



# Designer dining in Thailand

Sudeshna Ghosh travels to Phang Nga to try one of the most luxurious meals in the world.



Chef Alex Burger at work in Aziamendi

As we crowded around the gnarled, short bonsai tree, peering into the darkness, I really started to feel like I was having to 'forage' for my dinner. Is this what a THB50,000 (around Dh5,300) meal was going to be about? I needn't have worried – the rest of the meal was as luxurious as it gets – oysters, truffles, caviar and vintages peppering the entire evening, in the designer setting of Aziamendi restaurant.

The restaurant, which opened in December 2013, instantly catapulted straight to the top when it comes to gastronomic destinations in Thailand, competing with the best of Bangkok. The artfully designed restaurant is headed up by three Michelin-starred Spanish chef Eneko Atxa, and ably run by his trusted protégé, New Yorker Alex Burger. But, ignore the nomenclature, burgers aren't exactly the sort of thing you can expect on the menu here!

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Our bonsai tree pit-stop was the penultimate one in our adventurous journey to the restaurant as part of their new Ultimate Menu experience. My dining companions for the evening and I had started at the in-house art gallery of the Iniala Beach House, a design-led boutique ultra-luxury resort in Phang Na (but, more on that later), with a 'picnic'. Our first course, which arrived in a picnic basket while we were sipping creative cocktails – lemongrass and egg whites with truffle oil, anyone? – consisted of Cantabrian anchovies on brick paper (toast) with anchovy mayonnaise; piña colada cocktail in a gold bonbon; Hokkaido sea urchin custard with American sauce gel; and hibiscus infusion with orange and pomelo. And yes, each one of these bite-sized nibbles tasted as grandiose as they sound, with an incredible amount of intricacy and finesse going into the creation of each, resulting in a perfect balance of flavours and textures. But, I dare not use up all my superlatives in the very first course!

As we walked out of the art gallery, Alex, who was escorting us, suddenly stopped at the foot of the landscaped garden's pathway, and picked up some test tubes from the ground, to offer us some palate-cleansing mocktails – while we joked about how dodgy this could appear to be, the fruity shots were nothing short of delicious. A short walk then led us to afore-mentioned bonsai tree. Thoroughly intrigued, and enjoying the real sense of adventure this whole experience was bringing us, I plucked the juicy cherry tomatoes hanging off of said tree – which had been injected with raspberry juice – and bit into them, along with the 'tree bark' made of dehydrated skin of sunchokes, lying alongside.

Just when I thought our adventures were about to end, we were then escorted into the restaurant – not to our table, but straight into the kitchen instead! Our next course of truffled eggs involved Alex and his sous chef showing us how it's made – by injecting truffle oil into a parboiled yolk, and topped with some truffle caviar. After almost 'inhaling' these, we finally made our way to our table for our next course – oyster topped with tomato water gel, caviar, whipped butter on toast, and a very interesting tempura algae. The oysters are Fine de Claire (a strictly regulated French standard for oysters determining size, freshness and quality), the caviar the finest beluga variety, and the butter, Echire (a delicate, high-fat artisanal butter that is made using centuries-old techniques and a small selection of cows from within a 50km radius in a corner of western France) – this represents the quality of the meal. Literally, the finest, most luxurious ingredients from around the world are bought in to facilitate what truly feels like an 'ultimate' dinner.

Aziamendi's stylish, eclectic décor featuring art >>



Architectural and gastronomical mastery make a happy marriage in Aziamendi



A picnic basket for hors d'oeuvres



Truffled eggs like never before!



Oysters and caviar make for fine companions



The flavours of tuna belly allowed to shine through with a red pepper sauce, and in the form of Saku noodles with spicy tsuyu dressing and sesame seeds

from various South East Asian artists and organic shapes provide an appropriately luxurious setting for this kind of a meal.

