

International Living

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FEATURE STORY



So much more than an affordable place to live, Koh Samui is a serene, spiritual center.

The Most Livable Island in Southeast Asia

Bart Walters

The food. The people. The water." Jason Issacs, in a recent interview with *The Standard*, sums up the allure of Koh Samui well. Issacs spent seven months on the Thai island during the filming of HBO's *The White Lotus*.

Koh Samui's delectable local cuisine, warm hospitality, and majestic natural beauty have made it a go-to destination for film crews, the hashtag yoga set, and digital nomads worldwide.

I've visited countless beautiful islands in Southeast Asia. But once the novelty wears off, I start finding little things that prevent me from considering most of them for a long-term stay. It's too hot. It's too small. It's too expensive. I'm afraid I'll get bored. There may be practical reasons, like not enough shopping, or food choices... or limited access to good health care.

Yet Koh Samui, in the Gulf of Thailand, quashes all my objections. It's not just a picture postcard, it's a fascinating wonderland of Southern Thai culture and a diverse yet close-knit community of expats and locals. The laidback and surprisingly

affordable lifestyle seems almost too good to be true. So I dove deep for hidden warts... and came away nearly empty-handed.

Creative Inspiration Unlocked

The truth is, Koh Samui is tailor made for retirees, nomads, and freedom lovers from anywhere around the globe.

What I appreciate about Samui is the many social activities and opportunities for community involvement. You can join social or sports clubs, get involved in service organizations like Rotary, attend concerts and festivals, and participate in a dozen different sporting events. It's easy to be a social butterfly if that's your thing.

Alternatively, you can retreat to the quieter areas of the island for peace and solitude. For instance, I spent two months in a bungalow on the island's rugged west coast in **Taling Ngam**, where I focused on writing the second half of my first novel. It was the perfect atmosphere for inspiring creativity... I watched intense sunsets from my perch high up on the rocky cliffs... and my built-in alarm clock was a symphony

of birds inhabiting the verdant jungle. I enjoyed my afternoon coffee ritual every day without the intrusion of a single mechanized hum.

A unique characteristic of the expat community in Samui is the inclusiveness of all ages in group activities. Early one morning, I was enjoying a coffee at my favorite beachside cafe in Bangrak when I saw a group of paddleboarders cruising across the bay. There were at least twelve people in the flotilla, including a family of five with elementary school-aged kids, a spry sixty-something couple, three young Thai ladies I recognized from town, and one gentleman who was at least 75 but looked like he could run a marathon. They wore matching green "Paddleboard Exploration Club" T-shirts. I smiled and thought to myself, That's Samui in a nutshell.

A Place for Resilience and Renewal

Samui is renowned for its yoga, meditation, and holistic health centers. The island boasts a variety of reputable

COMFORTABLE LIVING FOR \$2K

Food costs on Samui can be as low as \$300 per month for a single person and \$450 for a couple. There's a lot of Western food available, which can easily drive up your costs. But there are plenty of choices for people who cook for themselves. It takes a little trial and error to find the best food values. Stay away from Chaweng Beach, and you'll be okay.

There's a small store on Ring Road in Bangrak I consider to be the most well-stocked independent grocery on the planet. From blue cheese to Spanish wine to Häagen-Dazs, there was nothing I wanted

that **BM Grocery** didn't have. What's more, they deliver!

Utility costs are pretty standard across Thailand thanks to government rates. But it's important to understand how you will be charged for electricity when you sign a lease: some buildings or landlords add on a few baht per kilowatt hour to cover electricity for the common areas of the building.

Generally, a single person could live comfortably in Koh Samui for \$2,000 per month. A couple could do the same for \$3,000 to \$3,500.

well-known night spots like Bophut Beach and places to relax if you people sound of The at Fie Ele the t the sams. hangout at the age in a rustic ne corner. It's eats and cheeses ver the world. The mpresive and it's a pend an afternoon noshing oyng a crisp sauvignon

many visitors, Chaweng Beach is paradise. Many expats relocating to Samui begin their journey in Chaweng, but most eventually prefer a quieter setting and move to other areas of the island. They return to Chaweng to shop, watch movies at **Central Festival Mall Samui**, or visit specific restaurants along the waterfront.

Locating yourself where you can enjoy the modern amenities—but escape the noise and traffic—is the secret to harmonious living near a tourism hotspot like Chaweng Beach.

Just south of Chaweng Beach lies a serene cove known as **Chaweng Noi** (Little Chaweng) on sparkling **Crystal Bay**. In stark contrast to its bustling sister to the north, Chaweng Noi is a tranquil setting with a cleaner beach. One of my favorite resorts in the area is **Vana Belle Luxury Resort** in Chaweng Noi. If you are visiting Samui, it provides an excellent base for exploring the rest of the island.

There are many beautiful neighborhoods in Samui, but these are my favorites:

Neighborhoods

Bangrak A little further inland on the west coast of the island, Bangrak is a quiet part of the island. It's perfect for those who want all the comforts of airport and the pier, and a nice white sand to chill out on. Most mornings, I enjoyed my first cup of coffee at the **Secret Garden** on Big Buddha Beach off the forty-foot grove Wat Phra Yai across the road. signaled that my broken. I loved the colorful come and Bangkok my

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expats and snowbirds inhabit gated neighborhoods south of the beach in Bophut Hills, mostly in condos or villas with breathtaking sea views over an endless swath of swaying coconut trees. As with most of Samui, the further inland you travel, the higher you go and the more spectacular the views become.

Not only is this area convenient for transportation options, but it's also near some of Samui's finest resorts. The Anan-

and Beach
the most
able area on
the island."

Bangrak is convenient and chill. Sit back, sip a sauvignon blanc, and watch the boats sail by.

© BART WATLES

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