



Time to pack a trunk

An exclusive development near Phuket could make the island the most luxurious area in Asia. **Mary Wilson** tests the waters

YOU'VE FOUND the film-set home, planned your never-ending easy days sipping cocktails on the talcum-powder beach, getting back to nature on the slopes of a mountain or whatever it is that takes your fancy, and then you discover that your chances of travelling to this idyll are about equal to your chances of winning the lottery to pay for it.

So, if you've chosen somewhere in Thailand, Bangkok's new airport, Suvarnabhumi (it means "golden land"), will be a welcome surprise. It will make access to the country a lot easier. But you might want to clinch your choice sooner rather than later. The new airport will, of course, tempt other visitors to put down roots in this former Kingdom of Siam.

For a start, there's Robert Seed, an international investor who now lives in Spain. He is building a six-bedroom villa on a plot he bought on a development on Barama Bay, a pretty island in Phang Nga Bay, three miles off Phuket's north-eastern shore, and on it. He hopes to use it in the winter and let it out in the summer.

"I reckon I will see much better value for money in Thailand than in Europe," Seed says. "The cost of living is much lower - a maid, gardener and servicing of the villa will be the same as I pay my maid in Spain

and I will be able to afford to have a skipper all the year round to look after the small yacht I intend to have there."

Barama Bay's 80 acres are covered in virgin tropical vegetation and, although some of this will be removed to make way for the 31 large villas being built, there will be plenty left behind, including most of the mangrove trees as well as ancient Ban Yan trees, cashew-nut, coconut, tamarind, mango, rubber, bamboo and coral trees. Within the natural harbour on the east side of the island, a 73-berth marina will be created, behind which will be the five-star Jumeirah hotel resort, with spa, private beach, tennis court, business centre and library.

The developers are aiming high. "It is destined to become the most exclusive and most luxurious resort in Asia, appealing to international jet-setters, who value both top-notch service and luxury facilities," says Anthony Franklin, partner and marketing director of the TGR Group, which is a developing Barama Bay.

"Immediately after the tsunami, there was a month of uncertainty. But there was no private property damage. Prices never fell and it was back to business as usual, with educated buyers realizing there was no damage to the market," Franklin has



A place in the sun: an elephant and its mahout walk among the parasols on Phuket beach



the highest backing for his optimism. The governor of Phuket, Udomsak Usamaramkura, adds: "The level of tourism was back to what it was a year after the tsunami. Phuket is far changed from the back packing paradise it was in the 1980s and we are trying to encourage more upper class tourism to make Phuket a world-class destination." This is the market the developers of Barama Bay want to attract.

Both the governor and the Thai government are hoping that the area will become as highly regarded for yachting as, say, Antigua in the Caribbean. And plans to boost its prestige are well on their way. Later this year, the Kings Cup Regatta will be held in Chalong Bay and in 2007, the Tasar World Championships are due to be held in Phuket for the first time.

This tropical cocktail is made all the more seductive by fuel costs 75 per cent lower than in Europe and tax-free luxury-yacht sailing into Thai waters.

These attractions are all fine, of course, but without the ease of access, they'd mean nothing. And that's where the new airport lands. It will eventually handle 100 million passengers per year with a capacity of 76 flights an hour.

This burgeoning market, which has been growing at between 15 and 20 per cent since the year 2000, looks likely to be a boom area for 2007. The peaceful coup at the beginning of the autumn had little effect on the market and even the 2004 tsunami hardly dented property prices, as the government set about rebuilding and repairing the damage in double quick time, getting the infrastructure back to normal in less than a year.

This could be the film-set you can actually get to... but if you want to beat the rush, you'd better be quick.



£1.6M

BARAMA BAY

Homeowners get a 10-year lease at the marina, family lifetime membership in the Blue Canyon Gold and Country Club on Phuket and a golf car - the island is car-free. Plots from one to five acres with several designs of villa. Prices to £3 million
 Contact Aylesford International, 020 7351 2383, www.aylesford.com



£122,719

HUA HIN

Guti Kiri is a 70 one and two bed complex of villas with pools and spa
 Contact Colliers CRE, 020 7487 1978



£169,000

COCONUT ISLAND

148 villas at The Village, 500 metres off shore near Phuket
 Contact The Village, 00 66 76 239 724



PROS

- Good medical care - cheaper than the UK
- The culture is one of warmth and gentleness. Tourists are welcomed
- Excellent golf courses at half the price of those in Europe
- Property prices going up by 6 per cent per annum
- No tax on boats/yachts brought into Thailand and cheap fuel

CONS

- A foreigner cannot buy property freehold
- The language is hard to learn and impossible to read, although English is understood in most tourist areas
- Away from the main resorts, the infrastructure has a lot to be desired
- The traffic in Bangkok, where most people fly to, is horrendous
- 13-hour flight from UK and time difference of five hours

INVEST? 7/10