Subsequent courses, each of them artfully presented, included Iberico ham, porcini carpaccio topped with potato omelette foam – which was sprayed on to our plates at the table in another example of culinary theatre – seared tuna belly from Japan, and also from Japan, Kobe beef striploin with a red wine sauce and a light-as-air potato soufflé ‘pillow’ filled with garlic cream (who knew the humble potato could be elevated to such gourmet status?). Each course was paired with the finest vintages – and when I say finest, I mean it; we started with a Krug champagne, and one of the wines we enjoyed was a rare 1961 vintage French Domaine Huet from the Loire valley. After all, the wine pairing was managed by one of Thailand’s best sommeliers, Fabienne Etienne, whose passion for viticulture has won him many awards.

The twelve-course menu also included foie gras – something I have personal concerns about, because of the ethical issues surrounding it – but I was assured that it was sustainably produced (no ducks are force-fed), as sustainability is very much a part of Aziamendi’s philosophy. Thus persuaded, I allowed myself to enjoy the foie gras three ways dish – served simply seared with orange marmalade; grilled, with a strong smoky flavour from the ashy coating; and in a cute bonbon where the foie gras was coated with smoked, blast frozen then shaved – to offer a completely new textural and flavour experience with the liver speciality. Another highlight was kokotxas, a Basque country speciality – an obvious nod to Eneko Atxas’ heritage – in which the cheek of hake fish is confit-ed and served with a spicy garlic Pil Pil sauce, resulting in a beautiful butter-soft dish oozing flavour.

The pace and portions of the meal were perfect, so you don’t feel over-full, even if the cheese course starts pushing your limits. Dessert, which was a multi-textured chocolate concoction of mousse, ice cream and tuille with dulce de leche ganache, featured the world’s best chocolates again (Caraiibe, a single-origin dark chocolate from the Caribbean; Jivara, a creamy, milky chocolate perfect for cooking with; and Manjari, a dark chocolate made with the finest beans from Madagascar), kind of snuck its way into our bellies anyways. But I had to put my foot down when it came to the petit fours of chocolate raspberry macarons, bon bons and marshmallow – these came back with me to my chic Owner’s suite in the Collector’s Villa of Iniala Beach House.



All the three villas enjoy their own private pools and lounge areas

## Stay in style

One of just ten suites in this three-villa boutique resort, Iniala is unlike anything else. Don’t come here expecting traditional Thai arches (although there is one at the entrance) and lotus ponds – this is designer luxury at its edgiest best. Each villa and room in the resort has been created by a different international designer, with their wildly varying styles coming through loud and clear, with subtle nods to Thai elements along the way. So, if one suite is a sunlit, white space with hardwood floors, an oversized marble bathroom the size of an average Dubai apartment, and the beach only footsteps away, another is a decadent boudoir with plush fabrics, jewelled accessories and opulent furniture, designed by Mark Brazier-Jones (who has also designed the sets of the 50 shades of grey movie).

Each of the three villas features its own common areas, private spa and pool – all of them exquisitely designed. The Collector’s Villa features pillars covered by broken teacups and saucers, and a giant octopus-shaped sofa, just some of the quiriness brought in by the renowned Brazilian design duo, the Campana brothers, and mother of pearl-covered walls and ceiling in the spa, to represent being inside a seashell. In Villa Bianca, you’ll find a room themed entirely around Matrioshka dolls and another featuring a stunning bed – made of thinly sliced and sanded ash wood to look like oversized ribbons, the Joseph Walsh-designed bed is a triumph of organic form.

I loved how each room, indeed each corner of the property, seemed to tell a story all its own, and yet, everything came together with a unifying

## DAY-TRIPPING

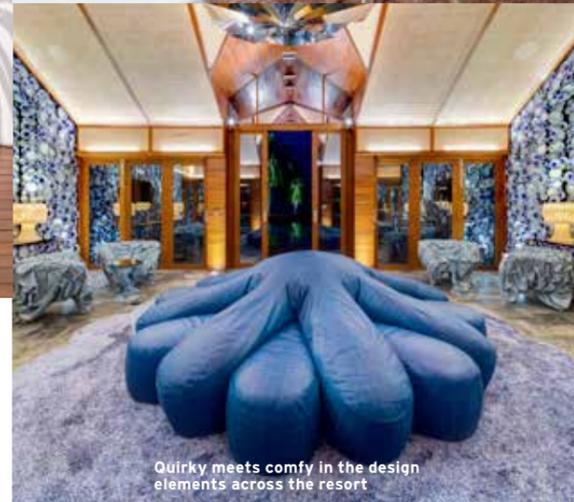
Phuket old town is a charming mix of Thai culture with colonial influences, and makes for a lovely day trip of wandering the streets filled with eclectic boutiques, hole-in-the-wall cafes and souvenir stores. Here’s our pick of what not to miss:

