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THAILAND



# PHUKET REDESIGNED

Leave Patong to the backpackers and head to the island's scintillating six-star resorts for sun, sand and serenity     *Writer Johannes Pong*





Mention Phuket and the image that comes to mind may be infamous Patong's tourist and tuk-tuk-infested Bangla Road. Thailand's biggest island still offers the most glorious beaches in the country, but six-star development is now expanding up to the lush jungle-clad mountains. North, west and east of Phuket is actually where Bangkok's well heeled go for a long weekend or two. There is no shortage of luxury accommodation, each trying to outdo the next with superior design; the only problem is deciding which to stay at. Here are four of our favourite uber-plush properties on the Pearl of the Andaman.

## KEEMALA FAIRY TALE TREE HOUSE FANTASY

Swathed in green above Kamala beach on Phuket's posh northwest coast, Keemala is a surreal, sophisticated hideaway. The resort is gasp-inducing in design, like Lothlórien – the realm of the elves in *The Lord of the Rings* – with a tropical twist. Terraces emerge from the lush jungle canopy, while teardrop-shaped tree houses with half-moon infinity pools hang amidst the majestic foliage of the rainforest.

Thirty-eight villas come in four different styles: cute clay pool villas for solo travellers; safari-style tents that glampers can unzip to let Mother Nature in; the iconic two-level tree houses and vast bird's nest villas with Andaman views from the balconies. Interiors vary in design, but are all sleek with charcoals, cherry woods and dramatic bathrooms featuring boulder-sized bathtubs, indoor and outdoor

showers. Each villa comes with a private pool and an intuitive host who delivers personalised service.

Alongside traditional Thai therapies, their Mala Spa is an other-worldly healing haven with eight pod-like treatment chambers. Besides the usual massages and anti-ageing skin treatments with natural products from Voya and Siam Botanicals, Keemala offers more alternative remedies like reiki, raindrop healing, singing bowls and integrative Thai bodywork. Sign up for a three- or six-day Holistic Living Retreat programme, which includes customised massages, private fitness sessions and seasonal spa cuisine. The fully-equipped fitness studio also offers complimentary classes daily: Muay Thai, yoga, meditation and tai chi on the powder-fine platinum sands of Kamala beach, just five minutes away by free shuttle.

Keemala's organic gardens provide the spa with medicinal herbs, and the kitchen with aromatics and vegetables. The Mala Restaurant serves up a healthy living menu featuring Thai, Indian and international dishes, rich in variety and flavour. Think *yum tua plu*, an appetising salad of wing beans, shallots, roasted coconut and chilli paste, and a nutritious black spring chicken broth with goji berries.

[www.keemala.com](http://www.keemala.com)

## THE NAKA PHUKET SLEEK, SUBTLE AND SECLUDED

With Kamala beach to the north and two smaller ones to the south, The Naka Phuket is a jaw-droppingly minimalist resort hidden in a valley on the western edge of the island, accessible only via an isolated mountain road – perfect for those seeking seclusion.

Instead of traditional Thai materials, architect Duangrit Bunnag created a colony of stone and steel-framed matchbox villas, all with wrap-around walls of floor-to-ceiling glass. The 94 cantilevered villas, each with its own sun decks and outdoor pools, jut out boldly from the hillside. Timber pillars and amber-coloured teak flooring add a





touch of warmth to the understated cool of the grey walls and white corner sofas. Natural stone bathrooms and oversized rain showers complete the tropical experience. Beach villas open directly out to their pristine private beach in Kamala Bay, but there's also an Olympic-sized 50-metre infinity pool, just a stone's throw away from the resort's principal restaurant, Wiwa, which serves Thai, Western and delicious fusion dishes (who doesn't like pasta pepped up with Thai spices?) made from fresh market produce.

The rooftop spa Napa offers stunning views of both the verdant forest and the azure Andaman from the fifth floor, as well as a comprehensive spa menu that has the whole body covered. Soothing scrubs, warming wraps, Biodroga facials and treatments based on the Thai elements of earth, water, wind and fire are all available with their tailor-made spa packages. [www.thenakaphuket.com](http://www.thenakaphuket.com)

#### POINT YAMU BY COMO

##### MINIMALISM WITH HINTS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

Set on a craggy cape overlooking Phang Nga Bay by Phuket's barely-developed east coast, Point Yamu by COMO offers 360-degree sea vistas. Its elevated aspect, however, means that it does not come with direct access to wave-lapped beaches. The sexily desolate location of the property does offer solitude, and is a fine point of embarkation for sailing around the smaller islands in the bay. For sea, sand and

OPENING PAGE Keemala. OPPOSITE PAGE: Become one with nature at Keemala; enjoy the sunset at The Naka Phuket. THIS PAGE: Treatment room with a view at Point Yamu by Como; The Naka Phuket's sleek rooms



socialisation, the new luxurious private COMO Beach Club on the small isle of Koh Naka Yai is 40 minutes away via complimentary boat shuttle.

