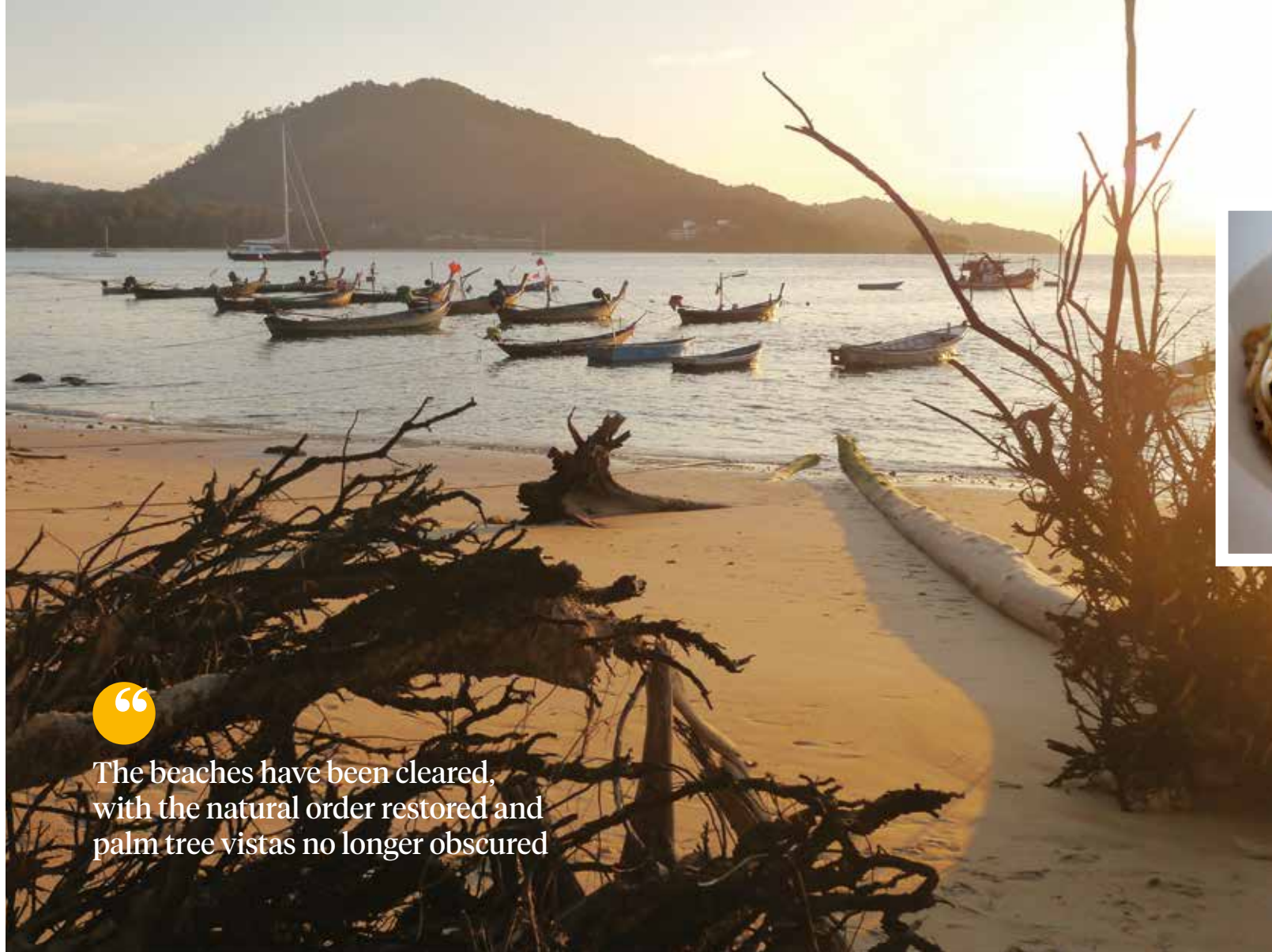


THE REAL PHUKET

Insiders, including writer Simon Ostheimer, share their favourite experiences of the Thai island beyond its stereotypical, touristy beach culture »

WORDS SIMON OSTHEIMER



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The beaches have been cleared, with the natural order restored and palm tree vistas no longer obscured

Phuket is a hugely different place from when I first arrived almost six years ago. From a sleepy backwater, it's become one of the most important provinces in Thailand, with all the major development that entails: tunnels and expressways are being built all over the island; three new mega shopping malls are currently under construction; and the airport began welcoming



Try the creative cocktails at Bookhemian

visitors via a flash new international terminal late last year.

