



Bill Heinecke expands cool

Anantara Resorts

Not too many Americans give up their US passports for a Thai one, but bearded Bill Heinecke, worth about US\$350 million, did exactly that 20 years ago, and continues a career that has led him from go-carts and racing cars to luxury motor yachts and private jets.

Story Bruce Maxwell Photos Anantara

His rationale for becoming a Thai was simple. Bill's multi-faceted Bangkok-based Minor Group had grown so big that he needed Thai nationality to keep director's status and retain control over his fast-expanding empire. Selling advertising, and introducing America's best-known food and drink brands into the burgeoning Thai market, were early success stories, followed by a venture into hotels, including the flagship Royal Garden Riverside Hotel on the Chao Phraya downstream from the Oriental.

Ten years back he launched upmarket Anantara Resorts with a property in Thailand's historic seaside enclave of Hua Hin. The name means "without end" in Sanskrit. Sumptuously-outfitted but priced below, say, Four Seasons rates, Anantara presently boasts about 20 ultra-sophisticated and unique establishments in Thailand, Indonesia, Maldives and United Arab Emirates, with more planned in China, Vietnam, and Tanzania. The exciting new group is a member of Small Luxury Hotels

of the World, and Global Hotel Alliance.

We happened to be at Anantara Phuket last April, prior to Boat Asia in Singapore, when Bill typically turned up unannounced for a brief visit. He had decided to take his dark-hulled Sunseeker 90 Major Affair for a cruise, so flew down from Bangkok in his latest Cessna Citation X, picking up mum Connie at Hua Hin en route, and off the family went into the azure Andaman Sea. Last time we saw him was a couple of years earlier, when he and wife Kathy were lunching at an over-water Thai restaurant in one of his fabulous South Male resorts in the Maldives. He is the Sunseeker agent for the Maldives, but acquired his first Sunseeker 60 for charter cruises at the two Anantara Resorts on Koh Samui in the Gulf of Thailand, calling her Minor Affair after his Minor Group.

So naturally the bigger boat in Phuket became Major Affair, and we hear there may be something along the lines of Monster Affair under consideration. Anything from day charters to two week voyages are offered, and the limestone cliffs of Phang Nga Bay to the Malaysian border 100 nm south and beyond to Langkawi and Penang are really interesting cruising waters.



veteran sailor and writer Harold Stephens, published by Wolfenden, and of course there are various internet accounts in Wikipedia and most recently in Forbes Asia. Andrew Turner, Australian General Manager of Anantara Phuket, was showing us around this resort as Bill blew through, and having previously seen the Hua Hin and Maldives Dhigu and Veli properties, each is clearly designed to make the best of its own environmental aspects. Here are a group of private pool villas and suites constructed around an L-shaped lagoon, fronted by a white sand beach and the Andaman Sea. It is located about 15 minutes drive from the airport, but is off the flight paths, so there is no noise.



Island and coastal Anantaras have fleets as well, so for example Laurent Dreyer at recently opened Anantara Kihavah on Baa Atoll in the Maldives advises that he has a Gullet 24 m yacht, custom 16 m diving and fishing boats, a 9.5 m parasail boat, two Gulf Craft 20 speedboats, and two seabobs, which are a great way to get around under water. This property also has an underwater wine cellar and restaurant, so we could be torn between the two activities. Bill's dad, Roy, served in the Marines during World War II and later had a roaming foreign role for the US State Department, a term that can mean many things, while Connie, still chirpy and staying in touch via email in her advanced years, was a Time correspondent. Their eldest son, Skip, six years senior to 62-year-old Bill, went to KGV school in

Hong Kong and the US Naval Academy. As a 16-year-old he crewed on the sailing yacht Morrisum on an adventurous passage from Hong Kong to Manila, which led to the start of the biannual China Sea Race in 1962. He was with the US Navy in the Vietnam War, nearly lost his life in a diving accident, and has always imbued a sense of the sea into the family's consciousness. His wife Katherine designed the luxury barge Manohra Song, which plies the Chao Phraya River, and returns to the Anantara fleet when the Royal Garden Riverside, presently a Marriott Resort and Spa, is rebranded an Anantara property in November. Available space precludes a more detailed history of the Heineckes, but an interesting account of Bill's early years is contained in the 1995-published book *At Home in Asia* by





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The 83 pool villas are absolutely superb, providing a Thai lifestyle experience without having to go further than one's wooden front gate. A little sala with bar and fridge is located in one corner of the outdoor courtyard, and across the pool, a spa bath is accessed also from the well-appointed bathroom and dressing room. An enormous bedroom with lovely Thai furniture and settings has all mod cons, such as large flatscreen TVs and iPod docks. Books in the bedroom show Anantara Phuket featured on the cover of Philippe Kjellgren's Overnight Sensations – Hotels For the Discerning Traveller as well as appearances in Hideaway Hotels. The 100 Most Beautiful Hotels and Resorts in the World 2010-2011 by Klocke Publishing, and Quintessentially Reserve – A Handpicked Collection of the Best Travel Destinations.



Oddly enough, a piece-de-resistance of the place seemed to be the highly-active white ducks that graced the lagoon, which obviously fascinated many guests with their goings-on. Of more importance, perhaps, are the endangered Olive Ridley turtles that breed on the beach in certain seasons.

Wining and dining is a treat, and we got to try the beachfront Sea.Fire.Salt restaurant, where one acquires a salt sommelier, providing advice on how to match succulent sea food and steaks with various flavoured salts. We went for fresh local sea bass on a Himalayan pink salt brick, and it was so good we have contacted the supplier, who turns out to be in America.

Phuket's many other attractions are only a short drive away, as it only takes an hour from the island's north to the southern tip, and Anantara Phuket is near the Sarasin Bridge, providing immediate access to a peninsula golf course and the northern part of Phang Nga Bay. Elephant rides, watersports, high-end or local shopping in town, and a charter on Major Affair are all part of the mix. For more information on individual Anantara resorts, which are listed on the lower part of the home page, go to www.anantara.com



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