



# PRESS KIT

Belmond Napasai introduced by Sanjay Surana

## OVERVIEW

From the moment that you turn off the main road, 20-or-so minutes into the drive from Koh Samui's comely, garden-style airport, and into the skinny lane leading into Belmond Napasai, nature just takes over. That transformation is fitting because if one memory endures from a visit to this 68-villa hillside resort on the island's north coast, it is that nature is not just sincerely celebrated but is the foundation of the overall experience.

Take that lane, the one that approaches the property. The paved part of it just imperceptibly seems to narrow, the trees and foliage appear to creep forward, looking to reclaim what once was their turf. Past the security gate, the resort opens up to a farm area that covers over one quarter of Belmond Napasai's footprint and offers a hint of the priorities here. Beside this farm space, in keeping with the ethos of a traditional Thai village, is a san phra phum, a house for spirits, to ensure that they do not run amok and cause villagers any ill fortune.

## HISTORY & BACKGROUND

The road leading into the property winds up to the reception area, commanding a position about half way up the resort on a hill above the sea. This lobby is the nucleus of the place, like the hub from which the spokes of a wheel emanate, not just because of its location but also because it feels like a spiritual centre. It's a multi-tiered space, with solid stone floors, lazily whirring ceiling fans, giant ceramic pots filled with water and topped with intricate flower-petal displays, wicker chairs, Thai statues, and sinuous orchid displays. The premise here, of less is more, sets the tone for the rest of the resort, creating an ambience where it seeks not to overshadow the natural setting. The staff's uniform continues in the same vein, with simple tones of cream and beige. In all, the space is a visual treat, exciting because of its unusual, multi-level design, but comforting and comfortable enough to invite moments of quiet contemplation.

Venturing beyond the lobby, the property, opened in 2004 on what is believed to be royal land, has a set-up that is refreshingly simple and one that makes full use of the hillside setting. Standalone villas are arrayed in rows on 17 acres of gardens, with cashew and coconut trees complemented by blooms of hibiscus and bougainvillea. Most villas have a view of the Gulf of Thailand and the position of the majority of the buildings, stacked up on a hill like terraces of a rice field, enables all parts of the resort to benefit from the breeze. This contrasts with many resorts on Koh Samui that are either spread on one level across beachfront land or built atop a cliff, where access to the beach is often down steep paths and stairs, hardly conducive to evening wanders or casual strolls along the sand.

Rooms focus on the star attraction, the natural setting. They are generously adorned with teak and the main embellishment in each is a tapestry above the bed, hung as a scroll—almost like a royal decree—that depicts a typical rural village from hundreds of years ago, elephants and oxen part of the bucolic scene. The “Do Not Disturb” sign for each villa is an elementary piece of thick rope that is strung across the entryway posts when the guests want some quiet.

All villas are spacious, beginning at 62 square metres with a roomy outdoor terrace, but families often opt for the garden villas that offer grander proportions and sleeping facilities for up to four. For large groups, the privately owned residence villas with multiple bedrooms, private pools, prime ocean views, and access to their own section of waterfront, are available for rent and are the most sensible choice. These residences, many with carved wood panels on their exteriors, spill over three levels and offer greater exclusivity, set at one end of the resort.

A handful of villas have direct access to the beach, but in truth none are more than a few minutes’ walk from the water. The beach is extremely private, with fingers of rocks either side making access to it all but limited to guests of the hotel. To the left of the beach is a small channel where fishing boats moor and where, in the mornings, you might see a mother and daughter walking through the water looking for clams, while in front of the property, at low tide, fishermen wade around the reef doing the same. These cameos illustrate the connection that the property has to the local community, fostering a sense of inclusion.

The size of the property ensures there is never a sense of crowding, with its varied levels helping to magnify the feeling of space and openness. What’s more, the ubiquitous willow coconut palms act as screens to everything around them, further breaking up any visual uniformity. The resort is notable for its sense of quiet—Belmond Napasai is so tranquil that the main sound is that of the birds chattering or the high-pitched guttural rat-a-tat-tat squeaks of the omnipresent geckos that roam their indigenous habitat—plus each villa is screened one from another, so privacy is a given. The resort actually feels like it’s on a desert island—an exceedingly comfortable one! There’s a strong sense of place here, with architecture that is thoroughly Thai, the kind of proud heritage that’s often missing in other international branded properties on the island. You can also expect uncomplicated examples of artistry ranging from mango with sticky rice that pairs uniform slivers of mango carefully arranged in a heart shape around a small mound of pandan-dyed sticky rice at the resort’s all-day dining restaurant Paddy, to chicken baskets, a symbol reflective of the location, used to cover bends of piping that appear momentarily above ground. And while golf carts are available for transportation, the property invites guests to walk around, to get a more appropriately low-tech experience.

