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New products filling the market

# FOREST FANTASY

With a design based on the story of fictional indigenous clans, Phuket's Keemala resort stands out from the crowd. Neena Dhillon speaks to the architects and designers behind the woodland retreat





The Keemala resort features seven two-story Tree Pool Houses, which are made from glass, encased by a bamboo and metal shell.



**T**raditional Thai, luxury beach resorts, slick urban retreats, hotels inspired by the destination's tin-mining industry, its Sino-Portuguese history, its natural wonders—all these architectural themes have been seen on Thailand's largest island. That's why the Somsam family, inhabitants of Phuket for four generations, decided that any new hotel it brought to the crowded luxury market would have to be inherently individual.

"So many design ideas have been done here but my mom 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," he says. Tanapong Somsam, who along with sister Sornpun, represents the youngest generation of the family's hospitality business, sharing executive-level responsibilities for sales, marketing and operations. Already an owner and operator of a 264-room beach resort in Patong, the Somsams' second hospitality project sets out to introduce an alternative ethos to Phuket's resort offering while highlighting the island's tropical landscape in a sustainable way.

The chosen location is 28,000 square metres of consigned hillside overlooking Kamala Village on Phuket's west coast, a parcel of land that was purchased because the family recognized the potential of its natural resources, including a fruit orchard, forest, streams and groundwater. Within this remote backdrop, the Somsams have partnered with two Thai firms to construct ▶



**Family entrepreneurs:**  
sister Sornpun  
Somsam (top) and  
brother Tanapong



Looking back, local people knew how to live among the forest, using knowledge and resources to benefit their wellbeing

► an all-pool villa resort. Realised through an investment of THB60m (US\$18.3m, £8.3m, €12.9m), Kaemala is conceived around an architectural vision of rustic luxury, inspired by Phuket's indigenous lifestyle, cultural customs and early settlers. "Chinese descendants, Thai, Muslims and Europeans all live together as a community, adhering to provincial values even today," notes Sermak in describing his home. "Looking back, local people knew how to live among the forest, using knowledge and resources to benefit their wellbeing. This village narrative we wanted to weave into our resort concept."

#### Natural wonderland

Through a competition process, the family selected Bangkok-based firm Architect Space and Pait Aongkikhong of Pivak Design Company for the architecture and interiors respectively. The studios, which have worked together previously, came with their own inspirations about how to build a genuinely distinctive resort experience.

Describing his approach, Sermak Kicharoenwong, managing director of Architect Space, says: "Kaemala and its grounds are designed as an expansion of the surrounding landscape, making use of natural features such as mature trees, streams and waterfalls. These have been integrated into the overall design, ensuring a wonderland for guests to enjoy." Such was the commitment to the preservation of indigenous vegetation, that drawings had to be changed to accommodate trees, this finally finding into an architectural plan that sees them incorporated prominently into the design of the villas, in some instances sprouting up through pool platforms. Aongkikhong's role meanwhile has seen him establish the idea of a village

"Kaemala and its grounds are designed as an expansion of the surrounding landscape creating a wonderland for guests to enjoy"

Sermak Kicharoenwong,  
managing director of  
Architect Space



The 16 Clay Pool Cottages featureatched roofs inspired by Phuket's farming communities

narrative into something more enchanting, fantastical even, based around a concept of four fictional clans with accompanying traditions and skills characteristic of early settlers. As Sermak explains: "Pait Aongkikhong is the dreamer. He imagined a story of a maritime caravan, a fleet of ships heading from West to East on a Silk Road trading route. Forging a strong bond, these people encountered a storm while crossing the Indian Ocean en route to China and, adrift, ended up starting a new life on this arable-rich island."

With the lifestyles of the imaginary clans crystallising in their minds as part of Kaemala's creative vision, the firms decided that four accommodation types could be designed to reflect their origins and rituals. Counting leaders in agriculture, fishing, carpentry and mining among their ranks, the 'Ye-Ta-Pur' clan is honoured by 16 Clay Pool Cottages, their interiors defined by 'rustic-tone colours, woven rattan and bamboo furniture and textured cement mimicking clay,' according to Aongkikhong, topped by pyramid-shaped, thatched roofs commonly associated with rural or farming communities. To make the semi-permanent homes of the nomadic



The Tent Pool Villa's bathroom (above, top), and exterior (above, bottom). The villas are made from a double layer of tent fabric.



Earthy colours are used in the Clay Pool Cottages.

