

# STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

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SO IT'S TIME TO PLAN THAT HARD-EARNED HOLIDAY GETAWAY ONCE AGAIN, ALBEIT IN TODAY'S ECONOMICAL CLIMATE WITH SOMEWHAT TIGHTER PURSE STRINGS. MAYBE AN ALL-INCLUSIVE PACKAGE AT A WELL ESTABLISHED RESORT IS THE WAY TO GO, OR EVEN BETTER, A RESORT CHAIN WHICH HAS THE ADVANTAGE OF OFFERING DIFFERENT LOCATIONS?

**T**here's always plenty of package deals out there, many of which can be very attractive. Going down the 'all-in' route can take the stress and exertion out of having to embark on the arduous task of all that planning, let alone research after a hard day's slog in the office! The desirable outcome is to have a great break and fully unwind – and there's no real reason why that shouldn't be achievable right from the outset. The idea of opting for an 'all-in' break can be so much more preferable to spending hours and hours trawling through convoluted information on the best places to stay and what's really on offer. Then there's the effort of sorting out all the logistics of getting there, with everyone dishing out different advice and directions!

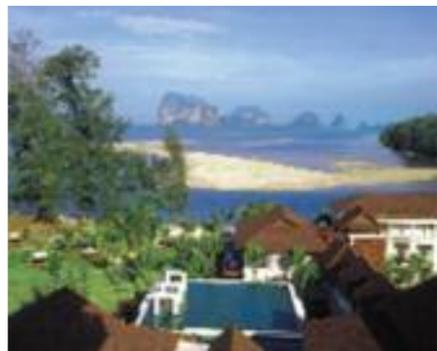
Make wrong decisions and you may end up wasting valuable holiday time by researching all the local facilities to see what's actually on offer once you're there - apart from wearing the unexpected extra costs which result. By making a confident booking your anticipation will grow which will make the world of difference to the weeks before your departure, as all the arrangements will be behind you!

Main: The Beach House at the Anantara Si  
Kao Resort & Spa.  
Bottom Lr: Overview of the Holiday Inn  
Resort Phi Phi Island; Small arrow crab in soft  
corals at Hin Daeng; The main pool of the  
JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa.



Top to bottom: Spectacular balcony view at the Anantara Si Kao Resort & Spa; Frogfish in the Mu Koh Similan Marine National Park; The Garden Pool also features a jacuzzi in the LE Meridien Khao Lak Beach Resort & Spa.

THE BEAUTY OF THE KHAO LAK AREA IS YET TO BE FULLY DISCOVERED. THERE'S NO HIGH RISE BLOCKS HERE; THE ONLY THINGS WITH NOTABLE ELEVATION ARE THE FOREST-CLAD HILLS WHICH PROVIDE THE BACKDROP TO PRISTINE BEACHES. THIS IS A VERY CONVENIENT LOCATION FOR ENJOYING SOME OF THE BEST DIVING IN THE COUNTRY – DAYTRIPS TO THE SIMILAN AND SURIN MARINE NATIONAL PARKS WITH THEIR STAR ATTRACTIONS OF MANTA RAYS AND WHALE SHARKS ARE JUST A COUPLE OF HOURS AWAY, .



Taking Thailand as the favoured destination, there's great food, loads to do and see and it's an economical and fun destination. As diving is high on the list of priorities, let's narrow the options to a selection of destinations in the south where the Kingdom has a wealth of resorts which have been pampering international and domestic visitors and their families for years. They must be getting it right, as many of the children return with families of their own!

The destinations include a handful of well-established beach resorts along the western coastline and on a few islands dotted around the Andaman Sea, all of which proudly flaunt a wide range of accommodation styles, dining menus and to add to the 'all-in' holiday experience, a variety of leisurely distractions such as spa treatments, tennis courts, cooking schools, cultural tours, baby sitting facilities and childcare centres. At the top of the list, and commonplace at all the resorts listed here, on-site dive centres managed by one of the top local dive centre chains, Sea Bees Diving, suitably selected for their high level of safety standards and all round professionalism. If you have

any non-diving family members, friends or even youngsters who are sporty (read restless!), this is a great opportunity for them to get acquainted with the sport, as the resorts offer free 'try dive' sessions in their resort pools, conducted by a diving professional. Dive training too, begins here so any that get hooked can dive straight in to their training. Sea Bees Diving also own and manage their very own dive resorts called Palm Garden Resorts. One is on Phuket and the other in Khao Lak; both have fine restaurants, comfortable accommodation and cooling swimming pools – in fact, all you need!

Using Phuket as a base, there's loads of terrific nearby diving opportunities for all experience levels and a good selection and variety of sites to visit. There's walls, fringing reefs and wrecks with marine residents and frequent visitors of all shapes and sizes, enough to satisfy the most demanding of critter hunters and high voltage dive enthusiasts alike.

The Amari Coral Beach Phuket overlooks Patong Bay from its secluded location on the southern headland and is as good a place as anywhere to consider staying. The resort's 197 rooms and suites are spread over 68 acres. Two pools keep guests cool and three restaurants keep them watered and fed with Italian and Asian menus. The Breeze Spa offers massage, body, and facial treatments which it presents as a simple yet innovative 'Mood Therapy Treatment' concept which will put a bounce in your step and a smile on your face!