Then there are the beaches. In 2011, Phuket's sands were covered in beach chairs and umbrellas and filled with assorted ice cream and souvenir vendors – there was barely a spot to put down a towel, and you were discouraged from doing so by the locals that made a living renting out sun loungers. Fast forward to 2017, and the beaches have been

(mostly) cleared, with the natural order restored and palm tree vistas no longer obscured.

Culinary advances

However, perhaps the biggest change has been the improvement of the island's culinary scene, which is now a vibrant world of top-class chefs and innovative mixologists. For instance, at Rustic ([facebook.com/rusticeateryphuket](https://www.facebook.com/rusticeateryphuket)), chefs Nikola Lesar and Chonthicha Surajaroenjajai

have breathed fresh life into Patong as a dining destination, with their fine contemporary European cuisine. Meanwhile, over at Suay ([suayrestaurant.com](https://www.suayrestaurant.com)) in Phuket Town, chef Tammasak Chootong has been doing the same for Thai food, merging his local heritage with a German upbringing to create an often unique menu of cross-cultural favourites, such as the Phuket-style quiche Lorraine with crab meat in yellow curry, and the

spaghetti with grilled river prawns served in spicy *tom yum* butter sauce.

Trendsetting bars

Indeed, the Old Town as a whole has gone from sleepy backwater to trendsetter, with new cafés springing up every week – try Bookhemian ([facebook.com/bookhemian](https://www.facebook.com/bookhemian)) for the hipster vibe – and a wave of brave new restaurateurs like chef Sakulyot Phongpheng at Smokin' Fish >



Top and bottom: delicious seafood dishes from Smokin' Fish restaurant



TIM NEWTON

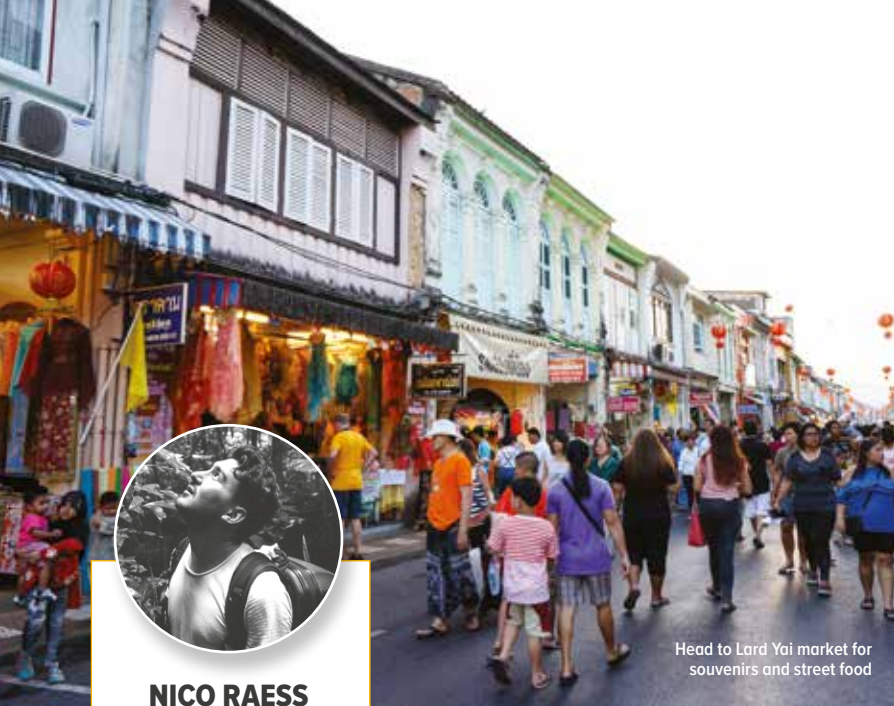
Tim Newton owns Phuket radio station The Thaiger and has lived on the island for five years. Originally from Melbourne, Tim came for the beaches, adventures and pad Thai.

