

A couple is seated at a table on a beach, dining at sunset. The woman is on the left, wearing a light-colored sleeveless top, and the man is on the right, wearing a light blue short-sleeved shirt. They are both holding glasses of wine and appear to be clinking them. The table is set with a small vase of flowers, a plate of food, and a drink with a straw. The background shows the ocean and a bright sunset sky. The scene is reflected in the wet sand in the foreground.

HIDDEN GEMS

Heading off the beaten track to see what **The Siam Residence** has to offer.

Samui is full of surprises. For a visitor, it must sometimes get quite confusing. We're only a little island. But once you begin to explore, things seem to get bigger. Even when you've been here for years, there's always something new. A rustic village that time has passed by, an unknown waterfall, a viewpoint, another little cove or bay, a great beach restaurant you never knew was there.

Or a very chic resort, top-notch, modern and friendly. Small and boutique, family-owned. Secluded and elegant with acres of scrubbed white sand. Luxury accommodation that's on a par with the 5-star places. A great restaurant under the stars. I don't suppose there are many like this – hidden gems are hard to find. But there's one just south of Nathon on the fringe of Lipa Noi. And its name is The Siam Residence.

This small boutique resort is no newcomer to the scene, but that only adds to its pedigree. The quality of the service here has always been first class – this made an impression when I first came here 12 years ago. But what also impressed me this time around was the standard of contemporary luxury that's everywhere. From the villas to the restaurant to the massage room on the edge of beach: this is on a level with some of the best resorts anywhere.

"We've always taken a pride in consistency," the resort's manager explained to me. "Training and maintaining a friendly and responsible staff. Keeping up the quality of the resort's structure and the contemporary décor of the villas. The quality and value of the restaurant's cuisine. We're in an age of instant communication and in a competitive arena. And everyone here, myself included, has to interact professionally and very personally with our guests. And that includes day visitors as well as those who are staying with us – everyone is warmly welcomed here."

And that's a lesson from which more than a few other resorts can benefit. I have to say that I've always found it a little strange when an out-of-town resort is reluctant to provide a pick-up service for potential visitors. But not so at The Siam Residence. Anyone who wishes to pop over for the day (or evening for that matter) can phone and be collected and then returned to their resort. There's no getting lost looking for somewhere you've read about. It's one thing for a resort's press officer to philosophise about how much the guests are valued. It's quite another thing to have this working on a practical level right throughout the fabric of the place. But this is something that's very much in evidence here.



Of course, you'll have ample opportunity to experience this if you're fortunate enough to be actually staying here. The villas are something of a joy to behold. Private, neat, and spruce (in fact they all look as if they're new) the tastefully-stuccoed exteriors reveal little of the cool refinement within. There are three two-bedroom family villas, each of which runs to 130 square metres overall. The main floors are quarry slate tiles but switch to a rich wood parquet in the bedrooms. The layout is cleverly centred around the huge bathroom, which

can be entered from either bedroom, as well as from the hall. This bathroom is a work of art in itself: an outside and well-screened Balinese-style shower and Jacuzzi sit alongside another interconnected inner area, mirrored and tiled, with another shower and clawfoot bathtub. It's quite spectacular.

There are three flat-screen TVs – in the bedrooms and living area, plus an entertainment centre – and, as you might imagine, the quality of the furnishings and fitting is modern, sumptuous and very, very comfortable throughout. Needless to say, there is full air-conditioning. I can actually imagine coming inside after a few baking hours on the beach and yelling aloud with joy at the cool and cosy relief. These villas are delightful.

And the same holds true for the smaller one-bedroom villas, although 80 square metres is hardly tiny! They're twins of the family villas, with all the same levels of sophistication and comfort. This is not a big resort. And that's where it scores. It's personal. And you'll thus be accorded the genuinely friendly interaction that usually only long-term repeat visitors can enjoy.

The restaurant is unusual in that the layout is two connected glass octagons. Plus, in the evenings, there are tables outside on the lawned terrace overlooking the sand. The menu is as impressive as everything else here, in both the quality and in its very realistic pricing; the most expensive dish, the big mixed grill, being just 295 baht. There's a full Thai menu. Then there are all day breakfasts, soups, salads, pasta dishes, mixed grills and barbecue dishes – plus the freshest of fresh seafood, as the local market is just three minutes up the road!

Having spent an enjoyable afternoon at The Siam Residence, I now know exactly what I'm going to do on my next weekend off. I'm going to phone the resort and ask for a pick-up in the mid-afternoon. I'm going to chill with a book by the pool for an hour or so, then shift to the shade under one of the huge beachside trees. And then take a slow massage, overlooking the sea. I'll let the restaurant know I want rock lobster and crab. I'm going to cash-in on the happy hour as the sun begins to set and maybe even get a bit mellow on the two-for-one cocktails. I'm going to slowly enjoy my beachside dinner, and maybe go and recline on a sunbed to linger over my dessert and another cocktail or two. And when they come to wake me up, everyone will be smiling. The Thai staff, because of the silly sleeping guest on the beach, and I'll be smiling because I'm amongst all these pleasant people. Plus the fact that at The Siam Residence there's already a mini bus, engine running, waiting to take me back. This resort is a gem, indeed!

Rob De Wet

For reservations or further information, telephone 0 7742 0008.
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CAPTAIN KIRK

First floor restaurant in a central location on Chaweng Beach Road. Huge portions and reasonable prices make it a very popular choice. Highly recommended are both the Plate of Mixed Grill Seafood and the Australian Beef Tenderloin. Desserts are equally tasty and there's a good selection of value-for-money wine to complete the dining experience.

Captain Kirk

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