



Phang Nga

Decadence

What's it like staying in a celebrity-worthy hotel? CHERYLENE CHAN visits **Iniala Beach Resort** in Phang Nga, Thailand, and finds the best of wining, dining and designer decadence.

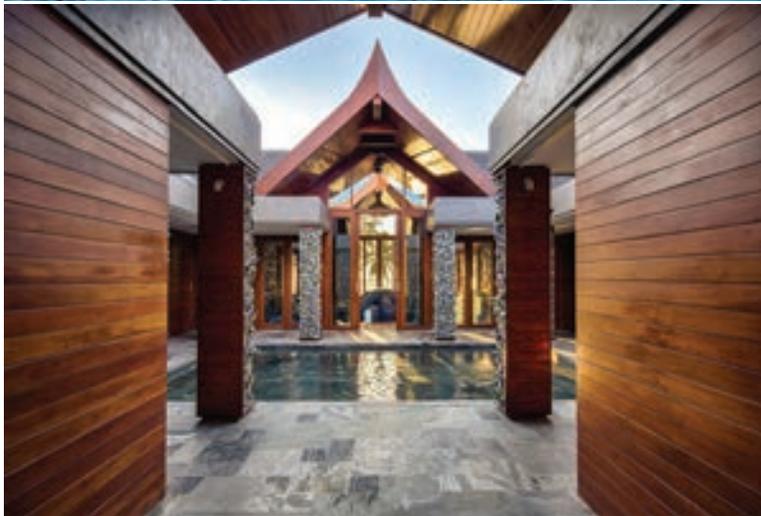


Singapore has plenty of amazing destinations for short breaks, and for someone who has lived here as long as I have, my first trip to Thailand's sandy coves and swish beach resorts has been shamefully overdue. So when I was given the chance to visit opulent Iniala Beach Resort, which now lets guests book individual suites (previously, their three-suite villas could only be booked as a whole), I tossed all my breezy tops and shorts into a bag without hesitation.

Situated at the foot of the largely untouched Natai Beach, a 20-minute drive from Phuket International

Airport, Iniala was recently in the spotlight for hosting the Kardashians.

While I have zero star power, I discovered that this place gives all its guests the VIP treatment from the moment they step off the plane. I was greeted by an airport employee who helped me breeze through customs, before escorting me to a comfy, air-conditioned car and plying me with bottled water, a cold towel and a huge macaroon. A portable Wi-Fi router was also on hand, which I immediately used to boast to all my mates back home.



The villas

The three-bedroom villas and penthouse are a design geek's dream, blending ultra-modern, organic lines and forms with traditional Thai architecture. Each individual suite drips with unique touches from forward-thinking architects and designers around the world. Villa Siam – designed by Thailand's Eggarat Wongcharit – boasts a bed and sofas suspended from the ceiling by cocoon-like wicker bamboo frames, while Villa Bianca has two rooms evoking giant, avant-garde seashells and a third with a whimsical nod to Russian matryoshka dolls.

Sensual with a touch of sci-fi, the penthouse (a joint effort by Iniala's founder Mark Weingard and director of design Graham Lamb) has a plush memory foam floor that begs to be rolled around on and a sunken hot tub right by the bed. Not surprisingly, it's popular among honeymooners.

In the Collector's Villa, luxurious rooms get an eclectic spin. The Boudoir is full of baroque glamour care of Mark Brazier-Jones, known for his work on the *50 Shades of Grey* set. My own suite, the Carpenter's Chamber, has intricate

hand-carved wooden and granite furniture by Irish designer Joseph Walsh. And the bathroom has a psychedelic pink glow and a light-up rain shower that changes hue at the touch of a button.

Aside from sensational looks, Iniala has heaps of high-tech touches to keep you on Cloud Nine. An iPad controls the telly, which comes crammed with classic movies and tunes; and an iPhone is available to ring the villa manager for requests. Pillows not to your taste? Choose another from a selection. Want a last-minute massage? Order one in your



villa's private spa room. And whenever I left my room for a short time (even 20 minutes!), the housekeepers slipped in like unseen elves to tidy everything, from topping up the tray of Jo Malone toiletries to neatly coiling my stray laptop charger. Service was flawless.

