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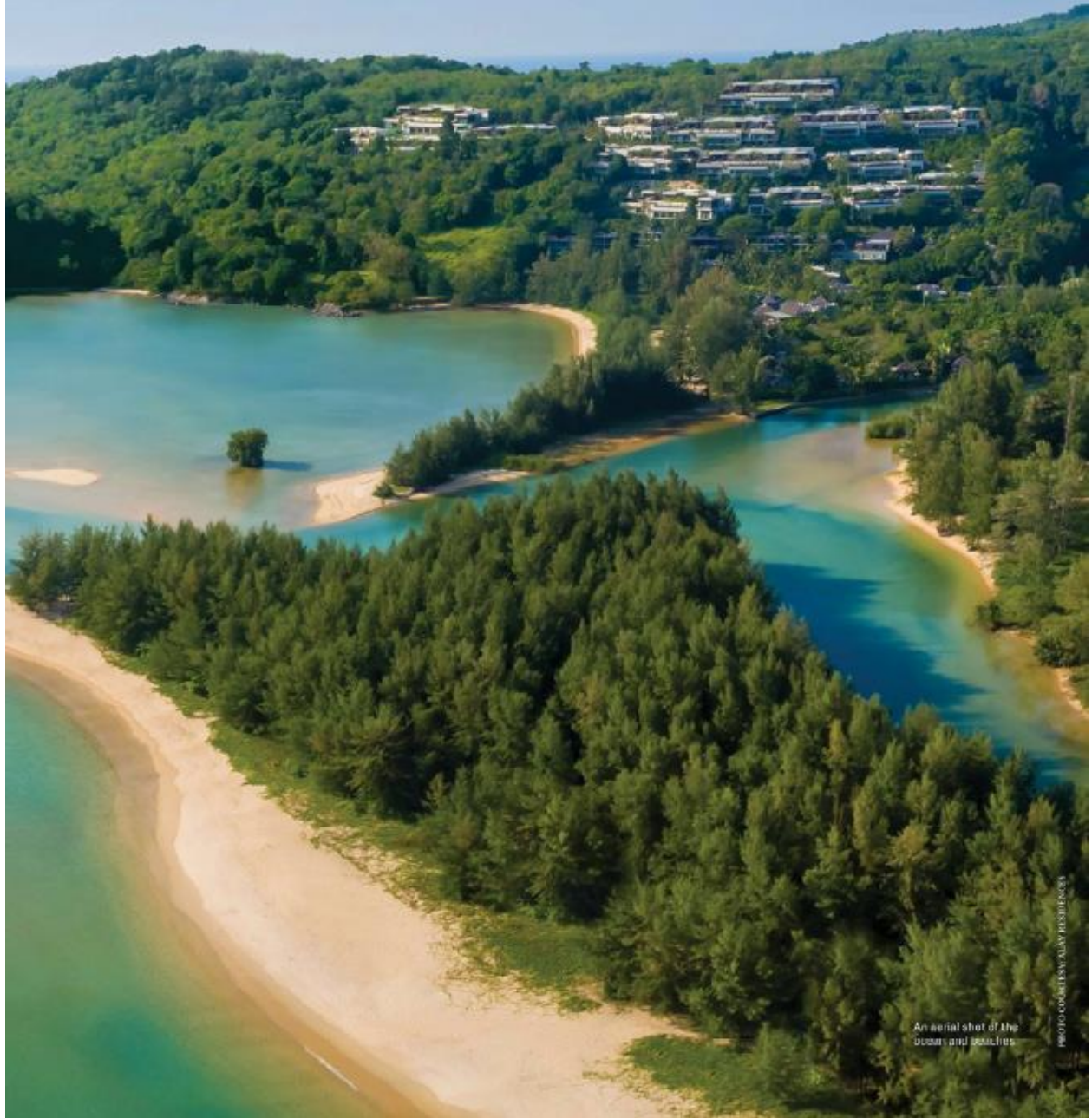
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BEST KEPT SECRET

There is a new viewfinder to look at Phuket. And it's set on a rented piece of paradise.

BY VISHAKHA TALREJA



An aerial shot of the
pools and beaches

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID J. PETERSON



Luxury must be comfortable otherwise it is not luxury, Coco Chanel once famously said. A four-hour direct flight, free visa-on-arrival and luxury villas to choose from if Coco were to talk about a holiday, Phuket would fit the bill perfectly.

