

Hop till you drop

Why settle for one island when you can hop from shore to shore along Thailand's southwest coast, asks Ben Ireland

@ben_ireland_ii



Images of your first foreign travels stick with you for years – golden beaches, tropical sunsets and far-flung islands are among the memories of many a former backpacker who has toured around Thailand.

Fast-forward a decade or two, and a lot of those ex-backpackers – now financially mature and looking to explore with the family – are keen to inspire the same love of travel in their little ones. And what better way than to go back to where it all started?

The islands of Koh Samui and Koh Phi Phi – the latter of Leonardo di Caprio movie fame –

have become more mainstream as the country has developed. They certainly didn't have super-fast Wi-Fi when *The Beach* was filmed. But hoteliers with foresight have opened up other islands, making it more attractive than ever to try an island-hopping escape.

► KOH YAO NOI

Take the aptly named resort of Paradise on Koh Yao Noi, a boat ride from Krabi or Phuket. It provides a luxury 'beach chic' feel that – although expensive – will make guests the envy of their social media followers.

Views from its 70 villas, most of

which are decked out with private pools and outdoor showers, give a glimpse of the myriad limestone karsts poking out of the water in Phang Nga Bay. For a closer look, take a sunset cruise or float past on a canoeing trip to your own private bay.

Managing director Josef Raess is adding 25 Swiss Family Robinson-style treehouses and six beachfront villas to the at-one-with-nature complex.

Raess, who opened Paradise in 2004, says: "You could tell Phuket was going in the direction of mass tourism. We wanted to be in the next phase. We wanted to

disappear into the islands, to have our own bay but still be within an hour of an international airport."

With a population of just 6,000 people, from which Paradise employs 95% of its staff, it doesn't take a long time to explore Koh Yao Noi, so after a couple of nights enjoying the beach, spa and sampling the traditional Thai menu, where should guests move to next?

► KOH YAO YAI AND KOH PHI PHI

It's just a 20-minute hop over to Koh Yao Yai, and the beauty of the boat transfers is they



ASK THE EXPERT



David Kevan, partner, Chic Locations
 “The boat transfers are quite scenic, so they feel like part of the trip. There’s always new and unique product coming on in Thailand too – hotels find the need to reinvent themselves when competition comes on the market.”

form part of the trip. More than just a way of getting people from A to B, a journey through the bay’s rock formations – typically covered in lush green mangroves – will have travellers transfixed until they reach their next boutique beach property.
 When they arrive at Santhiya on Koh Yao Yai, they can practise yoga on the beach or get the limbs moving with a Thai boxing class – followed by a spa session or Thai massage, of course.
 Clients can follow the crowds further south to Koh Phi Phi. They might find Maya Bay a bit busy, but they can still kick back at one of the more sought-after resorts on the island. Despite cashing in on the tourism boom, this is still a place of such natural beauty that you’d be happy to share it.
 Rather than slumming it as in their backpacking days, guests can experience traditional island life at the boutique and environmentally sustainable Zeavola, which prides itself on ‘barefoot luxury’. Alternatively, check in to Phi Phi Island Village, a

Despite cashing in on the tourism boom, Koh Phi Phi is still a place of such natural beauty that you’d be happy to share it

series of plush huts kitted out with all the mod cons you’d expect in the Med, but with a typical Thai feel.
KOH RACHA
 Offering even more seclusion, tiny Koh Racha – a 45-minute speedboat journey from Phuket – is home to the five-star, eight-hectare resort The Racha. Most villas boast private pools and outdoor showers, but it’s the attention to detail that really sets it apart, from choosing a favourite room fragrance at check-in to swimmers being able to listen to their favourite tunes underwater.



Gold Medal
 can arrange a nine-night island-hopping trip with four nights’ B&B at Manathai Khao Lak, two at the five-star Cape Kudu and three at the five-star Santhiya Koh Yao Yai Resort & Spa, from £1,269. The price includes Malaysia Airlines flights from Heathrow and transfers, valid until October 21. goldmedal.co.uk

Premier Holidays
 offers a 13-night West Coast Island Hopper from £1,495 in October, staying at Centara Villas in Phuket, Holiday Inn Resort in Koh Phi Phi, and Koh Yao Yai Village. The price includes breakfast, transfers and flights. Agents can earn £25-£150 for each inclusive Thailand booking. trade.premierholidays.co.uk

Outside the resort, the miniature island is home to buffaloes and monitor lizards, as well as cashew nut trees. It’s surrounded by coral, offering a good snorkelling or scuba experience.
MAINLAND
 Tour operators are reporting a rise in the number of family bookings for island-hopping itineraries, which is driving growth for mainland gateways such as Khao Lak, away from the party hubs of Phuket and Pattaya.
 New hotels keep popping up, including stunning La Vela, which has been welcoming guests since March. With its poolside rooms, all-inclusive options and modern take on Thai food, it’s quite a treat.
 Another growing mainland

destination that serves as an entry point to an island getaway is Natai Beach, near the town of Khok Kloi. Four-star boutique Le Coral Hideaway Beyond Phuket does exactly as the name suggests, offering a quieter option 30 minutes from the airport, but in the opposite direction from the city. It has direct beach access and provides kayaks and other equipment for guests to use at their leisure.
 With so much variety on offer, the value of a trade expert is more important than ever, so island-hopping is a real opportunity for agents to show their value.
 Chris Lee, head of marketing for the UK and Ireland at the Tourism Authority of Thailand, says: “We’ve seen big trends towards the smaller islands. They offer something different from the big islands, and a lot of people are combining the two. The customer is less likely to book online with a complex itinerary, and the more complex the itinerary, the higher the margin.”
 So your customers’ backpacking days may have gone, but they’re certainly not forgotten. Throw a little luxury into the mix and encourage them to relive it all with their family in tow. TW



ABOVE LEFT: Paradise, Koh Yao Noi
ABOVE RIGHT: Zeavola, Koh Phi Phi
LEFT: The fam group at Phi Phi Island Village



The Samaya Bali proudly showcases two properties under The Samaya brand; The Samaya Seminyak which offers the prime location at the beach front of Seminyak beach and is within walking distance to anything in Seminyak, including well known restaurants, bars, and shops and The Samaya Ubud which is spectacularly located amid the rice fields and verdant hillside of cultural and artistic capital of Ubud.....

THE SAMAYA BALI

Laksmana street, Seminyak - Bali Banjar Baung, Desa Sayan, Ubud-Bali info@thesamayabali.com