

A MAN OF HIGHLY DEVELOPED SENSES

words by Johnny McGeorge

VISIONARY PROPERTY DEVELOPER **RICHARD POPE** IS A MAN DRIVEN BY DESIRE AND IMPECCABLE TASTE. WITH A CAREER SPANNING OVER 27 YEARS IN HIS NATIVE ENGLAND, RICHARD'S FIRST ASIAN PROJECT, THE STUNNING **KATA ROCKS** SKY VILLA CONCEPT ON PHUKET'S SUNSET COAST HAS SERVED AS A TESTAMENT TO HIS TALENT.

AN INSTANT MULTI-AWARD WINNING DEVELOPMENT, KATA ROCKS SWEEP THE BOARD AND IS RECOGNISED INTERNATIONALLY AS ONE OF THE WORLD'S TOP SPOTS FOR THOSE IN THE KNOW. ONE COAST MET UP WITH THE MAN HIMSELF TO FIND OUT WHERE TO GO NEXT, ONCE YOU'VE REACHED THE TOP.

Over 27 years, how would you describe your career?

It's been an interesting journey with several of the ups and downs that most property developers will have experienced. I started out in property at the age of 24 with an engineering degree and no money but I managed to persuade someone with some money that I could redesign his property splitting it into two flats. After this initial success, we did some further conversions together before the recession of the early 90's set in in the UK. During this period, it was difficult to get finance from the banks and I focussed more on construction rather than development. Eventually, I had accumulated enough to do my own developments without other investors and I then focussed mainly in Notting Hill in London where I did many refurbishments and conversions of Victorian buildings. I still have a number of properties in Notting Hill which I manage and let out. In 2007, I came to Phuket and bought some fantastic oceanfront land in Kata and Kata Rocks was born.

Which have been the most 'memorable' projects in your portfolio?

Kata Rocks in Phuket has without doubt been the biggest and most challenging development to date. The brief was to create these oversized Sky Villas, all with private pools, and all with full sea views. What we now have is a truly iconic development and resort with these amazing futuristic buildings that look like they have been inspired by superyachts with their wrap around glass and louvers. We genuinely offer the space of a villa combined with the 5-star service of a quality boutique hotel.

How does London currently look as an investors market? What areas would be worth targeting given the current economic climate?

The prime areas of London have always shown great resilience to any downturn and they have seen some very good rises over the last few years. The same cannot be said for the rest of the UK which has generally lagged behind London. London is one of the world's truly international cities with a strong financial services market and it consequently attracts plenty of foreign purchasers as well as UK purchasers. It will always be a good long term investment especially if you buy in the prime areas which are essentially around Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens (Mayfair, Knightsbridge, Chelsea, Kensington, Notting Hill etc). I still have several properties in Notting Hill which is to the north west of Kensington Gardens and they have done very well over the last few years. Often after a rise in prices in London, purchasers are attracted to the 'up-and-coming' areas but personally I like to stick to the traditionally prime ones as they are always more recession proof.

With Kata Rocks, why Phuket specifically and how did you find such an incredible site?

I first came to Phuket to sail in the King's Cup Regatta in 2006 and I was not really thinking of doing any business here. While I was here on that trip, a friend got involved in a project on Natai Beach and so I looked at that and got interested in what was happening on the island in terms of property development. I met some people who I asked to look for land for me and I was shown lots of rubbish but on one of my trips back to Phuket in the middle of 2007, I was shown the Kata Rocks site. It was one of those sites which as a developer you know straight away that you need to buy it ... oceanfront, west facing for the sunset, perfect slope, great rocks placed like ornaments in front of it and looking straight at the little island Koh Phu ... it didn't take a genius to see that one!

With "luxury" a standard issue platitude in Thailand, what was your inspiration for Kata Rocks and what unique features set it apart from other Phuket luxury property?

The inspiration is the unique site and its amazing rock features joining it to the Andaman Sea. Luxury is certainly an overused word in real estate in Thailand. I think Kata Rocks stands out for many reasons ... prime oceanfront site, all Sky Villas have their own private pools, all with great sea views, 460 sqm penthouses, great resort facilities, 5-star hotel-style service etc. But, you don't have to take my word for it ... Kata Rocks has won more International Property Awards than any other development in the world including the title of "Best Apartment in the World" which we won in London beating entries from 110 countries. This year, we have gone on to win 10 new resort awards as well including "Best Small Hotel in Asia" and "Best Boutique Spa in Asia".

Asia obviously plays to a different set of rules than developing in UK. How was the culture shock?

Most aspects of development are actually the same whether you are developing in the UK or Thailand ... you still have to find a great site, good architects, good contractor etc ... and make it happen. In Thailand compared to the UK, the biggest problem is communication and you need to surround yourself with good Thai people that you can trust. I have been very fortunate to still have the core team that I started with 7 years ago and this has very much contributed to the success of the project. I have found that often it is the westerners who do not perform here and not the Thais.

What wisdom (grey hairs) have you gained from Kata Rocks that you could impart as advice to potential or fledgeling developers?

I've gained a few grey hairs during this project! To be a developer anywhere, you need to know quite a lot about a multitude of things if you are going to succeed - legal, accounting, sales, marketing, construction, design etc. In the UK, it is easy to find experts in all these areas but it is not that easy to find the right people here. You also need great attention to detail ... walking the site and checking everything.

Would you consider further projects elsewhere in Thailand?

I have built up some great teams here including an in-house design team, project and construction management teams and the resort management team. I am therefore interested in doing more projects here if the right sites come along at the right price. I am also looking at other possibilities in Europe.

Is Kata Rocks your magnum opus or is it the benchmark for things to come? What's left on your bucket list?

Kata Rocks has been a very unique project and it is the signature development and resort for my company Infinite Luxury. With Infinite Luxury, we intend to build more projects of a similar nature around the globe ... essentially offering the space of a luxury villa with the service of a 5-star hotel.