



luxé

TRAVEL

ISSUE 3 - SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2017

Sizzling staycations

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TOP TRIPS, FROM THAILAND
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THE WORLD'S MOST
LUXURIOUS TRAINS

Thai time

Elysia Agnew takes a tour of Thailand, uncovering its best bits and a few hip hotels along the way, from cliff-top villas and sun soaked beach clubs, to paradise coves and city-chic hideaways...

Thailand is a place where you can kick off your flip-flops and relax under the striking sunlight. But it's also a place for adventure – a place where you can hop on a flight or boat and experience something completely unique over the waters.

A sand-between-the-toes beach holiday might be your thing. Or it might be that you're the active type seeking a thrilling, action-packed vacation. Either way, Thailand has it all: from eco-friendly escapades and a bit of beach bliss, to spontaneous island-hopping trips and gritty city breaks. This electrifying, exotic isle ticks all the boxes for a beautiful beachy destination with all the trimmings. I had pieced together my own perceptions of Thailand from many friends' photographs, tales and tourist spots. A popular, year-round destination for sandy

beaches, lush greenery and crystal clear waters, it has made its way to the top of many a bucket list in recent years.

The beauty of Thailand is that every beach, every town, village, city and island is unique in so many ways. And after two nights of browsing the brilliantly bustling Bangkok, we're in need of a bit of island life and so our tour of Thailand begins in Phuket. First up is Surin Beach.

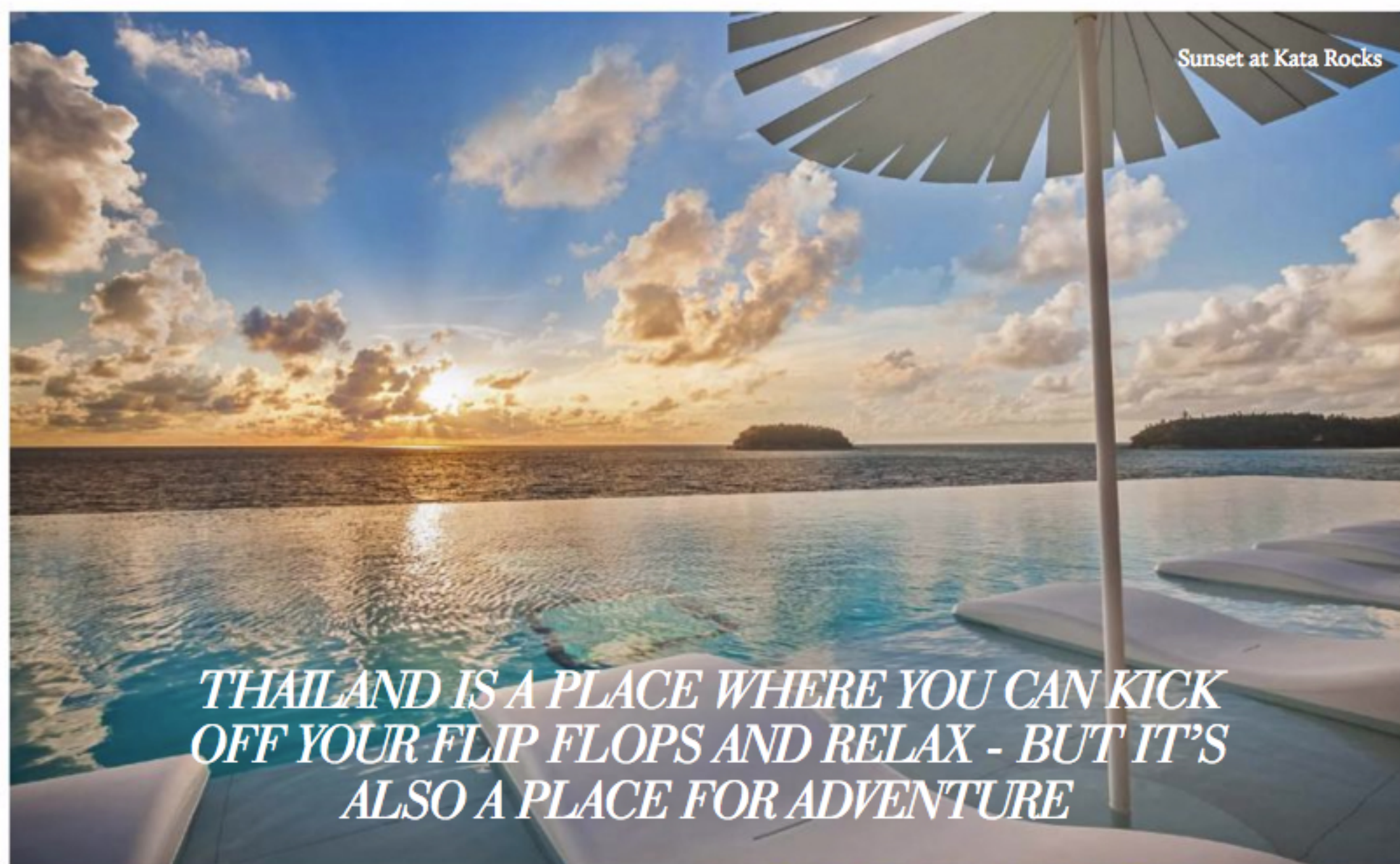
A contemporary haven by the coast, Manathai Surin's tranquillity and its sleek interiors blend effortlessly, creating a place of pure serenity. This design-led, waterfront hotel invites guests to enjoy stunning views of Surin Beach just footsteps away, while also offering an urban space to eat, sip cocktails and soak up the sun. Everything about this place is charming; laid-back luxury springs



