

## EXPLORATION

# Big-City Benefits in Thailand's Royal Resort Town

By Kirsten Raccuia

**S**mall, frothy waves slowly recede from the light tan sand, while the colorful parachutes of kiteboards fly overhead. A man in a cowboy hat walks his horse along the strand, hoping someone will ask for a ride. I'm sitting in Beach Café Restaurant, drinking fresh coconut water right from the shell (\$2) and taking it all in.

This is Hua Hin, Thailand's royal town. It became popular in the 1920s, when King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) and King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) built summer palaces here to escape the humidity of Bangkok. Much of the nobility followed suit and built their homes here, as well.

Today the city is home to about 85,000 people, so it's big enough to have all the modern conveniences a retiree needs, while still being laidback enough to retain its beach vibe. And in keeping with all of Thailand, Hua Hin is highly affordable. Even in the royal beach resort, an expat couple can live well on as little as \$1,500 a month, including rentals from just \$430 within five minutes of the beach.

A day at the beach in Hua Hin can be as adventurous as you'd like it to be. The shallow green waters, and just the perfect amount of wind, make it one of the country's top locations for kiteboarding. There are a few kiteboarding schools ready at a moment's notice to get your adrenaline pumping; at Kite Boarding Asia ([Kiteboardingasia.com](http://Kiteboardingasia.com)), a full day course is \$114. If lounging is more your style, the broad, three-mile-long beach is perfect for that, too.

Beyond the beach is a lively city just waiting to be explored.

### Royal Healthcare Standards at Affordable Prices

Hua Hin has three major hospitals, but the one most frequented by expats and sometimes even by the Royal Family is the Bangkok Hospital. It is accredited by the JCI (Joint Commission International, the gold standard for healthcare worldwide).

"It's not only super-efficient; I was totally comfortable every step of the way," says Michael, who was treated for bronchitis. "They explained everything they were doing in detail, in perfect English, and had great compassion for me, as well. It's not like that back home. And the whole visit, including three medications, was only \$40."



You can pick up a one-bedroom apartment five minutes from the beach for just \$430 a month in Hua Hin.

Expats from all over the world live here. Many are Scandinavian, French, and Swiss, which gives the city a European flair, not to mention fantastic international food.

There are two main streets. Phetkasem Road runs parallel to the beach and is lined with shopping plazas, markets, restaurants, hotels, and apartments. Damnoen Kasem Road runs perpendicular to it, from the beautiful, traditional Thai train station to the beach.

Check out the Cicada Market, where the focus is on handmade

goods, live music, and local eats. I stopped by the Wop Station Bar for their specialty blueberry cocktail (\$3.40), before wandering through the lanes of handmade wooden spectacles, housewares, and clothes. I bought some wooden coasters, ate some pad Thai (\$1.90), and saw a young boy getting his mohawk trimmed by a tattooed barber wearing a bowler hat. Hua Hin is an artsy community and the city celebrates and fosters art co-ops and markets around town.

Tucked away off these main arteries are little side streets, or *sois*, where you'll find small bars, eateries, shops, and more. It's easy to get lost in these *sois*, and that's usually when you stumble upon a hidden gem. This is exactly how I found the Saxophone Lounge ([Saxophoneloungehuahin.com](http://Saxophoneloungehuahin.com)), a wonderful place for nightly live jazz, blues, or soul music and a glass of wine.

Hua Hin is a golfer's paradise, with seven courses nearby and year-round temperatures that average between 79 F and 86 F. This means you can play whenever and as often as you like. Black Mountain is the top-rated course in Asia and requires that you hire a caddy.

Canadian expat Michael Brown, who loves to golf, enjoys having the caddy. He says, "They know the course really well. It is almost like having a private coach. They get to know my swing and tell me to shoot for the coconut tree. If I can get close to it, I'll be close to the green."

Hua Hin has a thriving expat community, with loads of activities to join. The Hua Hin Golf Society ([Huahingolfsociety.com](http://Huahingolfsociety.com)) meets twice a week for rounds of golf and beer. The Hash House Harriers ([H2h3-cah3.weebly.com](http://H2h3-cah3.weebly.com)) are a self-described "drinking club with a running problem," so if running is your thing and you don't take it so seriously, this could be for you.

### Beach Living for \$1,500 a Month or Less

Life in Hua Hin can be very affordable. You can rent a one-bedroom apartment five minutes from the beach for as little as \$430 a month, leaving you plenty left over for extras like a maid—only

"Hua Hin is a golfer's paradise, with seven courses nearby."

\$9 for a half-day—and a massage for \$8.30. Fast home internet is around \$15 a month, and a cellphone plan with 4G is only \$8, so the essentials in life are pretty cheap. Even a haircut with a shave is only \$3.40.

