



CUT-OUT-AND-GO GUIDE | SECRET PHUKET



instant escapes

Secret Phuket

The package hordes don't know the half of it. Follow us and keep schtum!

It may be Thailand's biggest, blingiest, best-known island, but Phuket has many secrets. Leave the crowds and there's a whole unseen side: easy bike rides through jungles filled with monkeys, and back rubs on sandy shores. Street food is as irresistible as it's Instagrammable, and hip hotels mean no backpack required. Come on, go it alone! **By Tristan Rutherford**



SEE & DO

● Phuket's photogenic Old Town grew wealthy on tin mining. The profits found their way into stunning Sino-Portuguese townhouses, where ostentation knew no bounds. On Thalang Road and Yaowarat Road, many still house silk stores, haberdasheries and antique printing presses. Others, such as **Thaivetro** (54 Yaowarat Rd; ① on map), **sell ice cream in exotic flavours, alongside bakeries, crêperies and while-you-wait tailors.** Historic immigration has left this walkable city with more Chinese temples than you can shake an incense stick at. Go wander...

● At sundown, the Old Town comes alive in the **Chillva Night Market** (②). With its boho vibe, this open-air flea market seems very much at home alongside the shops in repurposed shipping containers, selling hand-printed T-shirts and 50p face creams. Bizarre buys include dog jackets for Chihuahuas (yuppie Thailand's preferred breed). When you're peckish, you'll find **edible-bug bars, vegan stalls and Singha beer taps at every turn.** Patrons are mostly local, with foreigners very few and far between.

● Time to hit the beach. You'll need a rental scooter or some other wheels to reach **Ya Nui Beach** (③), the island's most immaculate expanse of sand. Set on a **road to nowhere at Phuket's southernmost tip, two half-moons of beach arc from a rocky outcrop.** These coves are protected by an island in the

WHAT TO BRING HOME

Tempeted to buy a few bottles to stash in your luggage for home? There's no need — **Chalong Bay Rum is available duty-free at Phuket airport**

Wish you were here: Banana Beach, northern Phuket, surrounded by mature forest; below, stone carving in the Botanic Garden; Sino-Portuguese townhouses in the Old Town

bay you can swim out to. Snorkel hire costs £2 from hire shacks by the beach.

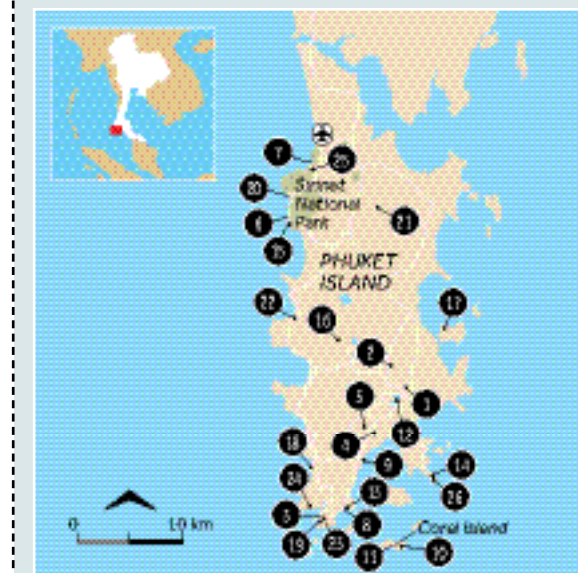
● Tranquil southern Phuket is home to **Chalong Bay Rum** (Tambon Chalong; chalongbayrum.com; ④). Seven years ago, French thirtysomethings Marine and Thibault established Thailand's first organic *rhumerie*, making use of farm-to-factory sugar cane. On their £10 tasting session and distillery tour you'll see a 45-year-old copper still imported from Armagnac. But you'll be more drawn to the **alfresco bar doing lemongrass Daiquiris. Tour groups are rare, so it'll just be the locals plus you.**

● **Phuket Botanic Garden** (Chao Fu Rd, Chalong; phuketbotanicgarden.com; ⑤) is a **seldom-visited jungle tamed into dozens of tropical biospheres, each alive with butterflies and lizards.** Think orchid gardens, human-size ferns and a herb garden pungent with Thai basil. Kids can go bananas here (and even pick them from a tree!).

● Northern Phuket's supreme secret shore is **Banana Beach** (⑥). Come for **flour-fine sand sheltered by mature forest and lapped by turquoise seas.** For food, a wooden shack dishes up grilled squid and shrimp, and operates a sprinkle of beach umbrellas.

● **Sirinat National Park** (nps.dnp.go.th; £4) epitomises Phuket's wild origins. It connects a protected marine area with virgin jungle, via a mangrove saltwater eco-system. **Tourists are as rare as the Asian fairy-bluebirds that patrol the ironwood and tulip tree forests.** The park is best conquered by mountain bike — it costs just a fiver to rent one from the rental shack by the Pensiri House guesthouse, near Nai Yang Beach (⑦).