Parents will love that the resort is extremely family-friendly, with its very own Kids' Hotel that, quite honestly, I'd be tempted to lark about in too. The sleepover-style bedrooms look like tree-houses and caves, and the play area has a costume closet, a theatre, a climbing wall, games and more. Plus, each child gets a backpack of fun goodies, as well as their own mini-bathrobe and slippers for bath time.





The cuisine

Food at Iniala matches the fantastical setting. Our daily meals were served in the Collector's Villa Sala, an intimate glass-walled space with views of rolling waves. Spanish chef Sandro Aguilera is the brains behind the ever-changing menus; I loved his succulent sea bass ceviche, sweet and creamy massaman curry, and beautifully seared tuna saku topped with an avocado wedge and a dusting of sea salt. The menu isn't fixed; Sandro can whip up whatever you desire. A fresh batch of rustic breads and pastries from Iniala's own bakery greeted us at breakfast each day, along with house-made tropical jams and spreads.

The pinnacle of my stay, however, was trying the Ultimate Dinner Menu at Aziamendi, Iniala's elegant and artsy restaurant. Its phenomenally creative degustation menu is the work of three-Michelin-star chef Eneko Atxa

and his equally gifted Chef De Cuisine Alex Burger.

Our 13-course menu was a sensory journey, starting in Iniala's art gallery with a "picnic basket" served on a diamond-studded pool table. Inside was a dish of salty Cantabrian anchovies on crisp brick paper (a type of filo pastry), a gold bonbon filled with piña colada, and an addictively *umami* Hokkaido sea urchin custard.

Chef Burger then led us through the hotel's garden, stopping at a bush to fish out a pail filled with vials of hibiscus, orange and pomelo juice. We went on to pluck some sweet and juicy raspberry-injected cherry tomatoes from the bonsai trees outside Aziamendi, and munched on some chewy "tree bark" chips made from the skin of sunchokes.

These Alice-in-Wonderland elements were only the beginning. Next, we ventured into the kitchen where Chef



Burger skilfully drained egg yolks halfway and injected them with truffle juice, cooking the eggs from the inside out. We ate these in one bite, and they burst with aromatic goodness.

At the table, the rest of the courses came in well-paced succession, from the Fine de Claire oyster served with a mother-of-pearl spoonful of imperial caviar to the Joselito Íberico ham, shaved from the bone and served with tomato bread. Other stand-outs included foie gras done three ways, and tender Kobe beef striploin in red wine sauce, served with chive mayonnaise and potato soufflé pillows filled with garlic cream.

Each course was paired with exemplary wines hand-picked by sommelier Fabien Ettiene – from a dry, honeyed and cider-like French Vouvray to a rich, citrusy Austrian Veltliner. After the mains, we savoured a selection of cheeses, including a whiffy Roquefort. A Valrhona chocolate dessert brought our feast to a sweet finish. We were also given a box of petit fours, which I happily took back to the room to nibble on before bed.

The spa

To cancel out the extra calories, or if you just like keeping active, Iniala offers a range of fitness activities, from stand-up paddleboarding to yoga. I joined in a boot camp on the beach, which involved running 3km to a pier and back, zig-zagging between sticks, push-ups crunches and more. It was the most I'd exercised in years, but our instructor was encouraging and mindful not to push us too hard. I also had the chance to try Thai boxing, which worked out muscles that I wasn't aware of before.

Feeling rather sore, I decided to have the kinks kneaded out in the spa. Each guest gets a complimentary one-hour spa treatment each day – something I made full use of. The Collector's Villa's private spa room glimmers with opulent mother-of-pearl and bronze walls, and the therapists are warm and well-trained. My gentle yet effective hot-stone massage left me feeling much

lighter, and I also tried a cold mask facial that cleansed my skin of gunk, and a tamarind-infused body polish that buffed my skin to baby-soft condition.

Spoilt silly, it's no surprise that I was reluctant to leave all the beauty and bliss. If you're looking for a getaway with no-holds-barred pampering inside and out, Iniala is the place to be. [📍](#)

Fact file

- We flew SilkAir. Singapore Airlines, Qantas, Thai Airways, Bangkok Airways, Jetstar, Tiger Airways and AirAsia also ply the 90-minute route.
- Rates start from US\$895 for a Deluxe Suite.

iniala.com

