



Main: A massage room at the Cape Panwa Hotel  
 Above: Rambutans for sale in the Phuket market  
 Top right: The jetty at the Cape Panwa Hotel

# Temptation in thailand

Sheridan Rogers sets out to explore the culinary delights of Cape Panwa on the holiday island of Phuket.

put down what they're doing and start dancing. Others follow. Tourists join in. Soon, the whole market is disco-dancing. After about 10 minutes, the music is turned off and everyone resumes their normal roles.

It's not until later in the day that a Thai journalist tells us about an initiative designed to encourage healthy living, currently being championed by the government. Dancing in the morning, he tells us, has been identified as one of those health-promoting activities.

The fish market comes to life in the very early hours of the day, and it's here you'll find the freshest of seafood, poultry, eggs, fruit, herbs and vegetables, amid more interesting items such as deep-fried cockroaches and butchered frogs.

Local fresh-produce markets like this are held in towns throughout Phuket – and for the adventurous foodie, what better place is there to experience the colour, confusion and vitality of Thai life?

Phuket, known as the Pearl of the South, is Thailand's largest and wealthiest island. Surrounded by the turquoise waters of the Andaman Sea, it's famous for its plentiful supply of fresh seafood – fish, squid, oysters, crabs, prawns and lobster – and for the seafood restaurants that cook it.

We have one of our best lunches at Raya Thai Cuisine, set in a charming old two-storey Sino-Portuguese house, with gentle breezes flowing through its double doors and open windows. Here, we feast on authentic Phuket-style dishes including a luscious fresh crabmeat curry swimming in coconut milk, with Thai holy basil; deep-fried

whole fish with papery fried garlic cloves; fabulous giant prawns in a tamarind sauce; and vivid-green, stir-fried broccoli with baby prawns. Despite the quality and freshness, all the dishes are crazily cheap: between 150 and 200 *baht* each.

Afterwards, we drive up Khao Rang hill to the north of town for an iced coffee at the pretty Tunka Café, nestled in lush tropical gardens at the foot of a flight of wooden stairs. The black sesame dumplings in ginger tea are as much of a treat as the view of Phuket town.

Most memorable, perhaps, is a dinner at Panwa House: a magnificently restored Sino-Portuguese home on the palm-strewn beach that fronts Cape Panwa Hotel. Built on a hill with a panoramic view of the Andaman Sea, this tranquil low-rise hotel boasts a variety of restaurants including Laem Panwa, famous across the island for its fresh, succulent seafood BBQ.

Executive chef Phudon Prachum, who also conducts cooking classes on Friday mornings under the palm trees, prepares us a sumptuous banquet that includes dishes such as *yam woon sen* – a glass-noodle salad with minced chicken and shrimps; *choo chee goong* – curried prawns in creamy coconut milk; and *pla krapong neung manow* – steamed white snapper with chilli, garlic and lime; all served with steamed jasmine rice.

The simplicity of the steamed fish, with its slightly sour, slightly hot sauce, is perfect for the warm, still night and a tribute to the elegance of Thai cuisine. As we walk back up the hill to our rooms, we pass a

It's early morning at the fish market in Ranong Road in Phuket town, and we're ogling an astonishing variety of seafood. Suddenly, disco music blares from loudspeakers through the market. A number of the stallholders



group of dancers at the Bamboo Bar Beach BBQ, all doing their best to support the new government initiative.

While most Aussie tourists head for Phuket's flashier, resort-laden west coast, it's worth making the effort to visit some of the lesser-known places on the island. Light years away from the loud, brash girlie bars, transvestite cabarets and knock-off DVD shops of Patong, Cape Panwa juts dramatically into the sea at the isle's southern end. A haven of peace and quiet set amid coconut groves and rubber plantations, it's where Phuket's aquarium, naval base and deep sea port are located.

On one side of the narrow peninsula is Panwa Bay Village, built around an old Sino-Portuguese building. The Village's pretty Mediterranean-style courtyards and gardens are worth exploring, and there are a number of boutique-like shops and restaurants with views over the bay.

Legend has it that before Cape Panwa was developed, a man called Nan lived at a coconut plantation on the Cape with his pet otter, Ki. A delightful Italian restaurant named after Nan can be found on the Village's second level. The food here is authentic Italian and very good, and there's a wide selection of pizzas and pastas, if you're not so hungry.

Adjacent to Nan's is the Dolphin Bar, an excellent spot for a pre-dinner drink. At the front of the Village sits Laem Panwa restaurant, popular with locals and a good place to sample traditional Thai dishes and freshly barbecued seafood.