Michael moved here a few years ago and only spends around \$600 a month, excluding his mortgage. But that does include all his food and drinks, one massage a week, one round of golf a week, health insurance, electricity, phone, pay TV, and internet.

For the best local produce, check out the markets. They're not just the best place to get the freshest fruits and vegetables, but also the perfect way to save money. Tesco, inside the Market Village shopping center in the heart of town, and Makro, only a 15-minute drive away, are the main grocery stores in Hua Hin. They have a mix of local and international products, as well as housewares. And you'll find plenty of specialty international grocery stores, like Villa Market, with all the imported goods you may miss from home.

You can choose from hundreds of restaurants at all price points. Take your pick from Spanish tapas at Cool Breeze (*Coolbreezecafebar.com*), Japanese at Hagi, or French at Orchids. Of course, there are also fantastic Thai restaurants, like Moonsmile. With about eight tables, it's always packed with locals and expats, and you'll spend only around \$5.30 for a massive plate of sizzling beef noodles and a beer.

For even cheaper—but equally delicious—Thai food, head to the night markets scattered throughout town, where you can find coconut green curry and spicy pad Thai. The markets are definitely the top places to keep your wallet and your stomach full.

The great thing about Hua Hin is that you don't need a car or a scooter to get around. *Songthaews* (trucks) kitted out with two rows of seats and a roof run everywhere throughout the city for about 40 cents a ride.

### Rent Near the Beach From \$430 a Month

Hua Hin has lots of housing options. Rentals run the gamut, from modern apartments to pool villas and everything in between. On my recent visit, I saw mansions that rent for \$3,000-plus a month and one-bedroom apartments for \$430 a month.

If you want to live on a golf course with all its lavish amenities—pool, restaurants, tennis courts, a fitness center—and don't mind living about 25 minutes away from Hua Hin, you can find a furnished, three-bedroom apartment for \$1,000 a month. Or for the same amount you can be in the heart of the city, in a fully furnished, two-bedroom apartment with a shared pool, private balcony, and parking.

If you decide to rent a home with a pool and a garden, the maintenance fees are usually around \$95 a month for each, unless you are lucky enough to have a landlord who takes care of that for you.

A fully furnished, four-bedroom villa—with a pool—in a gated community, only 10 minutes away from the city center, can be found for \$985 a month. And a simply furnished, three-bedroom townhouse, with a shared pool in an expat area, can be rented for \$624 a month.

Rents can be even cheaper if you don't need a pool; a two-bedroom home five minutes from Hua Hin is only \$436 a month. As with all things in Thailand, remember to negotiate your rent. What they quote you isn't necessarily the final price.

To find your perfect home in Hua Hin, check out Facebook pages and forums to get an idea of what's going on in town. Try Hua Hin Expats, Hua Hin & Cha-am Expats, and the Hua Hin Buy & Sell Official page. The Hua Hin Forum (*Huabinforum.com*) offers a wealth of information about all things Hua Hin, with every topic—from property to nightlife and visas to healthcare—covered. ■

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## Three Outdoor Adventures Around Hua Hin

**Kui Buri National Park** is the best destination in Thailand for wild elephant spotting. With more than 320 elephants roaming the area, it's not hard to find the gentle giants. Golden jackals, leopards, deer, langurs (monkeys), and various species of birds can also be seen in the park. It's open for wildlife safaris from 2 p.m. until sunset, when the herd is most active. You can use a tour company, like Tontan Travel in Hua Hin (*Tontantravel.com*), which will drive you the 90 minutes to the park and guide you once inside. Tours start at around \$91 for one person or \$114 a couple—

the more people in your group, the lower the price per person.

The **Pala-U waterfall**, in the Kaeng Krachan National Park, is one of the tallest in Thailand. It's near the Burma border and a 90-minute drive west of Hua Hin through pineapple plantations and undulating green countryside. The multi-tiered, 16-level cascade sits amid untouched rainforest heaving with wildlife. The higher the level, the more arduous the climb, and you must use ropes in some areas to help you ascend. The entrance fee to the park is \$11, and be sure to wear water shoes.

Ever wanted to try your hand



Pala-U waterfall is one of the best daytrips from Hua Hin.

at **squid fishing**? Go out with a local fisherman just before dark so you can get a bird's-eye view of the sunset. As the moon rises, the squid come out to feed. The boats are equipped with a bright green light that attracts them to the surface, making them easy to catch. You may be able to catch red snapper and small grouper to add variety to your dinner plate. After fishing time is over, head back to shore for a barbecue to enjoy the fruits of your labor. The more you catch, the more you eat. Prices start at around \$68 and can be booked through various tour operators in town.