

# Where to stay

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The seating area of a beachside bungalow at The Chedi



Thailand The Chedi, Phuket

## Good neighbours

James Fox and his children enjoy the laid-back atmosphere of the resort next-door to Amanpuri

THE CHEDI SHARES A SMALL, PRETTY BAY with one of the grandest hotels in the world, Amanpuri. Although you can't see the establishments from each other, their sunbed arrangements describe the difference. Those of Amanpuri are arranged in neat rows of white-towelled and regimented luxury, with hovering attendants and raked sand. At The Chedi you wheel a sunbed to your favourite palm tree where you will be sold a coconut to drink, with extraordinary politeness, usually by a child. Your soon-to-be masseur will be resting in the shade nearby. You can also walk to the rocky edge of the bay and eat grilled fish at a 'restaurant' with two plastic tables. Excess laundry can be offloaded there, too, if you feel you've overburdened the hotel. The Chedi doesn't seem to mind sharing its excellent

facilities with the mini-services – no doubt licensed by the hotel – of the beach traders.

The Chedi is also about one third of the price of Amanpuri, whose soaring teak halls and many restaurants and villas can envelop you in the paralysis of over-attentive luxury, or in the anxiety of the ticking meter. Having snooped about, these are the only two hotels I would go to on Phuket, if I was in funds. But with children I would always choose the Chedi for its delightful staff and the cheery version of Somerset Maugham communality in its expansive public rooms: it even has a library with shelves of sun-dried books by Daphne du Maurier.

The hotel is built in a coconut grove and old banana plantation, with cabins linked by steep staircases set among the palms. The beachside elevation looks like ➤

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### At The Chedi you can wheel your sunbed to the shade of your favourite palm tree

➤ a wooden reduction of the Lincoln Memorial, with very tall columns enclosing airy courtyards where you breakfast and lunch. It has the strange, dated air of post-colonial optimism circa 1965, not unlike the Panafric hotel in Nairobi. Oddly, The Chedi and Amanpuri were designed by the same architect, Ed Tuttle, whose mission was to ensure that overflowing guests from Amanpuri would be unashamed of staying at its cheaper neighbour (which belongs to the same owners).

Unless you're very fit or under 30, you might find it exasperating or dangerously taxing to have left something in your room at the summit of the escarpment and to have to ascend again, though this applies only to the cabins at the very top, near the reception desk. Our beachside bungalow on stilts had two bedrooms and an L-shaped veranda. You could just about jump down from that onto the beach, but barely climb back. It was restful, private, air-conditioned and made of slate and teak, with a vital dressing area between the rooms.

I discovered that the happy atmosphere and smooth running of the hotel had much to do with the staff. Many of the employees have been there for 14 years or so and take some pride in the place. Children love this hotel because everything is right for them. Families return year after year. The pool is

Sun-loungers on The Chedi's beach looking towards the Andaman Sea

huge and octagonal, and its water is warm so children can stay in forever, with their admiring parents never far away. Beside it is a shallow pool which parents with younger children will be thankful for – my four-year-old learned to swim in it by himself with no instruction. A few paces away, down some steps, is the expansive, white beach, where wind-surfers, sailing boats, kayaks and diving gear are available for hire.

The food is good; but beyond comparison are the tropical breakfasts of pawpaw, mango and pineapple. Bacon and eggs of any kind are cooked speedily near your table. The morale of resort-hotel guests is made or broken at breakfast, and the way things are arranged here – with enough space to absorb children and a playroom next to the dining area – seemed to put us all into a day-long atavistic

trance of civility. We invariably lunched on a Thai *plat du jour*, also cooked to order and always excellent. The Italian menu was missable – why eat mozzarella and tomatoes in Thailand? High-class hamburgers with a broccoli side dish were often brought to our room for child consumption. Any of the dishes could be ordered poolside. And a little way along the strand you could eat barbecued seafood at the beach restaurant.

The Chedi is relaxed and spread out and perfect. I felt as if I was in a photograph of happy days just before some civil war – of Mozambique, for example, and its beaches in the 1960s. The tsunami wrought havoc nearby, but in this little corner of the Andaman Sea little damage was done, as the mighty wave met the rock face and was repulsed.

There's a serene hour on this beach when it's quiet and almost empty, the air is warm and there's light enough to read. There are festive gala nights, where tables are laid on the beach and there's entertainment. At night the children tracked hermit crabs in the sand with torches. Our visit to Phuket town was noisy and pointless, but a trip to a rubber plantation for a lengthy elephant ride was the best thing that had ever happened to my son. There are fewer greater pleasures than resting your bare feet on the powdery skin of an elephant's neck as it slow-motions through the jungle.



**THE CHEDI, PHUKET**, PANSEA BEACH, PHUKET, THAILAND (WWW.GHMHOTELS.COM; 00 66 76 3240 1720). COTTAGES FROM 7,900 BAHT (ABOUT £115)

## FOUR MORE CHILD-FRIENDLY BEACH RESORTS

### FREGATE ISLAND PRIVATE, SEYCHELLES

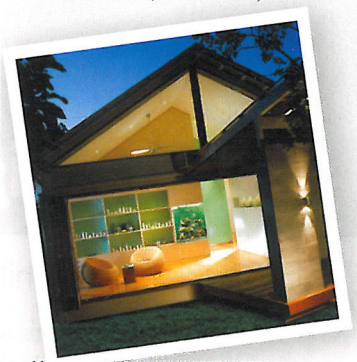
The Castaway Club for children aged five to 12 offers supervised pirate adventures, eco-tours in the forest, turtle-monitoring and more. The Castaway Clubhouse has a tree house and a climbing wall; Castaway Cove is a sheltered bay for safe snorkelling, sailing and fishing. 00 49 6102 501321; [www.fregate.com](http://www.fregate.com). Villas from €2,185

### THE RITZ-CARLTON, CAYMAN ISLANDS

'Ambassadors for the Environment' is a programme organised by Jean-Michel Cousteau to teach children about the sea through activities such as underwater photography. There's also a tennis camp run by Nick Bollettieri, coach to Maria Sharapova and Andre Agassi. 0800 234000; [www.ritzcarlton.com](http://www.ritzcarlton.com). Doubles from US\$360

### HERON ISLAND, GREAT BARRIER REEF, AUSTRALIA

This resort, below, is famous for its marine life, and there is a range of guided walks, dives and research-station visits on offer. The Junior Ranger Program (for seven- to 12-year-olds) includes reef-walking, fishing, snorkelling and co-piloting a helicopter. 00 61 2 8296 8010; [www.heronisland.com](http://www.heronisland.com). Doubles from A\$500 (about £200)



### PORTO SANI VILLAGE, HALKIDIKI, GREECE

UNDER £100

The emphasis here is on giving parents time to themselves while their children go off on adventures. The Children's Club (four- to 12-year-olds) and Teenager Club (13 to 16) offer activities including volleyball, excursions, picnics, water aerobics and a mini disco. 00 30 237 409 9500; [www.saniresort.gr](http://www.saniresort.gr). Junior suites from €120 FRANCESCA SYZ