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Boathouse voyage BEGINS ANEW

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THE NATION

ANCHORED AT THE end of Kata Beach, the venerable Boathouse Phuket has been freshly refurbished as a boutique hotel and a base for cruise holidays.

Extra-comfy beds, first-class hospitality and relaxing beach activities round out the inviting picture.

The Boathouse opened in 1991 under the umbrella of the Montara Hospitality Group. This year it was transferred into the hands of Singapore-based chain HPL Hotels & Resorts, which touts it as part of its Boutique Collection.

After a five-month makeover of guestrooms and other facilities, the hotel reopened earlier this month with its cool nautical vibe intact but its casual dining venues rather more chic.

Singapore-based interior-design firm Laank has made the Boathouse look more like a luxury yacht, wooden fittings everywhere and blue and white the go-to tones.

I went aboard, dropped my luggage in the lobby and headed for the classy lounge for a complimentary welcoming drink and Thai-fusion bites.

"The concept is small-scale boutique-style hotel with an intimate, personalised ambience," says general manager Max Chin. "Guests feel the friendly touch as they connect with staff and other travellers.

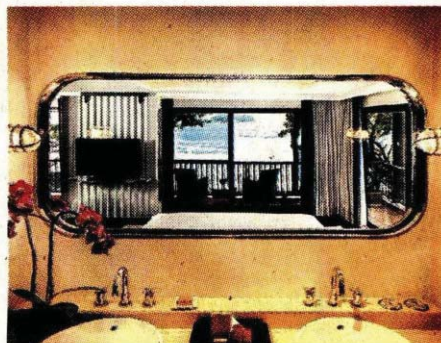
"Our staff will remember everyone's name. That's because we pay attention to every detail once the guest arrives, and we have a return rate of more than 20 per cent,

mostly guests from Europe. Some come back to the Boathouse every year and stay a few weeks or even months."

The beach deck overlooking the Andaman Sea is packed with foreigners getting a tan while their kids splash around in a large pool. The courtyard adjacent has playground swings and a flower-shaped Jacuzzi that affords a nice view of the sunset.

Health-conscious travellers can make use of the well-equipped gym, which features treadmills and shoulder press machines. Next door is the Hospitality Lounge, serving coffee, tea and snacks and has magazines to browse.

The four-floor hotel boasts 39 guestrooms ranging in size from 36 to 136 square metres. The choice includes Deluxe, Deluxe Sea View, Beachfront, Sea View Terrace rooms, Junior, Ocean, Beachfront and Hideaway suites and the Penthouse Suite. All have good views of the sea, are air-conditioned and have a mini-bar,



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espresso machine, tea-making facilities and a writing desk.

I'm in a posh, 90-square-metre Hideaway Suite, with its lovely shades of white and blue-grey. The sitting area has a comfy chocolate-hued sofa and a coffee table topped with a plate of fruit both fresh and dried, sauces and cheese.

In the bedroom is a 49-inch smart TV with movies and music on demand and a king-size bed that's super comfortable with a choice of pillows.

The walk-in closet has a glass front. There's a huge four-seat sofa and two wardrobes containing bathrobes, slippers and a small safe. The amazing bathroom has twin washbasins, a stand-alone shower, standard-size bathtub and top-notch toiletries.

But my favourite corner of the suite is the 22-square-metre private rooftop terrace with an outdoor rain shower, all set in a lush landscaped garden. This is a wonderful place to read between contemplative gazes at the beach and the setting sun.

The Boathouse Restaurant directly above the beach serves a tempting buffet

at breakfast. The open kitchen affords views of the chefs preparing their wide selection of scrumptious Thai and Western meals all day. At lunchtime they'll also welcome you for a cooking class if you like.

The hotel's Wine Cellar earned an award of excellence from *Wine Spectator* magazine in 2006 and stocks more than 600 varieties from 17 countries. Meanwhile the Pool Bar serves nice snacks with its cocktails as guests lounge and sunbathe.

AT A GLANCE

High point: The guestrooms are comfortable and homey, the staff very friendly. It's a good escape from the crowd on Phuket's most popular beach.

Low point: None

Pay for it: See the website for the best rates

Find it: 182 Koktanode Road, Kata Beach, Phuket

Call it: (076) 330 015-7

Browse it: www.Boathouse-Phuket.com

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THE POPULAR, FRIENDLY PHUKET BEACHFRONT HOTEL HAS BEEN REFITTED FOR MODERN LUXURY