Scale the steep hill leading up from the village: on the far side, you'll find Cape Panwa Hotel. Its panoramic views of the Andaman Sea, large, lagoon-style pool, coconut-palm-studded beach and natural surroundings make it ideal for relaxation. Unlike many other hotels on the island, the beach here is protected from rough seas during the monsoon (April-October) and is safe for swimming year-round. It's also self-contained, family-friendly and free of peddlers and hawkers.

One of the highlights of our stay at the hotel was a daytrip to Phi Phi



Island on the *Panwa Princess II*. This luxurious 25-metre motor yacht, belonging to the owner of the hotel Khun Tirapongse Pangsrivongse, is chartered out to guests wanting to visit the various islands around Phang-Nga Bay, including Coral Island, Khai Island and Phi Phi Island – where *The Beach*, with Leonardo di Caprio, was filmed. These islands, with their soaring limestone cliffs rising near-vertically out of turquoise waters, were made famous in James Bond movie *The Man With The Golden Gun* – though I'd recommend avoiding "Bond" island, as hordes of tourists mean it's less than tranquil.

Sitting in the top-deck Jacuzzi, cold drink in hand, as the *Princess* makes her way through these spectacular islands is an unforgettable experience. Meals on board are arranged according to passengers' preferences: we're treated to a fabulous array of fresh salads, gigantic barbecued prawns and lamb cutlets, accompanied by French wines.

Back at the Cape Panwa Hotel, we're beginning to unwind and it's difficult to leave. Each of the 246 rooms faces the sea and has a private

balcony. Guest quarters range in scale from twin rooms through to Jacuzzi suites, contemporary two-bedroom pool villas and the beautifully appointed, three-bedroom Panwa Lodge – where Leonardo di Caprio stayed while *The Beach* was shot.

Here, there's no need to dine in the same restaurant every day: there are a variety of onsite eateries, from the casual Café Andaman, which overlooks the hotel's pool, to the elegant Top of the Reef. Most of the staff come from the local village and are friendly and helpful.

Tennis, table tennis, windsurfing, waterskiing and snorkelling are just some of the activities available, plus there's a fitness centre, a hairdresser, a beauty salon and a state-of-the-art spa – an elegantly modern building fitted out with steam-rooms, a sauna and Jacuzzis, set among the coconut

Above: Phuket's beautiful off-shore islands are best appreciated on a boat tour

Left: Sunset over Cape Panwa

Far left from top: Chillies, the essential ingredient of any Thai cooking course; Phang Nga Bay en route to Phi Phi island; learn to cook Thai spring rolls on a cooking course; enjoying the tranquility of a corner of Phuket; colourful Hibiscus

## travelfacts

### gettingthere

Jet Star flies direct three times a week between Sydney and Phuket, with connecting flights available from other capital cities via Qantas. Phone 13 1538 or visit [www.jetstar.com.au](http://www.jetstar.com.au)  
Thai Airways flies from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth to Bangkok, with onward connections to Phuket. For bookings, phone 1300 651 960 or visit [www.thaiairways.com.au](http://www.thaiairways.com.au)

### gettingaround

The following travel companies offer a wide variety of Thai holidays and experiences:

Creative Holidays, phone 1300 747 400 or visit [www.creativeholidays.com.au](http://www.creativeholidays.com.au)  
Explore Holidays, phone 02 9423 8080 or visit [www.exploreholidays.com.au](http://www.exploreholidays.com.au)  
GAP Adventures, phone 1300 796 618 or visit [www.gapadventures.com/v&t](http://www.gapadventures.com/v&t)  
Intrepid Travel, phone 1300 364 512 or visit [www.intrepidtravel.com](http://www.intrepidtravel.com)  
Jetstar Holidays, phone 13 1538 or visit [www.jetstar.com.au/holidays](http://www.jetstar.com.au/holidays)  
Qantas Holidays, phone 13 1415 or 1300 HOLIDAY or visit [www.qantas.com/holidays](http://www.qantas.com/holidays)  
Royal Orchid Holidays, phone 1300 369 750 or visit [www.thaiairways.com.au](http://www.thaiairways.com.au)  
Travel Indochina, phone 1300 138 755 or visit [www.travelindochina.com.au](http://www.travelindochina.com.au)

### wheretostay

Cape Panwa Hotel & Spa, phone +66 7639 1123 or visit [www.capepanwa.com](http://www.capepanwa.com)

### wheretoeat

Raya Thai Cuisine is at 48 New Dibuk Crossroads in Phuket Town Phuket. Phone +66 76 218 155.

### tips

- At the time of writing, AU\$1 = 30 Thai Baht (THB).
- November to February is the best time to visit, with cooler temperatures.

### furtherinformation

Tourism Authority of Thailand, phone 02 9247 7549 or visit [www.tourismthailand.org](http://www.tourismthailand.org)

Photography by Sheridan Rogers, Tourism Authority of Thailand and Cape Panwa Hotel.