



Baan Rim Pa's stunning cliffside setting. Below: Loaf On's delectable mantis shrimps

asia

will travel for food

For some of us, keeping our tummies filled on holiday is not simply part of the deal but the main event. Here are restaurants we'd go out of our way for

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Visitors on the boardwalk find themselves surrounded by NATURE'S AQUARIUM

Have you ever driven four hours just to have dinner at a restaurant in the countryside? Or waited for the perfect weather just to dine in the best natural setting? Well, we've been known to do that, too — and then some — in pursuit of the perfect meal.

When Hong Kong got its first *Michelin Guide* in 2008, many people were amazed when judges awarded a Michelin star to a small restaurant in a fishing village in Sai Kung. Not that the place isn't famous for food, namely its seafood. Visitors walking along the area's boardwalk find themselves surrounded by nature's aquarium. Rows of tanks brim with ocean-fresh bounty on the left, while on the right goods are sold direct from junk ships at the waterside.

With attractions so plentiful, it isn't hard to see how an understated



The Deck combines PAN-ASIAN cuisine with LOCALLY SOURCED produce



Main & below left: The packed-to-the-rafters Loaf On and deep-fried squid; Above left to right: The Deck's seafood platter, Baan Rim Pa's steamed Thai dumplings

take me there

LOAF ON



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BAAN RIM PA



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Chung TRAWLS the local area each morning looking for the BEST CATCHES of the day

restaurant, called Loaf On might go unnoticed. Tucked in a side street away from the bustle, the restaurant has interiors that are as humble as owner and chef Sam "Tiger" Chung, who lets his winning cuisine do the talking. "I want to make food that is fresh and simple," says Chung, who has manned pans in kitchens for 15 years and opened Loaf On in 2006. To this end, he trawls the local area each morning looking for the best catches of the day.

Chung's aim for seasonal simplicity manifests itself across his menu. Signatures such as deep-fried squid have a texture that teeth just slide through and Hakka classics, like salt and pepper tofu, arrive coated in unique eight-grain flour. Other notables include razor clams with red pepper, bulging mantis shrimp and butter soft-fried abalone. Prices are reasonable, but do check for market prices.

Main photo: GARY MAK

A fixture in the increasingly crowded Phuket dining scene, and near the sea too, Baan Rim Pa (roughly translated to "house on the edge of the horizon") has wowed locals and tourists alike with its traditional Thai cuisine in a dramatic, cliff-side setting. Run from a renovated two-storey teak house, the restaurant boasts a menu stuffed chock-a-block with "Royal Thai" specialties — dishes originating from the royal palace — such as *goong sarong* (deep-fried prawns wrapped in yellow noodles, sarong-style), as well as popular standards like *penang ped* (duck curry with lychees).

Much of Baan Rim Pa's success can be attributed to executive chef Jaree Noisamlee, a native of Trang in southern Thailand and an anchor in the kitchen since the restaurant's inception in 1990. Formerly of the Mandarin Oriental, Jaree now

heads a team of 17 cooks, who can serve up to 700 covers a day. Jaree says of her more than two decades with Baan Rim Pa: "I work for good people and I love to cook Thai food and I love Baan Rim Pa."

Perched over the Saigon River in Ho Chi Minh City is The Deck restaurant, which remains a true standout. Located in District 2, a small distance from the city centre, The Deck is an in-the-know kind of place. It's styled after a seaside resort, with a secluded entrance in the form of a garden leading up to a glass-fronted restaurant and with the relaxing sound of waves lapping gently and cargo barges gliding across the water.

The restaurant combines pan-Asian cuisine with locally sourced produce — freshly caught seafood from Phu Quoc and Nha Trang as well as fresh vegetables from Dalat — to create a style that could be


described as haute cuisine with a twist. Think fusion dim sum, spring onion dumplings, duck spring rolls, Phu Quoc prawns and ostrich steak. The Deck is also the perfect place to kick back with a sundowner.

The real draw, however, is that The Deck offers a lavish James Bond-inspired dining experience that you would be hard pressed to find elsewhere. It charters a private speedboat that brings guests to the restaurant. "We wanted to have somewhere where we could hang out and drink cocktails on the Saigon River — The Deck was the ideal location," says owner Lawson Johnston.

Our final, but by no means least pick, nestles in the shadow of Mount Agung, Bali's most sacred mountain. Bali Asli offers guests an immersion in Balinese cuisine and village life. True to its name — Asli is a Balinese word for something that is created in a traditional way — the restaurant dishes up authentic Balinese delights prepared in a traditional kitchen, complete with wood-fired, mud-brick stoves and stone mortars and pestles.

"I was attracted to the area's remote setting and natural beauty. We are located around a two-hour drive from the crowds of Kuta beach. Coming here is like stepping through a looking glass into the real Bali," says Bali Asli's Australian chef and owner, Penelope Williams, who has worked in the kitchens of such reputable hotels as the Savoy in London and the Alila Manggis in Bali.

While Bali Asli's menu, which changes daily depending on the available produce, is filled with delights such as *sambal telur puyuh* (spicy quail eggs with runny centres and paddy herbs), there is far more. The restaurant's cooking classes, based around the concept of "a day in the life of..." take participants on a one-of-a-kind adventure. "It's more than just about cooking. Depending on the experience they choose, we take our guests fishing on a Balinese *jukung* (canoe), teach them to plough a rice field or simply get some cooking tips from the villagers — after all they are the experts." ■

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"We take our guests FISHING or TEACH them to PLOUGH a rice field"



On a Bali Asli fishing experience;
Top: The catch of the day