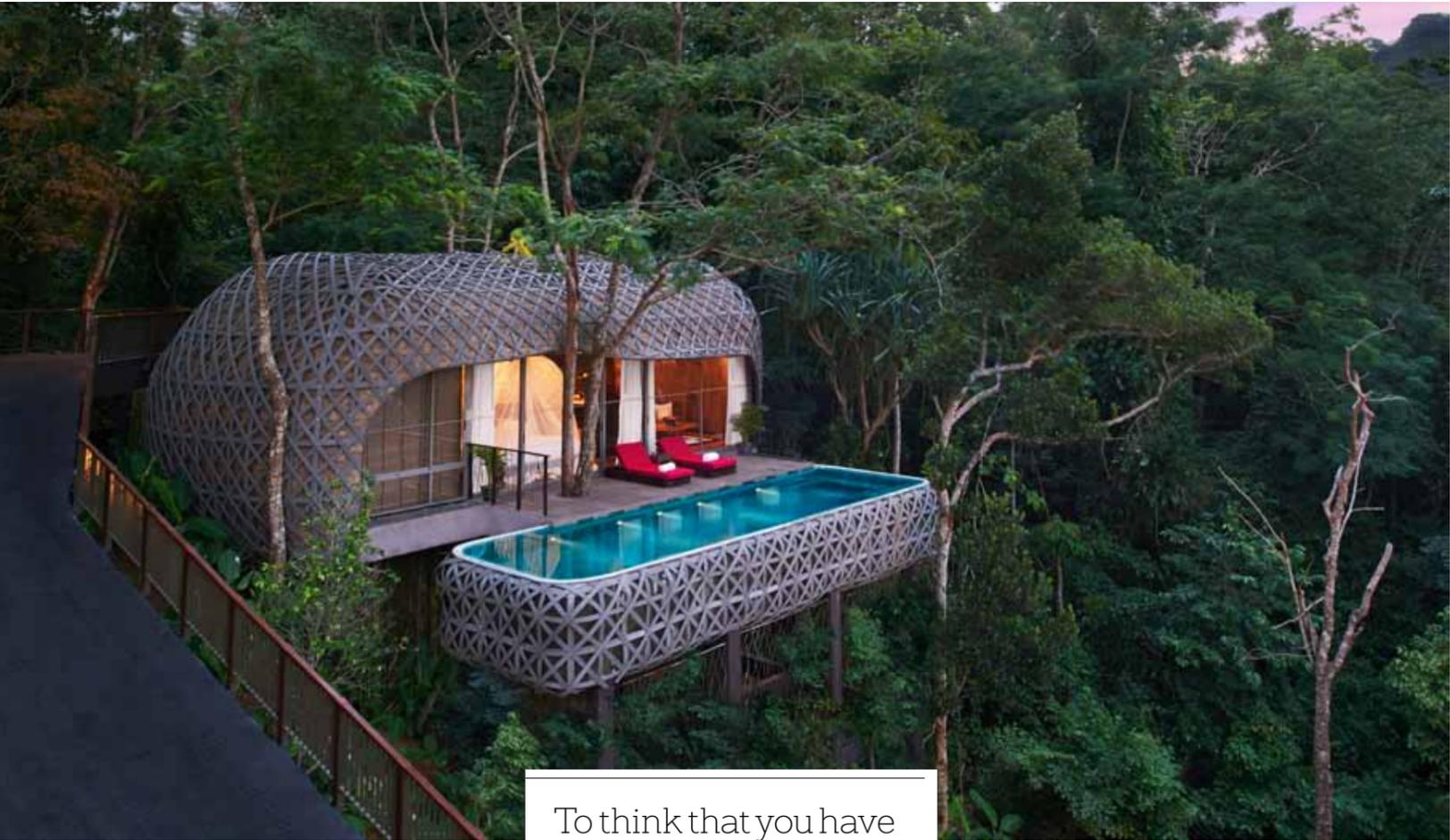


# Brave New World

You'd be forgiven for thinking you've just stumbled onto a movie set. Welcome to KEEMALA, which is quite unlike anything else on Phuket's luxury resort landscape. FRANÇOIS OOSTHUIZEN checks in





To think that you have arrived in a primitive world, you'd be mistaken. Throughout, the resort embodies every element of an upscale hospitality experience

IT TAKES A LOT OF courage to do something that does not correlate exactly to Phuket's tried-and-tested luxury resort formula – at least as far as concept and design are concerned. That's exactly what the owners of Keemala set out to do: something entirely different.

On route to Keemala from Phuket International Airport, I find myself thinking that the driver might have gotten lost. We're making our way through what appears to be the never-ending back streets of a local village. Lazy *soi* dogs lie baking in the sun, someone is hanging up washing for all the world to see, and a vegetable seller is peddling his wares noisily over a megaphone. There's no idyllic white-sand beach with swaying palm trees and blue Andaman Ocean in sight.

As our mini van makes its way up a hillside, the scenery takes a turn for the better. A world very far removed from the visuals just minutes earlier appears in view. It's quite unexpected – for Phuket anyway. Architecturally, it's more in line with something one would expect at a bush lodge in Africa: very tribal. And as I later discover, it's all intentional.

A starting point for Thailand-based design team Architect Space and Pisit Aongskultong from Pisud Design Company was to devise a narrative of four fictitious local clans. Then they went on to create a mix of cottages, tree

houses and pool villas around a village theme, incorporating mostly natural materials and the unique topographical conditions of the area – a sloping hillside sanctuary with waterfalls and streams, overlooking Kata village and the beach below.

Nature provided inspiration in abundance, with all exteriors and interiors, bridges and pathways using natural and nature-inspired materials, forms and shapes – earthy elements that make it all blend in seamlessly with the environment. It's no coincidence. The design philosophy consciously promotes a close-to-nature ethos that's intended to relax, restore and rejuvenate.

Step inside any of the four accommodation types – Clay Pool Cottages, Tree Pool Houses, Tent



Pool Villas or Bird Nest Pool Villas (from 126-185 square metres) – and it's an extension of the same architectural foundations. Natural materials, beautiful ethnic-printed textiles and finishes to marvel at – like the mosaic artwork in all the bathrooms. The attention to the smallest detail is certainly very impressive.

To think that you have arrived in a primitive world, however, you'd be

mistaken. Throughout, the resort embodies every element of an upscale hospitality experience: world-class spa treatments and wellness programmes at Mala Spa, Instagram-worthy cuisine and personal service. In fact, the service experienced from the young and enthusiastic team is jovial and warm, further enhancing the relaxed "village life" vibe.

At first, I'll admit, I missed not being closer to the beach – it's at least a 10-minute drive with the resort shuttle bus. But then, lapped up in luxury in a Bird Nest Pool Villa with its sparkling private

pool, overlooking the ocean in the distance, I felt perfectly content in my woodlands wonderland. Keemala is certainly different – quirky even. And it makes for great pictures. **✎**

*(Keemala is ideal for couples and spa/wellness fans seeking a romantic and/or peaceful retreat. Rates start from around 20,000 Baht.)*

**keemala.com**

CLOCKWISE (FROM TOP LEFT): THE BIRD NEST POOL VILLA; THE BATHROOM FEATURES BEAUTIFUL MOSAIC AND ECHOES THE BACK-TO-NATURE THEME; A CANOPY-BED ADDS A ROMANTIC TOUCH; MALA RESTAURANT; THE WINE CELLAR STOCKS AN IMPRESSIVE COLLECTION OF VINTAGES