departures between Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Samui. These boats leave throughout the day from 7am to 6pm and take from 20 minutes to an hour. All leave from either Thong Sala or Hat Rin on Ko Pha-Ngan. The *Haad Rin Queen* goes back and forth between Hat Rin and Big Buddha Beach on Samui.

Ko Tao

Ko Tao-bound Lomprayah ferries depart from Thong Sala on Ko Pha-Ngan at 8.30am and 1pm and arrive at 9.45am and 2.15pm. The Seatran service departs from Thong Sala at 8.30am and 2pm daily. Taxis depart Hat Rin for Thong Sala one hour before the boat departure. The cheaper-but-slower Songserm leaves Ko Pha-Ngan at 12.30pm and alights at 2.30pm.

Surat Thani & the Andaman Coast

Combination boat-bus tickets are available at any travel agency. Simply tell them your desired destination and they will sell you the necessary links in the transport chain. Most travellers will pass through Surat Thani as they swap coasts. There are approximately six daily departures between Ko Pha-Ngan and Krabi on the Raja Car Ferry, Songserm or Seatran. These boats leave from Thong Sala throughout the day from 7am to 8pm. Every night, depending on the weather, a night boat runs from Surat, departing at 11pm. Boats in the opposite direction leave Ko Pha-Ngan at 10pm. Visit **Backpackers Thailand** (www.backpackersthailand.com) to get detailed departure times for additional Andaman destinations.

i Getting Around

Motorbikes You can rent motorcycles all over the island for 150B to 250B per day. Always wear a helmet – it's the law on Ko Pha-Ngan, and local policemen are starting to enforce it. If you plan

on riding over dirt tracks it is imperative that you rent a bike comparable to a Honda MTX125 – gearless scooters cannot make the journey. Bicycle rentals are discouraged unless you're fit enough to take on Lance Armstrong.

Sŏrng-tǎa-ou Pick-up trucks and *sŏrng-tǎa-ou* chug along the island's major roads and the riding rates double after sunset. Ask your accommodation about free or discount transfers when you leave the island. The trip from Thong Sala to Hat Rin is 100B; further beaches will set you back around 150B.

Water taxi Long-tail boats depart from Thong Sala, Chalok Lam and Hat Rin, heading to a variety of far-flung destinations such as Hat Khuat (Bottle Beach) and Ao Thong Nai Pan. Expect to pay anywhere from 50B for a short trip, and up to 300B for a lengthier journey. You can charter a private boat ride from beach to beach for about 150B per 15 minutes of travel.

Ko Tao

เกาะเต่า

POP 1382

First there was Ko Samui, then Ko Pha-Ngan; now, the cult of Ko Tao ('Ko Taoism' perhaps?) has emerged along Thailand's crystalline Gulf coast. Today, thousands of visitors come to worship the turquoise waters offshore, and quite often they stay. The secret to Ko Tao's undeniable appeal? Simple: although the island is only 21 sq km, tiny Tao sure knows how to pack it in – there's something for everyone, and nothing is in moderation. Diving enthusiasts cavort with sharks and rays in a playground of tangled neon coral. Hikers and hermits can re-enact an episode from *Lost* in the dripping coastal jungles. And when you're Robinson Crusoe'd out, hit the pumpin' bar scene that rages on until dawn.

Many years have passed since the first backpacker came to the scrubby island and planted a flag in the name of self-respecting shoestrapping travellers everywhere (hello pizza parlours and ladyboy shows), but fret not, there's still plenty of time to join the tribe. Ko Tao has several years to go before corporate resort owners bulldoze the remaining rustic cottages, and visitors start discussing stockholdings rather than sea creatures spotted on their latest dive.



Activities

Diving

Never been diving before? Ko Tao is the place to lose your scuba virginity. The island issues more scuba certifications than any-

Ko Tao



where else in the world. The shallow bays scalloping the island are the perfect spot for newbie divers to take their first stab at scuba. On shore, over 40 dive centres are ready to saddle you up with some gear and teach you the ropes in a three-and-a-half-day Open Water certification course. We know, we know, homework on a holiday sucks, but the intense competition among scuba schools means that certification prices are unbeatably low, and the standards of service are top notch, as dozens of dive shops vie for your baht.

It's no surprise that this underwater playground has become exceptionally popular with beginners; the waters are crystal clear, there are loads of neon reefs, and temperatures feel like bathwater. The best dive sites are found at offshore pinnacles within a 20km radius of the island (see the boxed text p573), but seasoned scubaholics almost always prefer the top-notch sites along the Andaman Coast. The local marine wildlife includes groupers, moray eels, batfish, bannerfish, barracudas, titan triggerfish, angelfish, clownfish (Nemos), stingrays, reef sharks, and frequent visits by almighty whale sharks.

When you alight at the pier in Mae Hat, swarms of touts will try to coax you into

ZERO TO HERO

It's the oldest story in the book: 'I came to Ko Tao on vacation and six months later I'm still here!' Seems like the island's magical magnetic energy catches hold of everyone, so don't be surprised if you too find yourself altering plane tickets.

For those of you who anticipate embracing the castaway lifestyle, consider going from 'Zero to Hero' as they call it on Ko Tao. Over the last few years, several of the savvy diving operators started package deals where you can go from scuba newbie to pro over the course of a couple of months. You'll graduate through four levels of diving certifications, 'intern' as a divemaster at your dive school, then take a stab at the instructor program. Prices hover around 80,000B and include all the bells and whistles necessary to turn you into a fish. Accommodation is not included.

staying at their dive resort with promises of a 'special price for you' – some touts even start accosting tourists on the boat ride over to the island. There are dozens of dive centres on Ko Tao, so it's best to arrive armed with the names of a few reputable schools. If you aren't rushed for time, consider relaxing on the island for a couple of days before making any diving decisions – you will undoubtedly bump into swarms of scubaphiles and instructors who will gladly offer their advice and opinions. Remember: the success of your diving experience (especially if you are learning how to dive) will largely depend on how much you like your instructor. There are other factors to consider as well, like the size of your diving group, the condition of your equipment, and the condition of the dive sites, to name a few.

For the most part, diving prices are somewhat standardised across the island, so there's no need to spend your time hunting around for the best deal. A **PADI** (www.padi.com) Open Water certification course costs 9800B; an **SSI** (www.ssithailand.com) Open Water certificate is slightly less (9000B) because you do not have to pay for instructional materials. An Advanced Open Water certification course will set you back 8500B, a rescue course is 9500B and the Divemaster program costs a cool 25,000B. Fun divers should expect to pay roughly 1000B per dive, or around 7000B for a 10-dive package. These rates include all dive gear, boat, instructors/guides and snacks. Discounts are usually given if you bring your own equipment. Be wary of dive centres that offer too many price cuts – safety is paramount, and a shop giving out unusually good deals is probably cutting too many corners.

Most dive schools will hook you up with cheap – or even free – accommodation. Almost all scuba centres offer gratis fan rooms for anyone doing beginner coursework.

Expect large crowds and booked-out beds throughout the months of December, January, June, July and August, and a monthly glut of wannabe divers after every Full Moon Party on Ko Pha-Ngan next door. If you are planning to do 'diving detox' after a Full Moon romp, make sure you purchase your ferry tickets at least two days before the eve of the lunar lunacy – boats sell out quickly.

The following dive schools are among the best operators on the island; they all do their bit to help keep Ko Tao a pristine place.

Ban's Diving School

DIVING

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6466; www.amazingkohtao.com; Sairee Beach) A well-oiled diving machine and relentlessly expanding conglomerate, Ban's certifies more divers per year than any other scuba school in the world and refurbishments in 2009 have given it a five-star feel. Classroom sessions tend to be conducted in large groups, but there's a reasonable amount of individual attention in the water. A breadth of international instructors means that students can learn to dive in their native tongue. The affiliated resort (p577) is quite popular with party-seekers.

Big Blue Diving

DIVING

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6415, 0 7745 6772; www.bigbluediving.com; Sairee Beach) If Goldilocks were picking a dive school, she'd probably pick Big Blue – this midsize operation (not too big, not too small) gets props for fostering a sociable vibe while maintaining a high standard of service. Divers of every

ilk can score dirt-cheap accommodation at their resort (p578).

Buddha View

DIVING

(☎ 0 7745 6074; www.buddhaview-diving.com; Chalok Ban Kao) Another big dive operation on Ko Tao, Buddha View offers the standard fare of certification and special programs for technical diving (venturing beyond the usual parameters of recreational underwater exploration). Discounted accommodation is available at its friendly resort (p579).

Crystal Dive

DIVING

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6107; www.crystaldiving.com; Mae Hat) Crystal is the Meryl Streep of diving operators, winning all the awards for best performance year after year. It's one of the largest schools on the island (and around the world), although high-quality instructors and intimate classes keep the school feeling quite personal. Multilingual staff members, air-conditioned classes and two

on-site swimming pools sweeten the deal. Highly recommended.

New Heaven

DIVING

(☎ 0 7745 6587; www.newheavendiveschool.com; Chalok Ban Kao) The owners of this small diving operation dedicate a lot of their time to preserving the natural beauty of Ko Tao's underwater sites by conducting regular reef checks and contributing to reef restoration efforts. A special CPAD research diver certification program is available in addition to the regular order of programs and fun dives.

Scuba Junction

DIVING

(Scuba J; Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6164; www.scuba-junction.com; Sairee Beach) A groovy new storefront and a team of outgoing instructors lure travellers looking for a more intimate dive experience. Scuba Junction guarantees a maximum of four people per diving group.

Snorkelling

Snorkelling is a popular alternative to diving, although scuba snobs will tell you that

DIVE SITES AT A GLANCE

In general, divers don't have a choice as to which sites they explore. Each dive school chooses a smattering of sites for the day depending on weather and ocean conditions. Deeper dive sites such as Chumphon Pinnacle are usually visited in the morning. Afternoon boats tour the shallower sites such as Japanese Gardens. Recently, two large vessels have been sunk off the coast, providing scubaphiles two new wreck dives. Divers hoping to spend some quality time searching for whale sharks at Sail Rock should join one of the dive trips departing daily from Ko Pha-Ngan.

- » **Chumphon Pinnacle** (36m maximum depth), 13km west of Ko Tao, has a colourful assortment of sea anemones along the four interconnected pinnacles. The site plays host to schools of giant trevally, tuna and large grey reef sharks. Whale sharks are known to pop up once in a while.
- » **Green Rock** (25m maximum depth) is an underwater jungle gym featuring caverns, caves and small swim-throughs. Rays, grouper and triggerfish are known to hang around. It's a great place for a night dive.
- » **Japanese Gardens** (12m maximum depth), between Ko Tao and Ko Nang Yuan, is a low-stress dive site perfect for beginners. There's plenty of colourful coral, and turtles, stingray and pufferfish often pass by.
- » **Mango Bay** (16m maximum depth) might be your first dive site if you are putting on a tank for the first time. Lazy reef fish swim around as newbies practice their skills on the sandy bottom.
- » **Sail Rock** (34m maximum depth), best accessed by Ko Pha-Ngan, features a massive rock chimney with a vertical swim-through, and large pelagics like barracuda and kingfish. This is one of the top spots in southeast Asia to see whale sharks.
- » **Southwest Pinnacle** (33m maximum depth) offers divers a small collection of pinnacles that are home to giant groupers and barracudas. Whale sharks and leopard sharks are sometimes spotted (pun partially intended).
- » **White Rock** (29m maximum depth) is home to colourful corals, angelfish, clown fish and territorial triggerfish. Another popular spot for night divers.

Mae Hat & Sairee Beach



Mae Hat & Sairee Beach

Activities, Courses & Tours

1	ACE Marine Images.....	D3
2	Apnea Total.....	C3
3	Ban's Diving School.....	B4
4	Big Blue Diving.....	B3
5	Blue Immersion.....	B4
6	Crystal Dive.....	B6
7	Davy Jones' Locker.....	C3
8	Flying Trapeze Adventures.....	C3
9	Goodtime Adventures.....	B4
10	Scuba Junction.....	B3
11	Shambhala.....	C2

Sleeping

12	Ban's Diving Resort.....	C4
13	Big Blue Resort.....	B2
14	Blue Wind.....	B2
15	Bow Thong.....	B1
	Crystal Dive Resort.....	(see 6)
16	In Touch.....	B5
17	Koh Tao Backpackers.....	C3
18	Koh Tao Cabana.....	B1
19	Koh Tao Coral Grand Resort.....	B1
20	Montra Resort & Spa.....	B6
21	Mr J Bungalow.....	B6
22	Regal Resort.....	B6
23	Sairee Cottage.....	C3
24	Seashell Resort.....	C3
25	Sunset Buri Resort.....	B2
26	Utopia Suites.....	A7

Eating

27	Ally The Pancake Man.....	B2
28	Barracuda Restaurant & Bar.....	C3
29	Big Blue East.....	B3
	Blue Wind Bakery.....	(see 14)

30	Café Corner.....	C2
31	Café del Sol.....	B6
32	Chopper's Bar & Grill.....	C3
33	Darawan.....	C4
34	El Gringo.....	C3
35	Farango's.....	B7
36	Food Centre.....	B7
37	Greasy Spoon.....	B7
38	Kanya.....	C2
39	Krua Thai.....	C3
40	Pranee's Kitchen.....	B6
41	Safety Stop Pub.....	A6
42	Tattoo Bar & Restaurant.....	A7
43	Whitening.....	A7
44	ZanziBar.....	C3
45	Zest Coffee Lounge.....	C3
46	Zest Coffee Lounge.....	B7

Drinking

47	AC Party Pub.....	B5
48	Crystal Bar.....	B6
49	Diza.....	C3
50	Dragon Bar.....	B7
51	Fish Bowl.....	B4
52	Fizz.....	B3
53	In Touch.....	B5
54	Lotus Bar.....	B3
	Maya Bar.....	(see 47)
55	Office Bar.....	C3

Shopping

56	Avalon.....	B7
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Transport

57	Lederhosenbikes.....	B7
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strapping on a snorkel instead of an air tank is like eating spray cheese when there's Camembert on the table. Orchestrating your own snorkelling adventure is simple, since the bays on the east coast have small bungalow operations offering equipment rental for between 100B and 200B per day.

