



A Step Beyond Excellence

A look at what **makes membership of Relais & Chateaux** a coveted hallmark of excellence.



Ever since the turn of the last century, the French Riviera has been the place where the elite has wanted to be seen. The route from the capital, Paris, down to Nice was well-worn with the tyre tracks of the rich and famous of this period. There were a number of established and fashionable hotels en route where you could break your journey but, to many eyes, although these hotels were swollen with opulence, they were also lacking in character. And this remained so, even after the end of the Second World War. Which is why, in the early 1950s, a group of restaurateur friends from Paris decided to explore the route in greater detail and find alternative hotels that showed more style and individuality.

After having made the journey many times, noting a delightful *pension* here and a superb place to eat there, they began compiling a list. They were unimpressed by trends, fashions or reputations and so they wandered off the beaten track looking for places with personality and charm. Yes, of course the *quality* had to be there, too. But it didn't matter whether it was a vineyard or a castle, a city restaurant or a seaside bistro; all needed to have an outstanding ambiance and a level of friendly and personal attention that was genuine, spontaneous and effective.

Their search included all types of accommodation, from simple hunting lodges to castles. And this is how the name of *Relais & Chateaux* came about; from the French *relais*, meaning 'lodge' or 'boarding house' and *chateaux* meaning 'castles'. The group officially formed in 1954 using this title and invited those

establishments it had discovered to join and enjoy the benefits of being one of an elite group of restaurants and hotels.

If you hunt around or ask those 'in the know', you'll discover that there are various other associations that encompass an exclusive membership and which, in turn, bestow kudos upon their members. But Relais & Chateaux is unique amongst them all. All of the others are restricted to one specific genre: accommodation, dining, wine productivity, and so on. But the Relais & Chateaux net embraces all of these. With the common denominator, which runs through everything, being, and I quote from the Relais & Chateaux Mission Statement, "*To possess their own personality and character; a richness that is like no other.*"

And that's why current members include hotels and restaurants located in Alpine lodges, English manor houses, a Spanish monastery, a Kalahari game reserve, an Indian marquee, a collection of huts in Tahiti, a vineyard in South Africa, a lighthouse on Rhode Island, a wine lodge in Argentina and an old colonial-style aromatic *pension* on Samui amongst many others – but more of this last one in a moment!

If you're European or American, then Relais & Chateaux will probably already be a familiar name to you as the group already has over 400 members in those parts of the world. But in the last decade its tendrils have started to reach further afield and there are now golden 'R&C' plaques to be seen outside establishments in Africa and the Middle East as well. And now Asia has come under scrutiny, too.

Singapore was one of the first countries to be considered and so far it's evoked only one invitation. Cambodia, Indonesia and Malaysia have attracted just four members between them. But Thailand has four, and one of them is on our very own island of Samui.

The essence of a Relais & Chateaux-endorsed resort is 'personality'. And that's exactly what you'll find when you go to *The Scent Hotel* (formerly *Karmakamet Aromatic Hotel*) on Big Buddha Beach. It's styled around a 'courtyard', with the open end facing the sea and a low, two-storey block forming the U-shape – but where the cobbled court should be there's an volcanic rock-tiled pool instead. There're balconies running along all the top floors, there're red-tiled colonial-styled roofs and the paintwork is bleached and fading from baking in the tropical sun. And everywhere there are decorative cameos that add to the feeling of old colonial domesticity: a driftwood shelf with pot plants; a group of sepia photos on the wall; an antique and rusty bicycle seemingly abandoned in a corner. And all over, permeating the rooms and the courtyard, there's the wafting aroma of incense.

The atmosphere here originates from the ancient community of perfumers from Indochina who worked with natural fragrances. Here, everything is designed to awaken the senses; the white sandy beach, the sublime setting, the aromas and the superb cuisine in the restaurant.

Yannick Tirbois is both the hotel General Manager and also the Executive Chef at the resort's beachside *Le Jaroen* restaurant. The cuisine here is correspondingly superlative and

with none of the trendy labels or styles that are so often spotlighted. "*I make classical dishes,*" he told me. "*But everything's lightened and reduced and there are no heavy sauces. I completely revise the menu every three months, and there's an à la carte option and a degustation choice. But dining here with me is like being a guest in a friend's house. You can sit and ask me for a favourite dish that's not on the menu and I'll cook it for you. My way of working is like the chefs in the old days: I'm out sitting with and talking to my guests as much as I am in the kitchen. I think this element has been lost nowadays and, because of this, so many restaurants have lost their individuality and personality.*"

Personality ... it's that word again. So many places try hard to paint this on top of a bland setting and menu, but there are few that really have it. And there are just four in the whole of Thailand that have made the grade according to the exacting standards of Relais & Chateaux – and one of them's *The Scent Hotel*.

Rob De Wet