



Thailand's Most Misunderstood Island



Do you have a fondness for places with bad reputations that are highly misunderstood? I mean places like Las Vegas or Amsterdam or Bangkok where everyone cobbles together rumour, hearsay and urban legend to form an opinion of a place they've never been.

Here's one you probably never even heard of; Koh Phangan, Thailand. Koh Phangan is famous for being part of the picturesque Samui Island Group in the Gulf of Thailand and infamous for outdoor celebrations called "Full Moon Parties".

A proper "Full Moon Party" usually consists of a large number of people ranging from university age to mid-30's coming together to paint their bodies fluorescent colors, slurp buckets of alcoholic herbal elixirs, and gyrate to that dreadful "trance" music. Most of us over 40 probably don't do the drugs that go with that music.

Koh Phangan is home to one of these comically perverse rituals. If you believe that DJ's are artists and electronica is actually music ... then a Koh Phangan full moon party is probably on your bucket list. For the rest of us who just like idyllic tropical islands, there's good news. The parties pretty much take place on only one beach once a month. The remainder of Koh Phangan is the land that time forgot; coconut trees ... fishing boats ... and beach after beach after beach.

A dozen beaches

I've lived on more beaches than most people. Looking out at the same expanse of water day after day gets boring no matter how nice it is. Koh Phangan has more than a dozen beaches; each one with its own vibe. If you want a change of atmosphere, jump on your scooter and hop down to the next beach. Koh Phangan isn't "a beach community" It's "a community of beaches".

When I thought kite surfing would be a good hobby, I chose Ban Tai Beach on the Southwest shore because of the consistent waves and ever-present sea breezes. Trading in my board for a snorkel, I ventured further north on the west coast to Haad Salad where I floated over the reef and was startled by a whale shark cruising just offshore. And when I wanted to hide from everyone and just sip coconut juice under a tree, a winding mountain road took me to Chaloklum; a horseshoe shaped bay on the northern side of the island.

Every beach has its own personality. The water is clean. The sand is clean. There are no pesky beach vendors hawking massages or ice cream like many other seaside resorts in Thailand.

Food from God

For a small island, Koh Phangan offers an impressive array of food choices. As you might imagine, seafood is the speciality, with dozens of mom-n-pop places as well as some trendy beach front bistros. My favourite place on the island is Santorini in Thong Sala. You'll know when you see it from the sign painted on the wall that says "Food from God". God (a common Thai nickname) is a Cordon Bleu trained chef that got tired of the globetrotting corporate culinary life and settled back on his home island. The food that Chef God produces out of this open air shop-house restaurant is nothing less than spectacular.

Hippy Island

There is a very strong vegan and vegetarian influence on Koh Phangan. Many visitors come to the island specifically to "go veggie", learn some yoga and detoxify themselves from the ravages of the man-made world. Some old-time expats called it "Hippy Island". The expat community is a mixed bag of nationalities, but are mostly of the same mindset. Artists, writers, yoga enthusiasts and grown-up backpackers living their dream on laid back and back-to-nature Koh Phangan.

I've become familiar with expat communities in 6 different regions of Thailand and I can say that Koh Phangan is home to more female expats than any of them. I met an English woman that came to Thailand and learned to be a silversmith. Now she has her own jewelry shop in Thong Sala. She is a typical "Phanganer".

If you visit Koh Phangan, I recommend setting up "base camp" in Thong Sala as it is near the pier for transport convenience, and has all the amenities you might want. There's a really good night market that actually sets up around lunchtime but expands as the day goes on. A proper grocery store and household goods shop also make life easier in Thong Sala.

Stay in a cozy beach resort for less than \$20 per night, or rent a 1 bedroom bungalow for \$300 per month. The best place to find longer term accommodation is on KPN's social network pages. Try "Koh Phangan Classified Ads" Facebook group.



Big Sister

Only a 20 minute ferry ride away is Koh Phangan's big sister, Koh Samui. The most famous of Thailand's islands, it hosts 1.5 million visitors per year. Big shopping, high-end resorts and facilities like hospitals and schools can be found in abundance there. It should be noted, anything that costs money is twice as much in Koh Samui. Koh Samui's international airport can transport you to Bangkok, Hong Kong or Singapore in a matter of hours. So, "Phanganers" are always just a boat ride away from real civilization. Is the bad reputation deserved or is Koh Phangan misunderstood? Spend some real time there and you'll probably understand just fine.

