

# Ocean view

From coconut palms to plunge pools, Koh Samui is the perfect place to be marooned, finds Rose Dykins

Jungle leaves rustle in the rain as I stand knee-deep in the swimming pool, clutching an umbrella to shelter from the bullet-like drops. As lightning sparks on the horizon of the silver sea, I ask a local whether the rain is likely to subside for a while. She smiles knowingly and answers: "Do you want the truth?"

The best time to travel to the Thai island of Koh Samui is between December and August, when sunbathing weather is guaranteed. A one-hour flight from frenzied Bangkok, in the Gulf of Thailand, its calm waters and tropical scenery are a welcome sight – even if it does happen to be raining.

In the 1970s, the island was a haven for hippies and fishermen, with little more than coconut plantations and a few beach huts to be found. Now, the backpackers tend to favour nearby Koh Tao and Koh Phangan, which have not been developed to the same extent. While there is still plenty of natural beauty to enjoy on Samui – including waterfalls, palm-lined beaches and colourful marine life – families and designer-clad honeymooners are also attracted to the island's excellent luxury resorts.

Opened in 2011, the secluded grounds of the Conrad Koh Samui ([conradhotels.com](http://conradhotels.com)) are carved into the cliff face on the south-western side of the island. Its opulent villas with private plunge pools stand on stilts, scattered along a winding path fringed with dense greenery. Staff whisk guests

around in golf buggies, be it down to the pool or up to the Aromatherapy Associates spa, where I enjoy a lengthy massage with oils and soft coconut flakes.

On our first morning, we rise early for a Thai boxing lesson – Yak, a young local scouted from one of the island's boxing clubs, teaches us a series of combat moves, giggling modestly when we ask him to show us how it's really done.

Later, the restaurant buffet stations are transformed into work surfaces for a cooking class with Belgian head chef Konrad Inghelram, formerly of Harrods' Georgian restaurant. First he sets some ground rules – no swearing, and no asking him to judge whose attempts are the best – before guiding us through some classics: pad Thai, spicy papaya salad and Thai green curry.

The first storm of the day comes and goes, and we step out to feel fierce sunlight and a warm breeze. We take a dip in the infinity pool, leaning out over its edge to face the sea. The Conrad looks out to the Five Islands – a line of craggy landforms offering perfect white beaches and rocky snorkelling spots swarming with tropical fish.

They are also inhabited by flocks of swallows, a multimillion-pound commodity thanks to the popularity of their nests as a foodstuff in China. Apparently, the workers guarding them carry guns – which brings to mind certain scenes from Alex Garland's novel *The Beach* – but tourists are welcome on the islands, as long as they keep to themselves.

Jungle treks on foot or by elephant are possible on Samui, as is hiring a motorbike to travel its circumference, which takes about 45 minutes. There is a handful of scuba-diving schools, mainly towards the north, while Wat Phra Yai temple, on a small island connected by a causeway to Samui's north-eastern tip, is home to a 12-metre-tall golden Buddha that gleams in the sun.

After a few days of relaxation in the south, we head to the northern side, checking into the sprawling, unashamedly bling W Retreat Koh Samui ([starwoodhotels.com/whotels](http://starwoodhotels.com/whotels)). Again, we are escorted by golf buggy to our Ocean Front Haven villa, which has its own 11-metre private pool and a manicured lawn that leads straight to the unspoilt beach.

In the evening, we dine at the W's Japanese restaurant, Namu, tucking into fat, juicy

udon noodles laced with lobster and creamy orange sauce, before visiting Woobar just after sunset. With its fibre optic orbs illuminating the sea and house music emanating from a DJ booth, it's a memorable setting for cocktails.

On Friday night, we take a 15-minute taxi ride to the fishermen's village near Bo Phut for its weekly market – though rather touristy, there are stalls selling flavoursome street food and walkways lined with family-run cafés. We pause at one to grab a coconut juice and let the bustle surge by.

After making a few more purchases, we wander over to one of the beach bars, order some icy Chang beers and nestle on one of the bean bags dotted along the shore. It's a clear, balmy evening – couples snuggle, pointing at stars, and I feel warmth on my face as a woman in harem pants flings fire poi wands. We contemplate leaving for Chaweng, the nearby party strip, but are too content, and settle in for the rest of the evening. ■



*After Bangkok, the island's calm waters and tropical scenery are a welcome sight*

Main picture: Conrad Koh Samui Above: W Retreat