

SLEEPER

GLOBAL HOTEL DESIGN

MAY | JUNE 2016



Keemala

Boundary-pushing design comes to Thailand with a treetop wonderland in Phuket

Space Copenhagen

The Danish duo on introducing their Scandinavian design aesthetic to New York

Anantara Peace Haven

Anantara makes its Sri Lanka debut with a colonial inspired resort on the rugged south coast

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Cover Story

046 **Keemala** Phuket
With boundary-pushing design from Architecture Space and Pisud Design Company, Keemala – located on Thailand's largest island – unveils itself as a forest wonderland with a touch of the ethereal.





COVER STORY

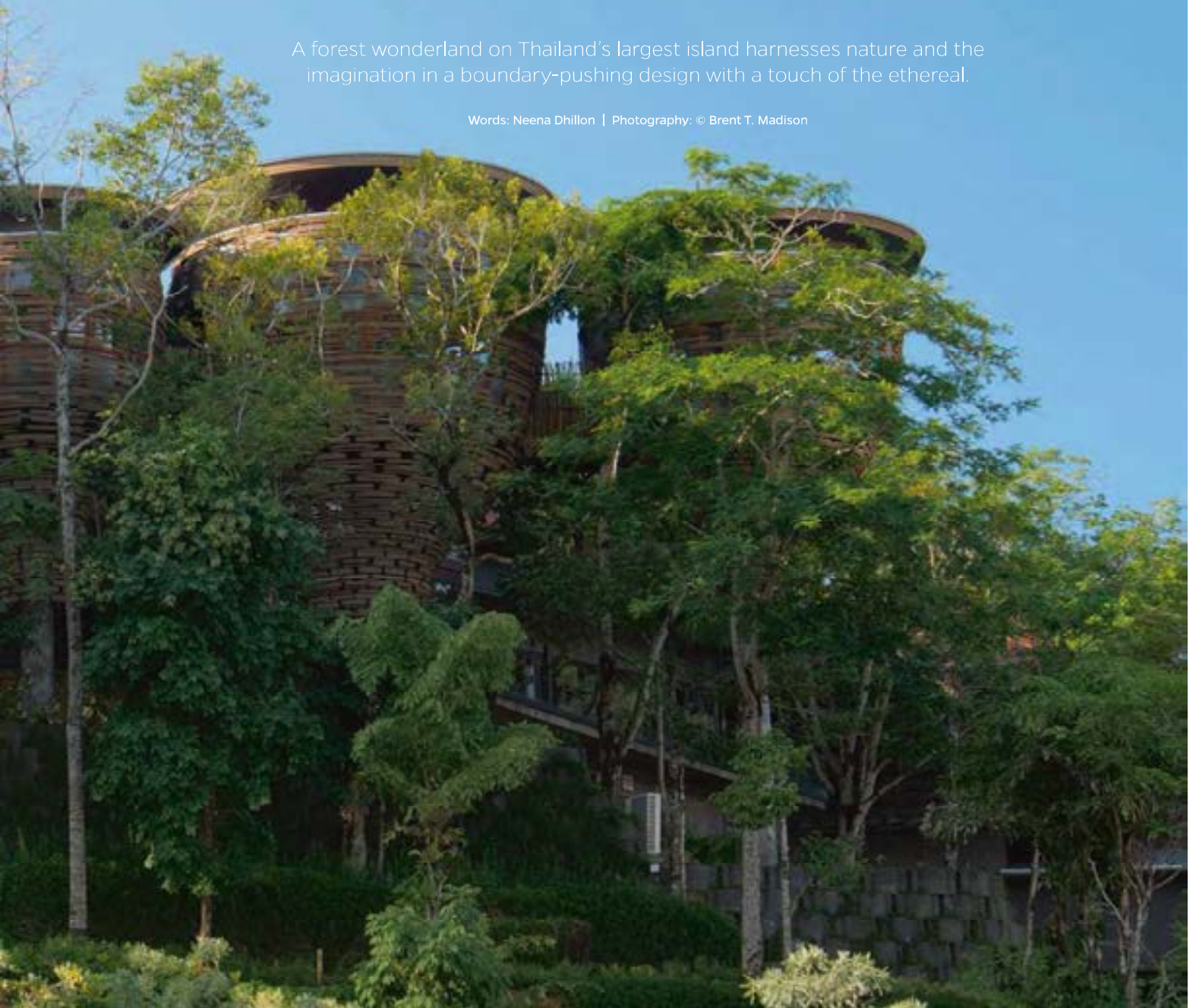


Keemala

PHUKET

A forest wonderland on Thailand's largest island harnesses nature and the imagination in a boundary-pushing design with a touch of the ethereal.