● The ultimate secret escape? Slip a longtail boatman £40 for a return whizz to **Coral Island**, a buttock-clenching 30-minute boat ride from Rawai (⑧) or Chalong Pier (⑨). This ocean speck is **Bounty-ad beautiful, not to mention a diver's dream.** The Coral Island Club bungalow resort (00 66 813 703181, coralislandclub.com; ⑩) can organise snorkel trips. **Freedom Beach** (⑪), on the south side of island, is the quietest of the three main sandy stretches, with waters well-stocked with tropical fish. ➤



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EAT

Moreishly Malay

ROTI CHAOF A (Mains about £1)

Because: A legacy of Malay fisherfolk means Phuket is about 20 per cent Muslim, and *roti canai*, a swirly whirl of eggy dough served with curry sauce, is a favourite dish. **Travel's tip:** Rotis here are tropically Thai. Order yours with banana slices or fish curry. *Chao Fa Rd, Old Town; 00 66 76 221771; @.*

Live bait

RAWAI SEAFOOD MARKET (Fish per kilo from £3)

Because: Select your seafood from a thousand bubbling tanks, then haggle: clams cost £1 per kilo, monster-of-the-deep lobsters up to £50. **Travel's tip:** Take your thrashing bag of fish to one of the restaurants over the street. They will sauté, grill or fry it for £2.50 per kilo. *Rawai Beach; @.*

Royally good Thai

BABA SOUL FOOD (Mains about £10)

Because: It pairs fresh seafood with wholesome ingredients, many from the King's Royal Project farms in northern Thailand. **Travel's tip:** Diners can take a pre-dinner splash in the ocean-view pool opposite its sister restaurant Baba Pool Club, a short walk up the hill. *Sri Panwa, Vichit; 00 66 76 371000, babaphuket.com; @.*

Fishy fine dining

SEAFOOD AT TRISARA RESORT (Mains about £16)

Because: Kla, the Thai chef, worked in Michelin-starred kitchens before opening this spot. **Travel's tip:** If you enjoyed the *Yam Subparod Goong Sod* made from prawns and herbs from Trisara's organic garden, you can gather your own ingredients during the restaurant's cooking classes. *60/1 Moo 6, Srisoonthorn Rd; 00 66 76 310100, trisara.com; @.*

Intimate meal

ROYALE NAM TOK (Mains about £22)

Because: This private villa turns into a secret six-table restaurant at dusk, and serves up refined Franco-Thai dishes. **Travel's tip:** Allow Corry, the host, to conjure up Royale Nam Tok's £45 Surprises Menu. It offers the best value and most seasonal treats. *Soi Pakdee Village; 00 66 87 263 7327, theroyalenamtok.com; @.*

LATE-NIGHT MOVES

If you do a Cinderella at Koko and leave after midnight, there are still speedboats back to Phuket (a 10-minute journey), but the cost rises to £6.

LOAF LIKE A LOCAL

After dinner, walk along the sandy shore right of Rawai pier. Soon enough you'll find the very same fishermen fast asleep among nodding palms after the day's catch. Join them for a snooze.

WRITER'S TOP TIP

You don't need to be an athlete to reach the wildlife reserve — simply take a cheap tuk-tuk. Minutes after you're enter, you'll find the gorgeous Tonsai Waterfall. Easy.

BEACH BARS

Eurasian mix

KOKO

Because: At this chic sunset lounge on Coconut Island, Kazakhstani mixologist Alexey blends tom yum powder with Tequila and mango syrup to delicious effect. **Travel's tip:** Drink up by 11.30pm to catch the £2 boat back to mainland Phuket. *The Village Coconut Island; @.*

Lively up yourself

SKA BAR

Because: Bob Marley is still waiting at this hopping beach boozier. An unruly collection of chairs, some adorned with Jamaican flag colours, tumbles down to the sea. **Travel's tip:** Ska Bar's crazed fire show starts at 10pm every Friday. *Kata Beach; skabar-phuket.com; @.*

Southern comfort

PROMTHER CAPE RESTAURANT

Because: On Phuket's lonely southwestern tip, concrete tables and benches are spread above the spectacular topaz coastline. **Travel's tip:** Each afternoon this bar bakes. Reserve a tree-shaded table in good time for the sunset Instagram shot. *Promthep Cape; @.*

ASK THE LOCAL

A Phuket resident since the '90s, Daniel Amby is a cycling coach at Thanayapura sports resort

The golden sands of Nai Thon Beach @ have been saved from development as they sit within the Sirinat National Park. I love it and lead my cycling groups there. I also take them to the Khao Phra Thaeo Wildlife Reserve (£4; @). It's filled with rainforest flowers and is tourist-free. Divers rave about the Similan Islands, but they're a long boat ride away, and if you get sick in such a remote place then you're in trouble — so I'd say stick to Phuket. Nai Yang @ is the dream beach you remember from backpacker days; Kamala @ is more buzzy — try the Salt & Pepper Steakhouse (121/5 Rim Haad Rd), a Thai restaurant with a Swedish touch.



