



# Thai High

*Four new beach resorts reflect the altered state of the beautiful, booming, and sometimes bizarre island of Samui.*

BY JENNIFER HALL

“JUNE NEVER SPITS,” says Tim Boda, hotel manager of the Anantara resort on the Thai island of Samui.

Jirachai “June” Sethisakko, Anantara’s slight, 31-year-old sommelier, looks up from his glass of wine and smiles. “With 27 I spit,” he says, a reference to the number of vintages he samples during the marathon tastings at Thailand’s

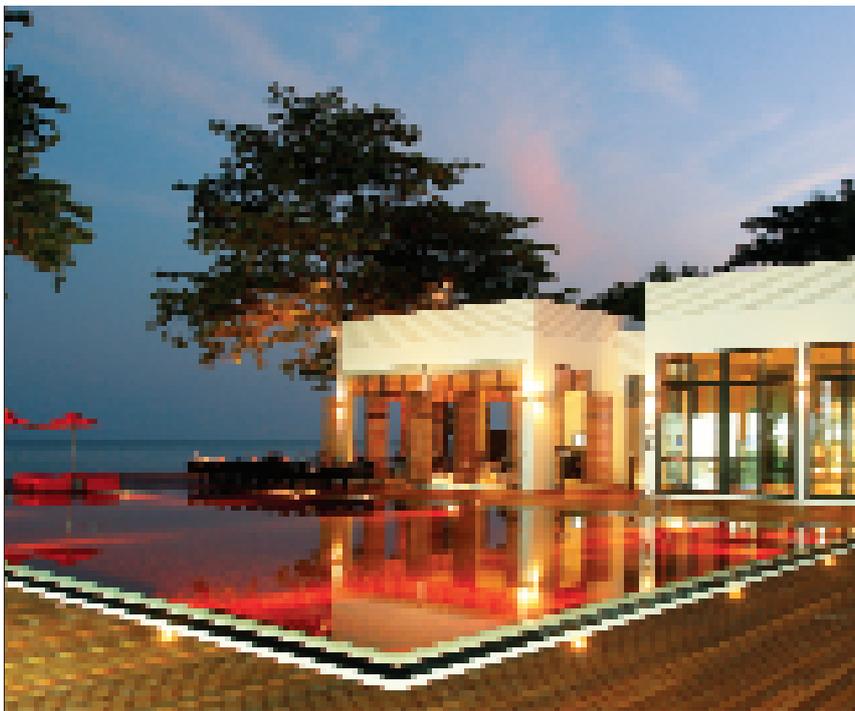
national sommelier competition. “There is a point when I must think of my professionalism.”

Sethisakko’s reluctance to spit might stem from a desire to make up for lost time: Three years ago, the Samui native never had tasted wine. “I knew whiskey,” says Sethisakko, who formerly worked as a bartender in Bangkok. “It is not traditional for Thais to drink wine.”

*Traditional long-tail fishing boats still ply the waters off Koh Samui, but the island’s landscape has been transformed in recent years. This February, a new Four Seasons joined Samui’s growing collection of upscale resorts.*

Just one year after sampling his first wine, a Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand, Sethisakko placed third at the Thai sommelier competition, earning a trip to Europe to meet with vintners and tour their estates. Tonight, during a tasting in Anantara's 1,500-bottle cellar, he serves a Villa Cornaro Prosecco Spumante from Veneto, Italy; a Gosset Excellence Brut Champagne from France; and a sparkling wine from Château de Loei in Thailand's northern highlands, where producers have been making wines since 1994. Anantara's cellar also houses bottles of 1998 Opus One, 1982 Château Lafite Rothschild, and other ultrapremium vintages.

Not long ago, such a collection had no place on Koh ("island") Samui. Like Sethisakko and his fellow *chao Samui* (Samui folk), most visitors to this island in the Gulf of Thailand had neither an interest in, nor the budget for, fine wines. But in the last three years, Anantara and a handful of other new resorts have expanded the pool of potential visitors to this former backpackers' hideaway. Their cause



Thailand, many travelers changed their reservations from Phuket and Khao Lak to Samui, which is located off southern Thailand's east coast. "Before the tsunami, the island brought in about 800,000 visitors

mainland. The island's lush jungle interior, mild rainy season, fish-filled waters, and native dragon, rambutan, and mangosteen fruits served to sustain a simple way of life.

