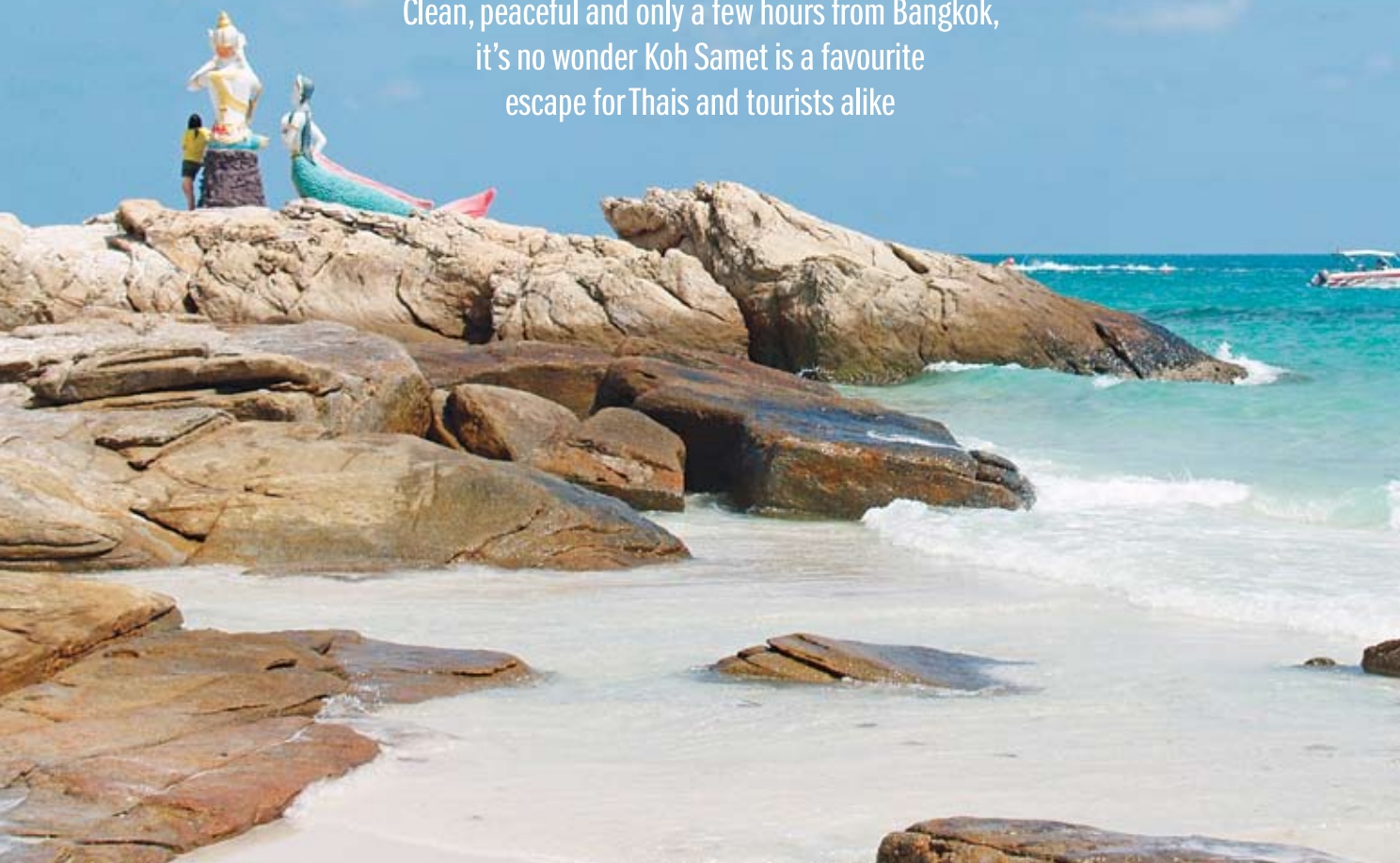


A Little Bit Of Everything

Clean, peaceful and only a few hours from Bangkok, it's no wonder Koh Samet is a favourite escape for Thais and tourists alike



BY AVIVA WEST IN KOH SAMET
ASIA NEWS NETWORK

Koh Samet may just be the lazy Bangkokian's perfect vacation.

While the capital city broils in baking heat and pollution, a quick hop over to the Ekkamai bus station and Bt157 (US\$4.63) will have you comfortably seated in an air conditioned bus on your way to this sun-soaked island.