Most snorkel enthusiasts opt for the do-it-yourself approach on Ko Tao, which involves swimming out into the offshore bays or hiring a longtail boat to putter around further out. Guided tours are also available and can be booked at any local travel agency. Tours range from 500B to 700B (usually including gear, lunch and a guide/boat captain) and stop at various snorkelling hotspots around the island. **Laem Thian** is popu-

lar for its small sharks, **Shark Island** has loads of fish (and ironically no sharks), **Hin Wong** is known for its crystalline waters, and **Light House Point**, in the north, offers a dazzling array of colourful sea anemones. Dive schools will usually allow snorkellers on their vessels for a comparable price – but it's only worth snorkelling at the shallower sites such as Japanese Gardens. Note that dive boats visit the shallower sites in the afternoons.

Freediving

Over the last couple of years freediving (exploring the sea using breath-holding techniques rather than scuba gear) has grown rapidly in popularity. Several small schools

have opened up across the island. We recommend the capable staff at **Apnea Total** (Map p574; ☎08 7183 2321; www.apnea-total.com; Sairee Beach) who have earned several awards in the freediving world and possess a special knack for easing newbies into this heart-pounding sport. The student-teacher ratio of three to one also ensures plenty of attention to safety. Also worth a special mention is **Blue Immersion** (Map p574; ☎08 7682 1886; www.blue-immersion.com; Sairee Beach) run by friendly Akim, a martial arts expert and a freediving pro – he is one of the first people in the world to freedive below 100m. Freediving prices are standardised across the island as well – a 2½-day SSI beginner course will set you back 5500B.

Technical Diving & Cave Diving

Well-seasoned divers and hardcore Jacques Cousteaus should contact **Tech Thailand** (www.techthailand.com) if they want to take their underwater exploration to the next level and try a technical dive. According to PADI, tec diving, as it's often known, is 'diving other than conventional commercial or recreational diving that takes divers beyond recreational diving limits'. Technical diving exceeds depths of 40m and requires stage decompressions, and a variety of gas mixtures are often used in a single dive.

Several years ago, Tech Thailand's old boat, MS *Trident*, made a name for itself in the diving community after successfully locating dozens of previously undiscovered wrecks in the Gulf of Thailand. Its most famous discovery was the USS *Lagarto*, an American naval vessel that sank during WWII. The gulf has long been an important trading route and new wrecks are being discovered all the time, from old Chinese pottery wrecks to Japanese *marus* (merchant ships). In 2011 the *Trident* was purposefully sunk off the coast of Ko Tao to create an artificial reef. A miscalculation with the explosives has left the wreck a bit too deep for beginners.

Recently, cave diving has taken Ko Tao by storm, and the most intrepid scuba buffs are lining up to make the half-day trek over to Khao Sok National Park (p611). Beneath the park's main lake lurks an astonishing submarine world filled with hidden grottos, limestone crags and skulking catfish. In certain areas divers can swim near submerged villages that were flooded in order to create a reservoir and dam. Most cave-diving trips depart from Ko Tao on the afternoon boat service and return to the island on the after-

noon boat service of the following day. Overnight stays are arranged in or near the park.

Stop by Buddha View (p573) on Saturdays for a free introduction into the world of technical diving, or hit the waters with the Tech Thailand team on 'wreck Wednesdays'. If you aren't diving with Buddha View or Master Divers, your dive school of choice can easily help you get sorted.

Underwater Photography & Videography

If your wallet is already full of PADI certification cards, consider renting an underwater camera or enrolling in a marine videography course. Many scuba schools hire professional videographers to film Open Water certifications, and if this piques your interests, you could potentially earn a few bucks after completing a video internship. Your dive operator can put you in touch with any of the half-dozen videography crews on the island. We recommend **ACE Marine Images** (Map p574; ☎0 7745 7054; www.acemarineimages.com; Sairee Beach), one of Thailand's leading underwater videography studios. Their interactive eight-dive course (30,000B) includes an independent diver certification and one-on-one instruction in the editing room. **Deep Down Productions** (☎08 7133 4102; www.deepdown-productions.com) and **Oceans Below** (☎08 6060 1863; www.oceansbelow.net) offer videography courses and internships that are a bit easier on the pocketbook.

Other Activities

Flying Trapeze Adventures

ACROBATICS
(FTA; Map p574; ☎08 0696 9269; www.flyingtrapezeadventures.com; Sairee Beach; ☀4-8pm, lessons at 4pm, 5pm & 6pm) Find out if you're a great catch while donning a pair of hot pink tights during a one-hour group trapeze lesson (950B). Courses are taught by super-friendly Gemma and her posse of limber sidekicks, who take you from circus neophyte to soaring savant in four jumps or less. Bookings are best done over the phone, or you can show up at one of the nightly demos, which start at 7.30pm. Participants must be at least six years old.

Goodtime Adventures TOURS
(Map p574; ☎08 7275 3604; www.gtadventures.com; Sairee Beach; ☀noon-late) Although most activities on Ko Tao revolve around the sea, the friendly crew at Goodtime Adventures offer a wide variety of land-based ac-

tivities to get the adrenaline pumping. Hike through the island's jungly interior, swing from rock to rock during a climbing and abseiling session (from 2000B), or unleash your inner daredevil during an afternoon of cliff jumping. Goodtime also offers accredited boating certifications, and at the time of research they were setting up a groovy zipline course on neighbouring Ko Nang Yuan. The Goodtime office, along the Sairee sands, doubles as a friendly cafe serving an assortment of international nibbles (including dip coffee!)

Shambhala

YOGA

(Map p574; ☎08 4440 6755; Sairee Beach) Ko Tao's only full-time yoga centre is housed in beautiful wooden *sāh-lah* located on the forested grounds of Blue Wind (see p577) in Sairee Beach. The two-hour classes, led by Kester, the energetic yogi, cost 300B.

Ko Tao Bowling & Mini Golf

BOWLING, MINIGOLF

(off Map p574; ☎0 7745 6316; ☀noon-midnight) Located on the main road between Mae Hat and Chalok Ban Kao, Ko Tao Bowling & Mini Golf has several homemade bowling lanes where the employees reset the pins after every frame (300B per hour). The 18-hole minigolf course has a landmark theme – putt your ball through Stonehenge or across the Golden Gate Bridge.

Sleeping

If you are planning to dive while visiting Ko Tao, your scuba operator will probably offer you free or discounted accommodation to sweeten the deal. Some schools have on-site lodging, while others have deals with nearby bungalows. It's important to note that you only receive your scuba-related discount on the days you dive. So, for example, if you buy a 10-dive package, and decide to take a day off in the middle, your room rate will not be discounted on that evening. Also, a restful sleep is important before diving, so scope out these 'great room deals' before saying yes – some of them are one 'roach away from being condemned.

There are also many sleeping options that have absolutely nothing to do with the island's diving culture. Ko Tao's secluded eastern coves are dotted with stunning retreats that still offer a true getaway experience, but these can be difficult to reach due to the island's dismal network of roads. You can often call ahead of time and arrange to be picked up from the pier in Mae Hat.

Note that Ko Tao is not Ko Samui – if you are looking for impeccable service and perfect five-star standards you will not find it here...yet.

SAIREE BEACH

Giant Sairee is the longest and most developed strip on the island, with a string of dive operations, bungalows, travel agencies, minimarkets and internet cafes. The narrow 'yellow brick road' stretches the entire length of the beach (but watch out for motorcycles).

Blue Wind

BUNGALOWS \$

(Map p574; ☎0 7745 6116; bluewind_wa@yahoo.com; bungalows 300-1000B; 📶📶) Hidden within a clump of bodacious lodging options, Blue Wind offers a breath of fresh air from the high-intensity dive resorts strung along Sairee Beach. Sturdy bamboo huts are peppered along a dirt trail behind the beachside bakery. Large, tiled air-conditioned cabins are also available, boasting hot showers and TVs.

Ban's Diving Resort

RESORT \$\$

(Map p574; ☎0 7745 6466; www.amazingkohtao.com; r 500-2500B; 📶📶📶) This dive-centric party palace offers a wide range of quality accommodation from basic backpacker digs to sleek hillside villas. Post-scuba chill sessions happen on Ban's prime slice of beach, or at one of the two swimming pools tucked within the strip of jungle between the two motel-like structures. Evenings are spent at the Fish Bowl bar downing international cuisine and 'buckets' in equal measure.

Place

VILLA \$\$\$

(www.theplacekohtao.com; villas 4000-7000B) Honeymooners will delight in this unique option – two private luxury villas nestled in the leaf-clad hills with sweeping ocean views down below. A private plunge pool comes standard – naturally – and private chef services are available for those who choose to remain in their love nest instead of sliding down to Sairee for restaurant eats.

Ko Tao Cabana

BUNGALOWS \$\$\$

(Map p574; ☎0 7745 6250; www.kohtaocabana.com; bungalows 2600-11,800B; 📶📶📶) This prime piece of beachside property offers timber-framed villas and crinkled white adobe huts dotted along the boulder-strewn beach. Bric-a-brac cheers the colourful bungalows – stone gnomes greet you with a naughty smirk as you shower in the roofless bathrooms. The newly constructed private

villas are one of the more upscale options on the island, though they're a bit rough around the edges compared to the five-star behemoths on Ko Samui.

Big Blue Resort

BUNGALOWS \$

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6050; www.bigbluediving.com; r 400-1000B; 🏠📶) This scuba-centric resort has a summer camp vibe – diving classes dominate the daytime, while evenings are spent en masse, grabbing dinner or watching fire twirling. Both the basic fan bungalows and motel-style air-con rooms offer little when it comes to views, but who has the time to relax when there's an ocean out there to explore?

Sairee Cottage

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6126; saireecottage@hotmail.com; bungalows 400-1500B; 🏠) The air-con bungalows are hard to miss since they've been painted in various hues of fuchsia. Low prices mean low vacancy rates – so arrive early to score one of the brick huts facing out onto a grassy knoll.

Bow Thong

BUNGALOWS \$

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6266; bungalows from 600B; 🏠📶🚰) A member of the quieter northern section of silky Sairee Beach, Bow Thong has a cluster of comfortable bungalows, if you're looking to be near the waves and aren't affiliated with a dive school.

Sunset Buri Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6266; bungalows 700-2500B; 🏠📶🚰) A long beach-bound path is studied with beautiful white bungalows featuring enormous windows and flamboyant temple-like roofing. The kidney-shaped pool is a big hit, as are the large beach recliners sprinkled around the resort.

Koh Tao Coral Grand Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$\$

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6431; www.kohtaacoral.com; bungalows 3350-6950B; 🏠📶🚰) The plethora of pink facades at this family-friendly option feels a bit like Barbie's dream Thai beach-house. Cottage interiors are coated in cheery primary colours framed by white truncated beams while pricier digs have a more distinctive Thai flavour, boasting dark lacquered mouldings and gold-foiled art.

Seashell Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6299; www.seashell-resort.com; bungalows 450-3800B; 🏠📶) Several bungalows have ocean views from their porches (a rarity in Sairee), while others sit in a well-maintained garden of colourful vegetation

and thin palm trunks. Seashell welcomes divers and nondivers alike.

In Touch Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6514; bungalows 500-1200B; 🏠📶) Older bungalows are a mishmash of bamboo and dark wood, while several rounded air-con rooms have a cave theme – it's all very *Flintstones*, except the shower nozzle hasn't been replaced with the trunk of an elephant.

Koh Tao Backpackers

HOSTEL \$

(Map p574; ☎ 08 8447 7921; www.kohtaobackpackers.com; dm 300B; 🏠📶) No-frills bunk beds for serious penny pinchers.

MAE HAT

All ferry arrivals pull into the pier at the busy village of Mae Hat. Accommodation is spread throughout, but the more charming options extend in both directions along the sandy beach.

North of the Pier

Regal Resort

RESORT \$\$

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6007; www.kohtaoregal.com; r 1500-4900B; 🏠📶🚰) Home to the most inviting swimming pool on the island, sparkling white Regal proudly sits along the sands of Mae Hat. Set slightly away from the pier, this is a solid option for travellers seeking a sprinkle of air-con and ocean views from their balcony.

Crystal Dive Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6107; www.crystaldive.com; bungalows 800-1500B; 🏠📶) The bungalow and motel-style accommodation at Crystal is reserved for its divers, and prices drop significantly for those taking courses. Guests can take a dip in the refreshing pool when it isn't overflowing with bubble-blowing newbie divers.

Montra Resort & Spa

RESORT \$\$\$

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 7057; www.kohtaomontra.com; r 4000-12,800B; 🏠📶🚰) A newer address virtually at the Mae Hat pier, Montra is an upmarket affair with all the modern bells and whistles. The hotel structure is rather imposing when compared to the scatter of humble bungalows next door.

Mr J Bungalow

BUNGALOWS \$

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6066; bungalows 250-1000B) Even though Mr J tried to charge us 50B for his business card, we still think he's well worth the visit. The eccentric owner entangles guests in a philosophical web while

tending to his flock of decent bungalows. Ask him about reincarnation if you want to hear some particularly twisted conjectures.

South of the Pier

Charm Churee Villa

RESORT \$\$\$

(off Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6393; www.charmchureevilla.com; bungalows 3700-18,700B; 🍷🍷🍷) Tucked gently under sky-scraping palms, the luxuriant villas of Charm Churee are dedicated to the flamboyant spoils of the Far East. Gold-foiled oriental demigods pose in arabesque positions, with bejewelled eyes frozen in a Zen-like trance. Staircases, chiselled into the rock face, dribble down a palmed slope revealing teak huts strewn across smoky boulders. The villas' unobstructed views of the swishing indigo waters are charming.

Sensi Paradise Resort

RESORT \$\$\$

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6244; www.sensiparadise.com; bungalows 2100-700B; 🍷🍷🍷) There are one too many geckos in the bathroom to call this place 'natural chic', but if you like to be at one with nature then you'll appreciate that these rustic cottages are somehow simultaneously upscale. Friendly caretakers and several airy teak *sāh-lah* add an extra element of charm.

