

Phuket is Thailand's largest island, but the otherworldly limestone formations that surround it are gold to filmmakers





THAI ISLAND DREAM

Alongside Bond and DiCaprio, **Phuket** has often played the role of paradise in the movies. Here's where to star in your own tropical epic.

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I was right there on location a dozen years ago as Leonardo DiCaprio waded ashore on Maya Bay.

Clockwise from left: Scenes from *The Beach* and *The Man with the Golden Gun*; a signature longtail boat

WHEN LEONARDO DICAPRIO, Tilda Swinton, and company landed on Phuket to shoot *The Beach*, they followed in the footsteps and boat wakes of the casts of the past Hollywood productions *Cutthroat Island* and the James Bond thriller *Tomorrow Never Dies*. Probably the best advertisement for Phuket's otherworldly beauty had come from an earlier Bond movie: *The Man with the Golden Gun* took rapt audiences on a speedboat chase around limestone formations that sprout like ethereal monoliths from the turquoise seas surrounding Thailand's largest island.

But *The Beach* was different; it didn't exploit dramatic Phang Nga Bay and Phuket's tropical foliage as a backdrop for high-tech action, but instead used the setting to portray the ultimate seaside hideaway. I was right there on location a dozen years ago as DiCaprio waded ashore on Maya Bay to a perfect crescent-shaped cove on Phi Phi Leh island. Dressed in white singlet, a cigarette dangling from his lips, Leo looked just like any other college-aged kid who'd come to the Phi Phi Islands seeking sun, fun, and perhaps a little mischief.

I was on assignment for a magazine based in Hong Kong, where I had lived since the early 1990s. But I also had a long history with this place of long-tailed boats. I knew that Phuket's sheer limestone rocks were called karsts; I knew the exact hue—a few shades lighter than teal—of

Phang Nga Bay; I knew the inlets and channels between Phi Phi and the bay's other tiny islands. And I knew that this place was indeed the perfect setting for the film version of Alex Garland's novel about a restless young man named Richard, aimless in Bangkok, who acquires a map that leads to a possibly mythical utopian community, ostensibly set on the world's most beautiful beach.

At the time of filming, 210-square-mile Phuket was still just a perpetually sunny place to rest a backpack and explore inland waterfalls and rich snorkeling opportunities. That was precisely why Danny Boyle, John Hodge, and Andrew MacDonald (the director, script writer, and producer behind the smash *Trainspotting*) had chosen this area for their adaptation of Garland's book. "We're trying to create that imagined paradise," confided MacDonald, who said they had scouted locations in the Philippines and all over Thailand before choosing Phuket. "This was the perfect place to make the movie."

LIKE MANY ON the location site, I thought that DiCaprio, hot off his *Titanic* success two years earlier, would propel the island to global fame. "God, I hope not," Garland told me as filming began. "That would worry me," he added, "but I really don't see Leo fans jumping on planes and coming to Thailand."

Of course, that's exactly what happened. Not right away and not solely due to Leo's charms (though the film scored an impressive \$154 million take at the box office), but Phuket is now safely on the Asia tourism map. On my first visit, in the early 1990s, tourism had cracked a million visitors for the first time, a tally that quadrupled by the end of the decade; 13 million visitors are expected in 2015. It's easy to see why. Phuket is reliably paradisiacal, with long stretches of beach, idyllic isles nearby, smiling locals who are hospitable to a fault, and some of the best food in the world.

Growth has not only brought more visitors, but maturity and a marvelous increase in options. There is probably no place in Thailand, or anywhere in Asia, with such a diverse stock of tourism opportunities, allowing Phuket the versatility to satisfy almost any holiday whim. Whether you want beachcombing, canoeing, shopping, cooking, or culture—Phuket delivers.

THOUGH ITS TOURISM and movie stardom are a relatively recent phenomena, Phuket has been a landing point of visitors for centuries. With its endless sheltered bays, it became part of the trading route of European vessels on spice voyages to Asia since the 17th century. Phuket's first boom came as a source of tin in the 19th century; the influence of Dutch, British, and especially Portuguese traders still

can be seen around town. Local teacher and guide Kritchaya Na Takuathung, a Phuket native, notes that the Portuguese influences in the cuisine and architecture link this spot with other historical Thai-Malay trading ports like Malacca and Penang.

For history, she suggests Soi Romanee as a great place to start. The quaint lane is lined with old shops in the distinctive Sino-Portuguese style. Waves of Chinese came to Phuket to work the tin mines, and many set up stores, housing their families in the rooms above. Nowadays, you'll find rows of shop-houses, many restored as pubs and restaurants, such as the century-old Baan Klung Jinda on Yaowarat Road.

