

BT Living

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JOYS OF JOYO

Spiffy accommodation (top) and scrumptious food are a winning combination at Joyo (below), which is enjoying good demand on weekends

FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARTHUR LEE

PLEASURE ISLANDS

As holidaymakers eschew the lure of bright lights and big cities in favour of the 'barefoot luxury' style of travel – where proximity to nature, and social and environmental consciousness share priority with top-end accommodations – more entrepreneurs are developing private islands and transforming them into resorts that resonate with that demand. **By Audrey Phoon**

Pulau Joyo
Indonesia
www.pulau-joyo.com

WHILE discussions about private-island holidays have only recently been banded about by the average traveller, at least one place here has, for some time, been pre-empting that trend. Pulau Pangkil Kecil, to Singapore's south-east, is the grand-daddy of private-island resorts in the region, having been around for more than a decade, and it's been something of a repository for early adopters of the commercial private-island vacation genre.

Ironically, Pangkil was not developed for public use. Its owner, a shipping industry tycoon, had a collection of eco-friendly "driftwood palaces" – villas made from wood salvaged from the sea – built on the

island so that he and his family could stay and enjoy it. But when their visits became rarer, he decided to open it up for rental, and customers poured in – mainly hard-partying INSEAD students, he says, who are "completely bananas" and who now consider a stint at Pangkil "a rite of passage".

The island became so popular that the owner (who declines to be named) started having to make his claim a year in advance, which "got a little irritating". Fortunately, as tycoons do, he had a couple of spare islands to play with, and he decided to develop another, more exclusive one for himself as well as a different band of guests.

Enter Pulau Joyo, which lies some distance to the south of Pangkil in Indonesia's Riau Archipelago and is accessible

via the resort's speedboat from Bintan Resorts Ferry Terminal. This tranquil haven, which has been six years in the making and officially opened for public bookings last month, is surrounded by clear blue waters and has white sand beaches and lush tropical foliage – the "classic Robinson Crusoe island", as the owner calls it.

Which would be true, if Mr Crusoe had had his pick of vast wooden villas to dwell in, complete with plush beds and designer sheets, and a team of staff to do his bidding. Because that's what the upmarket Joyo has been furnished with.

Along the island's beachfront, the owner has built eight "palaces" (rates from \$999++ per night per villa for two people), some of which are treehouses and others, driftwood structures similar to the ones on Pangkil, only about three times bigger.

"They're built for giants!" he says with relish. Two are *joglos*, traditional Javanese houses that the owner found in a warehouse in east Java, which he rescued, dismantled, then painstakingly moved to Joyo to be reassembled, a process that took months.

"Oh god, it was a terrible thing to do," he recalls. "We should never have done it! I thought it was going to be easy and cheap, but how wrong I was. It took us at least six months, probably more."

"But anyway, they're lovely now."

It does seem that his efforts were worth the considerable trouble – the stately, restored structures look good as new and lend a Javanese touch to this part of Riau. And they're just as spiffy on the inside, as are the other villas, all of whose interiors were done up by the owner's sister, Deb-

bie Gardner. Mrs Gardner is the creative force behind the renowned Begawan Giri Estate in Bali, now known as Como Shambala.

Step in and you'll find yourself in a spacious, high-ceilinged area, deftly done up with hand-hewn wooden furniture, cool white loungers and pretty porcelain vases. Ivory-hued curtains tied back with cord tassels that are embellished with pearly conches sweep along four-poster beds, while the owner's personal artworks – mostly Indonesian statues and carvings – enliven desks, tables and walls.

Of course, it's not just luxurious digs that Joyo offers, but the entire lifestyle. Guests are welcome to charter the owner's 40-metre-long steel hull boat, the *Hang Tuah*, to gently explore the untouched beaches and reefs surrounding the island. Then there are massage services, a deep teardrop-shaped pool and – perhaps most importantly – scrumptious food.

Joyo's consulting chef is Heather Barrie (of the catering and cafe operation Fine Palate), and she's come up with a special menu of spa cuisine that, she says, was "inspired by the sense of well-being" that's to be found on Joyo. "When you get there, it's the sun, it's the sea; everything is so pleasing that I wanted to do food that is good to yourself," she explains. Which translates to light dishes with an Asian influence – sprigs of coriander, curls of red chilli and wafer-thin slices of ginger enrich the food here – that are made surpris-

ingly tasty with a minimum of seasoning and an emphasis on local produce.

