

The game is afoot!

IN HOPES of further capitalizing on the success of their first venue in Bangkok, Escape Hunt has opened up franchise opportunities worldwide, including the Phuket franchise, launched recently in Kathu.

Business partners Jansam Sachathep, Surasit Sachdev, and Navin and Dave Anandsongvit quickly realized the business' potential in Phuket and celebrated their grand opening on August 11, joining the 23 other franchises, which are already open or opening around the world, including one in Pattaya.

Spawning from the popular online and smartphone escape-games, Escape Hunt operates on the basic premise that you are

locked in a room, with only a certain amount of time to figure out the clues and get out.

Although reaching greater popularity in recent years, the real-life escape-room scenarios are not a novel concept. In 2006, Agatha Christie's crime novels inspired a group of Silicon Valley programmers to create "Original Piece" which has only been solved by 23 people.

The Phuket Escape Hunt has eight rooms sporting four different themes. Having two rooms with matched themes means that groups can go head to head, directly pitting one team's power of observation against another's. Alternatively, a single team of two to five players is given

60 minutes to beat the clock.

Although not too many details can be revealed for fear of spoiling the game, think one part Sherlock Holmes and one part Cluedo – or Clue in North America (a popular board game).

The Escape Hunt game has proved challenging, with no groups able to solve the riddles and escape in less than the 44-minute and 20-second time achieved by a certain husband and wife duo.

The owners believe that Escape Hunt will become a popular pastime in Phuket, attracting corporate and MICE (meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions) groups, or as substitute entertainment for



The Escape Hunt Phuket team.

sunburned beach goers.

– *Jeremie Schatz*

The Escape Hunt Phuket is located in Kathu at 46/42 Moo 6 Prabarani Road and is open 365 days a year from 10:30am to 7:30pm. For more information or to make a booking, visit phuket.escapehunt.com, or call 076 323861 or 082-789 9620.

Be on the lookout for dubious investments

MANY readers responded to the recent article "Retirement is all about safety first". Many could relate to the common pitfalls that expats have discovered in Thailand. While investing in a bar or restaurant is typically a losing proposition, at least the foreigner would still have a place to eat and drink.

Where things take a really ugly turn is when retirees get burned on insurance-linked investment sales products and bad investments. Last week a reader reported the latest scandal involving the LM First Mortgage Income Fund and the LM Managed Performance Fund. Investors were told their investments were secure and backed by mortgages on Australian real estate. Investors got returns that were slightly above market rates and appealed to retirees looking for a steady income in retirement.

Now LM Investment Management has collapsed. What's most alarming is the agents who sold these investments have earned their commission and moved on. Those who invested in the fund are left wondering what to do. What was pitched as a safe investment has turned into a big nightmare. One caller said that the unlinked life assurance company (Friends Provident), which was involved in selling the fraudulent fund, is still charging him 1.5% on his original investment, which is now worth nothing.

What happened was that the sales agents for LM Investment Management were paid upfront commissions to get clients – typically 5-9% of the amount invested. There was quite a bit of incentive to tell clients whatever they needed to hear to get them to invest. And what was pitched is what investors all want to hear – steady appreciation, safety, regular payouts and so on.

As a matter of fact, no one can guarantee that. There is no guaranteed investment. The stock market goes up and down. The best an investor can do is diversify and buy quality stocks and Exchange-Traded Funds (ETFs) that trade on the US New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) or Nasdaq; that are regulated by the Securities and Exchange Commission; and that have a long-term outlook.

One good recommendation is Vanguard. Vanguard is the world's largest fund com-



There are no guaranteed investments – the stock market goes up and down. Photo: klip game

pany, with about US\$2.4 trillion invested in the US across more than 170 different funds.

One Vanguard fund of particular note is the Vanguard REIT ETF. This fund invests in US real estate investment trusts that own office buildings, hotels and other properties.

The Vanguard REIT ETF was formed in 2004 and today has US\$44.1 billion in assets. If US\$10k were invested at inception in 2004, you would have \$23,978 today – that's an annual return of 9.29% over the past 10 years. Currently, this fund pays a dividend of 3.7%. At the time this article went to print, no Vanguard fund in the past 10 years had gone bust.

Vanguard has 123 mutual funds and 52 diversified ETFs as of August 2014. All their funds trade on the NYSE or Nasdaq and the mutual funds are open-ended regulated by the US Investment Act of 1940.

The only risk to investing in Vanguard is normal market fluctuations. Can an investment lose value? Of course it can.



Back in 2008 during the financial crisis, US\$10k invested in 2004 was down to US\$6,114.07.

Had an investor ridden the downturn and held on, the stock would be worth almost US\$24k today. That's the nature of capitalism and markets.

The key is to invest money not needed tomorrow. Investors need to have seven to 10 years to invest appropriately in the stock market. If an investor does not have this length of time to commit to an investment, then the stock market probably isn't for him.

Don Freeman is president of Freeman Capital Management, a Registered Investment Adviser with the US Securities Exchange Commission (SEC), based in Thailand. He has over 15 years experience and provides personal financial planning and wealth management to expatriates. Specializing in UK and US pension transfers. Call 089-970 5795 or email: freemancapital@gmail.com.



Governor Maitri Inthusut hands the ITOP banner to Park Jeongha, vice governor of Jeju, South Korea.

ITOP addresses marine tourism

LEADING figures from a host of international tourist destinations dotted around the world placed sustainable marine tourism at the top of the agenda for the 18th Inter-Island Tourism Policy Forum (ITOP) at the Laguna Phuket resort complex on August 21.

Present at the meeting were representative members from Phuket, Hainan, Jeju, Okinawa, Bali, Cebu, Penang and Sri Lanka. "The topic of this year's forum is supporting marine tourism, with a focus on marine resources management; marine travel and transportation; and rescues at sea," Phuket Governor Maitri Inthusut explained.

"The sharing of information at this level is very valuable, as we can learn from the expertise and experience of all the members. Hopefully, we can use what they have to offer to make Phuket a better, more sustainable marine tourism attraction."

Governor Maitri highlighted how members shared their differing policies and experiences for assisting tourists affected by accidents and disasters; developing better security; and improving general safety for tourists.

"Another positive development from this forum is that the delegates have agreed to explore developing routes for tourists to travel among the ITOP members' areas to promote 'inter-island tourism'," Governor Maitri said.

Deputy Director of Yantai Foreign Affairs and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office Wan Hong said that he looked forward to developing "friendship links" with ITOP members.

"We should invite local government and education officials to attend [the ITOP Forum next year]. They will understand what we are doing, and if they have any ideas, they can present them to us," Mr Wan said.

"Phuket and Penang are very similar in terms of culture, landscape, traditions and types of people," Danny Law Henry Kiang, of Penang, told the Gazette.

"We are 'sister cities', and this is a good opportunity for effecting positive changes in our thinking of how we develop our cities."

– *Woranut Pechdee*