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# Pining for Phuket

Phuket is the ideal destination to introduce children to the culture and beauty of Thailand, writes **JULIE MILLER**.



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It's the stuff daydreams are made of. White-sand beaches lined with coconut palms, gin-clear water and an exotic, colourful culture thrown in for good measure. As a tropical destination, there's so much to like about Phuket; add to that the affordability and convenience of direct flights, and it's little wonder it remains the most popular Thai island for Australian families.

## An island of many hats

Phuket is a large island, with many moods and facets. First-time visitors are often surprised by its scale and density, and the location of your accommodation may dictate what sort of experience you have.

If you're longing for a tranquil and remote barefoot experience, look to far-flung parts of the island such as Cape Panwa in the south or Mai Khao Beach in the north. Or, for a lively holiday in the thick of the action, check out the beaches of Kata, Karong or Kamala.

At these lovely west-coast towns, where jungle-clad mountains dip into shimmering, emerald bays, you can enjoy the sophistication of restaurants, cocktail bars and good shopping with white-sand beaches (thankfully now sunbed free) to boot.

Don't let Patong's reputation for a colourful nightlife prevent you from visiting. During the daylight hours it's a fantastic beach town and shopping hub that's well worth experiencing.

**Holiday Inn Resort Phuket** on Patong Beach is a fantastic accommodation option for families with a kids' club to rival all others.

## Kids rule!

In fact, in the kids' club department, families are certainly spoiled for choice in Phuket.

Decided by you as the best family resort in Thailand in the 2014 *Holidays with Kids* Readers' Choice Awards, **JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa** at Mai Khao Beach offers an incredible array of activities, from a circus school to kids-only cooking classes, while the popular **Centara Grand Beach Resort Phuket** has its own water park.

For the ultimate in baby-friendly accommodation, it's hard to beat **Sunwing Resort Kamala Beach**. This modern beachfront resort features 30 Happy Baby Studios, providing all the necessities for life on the road with an infant, including a pram, baby bath, change mat, play mats and high chairs. Fenced garden areas offer direct access to one of seven pools, while mascots Lollo the Giraffe and Bernie the Bear bring smiles to tiny faces during their daily poolside appearances.

## Outdoor exploring

Taxis in Phuket are expensive (think Sydney prices), which may limit your travels beyond the vicinity of your resort. Make use of free shuttle services offered by your resort to shopping and entertainment hubs.

Renting a car is also a good option, allowing you the freedom to explore some of the lesser-known sights of the island, such as the spectacular Big Buddha, jungle waterfalls, mountain viewpoints and the traditional cityscape of Phuket Town. Be warned, however, the traffic can be manic and is not for the faint hearted! Luckily, Australians already have an advantage over the majority of international visitors, already well practised in driving on the left side of the road.

*“Jungle-clad mountains dip into shimmering, emerald bays.”*

## PHUKET TO-DO LIST:

If you've got a spare few hours in Phuket, try one of these activities:

### 1. Gibbon Rehabilitation Project

*This sanctuary rescues captive gibbons and prepares them for release into the wild.*

### 2. Splash Jungle Water Park

*Water slides, a wave pool and an aqua play pool make this a fun day out for the whole family.*

### 3. Baan Teelanka

*A three-in-one attraction, featuring an upside-down house, a maze and the Chamber of Secrets.*

### 4. Dino Park

*A fun mini-golf course at Kata Beach, featuring life-size prehistoric creatures.*

### 5. Spa treatments

*Thailand is famous for its day spas, and the whole family can indulge in foot massages, pedicures and Thai massages from around \$10 a session.*

### 6. Snorkelling

*The best locations near the shore include either end of Kata Noi Beach and Paradise Beach.*



01 Phang Nga Bay © Tourism Authority of Thailand 02 Elephant Hills 03 Crazy fun at Baan Teelanka 04 Holiday Inn Resort Phuket loves caring for its young guests 05 View from Centara Grand Beach Resort Phuket

## Monkeys and mudskippers

To see Phuket at its best, it's essential to get into (and onto) the water. The sea is at its calmest during peak season (December to April). Between May and October, the surf is pumping, making it less suitable for small children.

Most boat excursions leave from the eastern side of the island. From here, you can take day-trips to Phi Phi Island or spectacular Phang Nga Bay, where limestone cliffs jut vertically out of emerald-green waters.

As one of Thailand's natural wonders, Phang Nga Bay is often packed with tourists, but still an essential stop on any itinerary. A Hong by Starlight tour with **John Gray's Sea Canoe** reveals a more intimate side to this marine park, experiencing it on eco-friendly inflatable kayaks.

This is the perfect activity for all ages – adventurous yet safe, entertaining while still being educational. Experienced guides paddle guests through mysterious caves, emerging into a hidden paradise where cheeky macaques cling to branches and mudskippers scoot past. As evening falls, guests are encouraged to create their own *kratongs* – a traditional offering to the water deities – which are released on a starlit paddle through water sparkling with phosphorescent marine life.

Although best suited for children aged over seven, younger kids are welcome to join in, travelling on board the kayaks at their parents' discretion. I recently took my 11-month-old granddaughter on this tour, and she absolutely loved it, cradled in her father's arms and wide-eyed at the sights and sounds.

## Bathing with elephants

"Where can we see elephants in Phuket?" is a question I'm frequently asked. Unfortunately, it's a tough one to answer. There are several camps on the island but their reputation for animal welfare is questionable and it's certainly something to carefully consider.

About two hours north of Phuket Airport, however, is **Elephant Hills**, where guests can bathe and feed the gentle giants, which is much kinder than many tours by elephant-back and an ideal farewell to Thailand. ●

## THAILAND REPORT CARD



### ✈ Getting there

Thai Airways flies to Phuket from Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth.  
www.thaiairways.com

### 🏠 Stay

jw.marriott.com  
www.centarahotelsresorts.com  
www.sunwingkamala.com

### 📱 Do

www.johngray-seacanoes.com  
www.elephanthills.com