

Samui and Phuket in luxury bout



The Residences at W Retreat Koh Samui, set to open in the beginning of August, is one of many recently opened hotels that is giving Phuket luxury offerings a run for their money.

IN THE Hindu religion, the Banyan Tree is revered as a sacred symbol and is sometimes referred to as the "wish-fulfilling divine tree".

That might have played a role in the branding the hotel chain that now goes by the same name.

When Ho Kwon Ping started the chain from its flagship Phuket property in 1994, there was little thought that the fledgling island-born brand would one day become a revered hospitality group with properties spanning the globe.

This month, the Banyan Tree Samui opens its doors in a quiet, private bay located near popular Lamai Beach. With 78 pool villas and a stunning wellness center and spa called The Rainforest, the property looks to give its Phuket forbearer a run for its money.

Leading Thai conglomerate TCC Group is the owner, with Banyan Tree now diversifying into more management contracts in order to accelerate its expansion plans.

General Manager Fredrick Arul is outspoken about the quality of the new hotel and points out that the enormous hydrotherapy pool and themed spa flaunt innovations that are the object of envy from many hoteliers who have inspected the site.

Another Koh Samui property which is about to open the lifestyle buzz is the W Retreat, which is set to start taking guests at the beginning of August.

Strong design elements with leading design firms MAPS and P49 have created a series of "WoWs" in this unique cutting-edge symphony of style and passion.

With 79 fabulous pool villas



PROPERTY WATCH

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combining high-tech mood lighting, personal espresso machines and a wine bar, there is more than enough to keep guests occupied in this posh hideaway.

Perhaps the most stunning site of the sprawling resort is the

SIP Lounge Bar, where the ocean converges on two sides, or perhaps the WooBar, which offers just the right blend of music, mood, drinks and food.

Samui's hotel scene is undoubtedly taking things up to the next level on the back of these two exciting new hotels. With its already considerable brand concentration that includes Four Seasons, Six Senses, Renaissance and Langham, as well as an upscale Conrad in the pipeline, there is certainty that Phuket's leading hotels will have plenty of competition in the days ahead.

In spite of the "luxury guilt" that seemed to accompany the gloomy days of recent global financial crisis, there appears to be demand returning to the sector, which will push many of the established players to look at either refurbishing or upgrading if they want to remain competitive.

While branded residences languish in Phuket, it's difficult not to come away impressed from what's happening on the larger hotel stage and somehow feel some anguish that Phuket is lagging behind.

Sunset still brings people out in droves and quality oceanfront entertainment venues, such as Beach Republic and Nikki Beach, continue to woo those who wish to see and be seen. Comparing Samui and Phuket remains a mixed drink in a land of straight shooters, but there are plenty of reasons to be impressed with the innovation in the top-end luxury on a small island in the gulf of Thailand.

Of course, the combination of Phuket and Koh Samui's offerings could spell greater things for Thailand in general. After all, pairs beat singles in a game of cards.