## KEEMALA

### Design partners and suppliers

Developer: Sri Jameson Co Ltd  
 Creative vision and interior design:  
 Pivati Design Company  
 Architecture: Architect Space  
 Lighting design: Luman Light Company  
 Music artists: Surachai Sripaiboon  
 Canvas and tent fabric specialist:  
 Sang Thong Phasai Co Ltd  
 Culinary and chinaware:  
 Thai Sa-nguanwattaroon Co Ltd  
 Furniture design: Pivati Aongkubtong  
 Furniture supplier: Pattanasit Design Chiang Mai Ltd  
 Fabrics, textiles and carpets:  
 Dai Tung Development Project  
 Bathroom fittings:  
 Cresting Sanitary Co LME Sana Co Ltd  
 Technology: Pinks Tuning Co Ltd, SelectTV  
 Solutions Thailand Co Ltd



The interior designers aimed to merge the narrative of the four fictitious clans in the resort's public spaces

## SPA & WELLNESS

- "Close to" who, this group formed of foragers, hunters and traders, seven Tree Pool Villas are fashioned "out of a double layer of steady resin fabric held in place by large structural rods," says Kirchartanwong.

### Living up High

Over in the seven Tree Pool Houses, exteriors of glass encased by bamboo and metal shells appear as hanging pods in the landscape, with cocoon-like beds and loungers suspended from the ceiling internally. This particular free-moving design has been evolved in deference to the "We-Ha" or sky people, including healers, creators, architects and inventors. As the highest room category, eight Bird's Nest Pool Villas allude to the opulence, intellect and creativity of the "Yang-Nick" community comprising artists, poets, philosophers and astrologers. In the roofs of their abodes are formed of an interwoven free-form wood and plastic composite mesh to aid privacy while unique furniture pieces, such as multi-band woven stools, "represent the avant-garde nature of the clan," adds Aongkultong. A mural mosaic relief inlaid into the bathrooms, meanwhile, highlights the Yang-Nick belief that bathing under moonlight replenishes their souls.

In Keesala's public spaces, there has been an opportunity to merge these four narratives into creative architecture demonstrating the cohesive nature of the fictional society.

This particular free-moving design has been evolved in deference to the 'We-Ha' or sky people



The furniture has been designed by Aongkultong



The Bird's Nest Pool Villas feature a pool and terrace, and ocean view baths. They are inspired by the fictional Bung-Nok community



The welcome pavilion, for instance, is dominated by a detailed mosaic installation, hand-laid by Chiang Mai native Sunchai Sriplaboon, whose work continues in complex murals that also adorn the lobby and spa. The spa complex itself references the humble made of early settlers, its two-building types shaped to resemble traditional local fishing huts. Perhaps the most striking architectural addition, though, are the six kinetic pods that tower up into the sky from behind the welcome pavilion to house the lobby lounge, a library, boutique, wine cellar and wine lounge.

"Made from wood-plastic composites, bamboo accents and rubber shingle roofing, their single-pillar construction required a great deal of soil testing with the underground foundation structure carefully calculated to withstand external forces such as wind load," explains Kircharoenwong. "There are connecting walkways that serve to further anchor and secure the pods, which are inspired by the design of a poppy because these flowers have cultural significance in Thai and Chinese cultures."

#### Bespoke all the way

The land's steep incline and topographical conditions called for considered structural calculations to be made across the board. Alongside this list, Ampthuchong says the most challenging aspect of the overall design has proven to be "the odd-shaped architecture of the villas, requiring furniture and fixtures to be made to unusual specifications." Following his bespoke designs, all handcrafted furniture has been manufactured in Chiang Mai.

Materials are eco-friendly, heat reducing and selected for durability. Katan, bamboo, cement, granite and native Thai



timber species are commonplace throughout the scheme, which sees groundwater treated onsite to feed internal systems. As part of the Somsan family's commitment to create opportunities for local communities, all fabrics and textiles have been produced by the Doi Tung Development Project, which promotes the work of ethnic minorities by providing sustainable alternative livelihoods to those seeking to combat illicit crop cultivation.

All these elements feed into a design that is defined by its holistic nature, as Kircharoenwong observes. "Keremula is designed as a place where guests can be removed from their hectic lives. The four villa types, connecting pods, spa and welcome pavilion complement the surrounding nature, transporting visitors to a completely different setting from the norm." ●

The welcome pavilion features a mosaic by local artist Sunchai Sriplaboon who has also created murals for the resort