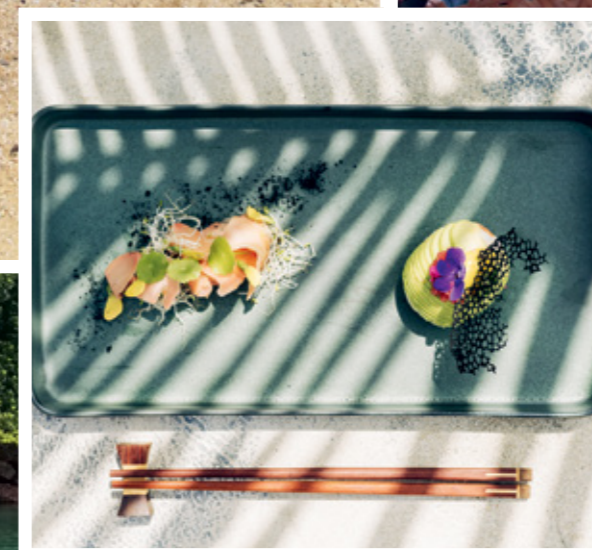


IT'S ALL YOURS

A private villa estate near Phuket that rewrites the rules of authenticity and exclusivity, *Emily Baxter-Priest* discovers why Àni Thailand should be on everyone's holiday hit-list



Clockwise from above: Every aspect of Àni Thailand has been designed to maximise the breathtaking views of Phang Nga Bay, from its arrival pavilion and 43-metre saltwater pool to the suites that survey the landscape; A chic private beach picnic on an 'undisclosed' island; Breakfast in a rice paddy field; The open-sided Dining Sala; Swimming Macaques feast on bananas; One of Chef Yao's masterpieces



Does Siri speak Macaque," laughs Andrew, as our long-tail boat cuts through the water of Phuket's National Marine Park, waiting patiently for the famous 'swimming monkeys' to make an appearance. We each try calling them, failing in our primate communication. But then, there's a rustle amongst the leaves as a Macaque launches itself off a rock, into water, and swims towards our boat. It is followed by 20 or so others. We grab sun-ripened bananas, peel back the skin, and throw bite-size pieces into the sea. The marauding Macaques, now by the boat's side, hungrily shove the banana into their mouths, filling every available space, taking the coveted rewards back to the island to feed their families. Watching them swim with such ease, and to get so close to these wild creatures, is a privilege. And we sit in awed silence, as we flit across the water back to our own island, Koh Yao Noi, mesmerised by encounter.

Extraordinary yet unscripted encounters are

a matter of course for guests staying at Àni Thailand, an exquisite private hideaway sitting in the east corner of Koh Yao Noi (meaning Small Long Island), where the crystalline waters and limestone karsts of Phang Nga Bay gift a mesmerising backdrop.

Koh Yao Noi is one of 42 islands in Phang Nga Bay, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and also one of the most unspoiled, its deserted beaches, protected mangroves and picturesque paddy fields a haven for wildlife and those, like us, seeking respite. Potter around it in a Tuk Tuk or perhaps on two wheels, and watch as fishing villages, rubber plantations and farms whistle by, the colourful roofs of terracotta-tiled houses – painted everything from turquoise to orange to purple – stirring artist's emotions.

Hidden behind some rather unimposing gates, Àni Thailand is the island's best-kept secret. Founded by ex-Wall Street trader Tim Reynolds, Àni Thailand opened in 2016 as part of Ani Private Resorts – the world's first private resort collection.

Born out of Reynolds' passion for art, hospitality and philanthropy, the now four-strong collection's focus is on forging genuine connections and offering a sense of exclusivity within a space that feels like home. And once inside Àni Thailand's gates, you too are part of an elite few fortunate enough to experience Àni's magic.

Akin to a private estate, every single element is beautifully thought through at Àni Thailand – from the umbrella, sunscreen and beautiful baskets of home-made food provided on your longtail boat ride over from Phuket, to the welcome ceremony you receive on arrival, complete with jasmine lei and an ice cold, herb-infused drink.

The resort has just eight villas, sleeping 20, with a staff of 22... The ratio is certainly in guests' favour. And the staff is wonderful. The GM Andrew is a permanent fixture throughout, accompanying us on our trips and regaling us with both curious and amusing stories of the island's history. The rest of his team waits quietly in the wings, anticipating your next move or request before you. By the end of





Clockwise from above: Chart a course around the surrounding islands of Koh Yao Noi; The views from the terrace of a Pool Suite, soaking up the limestone karsts and islands of Phang Nga Bay; So many places to sleep, relax and recline, from the bed, to the plunge pool, to a deep soak bath



my four days, the whole staff feels like family, one that I'll miss but promise to return to at some point.

