

5-STAR IN THE VILLAGE

Everyone goes to Fisherman's Village, but those in the know keep walking – **to Hansar!**



It's one of the island's main attractions. It's busy most of the time. But on Friday, it gets hectic. That's when they have one of the best 'walking streets' on Samui. Everyone's there looking for bargains or seeing the sights. Stalls pack the streets, there are performers and live bands playing – there's a tantalising carnival atmosphere throughout. Happily, there are many bars and restaurants along the strip, as taking all this in can be thirsty work. Food, too. You're spoiled for choice when it comes to eats. But, right at the end, almost un-noticed amongst all this fun, sits Hansar. And that's where the locals head when they need to take a quality break. The facilities are superb and the service, world-class. The spa suite is the height of luxury and yet with serious programs of holistic well-being, too. And, going by the simple name of 'H Bistro', the restaurant has become something of a legend since it opened.

It's worth mentioning that there are actually two restaurants here. H Bistro, as already outlined, takes up the lower floor of the two-storey block, butting up right against the beach road of Fisherman's Village. About as close as you can

get to the sea without being actually in it, and with a great open-sided view over towards Koh Pha-Ngan. The upper floor is the laid-back Chill Lounge. Although this was initially seen as a kind of 'meet 'n' greet' venue, it quickly lent itself to an alternative dining area to H Bistro beneath. Whereas the lower dining area is more traditional, with sturdy wooden tables and dining chairs, upstairs there are big comfortable sofas together with day beds and low tables, and the waiter service from downstairs means that you can enjoy your meal as well as being, literally, very laid back!

Executive Chef, Stephen Dion, is a very modest man, preferring to beaver away like an artist in his garret behind the scenes, creating new gastronomic works and tweaking old favourites. That's not to say he's any kind of hermit; on the contrary, he's often to be seen talking quietly with his guests and greeting new diners. But it means he's the last person who'd ever stand up and shout about his skills – no doubt one of the qualities that previously prompted His Majesty the King of Jordan to recruit Stephen to be his personal chef. The menu here is quite superb,

being distinctly a light, clean bias towards French-Mediterranean cuisine, but with an added emphasis on seafood. In this case, that means live lobster shipped-in from abroad, or live razor clams and langoustines from Scotland, oysters from Japan and mussels from Australia, depending on what's in season. Plus, naturally, Japanese Wagyu and Australian corn-fed beef.

"I like to feature seafood," Stephen observed, "because it's what most people seem to want. Obviously, it's because we're an island. But it's also a great favourite of mine. So as well as the locally caught items, I'm always keeping an eye out for something unusual or interesting. One of the current specials is the amazing yellow fin tuna. It's darker and firmer than you'd expect, and the taste is fuller. Likewise, the swordfish is from Sri Lanka, and it stays really delicate and moist."

But to my mind one of the most fascinating sections of the menu at Hansar can't be claimed by Stephen at all! It's the Thai menu, courtesy of Chef Boonson. And if you enjoy Thai food, then this is an absolute must. It's not fancy, there are

no pretensions to 'fusion' or other such fads, but it's special on several counts. Firstly, it's all made with quality, prime ingredients, unlike general Thai cuisine. And the difference that a plump corn-fed chicken or an imported cut of beef can make is simply startling. And second, the sauces and pastes are all Khun Boonson's own recipes – again, using imported or top-quality ingredients. The combination of these two aspects makes the à la carte Thai menu really something to sample. But there's an extra, added attraction, too.

Titled the 'Discovery Menu', it's a set meal for two people, beginning with 'Yam Talay' – seafood soup. But, in keeping with the gourmet approach, what you actually get is 'seared Thai Gulf sea prawn, squid and mussels, together with tomato, red chili, celery and spring onions, in a spicy seafood sauce'. There is then a similarly excellent 'Tom Kha Gai' (coconut soup) followed by a choice of either 'Pla Kapong Neung Manao' (steamed sea bass) or 'Zee Clong Kae/Moo Phad Prik Thai On' (slow-cooked lamb or pork ribs in garlic). The dessert is 'Thai Gluey Tord' (batter fried bananas with maple syrup)

and a choice of tea or coffee to finish. If you love Thai food but have never had it prepared and presented like this, then this is where to go to discover a new dimension!

However (and this depends on your view of life!) I've saved the best until last. The very chic beach bar is running a Free Flow Mojito evening every Monday night. There are a dozen alluring fruity flavours to go for, and the cost is just 450 baht per person, for as much as you want to sup. It kicks in at 7:30 pm, and you can wiggle your toes right through until 9:30 pm. Plus, come with four people and one person drinks for free! And that's the best intro to the 5-star Hansar Samui I can think of. So next time you go to Walking Street – just keep on walking!

Rob De Wet

For reservations or further information, telephone 0 7724 5511. www.hansarsamui.com