

PHUKET – RED MOUNTAIN, BLUE CANYON & MUCH MORE...



A Thai Pad in Phuket

Just like golf, buying property in an emerging market is a risk-reward business, reports **Peter Swain**

ON THE DAY IN AUGUST 2008 WHEN MID-handicapper Bruce Harris was due to transfer £100,000 into Thai Baht to buy his dream condo on the island of Phuket, mobs took to Bangkok's streets and the local currency plummeted. He was faced with a dilemma – push on or pull out.

Thailand has been attracting golfers for years. Last year, 818,000 Brits visited the country, with a fair number playing a round or three. Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Hua Hin and Pattaya all have good clubs, but if there's a single holiday destination with an enjoyable variety of great courses, it has to be Phuket.

As a British Airways purser, Bruce travels the globe – the world is his fairway. He and his wife Michele settled on the 30-mile long island of Phuket for the weather, food, beaches, and, of course, the golf.

They had decided to make a move on a condo costing about £150,000 at Chom Tawam in Laguna, a large gated estate with several luxury hotels, good security and in Laguna Phuket Golf Club at the Banyan Tree, a tranquil resort 18-holer.

“When we negotiated the price, the Baht was at 60 to the pound,” remembers Bruce. “The day the rioters hit the streets, it dropped



to 72, a depreciation of 20%.” As his condo price was quoted in local currency, it became 20% cheaper in pounds sterling overnight. But was it worth the risk?

Bruce decided it was, so stepped up, bought the apartment, and hasn't regretted it once.

Unlike the BA man, I had never played in Phuket, so when I travelled there a few months ago I enlisted as guide the splendid Mark Siegel of GolfAsian. Top of his list, and Bruce's, was the Red Mountain course, built in 2007. A deceased tin mine doesn't sound propitious, but the jungle has reclaimed most of it and the resultant mix of lakes, red rocky outcrops and forest is quite sim-

ply stunning (see the main image above).

English designer Jon Morrow has created 18 memorable holes with elevation changes, aggressive bunkering, several risk-reward challenges around water, and breathtaking vistas. The condition of the Paspalum fairways is immaculate, greens fast and clubhouse friendly. Part of the same club, Loch Palm is more forgiving but still a good challenge.

The other ‘must-play’ course on Phuket is the Canyon at Blue Canyon. Three times the venue of the Johnnie Walker, won most memorably by Tiger in 1998 after coming back from an eight-shot deficit on the final day, it's something of a



Blue Canyon boasts two ‘must-play’ layouts – the testing Canyon Course (above) and the less manic Lakes (above right). Marketing of fractional ownership at the Wintana project (right) is about to commence; a typical low-rise apartment block at Chom Tawan (below)



tropical West Course. Rather like Wentworth, several long wooded doglegs have downhill drives followed by uphill approaches to small, tricky greens.

As Mark warned me, it's also a walking-only course, so even with the compulsory caddie, it's a long, demanding round in the customary heat and humidity. In my judgment, any golfer with a two-figure handicap should think twice before attempting it. For good players, it's a blast. Its sister Lakes Course is altogether kinder.

The Nicklaus-designed Mission Hills nestles close to the cobalt waters of the Andaman Sea and features island greens, vast bunkers and a clubhouse spa to soothe aching joints and bruised egos. Another resort set-up, Phuket Country Club is the oldest course on the island, and features, in the horseshoe-shaped 10th around a lake, an unusual eagle chance for players who can accurately drive 200-plus yards over water.

Bruce Harris's local course at Laguna meanders through coconut groves with water in play on 13 holes. The greens have recently been rebuilt, but with generous fairways it's essentially a gentle warm-up round for headier local challenges.

The Harrises bought a well-equipped two-bedroom condo in a block of four with fast internet connection and a large pool in generously landscaped gardens, all just 200 yards from the beach. “We spend about 15 weeks a year there and rent it out in between – it's worked out really well,” says Bruce.

Chom Tawan now has 38 apartments and 12 spacious villas, selling mostly to ex-pats of whom there are 30,000 in Phuket. Advertised prices are between about £300,000 and £560,000, but in the current market, a 15% discount is realistic.

Right next door, the Banyan Tree Hotel has some incredibly ritzy L-shaped single-storey vil-



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GolfAsian / golfasian.com
 tourismthailand.co.uk
 Red Mountain / redmountainphuket.com
 Blue Canyon / bluecanyonclub.com
 Chom Tawan / tawanproperties.com
 Wintana / wintanahotelsandresorts.com
 Banyan Tree / banyantreeresidences.com
 CBRE / cbre.co.th

las, set in gorgeous gardens, built around their own private pools (as pictured opposite). With the services of a five-star hotel on tap, and outstanding rental income potential – upwards of £300 a night – the £1 million-plus price tag is reasonable by the standards of the island.

At a more modest budget level, and right next to the two Blue Canyon courses, the Wintana project aims to convert an existing hotel structure into a boutique resort, complete with jazz club.

£200,000 buys you 21 nights a year, plus about

an 8% annual return on capital. There's also a fractional offering starting at just £25,000. The 115 suites won't be ready for two years, they're still negotiating fees with the golf club, and the marketing drive hasn't even started, but it's one to keep an eye on.

Title in Thailand can be an issue. Foreigners can own outright 49% of a condo development, but individual fairway-side villas are likely to have your lawyer or accountant's name on the deeds, which doesn't appeal to everyone.

As well as new property, there are plenty of ‘re-sales’ on Phuket offering good value. CBRE are one of the local market leaders and always have a fair selection on their website. At the time of writing, they have several two-bedroom condos with access to pools and sea views in the region of £200,000, and a one-bedroom 800sq ft unit in a small development called Ocean Breeze for just £82,000.

A golfing break organized through Golf Asian is a good way of playing the courses and checking out the property scene. TAT, the Thai tourism people in London, are also very helpful.

There are potential pitfalls when buying in any emerging market like Thailand. Bruce Harris took the risk of buying in a politically volatile country, and has gained the reward. “In the local currency, the price of our condo hasn't changed much in three years, but as the exchange rate is now 48 Thai Baht to the pound, it's actually worth a third more than we paid for it. And my game's improving!”