There's a shrimp salad with rocket and chopped lettuce, for instance, that's given a lift with pieces of pomelo and a lovely and light calamansi-based sauce. And there are fat, crunchy baby cucumbers that have been hollowed out and filled with a medley of fresh crabmeat and Thai herbs. "Guests at Joyo need to be looked after in every sense," Ms Barrie says, "so the food has to match the aesthetics as well."

The entire Joyo recipe has taken off nicely, with the resort already quite busy on weekends. Now, it's working on drawing yoga and meditation groups for mid-week retreats, too. Shares Ms Barrie: "You may do yoga three times a week, but it's good to go on a longer retreat once in a while. You meditate, eat, swim outdoors ... you end up finding a better place for yourself."

Indeed, if you take her literally, that place could very well be Joyo.

Song Saa
Cambodia
www.songsaa.com

IF Cambodia is best known for its tooting, scootering cityscapes, not to mention one of the most visited tourist complexes in the world, Angkor Wat, one project will soon set the scales on a more restful keel.



ANOTHER CAMBODIA

Song Saa (main photo, above and left) combines luxury and adventure, proving that the country has a lot more to offer than just Angkor Wat

'WE BECAME THE SECOND COMPANY IN HISTORY TO OWN AN ISLAND IN CAMBODIA VIA A 99-YEAR LEASE, AND ARE THE ONLY ONES DEVELOPING.'

Rory Hunter,
developer of Song Saa

erating a business locally. "We were one of the first Western property development companies in Cambodia, which came with many challenges but also opportunities," says Mr Hunter. "And one of them was finding an island paradise."

This is how that discovery came about: the Hunters had heard about Cambodia's islands through a friend whose father was a fisherman. "He talked of virgin rainforests, white sandy beaches and oceans teeming with fish," Mr Hunter recalls. "It all sounded too good to be true, so we ... decided to charter a fishing boat for two weeks, circumnavigate the archipelago, and see for ourselves. From the first moment, we were hooked." On the final day of their journey, they arrived at Song Saa, were completely taken by the islets, and subsequently "asked the government the right question at the right time".

"We became the second company in history to own an island in Cambodia via a 99-year lease, and are the only ones developing," says Mr Hunter.

Because of that privilege, as well as the islands' pristine environment and rich wildlife, the couple have approached development very sensitively. Under the Song Saa Conservation and Community programme, which forms an integral part of the resort project, they've created the country's first policed marine reserve around Song Saa, are conducting surveys to gather data on the local marine life, and have taught local fishermen the benefits of marine conservation and more sustainable fishing practices. They're also engaging the surrounding communities by supporting activities that promote a sustainable livelihood, and will be setting up a hospitality training centre for people from the archipelago.

"Because we were the first to develop an island, we knew this came with a sense of responsibility to ensure we set as high a benchmark as possible, not only in the quality of our work, but also in how we engage and treat the local community and environment," says Mr Hunter. "Overall, we've aimed to create a business model that's triple-bottomline-driven – profit, people and planet – as opposed to the traditional model, where development is purely focused on profit, often at the expense of the environment and local communities."

Guests, then, can enjoy Song Saa guilt-free as they lounge about in its 27 luxurious villas (from US\$550 per night for doubles and from US\$40,000 per night for the whole island) after arriving via private plane from Phnom Penh or Siem Reap. Some of the accommodations are over water, others on the beachfront and yet others nestled within rainforest; all have been built with sustainable materials.

There's also a top-notch restaurant and lounge, for which the owners have flown in a chef direct from the Seychelles' North Island, and a raft of activities – such as champagne sunset cruises to other secluded islands, kayaking and rainforest hikes – are available should you choose to leave your villa.

It's a whole new window into Cambodia, and Mr Hunter says as much: "We also want to give our guests an experience where luxury and adventure are intertwined, showcasing that Cambodia has a lot more to offer than just the temples of Angkor."

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