Utopia Suites

APARTMENTS \$\$

(Map p574; ☎ 0 7745 6729; r/ste from 600/2000B, monthly from 20,000B) Utopia is located in the charming fishing village, just a stone's throw from the pier. The beachside apartment-style accommodation is perfect for families and small groups. Ask about discounts for extended stays.

The following sleeping spots are located further south and can be accessed by a quick ride in a boat taxi:

Sai Thong Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎ 0 7745 6868; Hat Sai Nuan; bungalows 400-900B; 🍷) As the rush of Mae Hat dwindles away along the island's southwest shore, Sai Thong emerges along sandy Hat Sai Nuan. Bungalows, in various incarnations of weaving and wood, have colourful porch hammocks and palm-filled vistas. Guests frequent the restaurant's relaxing sun deck – a favourite spot for locals too.

Tao Thong Villa

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 0 7745 6078; Ao Sai Nuan; bungalows from 500B) Very popular with long-termers seeking peace and quiet, these funky, no-frills bungalows have killer views. Tao Thong ac-

tually straddles two tiny beaches on a craggy cape about halfway between Mae Hat and Chalok Ban Kao.

CHALOK BAN KAO

Ao Chalok, about 1.7km south of Mae Hat by road, is the third-largest concentration of accommodation on Ko Tao, but can feel a lot more crowded because the beach is significantly smaller than Sairee and Mae Hat. The beach itself isn't tops as low tides are often muddy.

Ko Tao Resort

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 0 7745 6133; www.kotaoresort.com; r & bungalows from 2500B; 🍷🍷🍷) The entrance is a throwback to the days when taste and architecture weren't particularly synonymous (the '70s perhaps?), but inside everything's thoroughly modern and the facilities themselves fit the true definition of a resort. Rooms are split between 'pool side' and 'paradise zone' – all are well stocked, water sports equipment is on offer, and there are several bars primed to serve an assortment of fruity cocktails. 'Chalok Harbour', a new addition, features an extra dining option and additional chaise seating along a spacious pier.

Chintakiri Resort

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 0 7745 6133; www.chintakiri.com; r & bungalows 2900-4000B; 🍷🍷🍷) Perched high over the gulf waters overlooking Chalok Ban Kao, Chintakiri is one of Ko Tao's newer luxury additions as the island furtively creeps up-market. Rooms are spread around the inland jungle, and sport crisp white walls with lacquered finishing.

Buddha View Dive Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎ 0 7745 6074; www.buddhaviw-diving.com; r 300-1500B; 🍷) Like the other large diving operations on the island, Buddha View offers its divers discounted on-site digs in a super-social atmosphere. If you plan on staying a while, ask about the 'Divers Village' across the street, which offers basic accommodation from around 4000B per month.

New Heaven Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎ 0 7745 6422; newheavenresort@yahoo.co.th; r & bungalows 1200-3900B) Just beyond the clutter of Chalok Ban Kao, New Heaven delivers colourful huts perched over impossibly clear waters. A steep path of chiselled stone tumbles down the shrubby rock face revealing views ripped straight from the pages of *National Geographic*.

Freedom Beach

BUNGALOWS \$
(☎ 7745 6596; bungalows 400-1500B; ☼) On its own secluded beach at the eastern end of Ao Chalok, Freedom feels like a classic backpacker haunt, although there's a variety of accommodation to suit various humble budgets. The string of bungalows (from wooden shacks to sturdier huts with air-con) links the breezy seaside bar to the resort's restaurant high on the cliff.

Viewpoint Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$
(☎ 7745 6666; www.kohtaoviewpoint.com; bungalows 800-1300B) A hot-shot architect from Bangkok allegedly designed this friendly, family-run retreat at the end of civilisation. Cottages are spartan but airy and well maintained. Some have partial sea views; others quietly sit in a gorgeous hillside garden that thrums with cicadas at night.

Also worth a look:

Tropicana

GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 7745 6167; www.koh-tao-tropicana-resort.com; r from 400) Low-rise hotel units peppered across a garden campus that provide fleeting glimpses of the ocean between fanned fronds and spiky palms.

JP Resort

GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 7745 6099; r from 400B) A colourful menagerie of prim motel-style rooms stacked on a small scrap of jungle across the street from the sea.

EAST COAST BEACHES

The serene eastern coast is, without a doubt, one of the best places in the region to live out your island paradise fantasies. The views are stunning; beaches are silent, yet all of your creature comforts are 10 minutes away. Accommodation along this coast is organised from north to south.

Hin Wong

A sandy beach has been swapped for a boulder-strewn coast, but the water is crystal clear. The road to Hin Wong is paved in parts, but sudden sand pits and steep hills can toss you off your motorbike.

Hin Wong Bungalows

BUNGALOWS \$
(☎ 7745 6006; bungalows from 300B) Pleasant wooden huts are scattered across vast expanses of untamed tropical terrain – it all feels a bit like *Gilligan's Island* (minus the millionaire castaways). A rickety dock, jutting out just beyond the breezy restaurant, is the perfect place to dangle your legs

and watch schools of black sardines slide through the cerulean water.

View Rock

BUNGALOWS \$
(☎ 7745 6548/9; viewrock@hotmail.com; bungalows 300-400B) When coming down the dirt road into Hin Wong, follow the signs as they lead you north of Hin Wong Bungalows. View Rock is precisely that: views and rocks; the hodgepodge of wooden huts, which looks like a secluded fishing village, is built into the steep crags offering stunning views of the bay.

Tanote Bay (Ao Tanot)

Tanote Bay is more populated than some of the other eastern coves, but it's still rather quiet and picturesque. It is the only bay on the east coast that is accessible by a decent road. Discounted taxis (around 100B) bounce back and forth between Tanote Bay and Mae Hat; ask at your resort for a timetable.

Poseidon

BUNGALOWS \$
(☎ 7745 6735; poseidonkohta@hotmail.com; bungalows from 300B) Poseidon keeps the tradition of the budget bamboo bungalow alive with a dozen basic-but-sleepable huts scattered near the sand.

Family Tanote

BUNGALOWS \$\$
(☎ 7745 6757; bungalows 700-3500) As the name suggests, this scatter of hillside bungalows is run by a local family who take pride in providing comfy digs to solitude seekers. Strap on a snorkel mask and swim around with the fish at your doorstep, or climb up to the restaurant for a tasty meal and pleasant views of the bay.

Ao Leuk & Ao Thian Ok**Jamahkiri Resort & Spa**

RESORT \$\$\$
(☎ 7745 6400; www.jamahkiri.com; bungalows 6900-13,900B) The flamboyant decor at this whitewashed estate is decidedly focused around tribal imagery. Wooden gargoyle masks and stone fertility goddesses abound amid swirling mosaics and multi-armed statues. Feral hoots of distant monkeys confirm the overarching jungle theme, as do the thatched roofs and tiki-torched soirees. The resort's seemingly infinite number of stone stairways can be a pain, so it's a good thing Ko Tao's most luxurious spa is located on the premises.

KONANG YUAN

Photogenic Ko Nang Yuan, just off the coast of Ko Tao, is easily accessible by the Lom-

prayah catamaran, and by water taxis that depart from Mae Hat and Sairee.

Ko Nangyuan Dive Resort BUNGALOWS \$\$\$
(☎ 0 7745 6088; www.nangyuan.com; bungalows 1200-9000B; 🍷🍷) Although the obligatory 100B tax to access the island is a bit off-putting (as is the 100B water taxi ride each way), Nangyuan Dive Resort is nonetheless a charming place to stay. The rugged collection of wood and aluminium bungalows winds its way across three coolie-hat-like conical islands connected by an idyllic beige sandbar. The resort also boasts the best restaurant on the island, but then again, it's the only place to eat...

Eating

With super-sized Samui lurking on the horizon, it's hard to believe that quaint little Ko Tao holds its own in the gastronomy category. Most resorts and dive operators offer on-site dining, and stand-alone establishments are multiplying at lightning speed in Sairee Beach and Mae Hat. The diverse population of divers has spawned a broad range of international cuisine, including Mexican, French, Italian, Indian and Japanese. On our quest to find the tastiest Thai fare on the island, we discovered, not surprisingly, that our favourite local meals were being dished out at small, unnamed restaurants on the side of the road.

SAIREE BEACH

Darawan INTERNATIONAL \$\$
(Map p574; mains 160-400B; ☺lunch & dinner) Like a top-end dining venue plucked from the posh shores of Samui nearby, regal Darawan is the island's newest place to take a date. Perched atop the trees at the back of Ban's sprawling resort, the yawning outdoor balcony offers beautiful views of the setting sun (come around 6pm). Designer lighting, efficient waiters and a tasty 'wagyu' burger seal the deal.

Barracuda Restaurant & Bar

ASIAN FUSION \$\$
(Map p574; mains 180-380B; ☺dinner) A wonderful addition to Ko Tao's ever-expanding dining scene, Barracuda offers a refined selection of seafood and gourmet bites. The owner, a masterful chef with many years in the biz, makes an earnest attempt to use only locally sourced ingredients to enhance his fusion faves. The seafood platter is a steal at 395B – wash down your meal with

a mojito and head next door to watch the owner's boyfriend perform in the ladyboy cabaret.

ZanziBar SANDWICHES \$
(Map p574; sandwiches 90-140B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) The island's outpost of sandwich yuppie-dom slathers a mix of unpronounceable condiments betwixt two slices of wholegrain bread.

Blue Wind Bakery INTERNATIONAL \$
(Map p574; mains 50-120B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) This beachside shanty dishes out Thai favourites, Western confections and freshly blended fruit juices. Enjoy your thick fruit smoothie and flaky pastry while reclining on tattered triangular pillows.

Chopper's Bar & Grill INTERNATIONAL \$\$
(Map p574; dishes 60-200B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) So popular that it's become a local landmark, Chopper's is a two-storey hangout where divers and travellers can widen their beer belly. There's live music, sports on the big-screen TVs, billiards and a cinema room. Friday nights are particularly popular; the drinks are 'two for one', and dishes are half-priced as well. Cheers for scored goals are interspersed with exaggerated chatter about creatures seen on the day's dive.

Kanya THAI \$
(Map p574; mains 60-130B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Tucked at the back of Sairee Village on the road to Hin Wong, four-table Kanya serves an assortment of international dishes, but you'll be missing out if you stray from the delectable array of home-cooked Thai classics – the *dòm yam Blah* is divine.

Café Corner CAFE \$\$
(Map p574; snacks & mains 30-120B; ☺breakfast & lunch) Prime real estate, mod furnishings, and tasty iced coffees have made Café Corner a Sairee staple over the last few years. Swing by at 5pm to stock up for tomorrow morning's breakfast; the scrumptious baked breads are buy-one-get-one-free before being tossed at sunset.

Big Blue East THAI, INTERNATIONAL \$\$
(Map p574; dishes 70-250B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Big Blue Resort's busy chow house, located about 2m from the crashing tide, dispatches an assortment of Thai and international eats, including tasty individual pizzas. The joint fills up around sunset with divers chuckling at the daily dive bloopers shown on the big-screen TV.

Ally the Pancake Man

CREPES \$

(Map p574; pancakes from 20-40B; ☺lunch & dinner) Stop by the 7-Eleven beside Big Blue Resort to check out Ally The Pancake Man as he dances around – like an Italian chef making pizza – while cooking your tasty snack. The ‘banana Nutella’ is a fave.

Krua Thai

THAI \$

(Map p574; dishes 50-120B; ☺lunch & dinner) Popular with the tourists who want their food ‘faràng spicy’ rather than ‘Thai spicy’, Krua Thai offers a large assortment of classic favourites served in a well-maintained storefront.

El Gringo

MEXICAN \$\$

(Map p574; dishes 80-150B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) As if there aren’t already enough nicknames for white people in Thailand. The self-proclaimed ‘funky Mexican joint’ slings burritos of questionable authenticity in both Sairee Beach and Mae Hat. Delivery available.

MAE HAT**Whitening**

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(Map p574; dishes 160-300B; ☺dinner) Although it looks like a pile of forgotten driftwood during the day, this beachy spot falls somewhere between being a restaurant and being a chic seaside bar – foodies will appreciate the tasty twists on indigenous and international dishes while beertotalers will love the beachy, bleached-white atmosphere that hums with gentle lounge music. Dine amid dangling white Christmas lights while keeping your bare feet tucked into the sand. This is the top spot on the island for a celebratory dinner. And the best part? It’s comparatively easy on the wallet.

Café del Sol

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(Map p574; dishes 70-320B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; @☺) Even the pickiest eater will be satisfied with the menu’s expansive selection of ‘world cuisine’. Located just steps away from the pier, this is our favourite breakfast spot on the island – go for the ‘Del Sol breakfast’ (delicious fruit salad, yoghurt and coffee) with a scrumptious spinach omelette on the side. Lunch and dinner dishes range from hearty pepper hamburgers to homemade pasta, though prices tend to be quite inflated.

Zest Coffee Lounge

CAFE \$

(Map p574; dishes 70-190B; ☺breakfast & lunch; ☺) Indulge in the street-cafe lifestyle at

Zest – home to the best cup of joe on the island. Idlers can nibble on *ciabatta* sandwiches or sticky confections while nursing their creamy *caffè latte*. There’s a second branch in Sairee, although we prefer this location.

Safety Stop Pub

INTERNATIONAL \$

(Map p574; mains 60-250B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☺) A haven for homesick Brits, this pier-side restaurant and bar feels like a tropical beer garden. Stop by on Sundays to stuff your face with an endless supply of barbecued goodness, and surprisingly the Thai dishes aren’t half bad!

Pranee’s Kitchen

THAI \$

(Map p574; dishes 50-120B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☺) An old Mae Hat fave, Pranee’s serves scrumptious curries and other Thai treats in an open-air pavilion sprinkled with lounging pillows, wooden tables and TVs. English movies (with hilariously incorrect subtitles) are shown nightly at 6pm.