Once discovered by the Western world, Koh Samui's jungles and white-sand beaches became havens for backpackers, who found lodgings in hippie colonies or at the budget hotels that soon opened along the island's coast. By day, these foreigners lounged on the beaches and took speedboat rides to Ang Thong National Marine Park for glimpses of Talay Nai (Lagoon Inside the Mountain), a salt-water lake in a large natural basin surrounded by mountains. At night, their focus shifted to cheap liquor and hallucinogenic drugs.

By the 1980s, development on Koh Samui prompted the construction of a two-lane highway, on which autos now can circumnavigate the island in about an hour and a half. (Before the road, residents had to hike 9 miles through the jungle to cross the 95-square-mile island.) The backpacker party scene eventually moved



*"The Thai people . . . see neon lights and think, 'Hey, why don't we put these around the temple?'"*

—WAYNE LUNT, SILA EVASON HIDEAWAY

was aided by one of the most catastrophic events in modern history.

"I hate to say this, but the tsunami was the best thing that could have happened for Koh Samui in terms of tourism," says Australian Wayne Lunt, guest services manager at Sila Evason Hideaway & Spa at Samui, which opened on the island's northeast coast in 2004. In early 2005, while construction crews repaired damaged hotels and resorts on the western, Andaman Sea side of southern

[annually]," says Lunt. "Now it brings in more than a million."

WHEN BACKPACKERS first started flocking to Koh Samui in the early 1970s, the island existed much as it had since settlers arrived in the 15th century. Residents—who over the years have included Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Malaysian immigrants displaced by civil war or recruited to excavate ore for tin—had little contact with the Siamese

*The Library hotel and its sleek red-tiled swimming pool are anomalies on Chaweng, one of Samui's most popular beaches.*

elsewhere, and today Samui is a mix of midrange resorts on touristy beaches and stunning new properties on the island's few remaining pristine stretches.

"The backpackers would say the island has changed for the worse," says William Heineke, owner of Anantara and the Four Seasons Resort Koh Samui, Thailand, which opened in February. "But look at the accommodation that is available now. If you look at Anantara, which we opened just when the tsunami hit, it was really what we call 'affordable luxury.' The Four Seasons to me is pure unadulterated luxury."

The Four Seasons sits at the top of a steep driveway off Samui's main thoroughfare. Perched high on Laem Yai peninsula, the hotel's entry platform overlooks a turquoise sea dotted with midnight- and gray-blue islands. Directly below the platform, 60 villas bask in the shade of more than 850 coconut palms. "We didn't want to overbuild the site," says the American-born Heineke, who moved to Thailand with his parents as a child and since has become a Thai citizen. "We didn't build on the top of the hills; we built into the hills. You don't see ugly structures sticking out."

Heineke's two properties and, on the other side of the island, new resorts such as Sila Evason Hideaway and the Library, indeed are aesthetically pleasing, each offering the lush, carefree environment you would expect of a tropical paradise. But Samui as a whole is no utopia. Dusty construction sites have replaced native vegetation, Coke and Fanta cans litter public roads, and concrete and stucco structures sit side by side on crowded beachfronts.

The boom in tourism and construction on Samui also has resulted in trade-offs for the island's 40,000 residents. At dusk, streets in the main village of Hat Chaweng fill with trucks packed with construction laborers—many with face masks or head coverings to protect themselves from the dust—who earn about 180 *baht* (\$6) for a nine-hour workday. Nongyao Jirundorn, who works for the Tourism Authority of Thailand on Samui, has seen her 10-minute commute to work

increase to 40 minutes in the past five years. "I like [the island] before a lot of traffic jams," she says as she navigates 4169, the recently widened highway that circles the island. Jirundorn, however, also runs a small shop with her husband, and business has increased significantly in recent years.

Along 4169, open pavilion-style storefronts hawk plastic wall clocks, tight-fitting nightclub clothes, and cowboy hats. A pickup with speakers mounted to the truck bed weaves through the traffic. "Full Moon Party!" bellows a deep, computerized voice promoting an all-night rave on nearby Phangan island.

