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A Place to Wed



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Banyan Tree Phuket & the Chapel on the Lagoon, Thailand

Thailand is well known as a backpackers' paradise, an intriguing mix of the lurid back streets of Bangkok, hidden emerald lagoons and delicious castaway islands. Add to this a vibrant culture, gentle Thai hospitality and wonderful five-star resorts and spas, and you're starting to scratch the surface of what the 'land of smiles' has in store for couples in search of a serene wedding and honeymoon.

Phuket Island, on the jagged southwest coast of Thailand in the emerald Andaman Sea, has become a popular tourist destination, with its glistening white-sand beaches, coconut groves and sunny climate. Although Phuket was affected by the tsunami of Boxing Day 2004, the island's resorts are fully recovered and are extra-welcoming of visitors as tourism is what their livelihood relies on. Regular trips will take you out into Phang Nga Bay (where much of the James Bond film *The Man with the Golden Gun* was shot), with dramatic limestone karsts rising out of the water, covered in lush vegetation and hung with stalactites.

OPPOSITE: THE NON-DENOMINATIONAL CHAPEL ON THE LAGOON SEATS UP TO 50 GUESTS.

BELOW: THE CHAPEL IS INSPIRED BY THAILAND'S WATERBORNE CULTURE.

■ BEST TIME OF YEAR TO GO

November to April (high season), May to September (low season).

■ CEREMONIES

Religious, either Thai (Buddhist) or Western (Christian).

■ PRE-WEDDING RESIDENCY

Three working days.



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DINNER FOR TWO ON SANYA RAK
WHICH MEANS 'PROMISE OF LOVE'.

Phuket is usually blessed with good weather year-round. The hot (high) season runs from November to April and the rainy (low) season from May to September. Couples can therefore choose to come either during the tourist months from December to March, or in May, June and September, when it is less crowded.

For a marriage to be legally recognized under Thai law, the parties must be registered in the district Amphur, or Registrar's Office: in this case the Phuket Amphur. Foreigners must supply authenticated copies of their passport and a complete statutory declaration translated into Thai, and if they have been married before they must also have their original divorce certificate or the death certificate of their former spouse translated into Thai. These translated documents must be

authenticated by the Legalization Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bangkok. The whole process normally takes 48 hours. The couple must then return to the Amphur to register the marriage, after which they can marry at any register office or recognized place of marriage in Thailand, such as the Chapel on the Lagoon. The Banyan Tree's on-site wedding coordinators will help arrange all these legal details.

Set on the shores of Bang Tao Bay, Banyan Tree Phuket is one of the most beautiful and romantic hotels on the island, part of Laguna Phuket, Asia's first integrated resort. There are five luxury resorts and six palm-fringed lagoons, 600 acres of parkland and 3 km (1.8 miles) of pristine beach to enjoy. As the resorts lie side by side, visitors have the advantage of being able to use facilities at all five resorts.

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Couples wishing to tie the knot somewhere other than the beach need look no further than the stunning new Chapel on the Lagoon, available exclusively to guests at Laguna Phuket. Inspired by Thailand's waterborne culture, this charming white-painted wooden structure with glass walls seems to float on the water, though in fact it is supported on stilts. Its pitched roof and pavilion-style decks pay homage to traditional Thai architecture, while its glass sliding doors can be opened to create an alfresco ceremony. The airy interior has an atmosphere of reverence, and the panoramic 360-degree views of the lagoon impart a feeling of union with nature – at sunset it is magical.

The nondenominational chapel seats up to 50 guests comfortably on beautifully covered white chairs, often decorated with simple golden bows. For more intimate

weddings, some seating can be removed and a cosier arrangement laid out inside. Western (Christian) or Thai (Buddhist) ceremonies can be held. Thai weddings feature blessings by Buddhist monks and Thai musicians and attendants in traditional costumes; couples may even opt to have an elephant grace their big day. If they prefer their own music to Thai musicians, there is a Bose sound system or a traditional church organ to grant their wishes.