Food Centre

THAI \$

(Map p574; mains from 30B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) An unceremonious gathering of hot tin food stalls, Food Centre – as it’s come to be known – lures lunching locals with veritable smoke signals rising up from the concrete parking lot abutting Mae Hat’s petrol station. You’ll find some of the island’s best papaya salad here.

Greasy Spoon

BREAKFAST \$

(Map p574; English breakfast 120B; ☺breakfast & lunch) Although completely devoid of character, Greasy Spoon stays true to its name offering a variety of heart-clogging breakfast treats: eggs, sausage, stewed vegies and chips (their speciality) that’ll bring a tear to any Brit’s eye.

Tattoo Bar & Restaurant

BURGERS \$\$

(Map p574; mains 150B) Just 30m south of the Whitening (at the edge of the fishing village), Tattoo is a casual affair with a cosy area for TV watching. If you’re hungry, try the massive Aussie burger, homemade meat pies and sausage rolls.

Farango’s

PIZZA \$\$

(Map p574; dishes 80-230B; ☺lunch & dinner) Ko Tao’s first faràng restaurant spins tasty pizzas and other signature Italian fare. Free delivery. There’s a second location on the outskirts of Sairee Village.

LEARNING THE LOCAL LINGO

Due to the steady influx of international visitors, English is spoken just about everywhere; however, the locals on this scuba-savvy island regularly incorporate diving sign-language symbols into common parlance – especially at the bars.

Here are a few gestures to get you started:

- » **I'm OK** Make a fist and tap the top of your head twice
- » **Cool** Bring together the tips of your index finger and thumb forming an 'O'
- » **I'm finished/I'm ready to go** Hold your hand tight like a karate chop and quickly swing it back and forth perpendicular to your neck.

CHALOK BAN KAO

Long Pae

STEAKHOUSE \$\$\$

(mains 100-430B; ☺dinner) Situated off the radar from most of the island's tourist traffic, 'Uncle Pae' sits on a scruffy patch of hilly jungle with distant views of the sea down below. The speciality here is steak, which goes oh-so well with a generous smattering of pan-Asian appetisers.

New Heaven Restaurant

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(mains 60-350B; ☺lunch & dinner) The best part about New Heaven Restaurant is the awe-inducing view of Shark Bay (Ao Thian Ok) under the lazy afternoon moon. The turquoise waters below are so translucent that the curving reef is easily visible from your seat. The menu is largely international, and there are nap-worthy cushions tucked under each low-rise table.

Koppee

CAFE \$\$

(mains 60-180B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) A clone of some of the sleeker cafes in Mae Hat and Sairee, white-washed Koppee serves scrumptious international fare including a variety of home-baked desserts.



Drinking & Entertainment

After diving, Ko Tao's favourite pastime is drinking, and there's definitely no shortage of places to get tanked. In fact, the island's three biggest dive centres each have bumpin' bars – **Fish Bowl** (Map p574), **Crysal Bar** (Map p574) and **Buddha On The**

Beach in Chalok Bak Kao – that attract swarms of travellers and expats alike. It's well worth stopping by even if you aren't a diver. Fliers detailing upcoming parties are posted on various trees and walls along the island's west coast (check the two 7-Elevens in Sairee). Also keep an eye out for posters touting 'jungle parties' held on nondescript patches of scrubby jungle in the centre of the island.

In addition to the following options, several places already reviewed (p581), such as Choppers and Safety Stop Pub, double as great hang-out joints for a well-deserved post-dive beer.

Just remember: don't drink and dive.

Castle

CLUB

(off Map p574; www.thecastlekohtao.com; Mae Hat) Located along the main road between Mae Hat and Chalok Ban Kao, the Castle has quickly positioned itself as the most loved party venue on the island, luring an array of local and international DJs to its triad of parties each month.

Fizz

BAR

(Map p574; Sairee Beach) Recline on mattress-sized pillows and enjoy designer cocktails while listening to Moby, or Enya, mixed with hypnotic gushes of the rolling tide.

Lotus Bar

BAR

(Map p574; Sairee Beach) Lotus is the de facto late-night hang-out spot along the northern end of Sairee. Muscular fire twirlers toss around flaming batons, and the drinks are so large there should be a lifeguard on duty.

Dragon Bar

LOUNGE

(Map p574; Mae Hat) This bar caters to those seeking snazzy, cutting-edge surroundings. There is a happening 'communist chic' retro styling throughout, and everything's dimly lit, moody and relaxing. Dragon Bar is rumoured to have the best cocktails on the island.

Office Bar

BAR

(Map p574; Sairee Beach) With graffiti proudly boasting 'No Gaga, and no Black Eyed F*^#*# Peas', this hexagonal hut lures regulars with grunge beats and rickety wooden seats.

Diza

BAR

(Map p574; Sairee Beach) Once a tatty shack that blasted music as it sold pirated DVDs, Diza has evolved into a casual hang-out at the crossroads of Sairee Village. Locals lounge

on plastic chairs as they slurp their beer and people-watch.

Clumped at the southern end of Sairee Beach, **AC Party Pub** (Map p574), **In Touch** (Map p574) and **Maya Bar** (Map p574) take turns reeling in the partiers throughout the week.



Shopping

Although most items are cheap when compared to prices back home, diving equipment is a big exception to the rule. On Ko Tao you'll be paying Western prices plus shipping plus commission on each item (even with 'discounts') so it's better to do your scuba shopping at home or on your computer.

If you're having trouble scrubbing the sea salt out of your hair, stop by **Avalon** (Map p574; Mae Hat: ☎10am-7pm Mon-Sat) for some locally made (and ecofriendly) body and hair care products.



Information

The ubiquitous *Koh Tao Info* booklet lists loads of businesses on the island and goes into some detail about the island's history, culture and social issues.

Dangers & Annoyances

There's nothing more annoying than enrolling in a diving course with your friends and then having to drop out because you scraped your knee in a motorcycle accident. The roads on Ko Tao are horrendous, save the main drag connecting Sairee Beach to Chalok Ban Kao. While hiring a moped is extremely convenient, this is not the place to learn how to drive. The island is rife with abrupt hills and sudden sand pits along gravel trails. Even if you escape unscathed from a riding experience, scamming bike shops may claim that you damaged your rental and will try to extort you for some serious cash.

Travellers should also be aware that mosquito-borne dengue fever (and a similar but less-severe cousin) is a real and serious threat. The virus can spread quickly due to tightly packed tourist areas and the small size of the island.

Emergency

Police station (Map p574; ☎0 7745 6631) Between Mae Hat and Sairee Beach along the ratty portion of the beachside road.

Internet Access

Rates are generally 2B per minute, with a 20B minimum and discounts if you log on for one hour or longer. You may find, however, that certain useful tourism websites have been firewalled at internet cafes affiliated with travel

agencies. The larger dive schools on the island usually have a wireless connection available for laptop-toting travellers.

Medical Services

All divers are required to sign a medical waiver before exploring the sea. If you have any medical condition that might hinder your ability to dive (including mild asthma), you will be asked to get medical clearance from a doctor on Ko Tao. If you're unsure about whether or not you are fit to dive, consider seeing a doctor before your trip as there are no official hospitals on the island, and the number of qualified medical professionals is limited. Also, make sure your traveller's insurance covers scuba diving. On-island medical 'consultations' (and we use that term very lightly) cost 300B. There are several walk-in clinics and mini-hospitals scattered around Mae Hat and Sairee. All serious medical needs should be dealt with on Ko Samui. If you are diving, ask your outfitter to point you in the proper direction of medical advice.

Diver Safety Support (Map p574; ☎08 1083 0533; kohtao@sssnetwork.com; Mae Hat; ☎on call 24hr) Has a temporary hyperbaric chamber and offers emergency evacuation services.

Money

There are 24-hour ATMs at the island's 7-Elevens. There's also a cluster of ATMs orbiting the ferry docks at Mae Hat. There is a money exchange window at Mae Hat's pier and a second location near Choppers in Sairee. There are several banks near the post office in Mae Hat, at the far end of town along the island's main inland road. They are usually open from 9am to 4pm on weekdays. Almost all dive schools accept credit cards, however there is usually a 3% or 4% handling fee.

Post

Post office (Map p574; ☎0 7745 6170; ☎9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) A 10- to 15-minute walk from the pier; at the corner of Ko Tao's main inner-island road and Mae Hat's 'down road'.

Tourist Information

There's no government-run TAT office on Ko Tao. Transportation and accommodation bookings can be made at most dive shops or at any of the numerous travel agencies, all of which take a small commission on services rendered.

Bon Voyage (Sairee Beach) Run by the kind Ms Jai, a Ko Tao native, this is a great place to make your transport connections and update your blog beneath cool blasts of air-con. It's located along the road connecting Sairee Beach and Hin Wong.

Websites

Koh Tao Online (www.kohtaoonline.com)
An online version of the handy *Koh Tao Info* booklet.

i Getting There & Away

As always, the cost and departure times are subject to change. Rough waves are known to cancel ferries between the months of October and December. When the waters are choppy we recommend taking the Seatran rather than the Lomprayah catamaran if you are prone to seasickness. The catamarans ride the swell, whereas the Seatran cuts through the currents as it crosses the sea. Note that we highly advise purchasing your boat tickets *several* days in advance if you are accessing Ko Tao from Ko Pha-Ngan after the Full Moon Party.

Bangkok, Hua Hin & Chumphon

Lomprayah's new air service, **Solar Air** (www.lomprayah.com), jets passengers from Bangkok's Don Muang airport to Chumphon once daily in each direction from Monday to Saturday. Upon arriving in Chumphon, travellers can make a seamless transfer to the catamaran service bound for Ko Tao.

Bus-boat package tickets from Bangkok are available from travel agencies all over Bangkok and the south. Buses switch to boats in Chumphon and Bangkok-bound passengers can choose to disembark in Hua Hin (for the same price as the Ko Tao–Bangkok ticket).

If you are planning to travel through the night, the train's couchettes are a much more comfortable option than the bus. Travellers can plan their own journey by taking a boat to Chumphon, then making their way to Chumphon's town centre to catch a train up to Bangkok (or any town along the upper southern gulf); likewise in the opposite direction.

From Ko Tao, the high-speed catamaran departs for Chumphon at 10.15am and 2.45pm (1½ hours), the Seatran leaves the island at 4pm (two hours), and a Songserm fast boat makes the same journey at 2.30pm (three hours). There may be fewer departures if the swells are high.

There's also a midnight boat from Chumphon arriving early in the morning. It returns from Ko Tao at 11pm.

Ko Pha-Ngan

The Lomprayah catamaran offers a twice-daily service, leaving Ko Tao at 9.30am and 3pm and arriving on Ko Pha-Ngan around 10.50am and 4.10pm. The Seatran Discovery Ferry offers an identical service. The Songserm Express Boat departs daily at 10am and arrives on Ko Pan-Ngan at 11.30am. Hotel pick-ups are included in the price.

Ko Samui

The Lomprayah catamaran offers a twice-daily service, leaving Ko Tao at 9.30am and 3pm and arriving on Samui around 11.30am and 4.40pm. The Seatran Discovery Ferry offers an identical service. The Songserm Express Boat departs daily at 10am and arrives on Samui at 12.45pm. Hotel pick-ups are included in the price.

Surat Thani & the Andaman Coast

If you are heading to the Andaman Coast and do not want to stop on Ko Pha-Ngan or Ko Samui along the way, there are two routes you can take. The first, and more common, approach is through Surat Thani. First, board a Surat-bound boat (the Songserm or the night ferry, unless you want to change ships) then transfer to a bus upon arrival. The night boat leaves Ko Tao at 8.30pm. Daily buses to the Songserm Express Boat depart from Surat Thani at 8am and arrive at 2.30pm. Return passengers leave Ko Tao at 10am and arrive in Surat Thani at 4.30pm.

The second option is to take a ferry to Chumphon on the mainland and then switch to a bus or train bound for the provinces further south.

i Getting Around

Sörng-tāa-ou In Mae Hat *sörng-tāa-ou*, pick-up trucks and motorbikes crowd around the pier as passengers alight. If you're a solo traveller, you will pay 100B to get to Sairee Beach or Chalok Ban Kao. Groups of two or more will pay 50B each. Rides from Sairee to Chalok Ban Kao cost 80B per person, or 150B for solo tourists. These prices are rarely negotiable, and passengers will be expected to wait until their taxi is full unless they want to pay an additional 200B to 300B. Prices double for trips to the east coast, and the drivers will raise the prices when rain makes the roads harder to negotiate. If you know where you intend to stay, we highly recommend calling ahead to arrange a pick up. Many dive schools offer free pick-ups and transfers as well.

Motorbikes Renting a motorcycle is a dangerous endeavour (see Dangers & Annoyances, opposite) if you're not sticking to the main, well-paved roads. Daily rental rates begin at 150B for a scooter. Larger bikes start at 350B. Discounts are available for weekly and monthly rentals. Try **Lederhosenbikes** (Map p574; ☎08 1752 8994; www.lederhosenbikes.com; Mae Hat; ☀8.30am–6pm Mon–Sat). Do not rent all-terrain-vehicles (ATVs) or jet skis – they are unsafe.

Water taxis Boat taxis depart from Mae Hat, Chalok Ban Kao and the northern part of Sairee Beach (near Vibe Bar). Boat rides to Ko Nang Yuan will set you back at least 100B. Long-tail boats can be chartered for around 1500B per day, depending on the number of passengers carried.

Ang Thong Marine National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติหมู่เกาะอ่างทอง

The 40-some jagged jungle islands of Ang Thong Marine National Park stretch across the cerulean sea like a shattered emerald necklace – each piece a virgin realm featuring sheer limestone cliffs, hidden lagoons and perfect peach-coloured sands. These dream-inducing islets inspired Alex Garland's cult classic *The Beach*, about dope-dabbling backpackers.

February, March and April are the best months to visit this ethereal preserve of greens and blues; crashing monsoon waves means that the park is almost always closed during November and December.