to mind. The double height, open-air lobby boasts comfy armchairs and bold splashes of colour, combining contemporary designs with the easy-going aura of beach life.

Surin Beach is an area of spectacular scenery with tropical sunsets, glittering blue lagoons and perfect palm-lined seashores. And with a daiquiri in hand from

a cocktail shack on the beach, there's nowhere I'd rather be. Just steps from the golden sands, Manathai Surin perfectly embodies the 'anything goes' mantra of the beach, but with its very own boutique approach. The aromatic lotus ponds are a defining feature here, reminding guests of the calm waters that surround them. Inside, plush silk fabrics and dark >



wooden furnishings contrast to create an indulgent sanctuary of luxury Thai living by the coast. A one-hour drive up the coast and over the Sarasin Bridge (connecting Phuket to mainland Thailand), brings us to what I can only describe as beach club bliss - the delightful Akyra Beach Club.

A sophisticated, new ocean-side destination sitting on the peaceful beaches of Natai - an area heavily destroyed by the tsunami in 2004. It's finding its feet and is growing with a number of boutique, beachfront hotels - Akyra Beach Club being one of them. Spread out in beautifully exotic grounds, and decorated with cool blue and whitewashed interiors, the hotel instantly lifts the spirit and calms the soul. It's hip and it's modern, but it adopts a traditional beach club vibe where chilled-out experiences and comfort comes first.

It's a little slice of heaven on the white sands. Checked into our garden room tucked away in the trees, I feel like I've been whisked away to a luxurious log cabin lost in the jungle. But step outside and you're seconds from the pool area, which blends onto the beach

where leisurely afternoons can be spent supping coconut water and lounging in a hammock with a book in hand.

Life is simple here. It's a place to relax and retreat. With all your après-beach amenities on hand all day, every day, you can happily while away the days here or get involved in various on-site activities including yoga classes, day trips, foodie experiences and specially curated cameos to immerse yourself in the Akyra lifestyle. The sparkling sunset sets the scene as we check in for cocktail happy hour on the beach and the Ibiza beach club vibe rolls on into the night.

