

THAILAND

# LUCKY CHARM

Rejuvenate body and  
soul at a luxury resort in  
Phuket, an oasis far from  
the madding crowd

The beautiful gardens  
of the Sheraton  
Grande Laguna resort.

Words by Joanna Tovia



**LUXURY AND HARDSHIP**  
The lush oasis of Phuket's luxurious Sheraton Grande Laguna resort is a dramatic contrast to the island's bustling towns where locals try to make a living from tourism. Lilly, the Sheraton's elephant (*right*) leads a charmed life – hugging guests is her only task.



All of life's cares are supposed to be washed away when you go on holiday and this is true during a week-long visit to Thailand's Sheraton Grande Laguna resort in Phuket. It's not just the lazy days by the pool or the pampering at the spa that makes our days so carefree, however, as it isn't until we leave the idyllic resort for a day trip to Phuket Town and Patong, the main tourist areas, that we realise just how lucky we are to lead our privileged lives. In the face of grim surrounds and struggling locals, life's blessings become clear and any petty worries drift away.

Many of the Thai people who try to make a living selling cheap wares to tourists, drive tuk-tuks or serve holiday makers in the countless hotels dotted around the island, have an air of desperation about them that is difficult to ignore. Enter a shop and an assistant is soon glued to your side. "You like cushions? Very good price for you." Pass one of the many tailors displaying tired suits and dresses in their dusty windows and the response is similar. "You want to have a look, boss?"

"Not today, thanks."

"When, boss? Tomorrow?"

The people are unfailingly friendly despite their fierce desire for you to spend money. Our taxi driver tells us in stilted English that his wife is bored with him because all he does is work. He laughs when he adds that she is angry if he doesn't bring home a decent day's earnings.

It's difficult not to feel like a walking dollar sign as we stroll, in the sweltering heat and humidity, along the cracked, uneven footpaths (a lawsuit drawcard in Western countries for their stumble factor) past shop after shop selling the same things – T-shirts, thongs, sunglasses, trinkets and tattoos, all with little variation in design.

"You want taxi?", "You want eat?", "Just come and have a look!"

Cars and motorbikes whiz by, music belts out from restaurants, and garish shop signs beg for your attention. Various stenches fill the air ("It smells like elephant poo," our six-year-old announces) and bottles of petrol are displayed on milk crates for locals to buy to refuel their scooters.

At the edge of all this madness lie the warm waters of the Andaman Sea. Here, on the beaches, throngs of tourists bask in the blazing sun and cluster under umbrellas.

## ABOUT PHUKET

Phuket is Thailand's largest island and is connected to the mainland by a bridge. It suffered extensive damage and loss of life in the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami but there is no evidence of the destruction today. Tsunami detection buoys have since been positioned offshore to provide an early warning system. There are activities to suit every taste on the island, including tours to Ko Phi Phi Leh, where *The Beach* starring Leonardo DiCaprio was filmed; whitewater rafting and elephant trekking; scuba diving and horse riding. The FantaSea theme park is an extravaganza spread over 140 acres with a 4000-seat restaurant, theatrical show and carnival-style atmosphere. Direct flights to Phuket are available from Auckland, or via Sydney or Bangkok from Christchurch.

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## LAZY DAYS

*Clockwise from left:* Many of the Sheraton's rooms face tropical gardens and the ocean beyond; beachside dining at Gekko restaurant is a treat; the 323m-long swimming pool snakes its way through lush greenery to expansive lagoons and a swim-up bar – making it easy to find peace and quiet at any time of day.



When we arrive back at our hotel, about 20 minutes away, it is with a blast of good feeling. Life is in perspective and we have renewed appreciation for our good fortune at being able to come to this beautiful resort.

The Sheraton is one of five resorts in the Laguna district, a lagoon oasis located on the west coast of Phuket. All five resorts are owned by the one conglomerate so facilities are shared. A free water taxi leaves every 20 minutes and ferries guests between resorts, giving us access to 30 bars and restaurants and a choice of swimming pools and recreation facilities.

If it's rest and relaxation you're after though, there really is little reason to leave the expansive grounds of the Sheraton. With its 323m pool (the longest in Asia) winding its way between palm trees and gardens, it is a tropical wonderland. It also has a swim-up bar, volleyball net and its own private beach.

The sprawling nature of the place means it never feels crowded, even during the breakfast buffet when a horde of various nationalities descend upon the feast on offer. There's something for every taste: sushi, curries, salad, fruit, cereal,

bread and pastries and the makings for an English breakfast. We figure a big breakfast will mean we don't need lunch but all this lazing about makes us hungry again a few hours later and calls for further indulgence.

The resort is just as suitable for couples as it is for families. The Very Important Kids Club is a big hit for its batik painting and excursions to the waterslide at a neighbouring resort. Guilt-free us-time is ours for the taking.

An unexpected delight is the daily contact we have with two baby elephants, Lilly and Lucky, aged 3 years and 18 months. These friendly giants happily throw a trunk around guests for a hug, smack them with a kiss or go for a stroll by hanging onto the arm of a grinning child. Each elephant has its own handler and is untethered.

"Has she ever stepped on your feet?" I ask Lilly's handler, eyeing the elephant's tree-trunk legs.

"Many times," he smiles.

It's hot in Phuket, there's no denying it, and although some people are content lying in the scorching sun, some days we find it's even too hot to sit poolside under the umbrellas. Fortunately, the

spa has plenty of treatments on offer in airconditioned comfort and we keep our room a relatively icy 21 degrees. Our spacious room overlooks the tranquil lagoon and distant hills and its sunken bath and oh-so-soft sheets make it a restful retreat. There are much grander accommodation options on offer – some rooms have direct access to the pool and the exclusive multi-roomed villas are impressive.

There are plenty of dining options, but the Thai restaurant far outdoes their best attempts at cooking Western food.

It's hard to leave this heavenly escape but we go with re-energised spirits and without a care in the world. What's there to worry about when you are as fortunate as we are? 🍹

*For more details on the resort, visit [sheratonphuket.com](http://sheratonphuket.com)*

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Phuket, from Wat Chalong Buddhist temple to Hat Patong beach.