



PHUKET FOUND

YOU GOT TO KNOW
WHEN TO HOLD 'EM,
KNOW WHEN TO
FOLD 'EM, AND KNOW
WHEN TO GET OFF
THE BEATEN TRACK,
SAYS **SHANE CONROY**.

Every story you've ever heard about Patong is absolutely true. The home of Phuket's colourful nightlife, this is a place where Thai ladyboys entertain gawking crowds, you can pose for a happy snap with a live iguana on your head, and ping-pong enthusiasts can see the game played in an entirely different way. It's hot, crowded, loud, as seedy as Tom Selleck's moustache... and absolutely brilliant.

It's well past midnight when I find myself sitting at one of the multiple open-air bars on Patong's main drag, Bangla Road, playing Connect Four against one of the city's very friendly bar girls. Once upon a time I was a whiz at this childhood game, but my rusty skills are no match for her wily talents. As she empties out my wallet, 100 baht at a time, a fellow traveller warns me that these girls make their living gambling against dimwitted tourists and are practically unbeatable. I bet him a beer that I can win at least one game, which costs me another 700 baht – plus an ice-cold Singha – before I cave in and admit that I am, indeed, nothing more than a dimwitted tourist. When she whips out her Jenga set, I know it's time to leave.

Patong has an addictive energy, and while the weird and wonderful action of the town is a humorous novelty, there's much more to Phuket than the bachelor party stories.

If you're daring enough to negotiate the island's loose road rules, hire a scooter from one of Patong's many vendors, or jump in a tuk-tuk (it's wise to agree on the fare before you get in) and take the 30-minute drive to Rawai, a relaxed region on the southern tip of the island and home to its best beaches.

Unbelievably, this tropical paradise is ignored by most tourists who visit Phuket. Plant yourself on a public sun lounge on the wide, white sands of Nai Han Beach or dip your toes in the warm Andaman Sea. Take a short walk to the north and you'll find Ao Sane, a small, hidden beach that is popular among the locals, or drive a few minutes south to the rocky reef at Ya Noi for some spectacular snorkelling.

Buddhism is Phuket's major religion. To get an authentic taste of this harmonious belief system, take the 15-minute drive north from Nai Han Beach to Chalong on the east coast. Here you'll find a magnificent tiered temple, Wat Chalong, where you can witness local worshippers praying, offering gold-leaf donations and even setting off fireworks to scare away bad luck. Remember to remove your shoes before entering. ▶

From left: Scare away bad luck at Wat Chalong temple; Kick back with a cocktail on Patong Beach; Cool down with a dip in Phang Nga Bay; Discover the limestone caves via sea kayak at Ka Panuk.

“ Plant yourself on a public sun lounge on the wide, white sands of Nai Han Beach. ”

WHERE TO STAY

PATONG :: MERCURE PATONG RESORT

Located in the heart of Patong, this hotel is a four-star property, but it's hard to figure out where they lost the fifth. Don't miss an authentic Thai massage at the in-house spa (like Patong, it's a weird and wonderful experience. Call +66 76 302 100 or visit www.mercurephuket.com).

NAIHARN :: ALL SEASONS

It almost seems criminal that you can score a room at this luxury resort for only A\$30 a night. On the scenic southern tip of Phuket, the resort is just a stone's throw from the island's longest beach. Call +66 76 289 327 or visit www.allseasons-asia.com.

CHALONG BAY :: NOVOTEL PHUKET BEACH PANWA

Enjoy a cocktail at the resort's Sunset Pool Bar and you'll be greeted by a scene worthy of a postcard. Opt for an alfresco breakfast with views of Chalong Bay, then stretch out beside the impressive pool and the bartender will cater to your every whim. Call +66 76 393 300 or visit www.novotel.com/asia.

When the hunger pangs strike, make your way further up the east coast to the small village of Laem Hin, a 30-minute drive from Chalong. Head to the pier on the edge of town and take your chances aboard a well-travelled traditional longtail boat for the five-minute cruise to Kruvit Seafood Raft. This rustic restaurant is somehow kept afloat in the middle of Sapam Bay by styrofoam blocks and looks like it has been hastily nailed together by blind monkeys. However, the spectacular food makes up for any aesthetics the venue may lack. Expect to be the only tourist on board as you dig into fragrant cockle soup with lemon grass, deep-fried chilli fish and lashings of the best crab you've ever tasted – all washed down with ice-cold longnecks of the local beer.

After overindulging at Kruvit – trust me, you will – chances are you'll be ready for some calorie-burning action. The friendly guides at SeaCanoe get your arms pumping on a sea kayaking adventure to idyllic island Ko Panuk. Board the spacious transfer boat at Ao Po Pier, a 45-minute drive north-east from Patong, and take the 60-minute cruise alongside the soaring limestone cliff faces of Ko Panuk and settle into your kayak. With torch at the ready, you then paddle through a series of tiny caves that penetrate the outer cliffs of the island to reveal a prehistoric

interior of glassy bays to explore. There's a good chance the noisy native monkeys will reveal themselves – I saw three on my trip – and you may even spot some bats hanging from the roofs of the caves. Meanwhile, a generous spread of freshly prepared Thai delicacies awaits hungry kayakers on the mothership, as does a cooling swim in Phang Nga Bay.

Back in Patong, I finally take leave of the Connect Four magician to join a crowd of people who are cheering on a ladyboy engaged in an energetic impersonation of Marilyn Monroe (if Monroe had exercised a secret fondness for purple wigs). It may have cost me some cold, hard cash, but I've learnt that the golden rule of getting the most out of Phuket is to never bet against the locals. Rather, follow them to all the best spots. 🍻

Getting there :: Pacific Blue flies from Perth to Phuket and V Australia flies from Brisbane or Melbourne to Phuket. Blue Holidays offers return airfares to Phuket, eight nights' accommodation at Hotel Ibis Patong Phuket and breakfast daily from \$1,370pp.* Book at virginblue.com.au/holidays or call 13 15 16 (in Australia) or 0508 13 15 16 (in NZ). *Departing Sydney. Twin share. On sale until 31 January 2010 for travel until 31 March 2010.

From left: Try the crab at Kruvit Seafood Raft; Relax on a sun lounge and have a chat with the locals; Play a game of Connect Four with the girls on Bangla Road; Do some laps of the large pool at Mercure Patong Resort.