- **Aroon restaurant:** A tiny streetside café that is favoured by Thai celebs, specialising in local ‘rotis’ – fried flatbreads served with bananas and condensed milk.
- **Eleven & Co:** A quirky boutique and café offering pop culture memorabilia, and urban bites.
- **One Chan:** An atmospheric family-run restaurant in a historic home (the family still lives there in the back of the building) where you can try local specialties (indigenous to Phuket) such as crab in yellow curry and ‘Pad Pak Miang’ (stir-fried local vegetables).

theme that was as much a celebration of art and design, as it was about cocooning the resident in luxury. The resort has been converted from the British owner’s private beach residence, and it feels exactly like holidaying in your wealthy friend’s beach house – intimate and homely, in spite of the uber-luxury one is surrounded by. But the luxury doesn’t lie in just the design, it lies in the attention to detail. Whether it’s the VIP fast-track service all guests enjoy at Phuket airport; the bathroom amenities that exceed all five-star norms, with his-



The Owner’s Suite looks directly on to the beach



Quirky meets comfy in the design elements across the resort



Christian Grey fans will love this baroque-style boudoir!



A bed that’s a work of art!



The only ‘kids’ hotel’ of its kind!



Aziamendi’s interiors are funky and artsy

and-hers boxes, complete with deodorants and bespoke scented candles, and Jo Malone toiletries; the daily spa or beauty treatment that is included in the price; or the staff-to-guest ratio, no effort is spared in making a stay here special. The philosophy here is – whatever you feel like, whenever, is made available to you.

Not least the food, which is as personalised as anything else. Aside from the gourmet Aziamendi experience, Iniala executive chef Sandro Aguiliera ensures mealtimes here are relaxed and delicious, best enjoyed in the glass-walled geometric cube of a dining room that extends over the infinity pool. Breakfasts are a delicious spread of homemade breads, pastries, jams, preserves plus hot dishes prepared à la carte (think scrambled eggs with brie); lunch usually features light, fresh salads and Mediterranean-inspired dishes; while dinner is a more gourmet affair and can include authentic Thai delicacies or classic European-style dishes such as slow-cooked duck with black garlic cream, and tenderloin with red wine reduction.

Located in Phang Nga, on the southernmost tip of Thailand (although the closest airport is Phuket), and probably one of the country’s few remaining unspoilt reaches – although several new resorts are being built up in the area now – the resort enjoys a

wide expanse of private beach. For the active-minded, watersports including stand up paddle boarding and even diving is offered, as well as daily fitness and yoga sessions. And for those looking to just veg out, beyond the pool-beach-book-spa mix, the resort is also home to its own private cinema – think plush sofas and refreshments on request, to complement the state-of-the-art technology. The cinema may be the perfect date-night spot for parents, while their children hole up in the kids’ hotel – another unique offering at Iniala. Taking kids’ play areas to a whole other level, this is a full-on mini hotel, complete with cute cave-like bedrooms for sleepovers, children-sized bathrooms and amenities, and all conceivable games for little ones on tap – it isn’t uncommon for grown-ups to want a night here, and it’s not hard to see why!

If you can tear yourself away from all this, tours to surrounding local areas, such as temple visits, nature parks, or even day tours to Phuket town can be arranged (See Day-tripping) and are included in the price. While these offer a taste of the local culture that is thoroughly enjoyable, coming back from the great outdoors into the welcoming confines of the resort, where warm smiles and cold towels greet you, will feel like coming home – Iniala is just that kind of place. ☑

## TRAVEL DIARY

**GETTING THERE:** Emirates offers direct daily flights between Dubai and Phuket, ticket prices start from around Dhs3,000, [www.emirates.com](http://www.emirates.com).  
**STAYING THERE:** Prices for a suite start from US\$895 per night (around Dhs3,200), visit [iniala.com](http://iniala.com).