

To the beach

Airport expansion, high-speed rail and exciting hotel openings are giving Thailand's Hua Hin a new lease of life, says **Tamara Hinson**

1 Thailand's historic coastal resort city Hua Hin is going through something of a renaissance. Reasons to visit include a flurry of new hotels and a new second railway line, which is due to be completed next year and will slash journey times between Hua Hin and Bangkok to just two hours. And with a mix of quirky bars, nature spots and golden sands, there are plenty of reasons to linger in Hua Hin, too.

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Arrive by train on a spectacular journey from Bangkok and you'll pull into Thailand's grandest train station, built during the reign of King Rama VI. Its highlight is the temple-like Royal Waiting Room, a pavilion that was relocated from Nakhon Pathom's Sanam Chan Palace and installed to accommodate the Thai royals who started flocking to Hua Hin in the 1920s. Another highlight is the steam train (a 305 Unit Baldwin steam locomotive, to be precise) proudly displayed next to the station.

Hua Hin's temples include the one on Khao Takiap (often referred to as Monkey Mountain). At the base of the hill is a 20-metre-tall golden Buddha, which surveys the southern end of Hua Hin beach. Clamber the steep flight of stone steps to the ➤

Hua Hin beach, Thailand

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Kaban-Sila



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Prachuap Khiri Khan-Hua Hin Night Market; Buddhist pavilion in cave, Sam Roi Yot; Hua Hin Hills Vineyard

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top of Khao Takiap and you'll find Wat Khao Takiap – a cluster of temples that is home to a troupe of curious monkeys. The site itself is slightly ramshackle, but the views of the coastline make the exertion worthwhile.

HIT THE BEACH

There's only really one option in Hua Hin itself – the five-mile Hua Hin Beach. The vast majority of hotels line this wide strip of golden sand, which is just a short walk from central Hua Hin. There's no shortage of space to lay out your sun towel and there's a wide range of watersports available. Beachfront vendors rent items such as kayaks and several offer kiteboarding lessons.

To escape the crowds, consider heading to the Pran Buri Forest Park, a 20-minute drive from Hua Hin. Most people come here to walk along the raised boardwalk that twists through the park's mangroves (more on those later), but there's also a pretty beach that runs

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parallel to the park. If you're lucky, you might spot some crabs or turtles – the beach is a turtle nesting site.

NATURE SPOTS

Pran Buri Forest Park is a 20-minute taxi ride from the centre of Hua Hin. This tiny 1.2sq mile national park was established in 1982 as a reforestation project. A serpentine boardwalk twists through thick swathes of mangroves and during the rainy season (May to November), when water levels are higher, visitors can hop on a small passenger ferry. There are more than 100 bird species in

the park, including four types of kingfisher, as well as macaques and monitor lizards.

Clients should also consider heading to the Monsoon Valley Vineyard to explore this 110-hectare site (on foot or on one of the rentable bikes). Keep an eye out for the old wine barrels suspended from trees and repurposed as hornbill nesting sites. Visitors can sign up for wine-tasting sessions, guided tours and wine bottle-painting classes before restoring energy levels at the Sala Wine Bar & Bistro, where much of the food comes from the on-site vegetable garden. The vineyard, 28 miles west of Hua Hin, runs a twice-daily shuttle for visitors staying in the city.

NOSTALGIA FIX

Hua Hin has some brilliant cafes, including the fantastic Airspace, which you'll find near the southern tip of Petchkasem Road – the road that runs parallel to Hua Hin Beach. This huge cafe, tucked inside an airy building, which ➤

ASK THE expert

Erica Moore, product manager (Far East), Inspiring Travel

“Hua Hin is the perfect place to escape the heat of the Bangkok. With miles of unspoiled beaches, five golf resorts and a wide variety of restaurants and night markets, Hua Hin is a beautiful destination that's ideal for those seeking a beach resort with a relaxed vibe. It's got some exquisite accommodation and plenty of things to see and do, including snorkelling, night fishing boat trips and trips to historic landmarks.”



fast fact

Hua Hin's airport is undergoing an upgrade, including a runway expansion, in a bid to attract more international flights

DESTINATIONS

WINTER SUN | THAILAND



ABOVE: Reclining Buddha in Hua Hin, Thailand PICTURE: Shutterstock/OlegD

feels like a cross between a glasshouse and an aircraft hangar, is a tribute to Prince Purachatra Jayakara, who established Thailand's first radio station in the 1930s. Inside, diners sit at tables surrounded by lush foliage and various knick-knacks, ranging from the replica biplane hanging from the ceiling to ancient radios, typewriters and Singer sewing machines.

For a nightcap, consider McFarland House at the Hyatt Regency Hua Hin. You'll find this bar inside a beautifully restored 19th-century pavilion. For the best sunset views, it's got to be the Vana Nava Sky Bar, a rooftop watering hole atop the beachfront Holiday Inn Vana Nava Hua Hin. Father Ted's, a pub on Damnernkasem Road, is where to go for regular performances by the legendary Bangkok Beatles, Thailand's top Beatles tribute act.

TAKE A BITE

Hua Hin's night market, which fans out from the spot where Decha Nuchit Road and Phetchkasem Road intersect, is a great place to sample local street food, including deliciously fresh squid. Many of Hua Hin's top restaurants can be found in its resorts. At the Hua Hin Marriott Resort & Spa's Big Fish restaurant, diners can browse the menu or choose from the mouthwatering display of freshly caught seafood. The setting is spectacular and floor-to-ceiling windows make the most of the resort's beachfront position. For cheap and cheerful cuisine, we recommend the restaurants lining Petchkasem Road, which runs parallel to the beach. One of its highlights is Rolling Stone Pizza – a tiny blink-and-you'll-miss-it pizzeria with a wood-fired pizza oven.

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HOT HOTELS

Several new hotels have opened in Hua Hin in recent years (such as The Standard's first Thai property), with more coming, including the Kimpton Hua Hin, due to open in 2024. Until then, beach bums will love the Hua Hin Marriott Resort & Spa, where rooms surround an enormous pool complex. Its lazy river-style layout means there's plenty of space for swimmers and the most sought-after rooms back onto sections of the pool. Doubles start from £102 per person on a B&B basis.

For a history fix, it's got to be the 251-room Centara Grand, a storied hotel with a Raffles-like vibe. This hotel, which turns 100 this year, was originally known as the Railway Hotel and was the go-to spot for travellers visiting King Rama VI's Summer Palace. Its construction was commissioned by the State Railway as part of an effort to upgrade accommodation options in a destination the royal family had fallen in love with. Relics on display include crockery adorned with the logo of Thailand's State Railway, the original telephone switchboard and photographs of the *Killing Fields* crew – in the film, the hotel stood in for Cambodia's Hotel Le Phnom. Doubles start from £103 per person on a room-only basis. **TV**

BOOK IT

If Only offers a seven-night break for two people, staying at Hua Hin's Centara Grand on a bed-and-breakfast basis and including airport transfers and return flights from Heathrow to Bangkok with British Airways, from £2,899, departing on November 3. ifonly.net