



OLD TOWN, NEW LIFE

Take a break from bucolic beaches and explore Phuket Town's many interesting attractions, writes **Andrew Scott**

The Thai island of Phuket is without doubt one of Southeast Asia's most famous holiday destinations, and there are usually two distinct holiday experiences here: the lively and sometimes rowdy tourist precinct of Patong Beach, or serene and charming resort sanctuaries along both the northern and southern coastlines. But there is actually a third experience if one is willing to explore: the Old Town.

Phuket Town was built on the riches that came with a flourishing tin mine industry in the 20th century. Mining in Phuket actually dates back to the 16th century, but from the 19th century it was controlled by Chinese immigrants, who came up from Penang. The town at this time was a very transient place, with workers coming to sell their goods, stock up on provisions and then leave.

It took until the 20th century before roads, public buildings, temples and basic infrastructure appeared in Phuket Town, and with infrastructure came settlers. Huge colonial houses, once occupied by the wealthy tin mine barons, are still scattered throughout the town among Sino-Portuguese shophouses. The legacy of migrants to Phuket can be seen in the architecture throughout Phuket Town; today, Thais and Chinese mingle with the Malays and Indians who own a variety of shops in the Old Town on Thalang Road, Dibuk Road, Yaowarat Road, Rassada Rd and Phang Nga Rd. The town's diversity is best captured around these roads, which are all within walking distance of each other.

Thalang Road is steeped in history, with guesthouses, roti cafés, teashops and cloth shops running their

businesses in shophouses dating back to the 19th century. Yaowarat Road is a vibrant street with a number of bars catering to a range of discerning drinkers: there's live music, chic cafés, dark and dingy drinking spots and hipster Thai hangouts. Rassada Road has a very Western feel to it with an upmarket pizzeria, Belgian beer bar and popular daytime café, while Phang Nga Road has a number of art galleries exhibiting the work of local artists, along with a smattering of restaurants and bars. The tin mines may be long gone, but the legacy the industry and its people left behind helps to keep Phuket Town on the tourist map.

MORNING

The quintessential Phuket morning meal is, perhaps surprisingly, dim sum. With its Chinese origins, Phuket Town plays host to a plethora of small eateries serving up this distinctive cuisine. One of the best is **Phuket Pochana** on Wirat Hongyok Road. An upstart on the dim sum scene when it opened just a few years ago, the restaurant serves excellent classic dishes like *chumai*, *har gao* and *salapao*, as well as some well-executed Thai fusion variants. In an area surrounded by run-of-the-mill shophouses, Pochana stands out with its wooden structure and

Clockwise from this page top: Phuket Town's Chinese shophouses; Expo Market; Wua Art Gallery; Rassada Road; Gallery Café

charming interior. The theme of the interior is of an age gone by, and the old-fashioned household items and rustic furniture in an open veranda setting overlooking a quaint garden gives off the air of a simpler time. Sections of the restaurant are divided into areas of Phuket – Thalang, Kathu and Amphoe Muang.

The Gallery Café on Rassada Road serves a number of Western choices for breakfast, including poached eggs on toast, omelettes and a delightfully filling all-day breakfast. The Gallery has the feel of a friend's welcoming front room with sofas lining the walls, a number of books, magazines and newspapers, free wifi, and outdoor seating if cosy indoor seating is not your thing.

Rather than walking around Phuket Town aimlessly after breakfast, the best way to view it and learn about the area is by taking a guided tour of the Old Town.

Heritage Trails offers a "Meet the Locals" walking tour and a "Walking Food Tour" of Phuket Town. The educational and cultural facets of these tours will open up Phuket Town in a way many people have never seen. A lot of attention is given to the symbolism hidden within the construction details of the Chinese shophouses, and how the Peranakan culture influenced Phuket Town.

AFTERNOON

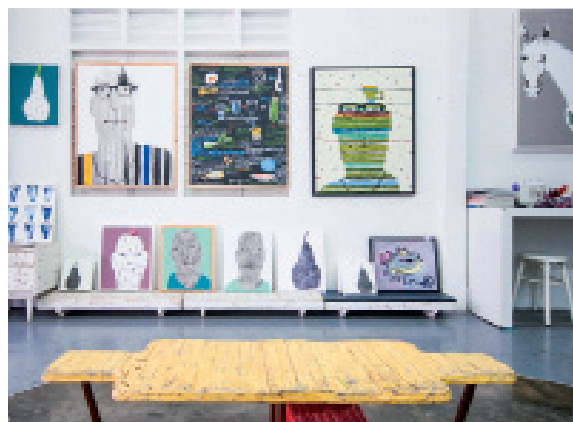
Uptown is perfectly located next to the Expo and Ocean shopping centres on Chanacharoen Rd in the downtown area. This open-

plan, breezy restaurant is extremely popular with locals on their lunch break, which is always a good sign. The large photo menu makes it easier for visitors to point out what they would like, and the back wall of the restaurant also acts as a huge photo menu of delectable treats. The food on offer is Thai and the speed of service means that you're fed and watered in no time.

