Princess Sareeraya

Super **seafood BBQ** buffets at **Chef's Table**.

There are few people who come to Samui only once. There's an allure to our little island, and this brings people back again and again. It's partly the climate. It's connected to our rustic charm. It's a lot to do with the superb range of cuisines available here. But, even with all these things together, it's mostly because we're a lovely tropical island. And that means endless dining out under the stars – and particularly on the beach.

There are many wise managers and owners who understand this. And therefore there are lots of resorts and restaurants that will shift off their daytime terraces and create a whole new ambiance at the edge of the sea every evening. Most people who are visiting Samui do the obvious thing: they take a stroll along the sand each night to see what takes their fancy. But this is a process of trial and error – not every attractive eatery fulfils its promise when it comes to quality and service. But those people who've done this a few times (including the ones who live and work here) have narrowed their options down to a handful of excellent beachside restaurants. And one of these is Sareeraya Villas & Suites in the northern part of Chaweng.

'Sareeraya' means 'Princess of the Sea', and although it's positioned right on the main road, just across from the Samui International Hospital in North Chaweng, it's not an edifice which catches the eye. And deliberately so – it's a resort which is happy to understate its luxury. The frontage is unassuming; a high, plain grey wall with discrete gold titling. And the décor throughout is in the same vein: not exactly minimalist, but with a simple and uncluttered elegance that's offset by the sheer quality of the fittings and fixtures. As you stroll through reception towards the beach there is little evidence of the 36 suites and 13 pool villas– all 5-star quality throughout – which are discreetly located on either side of the main walkway. But there's one thing that will strike you right away, and this theme ties in again with the name.

The water-theme is echoed everywhere you go, from the gigantic wooden feature at the entrance, to the terraced layers of cascading lily ponds that reveal themselves as you go. Everywhere there's the gentle sound of tinkling water. Even making your way towards the resort's signature restaurant, 'Chef's Table', the route is gently overlaid with rivulets and ponds. And then, of course, as you near the restaurant, the nature of the sound shifts, this time to be woven into the whispering of the waves.

It's all really pretty, and it's all quintessentially 'Samui'; this is the reason you came here. But, as I've already pointed out, not everything that glistens is gold, and not every picture-postcard beachside restaurant lives up to its promise. This is simply not an issue at Chef's Table. Yes, the interior of the open restaurant is enticing: the slatted dark wood floor; the sculpted curves of the wall; the strong dark tables and chairs; the antique rattan fans and the warm, glowing lights. But this isn't where you're heading. Moving past this upper terrace you'll be guided onto the sand, where a veritable gourmet fairyland awaits. Although Executive Chef, Steven van Duyn, has created an outstanding à la carte menu, he's also put together a seaside extravaganza on two special evenings of the week.

These events happen every Monday and Friday. This is when you can indulge yourself in one or the other of Sareeraya's seafood beach barbecues. On Monday there's the Seafood Thai BBQ, followed by the Seafood Asian BBQ on the Friday. And it's fairyland in every meaning of the word. The dining tables are nestled together on the sand amidst pools of softly glimmering coloured lights. A little way away from this intimacy it's all business: the live cooking stations are clean and brightly lit, with the white-clad team of chefs scurrying to prepare your seafood and meat just the way you want it. (Yes, it's not only seafood, there are meat dishes, too.) And when it comes to the actual food itself, these are no ordinary offerings.

If you've ever tasted an authentic Thai recipe but made with prime, top quality imported meat or succulent cuts of chicken or duck, you'll understand what I mean. Some of the seafood is caught locally, the fish, for instance. But the best mussels come from New Zealand. And Chef Steven imports his scallops from America, although the king prawns, lobster, rock lobster, blue crab and soft-shell crab all come from the Andaman region around Phuket. There are soups and salads and nibbles and finger food. Plus several sorts of rice, prepared in different ways. And all you do is decide on what you want to begin with, select it, ask one of the chefs to cook it, pick and mix a couple of plates of whatever takes your fancy to go with this, and then return and sit back down. A few minutes later your seafood (or prime steak) will be brought sizzling to your table.

The Friday night Asian BBQ experience runs along much the same lines. Although, here, there's a more indulgent selection of dishes to pick from. There's a wide choice of both Japanese and Chinese offerings, together with a selection of various popular Thai platters. But, as with all the cuisine prepared at Chef's Table, the recipes might be traditional but the quality of the ingredients isn't! This isn't just Thai or Japanese 'food' – it's all taken up a notch to a whole new gourmet level. Plus, of course, if you come along with the family or your children, you can always opt for one of the à la carte menu items rather than the full buffet barbecue option.

It's unlikely that you'll accidentally stroll past this culinary event – Sareeraya isn't in the centre of the bay, after all. But it's easily within walking distance, only about ten minutes along the sand and even less if you stick to the road. And that's a small concession to make for dining with royalty. After all, not everyone gets the chance to sit-in with the 'Princess of the Sea'!

Rob De Wet

For reservations or further information, telephone 0 7791 4333.
www.sareeraya.com