

Beachfront birthday bliss

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October 22, 2010, 3:25 pm



It is two days before my birthday and I have just walked into a pool villa with a rock-star view of the beachfront at Chaweng on the popular Thai island of Koh Samui.

Here five-star resorts share the sand with a variety of accommodation, beach bars and restaurants. I'm here to stop, flop and shop. It was only a 50-minute flight from Bangkok and a five-minute drive from the quaint island airport at Koh Samui to my digs at Sareeraya Villas & Suites.

It sits at the top end of Chaweng where at neighbouring bars Bob Marley's brand of reggae, shisha pipes and Moroccan lounges add a bohemian feel and fireworks and floating lanterns still light the night sky even though they are supposed to be illegal.

Sareeraya has a more sophisticated vibe. "It's more Oriental chic than Thai," general manager Pius Luechinger says.

I am warmly greeted by senior sales and event manager Lissa Par, who from the outset slips into the habit of calling me "Miss D". In almost conspiratorial tones it's "well, Miss D" or "actually, Miss D". With an unaffected charm Lissa gives me the lowdown on Sareeraya and tips on Chaweng.

I'm escorted through a hip entry, past the pool and through wooden doors leading to my villa. Sometimes you just walk into a place and feel right at home.

The bedroom is spacious with natural wood finishes, gold accents and splashes of colour. It opens on to a deck with private plunge pool overlooking the beach.

The decent-sized dressing room leads into the fabulous bathroom, which is a three-way affair. The first section features a deep spa bath. Doors lead into an indoor shower and then another door opens on to an outdoor rain shower and garden.

We are at the quieter northern end of the beach but it's only a 10-minute walk into Chaweng's famed 5km main stretch of stalls, shops, restaurants, beauty salons and bars where you can buy everything Thailand is known for - cheap beachwear, jewellery, bejewelled thongs, sarongs and an array of bags that'd leave the most discerning designer shopper agog.

Lissa's recommendation of a boutique that sells great evening wear is right on the money and I walk away with a couple of fabulous frocks at a fraction of the cost I'd spend at home.

At early morning and sunset Chaweng puts on another kind of show as people of all shapes, sizes and race strut their stuff on the white sand. It's a palm-tree-fringed picture postcard at any time of day.

Koh Samui's many attractions include elephant riding, golf, sailing, snorkelling and diving. Temples, waterfalls and exotic nightlife are all easily accessible.

Sareeraya's Chefs Table restaurant offers a great buffet breakfast where you are most likely to meet other house guests but lunch and dinner are quieter because many head out to try the myriad dining options on the island.

I breathe in the delicious aroma of coffee grounds but I'm not in a cafe. Coffee and milk are being rubbed all over my body in a scrub to exfoliate, detoxify, soothe and nourish the skin. Raya Spa is across the road from the hotel. My 90-minute treatment began with a 30-minute eucalyptus steam to stimulate circulation and rejuvenate the spirit. The following day I returned for a wonderful 90-minute oil massage.

Travelling solo on one's birthday can be a bit lonely but the warmth of spirit that pervades Sareeraya ensured mine was memorable, with rose-petal strewn bed covers, flowers, a surprise chocolate cake and rousing rendition of the Happy Birthday song by staff.