

Property: TDXSA

Title: "Paradise Found"

Publication: Arabian Property magazine

Page: 5 pages

Date: January, 2009

PR Office: Dubai, UAE

Section: Thailand | Feature

Estimated value: US\$ 62, 946.39

Circulation: 10, 000

ap
Arabian Property

AN ITP EXECUTIVE PUBLICATION

Vol. 3 | Issue 1 | JANUARY 2009

26 PHONE HOME
Etisalat's Ahmed Al Jarwan on his Smart Home real estate division

45 SPLENDID SPAS
Senior Director of Six Senses on the move into luxury properties

34 ART ADVANTAGE
How to diversify your property portfolio even further

52 LOYAL LAWYERS
Lawyers Holman Fenwick Willan on finding a way out for contractors

How to buy a second home
...and still make money

Buying in Bahrain
Mega shopping mall pulls in global retailers

Cruise liner to sell luxury units
US\$1.2 billion Magellan to sell residential apartments

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ISSN: 1995-0934
0 4



Paradise found

Six Senses Spas and Soneva resorts are popular around the world among high-net worth individuals. Lynn Villadolid, Senior Director of Six Senses Private Residences outlines the company's move into the property sector, their residences' unique selling points and how they will appeal to Middle East investors. Shane McGinley reports.

The tallest tower, the largest mall or the biggest fireworks display – Dubai is used to lavish superlatives. Therefore entrepreneur Sonu Shivdasani's ambition to discover the ultimate paradise retreat and to build the world's greenest and most luxurious resort does not sound overzealous.

"He is very much a visionary and the smartest man I have met," gushes Lynn Villadolid, Senior Director of Six Senses Private Residences, of the Eton and Oxford educated developer.

Most famous for his Six Senses branded spas and Soneva luxury resorts, of which there are currently 13 and a further 20 planned, Sonu is now entering the property sector with the

launch of Private Residences by Six Senses at his Soneva Kiri resort in Thailand.

Villadolid claims that what sets the Residences apart from similar properties in Thailand are the fact that they come with one of the longest leaseholds available in Thailand, that on a sq metre basis they are 30% better value than equivalent villas in Phuket and they offer all the luxury services of Soneva resorts.

"Six Senses Private Residences is quite new. We have been in existence for two years so we are very much an infant but we are growing incredibly fast," says Villadolid.

"Six Senses Private Residences offer intelligent luxury of the highest international standard in a remote environment that nurtures the indigenous feel in design, archi-

ture and service. Construction methods have been carefully adapted to protect and even nurture the environment," says Sonu.

Island resort

The first Residences are being built at Soneva Kiri, located in Koh Kood on the east coast of Thailand. Situated within the Koh Chang Marine National Park, Koh Kood is Thailand's fourth largest island and is inhabited by approximately 4,000 locals, most of whom are Buddhist fishermen. Soneva Kiri makes up about 1% of the island's 200,000 acres and is located close to Cambodia's famous temples at Angkor Wat.

Within the protected waters of the Gulf of Siam, Sonu took five years to find the resort's location and he believes its attractions are its

FEATURE | THAILAND



pure waterfalls, crystal clear waters, traditional village life, tropical rainforests, white sandy beaches and unspoiled coral reefs.

"It is where Phuket was 20 years ago," says Villadolid. A self-contained resort, Soneva Kiri already comprises 42 beach and hillside guest villas and, of the 20 residences planned in phase one, eight are sold and Villadolid reports that prices have risen three times

since they began selling a year and half ago.

Although prices currently range from US\$4.5 to US\$7.5 million and, while it is possible to get properties in Thailand for about US\$500,000, Villadolid believes the main attraction is the fact that Soneva Kiri has negotiated a 120-year renewable lease in perpetuity to lease the land and residence owners are offered 30-year leases which can

be renewed three times. The villas themselves are sold freehold.

Villadolid claims this is the longest leasehold granted to a luxury developer in Thailand as the majority of leaseholds in Phuket are usually for 60 to 75 years.

Facilities

The Residences are also three times the size



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of the standard guest villas and Villadolid says that on a dollar per sq metre basis they are 30% better value than equivalents in Phuket, which she believes indicates that there is strong potential for price appreciation.

The hilltop villas in the Residences have 1,066 sq m of living area, a 168 sq m swimming pool and four bedrooms. The master bedroom has a walk through dressing

room and bathroom with outdoor vanity, a blitz shower, a steam room and a bath. There is a tree house for the children, two en-suite bedrooms, a spa treatment area, a gym with a Kinesis exerciser, a steam room, an entertainment area with a 42 inch LCD TV and full Wi-Fi connection.

Located on a total plot of approximately 1,234 sq m, there is also a deck area with

an open plan seating area and dining table, which leads onto a lower pool side area, a water slide to the swimming pool, a large half-moon infinity edged pool and a variety of terraces for sun loungers.

The four bedroom beach villas have 1,001 sq m of living area, 210 sq m swimming pools and are located on plots starting from 1,211 sq m. The larger six bedroom beach villas ▶

FEATURE | THAILAND



have living areas of 1,393 sq m, 206 sq m swimming pools and their land plots start from 1,599 sq m.

Living the life

Soneva Kiri will officially open in April 2009 and facilities include three restaurants with over 2,500 wine labels and food made from fresh produce grown daily in the organic gardens, a Six Senses Spa, a fitness centre, retail outlets, various educational courses, a tennis court, a kids' den and an outdoor cinema.

Water sports available include catamaran sailing, sea kayaking, snorkelling, water-skiing and windsurfing and there is a fully equipped PADI dive and training centre on site.