Sights

Every tour stops at the park's head office on **Ko Wua Talap**, the largest island in the archipelago. The island's **viewpoint** might just be the most stunning vista in all of Thailand. From the top, visitors will have sweeping views of the jagged islands nearby as they burst through the placid turquoise water in easily anthropomorphised formations. The trek to the lookout is an arduous 450m trail that takes roughly an hour to complete. Hikers should wear sturdy shoes and walk slowly on the sharp outcrops of limestone. A second trail leads to **Tham Bua Bok**, a cavern with lotus-shaped stalagmites and stalactites.

The **Emerald Sea** (also called the Inner Sea) on **Ko Mae Ko** is another popular destination. This large lake in the middle of the island spans an impressive 250m by 350m and has an ethereal minty tint. You can look but you can't touch; the lagoon is strictly off-limits to the unclean human body. A second dramatic **viewpoint** can be found at the top of a series of staircases nearby.

The naturally occurring stone arches on **Ko Samsao** and **Ko Tai Plao** are visible during seasonal tides and weather conditions. Because the sea is quite shallow around the island chain, reaching a maximum depth of 10m, extensive coral reefs have not developed, except in a few protected pockets on the southwest and northeast sides. There's a shallow coral reef near Ko Tai Plao and Ko Samsao that has decent but not excellent snorkelling. There are also several novice dives for exploring shallow caves and col-

ourful coral gardens and spotting banded sea snakes and turtles. Soft powder beaches line **Ko Tai Plao**, **Ko Wuakantang** and **Ko Hintap**.

Tours

The best way to experience Ang Thong is by taking one of many guided tours departing from Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan. The tours usually include lunch, snorkelling equipment, hotel transfers and (with fingers crossed) a knowledgeable guide. If you're staying in luxury accommodation, there's a good chance that your resort has a private boat for providing group tours. Some midrange and budget places also have their own boats, and if not, they can easily set you up with a general tour operator. Dive centres on Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan offer scuba trips to the park, although Ang Thong doesn't offer the world-class diving that can be found around Ko Tao and Ko Pha-Ngan.

Due to the tumultuous petrol prices, tour companies tend to come and go like the wind. Ask at your accommodation for a list of current operators.

Sleeping

Ang Thong does not have any resorts; however, on Ko Wua Talap the national park has set up five bungalows, each housing between two and eight guests. Campers are also allowed to pitch a tent in certain designated zones. Advance reservations can be made with the **National Parks Services** (☎ 0 7728 6025; www.dnp.go.th; bungalows 500-1400B). Online bookings are possible, although customers must forward a bank deposit within two days of making the reservation.

Getting There & Around

The best way to reach the park is to catch a private day-tour from Ko Samui or Ko Pha-Ngan (located 28km and 32km away, respectively). The islands sit between Samui and the main pier at Don Sak; however, there are no ferries that stop off along the way.

The park officially has an admission fee (adult/child 400/200B), although it should be included in the price of every tour (ask your operator if you are unsure). Private boat charters are also another possibility, although high petrol prices will make the trip quite expensive.

SURAT THANI PROVINCE

Surat Thani อำเภอเมืองสุราษฎร์ธานี

POP 128,990

Known in Thai as 'City of Good People', Surat Thani was once the seat of the ancient Srivijaya empire. Today, this busy junction has become a transport hub that indiscriminately moves cargo and people around the country. Travellers rarely linger here as they make their way to the deservedly popular islands of Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Tao.

Sleeping

For a comfy night in Surat, escape the grimy city centre and hop on a *sörnng-tāa-ou* heading towards the Phang-Nga district. When you climb aboard, tell the driver 'Tesco-Lotus', and you'll be taken about 2km to 3km out of town to a large, box-like shopping centre. A handful of hotel options orbit the mall and have reasonable prices and refreshingly modern amenities.

Options in the downtown area are cheaper, but they tend to offer 'by the hour' service, so things can get a bit noisy as clients come and go. If you're on a very tight budget, consider zipping straight through town and taking the night ferry to reach your island destination.

100 Islands Resort & Spa RESORT \$

(☎0 7720 1150; www.roikoh.com; 19/6 Moo 3, Bypass Rd; r 590-1200B; 🍷🍷🍷) Across the street from the suburban Tesco-Lotus, 100 Islands is as good as it gets in Thailand for under 600B. This teak palace looks out of place along the highway, but inside, the immaculate rooms surround an overgrown garden and lagoon-like swimming pool.

Wangtai Hotel HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 7728 3020; www.wangtaisurat.com; 1 Th Talat Mai; r 790-2000B; 🍷🍷🍷) Across the river from the TAT office, Wangtai tries its best to provide a corporate hotel atmosphere. Polite receptionists and tux-clad bellboys bounce around the vast lobby, and upstairs, rooms have unmemorable furnishings, but there are good views of the city.

Eating

For foodstuffs, go to the **night market** (Sarn Chao Ma; Th Ton Pho) to enjoy fried, steamed, grilled or sautéed delicacies. There are additional evening food stalls near the depart-

ure docks for the daily night boats to the islands, a seafood market at Pak Nam Tapi, and an afternoon **Sunday market** (☎4-9pm) near the TAT office. During the day many food stalls near the downtown bus terminal sell *kôw gài òp* (marinated baked chicken on rice).

Crossroads Restaurant INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(Bypass Rd; dishes 50-200B; 🍷lunch & dinner) Located southwest of Surat across from the Tesco-Lotus mall, Crossroads has a quaint bluesy vibe enhanced by dim lighting and live music. Try the oysters – Surat Thani is famous for its giant molluscs, and the prices are unbeatable.

Information

Th Na Meuang has a bank on virtually every corner in the heart of downtown. If you're staying near the 'suburbs', the Tesco-Lotus has ATMs as well.

Boss Computer (per hr 20B; ☎9am-midnight) The cheapest internet connection around. Located near the post office.

Post office (☎0 7727 2013, 0 7728 1966; Th Talat Mai; ☎8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-12.30pm Sat) Across from Wat Thammabucha. The local One Tambon One People (OTOP) craft house is located inside.

Siam City Bank (Th Chonkasem) Has a Western Union office.

Taksin Hospital (☎0 7727 3239; Th Talat Mai) The most professional of Surat's three hospitals. Just beyond the Talat Mai Market in the northeast part of downtown.

TAT office (☎0 7728 8817; tatsurat@samart.co.th; 5 Th Talat Mai; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) Friendly office southwest of town. Distributes plenty of useful brochures and maps, and staff speak English very well.

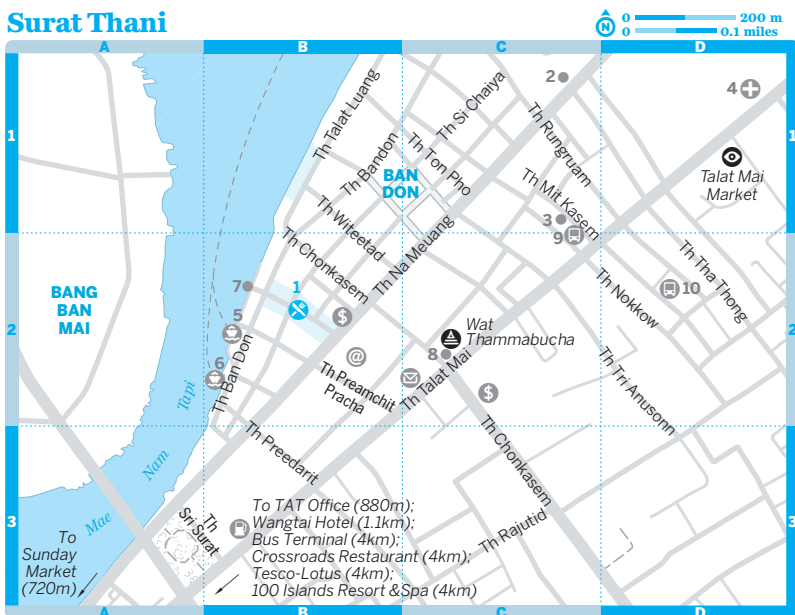
Getting There & Away

In general, if you are departing Bangkok or Hua Hin for Ko Pha-Ngan or Ko Tao, consider taking the train or a bus-boat package that goes through Chumphon rather than Surat. You'll save time, and the journey will be more comfortable. Travellers heading to/from Ko Samui will most likely pass through. If you require any travel services, try **Holiday Travel** (Th Na Meuang) or **Pranhip Co** (Th Talat Mai) – both are reliable and English is spoken.

Air

Although flights from Bangkok to Surat Thani are cheaper than the flights to Samui, it takes quite a bit of time to reach the gulf islands from the airport. In fact, if you are attempting to fly back

Surat Thani



Surat Thani

Eating

1 Night Market..... B2

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2 Holiday Travel C1
 3 Pranthip Company C1
 4 Taksin Hospital D1

Transport

5 Ko Tao Night Ferry Pier..... B2

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6 Night Boat to Ko Pha-Ngan..... B2
 7 Seatran Discovery B2
 8 Seatran Office C2
 Songserm (see 7)
 9 Talat Kaset 1 Bus Terminal..... C2
 10 Talat Kaset 2 Bus Terminal..... D2

to Bangkok from the gulf islands, you'll probably have to leave your beachside bungalow the evening before your flight and spend the night in Surat. Not ideal. If you want to fly through Surat, there are daily shuttles to Bangkok on **Thai Airways International** (THAI; ☎ 0 727 2610; 3/27-28 Th Karunarat).

Boat

In the high season travellers can usually find bus-boat services to Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan directly from the Phun Phin train station (which is 14km west of Surat). These services don't cost any more than those booked in Surat Thani and can save you some serious waiting time. There are also several ferry and speedboat operators that connect Surat Thani to Ko Tao, Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Samui. Most boats – such

as the Raja and Seatran services – leave from Don Sak (about one hour from Surat; bus transfers are included in the ferry ticket) although the Songserm leaves from the heart of Surat town. Be warned that the Raja service can be a very frustrating experience, especially for travellers who are tight on time. The boat trip usually takes around 90 minutes to Ko Samui and 2½ hours to Ko Pha-Ngan, although oftentimes the captain will cut the engines to half propulsion, which means that the journey can take up to five hours.

From the centre of Surat there are nightly ferries to Ko Tao (eight hours, departs at 10pm), Ko Pha-Ngan (seven hours, departs at 10pm) and Ko Samui (six hours, departs at 11pm). These are cargo ships, not luxury boats, so bring food and water and watch your bags.

Bus & Minivan

The most convenient way to travel around the south, frequent buses and minivans depart from two main locations in town known as Talat Kaset 1 and Talat Kaset 2. Talat Kaset 1, on the north side of Th Talat Mai (the city's main drag) offers speedy service to Nakhon. This is also the location of Pranthip Co, one of the more trustworthy agencies in town. Buses to Phun Phin also leave from Talat Kaset 1. At Talat Kaset 2, on the south side of Th Talat Mai, you'll find frequent transportation to Hat Yai and minibuses to Nakhon, Trang, Khanom and Krabi. Andaman-bound buses (usually destined for Phuket) depart every hour from 7am to 3.30pm, stopping at Takua Pa for those who want to access Khao Sok National Park. The 'new' bus terminal (which is actually a few years old now, but still referred to as new by the locals) is located 7km south of town on the way to Phun Phin. This hub services traffic to and from Bangkok.

Train

When arriving by train you'll actually pull into Phun Phin, a cruddy town 14km west of Surat. From Phun Phin, there are buses to Phuket, Phang-Nga and Krabi – some via Takua Pa, a junction city further west and the stopping point for Khao Sok National Park. Transport from Surat moves with greater frequency, but it's worth checking the schedule in Phun Phin first – you might luck out and save yourself a slow ride between towns.

If you plan on travelling during the day, go for the express railcars. Night travellers should opt for the air-con couchettes. Odd-numbered trains are travelling from Bangkok south – even-numbered trains are travelling in the opposite direction. Trains passing through Surat stop in Chumphon and Hua Hin on their way up to the capital, and in the other direction you'll call at Trang, Hat Yai and Sungai Kolok before hopping the border. The train station at Phun Phin has a 24-hour left-luggage room that charges around 20B a day. The advance ticket office is open from

6am to 6pm daily (with a nebulous one-hour lunch break somewhere between 11am and 1.30pm).

Getting Around

Air-conditioned vans to/from Surat Thani airport cost around 70B per person and they'll drop you off at your hotel.

To travel around town, *sǒng-tǎa-ou* cost 10B to 30B (it's 15B to reach Tesco-Lotus from the city centre), while *sǎhm-lór* (also spelt *sǎmláw*; three-wheeled vehicles) charge between 20B and 40B.

Fan-cooled Orange buses run from Phun Phin train station to Surat Thani every 10 minutes (15B, 25 minutes). For this ride, taxis charge a cool 200B for a maximum of four people, while share-taxi charge 100B per person. Other taxi rates are posted just north of the train station (at the metal pedestrian bridge).

NAKHON SI THAMMARAT PROVINCE

Ao Khanom

อำเภอขนอม

Little Khanom, halfway between Surat Thani and Nakhon Si Thammarat, quietly sits along the blue gulf waters. Overlooked by tourists who flock to the jungle-islands nearby, this pristine region, simply called Khanom, is a worthy choice for those seeking a serene beach setting unmarred by enterprising corporations.

Sights

The most unique feature in Khanom are the **pink dolphins** – a rare albino breed with a stunning pink hue. They are regularly seen from the old ferry pier and the electric plant pier around dawn and dusk.

WORTH A TRIP

WÁT SUAN MOKHAPHALARAM

Surrounded by lush forest, **Wát Suan Mokkaphalaram** (Wat Suanmokkh; www.suanmokkh.org), whose name means 'Garden of Liberation', charges 2000B for a 10-day program that includes food, lodging and instruction (although technically the 'teaching' is free). English retreats, run by the International Dhamma Hermitage, begin on the first day of every month and registration takes place the afternoon before. Founded by Ajan Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, arguably Thailand's most famous monk, the temple's philosophical teachings are ecumenical in nature, comprising Zen, Taoist and Christian elements, as well as the traditional Theravada schemata.

For details on reaching the temple, located 7km outside of Chaiya, check out www.suanmokkh-idh.org/idh-travel.html.

