

# TRAVEL+ LEISURE

SOUTHEAST ASIA

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## ESCAPE TO BOHOL

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# ASIA'S BEACH BARS





FROM TOP: The glamorous shell pool at JW Marriott Emerald Bay; the resort's airy Turquoise suite.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

# Making Waves

With tons of visitors—and dollars—pouring into the southern Vietnamese island, once-languid Phu Quoc is on the verge of a major transformation. BY VERONICA INVEEN



**NEVER HEARD OF PHU QUOC?** Not many have. It is easy to overlook the Vietnamese island, tucked away in a quiet corner of the South China Sea, just 14 kilometers from Cambodia. Despite being the largest island in the Gulf of Thailand, it is, for now, one of the area's best-kept secrets.

From the air, you would think Phu Quoc was the filming location for *Jurassic Park*, lush with tropical foliage, and ringed by ivory sands and a turquoise coast. It isn't until you make your way out of the single-runway airport, which is undergoing a US\$45-million expansion, and onto the new grand highway that the boom in development becomes apparent. Even though the Vietnamese government has been pushing Phu Quoc as a "modern center of tourism" since 2004, it has been slow going for the sleepy fishing island. But the opening of the JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay is pushing the pedal on the pace of development here. For now, Phu Quoc is in its sweet spot: with infrastructure improving, there are great places to stay, lots to do, and you won't have to fight through hordes of tourists to enjoy its many charms.

## STAY

### JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay

The massive entrance of this 17-hectare estate stands in stark contrast to its unassuming surroundings. Fifteen minutes south of the airport, just before the grand boulevard turns into rough tracks of bumpy red clay, the gateway befitting a palace breaks a dusty scene of roadside food stands, motorcycle repair shops and the occasional karaoke joint. The farther you venture along the pathway, the deeper you enter a dreamland designed by Bill Bensley. Though the hotel is new, Bensley concocted a backstory for it, imagining it was built on the site of the fictional Lamarck University, an early 20th-century school he decided was for the island's French colonists.

The academic narrative is carried on throughout the 244-room resort. From the omnipresent Phu Quoc ridgeback, a dog native to the island that has been dubbed the mascot of the hotel, to the library-themed lobby adorned with vintage tomes, the hotel will have you wandering the grounds wide-eyed.

COURTESY OF JW MARRIOTT PHU QUOC EMERALD BAY (2)



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY OF LA VERANDA RESORT (2); COURTESY OF PHU QUOC BEE FARM; COURTESY OF PHU QUOC COUNTRYSIDE PEPPER FARM; COURTESY OF RED BOAT FISH SAUCE

Building on the university concept, guestrooms, suites and villas are organized by academic departments, including zoology, astronomy, agriculture and oceanography. Facts about marine animals decorate the elevator of the Oceanography Department wing and Zoology is a trove of fossils. The rooms are luminous and airy, with floor-to-ceiling windows and spacious balconies that overlook the property's three pools, edged by wide vistas of sand and sea. The cloud-like beds and gorgeous claw-legged bathtubs make it a challenge to leave the room, but soldier on for a treatment at **Chantrelle Spa by JW**, a two-story haven decorated in some 100 illustrations of mushrooms, in whose therapeutic qualities the French have believed in for centuries. In the evening, stroll down the **Rue de Lamarck**, at the center of the resort, lined in Hoi An–style shophouses and boutiques selling products like local silks, art and pepper. Follow the colorful lanterns to the Department of Chemistry where a daybed, steps from the shores of Bai Khem beach, and a divine cocktail await your arrival. [marriott.com](http://marriott.com); *doubles from VND9,000,000.*



## SEE & DO

### Phu Quoc Bee Farm

On the outskirts of Phu Quoc National Park, in a family-run organic fruit and flower farm, learn about bees from the passionate students who run this haven, while sipping honey-based beverages like their coconut-and-turmeric tea or a raw honey mojito. [phuquocbeefarm.com](http://phuquocbeefarm.com)

### Phu Quoc Countryside Pepper Farm

Every year, Phu Quoc yields more than 1,100 tonnes of peppercorn using traditional—not to mention labor-intensive—methods. Here, after a tour of the harvesting process, you can kick back with some of the many ridgeback puppies roaming the farm and enjoy a Vietnamese feast made from fare grown onsite and sample rose myrtle wine and their homebrewed beer. [phuquoccountryside.com](http://phuquoccountryside.com). [121.chiliweb.org](http://121.chiliweb.org)

### Red Boat Fish Sauce

If you can handle the stench, add a visit to this fish sauce factory to your itinerary to experience first-hand how the pungent flavor enhancer is made from tons of anchovies. It is Phu Quoc's most famous export and is said to be the tastiest and most natural in Southeast Asia. [redboatfishsauce.com](http://redboatfishsauce.com). **T+L Tip:** Try **La Veranda Resort's** ([laverandaresorts.com](http://laverandaresorts.com)) Phu Quoc Blood Mary, which features the fish sauce, local pepper and veggies grown onsite.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The colonial mansion at La Veranda Resort; a trio of spring rolls from La Veranda Resort; busy bees at Phu Quoc Bee Farm; harvesting peppercorns; Red Boat fish sauce.



## COMING UP

Though local charm remains, Phu Quoc is fast developing. Plans call for the building of the world's longest overwater cable car, a massive tourist complex, a resort center and a theme park—those attached to Phu Quoc's anonymity hope it will remain a “tranquil island.”

## GETTING THERE

Non-stop flights from Saigon and Hanoi to Phu Quoc run daily on Vietnam Airlines, JetStar and VietJet. ✈