



Climb Every Mountain

The Messner Mountain Museum in Corones, Italy, was born of an extraordinary collaboration between mountaineer Reinhold Messner, mountain tourism experts Skirama Kronplatz and Zaha Hadid, star of contemporary architecture

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Outside in

Text: Jo Baker
Photography: Courtesy of Samujana

The second phase of an integrated villa resort in Koh Samui softens its harder edges with vegetation and sublime views

When Gary Fell first encountered the north-eastern coast of Koh Samui in 2003, the landscape was very different. Finding it under-developed for tourism and rife with traditional Thai-style dwellings, the architect wondered how well the newcomer that he had in mind — a series of startlingly white, modern, concrete villas — would be received.

“Most of the places were straw-roofed, and at that point we still weren’t sure that it actually was going to take off as a tourism destination,” explains Fell, who founded and leads the Bali-based architects studio, Gfab. Plans for Samujana involved 19 bespoke luxury villas, privately-owned but centrally-managed, each laid out across one rai (1,600

sq-m) of land that slopes steeply down to the Gulf of Thailand. “There was definitely the space for more villas, but we needed to gauge the market before going any bigger,” he adds.

Yet by 2009, with all the villas owned, various regional awards to its name, and vacation enquiries on the rise, Samujana looked ready to expand. Work began on the design of eight new holiday homes. “Everything got supersized!” says Fell. “Phase Two is all-round bigger — it caters to bigger groups, with an expanded bedroom and living space, and plenty of space for parties. And the luxury is that now we have the confidence and the backing to really tune the design to our vision.”

To do this, Gfab drew from elements

that had been best received in the first round of design, as well as its other projects around the region. A winning formula, says Fell, includes an expansive infinity pool, and large bedrooms and bathrooms, but also climate responsiveness and highly functional luxury services that suit large groups. The new villas boast vast indoor and outdoor kitchens, staff quarters, gyms, game rooms and cinemas, the latter of which work well in interior filler spaces, without windows. Other clients have made specific requests such as wine cellars, offices, personal spas, and even a bowling alley.

Many of these spaces are distinctively open to the outside environment. “Koh Samui has a kind climate with just a few

weeks of horrible weather,” explains Fell. “Instead of putting windows around it, like you’d need to in Phuket where it rains heavily, we’ve situated most of the communal living space, including kitchens, entirely in the open air.”

To get the most of the views, and sea breeze, balustrades are entirely in glass, pools are infinity-edged, and staircases float, while outdoor furniture is neutrally toned and sits low, or nested in sunken salas. Bedrooms are oriented towards the same views through floor-to-ceiling glass doors that can be slid aside.

The dramatic, angular style chosen by the architects is not uncommon in their work around the region. White, flat concrete plains and strong lines dominate, with barely a

From Left

White, flat concrete plains and strong lines dominate, with barely a single curve to be found
• A cream-coloured regionally-sourced paras Jogja stone runs through much of the property

Facing page

Gfab drew from elements that had been best received in the first round of its villa design, as well as its other projects around the region — such as expansive infinity pools

single curve to be found. This is both a visual and practical choice, says Fell. “When we first got to Samui, there weren’t many skilled builders,” he says. “So we chose an aesthetic that would be simple to achieve.”

Emphasis has been placed on the play of natural stone textures, often roughly and locally hewn, which contrasts with the villas’ precise lines, smooth plate glass, and strategic vegetation. White expanses are interrupted by angular alcoves that showcase large Asian-inspired art pieces, strikingly lit. Water features are well used. In Villa 30, for example, a striking spiral staircase curves out of a reflection pool, while in Villas 22 and 26, floating paving slabs lead into the property across water.



Clockwise from above
Bedrooms are oriented toward stunning views through floor-to-ceiling glass doors that can be slid aside • Most of the communal living space, including kitchens, have been designed to be entirely open to the elements, rather than be enclosed by wall-to-wall glass windows • Many of the villas' spaces are distinctively open to the outside environment, thanks to the hospitable weather in Koh Samui, which gets significantly less rainfall than Phuket, for example

Indoor gardens and planters are also abundant, including in bathrooms. These are vast in size, and flooded with natural light — often through atriums and open showers. Bathroom tiles are clad in a distinctive pale green Sukabumi stone, and a cream-coloured regionally-sourced paras Jogja stone that runs through much of the property.

A strong natural element was important to Fell, particularly given the huge use of concrete. Phase I villas had seen Gfab memorably incorporate elements of the landscape into the villa designs — mainly rocky outcrops and old trees. Yet because they are situated at the top of the slope, the new villas faced fewer obstructions, so the studio focused instead on sweeping views and natural local materials.

Samujana is not overtly sustainable in its energy use, and only passive measures are in

place. "I'm a big believer in natural light and ventilation and it's safe to say that we've got the usual, like LED lighting and lower energy air-con systems," says Fell. "But energy-saving is difficult to do at that scale, although we're keen. When everyone's looking at your roof you can't really get away with a solar farm."

Instead, Gfab has designed dual-function roofs as an aesthetic and passive environmental solution. Around a third are planted with grass, a third are comprised of angular ponds, and a third are covered in large stones, which provide thermal insulation and a pretty rooftop panorama. To get around the Thai regulations that requires roofs in the country be pitched, in a traditional style, each roof is pitched by the tiniest degree — under its chosen cladding.

Samujana may no longer be the new kid in town, but it's still a little bit of a rebel. ●

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