The area is also home to a variety of pristine geological features including **waterfalls** and **caves**. The largest of the falls, known as **Samet Chun**, has tepid pools for cooling off, and great views of the coast. To reach the falls, head south from Ban Khanom and turn left at the blue Samet Chun sign. Follow the road for about 2km and after crossing a small stream, take the next right and hike up into the mountain following the dirt road. After about a 15-minute walk, listen for the waterfall and look for a small trail on the right. The scenic **Hin Lat Falls** is the smallest cascade, but it's also the easiest to reach. There are pools for swimming and several huts providing shade. It's located south of Nai Phlao.

There are also two beautiful caves along the main road (Hwy 4014) between Khanom and Don Sak. **Khao Wang Thong** has a string of lights guiding visitors through the network of caverns and narrow passages. A metal gate covers the entrance; stop at the house at the base of the hill to retrieve the key (and leave a small donation). Turn right off the main highway at Rd 4142 to find **Khao Krot Cave**, which has two large caverns, but you'll have to bring a torch (flashlight).

For a postcard-worthy vista of the undulating coastline, head to **Dat Fa Mountain**, located about 5km west of the coast along

Hwy 4014. The hillside is usually deserted, making it easy to stop along the way to snap some photos.

Sleeping & Eating

In the last few years, there has been talk of further developing Khanom's beaches into a more laid-back alternative to the islands nearby. The area is still far from booming, but large-scale development is on the cards. A recent surge in gulf oil rigging has meant that developers are eyeing Khanom as a potential holiday destination for the nearby workers.

There are enough options here that pre-booking isn't a must – in fact we advise checking out a few places before picking a spot to crash. Many of the resorts see very few customers and the constant disuse (not regularly flushing the toilets etc) means that some rooms are dank as the relentless jungle reclaims them. It's best to stay away from the large hotels and stick to beachside bungalow operations.

For some cheap eats, head to **Kho Khao Beach** at the end of Rd 4232. You'll find a steamy jumble of BBQ stands offering some tasty favourites such as *mõo nám ðòk* (spicy pork salad) and *sõm ðam* (spicy green papaya salad). On Wednesday and Sunday there are markets further inland near the police station.

JATUKHAM RAMMATHEP

If you've spent more than 24 hours in Thailand, you've probably seen a Jatukham Rammathep dangling around someone's neck – these round amulets are everywhere.

The bearers of the Jatukham Rammathep are supposed to have good fortune and protection from any harm. The origin of the amulet's name remains a mystery, although a popular theory suggests that Jatukham and Rammathep were the aliases of two Srivajayan princes who buried relics under Nakhon's Wat Phra Mahathat some 1000 years ago.

A notorious Thai police detective first wore the precious icon, and firmly believed that the guardian spirits helped him solve a particularly difficult murder case. He tried to popularise the amulet, but it wasn't a market success until his death in 2006. Thousands of people attended his funeral, including the crown prince, and the Jatukham Rammathep took off.

The talismans are commissioned at the Mahathat temple, and in the last several years, southern Thailand has seen a spike in economic activity. The first amulet was sold in 1987 for 39B, and today, over 100 million baht are spent on the town's amulets every *week*. The desire for these round icons has become so frenzied that a woman was crushed to death on the temple grounds during a widely publicised discount sale (she was not wearing her talisman).

Every day, trucks drive along Nakhon's main roads blaring loud music to promote new shipments. These thumping beats have started to shake the ground beneath the temple, and the repeated hammering has, in an ironic metaphor, bent the main spire of Wat Mahathat.

Racha Kiri

(☎ 0 7530 0245; www.rachakiri.com; bungalows 3500-12,500B; 🏠🏠🏠) Khanom's upscale retreat is a beautiful campus of rambling villas. The big price tag means no crowds, which can be nice, although the resort feels like a white elephant when the property isn't being used as a corporate retreat.

Talkoo Beach Resort

(☎ 0 7552 8397; bungalows 1470B; 🏠🏠) This charming operation has dozens of snazzy white cottages featuring quirky fixtures such as sinks made from hollowed-out tree trunks. This is the best lodging option in the vicinity.

Suchada Villa

(☎ 0 7552 8459; bungalows 800B; 🏠) Right along the main road, Suchada is recognisable by its cache of brightly coloured bungalows. Rooms are cute and clean with quirky designer details such as strings of shells dangling in front of the bathroom doors.

**Information**

The police station and hospital are located just south of Ban Khanom at the junction leading to Kho Khao Beach. There's a 7-Eleven (with an ATM) in the heart of Ban Khanom.

**Getting There & Away**

From Surat Thani, you can catch any Nakhon-bound bus and ask to be let off at the junction for Khanom. Catch a motorcycle taxi (70B) the rest of the way. You can get a share taxi from Nakhon Si Thammarat's share-taxi terminal to Khanom town for 85B.

From Khanom town you can hire motorcycle taxis out to the beaches for about 60B. There are three separate bus stops in the vicinity. Ask your driver to stop near the fruit market or the hospital, as these are the closest stops to the beach.

Nakhon Si Thammarat

อำเภอเมืองนครศรีธรรมราช

POP 117,100

The bustling city of Nakhon Si Thammarat (usually shortened to 'Nakhon') won't win any beauty pageants. However, travellers who stop in this historic town will enjoy a decidedly cultural experience amid some of the most important wát in the kingdom.

Hundreds of years ago, an overland route between the western port of Trang and the eastern port of Nakhon Si Thammarat func-

tioned as a major trade link between Thailand and the rest of the world. This ancient influx of cosmopolitan conceits is still palpable today, and can be found in the recipes of local cuisine, or housed in the city's temples and museums.

**Sights**

Most of Nakhon's commercial activity (hotels, banks and restaurants) takes place in the northern part of the downtown. South of the clock tower, visitors will find the city's historic quarter with the oft-visited Wat Mahatath. Th Ratchadumnoen is the main thoroughfare and teems with cheap *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* heading in both directions.

Wat Phra Mahatath Woramahawihan

TEMPLE

(Th Si Thamasok) The most important wát in southern Thailand, Wat Phra Mahatath Woramahawihan (simply known as Mahatath) is a stunning campus boasting 77 *chedi* (stupa) and an imposing 77m *chedi* crowned by a gold spire. According to legend, Queen Hem Chala and Prince Thanakuman brought relics to Nakhon over 1000 years ago, and built a small pagoda to house the precious icons. The temple has since grown into a rambling site, and today, crowds gather daily to purchase the popular Jatukham amulets (see opposite). Don't miss the modest ceramics museum inside.

Shadow Puppets

MUSEUM

(Th Si Thamasok Soi 3) Traditionally, there are two styles of local shadow puppet: *nǎng dǎ-lung* and *nǎng yǎi*. At just under 1m tall, the former feature movable appendages and parts (including genitalia); the latter are nearly life-sized, and lack moving parts. Both are intricately carved from cow hide. Suchart Subsin's puppet house has a small museum where staff can demonstrate the cutting process. Short shows can be performed for visitors for a nominal fee.

National Museum

MUSEUM

(Th Ratchadumnoen; admission 30B; ☎9am-4pm Wed-Sun) When the Tambralinga (also known as Tambralinga) kingdom traded with merchants from Indian, Arabic, Dvaravati and Champa states, the region around Nakhon became a melting pot of crafts and art. Today, many of these relics are on display behind the run-down facade of the national museum.

KHAO LUANG NATIONAL PARK

Known for its beautiful mountain and forest walks, cool streams, waterfalls and orchards, **Khao Luang National Park** (อุทยานแห่งชาติเขาหลวง; ☎0 7530 9644-7; adult/child 400/200B) surrounds the 1835m peak of Khao Luang. This soaring mountain range reaches up to 1800m, and is covered in virgin forest. An ideal source for streams and rivers, the mountains show off impressive waterfalls and provide a habitat for a plethora of bird species – this place is a good spot for any budding ornithologist. Fans of flora will also get their kicks here; there are over 300 species of orchid in the park, some of which are found nowhere else on earth.

Park bungalows can be rented for between 600B and 1000B per night, and sleep six to 12 people. **Camping** is permitted along the trail to the summit. To reach the park, take a *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* (around 25B) from Nakhon Si Thammarat to the village of Khiriwong, at the base of Khao Luang. The entrance to the park and the offices of the Royal Forest Department are 33km from the centre of Nakhon on Rte 4015, an asphalt road that climbs almost 400m in 2.5km to the office and a further 450m to the car park.

Sleeping & Eating

Nakhon is a great place to sample cuisine with a distinctive southern twist. In the evening, Muslim food stands sell delicious *kǒw mǒk gǎi* (chicken biryani), *má-dǎ-bà* (*murdabag*; Indian pancake stuffed with chicken or vegetables) and roti. Several tasty options cluster around Bovorn Bazaar on Th Ratchadamnoen.

Nakhon Garden Inn GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎0 7532 3777; 1/4 Th Pak Nakhon; r 445B; 🏠) The motel-style Nakhon Garden Inn offers a pleasant alternative to the usual cement cube. Rooms are encased in exposed crimson brick and set around a sandy garden. Each unit is identical, sporting a TV and fridge; try to score a room that gets plenty of sunlight.

Twin Lotus Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎0 7532 3777; www.twinlotushotel.net; 97/8 Th Phattanakan Khukhwang; r 1400-1600B; 🏠📶🚰) Its age is starting to show, but Twin Lotus is still a nice spot for a little pampering while visiting Nakhon. This 16-storey behemoth sits a couple of kilometres southeast of the city centre.

Khrua Nakhon THAI \$\$
(Bovorn Bazaar; dishes 60-200B; 🍽️breakfast & lunch) This joint has a great selection of traditional Nakhon cuisine. Order a sharing platter, which comes with five types of curry (including an unpalatable spicy fish sauce), or try the *kǒw yam* (southern-style rice salad). There's one at a second location in Robinson Ocean Mall.

Rock 99 INTERNATIONAL \$
(1180/807 Bovorn Bazaar; dishes 40-130B; 🍽️dinner) The choice *fa-ràng* hang-out in Nakhon, Rock 99 has a good selection of international fare – from taco salads to pizzas (avoid the Thai fare though). There's live music on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights, but expect to bump into friendly expats almost all the time.

Information

Several banks and ATMs hug Th Ratchadamnoen in the northern end of downtown. There is an English-language bookstore on the 3rd floor of Robinson Ocean shopping mall.

Bovorn Bazaar (Th Ratchadamnoen) A mall housing a few internet cafes.

Police station (☎1155; Th Ratchadamnoen) Opposite the post office.

Post office (Th Ratchadamnoen; 🕒8.30am-4.30pm)

TAT office (☎0 7534 6515) Housed in a 1926-vintage building in the northern end of the Sanam Na Meuang (City Park). Has some useful brochures in English. The local OTOP craft house is just a block away on the west side of Sanam Na Meuang Park.

Getting There & Away

Air Several small carriers such as Nok Air, Air Asia and Orient Thai Airlines (plus Thai Airways) fly from Bangkok to Nakhon every day. There are about six daily one-hour flights.

Trains There are two daily train departures from Bangkok to Nakhon (stopping through Hua Hin, Chumphon and Surat Thani along the way). They are both 12-hour night trains leaving at 5.35pm and 7.15pm. These trains continue on to Hat Yai and Sungai Kolok.

Bus Buses from Bangkok depart either between 6am and 8am, or between 5.30pm and 10pm. There are about seven daily departures. Ordinary buses to Bangkok leave from the bus terminal, but a couple of private buses leave from booking offices on Th Jamroenwithi, where you can also buy tickets. The journey takes 12 hours.

When looking for minivan stops to leave Nakhon, keep an eye out for small desks along the side of the downtown roads (minivans and waiting passengers may or may not be present nearby). It's best to ask around as each destination has a different departure point. Krabi and Don Sak minivans are grouped together – just make sure you don't get on the wrong one. Stops are scattered around Th Jamroenwithi, Th Wakhit and Th Yommarat.

i Getting Around

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou run north–south along Th Ratchadamnoen and Th Si Thammasok for 10B (a bit more at night). Motorcycle-taxi rides start at 20B and cost up to 50B for longer distances.

SONGKHLA PROVINCE

Songkhla's postal code is 90210, but this ain't no Beverly Hills! The province's two main commercial centres, Hat Yai and Songkhla, are not usually affected by the political turmoil plaguing the cities further south. Intrepid travellers will be able to count the number of other tourists on one hand as they wander through local markets, savour Muslim-Thai fusion cuisine and relax on breezy beaches.

Songkhla & Around สงขลา

POP 90,780

'The great city on two seas' lends itself perfectly to the click of a visitor's camera; however, slow-paced Songkhla doesn't see much in the way of foreign tourist traffic. Although the town hasn't experienced any of the Muslim separatist violence plaguing the provinces further south, it's still catching the same bad press. This is a darn shame, since it's the last safe city where travellers can experience the unique flavour of Thailand's predominantly Muslim Deep South.

The population is a mix of Thais, Chinese and Malays, and the local architecture and cuisine reflect this fusion at every turn.

👁 Sights

National Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑ์ชาตนาแห่งชาติสงขลา; Th Wichianchom; admission 150B; ☉9am–4pm Wed–Sun, closed public holidays) The 1878 building that now houses the **national museum** was originally built in a Chinese architectural style as the residence of a luminary. This museum is easily the most picturesque national museum in Thailand and contains exhibits from all Thai art-style periods, particularly the Srivijaya. Also on display are Thai and Chinese ceramics and sumptuous Chinese furniture owned by the local Chinese aristocracy.

Hat Samila

BEACH

(หาดสมิหลา) If museums aren't your style, head to the beach. The residents have begun taking better care of the strip of white sand along Hat Samila, and it is now quite pleasant for strolling or flying a kite (a local obsession). A bronze **Mermaid sculpture**, depicted squeezing water from her long hair in tribute to Mae Thorani (the Hindu-Buddhist earth goddess), sits atop some rocks at the northern end of the beach. Locals treat the figure like a shrine, tying the waist with coloured cloth and rubbing the breasts for good luck. Next to that are the **Cat and Rat sculptures**, named for the Cat and Rat Islands (Ko Yo and Ko Losin). Fragments of a dragon statue are sliced up and placed around the city. The **Nag Head** (dragon head), which shoots water into the ocean, is said to bring prosperity and fresh water – it's a popular meeting spot for locals.