Akyra Beach is the perfect paradise escape. All you need is a bikini, a book and a bum to sit on, and you're tucking in to a hefty slice of serious luxury. Our final Phuket port of call is a sumptuous cliff top setting fit for a rock star. A taxi tour to the southwest tip of Phuket takes us to the lush retreat that is Kata Rocks. A dream-like destination of white pavilions and cliff side villas, this beautiful bubble of luxury overlooking Kata Beach takes me to a private Greek isle. White walls, blue waters and private boltholes



with infinity pools hidden within the cliffs - it's magic.

Upon arrival, our personal assistant for the weekend escorts us to our suite in a buggy - our ride for the duration of the stay. Because Kata Rocks has been built into the cliffs, assistants (or 'Rock Stars') are on hand all day, every day to shift guests from poolside to spa, spa to restaurant, from restaurant to town, and from town to your villa. You don't have to lift a finger. Although doing nothing in the comfort of our 'has-it-all' cliff top villa is oh-so appealing, we can't help but get to know this exclusive, boutique resort - booking in for both holistic and

culinary experiences. A trip to The Infinite Luxury Spa means a 'Sense of Thai Aroma' spa treatment is on the cards and a calming couples massage brings the 'holiday-body' back to life. Truly refreshing and rejuvenating. When it comes to the culinary delights of Kata Rocks, we enjoy a romantic, sunset-soaked dinner at the hotel's restaurant, where Thai-infused lobster seals the deal. The food and wine here is phenomenal. And as good food and wine tastes better when shared, we book up an evening in the majestic wine cellar. The hotel's sommelier takes us from Bordeaux to Mosel, the Loire Valley and back, sampling a



Poolside at Manathai Surin

collection of vintage wines and innovative flavours. The wines are playfully paired with an array of artisanal cheeses.

Taking the luxury lifestyle to a whole new level, Kata Rocks brings an essence of contemporary, western-inspired flavour to our tour of Thailand. So finally, to bring a bit of rustic, island life back into the mix, we sail over the seas to a taste of real island paradise at Koh Yao – recommended to us as Thailand's last unspoilt island. Despite

finding the true beauty of Thailand in every destination on our tour, some islands have allowed their perfectly pristine worlds to be chomped up by flash resorts and party people. Meaning you have to search that little bit harder to find that foot-print free sand and those peaceful palm-trees we see in the movies. Koh Yao comes pretty close. A private boat from piers in either Phuket or Krabi will bring you here. To a tiny island with nothing much more than this piece of

paradise and a couple of shacks. It's simple and it's all in the name – Paradise, Koh Yao. Hop off the boat, dip your toes in the water and you're here. There's no taxi ride to reach the resort. The resort is the island. You step straight into the action – or shall I say heaven. There's plenty to do if lounging on the beach isn't your cup of tea, with sports, mindfulness workshops and spa days. But if taking in the island air is what you're here for, you're going to love it. Paradise is a jungle getaway and a real retreat in the mountains. Paradise it is – but it's got a rustic feel too. The rooms are like treehouses and the washrooms are set up on the balcony, so don't be alarmed if you're sharing your shower with a creepy crawly. It's peaceful, it's playful and takes a bit of getting used to, but you're certainly at one with nature here. Saying that, the luxurious touches don't go a miss; with all the amenities you'd expect and more. Nestled within a national reserve

tropical rain forest and its own private bay, and surrounded by towering limestone cliffs, Paradise is an area of gold and blue-drenched bliss. It's what you might expect from a true Thai island – minus the tourists. It's a romantic escape incorporating shabby-chic designs and natural materials, without compromising on comfort and convenience. It's a spot where you can truly harmonise with nature. For me, a thankful victim of the travel bug, falling in love with a new destination isn't hard. Give me glorious sunshine, warm, white sands and charming villages with lovely, friendly people and I'm in. But there's something special about Thailand. It's the perfect blend of tranquillity and adventure and I can't wait to pop back over for more island-hopping fun.

www.manathai.com/phuket
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