

SYLVAN SA

New residences, resorts and renovations in Phuket's forested northwest tap into the island's unspoilt reserve of quietude and verdant beauty – and set a breathtaking new bar, as **Maria Shollenbarger** discovers

Once upon a 20th-century time – the late 1980s, to be precise – Phuket was one of those destinations where an abundance of natural beauty married with acute modishness made it, for a few years, a real Place To Be. At the time, the southern Thai island was still largely undeveloped, its hilly, jungled promontories held back from spilling into mirror-like blue sea by thin white filaments of sand. For many, Surin Beach – and Amanpuri, the ineffably elegant house-hotel opened in 1988 by Adrian Zecha, which hugged its northern curve – was the progenitor of the exotic southeast Asian idyll.

Almost 30 years on, and Phuket, like many other such places, displays the often unsightly scars of that high-end

holiday paradigm gone awry, with once-pristine coves and hilltops bristling with accretions of concrete and glass, sometimes in questionable taste. And Thailand itself is, as headlines bear out, a nation in a state of flux; at the time of writing, a series of localised bomb attacks, on Phuket's Patong Beach and at a handful of other resort towns, reflected the unease surrounding potential political change here and the fact that the country's future cannot be easily foreseen.

Yet Phuket's beauty is far from eradicated (at roughly 50 times the size of Capri, it's arguably too large for that ever to happen); and for all those hawker-rammed beaches and unfortunate condominium complexes, there remains a reserve of unexploited quietude. A handful of hoteliers and private investors certainly believe the allure endures, anyway: witness new arrivals, from Point Yamu by Como, the Paola Navone-designed charmer overlooking the karst monoliths of Phang Nga

A villa at the Anantara Layan Phuket Resort, adjacent to Sirinat National Park

CTUARY





From top: the pool and deck at Trisara. A view of a villa at Anantara Phuket Resort

Each of the 15 new residences is a world sufficient unto itself – it's privacy of another level, thanks to clever landscaping

Bay, which opened in late 2013 (and last year added a private island beach club, complete with yoga pavilions and restaurant), to the sleek Rosewood currently under construction on Emerald Bay, just below Patong Beach – one of the last undeveloped sites in a now woefully over-conceded area.

The Anantara Layan resort (pictured right) is another, opened two years ago on the west coast, which is still something of a sanctuary: lush, free of excessive development and largely destined to remain that way, by dint of geography, esoteric Thai land-title legislation and its felicitous situation adjacent to Sirinat National Park. Anantara Layan's one- and two-bedroom suites and villas cluster around a small bay right at the national park's edge. The resort is charming: understated, gratifyingly small-feeling, with an alfresco Mediterranean restaurant serving delectable Siamese-inflected takes on crudo, an open-air muay Thai training ring (virtually a requisite in these parts) and a staff whose competence is underscored by genuine playfulness. (They go to brilliant lengths to educate guests sceptical of the more sylvan, less flawlessly manicured charms of the resort's beach in the virtues of supporting an environmentally protected marine zone, which Anantara's bay is.)

But just behind, scaling sleekly up the steep hill, is the real draw: the 15 new residences (pictured on previous pages) at Anantara Layan. Each of the three- to nine-bedroom properties is a world sufficient unto itself, catered to by dedicated staff and butlers (mine was a hilarious 24-year-old called Niki, who doubled as a very able breakfast chef). What ties the residences to the resort is the idea that each service offered below can be translated into a private or semi-bespoke one for villa guests up above. This means in-room spa and bodywork treatments, fitness training and yoga; private guided beach walks and paddleboard excursions; dedicated chefs; and all manner of expert tuition, from cookery to flower arranging.

It's privacy of another level up here, thanks to clever landscaping and sheer space; the smallest of the residences spreads across roughly 1,400sq m; the largest, almost 5,000sq m (the one belonging to William Heinecke, chairman and CEO of Minor International,



Anantara's parent company – which, when Heinecke's not around, is available for takeover – clocks in at about 3,000sq m). They largely forgo traditional Siamese vernacular in favour of polished limestone floors and acres of floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors. Opulence comes in measured but impactful doses – a touch of shot-silk upholstery, the suspended carved-wood ceilings in the bedrooms – courtesy of a design scheme by the late Jaya Ibrahim. Enormous living and dining pavilions are bookended by master bedroom suites with 5m ceilings and glass walls on three sides. Which is ideal, because the views are arresting: they extend across the resort and down the two-mile length of Layan Beach to Surin – a mutable canvas of sea, huge sky and remarkably unmarred landscape (what was once a boisterous Nikki Beach concession at the northern end of Layan's powdery white sands has, thankfully, been shuttered). All day long, from a linen-canopied lounge next to the slim rectangle of my villa pool, I watched clouds, hustled along by a monsoon breeze, cast roving pools of inky shadow over jungle and sugar-cane fields, while the tide funnelled in and out of the bay in blossoming turquoise surges, and locals and resort guests picked their way out to fossick in the shallows for shells like tiny sandpipers. The views from my rooftop

– meticulously laid with grass, where private yoga happened – were even more cinematic. Just a few minutes north of here is the precedent for such indulgent privacy on the island. Trisara opened in 2004 after four painstaking development, evident today in its landscaping that coddles its 39 one- and two-villas and 20 residences. Even the smallest of residences have their own vast pools and wide terraces (pictured top); the largest, at seven bedrooms, multiples of both, along with private beach access, face a 200-degree view of the Andaman Sea as they are along the sloping side of a shallow peninsula; and, set back into a canopy of intricate palm trees, they are more or less invisible to the eye.