Ko Yo

ISLAND

(เกาะยอ) A popular day trip from Songkhla, this island in the middle of Thale Sap is actually connected to the mainland by bridges and is famous for its cotton-weaving industry. There's a roadside market selling cloth and ready-made clothes at excellent prices.

If you visit Ko Yo, don't miss **Wat Phrahorn Laemphor**, with its giant reclining Buddha, and check out the **Thaksin Folklore Museum** (☎0 7459 1618; admission 100B; ☉8.30am–4.30pm), which actively aims to promote and preserve the culture of the region, and is a must-see. The pavilions here are reproductions of southern Thai-style houses and contain folk art, handicrafts and traditional household implements.

If you have kids in tow, try the following:

Songkhla Zoo ZOO
(สวนสัตว์สงขลา; Khao Rup Chang; adult/child 30/5B;
☀️9am-6pm) Enjoy cuddling with baby tigers.

Songkhla Aquarium AQUARIUM
(สงขลาอะควาเรียม; www.songkhlaaquarium.com;
adult/child 150/80B; ☀️9am-5pm Wed-Mon)
Point at clownfish at this flashy new attraction.

Sleeping & Eating

Songkhla's hotels tend to be lower priced than other areas in the gulf, which makes going up a budget level a relatively cheap splurge.

For quality seafood, head to the street in front of the BP Samila Beach Hotel – the best spot is the restaurant directly in the roundabout. If market munching is your game, you'll find a place to sample street food every day of the week. On Sundays try the bustling market that encircles the Pavilion Hotel. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday feature a night market (which closes around 9pm) near the local fish plant and bus station, and the Friday-morning market sits diagonally opposite the City Hall.

BP Samila Beach Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎️ 7444 0222; www.bphotelsgroup.com; 8 Th Ratchadamnoen; r 1680-2500B; 📞@☎️) A landmark in quaint Songkhla, the city's poshest address is actually a really good deal – you'd pay nearly double for the same amenities on the islands. The beachfront establishment offers large rooms with fridges, satellite TVs and a choice of sea or mountain views (both are pretty darn good).

Green World Palace Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎️ 7443 7900-8; 99 Th Samakisukson; r 1000-1200B; 📞@☎️) When expats say that sleeping in Songkhla is a steal, they're not lying – Green World is the proof. This classy affair boasts chandeliers, a spiralling staircase in the lobby and a 5th-floor swimming pool with views. Rooms are immaculate and filled with all the mod cons of a hotel twice the price.

Khao Noy CURRY SHOP \$
(☎️ 7431 1805; 14/22 Th Wichianchom; dishes 30-50B; ☀️breakfast & lunch Thu-Tue) Songkhla's most lauded *râhn kôw gaang* (curry shop) serves up an amazing variety of authentic southern-style curries, soups, stir-fries and salads. Look for the glass case holding several stainless-steel trays of food just south of the sky-blue Chokdee Inn.

Information

Banks can be found all over town.

Indonesian Consulate (☎️ 7431 1544; Th Sadao)

Malaysian Consulate (☎️ 7431 1062; 4 Th Sukhum)

Police station (☎️ 7432 1868; Th Laeng Phra Ram) North of the town centre.

Post office (Th Wichianchom) Opposite the market; international calls can be made upstairs.

Getting There & Around

Trains From Songkhla you'll have to go to Hat Yai to reach most long-distance destinations in the south (trains no longer pass through town).

Buses The government bus station is located a few hundred metres south of the Viva Hotel. Three 2nd-class buses go daily to Bangkok, stopping in Chumphon, Nakhon Si Thammarat and Surat Thani, among other places. For Hat Yai, buses and minivans take around 40 minutes, and leave from Th Ramwithi. *Sörng-tăa-ou* also leave from here for Ko Yo.

Hat Yai

หาดใหญ่

POP 157,400

Welcome to backcountry Thailand's version of big city livin'. Songkhla Province's liveliest town has long been a favourite stop for Malaysian men on their weekend hooker tours. These days Hat Yai gladly shakes hands with globalisation – Western-style shopping malls stretch across the city, providing local teenagers with a spot to loiter and middle-aged ladies with a place to do their cardio.

Tourists usually only get a glimpse of the city's winking commercial lights from the window of their train carriage as they connect the dots along the peninsula, but those who decide to explore will be rewarded with excellent local cuisine (the city has hundreds of restaurants), shopping (DVDs anyone?) and an evening bar scene that brilliantly mixes cosy pubs and bouncing discotheques.

Sleeping & Eating

Hat Yai has dozens of hotels within walking distance of the train station. The city is the unofficial capital of southern Thailand's cuisine, offering Muslim roti and curries, Chinese noodles and dim sum, and fresh Thai-style seafood from both the gulf and Andaman coasts. On Th Niyomrat, between Niphat Uthit 1 and 2, starting at Tamrab

Muslim, is a string of casual and inexpensive Muslim restaurants open from about 7am to 9pm daily. Meals at these places cost between 20B to 60B.

The **night market** (Th Montri 1) boasts heaps of local eats including several stalls selling the famous Hat Yai-style deep-fried chicken and *kà-nòm jeen* (fresh rice noodles served with curry), as well as a couple of stalls peddling grilled seafood.

Regency Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 7435 3333-47; www.theregencyhatyai.com; 23 Th Prachathipat; r 798-5680B; 📞📧📷) This beautiful hotel has that grand old-world charm that's so very rare nowadays. Rooms in the old wing are smaller (and cheaper) and feature attractive wood furnishings, while the new wing boasts amazing views.

Sor Hueng 3

THAI \$

(☎08 1896 3455; 79/16 Th Thamnoonwithi; dishes 30-120B; 🍴dinner) This popular local legend with branches all over town prepares heaps of delicious Thai-Chinese and southern Thai faves. Simply point to whatever looks good or order something freshly wok-fried from the extensive menu.

i Information

Immigration Office (Th Phetkasem) Near the railway bridge, it handles visa extensions.

TAT Office (tatsgkhla@tat.or.th; 1/1 Soi 2, Th Niphat Uthit 3) Very helpful staff here speak excellent English and have loads of info on the entire region.

Tourist police (Th Niphat Uthit 3; 🕒24hr) Near the TAT office.

i Getting There & Away

Air

Thai Airways International (THAI; 182 Th Niphat Uthit 1) operates eight flights daily between Hat Yai and Bangkok.

Nearly all of the low-cost airlines now operate flights to and from Bangkok:

Air Asia (www.airasia.com) Daily flights from Hat Yai to Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur.

Nok Air (www.nokair.com) Daily flights between Hat Yai and Bangkok's Don Muang Airport.

Bus

Most interprovincial buses and south-bound minivans leave from the bus terminal 2km south-east of the town centre, while most north-bound minivans now leave from a minivan terminal 5km west of town at Talat Kaset, a 60B túk-túk ride

from the centre of town. Buses link Hat Yai to almost any location in southern Thailand.

Prasert Tour (Th Niphat Uthit 1) conducts minibuses to Surat Thani (4½ hours, 8am to 5pm), and **Cathay Tour** (93/1 Th Niphat Uthit 2) can also arrange minivans to many destinations in the south.

Train

There are four overnight trains to/from Bangkok each day, and the trip takes at least 16 hours. There are also seven trains daily that run along the east coast to Sungai Kolok and two daily trains running west to Butterworth and Padang Besar, both in Malaysia.

There is an advance booking office and left-luggage office at the train station; both are open 7am to 5pm daily.

i Getting Around

An **Airport Taxi Service** (☎0 7423 8452; 182 Th Niphat Uthit 1) makes the run to the airport four times daily (80B per person, 6.45am, 9.30am, 1.45pm and 6pm). A private taxi for this run costs 280B.

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou run along Th Phetkasem (10B per person). Túk-túk and motorcycle taxis around town cost 20B to 40B per person.

DEEP SOUTH

Yala

ยาลา

POP 65,000

Landlocked Yala feels quite different from the neighbouring towns. The city's gaping boulevards and well-organised street grid feels distinctly Western, especially since Yala is predominantly a university town.

Yala's biggest attraction is **Wat Kuha Pi Muk** (also called Wat Na Tham or Cave-front Temple), 8km west of town on the road connecting Yala to Hat Yai (Rte 409). This Srivijaya-period cave temple features a reclining Buddha that dates back to AD 757. A statue of a giant guards the temple's entrance, and inside small natural openings in the cave's roof let in the sun's rays to illuminate a variety of ancient Buddhist cave drawings. Wat Kuha Pi Muk is one of the most important pilgrimage points in southern Thailand.

Take a breather from wát ogling and check out what is known as the largest mail box in Thailand, built in the township of Betong in 1924. Betong also functions as a legal, but inconvenient, border crossing to

TROUBLE IN THE DEEP SOUTH

Background

Patrick Winn

Thailand's southernmost frontier is lush, green and prone to violence. Though the three provinces in Thailand's deep south were conquered by the Siamese kingdom more than 100 years ago, a regional insurgency still kicks and screams for independence.

Armed separatists dream of reclaiming 'Patani', a Qatar-sized Muslim sultanate that perished long before today's insurgents were even born. Along with much of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, the region absorbed Islamic beliefs from 13th-century Arab traders. The kingdom existed for about 500 years until 1902, when it was seized by Buddhist Siam and carved into three provinces: Yala, Narathiwat, Pattani and parts of neighbouring Satun.

But the deep south has never truly assimilated with Thailand. After a relative lull of violence in the 1980s and '90s, the independence struggle is now raging harder than ever.

Deaths have reached 4600 since 2004, a year marking the revival of violent struggle. Despite separatists' semi-secret peace talks with the Royal Thai Army, few expect the low-grade civil war to end anytime soon.

Killings occur at a daily clip. Shock tactics rival those of insurgents in Iraq or Pakistan. Beheadings of monks and kids are recurrent. Teachers, seen as agents of cultural assimilation, are shot dead en route to morning lessons. Rubber farmers are gunned down with AK-47 fire simply for having good relations with Buddhist neighbours.

The separatists are also growing more sophisticated and savvy. Their roadside bombs were once built from Tupperware, C-4 and rusty nails. They have since graduated to radio-control detonators and complex attacks, which first wipe out unlucky civilians and then responding bomb squads with secondary bombs planted nearby.

What compels insurgents to such extremes? According to separatists, they must resist 'Siamese Infidels' forcing Buddhist culture down their throats. As far back as 1939, the Thai state shut down the region's Islamic schools and Qu'ranic sharia law courts. The local Yawi dialect was forbidden in government offices.

Locals still bemoan the indignity of visiting government bureaus where imported officials can't speak their local tongue. The army also enforces a 'state of emergency' – essentially martial law – that limits the rights of those arrested. Muslim groups complain that men are falsely accused and never come home. Powerful positions, from army officers to police chiefs to mayors, are typically held by Thai Buddhists and not local Muslims.

Two army scandals have helped galvanise disdain for the Thai state: the Tak Bai and Krue Sae events of 2004. The former saw roughly 80 Muslim protesters in the town of Tak Bai, Narathiwat, stacked in a truck's sweltering cargo hold until they suffocated. In the latter incident, troops stormed a mosque called Krue Sae in Pattani and gunned down more than 30 suspected insurgents. The alleged separatists were armed with knives and a single gun. The army insists both incidents were accidental.

Perhaps the separatists' most unique feature is their ironclad code of silence. Thai soldiers say combating the insurgency is akin to fighting ghosts. The self-proclaimed 'Patani Mujahedin' run what one academic calls a network without a core: a patchwork of village-based cells operating independently.

The various resistance groups share common ideals but no common leader. Accounts vary, but the various networks are believed to control roughly 8000 separatists. Unlike al-Qaeda or the Taliban, they seldom claim responsibility for attacks, preferring silence to glory.

Leaflets scattered around victims' corpses are the insurgents' preferred method of communication. One typical screed reads: 'Make violence brutally. Attack the Buddhist Thais. We know that the Buddhist Thais do not like violence and love peace. When the Buddhist Thais cannot stand, they will surrender.'

As intended, killings have stoked Buddhist flight en masse. In parts of the army's so-called 'red zone', vestiges of the Thai state control, such as schools and even postal routes,

are few and far between. Monks dare not go on alms runs without M-16-gripping soldiers at their sides. At times, according to some experts, as many as 25% of the deep south's villages have at some point fallen under de facto insurgency control.

The insurgency is noted for its reluctance to attack targets outside the deep south, which is likely the reason the conflict attracts scant global interest. The greater region offers targets that, if attacked, would deal great damage to the psyche of Thailand and its tourists.

But separatists have left alone the backpacker beaches of Krabi, Phuket's resorts and even Bangkok, the heart of the Thai authority. Likewise, insurgents appear uninterested in joining forces with al-Qaeda or Islamic terror groups in Pakistan or Indonesia.

One senior member of the oldest insurgent group, the Patani United Liberation Organization, has insisted the insurgency will never solicit outside help. Though speaking only for one of several factions, he claims post-revolution Patani will warmly welcome Western tourists to its pristine beachfront.

But for now, the violence has strangled regional tourism. Even if separatists are only out to harm Thai Buddhists and Muslim collaborators, marketplace bombs kill indiscriminately. Hotels classy enough to satisfy tourists have also come under attack; these are the same hotels favoured by high-ranking officers.

The only reliable stream of tourism comes from Malaysian men travelling north for booze and rented female company. Still, given a spate of explosions outside dodgy night-clubs, they do so at a pronounced risk.

But no matter how much blood the 'Patani Mujahedin' spill, they are unlikely to secure their stated goal: an independent Islamic state.

Though most Thais view the deep south as a different planet, heavy nationalism imbued in Thai schools has bred a population incapable of stomaching territorial loss. An authority figure who backed ceding Thai soil would risk political suicide. And though the Bangkok press chronicles daily killings in detail, the insurgency remains an afterthought to voters convinced terror will never creep outside the deep south.