The openness and tranquillity—reasons that many guests return to the property time and time again—are best appreciated from the water. Here, from a kayak or when swimming among the gentle ripples, the views take in the shoreline and the land behind it. What becomes most readily apparent is how little development this slice of the island has witnessed. A pontoon is located about 50 metres from the shore—not so far away that you need Olympian stamina to reach it, but far enough away that you need commitment to get there. There, you will really appreciate the setting, a stretch of sea where all you hear is the murmur of the water and the light chirping of the birds. You’ll notice how clever landscaping covers the villas’ stilts, so they look like they have literally sprouted up from the land.

At night, the resort has a different ambience, when the sense of being a castaway is even more intense. Lights pepper the gardens—especially the bird cages suspended from branches and lit up by firebirds, as the staff jokingly call the bulbs. There are fairy lights on trees, spotlights beneath coconut trees, fire torches by the beach and positioned like sentries up the hill towards the lobby and spherical paper lanterns in front of the pool. Together they make every evening feel like a special occasion—which indeed it is—and with so few lights visible anywhere beyond the resort’s boundaries, the sense of remoteness is heightened.

As appealing as the sense of solitude is the dedication to activity. Commanding a position at the very top of the resort, the skydeck presents yoga aficionados with a striking view of the sea unfurling below and the forest behind, and an enduring sense of peace. Elsewhere adults have the spa, unusual educational activities like complimentary lessons on basic Thai and fruit-carving (hugely popular) and, outside the resort, the chance to visit a temple or Angthong National Marine Park. Most impressive is the range of water sports, but in keeping with the aesthetic and ethos of the simple, quiet life, most of are not motorised. None are chargeable unless an instructor or tutor is needed. The Hobie Cat sailboat, for instance, is out virtually every day. The one exception to the motorised rule is the resort’s own speedboat that can take guests out for water-skiing.

Children have numerous options to keep them entertained. The farm area, known as the Napasai Secret Countryside, is a natural draw, resembling a village farm from a century ago.

On any visit guests will typically see two or three farmers tending the land. Enclosures house goats, geese, and other livestock, while some water buffalo roam. All are kept not for fattening for food but as a link to the country's strong pastoral past, to help guests understand the role of the village farm in Thai society. Crops are grown, too, including dill, papaya, holy and Italian basil, chillies, rocket, beans, peppermint, potatoes, tomatoes, and aubergines. There are plans to create an orchard, plant rice paddies, and tap the gum trees in the Countryside's forested areas. In the late afternoon you might spot kitchen staff wandering around the plants as they pick supplies for that evening's dinner. The renowned chef Raymond Blanc, who runs a Belmond property in the United Kingdom, was here recently to share his expertise in organic farming with the kitchen team, and to see what lessons could be learned for his own hotel in Oxfordshire.

In the heart of the Countryside are a couple of basic thatch-roof salas where cooking classes take place. It's worth noting this seemingly minor detail—the classes aren't in some air-conditioned hall but in a rustic hut using a gas stove right by the growing area of many of the ingredients, about as authentic a cooking experience as possible.

Overall Belmond Napasai aims to return the holiday experience to a simpler time. This starts with young children, who are diverted from their smartphones, and continues with adults that indulge in water activities they last enjoyed decades ago. In the resort's My First Job programme for youngsters aged three to 12, children's natural curiosity is explored and encouraged. These hour-long experiences include working as a pastry chef with the Head Chef in the kitchen and whipping up chocolate roses or coconut biscuits. Or children can join a flower-arranging workshop, learn how to make a mocktail, take some steps of traditional Thai dance, feed the farm animals with the hotel gardeners, and even, in what might sound mundane for adults but is inexplicably fascinating for a five-year-old, work with the engineering team to demystify how a golf-cart works.

Belmond Napasai is a beguiling mix of countryside and beach resort and the connection to nature is hard to overstate. It informs all aspects of the resort, in the way it's expressed, enjoyed and represented, and strives to not outdo the surroundings. Consider this as a distillation of how it feels to be here: At breakfast at the hillside Paddy restaurant, enjoying the gentle breeze under the shade of the frangipani, and tamarind trees, as sweet-eyed mynah birds hop between the tables looking for a nibble, you spy some sharply peaked islands rising from the sea in the distance, and your mind empties of everything except what is around you. And isn't that the point of a holiday?

