



# FANTASY LAND

**Simon N. Ostheimer**  
sets foot on Thailand's  
Samui and finds an island  
paradise to treasure



Opposite page: (Left) The pristine Ang Thong National Marine Park is a paradise found. (Bottom) Taking design cues from luxe hotels, the breezy Samui airport gets those holiday vibes flowing. This page: (Right) Head to Chaweng Beach for amazing views and even better dining. (Below) Pay a visit to the Big Buddha. (Bottom left) The Larder's impressive Inside Out Bloody Mary. (Bottom right) The stunning 'floating' ordination hall of the active Buddhist temple Wat Plai Laem is a must-visit on Samui



from the sole ring road. For many though, a visit to Samui will be centred around two beaches in the northeast: Chaweng and Bophut.

Facing out east to the vast Gulf of Thailand (the next land you would encounter is Vietnam), Chaweng Beach is not only one of the largest stretches of sand, but also the centre of the island's emerging dining scene. It's here that you'll meet with one of Samui's celebrity chefs, British-born Martin Selby, who serves up contemporary European cuisine with an innovative local twist at his eatery **The Larder** ([thelardersamui.com](http://thelardersamui.com)). Having been involved in running the kitchens of many of Samui's top restaurants, in 2012 he opened his own venue, which is now rated as one of the best on the island. We particularly like his soft-yolk take on the Scotch egg, and the 'Belly Legal', slow-cooked pork belly with sweet potato purée, all washed down with his signature cocktail, the Tom Yum Siam (a potent concoction of vodka, coconut rum, chilli and lemongrass). →

**T**he Thai island of Samui sets out its stall early – in fact, the moment you step off the plane. Unlike almost every major tourist airport in the world, where you either walk straight into an arctic-cooled airbridge, or get herded unceremoniously onto buses, in Koh Samui ('koh' means island), passengers are embraced by the warm tropical air, and invited to board the nearest trolley bus – quaint electric vehicles adorned with colourful flowers. The laid-back island feel continues at the open-air terminal building, which is more a series of connected wooden roofs. You casually saunter through baggage claim and immigration, and before you know it, you're in a taxi and on your way to your hotel. Welcome to 'fantasy island'.

Though you wouldn't know it by the array of big-name hotels and resorts that occupy the lush green hilltops and white-sand beaches, Samui was once firmly backpacker territory. Much of that had to do with the fact there was no airport (it only opened in 1989), and so the only way to

get here entailed catching a slow local ferry from the mainland province of Surat Thani, accompanied by locals loaded down with goods, produce and even a few animals. Indeed, up until the 1970s there were no paved roads, and a trek from one side of the island to the other could take an entire day. However, in the ensuing decades, what was once a remote, undeveloped island has now become arguably Asia's luxury destination of choice.

That's not to say it's all Champagne wishes and caviar dreams. The islanders, a relaxed mix of Buddhist, Muslim and Chinese elements, have held onto their customs, as shown by the many old, traditional temples, mosques and shrines you encounter – though the Big Buddha that looks over the northern shore was only built in 1972. In the rural south of the island, small roads pass through coconut groves (with more than three million coconut trees, Samui is said to grow the best in Thailand), as water buffalo graze in between. Much of the centre is still wild, inaccessible jungle, and only glimpsed





Alternatively, down the road you'll find **Stacked** ([stacked-samui.com](http://stacked-samui.com)), where larger-than-life American chef Matthew Rubin serves up sublime steaks and huge burgers.

A short way to the north of Chaweng is Bophut Beach, which faces north to the island of Koh Phangan, infamous for its raucous full-moon parties. Thankfully, life in Bophut is rather more relaxed, though things become a little livelier on Friday nights with the weekly Fisherman's Village Walking Street. Once, the charming wooden buildings along this narrow seaside lane were home to local fishermen, who would set out from these shores every evening. While the island still has a strong fishing industry – particularly for squid – many of these traditional family homes now house bars and restaurants, though seafood remains prominent on the menu. Stalls sell a variety of tourist souvenirs, including locally made handicrafts, while many of the more upmarket eateries set up tables and chairs on the sand so you can watch the sunset as you enjoy dinner.

At the far western end of the street is a scenic oceanside mall called The Wharf, where you'll find the excellent **Barracuda** ([barracuda-restaurant.com](http://barracuda-restaurant.com)), a stylish restaurant filled with brown leather banquettes, hanging lightbulbs and bare concrete walls, serving Mediterranean cuisine with a local touch – think spiced crab rolls with mango salsa.

While you should certainly enjoy a drink or two at any of these restaurants, for the most >



(Top) With its trendy fitout and epic gourmet burgers, Stacked could easily hold its own in New York. (Above) Bophut Beach has a relaxed village feel and the freshest seafood. (Below) Head to Barracuda for Mediterranean-fusion dishes served in an industrial-chic setting



## “Gaze upon the multicoloured sunsets with a cocktail to match”



important time of day in Samui you need to head somewhere special – we are, of course, talking about sunset. Over on the west coast, perched on top of the cliffs of Taling Ngam in rather splendid isolation, is **Air Bar** ([samui.intercontinental.com/air-bar](http://samui.intercontinental.com/air-bar)). One of the few, if not only, bars to face directly west, it'll have you gazing upon the multicoloured sunsets with a cocktail to match. Another perennial favourite with locals and visitors alike is **Woobar** ([wretreatkohsamui.com/woobar](http://wretreatkohsamui.com/woobar)). Though the views aren't quite as good, it more than makes up for it with live DJ tunes and a unique setting: neon green loungers floating over an infinity pool. However, if you're looking for a chilled place by the sand with no pretensions, then locals swear by **Hemingway's on the Beach** ([facebook.com/hemingwaysonthbeach](https://www.facebook.com/hemingwaysonthbeach)) on the southern coast, where wooden decking, cheap drinks and friendly owners make for a place you'll want to visit again and again – perhaps for one of their Thai cooking classes.

Of course, it would be remiss to come all this way and not venture out on the water. There are few boats on the island that can match the **Kindred Spirit** ([samujana.com](http://samujana.com)), a luxury 13-metre, fully equipped catamaran, replete with staterooms and air-conditioning. You can



(Above) Air Bar is the perfect perch for a sundowner. (Below) Woobar's sunset views might not be quite as good, but it does have the most Insta-worthy seats. (Below left) A yacht charter is a glam way to see the Ang Thong archipelago (bottom right)

choose between half-day and full-day trips, which take you out beyond Samui to the Ang Thong National Marine Park, a collection of 42 uninhabited islands covering 250 square kilometres. You'll find some of the best snorkelling in Thailand in these protected waters, with the chance to go ashore and explore the jungle interiors. If that all sounds like too much hard work, then instead opt for the sunset cruise, where you can enjoy bubbles and nibbles as you soak up the spectacular end to yet another remarkable Samui day. 📍

// Most codeshare flights go with Bangkok Airways via the Thai capital, with a complimentary lounge at Suvarnabhumi Airport available for all passengers. [bangkokair.com](http://bangkokair.com)

