

Who's setting the benchmark for 'chicness'?

When the all-pool-villa hotel, Phuket Pavilions, opened a few years back, one of its key positioning points against larger, upscale competition was 'no welcome drinks, no buffets and no tan line'. Meet the sexy and provocative world of design and boutique hotels where size really does matter and small rules.

Looking back at the evolution of these types of hotels, the emerging tide shift was clearly the entry of Twin Palms. The hotel launched successfully without the advantages of a beachfront location or the backing of a large international management chain. It couldn't even boast having pool villas, yet the hotel created a buzz in the local community as well as among visitors, who raved about its unique design and how it reflected their lifestyle ambitions. The hotel became a screaming success eliciting a league of return guests, while its occupancy and average-rate performance was envied by many of the island's elite-brand hotels.

Page forward into more recent times and scroll back into the Greater Phuket landscape where hotels such as Aleenta, over the bridge in Phang Nga, and the Sarojin in Khao Lak, have wooed investors and guests by presenting a stylish image. The developers came up with innovative designs and styles for the hotels, effectively enabling them to get approval from the bank.

Just last year, the stylish design of the Department of Architecture's Amata Lupaiboon at Sala Phuket captured the imagination of a new set of tourists, who are looking for personalised arrangements as opposed to cookie-cutter holidays.

A growing number of smaller properties are also developing in this niche such as Manathai in Surin and BYD Lofts in Patong and it looks as if 2009 will usher in even more.

One much anticipated project is the B-Lay Tong, located at the northern end of Patong Beach Road (north of Graceland and south of Novotel). This 125-key property is scheduled to open in the second quarter of 2010 and may well set a new benchmark in innovation and imagination. Sarinrath Kamolratanaipiboon, one of the B-Lay Tong project directors, has extensive experience with top design firm DWP in Bangkok. Having walked through the project last week, it's clear that when completed, this hotel is going to turn heads.

At the same time, other independent hotel projects, such as Sri Panwa with its headline-making outlet Baba, has generated huge interest among the



crowd from Bangkok and has become a destination unto itself through its focus on creating great events and unique culinary experiences.

Other properties set to enter this segment include the recently-opened Anantara in Mai Khao. Although this is a smaller institutional brand, its Bill-Bensely designs, the small number of villas and attention to artwork will put it in competition with larger luxury-pool-villa resorts like Banyan Tree and Trisara. In Kamala, Cape Sienna, set to open next year, is also carving out a unique offering. These additions will give visitors to Phuket much more freedom of choice.

Yet another entry about to start construction is the Langham Place Resort & Spa in Kalim. The resort is a 78-key, all-pool villa, designed by Clint Nagata of Blink Designs. As with its flagship hotel in Hong Kong, the new Langham will highlight original artwork and introduce a number of ground-breaking service innovations. Andrew Jessop, a mainstay at the Sheraton Grande in Laguna for a number of years, is co-ordinating the new ideas. It promises to be stylish and cater to a more demanding client base.

A rundown of boutique-design hotels wouldn't be complete without including the granddaddy of 'em all: The Yamu. This iconic Philippe Starck/Jean-Michel Gathy collaboration has been slow into the ground but is now looking at opening in 2009 and may give birth to the concept of Phuket Luxury 2.0. While the current benchmark for chicness is the Amanpuri, the Yamu will offer a truly new concept for accommodation options in Phuket and looks to be the cream of the crop in the years ahead.

On the institutional boutique front, there are rumours that Starwood's W Hotels is coming to Phang Nga, but no announcement has been made yet. Over the past year, a number of lifestyle brands have been taking hard looks at Phuket, including Per Aquum, Kor/Viceroy and Nikki Beach.

Globally, even the conservative market leader Marriott Hospitality, which has luxury brands such as Ritz Carlton and Bvlgari under its umbrella, is now spinning the 'Edition' brand in partnership with Ian Schrager who is the one of the godfathers of hip, modern-lifestyle hotels and was behind the success of the Morgan's chain.

To sum it all up, in the growing age of long-tail customised consumer experiences, even the staid hotel market is starting to take heed of demand and is offering a broader scale of options to give travelers more intimate experiences.

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