The cold grey exterior of the lobby, conceived by avant-garde Italian designer Paola Navone, is minimalist and museum-like. Its vast open-sided space within though, is light and airy, brightened up with accents of warm tangerine. The whimsical Italian talent's touch – referencing Thai Buddhist culture as well as Phuket's Peranakan heritage (the Malay-Chinese who first settled the island) – is seen in the swaying lampshades of old lobster traps and an impressive installation, wooden tables stacked and laden with ceramic dolls and bowls that hold brilliant blossoms.

All 79 rooms and private pool suites (plus 27 villas to come) are positioned around the promontory, with floor-to-ceiling windows framing those spectacular sea views. Interiors throughout are white and uncluttered, jazzed up with textures like turquoise tiles and cobalt cushions, bringing the Mediterranean to Phang Nga Bay.

The hotel's two restaurants flank the 100-metre long pool. Nahmyaa, sister restaurant to the award-winning Nahm in Bangkok,





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Chic aesthetic at The Slate; cool off in the hotel's swimming pool; get pampered al fresco at the COMO Shambala Retreat Spa



serves up tantalising Thai as well as Peranakan dishes. La Sirena is an open-air, all-day Italian affair. COMO Shambala's signature healthy fare is also available at the dining venues and via room service.

The award-winning COMO Shambala Retreat Spa sits above the two restaurants, offering hands-on healing, and the signature COMO Shambhala Massage. Unique to Point Yamu are a Thai Abdominal Chi Massage to promote better digestion, and a Lanna Heritage Body Scrub using citrusy lemongrass and galangal to stimulate circulation and nourish the skin. Spa treatments are also available at the COMO Beach Club for those who can't bear to leave the satin-soft sands of Naka Yai Island. [www.comohotels.com](http://www.comohotels.com)

### THE SLATE THAI INDUSTRIAL GLAM

Nestled by a jungle near Nai Yang Beach just 10 minutes northwest of Phuket International Airport, the island's first postmodern design-centric resort Indigo Pearl relaunched as The Slate in August. The quirky hotel still rocks its industrial glam-meets-tropical Thai look; but all suites, villas and eateries have undergone a nip and tuck. The place

is a tribute to the owner's family's role in Phuket's tin mining history.

Rooms feature smooth marble, polished concrete walls and dark wood floors covered with rich red rugs. Private pool villas retain tinted concrete floors and handsome cast iron bathtubs, the steampunk aesthetic warmed with accents of Thai timber and handcrafted carpets.

The public areas are even more mesmerisingly design-conscious. Sapphire-studded pillars, aluminium panels and architectural flora like sharp, mother-in-law's tongue in the lobby; fascinating tchotchke and trinkets from the Na-Ranong family mines at the craft cocktail bar Tongkah Tin Syndicate; heavy doors on pulleys, cavernous ceilings

with wooden beams punctuated with specially commissioned industrial lighting at the Dirty Monstera bar, which takes on a moodier tone at night when bathed in purple.

One of the highlights is their floating restaurant, Black Ginger. The majestic wooden Thai mansion cloaked in contemporary blues hover in the middle of a lily-clad lagoon, accessible only via a theatrical roped raft. The rich cuisine on offer lives up to the fantasy setting. On buffet nights, they recreate a traditional Thai street market, serving authentic Phuket-style street food like deep-fried *cha plu* leaves, DIY rice-flour pancakes with crab, coriander and tamarind sauce, or a tangy southern Thai fish curry stew.

The award-winning Coqoon Spa takes the concept of being 'cocooned' quite literally with the Nest, a spectacular wicker structure suspended dramatically from a giant banyan tree. The sumptuous spa suite within feels like a true sanctuary, accessible only by a flying bridge. Emerge from your spa chrysalis with the Nest Detox, a treatment that begins with a warm Bamboo Charcoal wrap that draws out impurities, followed by a lymphatic drainage massage. [www.theslatephuket.com](http://www.theslatephuket.com)