

Love is IN THE AIR



Thailand's Koh Samui has created a romantic niche as the island of choice for those in search of Cupid's arrow. *By* GARMEN JENNER.

The night promises all the drama of a tropical storm as palm trees bow to the tumultuous weather gods holding court.

Serene skies make way for the approaching monsoon season as the rain pounds sideways into Manathai Koh Samui's restaurant Waterline. Everyone takes cover as the wait-staff prepare the restaurant for the impending deluge.

There was a time not that long ago when fine dining wasn't a feature and Koh Samui was famed instead for its fishing communities and coconuts.

Now its staggering beauty fringed

by aquamarine is a drawcard for loved-up couples.

There're plenty more civilised ways to get soaked, like the glorious Crystal Bay whose name derived from its insanely pretty waters. Join the bevy of bikini-clad pretties emerging from the sea swanning into Rock Salt Restaurant perched on the water's edge for plenty of raw and green options. Choeng Mon, near the Big Buddha on the north-western tip of the island, is popular for the sophisticated while the soft sands of Bophut Beach give the calves a workout leaving you completely

justified to flop until you need refreshment from the nearby Fisherman's Bay.

Forget the trashy full moon parties and instead explore Koh Phangan's gorgeous beaches in virtual seclusion just 20 minutes away by ferry. Hire a taxi from the ferry terminal or grab a map and hire a boat or bike to explore at whim. Two stand-out beaches are Bottle Beach in the remote northern end adorned with powdery white and turquoise hues, and if time and energy permits, climb the steep track for envy-inducing Instagram views. From Bottle Beach, walk or take a longboat to Thong Nai Pan Beach, which has two heavenly sandy bays lined with rustic eateries. There are plenty of water lapping-bungalows which is just as well since you're not going to want to leave. Lingering on the island demands a gorge on Parisian fare at the candlelit

L'Alcove with dessert at the nearby Organic Chocolate House; aka the Naked Chocolate café – and I dare you to ask why.

Safari Boats offer tours and private charters of Koh Phangan, Koh Nang Yuan (believed to be the most beautiful of them all) and Angthong Marine Park, featuring an archipelago of 42 islands, including monkey island which has no monkeys but claims its name from its gorilla shape. Snorkel through schools of sea bass and pilot fish, take an invigorating climb to Emerald Lake, go sea kayaking and swimming through spectacular outcrops.

Back on the mainland, it's time to

create more memories and pad thai, green curry chicken and green papaya salad at the Island Organics cooking school. Even if you're no connoisseur, it's worth spending time with owners Cameron Hanson, a renowned photographer, and his gorgeous wife Lat on tours through her abundant garden which she impressively transformed from a barren plot.

Now, back to our stormy dinner at Waterline Restaurant. Inspired by his Italian roots and items randomly washed ashore, chef Roberto Bellitti creates a whimsical menu, like Liquid Underwood depicting the ebb and flow of the tide with a mushroom and herb soup with mascarpone, or Sweet and

Salty constructed of river prawns with calamari, mango and coconut salsa.

Each dish was a revelation.

Following the island's lead, the Manathai is unique in that it's the only colonial-style hotel on Samui. If Graham Greene were still alive, I could picture him penning a novel here just as he wrote the Quiet American in Hanoi's Hotel Metropole. Recently opened in July 2015, the suites, decorated in soft blues and greens with four-poster beds and wood panelling, are luxurious in their furnishings and size.

Manathai is located in Lamai, an area known for its French expat community, and there are several French bakeries and a cheese shop nearby which could be the makings of a decadent beach picnic.

Or be enchanted at Villa Chocolat, a café serving coffee and chocolates handcrafted to the tunes and twirls of the ballet school on the premises.

Just as the island prides itself on its pristine condition, it naturally attracts couples attune to keeping their bodies aligned and healthy. The insane views of Jungle Club, Gecko Bar and June's Art Café are just a few hotspots dishing up organic

CHIC CASTAWAY below, the sumptuous Lamai Suite at the Manathai Koh Samui.



freshness, as do Vikasa and the Yoga Garden along with yoga for the bendy. Day spas are plentiful, and Tamarind Springs is conveniently close to Manathai, offering all kinds of heavenly treatments among lush vegetation.

So if you're in need of a love nest, look no further than Samui. **MQ**
Carmen Jenner was a guest of Manathai Koh Samui – manathai.com/samui. Rates start at approximately \$100 per night. For more information on Koh Samui go to kohsamui-tourism.com