## PEOPLE

### **General Manager Biography – Sven Gevers**

With his remarkable ability to speak seven languages, and an education that has seen him attend schools and colleges in Brazil, Colombia, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Venezuela, general manager Sven Gevers is globalism personified. German by birth, his professional career is equally multicultural, with working stints in Australia, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Nicaragua, Qatar, Spain, and the United Kingdom before landing in Thailand (in addition to being the general manager of this property, he is also the Regional Managing Director Asia for Belmond, in charge of five hotels, two ships, and one train spread across five countries). His keen sporting past—he was a competitive windsurfer and slalom kayaker—was a key motivator behind his overhaul of the water sports programme at the property which, as he puts it, was virtually non-existent apart from a paddle boat two years ago. He's a smart, articulate, focused, and extremely down-to-earth leader who has forged an easy, approachable relationship with his staff and who is as happy to talk about the state of football in Europe as politics in Asia and beyond.

### **Team Member Biography - Khun Lek**

Though Thai people are generally reserved, staff here are friendly, playful, engaging, warm, unobtrusive, yet always game to enter into some jokey, friendly banter. They are especially attentive to babies and young children—some have been known to look after a baby during an entire meal so that the adults can eat in peace. Among the most dynamic is Khun Lek (khun is a respectful honorific for an adult, like Mr. or Miss/Mrs), an activities coordinator. A trained muay thai fighter, competing for five years in his early and late teens, and an accomplished all-around athlete, he has seemingly limitless banks of energy and boundless enthusiasm, positivity, and a real sense of joie de vivre. In the space of one afternoon he'll happily take a guest out on the Hobie Cat sailboat, followed by some stand-up paddle boarding, kayaking, pool, table tennis, badminton, tennis and a session of muay thai (Thai boxing)—and he will still manage to look as fresh and full of energy as first thing in the morning. In a way, he reflects the general philosophy of all the staff here – always make time for the guest. They

aren't there just to serve, but to be a part of the holiday, to interact when you need them to, partner you on the tennis court when nobody else can, take you out on the stand-up paddle board when everyone is taking a nap, or play a game of pool when you have to 10 minutes to kill because you're ready for dinner earlier than everyone else.

## TOP EXPERIENCES

Yoga is the most popular activity and given the location of the complimentary yoga sessions each morning — at the skydeck at the pinnacle of the property — that makes sense. The setting, with the sea dominating the scenery, the rhythmic sounds of the water below, and the clean air are ideal environments for contorting one's body and cleansing one's mind. Come here at night when it's empty—with a few lights glinting in the distance on Koh Phangan or along the coast, you'll feel like you're secluded in a mountaintop refuge in a faraway land.

Muay Thai, or art of the eight limbs, has become famous enough to be incorporated in fitness regimes at slick city gyms around the globe, taught by trainers who have never set foot in Thailand. Here it's taught in the traditional way, in a small roped ring on a patch of ground by former fighter Khun Lek, a scene that wouldn't look out of place 100 years ago in any Thai village. Khun Lek will run guests through the basic jabs, hooks, kicks, knee lunges, and elbow strikes against a punching bag before fitting them with gloves—and himself with kickboxing pads—and cajoling them through three muscle-shredding 'rounds' to show off what they've learnt. The experience is immensely exhausting, but rewarding (you'll be guaranteed a good night's sleep later on) and will give you the utmost respect for the physical conditioning of professional muay thai fighters.

With its own speedboat that is available exclusively for a maximum of eight guests per trip, the resort can take guests out to discover the beauty of the Gulf of Thailand, known for its clear, deep blue water. Options include water-skiing behind the boat, a sunset cruise, a day trip to the nearby Five Islands (five small isles to the southwest famous for swifts' nests procured for Chinese bird's nest dishes) and Koh Taen for snorkeling, or an excursion to the stunning Angthong National Marine Park, whose forested limestone islands set among clear turquoise seas are Asia's answer to the famous Rock Islands in Palau. On full day trips, a picnic lunch prepared by the hotel's executive chef is taken on a beach chosen by the captain that day.

## CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY & ENVIRONMENT

Belmond Napasai received a Green Hotel Award from the Thai Department of Environmental Quality & Promotion in 2015.

The hotel participates in a number of environmental projects. Recent initiatives have included releasing crabs and fish into the nearby reef area to help maintain its eco-system, as well as planting mangrove and coconut trees in areas previously affected by an infestation.