Managing director Anthony Lark, the first Amanpuri (that's almost 30 years of Phuket for Trisara's owners, a Thai father and son, in the to help steer its development. In the 12 years opened, he's never stopped evolving what's on the island (Trisara was, for instance, one of the first resort country to fund organic farming concessions, and to serve organically raised meat sustainably caught fish). While its owners continue to expand, Lark has just overseen a thoughtful

comprehensive renovation. The villas have all been reworked, with their rich teak and travertine floors, and walls and ceilings limewashed to bring a contemporary, vaguely Caribbean brightness to the spaces. He has gutted and rebuilt the spa and fitness centre (trainers can create bespoke programmes with the chefs, including raw food options, at which Trisara's kitchens excel) and added a preservative- and chemical-free product line, produced in Thailand. Guests can commandeer the hotel's GoPro and digital camera equipment (and, if they like, a professional videographer) to chronicle their holiday, whether on the beach, hiking in Khao Phra Taew rainforest, or out at Phang Nga Bay or the Similan Islands on one of its fleet of power yachts; and there's a state-of-the-art editing suite and screening room, complete with stock footage and music libraries.

But even before these renovations, some 25 per cent of Trisara's guests were already multiple-repeat ones – sold years ago on its long ribbon of private beach, its swimming pontoon and buzzy bar, its six-handed royal massage, and any number of other only-here details with which it has been associated for more than a decade. Proof positive that, intelligent evolution aside, it pays to get a thing right from the outset.



From top: Moonstone Villa at TreVille Phuket estate, which will be available for private hire. The villa's main sala, with its spectacular ocean view



A few minutes' drive further north of here, however, is another stratum of luxury and exclusivity altogether. There is no fanfare – definitely no sign – to indicate my arrival at the entrance to TreVille Phuket – just a sliding door in a high wall, hard by the ocean side of the road. TreVille Phuket is the eight-years-in-the-making passion project of Robert Friedland, the Singapore-based American founder-chairman of Ivanhoe Capital Corporation. Friedland's fortune comes from mining, but the family are also hoteliers, of sorts. In 2013, he and his son Govind acquired the 15-suite Villa TreVille in Positano – the former estate of Franco Zeffirelli, which had been refashioned as an über-exclusive inn in 2010 by Neopolitan businessman Giovanni Russo (who also owns Li Galli, the private islands off this coast). In the three years since, Villa TreVille has parlayed itself into one of the most sought-after – and difficult to procure – bookings in southern Italy, with a client roster that's as thick with high-wattage names as a *Vanity Fair* Oscar

The multistructure state-of-the-art estate brings unseen levels of bespoke craftsmanship to Phuket and sets a breathtaking new bar

party. Villa TreVille is known for inculcating a shoes-off, hair-down, more-at-home-than-when-I'm-home default setting in even its wealthiest and most self-reverential guests; but TreVille Phuket (pictured above and top) actually is a home – the final fit-out will complete this month and, when its owners are not in residence, it will be available for private hire.

A multilevel, multistructure, utterly state-of-the-art estate that brings heretofore unseen levels of bespoke

craftsmanship to Phuket, this place sets a pretty breathtaking new bar; its cost, certainly, can safely be said to be unparalleled on Phuket (and perhaps in Thailand). Singapore-based HB Architects and interior architects and designers WE Craft Group spared no expense in enlisting makers, builders and specialists from across the world: Colombian and Nepalese weavers, Malaysian woodworkers, French and Italian furniture makers, even a Singaporean engineering company that specialises in military tank design (it created the property's four stunning copper-clad staircases). The open-air living, dining and meditation salas are Burmese teak, the beams more than 30cm in diameter, seamlessly joined and hiding lighting and sound systems; the floors in the suites (mine measured about 450sq m, with its own cinema) are of engineered German oak, in 40cm-wide planks. The spa, which rivals in beauty and technology those of some very smart hotels I've seen, has treatment suites for Thai and hydro massage, dry and wet saunas and a hammam clad in thousands of fingernail-sized, hand-painted tiles. Many tons of imported Portuguese limestone form walls, water features and staircases. There's also a small private beach flanking the north end of the estate; come the high season, it will be layered in chaises and umbrellas and furnished with a pop-up bar.

Trope phrases like "billionaire crash pad" and "Bond lair" do TreVille Phuket an injustice (though in fairness, anyone whose sybaritic holiday fantasy stipulates for one or the other, and whose pockets are deep enough to fund the vision, probably won't be disappointed). And while the "hardware" is all impeccable, the owners recognise it's the experience and service that will make or break a stay here, so they have recruited a team comprising top luxury-hospitality talent, including chefs and wellness experts, to be on-site.

Its illustrious CV notwithstanding, though, TreVille Phuket's real assets might, rather counterintuitively, be its simplest. It has its own untouched forest canopy; its own little vanilla-sand beach; its own big, glorious swathe of Andaman-and-sky horizon; its own equally vast silence. All the beauty that, in short, has endured – still, in a few select places, there for the enjoying. ♦

BLUE THAI THINKING

Maria Shollenbarger travelled as a guest of **The Residences at Anantara Layan Phuket Resort**, www.anantara.com, from £2,587 per night in a two-bedroom residence; **TreVille Phuket**, www.trevillephuket.com, price on request; and **Trisara**, www.trisara.com, from \$774 per night. **British Airways** (0844-493 0787; www.ba.com) flies three times daily from London Heathrow to Bangkok, from £475 return. Various local airlines, including Thai Airways, Air Asia and Nok Air, connect to Phuket several times daily, from about £28.