There are two main shopping centres in Phuket and another three on the way, but I prefer to head to the Expo Market close to Phuket's Old Town where the locals shop. Bargain hard! For a drink, head – at sunset, of course – to the Sunset Bar on the cliff road between Kata Beach and Nai Harn. When it comes to eating on the island, you can't go wrong with a banana pancake on the street.

There's approximately three million calories in each, or something like that, but it's true love in every bite. I like mine with Nutella spread.

When I'm looking for something to do, I head up to the Khao Rang Viewpoint overlooking Phuket Town. Get up there before sunset to enjoy amazing views, then enjoy dinner at Tung Ka Cafe, where they serve outstanding local curries.

Lastly, when I need an escape from it all, I head to Mai Khao Beach in the north of the island. There's kilometres of sand where you're unlikely to see a tourist all day. That's paradise for me.



NICO RAESS

Filmmaker Nico Raess co-owns Phuket video production company Fat Mango Videos. He moved to Phuket at age 13 and has called it home ever since.

I don't really shop much, but if I were to get a gift for someone, I'd go to the Lard Yai Sunday Night Market on Thatang Road in the Old Town. It's become a kind of gathering point for local handmade goods, and they have some great street food. When it comes to eating, I'm a sucker for Isaan food from the northeast of Thailand.

If you can handle your spice, then head to the Big Chicken in Kathu – it's a local landmark with a huge 15m-tall rooster statue at the entrance. Order the *tum taeng* spicy cucumber salad, it's delicious. If you want to get away from the craziness of Bangla Road in Patong, Phuket Town has some great little watering holes – check out Cue Bar next to the Clocktower roundabout. When I need a getaway, I head down to Rawai Beach and rent a longtail boat for the day.

For around THB 1,000 (\$40), they will take you on a private tour of the offshore islands.

Head to Lard Yai market for souvenirs and street food

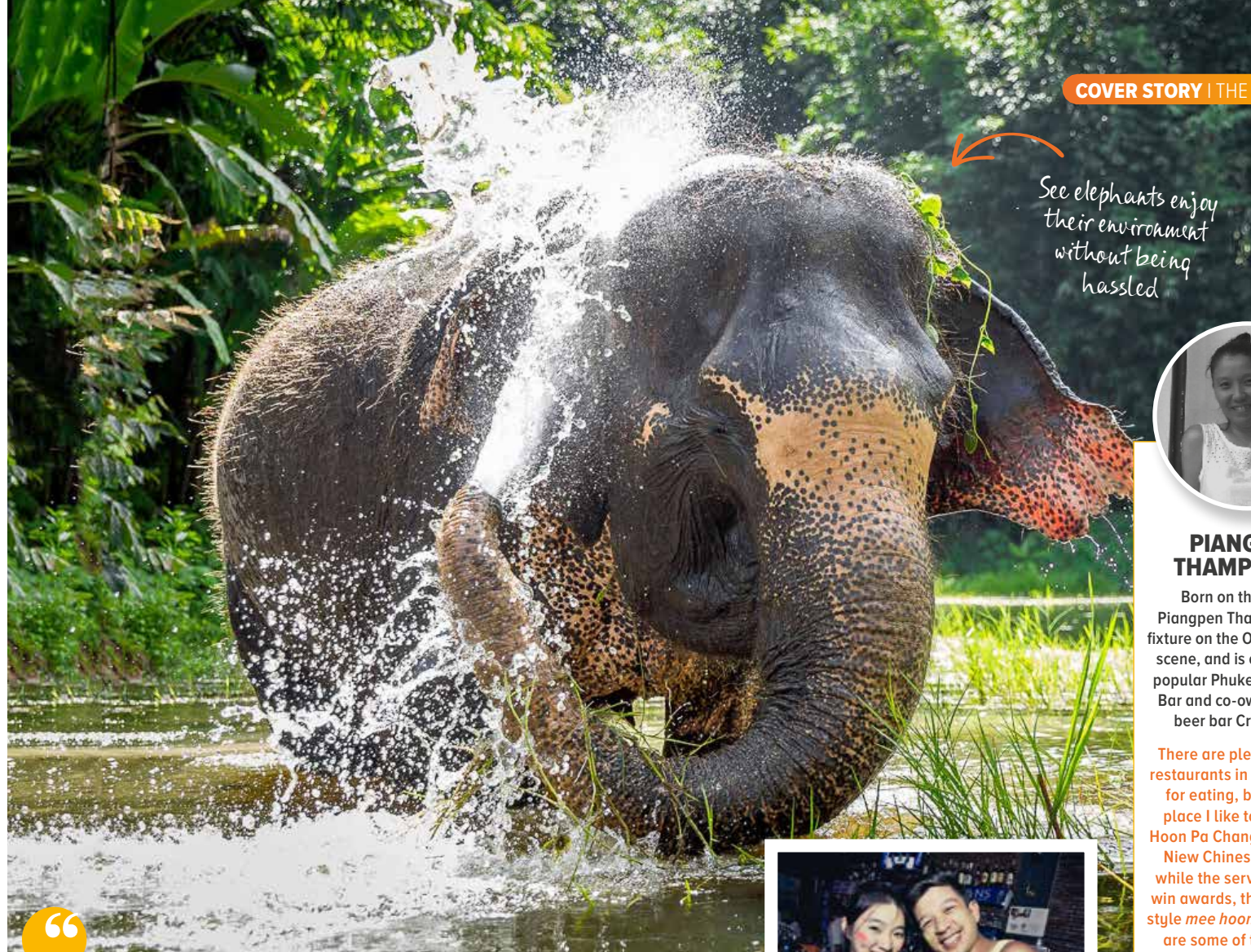
(facebook.com/smokinfish.phuket). Right next door is Phuket's coolest bar Z1mplex (facebook.com/z1mplex), where mad scientist duo Tom Auttayamavittaya and Nann Yantapanit have drawn in punters from as far afield as Bangkok with their crazy concoctions. Try the 'Hannibal' cocktail with schnapps, rum, gin, cream liqueur, and bitters melded in a skull-shaped shot or the other worldly 'Parallel Universe' with absinthe, vodka, and liqueurs.

