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HONG KONG'S INTERIORS
MAESTRO STEVE LEUNG

SETTING UP IN *Samui*

Paul Hicks talks to LOFT about building a luxury property in Thailand.

Words by Dominique Afacan

Paul Hicks, a founder of Hong Kong based PR firm Grebstad Hicks Communications is one of the brains behind the stunning Suralai – a luxury 6-bedroom private villa recently opened in Koh Samui, now available for rent. LOFT caught up with him to find out just how difficult it is to build a property overseas.

L: WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO BUILD IN KOH SAMUI?

P: Myself and my business partner Lynn, have been there a lot and think it's charming. More importantly, a direct flight from Hong Kong was launching with Bangkok Airways. Samui is quite undeveloped too, so there's plenty of nice land for sale.

L: AND HOW DID YOU CHOOSE YOUR PARTNERS?

P: Quite easily. Lynn is my partner at Grebstad Hicks. Her husband owns an architecture firm – MAP Architecture and Planning – and as the project progressed, they got interested and became partners too. It's vital to have people involved who know what they're doing. MAP had built places in Samui before

so they were aware of potential pitfalls and had lots of useful contacts.

L: TALK US THROUGH THE PROCESS OF FINDING AND SECURING THE LAND.

P: In Thailand you can go shopping for land in the same way that somewhere else you can go shopping for apartments. There are estate agents brokering parcels of land – which you can go and look around as you may a house. Land is sold in Rai (about half an acre). Lynn found our plot, high in the hills of Bophut, on the north east of Samui.

L: HOW DID YOU CHECK INTO BUILDING LAWS/ PLANNING PERMISSION?

P: There were ownership issues which we had to deal with. In lots of countries in Asia, foreigners cannot own land. That was also the case in Thailand where you can only be the minority shareholder in the company that holds the land. So we created a new company called Samui Concepts, which we hold shares in and this Thai partner is the majority shareholder.



THE DETAILS – SURALAI

- ▶ **LOCATION** Monkey Theatre Road, Bophut, Koh Samui, Suratthani, Thailand
- ▶ **RATES** Seasonal from US\$1,200 to US\$2,400 per night
- ▶ **RESERVATION** www.thesignaturecollection.com/Suralai.html
- ▶ **WEB** www.suralai.com

01 The gorgeous terrace is the perfect place for a sundowner

02 Views to kill at Suralai

03 Paul Hicks with his business partner, Lynn

L: AND HOW SMOOTH WAS THE ACTUAL BUILD PROCESS? ANY DISASTERS?

P: There were disasters! One of them involved a huge glass railing for people to lean on outside the villa. Basically the contractors decided the glass we had specified was unnecessary so they put something much thinner in. We were really unhappy about it but they assured us it was fine. Then there was a storm and some of the glass panels blew out – so we ended up replacing the whole thing in the way we had originally planned.

L: HAD YOU OVERLOOKED ANYTHING ELSE?

P: Yes. The people who we bought the land from also supply our electricity – but there was nothing in the contract to say what price that electricity would be. So we have had some phenomenal bills. We can do very little about it – so I'd look into that more closely next time. The infrastructure you take for granted when you buy a house in the city needs to be considered carefully when you're buying in relatively remote areas. We even had to build our own road!

L: WHAT WAS YOUR MAIN AREA OF INVOLVEMENT?

P: The interiors were my strength. I found it tough to plan while things were still in sketch form though. It was only once it started coming to life physically that I started to visualise exactly how it would look. I made lots of buying trips. All the actual materials are locally sourced, then we imported some furniture from Chiang Mai, Bangkok, Indonesia and China.

L: HOW IS THE VILLA DOING SO FAR?

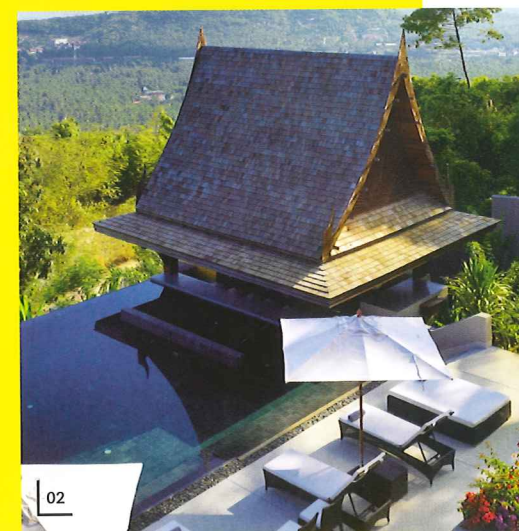
P: Last year was the first year of operation and it was rented for 100 nights (not including partners or friends) which is pretty good for year one. Having said that, it's difficult to make money from the villa rental model. The aim is to cover the ongoing maintenance costs and any money will be made from the increase in value of the property. [L]



THE BILL

COSTS TO PREPARE FOR IF YOU'RE BUILDING ABROAD

- ▶ **LAND** 'Make the choice between beach-front and ocean view. We went for ocean view because it's cheaper, there's more choice, it's more private, plus it's cooler.'
- ▶ **CONSTRUCTION** 'Take into account what you decide to build, the size, what materials you use and how complicated it is.'
- ▶ **FIXTURES, FITTING, FURNITURE** 'We spent over the odds on these but we felt strongly that it should feel very 'design'. I think that's a good investment. Ultimately it's not a home, it's a resort that you have to yourself.'
- ▶ **MAINTENANCE** 'People forget this but you have to hold back a large part of the budget to keep things running smoothly. Things like the swimming pool, pest control and a host of other things are ongoing.'



- ▶ **MANAGEMENT** 'Having reliable management is key. We use a company called Samui Villas and Homes who provide management services to villas. They supervise things on the ground, including taking reservations and bookings – and we pay them a fee and the staff salaries. They have a few villas and that works well as we only pay for the chef, for example, when we have guests. When he isn't at our villa, he's at one of the others they look after.'
- ▶ **MARKETING** 'Luckily this is our forte, but obviously once the villa is ready, you need people to know about it!'