Words: Neena Dhillon | Photography: © Brent T. Madison





Hoteliers for 15 years, with roots that stretch back on the island for four generations, the Somnams had a clear vision of what they needed to achieve to stand out in crowded Phuket. Already owning and operating a contemporary 244-room beach resort in Patong, the family realised there was a gap in the market for a hotel that would celebrate the island's community spirit while offering an insight into traditional Thai customs. "Although we didn't decide immediately how we would use it, my grandmother purchased this land because she recognised the potential of its natural resources," explains Tanapong Somnam, who along with his sister Samornpun, shares executive-level responsibilities for sales, marketing and operations within the family-led hospitality business. "So many design themes have been done here but my mum saw an opportunity to develop something entirely different, conceived around a village concept where people could escape from the stresses of daily life while getting to know an undiscovered side of Phuket."

Embedded into verdant canopied woodland overlooking Kamala Village on Phuket's west coast, the 29,000m² plot came as part forest, part orchard, complete with natural streams and its own supply of groundwater. Challenging Thai firms through a competition that called for these natural assets to be preserved while finding a way to showcase the indigenous lifestyle in a rustic-luxury setting, the Somnam family selected Bangkok-based Architect Space and Pisit

Aongsuktong of Pisud Design Company for architecture and interiors respectively. "We knew from the outset that construction would be the most challenging aspect because of the land's steep incline and topographical conditions," notes Somnam. "We were looking for partners who understood that we wanted to work around the mature trees and vegetation – indeed we had to change drawings from time to time to accomplish this – as well as designers who could contribute their own inspiration."

Phuket's historical story is one of settlers who have come to call the island home and live together in a community that still adheres to provincial values. Picking up this narrative and embellishing it into something more enchanting, Aongsuktong suggested that a design concept be developed around four fictional clans and their respective traditions, rituals, skills and cultures. "Khun Pisit is a dreamer," notes Somnam. "He imagined a maritime caravan, a fleet of ships heading from West to East on a Silk Road trading route. Forming a strong bond, these people from various places encountered a storm while crossing the Indian Ocean en route to China and, set adrift, ended up finding shelter and starting a new life on this arable-rich island." This fictional narrative gave all the partners freedom to explore avant-garde design interpretations, with the Somnam family ensuring the creative vision could be turned into reality.

A THB650 million, all-pool-villa retreat realised by Thai designers,





Above & Opposite: Fabrics and textiles have largely been produced by ethnic minority groups in Thailand under the Doi Tung Development Project

contractors and suppliers over a three-year period, Keemala features the work of high-profile artisans including Chiang Mai native Surachai Sripaiboon, whose stunning mosaic murals enliven the welcome pavilion, lobby lounge and spa reception. From behind the welcome pavilion rise six pods housing the communal areas, their shape inspired by the culturally symbolic poppy flower, their daring single-pillar construction calculated to “withstand external forces such as wind load, then secured by connecting walkways to reduce movement,” according to Architect Space’s Sermuk Kitcharoenwong. He explains that the creative architecture across the public spaces has allowed the team to merge and display the “cohesive and compassionate societal traditions of all four clans.” So, in the lobby lounge, Sripaiboon’s painstakingly hand-laid mosaic carpet, entitled ‘A Day and Night at Keemala,’ depicts the tribes’ origins and their accompanying ways of life. Su-Tha restaurant meanwhile features a distinctive tribal pattern laser-cut into MDF board, the swirling motif reminiscent of early cave paintings, complemented by wall-mounted displays of rural implements and tools. Soft furnishings here and elsewhere are adorned with the Keemala patterns representing each clan, the symbols picking up on the four forms of accommodation dotted around the retreat.