The latest sights

Of course, there's plenty more to do than just drinking and dining in Phuket.

The complex that houses the 45m-tall Big Buddha, which provides 360-degree views of the south of the island, has been under construction since I arrived, and the launch of the cultural-themed Thai theatre show at Siam Niramit (siamniramit.com) a few years back brought a little cultural perspective to Phuket's tourism offerings, while fresh new hotels like the Cassia (cassia.com) continue to spring up on the shores. However, one of the island's newest attractions, if that is the right word, perhaps offers the most promise.

The Phuket Elephant Sanctuary (facebook.com/phuketelephantsanctuary) opened in November last year as a retirement home for sick, injured and old elephants from the island's many trekking camps. Visitors here have limited interaction with the elephants, and instead observe the animals – which often arrive



See elephants enjoy their environment without being hassled



PIANGPEN THAMPRAKIT

Born on the island, Piangpen Thampradit is a fixture on the Old Town's bar scene, and is owner of the popular Phuketique Coffee Bar and co-owner of craft beer bar Crafts & Co.

There are plenty of great restaurants in Phuket Town for eating, but a secret place I like to go is Mee Hoon Pa Chang in the Bang Niew Chinese Temple – while the service may not win awards, their Hokkien-style *mee hoon* rice noodles are some of the best on the island. When I'm not looking after the bar in my own places, I head to Club No. 43 – while I prefer their classic-style cocktails, you can tell the staff here what you like and they'll create something special just for you. When I'm looking for a little adventure, I take to the skies at the Flying Hanuman in Kathu, a zipline adventure park where you 'fly' across the jungle canopy. When I need a change of pace, my favourite place to head to is the southern end of Kata Beach, to find a quiet and shady spot of sand – if you're here in the evening, grab a drink at the nearby Reggae Bar, perched on the rocks.

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Visitors observe the injured elephants as they graze, swim and play

with severe man-inflicted injuries – as they graze, swim and play. Within a short space of time it has already started to change attitudes on the island towards elephants, helping steer it towards ethical tourism. Much like the clearing of the beaches, and the infrastructure

improvements, it shows how Phuket continues to grow, and remains a truly wonderful place to visit – and call home. ✈

In 2011, Simon Ostheimer left behind the busy streets of Bangkok to raise his young family on Phuket, and has been writing about his adopted home ever since.

Getting there

Jetstar flies three times daily from Singapore to Phuket.

To book visit JETSTAR.COM



Check out the nightlife at Cue Bar (above) and Club No. 43