The bride arrives by water on a traditional long-tailed boat named Sanya Rak, meaning 'Promise of Love'. The chapel has rest rooms with a full-length mirror so she can check her appearance before walking down the aisle. A framed 'Welcome' notice board in the entrance to the chapel allows the bride and groom to display a personalized greeting to all their guests.

LEFT: CHOOSE BETWEEN THAI GARLANDS OR WESTERN STYLE FLOWERS.

RIGHT: PHANG NGA BAY WITH ITS DRAMATIC LIMESTONE KARSTS.

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BANYAN TREE'S SPA POOL VILLAS ARE
ROMANCE INCARNATE.

Once the cake has been cut and the Champagne served after the ceremony, all the guests can be ferried to the reception venue at the Banyan Tree Phuket by boat.

For just the two of you, or perhaps with a couple of friends, the Sanya Rak dinner cruise makes a memorable nuptial celebration. The boat is staffed by your own host, chef and traditional Thai musician, and with only one cruise on the lagoon in the evening there is no risk of bumping into other couples. The choice of five menus includes Western, two Thai menus and two vegetarian options. The Thai menu includes classic dishes such as tom kha gai (chicken and coconut soup with lime) and kao suay

(steamed jasmine rice). Truffles and pralines finish off the meal, or of course wedding cake and Champagne.

Couples who want an intimate dining experience in the privacy of their villa can enjoy a barbecue for two under the stars in their villa garden on their poolside terrace. A chef will come and prepare delicious dishes. Midnight feasts or Champagne breakfasts are also available. If a more formal reception is required, there is a selection of restaurants to choose from at the Banyan Tree Phuket, including the superb Saffron, which serves Asian dishes with exotic twists such as crisp fried catfish with mango salad, sticky rice and curry ice cream.

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Another option is the Tamarind, a semi-alfresco restaurant beside the pool offering fresh fish and light meals.

After the wedding celebrations, couples return to their villa to find their bed swathed in midnight-blue Thai silk and petals, with incense and candles burning gently. There is also a candlelit outdoor bath overflowing with orchid petals and a bottle of bubbly on ice. Even the resident frogs seem loved up and full of Thai goodwill.

The Banyan Tree Phuket's spa pool villas are highly recommended for honeymooners. We are not talking plunge pools here rather; a very swimmable green-tiled pool surrounded by ornamental statues, double sunbathing loungers, chic tented pavilions and private terrace for meals under the stars. On arrival, all five senses are set tingling with the aromatic fragrances of incense and aromatherapy oils, soft background music and the beautiful decoration of the villas. Among the delights here is the 'floating bed pavilion': a glass-walled bedroom set over a tranquil lily pond, where you can choose Thai silk sheets and select the consistency of the pillows for the king-size bed from a 'pillow menu'. Above is a high, draped ceiling resembling a grand Mongolian canopy, which sways gently in the breeze. One of the wonderful things about the spa pool villas is that they are completely private: newlyweds can enjoy an outdoor shower together amid tropical greenery, bask naked on the sundecks without inhibition or lounge unobserved on the luxurious sheets of their pavilion bed, admiring the pink water lilies floating around them.

Several visits to the spa before and after the wedding are an absolute must. Banyan Tree Phuket has been voted the World's Best Spa Resort by readers of the prestigious *Condé Nast Traveller* magazine, and its outdoor stone-built double treatment rooms resemble mini-temples, with goldfish- and lily-filled water inlets and sensuous massages, wraps, rubs, scrubs, facials, steam heaters and herbal baths that draw on ancient Asian traditions. A pampering two-hour rejuvenation spa package is usually offered to newlyweds. Alternatively, intimate tailor-made spa packages can be enjoyed in the pavilion of the couple's spa pool villa garden, with side-by-side massage beds. A bridal beauty package includes a manicure, pedicure and facial treatment, ensuring brides look radiant on their big day.

With such a strong sense of Thai culture from the waterborne chapel to the long-tailed boat, couples are assured of memorable day, infused with a great sense of place.



ABOVE TOP: PRIVATE POOLS OFFER TOTAL PRIVACY.

ABOVE: BLUE THAI SILK SHEETS AND FRANGIPANI BLOOMS ON YOUR WEDDING NIGHT.

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