The highway heads from Hat Chaweng to Fisherman's Village, where signs along the public beaches advertise "Top Massage Place," "House for Rent: Long Time," and "Enjoy Traveling Thailand Naturally, Don't Mess with Drugs." Government-issue "Please remember to drive on the LEFT side of the road" postings speak to foreign tourists, but during rush hour anything goes. Jirundorn moves to pass a sluggish pickup truck, while a scooter and an Isuzu sedan approach from the right lane. The oncoming vehicles swerve into the dirt on the side of the road, and yet all four vehicles continue on without incident or the honking of horns.

Jirundorn stops periodically at popular tourist attractions, which include the Mummified Monk, whose corpse, like that of Lenin, is displayed in a transparent case. Instead of lying supine, however, the monk (who wears sunglasses) sits upright in a meditation position. Other stops include the Grandfather and Grandmother rocks (two granite formations that resemble male and female genitalia, respectively) and Big Buddha—a 1970s-era, shiny gold, 39-foot-tall, cross-legged icon that sits at the top of a long staircase lined with glittering green dragons. Elsewhere on the island, a rotund Buddha clutching a string of jewels is under construction adjacent to a massive papier-mâché-like Buddha with 18 arms. Both structures are on the grounds of Wat Plai Laem, a multicolored temple built on a man-made lake in 2004.

“Tourists come here, and they like to see everything look old; they don’t like to see the society change,” says Sila Evason’s Lunt. “But the Thai people, they see the new technology and want to use it. They see neon lights and think, ‘Hey, why don’t we put these around the temple?’”

Lunt works far away from the crowds of Fisherman’s Village and the gold paint of Hat Bang Rak (Big Buddha Beach). Set on the remote northeastern tip of Samui, Sila Evason is an environmentally sustainable resort managed by Bangkok-based Six Senses, which opened its first

property, Soneva Fushi, 11 years ago in the Maldives. In addition to ocean views from each of its 66 villas, Sila Evason features an on-site treatment plant that cleans water from laundry facilities and restrooms with compost, sand, and pinewood. The treated water is then used to irrigate three herbal gardens and the resort’s landscaped grounds.

Each of Sila Evason’s bamboo-walled villas, most of which have private pools, is made of wood from forests that are harvested and then replanted with fast-growth trees. Recycled materials on the property include old railroad piles that, arranged as steps, lead down to the resort’s beach and makeshift weather station: a coconut suspended on a piece of rope. If the coconut is swaying, a sign reads, it is windy; if the coconut feels hot, it is sunny; if the coconut is gone, hurricane.

Although located close to Sila Evason, on Samui’s east coast, the Library, a 26-room hotel that opened on Chaweng beach this year, does not share the Six Senses property’s seclusion. “I think we are like aliens on this beach,” says the Library’s 28-year-old owner, Kasemtham Sornsong, who was raised on Samui by parents who operated a backpackers’ bungalow. Sornsong inherited this 1.5-acre stretch of beach and built his “dream,” which includes a red-tiled pool and a media library designed to look like an Apple computer store.

Tirawan Songsawat, the Library’s Bangkok-based designer, had most of the furnishings custom built for the hotel. She based her furniture designs on the reading posture of relaxed travelers, and almost everything else at the Library, including the property itself, is shaped like a book. Thirteen ground-floor suites and 13 second-story studios are block-shaped, as are the iMac computer screens, 42-inch plasma TVs, and writing desks. CDs, DVDs, novels, and coffee-table books about interior design and travel can be checked out of the resort’s stark,



Wat Plai Laem (top) and a villa at the Four Seasons Resort Koh Samui (above).

TOP: JENNIFER HALL

white, beachside library. At the adjacent restaurant, Page, Thai and international cuisines pair with wines from a block-shaped cellar.

A KNOCK AT THE DOOR of Anantara's cellar interrupts Sethisakko's tasting; a server from the Full Moon restaurant upstairs has come for a bottle of Cloudy Bay. Sethisakko introduces Charuk Chochan, one of the resort's sommeliers in training,

and says that she has been studying wine for only six months. "June's tests are very strict," interjects hotel manager Boda, a Swiss who worked as a sommelier in Canada. "I have trouble, and [Chochan] passed with zero mistakes."