Opposite Uptown is the **Expo** shopping bazaar. The indoor market is scattered with stalls selling clothes, souvenirs, shoes, household goods, sunglasses (fake) and pretty much anything you could want from a shopping trip. It also has the added bonus of being air-conditioned. A short walk from Expo is **Ocean**, which is also a shopping centre but tends to cater towards clothing. In the area around Ocean are a number of smaller shops, a Robinson's department store, coffee shops, Swensens ice-cream parlour and a few restaurants.

Heading away from downtown back towards the Old Town you'll find **Wua Art Gallery** on Phang Nga Road, which offers a contemporary look at minimalist art by young local Thai artists. The gallery is spread over two floors of an old shophouse, **The Drawing Room**, also on Phang Nga Road, is another art gallery covering both floors of a shophouse. It rotates exhibitions of local artists and the downstairs gallery, with easels and brushes haphazardly lying around, feels like an artist's personal studio.

The **Thai Hua Museum** on



Krabi Road is in one of Phuket Town's better-maintained traditional buildings, which was recently refurbished. Visitors enter through an inner courtyard – the building was originally built as a school for Thai-Chinese families in the early 20th century. The museum covers both floors, with exhibits and interactive displays that explain the history of Phuket Town, the origins of the Chinese families that



Getting around

Phuket is notorious for its lack of taxis and public transport. Luckily Phuket Town is easily manageable on foot, and this is the best way to immerse yourself in its day-to-day life. For those who do require a mode of transport to get from A to B, Phuket Town is one of the better areas to do this (though it's still not great). *Motosais* (motorbike taxis) are a common site in the daytime and a number of them wait around the main banks on Rassada Rd and Phang Nga Rd. Buses leave from Ranong market on Ranong Rd to all the main beaches from 7am to 6pm.

Blue *songtaews* (open-sided minivans) leave from Ranong market and do loops of Phuket Town and the surrounding areas, but they also stop around 6pm. As night falls things start to get a bit trickier. Tuk tuks will take you anywhere you want to go but you will pay an exorbitant fee. There are no metered cabs and any taxi fare has to be negotiated before the journey starts. *Motosais* are still around in Phuket Town but they are a lot harder to find at night.

If you are staying at a hotel outside Phuket Town it is best to arrange a taxi for both the trip into town and back to your hotel if travelling at night. A new hop-on, hop-off bus service is expected to start in March. The service will run from the airport to Patong, Karon and Kata. If this service is successful it could be a breakthrough for public transport on Phuket, which hopefully will then spread to other areas of the island.

helped to shape it – some still live in Phuket today – and how they built up their restaurants and businesses. An exhibition hall is dedicated to describing all the major events and festivals of Phuket, such as the famous Vegetarian Festival. Some of the rooms have retained the look and design of the old school, including a classroom that looks just as it did in the early 20th century.

DINNER

A restaurant that exudes understated cool and signature dishes combining Thai classics with the unexpected – try the green curry with frogs legs – is a favourite among Thai and expat diners alike. **Suay**, set in an attractive white house on Takuapha Road, serves Thai fusion dishes that keep the hungry masses coming, as well as cocktails which help get you in the mood for a night on the town.

A short walk from Suay is the **Belgian Brasserie** on Rassada Road. Two years after opening it continues to grow in popularity, with a range of beers on offer – Leffe, Hoegaarden, Stella and Delirium, to name a few – to keep the thirsty appeased, and freshly imported oysters and mussels that keep the well-heeled happy. This place has the



Uptown's breezy interior

feel of a genuine brasserie, with its long red sofa against the back wall, a curved bar and a smaller restaurant area at the back.

Take a short stroll to Yaowarat Road and you'll find a number of bars ranging from dark drinking holes to entertaining bars with live Thai or Western bands. **Sanaeha** is a dimly lit, intimate bar with chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and one of Phuket's better live bands. The crowd is a mix of hip young Thais, tourists and expats. It's normal to buy a bottle of spirits, share it among friends while listening to the music and letting the conversation flow. If drinking spirits is not your thing, the caipirinhas and mojitos are among the best cocktails in town.

Thai Hua Museum



The clock tower on Phang Nga Road





Crowne Plaza Phuket Panwa Beach Resort

BACKGROUND Opened in the summer of last year, this is the second Crowne Plaza property in Thailand and the first resort under the IHG business/meeting hotel brand.