For many seeking fun and relaxation, Pattaya will do. However, for the visitor more interested in Thai food than German sausage and quiet beaches rather than masses of bodies, Koh Samet is the place to be.

Twenty years ago this small island off the coast of Rayong province was a tranquil paradise verdant with cajeput trees. Today, it's a National Park with

kilometres of white sand beaches and cosy bungalows stretching as far as the eye can see.

The main mode of transportation once you're on the island (the 30-minute ferry ride from Ban Phe pier in Rayong is a pleasure) is the *sangtaew*, basically a pickup truck with benches in the back. After you've decided which of the many beaches you want to stay at, you simply tell the driver your destination and once the truck is full, off you go.

Before entering the park proper, be forewarned that a Bt400 (\$11.80) ticket must be purchased by all tourists. This funds the various conservation projects, and is available for Bt40 (\$1.18) for Thais and foreigners with work permits.

With Samet shaped like a 'T', the western side of the island is generally more upscale, and as a result, significantly pricier. One reason for this are

the spectacular sunsets visible from the rocky cliffs on the western edge — a truly spectacular sight. The eastern beaches, however, including Ao Phai, Hat Sai Kaew and Ao Vong Duan, are famous for their pure white sand and sunrises, along with plentiful restaurants and cheap guesthouses. These beaches tend to fill up with backpackers and Thai families on the weekend.

Prices range anywhere from Bt400 (\$11.80) a night for a basic, fan-only room all the way up to Bt1,500 (\$44) for air-con, cable TV outfitted accommodation. Room prices tend to spike on the weekends and during the high season (November-February, June-August), so if you arrive on a weekday, make sure to get the weekday price.

Once settled into a bungalow or guesthouse, there isn't much to do but hit the beach.

Early in the morning most of the



PRISTINE: Once settled on Koh Samet, there's not much to do but hit the beach.

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DAZZLING: The island's fire shows shouldn't be missed.



white sand disappears under the tide, but as it recedes during the day, the brilliance of the blue and green waters becomes clear. There are plenty of activities to while away the afternoon, including banana-boating (a hit among drunk backpackers), fishing, snorkeling, hiking and touring the nearby isles. Various companies and bungalows offer these services, again with prices ranging wildly. There are also impromptu games of football, volleyball and pool with the island's resident teenagers, though be prepared to lose mightily.

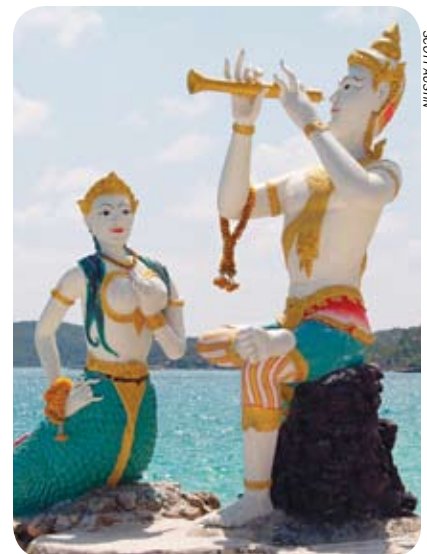
In the evening, Samet shows off another side of its personality.

Though nowhere near as famous for its parties and nightlife as Samui or Phuket, the island doesn't lack for a festive atmosphere. Each of the many bungalows lining the beach has their own restaurant, bar and in some cas-

es, nightclub. In the early evening, it's worthwhile to watch the sky change colour while chowing down on delicious seafood, curries and ice cold beer. Cushions are placed on mats directly on the sand, with only a candle to light the dinner table. Needless to say, the vibe is very romantic.

When it becomes dark, patrons and beachwalkers are dazzled with fireworks, floating lanterns and fire shows. The music comes on and the drinks start flowing seriously around 9pm, though the beach bars tend to shut down around midnight.

With its myriad activities and attractions, Koh Samet has become a major lure for tourists in Thailand. With its peacefulness, beauty and isolation, it's also become a favourite getaway for Thais. Let's hope this delicate balance remains in place for the benefit and enjoyment of all.



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MERMAID AND THE PRINCE: Don't miss the island's most famous landmark; two statues depicting the story of Pra Apai Manee, the Prince and the Mermaid, written and set in Koh Samet.