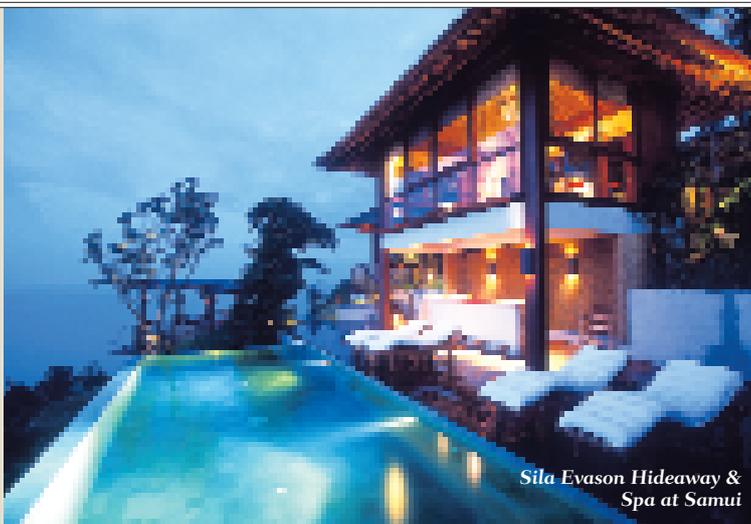
Anantara owner Heineke also operates a cellar at the Four Seasons, which hosts wine tastings for guests in the space. The selection includes 191 labels ranging from Grand Cuvée

Champagnes and Barolos to Cloudy Bay and other New Zealand wines. Sethisakko, however, would have to look elsewhere to sate his changing tastes. "My favorite now is Mouton Rothschild 1986," he says.

For that, Anantara's sommelier would have to travel across the island to the Wines on the Hill cellar at Sila Evason Hideaway, which, with 300 labels, now boasts Koh Samui's most comprehensive collection. R



Anantara Koh Samui



Sila Evason Hideaway & Spa at Samui

## TROPICAL TRANSFORMATION

KOH SAMUI, Thailand's third-largest island, is casting off its reputation as a hippie hangout and is now home to some of the country's most exclusive retreats.

### ANANTARA KOH SAMUI

Built around a man-made lagoon on Bo Phut Bay, Anantara Koh Samui consists of 106 rooms and suites, two of which have plunge pools. Lily pads illuminated by tiki torches surround the welcome pavilion at Anantara Spa, where treatment rooms include private water gardens. The resort's Full Moon restaurant serves Italian cuisine and a range of old-world and new-world selections from a 1,500-bottle wine cellar maintained by sommelier Jirachai "June" Sethisakko. +66.7742.8300, [www.anantara.com](http://www.anantara.com) (\$330–\$955)

### SILA EVASON HIDEAWAY & SPA AT SAMUI

Set on a secluded peninsula, this resort affords ocean views from both its east and west sides and looks directly out toward Phangan island from its centrally located lobby pavilion. Bamboo-walled villas, most with private pools, incorporate coconut sink basins and other naturally themed design elements. +66.77.24567.8, [www.sixsenses.com](http://www.sixsenses.com) (\$520–\$6,250)

### THE LIBRARY

This book-themed (and book-shaped) resort, which opened in January, is built on a rectangular lot along the popular Chaweng beach. On either side of a long wooden boardwalk, green lawns and mature trees border 26 studios and suites. Orange letters and numbers in the grass direct guests to their rooms: "page 1," "page 2," "page 3." Inside the suites, white beds rest on black polished floors, next to sliding glass doors that lead to outdoor living areas furnished with lacquer desks and lounge chairs. On the beachfront side of the hotel, lounge chairs and seven red umbrellas flank a stunning red-tiled swimming pool. +66.7742.2767, [www.thelibrary.name](http://www.thelibrary.name) (\$275–\$415)

### FOUR SEASONS RESORT KOH SAMUI, THAILAND

Cut off from the rest of Samui by a steep hill, the Four Seasons' 60 villas, 88 pools, two restaurants, and spa appear to hang off an ocean-facing slope. The buildings, supported by wooden stilts, maximize water views while still blending into the jungle landscaping when viewed from the private beach below. Butlers shuttle guests to the beach along narrow and precipitous pathways in electric golf carts. +66.77.243.000, [www.fourseasons.com](http://www.fourseasons.com) (\$480–\$3,800) —J.H.