

In Thai spirits

Katie McGonagle looks at how a new luxury resort is embracing local culture

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With my water pistol primed and ready, face dusted with talcum powder, and clothes already dripping wet, I was ready to take on anyone – until I came face to face with a seven-year-old sporting a dual-barrel turbo water blaster almost as tall as he was. When it comes to a water fight, I guess size does matter.

What led us to this soaking skirmish in the heart of a new luxury hotel, you might ask? It's the only way to celebrate Songkran, the festival that draws exuberant crowds to the streets to see in the Thai new year by spraying each other with water.

Having experienced Songkran in Chiang Mai on a budget backpacking trip 10 years ago, I wondered whether a five-star

resort would match up to those joyous street-side splashathons taking place all over Thailand. But The Ritz-Carlton Koh Samui, the YTL Hotels-owned resort that officially opened its doors last month, following a soft opening in October, is all about bringing Thai culture inside the hotel to connect guests with local life. And what a way to start...

STREET FOOD

Songkran is once a year, but there are plenty of other Thai touches that keep guests connected to the local area year-round. Each Saturday night, Baan Talat, an outdoor space in the centre of the resort, brings street food-style dining to the property with stalls serving pad Thai, spicy fish



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and grilled chicken, with classic mango and sticky rice for afters.

The food is more of a hit than the display of traditional Thai dancing and music that accompanies dinner, but together, they create an entirely different atmosphere from your average hotel restaurant.

If that whets the appetite for

more, book a cooking class. Chef Coco takes small groups to a food market to wander past stalls piled high with juicy mangoes, aromatic herbs and fresh-grilled fishcakes, though the most bizarre sight had to be seeing skewers of 'barbecued' eggs served shish kebab-style in their shells.

Having picked up a few fresh ingredients for our cooking class – and via a detour to a nearby Buddhist temple – we headed back to the hotel to have a go at whipping up our own Thai green curry, albeit with ample assistance from a troop of apron-clad cooks. The Southern Gastronomic Journey starts at £80 per person – though be warned, dishes in this part of the country come with quite a fiery kick. →





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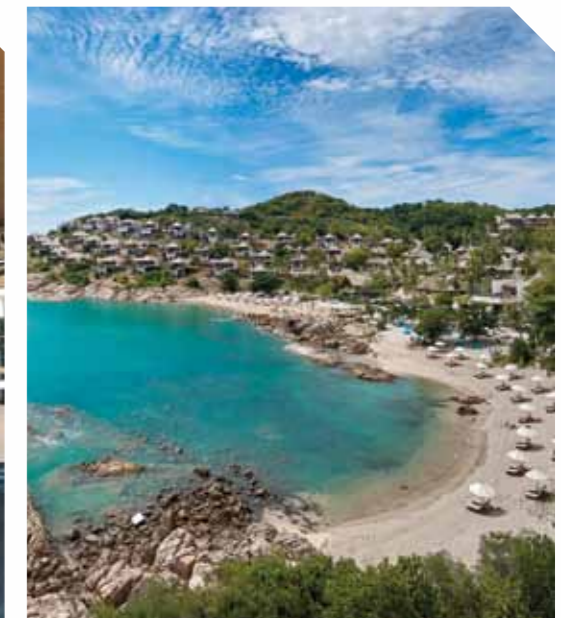
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HOTELS, RESORTS & SPAS KOH SAMUI DESTINATIONS

RIGHT: The Art of Muay Thai



FAR RIGHT: Aerial view of the resort



▶ SPA OR SPAR

If that's not the kind of kick you're after, sign up for a session in the outdoor muay thai arena, where an expert in this traditional martial art teaches guests a few tricks.

There's no need to be a champion kickboxer – it's purely for fun and fitness – but the chance to don a pair of boxing gloves and get in the ring with a pro shouldn't be missed. Despite starting off as nervous novices, in less than an hour we were sparring and doing high kicks we didn't think ourselves capable of before the lesson began. The Art of Muay Thai starts at £57.

To ease tired muscles after all that exertion, head to the Spa Village, where eight treatment rooms, a cluster of massage huts and a yoga pavilion surround a pool open only to spa-goers.

Treatments draw on local ingredients, from coconut scrubs – this is the 'coconut island', after all – to Songkran showers, but my tok sen massage took things a step further. This ancient practice, hailing from northern Thailand, involves rhythmic tapping all over the body using a wooden mallet – and despite being sceptical at first, it was surprisingly hypnotic. The two-hour treatment costs £125.

▶ SEA LIFE

For relaxation, though, few things



My tok sen massage, which involves rhythmic tapping all over the body using a wooden mallet, was surprisingly hypnotic

beat skimming the waves in The Ritz-Carlton speedboat to neighbouring Koh Phangan for a spot of snorkelling and chill-out time on the beach.

We set off with Captain Bo at the helm, and the rugged scenery of Koh Samui soon retreated into the distance

as we passed palm tree-lined beaches and rocky islets blanketed with thick forest, before pulling up at a reef just offshore for snorkelling – just watch out for the tiny jellyfish!

For a gentler introduction to snorkelling, there's the hotel's man-made reef, a conservation project for 'rescue' fish endemic to Thai waters. With vibrant emperor angelfish, Nemo-like clownfish and striped sergeant majors to watch out for, and the chance to hold a sticky sea cucumber – bound to be a hit with kids – it's more enlightening than artificial, and a fun way to bring some of the area's natural beauty inside the hotel. The Swim Reef Snorkelling Experience starts at £11.

