

Travel journalist Jared Ruttenberg was invited to Thailand to celebrate a momentous change in legislation and sun soak on White Lotus Season 3's dreamy island.

BY JARED RUTTENBERG

# A TASTE OF THAILAND



**THAILAND FOR ALL**

In January, Thailand made headlines as the first Southeast Asian country to pass laws allowing marriage irrespective of gender. This marks an unabashed celebration of the right to love whomever one chooses and formalises that ceremoniously and legally.

Since the recent announcement, two thousand couples have registered to tie the knot. This also furthers Thailand's longstanding welcome to the world's LGBTQ+ community – prepare for some exciting destination weddings.

Alongside media from around the globe, I accepted the Tourism Authority of Thailand's invitation to celebrate a visual feast at the W Bangkok, featuring a stirring address from the Governor of Tourism, Thapanee Kiatphaibool, herself.

**ONE NIGHT IN BANGKOK**

The city bustles effortlessly, exuding an almost dizzying excitement. Modern Bangkok sprawls, with glass skyscrapers reaching into the sky in every direction.

Since our itinerary included this celebratory stopover, the W Bangkok was the obvious choice for accommodation. Since 1998, W Hotels has been redefining norms and creating spaces that championed inclusivity. There's a contagious playfulness throughout, from communal areas and rooms with chic city views to vibrant dining options.

Adjacent to the hotel is Sky Beach Bangkok – the city's highest bar. At a staggering height of 250m from the 64th floor, the skyline is invigorating – no wonder that one night in Bangkok and the world's your oyster.





**ISLAND BLISS IN KOH SAMUI**

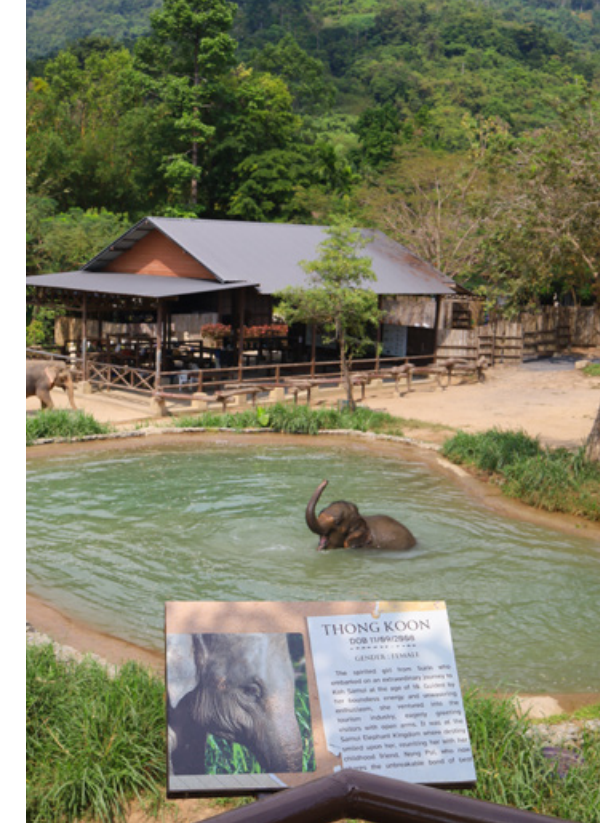
At 229 square kilometres, the island is half the size of its popular sister, Phuket. With the recent release of *White Lotus* Season 3, filmed on the island, visitors are guaranteed to seek out the tropical paradise they've seen on screen.

Alighting the aircraft, we met the delightful Pong Srikhaisorn, a guide in the region for three decades. Very eager to show us the island, we set off, and thankfully, for a hungry traveller, our first stop was a cooking class.

Chef Keng welcomed us at a market where we were introduced to a range of local ingredients. Go Cook Samui offers a truly authentic experience as Keng teaches recipes his family has cherished for years. Your culinary efforts are, of course, rewarded by savouring your freshly made meals.

From cooking for humans to cooking for elephants! Elephant Kingdom Sanctuary stands apart from most similar experiences: here, elephants are revered and not exploited at Koh Samui's only locally owned ethical sanctuary. The rescued pachyderms come from across the country and now roam freely in a protected and rehabilitative environment. From elevated walkways, they can be safely observed – and if you wish, you can prepare a nutrient 'power ball' to feed them.

Needing some downtime, the W Koh Samui is one of the island's highest-rated hotels - and upon arrival, it's clear why. The sprawling resort begins at the beach and ascends the lush hillside, culminating in a pool terrace that's oh-so-Instagrammable.





The accommodations range from Oasis resort rooms to freestanding villas – impressively, every room features a private pool.

Unmissable is the AWAY Spa, the largest I've visited. It has dreamy solo and couples' rooms nestled in the forest, as well as the signature Japanese Namu Restaurant.

Refreshed, I took a short break from the beach to explore the island's dense forest – particularly the dual Na Muang. The lower waterfall is directly adjacent to the car park, while the higher one requires an easy 30-minute hike. At 80 metres each, they're natural sights to behold, and thankfully, refreshing swims are permitted at both.



Sticking to the forest theme, Pong led us to our final resort – the luxury Vana Belle (vana being Thai for 'forest' and belle French for 'beautiful'). Elegantly raised wooden structures capped with scarlet-tiled pitched roofs, the Vana Belle is a secluded oasis in the forest. Sitting in the reception, which seemed to float in the forest, the sounds of water replaced music, and under the traditional pagodas, the sense was total seclusion from the island's busyness.

A last-minute upgrade to a beachfront villa was the cherry on top (it does pay to be a Marriott Bonvoy member). From the master bed, loungers and wrap-around pool, we could endlessly gaze out at the coral-coloured water.

Having seen floating breakfasts on social media, I wondered if they were gimmicks or genuine. Taking the plunge, my friend and I ordered one. The experience? Irrevocably unforgettable. The tray laden with tasty choices floated comfortably on the water, allowing us to stand and eat or use the pool's built-in chairs. Champagne in hand and a postcard beach before us, this was tantalising Thailand at its best.

For help planning your trip, contact the Tourism Authority of Thailand SA office at +27 11 463 8195 or visit [fanclubthailand.co.za](http://fanclubthailand.co.za)

## WHERE TO DINE IN KOH SAMUI

### PAGE AT THE LIBRARY

The elegant and minimalist Library Hotel follows a literary theme. Start with a cocktail on the beachfront deck, then head indoors for the four-course tasting menu in the gorgeous dining room.

### COCO'S TAM

The vibey Coco's Tam offers elevated restaurant seating or rows of beach beanbags. At night, the moon rises ahead while fire poi dancers offer thrilling light shows.

### SEEN BEACH CLUB

This is 'the' place to be seen: free-flowing drinks, bodies pulsating to the thumping music, and beach club vibes around the pool. Monthly parties add to the fun; during the day, it is slightly more chilled, and in the evenings, a full party scene.

### KAPI SATAR

Koh Samui is also home to 12 Michelin-recommended restaurants – and Kapi Satar was our choice as an unassuming. The eatery also carries a Gourmand bib award for affordable dining, meaning you'll find with locals.

### PI BEACH CLUB

The location of Pi couldn't be more enviable – beachside, where a shallow sandbar links the adjacent Ko Fan Island. Dine directly on the beach, in the shade of the circular building or in the rattan cabins on the top story.