Instead of Thai surrender, some version of autonomy is a more reasonable, but still distant, hope for insurgents and their sympathisers. Sporadic talks between Thai military officials and separatists in exile have taken place since the late 2000s. However, the army's faith is shaken each time insurgency heads try to prove their authority through ceasefires that are ignored by rebels on the ground.

So a vexing question remains for Thailand's military: how do you negotiate with a network with no core?

Patrick Winn is the Southeast Asia correspondent for the Global Post foreign news agency

Should You Go?

Although it's possible to visit the region, the insurgency has stifled tourism in the deep south to the extent that tourist infrastructure – hotels, restaurants, transportation and activities – is minimal. And the threat of violence means that exploring the area's largely pristine and uninhabited beaches – ostensibly most travellers' reason for visiting the region – can't generally be recommended.

To date, tourists have not been targeted, but the haphazard nature of the insurgency makes it difficult to predict which way the situation will turn (and bombs kill indiscriminately). If you plan to visit the region and want to know the situation on the ground, the authorities suggest contacting the local Tourist Police or TAT, but you'll have to be prepared for pessimistic spiel. Generally speaking, travel in Pattani and Narathiwat in the early morning and late evening is discouraged, and independent travel via rented motorcycle carries considerable risk. While in urban areas, it's probably also a good idea not to linger around parked motorcycles, as they have been used to carry remote-controlled bombs.

Austin Bush, author of the Deep South section of this chapter

Malaysia; contact Yala's **immigration office** (☎ 0 7323 1292) or see the boxed text, p600 for details.

Sleeping & Eating

The lack of tourism means great bargains for a comfy bed.

Chang Lee Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎ 0 7324 4600; www.yalasirichot.4t.com; 318 Th Siriroi; s & d 400-460B; ☎) A 15-minute walk from the train station, the Chang Lee has plush rooms that cater to business travellers. Facilities include a karaoke nightclub and coffeeshop.

Although inland, Yala has several excellent seafood restaurants – there's a cluster around Th Pitipakdee and Th Sribunrung. Rice and noodle stalls abound near the train station.

Getting There & Around

Buses to Hat Yai (150B, 2½ hours) stop several times a day on Th Siriroi, outside the Prudential TS Life office. Across the street is the stop for other short- to medium-distance buses north. Yala's train station has four daily departures for Bangkok (193B to 1675B, 18 to 22 hours) and seven for Sungai Kolok (41B to 917, two to three hours).

Pattani

ปัตตานี

POP 118,000

Like a rebellious child that can never get along with his stepmother, Pattani has never quite adjusted to Thai rule. It was once the heart and soul of a large Muslim principality that included the nearby provinces of Yala and Narathiwat. Although today's political situation has stunted the area's development, Pattani has a 500-year history of trading with the world's most notorious imperial powerhouses. The Portuguese established a trading post here in 1516, the Japanese passed through in 1605, the Dutch in 1609, and the British flexed their colonial muscle in 1612.

Yet despite the city's interesting past, there's little of interest in Pattani except its access to some decent nearby beaches. Unfortunately, the ongoing insurgency (see the boxed text, p596) has made all but a handful of these sandy destinations unsafe for the independent traveller.

Sights

The Mae Nam Pattani (Pattani River) acts as a divider between the older town to the east

and the newer town to the west. Along Th Ruedi you can see what is left of old Pattani architecture – the Sino-Portuguese style that was once so prevalent in this part of southern Thailand. On Th Arnoaru there are several very old, but still quite intact, Chinese-style homes.

Thailand's second-largest mosque is the **Matsayit Klang** (Th Naklua Yarang), a traditional structure with a green hue that is probably still the south's most important mosque. It was built in the 1960s.

If it weren't for the political unrest, Pattani could be one of the better beach destinations in the region. Unfortunately, exploring much of the area independently is not a safe option at this time, and there are plenty of pretty beaches further north that are perfectly safe.

Locals frequent **Laem Tachi**, a sandy cape that juts out over the northern end of Ao Pattani. It can be reached by boat taxi from Pattani pier. **Hat Talu Kapo**, 14km east of Pattani near Yaring Amphoe, is another hot spot. And although it's technically in Songkhla Province, **Thepha district**, 35km northwest of Pattani, is the most developed beach destination in the area. There you'll find a few slightly aged resorts that cater mostly to middle-class Thais. At **Hat Soi Sawan**, near the Songkhla-Pattani border, several families have set up informal beachfront restaurants that are popular with weekend visitors. To reach Thepha, hop on any Songkhla-bound bus from Pattani (or vice versa); mention the name of your resort and you'll be deposited at the side of the road for the brief walk to the beach.

Sleeping & Eating

PATTANI TOWN

CS Pattani Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 7333 5093; www.cspattanihotel.com; 299 Moo 4, Th Nong Jik; r/ste incl breakfast 1000-1500/2500-3500B; ☎@☎☎) If you are spending the night in Pattani, you might as well enjoy it. The CS Pattani features a gorgeous colonial lobby, two pools, an excellent restaurant, a sauna and steam room...the list goes on. It's located about 2km west of the centre of town.

Palace Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎ 0 7334 9171; 10-12 Pipit Soi Talattewiwat 2; r 200-700B; ☎) Despite its location in a grubby soi near the town market, the rooms here, in particular those with air-con on the lower floors, are neat and comfortable.

Satay Jao Kao

MUSLIM-THAI \$

(37/20 Th Udomwithi; dishes 20-30B; ☺10am-6pm) This well-respected open-air restaurant serves beef satay local style with cubes of rice and a sweet dipping sauce. Several other restaurants along Th Udomwithi come highly recommended by Pattani's Muslim foodies.

THEPHA DISTRICT**Sakom Cabana**

RESORT \$\$

(☎0 7431 8065; 136 Moo 4, Tambon Sakom; r 600-800B; ☹) Located about 40km from Pattani town, this basic resort features a clean compound with several attractive wooden duplex bungalows a short walk from the beach.

i Information

There are several banks along the southeastern end of Th Pipit, near the Th Naklua Yarang intersection.

Internet cafe (cnr Th Peeda Talattewiwat 2 & Th Pipit; per hr 20B) Near Palace Hotel.

Pattani Hospital (☎0 7332 3411-14; Th Nong Jik)

Police station (☎0 7334 9018; Th Pattani Phiram)

i Getting There & Around

Minivans are the region's most popular mode of transport and there are frequent daytime departures to Hat Yai (100B, 1½ hours), Narathiwat (100B, two hours), Songkhla (90B, 1½ hours) and Sungai Kolok (130B, 2½ hours) at various terminals around Pattani town. Ask at your hotel for the departure points. Buses to Bangkok (594B to 1187B, 15 to 16 hours) depart from the station near the CS Pattani Hotel. Local taxis can take you anywhere in town for 10B per person.

Narathiwat

นราธิวาส

POP 109,000

Sitting on the banks of the Bang Nara River, Narathiwat is probably the most Muslim large city in Thailand. Some of the Sino-Portuguese buildings lining the riverfront are over a century old, and some pleasant beaches are just outside town. Unfortunately the security situation in this part of the country (see the boxed text, p596) has suffocated the little tourism that this region used to see. Be sure to check the latest situation before travelling to Narathiwat.

👁 Sights

Towards the southern end of Th Pichitbamburung stands **Matsayit Klang**, a wooden mosque built in the Sumatran style. It was reputedly built by a prince of the former kingdom of Pattani over a hundred years ago.

Just north of town is **Hat Narathat**, a 5km-long sandy beach fronted by towering pines, which serves as a veritable public park for locals. The beach is only 2km from the town centre – you can easily walk there or take a sǎhm-lór.

Five kilometres south of town, **Ao Manao** used to be a popular sun and sand destination, but today it's increasingly the stomping ground of local fishermen.

The tallest seated-Buddha image in southern Thailand is at **Wat Khao Kong**, 6km southwest on the way to the train station in Tanyongmat. The image is 17m long and 24m high, and made of reinforced concrete covered with tiny gold-coloured mosaic tiles that glint magically in the sun.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

Most of the town's accommodation is located on and around Th Puphapugdee along the Bang Nara River.

Tanyong Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 7351 1477; 16/1 Th Sophaphisai; r incl breakfast 900-1700B; ☹☺) A few decades ago this was undoubtedly Narathiwat's most upscale hotel, but the passing of time has rendered it a convenient and competent, although slightly overpriced, choice.

Ocean Blue Mansion

HOTEL \$

(☎0 7351 1109; 297 Th Puphapugdee; r 350-1500B; ☹) This hotel/apartment is the only one in town to really take advantage of the riverfront view. Rooms include a huge fridge and cable TV.

Jay Sani

MUSLIM-THAI \$

(50/1 Th Sophaphisai; dishes 30-60B) This is where locals go for excellent Thai-Muslim food. Point to whatever curry or stir-fry looks good, but be sure not to miss the sublime beef soup.

Ang Mo

CHINESE, THAI \$

(cnr Th Puphapugdee & Th Chamroonnara; dishes 30-80B; ☺lunch & dinner) This exceedingly popular Chinese restaurant is both cheap and tasty, and has even fed the likes of members of the Thai royal family.

BORDER CROSSING: SUNGAI KOLOK TO RANTAU PANJANG

The Thai **border** (☉5am-9pm) is about 1km from the centre of Sungai Kolok or the train station. After completing border formalities, cross the bridge to the Malaysian border post, and then to an informal transport centre, where a share taxi to Kota Bharu, the capital of Malaysia's Kelantan State, will cost about RM\$8 per person (about 80B) or about RM\$40 to charter the whole car yourself. The ride takes around 40 minutes. There are also buses to Kota Bharu for RM\$4.50, taking about an hour.

It's possible to continue south by the so-called 'jungle train', but the closest station is at Pasir Mas, located along taxi/bus routes to Kota Bharu.

Tak Bai, also in Narathiwat, and Betong, further south in Yala, are also legal crossing points for foreign tourists, but the abundance of transport and other infrastructure makes Sungai Kolok-Rantau Panjang the area's most convenient crossing point.

i Information

The **Tourism Authority of Thailand office** (TAT; ☎ nationwide call centre 1672, Narathiwat 0 7352 2411) is inconveniently located a few kilometres south of town, just across the bridge on the road to Tak Bai.

i Getting There & Around

Air Asia (☎ nationwide call centre 02 515 9999; www.airasia.com; Narathiwat Airport) and **Nok Air** (☎ nationwide call centre 1318; www.nokair.co.th; Narathiwat Airport) each operate a daily flight to and from Bangkok (from 1790B, 90 minutes).

Air-con buses to Bangkok and Phuket and most minivans leave from the **bus terminal** (☎ 0 7351 1552) 2km south of town on Th Rangae Munka. Buses to Phuket (530B, 12 hours), which originate in Sungai Kolok, pass Narathiwat three times daily at 7am, 9am and 6.30pm, and continue via Pattani, Hat Yai, Songkhla, Trang, Krabi and Phang-Nga. Buses to Bangkok (669B to 1296B, 15 hours) depart several times during the day.

Minivans heading to Hat Yai (150B, three hours), Pattani (100B, two hours), Songkhla (150B, two hours), Sungai Kolok (70B, one hour) and Yala (100B, 1½ hours) generally leave on an hourly basis from 5am to 5pm.

Narathiwat is small enough to navigate by foot, although motorcycle taxis only charge 20B to get around.

dustries here revolve around border trade and catering to weekend Malaysian men who are often looking for sex. Every night Soi Phuthon and the small strip behind the Marina Hotel come alive with booming bars that make Pattaya or Patong look sedate in comparison.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

If you must stay the night in Sungai Kolok, there's a large assortment of hotels to choose from – most cater to the 'by-the-hour' clientele.

Unfortunately, despite the mix of cultures and emphasis on tourism, Sungai Kolok is definitely not a culinary destination. A small **night market** unfolds next to the immigration office – exceptionally good and cheap eats can be got at the stall in the centre that only has Chinese writing.

Genting Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 7361 3231; 250 Th Asia 18; r 620-720B, ste 1520B; 🍷🍷🍷) Geared towards the conference trade, the Genting comes equipped with a pub and a karaoke lounge. There are some good, only slightly scuffed, midrange rooms, and it's away from the seedier areas.

Merlin Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎ 0 7361 8111; 68 Th Charoenkhet; r 480-700B; 🍷) Don't let the lobby fool you – the rooms here are very plain indeed, but the Merlin's a good choice if you need a cheap room with a view.

Sungai Kolok



POP 70,000

Although Narathiwat is officially the provincial capital, it's a skinny wimp compared to its bigger and brasher sibling, Sungai Kolok. This soulless border town is the main southern coastal gateway between Malaysia and Thailand, and the primary in-

i Information

In addition to the one at the border, there is an **immigration office** (☎ 0 7361 1231; Th Charoenkhet; ☉8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) across from the Merlin Hotel. A tourist police office sits at the border. There are plenty of banks with

ATMs in town as well as foreign-exchange booths, which are open during border-crossing hours.

CS Internet (Th Asia 18; internet per hr 20B; ☺10am-9pm) Across from the Genting Hotel.

i Getting There & Away

Bus & Minivan

The long-distance **bus station** (☎0 7361 2045) is located east of downtown, from where there are three daily air-con buses for the 18-hour trip to Bangkok (720B to 1400B) between 9pm and 10pm. There are two early-morning buses that head to Phuket (580B), stopping in Krabi (460B) along the way. Minivans to Narathiwat (80B, one hour) depart on the half-hour from across from the train station. Minivans heading to Pattani (130B, 2½ hours), Yala (90B) and Hat Yai (180B,

four hours) depart hourly during daylight hours, from in front of the Genting Hotel.

Train

Two daily trains connect Sungai Kolok to Bangkok (200B to 1753B, about 20 hours, departures at 11.30am and 2.20pm). Local trains also make stops in Surat Thani, Nakhon Si Thammarat and Hat Yai; to check timetables and prices for other destinations contact the **State Railway of Thailand** (☎ nationwide call centre 1690; www.railway.co.th) or look at their website.

i Getting Around

Motorcycle taxis zoom around town – it'll cost you around 30B to make the ride between the city centre and the border.

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