Besides the lure of a luxurious beach holiday, there was another rather mundane yet pertinent reason, for my recent vacation. It was my husband's birthday so I decided to gift him a luxury holiday home, albeit only for four nights. No point spoiling a 35-year-old beyond that.

We checked in straight to our awe-inspiring two-bedroom sea facing residence at Anantara Layan that overlooked the bay and had the most gorgeous infinity pool I have

ever taken a dip in. Our oversized villa also had a spacious dining room, a living room, a typical Thai outdoor dining sala and a lavish bathroom that stocked Bulgari toiletries. Anantara Layan Phuket houses 15 uniquely designed residences that dot the lush hillside featuring incredible coastal vistas showcased by high ceilings and expansive windows.

Some days we would hop skip and jump to the Thai restaurant Dee Plee at the resort next door, then there were days we settled for a private barbecue at our sala or a lazy in-residence bubbly breakfast that our charming butler Alan would lay down with warmth.

The evenings at our not-so-little paradisiacal residence were magical as it would turn into a magnificent abode, lit with many candles and outdoor torches. One of the most beautifully planned turndown services were at our disposal. Hotels can be so

incredibly innovative, and subtly luxurious.

Anantara Layan Residences is a perfect resort to rekindle romance and indulge in some activities together. We spent an afternoon cooking a four-course Thai meal, next noon we were at the couple suite of the spa soaking in brilliance of the Anantara signature massage. There were also Muay Thai classes at their stadium. Evenings were spent sipping mango mojitos and watching the sun go down at their powdery beach. Talking about sundowners, The Mojito Factory at Anantara Layan Resort's beach is a cool pop-up beach bar, not everything needs to be outrageously fancy to be good.

When we were not being pampered at our plush residence, we would sneak out for a quick drink at the bustling Patong Walking Street or souvenir shopping at a night market. Phuket has some very cool clubs as well, where you can dance the night away.



1. Pool Sala at Alay Residences
 2. Master bedroom at Alay Residences
 3. Living Room at Alay Residences
 4. Arva, Italian Restaurant at Amanpuri
 5. Main Swimming Pool at Amanpuri

Though we preferred sipping wine sitting in our verandah gazing at the stars. Alan would keep our glasses full and get me macaroons. I was still in a dream, while we shifted our holiday home to Amanpuri.

This Aman Resorts property was conceived when its founder Adrian Zecha stumbled upon a site walking along Pansea Beach. He came across a coconut plantation and first wanted to build a holiday home there, but ended up building a boutique resort. Aman Resorts added many more hotels to its kitty and is a global brand today, synonymous with personalised luxury hospitality, but just like first love, this one is surreal.

We spent an exciting morning onboard Amanpuri's swanky new sports boat MasterCraft X23, with our passionate trainer Jessica Winkler. She was an extreme sports athlete before she retired and started her second career of being a water sports trainer

at resorts. She explained to us about the boat that comes packed with features, before we went snorkeling and wake boarding. We stopped at one of the beaches for a picnic and returned to our resort thankful for the experiences that we earn as travellers and for meeting interesting people like Jessica. We came back to more water sports, sea bobbing being the highlight. Amanpuri has some cool machines. After an exciting morning, we calmed and cleansed ourselves at the Aman Wellness Centre with a healing massage.

This three-decade old resort that was recently refurbished, satiated the gastronome in me. The Thai Restaurant at AmanPuri and its Italian restaurant, Arva, use the freshest of ingredients serving authentic cuisines that would please a global epicurean as well. The gem is its Japanese restaurant Nama that serves exquisitely crafted sushi, sashimi and Wagyu beef. Amanpuri sources

specialist produce from Japan to lend that authentic taste to the celebrated Japanese cuisine. A meal at Nama should be in your Phuket itinerary. Every day, Khun Somnai, a fisherman from the local village of Bangtao, brings the prime of his latest catch to Amanpuri, including snapper, Phuket lobster, soft-shell crab, Thai tiger prawns, mud crabs and live grouper, caught to order.

Each night we would return to our villa post dinner with an interesting Thai souvenir left for us post the turndown service—a wooden bookmark, fisherman pants and our last evening we returned to a candle-lit room with bathtub made with flowers. These details, these hotels, melt my heart.

So, here is a plan for your weekend vacation. Get on a direct flight and rent a villa at a luxury resort, whether you are a couple or a family of four, there is a villa for everyone.