A Pool Suite becomes my home, a beautiful sea-facing villa with private terrace, vaulted ceilings, vast ensuite bathroom and a deep bath overlooking my own plunge pool. There's a double daybed on the terrace for post-lunch snoozes, a snack and mini bar that is replenished every day, and pillars hand-painted by a local artist. There's also an incredible sense of calm to it that allows for the best sleep I've had in a long time.

There's a natural flow to the resort, steps winding from the arrival pavilion down to a glass-walled Living Sala, which overlooks a 43-metre mirror-like saltwater pool, the rolling lawn – which plays host to elegant lunches, dinners and shows – to the dining sala, and onto the water beyond. Round another corner sits the Àni spa, with 10 treatment rooms, a rooftop meditation area, and a masterfully curated list of treatments each designed to bring balance to the mind, body and soul. One of the greatest discoveries is a waterslide that brings out the big kid in everyone, twisting its way from the second floor of the spa, through foliage to a plunge pool at the bottom. I challenge anyone not to find pure joy in such a childish activity.

Days here unfold only as you want. There's much to do or very little. One interesting feature about Àni Thailand is that it's all-inclusive, meaning everything from your personalised meals to spa treatments to tailored excursions are all part of the package – no hidden costs, just exceptional experiences.

One day we jump in the resort's Tuk Tuk to criss-cross the island in search of a rubber plantation, where we meet Mah, the owner of a five-acre plot of rubber trees. She has 350 trees to 'tap' each day to release the latex, which is then collected and once dried yields a rubber. Her family has owned the plantation for generations, and she proudly shows us how to tap the tree ourselves. After, we spend a few hours wandering around Koh Yao

Noi's town centre, befriending cats, sipping various caffeine concoctions and buying colourful curios from the many stalls. We finish the day drinking cocktails at the Longtail Boat Bar and feasting on seafood, dumplings and *pad see ew*, as traditional Thai dancers from the local community perform before us.

We rise early each morning for sunrise yoga and Muay Thai on the lawn, with the limestone karsts as our audience. Another morning we set off for a bike ride around the island, before traversing through the centre of the island, to find old houses, strolling chickens and monkeys playing hide and seek in the hedgerow. One of the most beautiful activities we do is a visit to a rice paddy field for breakfast. We're ferried to our destination in rather chic motorcycle sidecars, deposited at 'The Noodle Shop At Rice Paddy Field' restaurant, where we're fed eggs, noodles, sticky rice, spring rolls and exotic fruit. There's a buffalo grazing in the distance, cranes on the lookout, and the smell of rain in the air.

The rest of our days include Thai cooking classes with Chef Yao – the mastermind behind every exquisite dish we eat – singing bowl meditation, batik painting and garland making. We also spend a few hours in the company of Dan, who runs Àni Art Academy and mentors students from the local community. He's fiercely passionate about his role in shaping Thai artists, with the knowledge that the academy offers a life-changing opportunity for many, and "sends them out the door ready to take on the art world."

It's really these cultural immersions that makes the Àni Thailand experience so extraordinary. Because, beyond the exquisite service and attention to detail, it's the memories we make that stay with us long after we leave. And the team at Àni has curated such an enriching programme that really explores the cultural richness of the island.

The exploring is hungry work, and we return famished but never for long. Chef Yao is a genius in the kitchen, and we're treated to sushi, Thai,

Italian, BBQs, picnics, and a few others in between, each dish meticulously presented, using flowers and herbs from around the resort. The flavours are phenomenal, and we each lament the day we leave for fear of never eating this well again.

Every day brings something new at Àni Thailand, but two experiences, really stand out... One evening we take a longtail boat out at sunset to a neighbouring sandbar, where we sip champagne and 'walk on water' as the sun goes down. The sky burns a vibrant orange, as sleepy clouds slip off for the night, and we become nothing but hazy silhouettes. And the other, a beautiful beach day where we're taken to a private cove that has been set up with parasols and an elegant picnic table. The team is waiting as we arrive, a vision of white uniforms cut against the dramatic limestone rock façades. We swim, sleep, eat and are thankful for the privileged position we've found ourselves in. This place feels secretive, special and something only Àni guests are privy to. We return to the resort salty, sun-kissed and incredibly content.

There's plenty more to do at Àni Thailand, but part of its charm is the element of surprise. I don't want to stay too much, because the magic only truly unfolds once you're there. The hand-picked activities, the cultivated relationships, the intuitive TLC... It all collides to create something unique, mindful, authentic and exclusive. While there may be other luxury resorts on Koh Yao Noi, nowhere is quite like Àni Thailand.

We all walk away from our trip with our hearts full, our memories well-stocked and friendships that we know will last. A fitting tribute to somewhere very special indeed.

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