STAY

Paradise found

NAIYA BEACH BUNGALOW

(Doubles from £22, room only) **Because:** Here you have the epitome of flashpacking, in bungalows built from bamboo, with wooden armchairs out front, and the pristine sliver of Ya Nui Beach beyond. **Travel's tip:** Call ahead for an airport pick-up (£23). Naiya Beach can then rent the two wheels you'll need to scoot around Phuket's secret shores (£5.50 a day). *Ya Nui Beach; 00 66 91 439893, naiyabeachbungalow.com; @.*

End of the world

BAANKRATING RESORT

(Doubles from £36, B&B) **Because:** Bungalow villas peep out from verdant jungle here on Phuket's southernmost tip. Swim south and it's next stop Indonesia. **Travel's tip:** Rates are so cheap that it's worth upgrading to a beachfront pavilion villa. It's not even double the standard-room rate, and these sit above the private beach loved by snorkellers. *Ao Sane Beach; 00 66 27180858, baankrating.com; @.*

PHOTOGRAPHS: AWL IMAGES; GETTY MAP; MAIDENHEAD CARTOGRAPHIC

Bargain bling

THE VILLAGE COCONUT ISLAND

(Doubles from £90, room only) **Because:** Romantics can rent an entire pool villa that overlooks the Andaman Sea for just £200, while families can explore the island wilderness on free kayaks and bikes. **Travel's tip:** Sample something completely different: the Village recently introduced a selection of island-life packages, which include food-foraging, fishing with locals, and Thai kickboxing on the beach. *51/7 Moo 6, Tambon Kohkaew; 00 66 76 352148, thevillage-coconutisland.com; @.*

Tropical triple pool

THE SLATE (Doubles from £164, B&B)

Because: Relaxing was never so easy. The Slate pairs industrial design with famously good hospitality, all just eight minutes from Phuket International airport by cab (which is complimentary). **Travel's tip:** Rooms are ginormous. Even standard Pearl Suites are 56sqm, so you needn't shell out for anything more sizeable. *Nai Yang Beach; 00 66 76 327006, theslatephuket.com; @.*

Night lights: clockwise from top left, Baba Beach Club; fresh fish dish at Baba Soul Food; pool villa at the Village Coconut Island; Sri Panwa; nibbles at Seafood at Trisara Resort

TOP SECRET BEACH

Go up another notch in the seclusion stakes and ride the Village's longtail boat to Koh Rang Yai — Coconut's tiny, sandy sister island

Brand-new beach club

BABA BEACH (Doubles from £195, B&B)

Because: Ibiza tunes bang out in the tropical night, as grizzled glowstickers detox with Thai herb compresses between the lychee Mojitos and the tuna-belly sashimi. **Travel's tip:** Book a five-night stay between April and October and you can bag the Long Stay Full Board deal — this includes meals, massages, minibar and airport pick-up, all for a paltry £14 extra a day on the normal room rate. *Takua Thung; 00 66 76 429388, bababeachclub.com; @.*

Royal seal

SRI PANWA (Doubles from £278, B&B)

Because: You'll be in the company of A-listers who come to hide out and play in the myriad infinity pools of this managed jungle peninsula. **Travel's tip:** For a remarkably good-value £409 (somewhere else would easily charge double) you can push the boat out and book in at Sri Panwa's new Habita Wing. This has huge rooms — the 140sqm penthouse comes with private infinity

pool and a fridge stocked with free beer and treats. *Sakdidej Rd, Vichit; 00 66 76 371000, sripanwa.com; @.*

GET ME THERE GO INDEPENDENT

Thai Airways (thaairways.com) flies from Heathrow to Bangkok from £650 return, with a quick hop onwards to Phuket. From £570 return, flights with BA (ba.com) go via Bangkok, Singapore or Kuala Lumpur on partner airlines.

GO PACKAGED

TUI (020 34512688, tui.co.uk) has seven nights in a four-star on tranquil Karon Beach from £1,050pp, B&B, with Gatwick flights. Mr & Mrs Smith (0333 363 3180, mrandmrsmith.com) has a week at Trisara, from £3,581pp, B&B, with Heathrow flights and transfers.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Thailand's free visa-on-arrival scheme allows you to breeze through security after filling in a simple form. You can be on the beach within the hour. For more details, see tourismthailand.org.