

Searching for Samui

By Nellie Huang

As Thailand's third largest island, Koh Samui has blossomed into one of Southeast Asia's most sought-after beach destinations. But amidst the touristy towns and chic restaurants, there remain pockets of tranquil hideouts and traditional flair.

A water buffalo wades through the shallow waters, metres away from me. He stares at me for a minute and then looks away, without a care in the world. Apart from the buffalo, I am completely alone. Sunset is a peaceful affair here as Bang Rak beach runs for miles without a single person in sight. I never thought I would find this sort of tranquillity on the holidaymakers' playground of Koh Samui. But it is all around me: from the minute I awake to the afternoon spent watching the water-buffalo frolic in the water to the evening when the ocean lulls me to sleep. At my base in Upni Duniya, I get acquainted with a different side of Koh Samui, one that shies away from glossy posters and travel pin-ups.

Thailand's Sweetheart
In the last decade, Samui has become Thailand's tourism sweetheart, drawing thousands of travellers here with its perfect year-round tropical climate and idyllic location in the Gulf of Siam. It was only 30 years ago when the first backpackers arrived on the isle via dingy coconut boats. Today, the primitive fishermen's settlement has developed into a full-scale tourist destination boasting high-end resorts and modern malls.

But Samui has not forgotten its roots. Beyond the touristy town of Chaweng lie traditional fishing towns, sprawling coconut palm

tree plantations and remnants of the island's heritage and culture. Tucked between golf courses and boutique hotels are strings of hidden villages and empty beaches.

Upni Duniya

"It's precisely why I chose to move to Koh Samui," Salim Jiwa, a long-term resident shares his love for the island. "Samui might have developed drastically over the years, but much of the island is still covered with plantations and fishermen villages."

Since nine years ago, Salim planted his roots here and worked hard to retain his and Samui's identities. Upni Duniya is the fruit of his labour, a luxurious beachfront residence transformed from his former private home.

Swathed in rich teak-wood panelling, matching red opulent lamps from Chiangmai, oversized ceilings and local artwork, every corner of the boutique villa is closely linked to the Thai culture.

Although local architectural style takes centre stage at Upni Duniya, mod cons are not forgotten. My oceanfront master suite features state-of-the-art entertainment systems and electronic blinds. Glass doors open up to my very own open-air Jacuzzi, backdropped by the infinity-edge pool and the beach.

Upni Duniya translates to 'Our World' in Hindi – aptly describing how this villa warmly welcomes



guests into their world. During our stay, my travel mates and I experience genuine Thai hospitality as the team at Upni Duniya shows us their home and their culture.

The Real Samui

Our journey begins with a culinary experience right in Upni Duniya's kitchen. Chef Preuk, a veteran of former Four Seasons Chiang Mai fame, shows us what it takes to prepare a complete Thai meal.

Under his guidance, we learn to whip up quintessential Thai fare using local ingredients and traditional culinary practices. Crunchy som tum (fresh papaya salad), savoury green curry and sizzling grilled tiger prawns are no longer dishes on a restaurant table – they are the fruit of my own labour and the aftermath of an enjoyable learning experience.

Over the next few days, we continue to experience the island through its jungles and beaches. As a local expert in every sense of the word, Upni Duniya's Manageress Khun Na shows us her island – from the plunging waterfalls of Namuang to the unspoiled coastline of Baan Taling Ngam littered with longtail boats to the majestic Choengmun Buddhist Temple. With Khun Na, we learn about Thai legends, meet local fishermen who share a story or two with us and sample some of the tastiest street foods I've ever had.

Like a versatileameleon, Samui springs a surprise on just about anyone – even my travel mates, most of whom have lived in Thailand for a decade or so, are all left starry-eyed. I, for one, have been bowled over by Samui's charm. Perhaps the next time I return, I'll be here to stay...

Upni Duniya's nine-bedroom villa complex sits on Bang Rak Beach, 10 minutes from the Koh Samui international airport. Perfect for hosting families and corporate retreats, the six-star resort accommodates up to 18 people and comes with 24-hour butler and chef services. Bookings are only accepted for the entire complex.

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