In contrast to DiCaprio, who obsessively studied his coordinates, the real pleasure of this historic area is to wander around without an agenda, losing yourself in the atmosphere. Still, it is worth seeking out Jui Tui, a colorful Chinese shrine off Ranong Road. Dedicated to Kui Wong In, a Taoist vegetarian god, it plays a central role in Phuket's annual Vegetarian Festival. The shrine of Kui Wong In suggests how important homegrown cuisine is to this culture.

Phuket's food is so distinctive that the island is currently bidding to be named a UNESCO City of Gastronomy. Thai cuisine is world-famous but Phuket's cuisine includes many rich curries of the Malay Peninsula, such as Penang and Massaman (a blend of chili, peanuts, and potatoes in thick

coconut cream sauce), and an island favorite, crab coconut red curry. Raya Restaurant on Deebuk Road is renowned for this dish, served with thin noodles. Another worthy eatery is Siam Indigo, which joined two Chinese shop-houses to create a chic restaurant. Try the spicy-sweet mango salad and the duck curry, but leave room for desserts like ginger creme brulee and coconut caramels.

When I come to Phuket, I'm inevitably drawn back to the Boathouse, and always leave satisfied. The place is a landmark on one of the island's best beaches, Kata. Its gourmet French and Thai food makes it one of Thailand's top tables, buoyed by a 750-bottle wine cellar. Last year, the Boathouse was revamped, adding a new beach club, with day-use cabanas, spa, and a second restaurant. Called ReKata (as in, the rebirth of Kata), this new venue features the unique raw and slow-cooked recipes of South African chef Bryan Burger. A kitchen magician, he makes a pasta of shredded zucchini, and raw breads without flour or yeast. "People have this stigma about raw food," he says, "but they will be surprised. Healthy can be tasty."

OF COURSE, LIKE DiCaprio's on-screen character, most visitors are drawn to Phuket because of its beaches. Kata winds up on plenty of posters, its long stretch of white sand trimmed with palms, a small islet perfectly centered in the bay. Patong, to the north, is the Waikiki of Phuket, busy with activity, watersports, and rows of shopping stalls; strolling Thai vendors

offer everything from sarongs to massages right on the sand. A quiet sanctuary, the old quarter known as Phuket Town still hums with the stately authenticity of colonial-era mansions and rows of 19th-century shop houses and courtyards; the picturesque area was the hub of activity during the island's prosperous days of tin mining.

Beaches further north and on the west coast of the island, particularly Surin and Nai Yang, offer lovely coastal scenery without the crowds. Nai Yang is good for snorkeling, with some vibrant coral reefs not far offshore. Bang Tao is a stunning extended run of white sand with plenty of high-rise development, along with good beach bars and restaurants. Just a ten-minute walk south, however, gets you back to the relaxed atmosphere that marks the best of Phuket's beach attractions.

John Gray, an Emmy Award-winner for his documentaries on sea canoeing around California and Hawaii, knows this place better than most. He relocated from Hawaii to Phuket decades ago, lured by the astounding natural beauty and teeming wildlife. "Paddling in Phang Nga Bay means spying egrets, eagles, kites, and kingfishers among eerie mangrove forests," he told me, noting that a special thrill comes from slipping between islands through tight passes accessible only by canoe. "This is a trip you will remember your whole life," Gray promised.

I asked him if those narrow channels appear on any map of Phuket. Gray took a movie star pause, and then, in this so-called Land of Smiles, he let slip an especially mysterious grin. ✪



Clockwise from left: a row of longtail boats; deep-fried prawns wrapped in angel hair noodles and chili sauce from the Boathouse; statuettes at the entrance at the Jui Tui shrine.



PHUKET

FEATURED CRUISE

ms Rotterdam: 25-Day Arabia & India Discovery; 25-Day Gems of Arabia & India

Available January and March 2014

PORTS OF CALL: Athens (Pireaus), Greece; Safaga, Egypt; Salalah, Muscat, Oman; Mumbai (Bombay), Marmagao (Gao), India; Colombo, Sri Lanka; Phuket, Thailand; Penang, Port Kelang, Malaysia; Singapore

FEATURED SHORE EXCURSION

Phang Nga Bay: Cross the Sarasin Bridge, and then board a boat to cruise the blue waters and towering limestone outcroppings. If tides are right, visit a village on stilts. After lunch, visit a Buddhist cave temple, then shopping for local goods.



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