WHAT'S IT LIKE? The lobby is open-air and looks out to sea, and the design is elegant and understated, with subtle Sino-Portuguese touches that reflect Phuket's heritage. There is a sandy strip right in front of the resort, and some of the tables at Italian restaurant Patio are only steps away from the beach. A big lawn hosts yoga and Muay Thai lessons for guests, and there are two pools – one round and another rectangular – open to all guests, and an elongated one accessible directly from the private patios of the pool loft suites. Hallways to the rooms, though, look a little bare – they would benefit from more plant placements.

WHERE IS IT? Although the property is named after Panwa, the area in which the celebrities' favourite Cape Panwa Hotel is located, it actually lies along the Makham Bay, which is much closer to Phuket Old Town (about 20 minutes' drive away) and the tourist precinct of Patong Beach (about 30-45 minutes' drive). From the airport, it takes close to an hour to get here. The area is surrounded by residential areas, and I could hear prayer calls from time to time from the nearby Muslim neighbourhood.

ROOM FACILITIES My 70 sqm Grand Sea View Room faces the bay and features a private terrace. The big windows allow ample natural light during the day, and the décor is simple, with white tiles juxtaposing wood-panel flooring. There is a framed art piece featuring Sino-Portuguese porcelain ware (the sink is also in a similar style), and otherwise furnishings are streamlined, mostly in dark wood and neutral colour tones. There are universal sockets around the room – one by the simple but functional work desk, and two others above

the nightstands. There are three telephones in the bedroom area but none in the bathroom. My minibar was empty – I was told that I had to either order from room service or buy my own provisions from nearby stores, but I was also told that the hotel was reviewing that policy.

RESTAURANTS AND BARS

Other than the aforementioned beachside Patio, there is also Mosaic by the poolside, where breakfast as well as à la carte Thai and international dishes are served. The head chef used to work for The Sukhothai Bangkok. There is also the lobby lounge, a poolside bar at the other end of the green lawn and a delicatessen. Everything that I sampled at the resort, from antipasto to *tom yum*, was authentic and of good quality.

BUSINESS AND MEETING

FACILITIES A ballroom called Luna Terrace seats up to 220 in theatre style, and there are also two small boardrooms – all have views of the bay.

LEISURE FACILITIES There is a small but reasonably well-equipped gym (open 24 hours), and the Thann spa that feels like a little sanctuary by itself.

VERDICT It's nothing over-the-top, but this resort is very comfortable, and the location is suitable for vacationers who like a tranquil beach but still want accessibility to town.

TESTED BY
Reggie Ho

HOW MANY ROOMS?

224 rooms and suites.

HIGHLIGHTS

The bay view and the great settings of the restaurants, especially Patio and Mosaic.

PRICE

Internet rates for a one-night stay in a King Grand Sea View room over the weekend in mid-April start from THB6,400 (US\$214) before tax and service charge (non-refundable).

CONTACT

8/88 Moo 7, Sakdidech Road, Vichit, Phuket, tel +66 76 302900, www.crowneplaza.com

- 5 RESTAURANTS
- 3 POOLS
- FREE WIFI
- 24-HOUR ROOM SERVICE
- SPA
- 3 MEETING ROOMS

All bars on Yaowarat Rd and most in Phuket Town close at midnight, and late-night bars come and go, but **Sofa** and **Sofa Boutique** on new Dibuk Rd continue to thrive. Sofa tends to be rammed with a mainly Thai crowd huddled around tables in the dark while listening to a live Thai band. Sofa Boutique, located next door, pumps out techno and hip hop to an eclectic crowd. Both bars are open until the small hours. ■

Phuket Pochana: Open 6am-2pm. Located along Wirat Hong Yok Rd.

The Gallery Cafe: 106 Rassada Rd; tel +66 76 211 775, +66 89 103 7000

Heritage Trails: For more information on prices, and booking, email Chaya at heritage.th@gmail.com

Uptown: Chanachareon Rd, Talat Yai.
Expo: Open 10am-9pm on Tilok-U-Thit 2 Rd.

Ocean Shopping Mall: Open 10am-10pm on Tilok-U-Thit 1 Rd; tel +66 76 223057

Wua Art Gallery: Open 10am-10pm every day. Located on 95 Phang Nga Rd.

The Drawing Room: 56 Phang Nga Rd.

Thai Hua Museum: 28 Krabi Rd, Tambon Talat Nua.

Suay: 50/2 Takuapa Rd, Talat Nuea; tel +66 87-888 6990

Belgian Brasserie: 18 Rassada Rd, T. Talandnua; tel +66 7621 0511

Sanaeha: 83-85 Yaowarat Rd; tel +66 81-536-1377

Sofa and Sofa Boutique: 2/13 New Dibuk Rd; tel +66 76 233118