The Residences do not come with restrictions on owner usage; however owners may opt to have their villa placed in the Villa Rental Programme for a minimum of six months.

From the revenue generated by the Villa Rental Programme 16% is deducted to cover villa maintenance and expenses and the remainder is divided between the owners and the resort. Rooms will rent for approximately US\$4,000 to US\$8,000 a night and the resort is offering a 6% gross yield on the villas.

The payment terms are 5% upfront, 10% on contract execution, 30% on completion of the first third of construction, 30% on completion of the second third and finally the remaining 25% on completion of the villa.

The Shivdasanis' route into the resort and residency industry began in Monte Carlo in

SIX SENSES PRIVATE RESIDENCES OFFER INTELLIGENT LUXURY OF THE HIGHEST INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS IN A REMOTE ENVIRONMENT THAT NURTURES THE INDIGENOUS FEEL IN DESIGN, ARCHITECTURE AND SERVICE

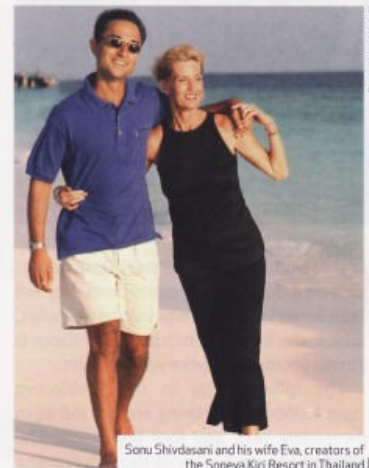
the late 1980s where Sonu met his wife Eva, a Swedish model. Upon getting married the couple chose to spend their honeymoon travelling the world sampling some of the best resorts and hotels that were on offer at the time.

Unable to find the perfect resort they decided to combine Sonu's management expertise and resources and Eva's creative ideas to create their own retreat.

Villadolid reiterates that the Shivdasanis, like the ambitious mega developers in Dubai, are a couple that like to approach challenges head on. This was evident in the obstacles they encountered when Sonu eventually found a location in the Maldives to build his and Eva's vision of paradise.

The local authorities in the Maldives refused to allow them to buy the site unless they ran it as a resort. Undeterred they agreed and the Shivdasanis entered the luxury resort development business.

Villadolid also recounts that when Soneva Fushi was ready to open in 1995 the seaplane company in the area refused to fly customers in the location as they deemed it not to be feasible, so Sonu borrowed some money and



Sonu Shivdasani and his wife Eva, creators of the Soneva Kiri Resort in Thailand ▶

Photo: Anna Wastoff



bought the company.

When they submitted their business plan in order to obtain a license, the resort planned to charge US\$270 a night. At the time the Maldives was considered a backpacker location and the authorities scoffed at their plans. The resort has since gone on to win many international awards, has many fans among the rich and famous and 40% of its business is currently repeat business.

"The Best of the Best in the World," says Conde Nast Traveller magazine. Villadolid reports that at present it is impossible to get a booking in December as they are booked up for the next three years with repeat customers.

Considering the demographic and profile of clientele at the Soneva resorts the company is reluctant to divulge the who's who of their

guest list as privacy is one of its core selling points. We don't promote celebrities, we offer them privacy and security and a real retreat from the world, says Villadolid, and for that reason she believes the resort and the new Residences will appeal to Emirati nationals.

Privacy in paradise

"On Soneva Fushi they have beach locations but each property has a private landscaped garden, which is growing naturally with a private beach so for national ladies because of their traditions they may not be able to bath publicly but here each property has its own private pool," says Villadolid.

So how do Arabian owners get to this remote retreat? Villadolid believes that, not taking Dubai traffic into account, the Residences will be roughly 10 hours door-to-door.

VILLADOLID CLAIMS THIS IS THE LONGEST LEASEHOLD GRANTED TO A LUXURY DEVELOPER IN THAILAND AS THE MAJORITY OF LEASEHOLDS IN PHUKET ARE USUALLY FOR 60 TO 75 YEARS

There are about eight flights a day from Dubai International Airport to Bangkok International Airport.

Upon arrival owners' butlers meet them and escort them to the Thai Airways First Class Lounge or directly to the airports dedicated Soneva Kiri hanger. From here a custom fitted eight-seater Cessna Grand Caravan takes them the sixty minute flight to Koh Kood and a speed boat then completes the journey to Soneva Kiri.

With the Shivdasanis placing such emphasis on protecting the environment, green credentials and creating the world's greenest luxury retreat it is however a surprise as to why they use a small low occupancy plane to courier passengers.

Villadolid however has been asked this many times and points out that the couple have found a solution to this and when clients arrive at Soneva Kiri they work out the exact carbon credits they have used to arrive at the resort and are given the opportunity to donate to a charity headed by a group called Converging World, which operates windmills. This then offsets the carbon credits generated by their journey.

"We are showing people that you can consume differently," says Villadolid. "By 2010 the resort will be carbon neutral and by 2020 it will be carbon positive." Another common query is regarding tsunamis, however Villadolid points out that Soneva Kiri is insulated by the Bay of Thailand.

The company currently has 35 representative agents around the world and is one of only two luxury resort developers listed by Christies Great Estates.

The majority of owners are from Switzerland, the UK and Scandinavia, with 80% being entrepreneurs and the majority work in the hotel industry. There are currently some Six Senses spas and resorts in the Middle East in Oman and Jordan and Villadolid reports they plan to introduce their Residences to the Middle East and Australasia. She believes the privacy of the Residences will be particularly attractive to Middle Eastern nationals. **ap**