

## TRAVEL

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Above: A boardwalk lines the rocky section of Hat Yuan beach. Below: The beach in front of the aptly named Sanctuary resort is a haven for beachgoers.

PHOTOS: ALITA RICKARDS

## Koh Phangan: same, same, but different

*A short boat ride away from Koh Phangan's full-moon frenzy, a laid-back yoga retreat offers ravers calm after the party storm*

BY **KATIE MONK**  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

I'm perched on the end of a longtail boat, cocktail in hand, head to the wind. The silhouettes of thousands of people line the length of the beach in front of me, and a throbbing bass reverberates in my chest. Just two minutes ago, I was in the middle of that neon-clad throng, dancing full-moon-style with the best of them. And now here I am, making my James Bond-style getaway to quieter shores up the coast. If only I could leave every party in this way.

Unlike its neighbor Koh Samui, the mountainous island of Koh Phangan in southern Thailand has no airport and only a small number of roads. Its terrain has saved it from large-scale development, and much of the island is only accessible by boat. Aside from the mainstream commerciality of Hat Rin, near-deserted beaches and pockets of solitude abound.

In fact, the further up the coast you go, the quieter life becomes. Huge limestone rocks frame the bays, and dense forest rises up the hillside behind. At this time of year — June to September, before the monsoon comes knocking — it's the islands on the eastern side of the peninsula that remain drier and sunnier.

As we round the headland and point our boat towards the next bay, my shoulders relax. The atmosphere has changed drastically, and in place of the craziness of Hat Rin, a more peaceful scene comes into view — the calm after the party storm.

By the light of the full moon, I can just make out wooden huts standing precariously on the rocks. People sit around bonfires on the beach, and the pace of life drops about 20 notches. This is what I love about Koh Phangan. Within a 6.4km radius two different worlds exist. As the Thais say, "Same, same, but different."

I discovered this particular stretch of coastline after a two-month spell in Nepal. I'd pushed my body to its limits trekking around the Annapurna circuit and contracted a particularly nasty and resilient stomach parasite in the process. A girl I met in Kathmandu told me that to stand any chance of getting well again, I should hop on the next flight to Thailand and get myself to Koh Phangan, pronto.

One plane ride, a night bus, a catamaran, two taxis and a longtail boat later, and I arrived at the Sanctuary resort. Tucked into a corner of Hat Thian beach, it is the kind of place you book into for a week and end up staying for a month.

Here, among the thatched roofs, decks and balconies above a translucent Gulf of Thailand, health and well-being is a laid-back, low-key affair. The antithesis of a clinical five-star spa, nobody's going to come at you with a white coat and a clipboard and, depending on your inclination and budget, you can do as much or as little as you like. You can detox or retox, stay in a dorm for NT\$115 per night or a NT\$5,200-a-night air-conditioned chalet.

As well as the large tree-house-style restaurant, the Sanctuary has a small shop, a spa offering Balinese body wraps and pineapple scrubs, a plunge pool and a herbal steam room built into the rocks. Incense floats on the breeze and people drift between yoga and meditation classes or laze around in hammocks

sipping fresh fruit smoothies.

If you have to up the ante — to add some oomph to your Om — there's elephant trekking, jet-skiing and cooking classes, along with diving and snorkeling in the Ang Thong marine national park. Many of the Sanctuary's guests drift in and out of the retreat, interspersing its serenity with the buzz of Hat Rin or less commercial local bars nearby.

Some come just for the yoga, which is held three times a day in a large hall in the jungle, others to gorge on seafood or healthy veggie dishes, tucking into the likes of Thai spinach salad with peanut coconut sauce, or *pad pak sai met ma muang* (stir fried vegetables with cashew nuts and chilli).

Give it time to settle and there's kayaking, snorkeling and hikes up to the lookout, not to mention a well-stocked library and workshops on every complementary therapy under the sun. They're balm for the party animals, who slip away from the Sanctuary to cane it under a full moon before returning for rest and recovery.

To one side, in its own enclave, is the wellness center — a separate home for the cleansing programs. Run by a man called Moon, for whom fasting is a way of life, the detoxes range from one to seven days, with milder juice fasts and specific liver-cleansing regimes.

I opt for the three-day cleanse, feeling a little nervous about its psychological and physical effects. Moon tells me to eat nothing but raw fruit and vegetables for two days in order to prepare my body. After that only coconut, clay and psyllium juice will pass my lips during the fast.

Considering the Sanctuary serves some of the best vegetarian food this side of California, it feels sadistic in the extreme. Moon tells me my body will thank me when it's all over, while I remind myself that Dolly Parton wrote some of her best songs while fasting. So maybe some good will come of it.

I cast a wistful glance in the direction of the cake cabinet and sulk off to my salad. The cleanse is not for the fainthearted, and it's a good idea to eat healthily beforehand and get in the right frame of mind, but I was amazed how good I felt after.

Back on solids, and the days pass in a haze of extended mealtimes, chats about life, and swims in the ocean. I make the most of the morning yoga, experience one of the best massages of my life, and leave feeling stronger, happier and more relaxed than I have in a long time.