Fabrics and textiles have largely been produced by ethnic minority groups in Thailand under the Doi Tung Development Project, set up

with royal patronage. Lounge chairs are custom-made in Chiang Mai, taking their inspiration from age-old cultural customs, while chamchuri wood, rattan and bamboo are recurring materials for bespoke furniture.

At Mala Spa, traditional fishing tools have informed the shape of two types of treatment room. Presented as a tranquil hamlet of eight standalone structures, the first is rectangular and distinguished by clay-like cement surfaces; the second is rounded with a synthetic thatch roof and seemingly sunk into the water. Both connect to generous-sized bathrooms with outdoor showers and steam rooms, these extensions covered in bamboo encased in bars of synthetic rattan, the overall effect bringing to mind Thai fishing pots or nets. Aongskultrong says the flowing water surrounding the treatment rooms is “reflective of the ocean where fishing tools are used – a key part in the survival of ancient folks once living on Phuket – while symbolising peace and serenity.”

Awash in tropical grounds designed as an expansion of the landscape with mature trees and water features harnessed for maximum impact, Keemala’s accommodation appears to spring from the lush vegetation. Architect Space has selected environmentally friendly, heat-reducing materials, favouring synthetic composites in places for durability and to avoid an over-reliance on natural wood.

Conceived to complement the natural environment, the four





Above: Distinctive tribal patterns representing each clan adorn soft furnishings and surfaces throughout the villas and public spaces

accommodation categories strongly signify the fictional clans. Most abundant in numbers, Clay Pool Cottages allude to the earthiness of the 'Pa-Ta-Pea' clan, counting leaders in agriculture, fishing, carpentry and mining among their ranks. "We've employed earth-tone colours with woven rattan and bamboo furniture for the cottages, which are fashioned from a textured cement mimicking clay, topped with a synthetic thatch, pyramid-shaped roof," elaborates Aongsokultong. Over in the Tent Pool Villas, the structures are formed from twin layers of sturdy tent fabric, held steady by large rods. It is the wandering 'Khon-Jorn' tribe for whom these semi-permanent homes have been erected, their interest in wildlife and exploration referenced by decorative ram's head detailing on select furniture, sinks embedded into water barrels and leather-stitched detailing. Through all the villas, houses and cottages, the clans' symbols are carved into headboards with beds draped in translucent fabrics.

Two separate storeys distinguish the Tree Pool Houses, which incorporate cocoon-like beds and loungers, often suspended from the ceiling. Exteriors of glass encased by bamboo and metal shells

shaped into hanging pods have been created in deference to the 'We-Ha' people who worship the universe and choose to live among the trees, close to the sky. Yet the highest attainment is reserved for the Bird's Nest Pool Villas, their design conceived for the 'Rung-Nok' community, thought to be superior in intellect, creativity and spirituality. Sheltered within an interwoven free-form wood and plastic composite mesh, the villas have an abundance of teak and hlumpa wood panelling with pops of colour delivered by unique furniture pieces. Aongsokultong, who enjoyed creating such dramatic flair, explains that the nature of this clan is to live an opulent lifestyle and not conform to normality or expectations. As such, bathrooms are adorned with a mural highlighting the Rung-Nok's belief that bathing under moonlight replenishes their souls.

In collaboration with the Somnam family, Aongsokultong and Architect Space have striven to transport modern travellers to a natural hideaway with a difference. Rich in detailing, charmingly fantastical in places, yet always forging a clear bond with the natural landscape, Keemala is certainly one-of-a-kind.

EXPRESS CHECKOUT: 38 villas | 1 restaurant | 2 bars | Spa, fitness studio | Boardroom | www.keemala.com

Owner / Operator: Sri Jamroon Co. | **Architecture:** Architect Space | **Creative Vision & Interior Design:** Pisud Design Company

Landscape Design: Stone Design & Contractor | **Lighting Design:** Lumen Light