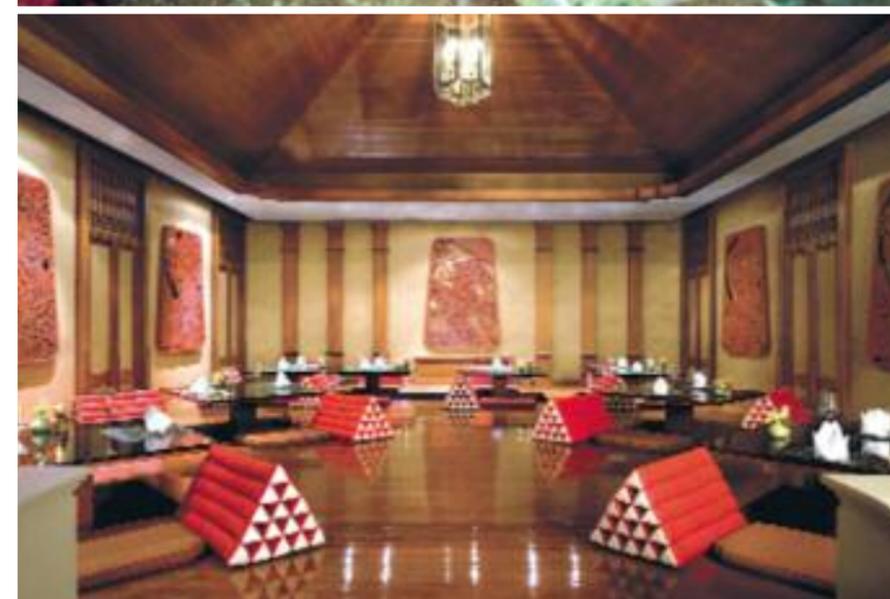
Another worthy alternative is the JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa on Mai Khao Beach. The resort boasts 265 ocean facing rooms with some of the suites having their own 18m swimming pool, outdoor whirlpool and private deck. The Mandara Spa provides traditional and western spa treatments with a special emphasis on Thai-style

massage and beauty processes. For the more energetic is a health club and fitness centre, two tennis courts plus three swimming pools to cool down in afterward the exertion. Restaurants include a steak and seafood grill, Italian, traditional Thai and the Kabuki Japanese Cuisine Theatre, which marries Japanese cuisine with a sense of theatre. The chain also has a fine sister resort, the JW Marriott Khao Lak Resort and Spa in Khao Lak, just an hour's drive north of Phuket International Airport.

Also worth checking out is the Le Meridien Khao Lak Beach and Spa Resort on the beachfront and its six restaurants, all with different styles of menus. There's plenty of distractions during the day to while away the hours including a spa, tennis courts, a mini golf course and driving range, yoga and Tai Chi on the beach and, for the highly active, Thai boxing classes. To ensure you can really relax, the resort's family complex features a Kids' Club complete with kids' pool with water slides and games area.

The beauty of the Khao Lak area is yet to be fully discovered. There are no high rise blocks; the only thing with any notable elevation are the forest-clad hills which are the backdrop to pristine beaches. This is a very convenient location for enjoying some of the best diving in the country – daytrips to the Similan and Surin Marine National Parks are just a couple of hours away, with their star attractions of manta rays and whale sharks. There's also plenty of macro encounters right on Khao Lak's very doorstep on the *Boonsung* wreck.

The Phi Phi Islands have been attracting divers to their teeming reefs for decades and to meet demand, the islands' facilities have been expanded and upgraded, as has the choice of accommodation. The Holiday Inn Resort Phi Phi Island at the southern end of



Laem Tong Beach may well be away from the hustle and bustle of Ton Sai Bay or the tourist amenities of Loh Dalam, but it's rich in facilities and due to its secluded location it keeps a welcome distance from the crowds. There's also wifi for those not quite able to completely go it alone! Two swimming pools refresh guests while both restaurants serve local seafood and International dishes, either indoors or beachfront alfresco.

This last destination will suit those who like to get off the beaten track but still enjoy their creature comforts. It's only an hour south of Krabi International Airport and there's fabulous diving on the cards including the open ocean sites of Hin



Top to bottom: Snorkelling around the reefs in Phi Phi can be very rewarding and colourful; Traditional Thai style restaurant in the JW Marriot Khao Lak Resort; An educational and refreshing dip in the Sea Bees Palm Garden Resort pool.

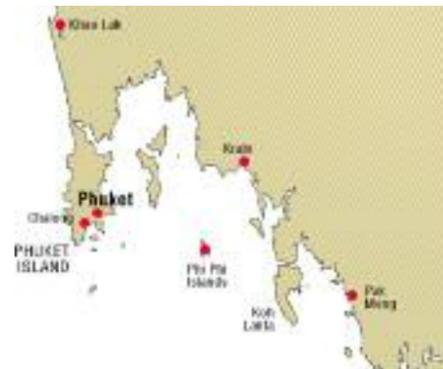


Top to bottom: The beachside La Gritta Italian Restaurant at the Amari Coral Beach Phuket; More beachside dining, but this time at the Holiday Inn Resort Phi Phi Island; Lots of space and fresh air, very commonplace on a Sea Bees day trip boat; Catching the eye of a squid on a night dive on Khao Lak's Boonsung wreck.



Daeng and Muang, along with some other less regularly dived spots in the Koh Rok group. The Anantara Si Kao Resort and Spa is the place to stay and not just because it has an exclusive beach club and superb restaurant on the island of Koh Kradan. Back on the mainland the resort has open-air balconies and airconditioned dining rooms serving Italian and seafood savouries as well as a host of enjoyable distractions and activities to enjoy between meals.

No matter which of the destinations mentioned here takes your fancy, a little bit of research should point you more or less in the right direction. Once there, the hardest thing you'll have to do will be getting up in the morning in order to enjoy all that's on offer – both below and above the surface!



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Sea Bees is the multiple winner of the "Golden Dolphin Toucher Award" for "Best Dive Centre in South-East Asia" and the only dive centre in Thailand with a 5 Star ISO 9001 certificate. Sea Bees Diving is also a "Go Sea Operator" and member of Quality Divers.