As well as the Sanctuary, there are a number of smaller-scale resorts, both in Hat Thian and Hat Yuan, that serve phenomenal Thai and Western food. Most also have cheap beach huts to rent. My favorite is the Bamboo Hut, an open-air restaurant with a smattering of bungalows perched on top of the rocks between the beaches. It does a mind-blowing tofu cheeseburger and the best chocolate coconut muffin you'll ever taste. Fasters need not apply.

### Quiet side of the moon

BY **ALITA RICKARDS**  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

While Hat Rin's full moon, half moon, and dark moon parties garner the most press and biggest crowds, it is Koh Phangan's quieter beaches that are the island's real treasure. Both Thong Sala and Hat Rin are the main centers for tourists, especially those that have never been before, or for those seeking the sex industry. Hat Rin is nicknamed "Little Bangkok" by seasoned travelers for its seedy nightlife. A short taxi-truck ride or boat taxi away can transport you to the kind of places that look exactly like the postcard-perfect images you see in travel guides: golden sand beaches, quaint rustic huts, palm trees, and the aquamarine tropical ocean. Stay on the beaches on the southern part of the island between Thong Sala and Hat Rin, around Ban Tai and Ban Kai, or venture to the east or west coast of the island depending on the season: when the waves are calm on one side, which makes for great snorkeling, they are bigger on the other, which is fun for bodysurfing and splashing about. You can arrange day trips in Hat Rin that will take you to several of the beaches that are accessible by boat only, such as Bottle Beach and Hat Yao (Long Beach), and include snorkeling, lunch, and a chance to explore the quieter parts of the island.



Chef Zul Aman shows off a grilled grouper.

PHOTO: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES

## Over the moon

*While the economic downturn hasn't put off tourists from visiting Sun Moon Lake, the competition is hotting up*

BY **IAN BARTHOLOMEW**  
STAFF REPORTER

Sun Moon Lake is widely recognized as one of Taiwan's premier attractions, both for international and local tourists. It's one of the few destinations that has not suffered a dramatic reduction of visitors as a result of the financial crisis, said Tseng Kuo-chi (曾國基), director of the Sun Moon Lake National Scenic Area Administration (日月潭風景區管理處處長).

Of its many attractions are high-end venues such as The Lalu (瀨碧樓), which has long been regarded as one of the most exclusive hotels in the country.

The Lalu is far from being the only top-end hotel by the lake, and more recent additions such as the Fleur de Chine Hotel (雲品酒店) and The Rich Forest (日月潭巒山林哲園會館), all compete with The Lalu in offering what each claims to be the most luxurious accommodation and the best views.

The Lalu, which takes up a 10-hectare site on the Lalu Peninsula (瀨碧樓半島), has the distinction of being pointed out to visitors on virtually every one of the ubiquitous boat tours of the lake. It's simple facade is easily recognized by visitors who have no intention of staying at a hotel that prides itself on its exclusive (read high-priced) room rates.

The hotel, which was designed by Kerry Hill, the Australian architect behind outstanding hotels such as the Amannusa in Bali and the Aman Resort in Hawaii, accords The Lalu considerable distinction. The appeal of the hotel is emphasized by the site, which commands a view of the lake from the point where Sun Lake and Moon Lake meet, and was originally the location of a villa frequented by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石).

But The Lalu's preeminence is far from assured. New constructions, such as the Sun Moon Villa Hotel (日月行館) with its design that imitates the billowing sailing-ship shape of the Burj Al Arab hotel in Dubai, aim to outdo The Lalu.

The Lalu's efforts to uphold its reputation as an international hotel include its biannual food festivals, which target a wide range of international cuisines. This month the theme is Malaysian food, and the hotel has invited "Carloz" Zul Aman, chef de cuisine at the Hilton Petaling Jaya near Kuala Lumpur, to produce a menu of Malaysian food.

Chef Aman is a great fan of "thinking globally, cooking locally," and in introducing his menu pointed out that there were many overlaps in the use of ingredients between different Asian countries. Talking about his seared beef with chili jam, asparagus and banana blossom, he pointed out that the latter ingredient is easily available in Taiwan. "But they [Taiwanese] don't know how to use it. This way, I can teach them," he said.

The Lalu's Malaysian Food Festival, like The Lalu itself, is about style, and Aman emphasized that he was creating a menu designed to impress the eye as well as the palate. Many of the dishes might not be recognizable to lovers of Malaysian street food, and a combination of rack of lamb and spiced masala lamb ragout in puri bread might look more at home in a French nouvelle cuisine restaurant. "But the taste is straight from Malaysia," Aman said with a mischievous grin.

Willie Liao (廖偉立), Communications Manger at The Lalu, said that next year the hotel might hold a festival of Chinese imperial cuisine, inviting chefs over from top hotels in China.

While the food at The Lalu might focus on the wider world, the view, which is indisputably what keeps visitors coming back, is absolutely and uniquely local. The Malaysian Food Festival runs until May 31. For reservations, call (049) 285-5313.

#### NOTE:

- Read the *Taipei Times' Travel* page on **June 4** for the inside track on new places to stay at Sun Moon Lake.
- Ian Bartholomew stayed at The Lalu courtesy of the hotel.



Malaysian food comes in an unexpected guise with Zul Aman's pandan pancake with seared caramel banana.

PHOTO: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES

