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Introduction



Thailand is one of those places that is on everyone's travel list. From the highly cosmopolitan Bangkok to the remote islands of the Andaman Sea, this exotic country has a little bit of everything for most everyone. When people think of Asia, Thailand is often the image that first comes to mind.

Over the years, Thailand has blossomed into a true Mecca for scuba divers from all over the world. Indeed, The Kingdom of Thailand draws more visitors than any other country in Southeast Asia. It has an irresistible combination of breathtaking natural beauty, inspiring temples and ruins of fabulous ancient kingdoms, and is renowned for its hospitality and robust cuisine. Few countries are so well endowed.

Thailand draws more divers than any other Southeast Asia destination, with an estimated 300,000 divers – from the

wide-eyed novice to the seasoned pro – venturing to the country each year. It is estimated the dive industry generates 50,000 jobs as a result. The country has responded by declaring many of its offshore resources as marine national parks and has put rangers in place to run off poachers. It has banned fishing for whale sharks, something none of its neighbors has done, and has placed boat moorings on many sites to prevent anchor damage to the coral reefs.

Having weathered a devastating tsunami in 2004, the industry is on the rebound and is especially strong in places like Pattaya, Ko Tao, Ko Samui and Phuket.

Diving & Snorkeling Thailand will introduce you to the historic shipwrecks of the Eastern Gulf, which sit beside new, habitat-building wrecks created especially for divers to enjoy. The islands of

2 Introduction

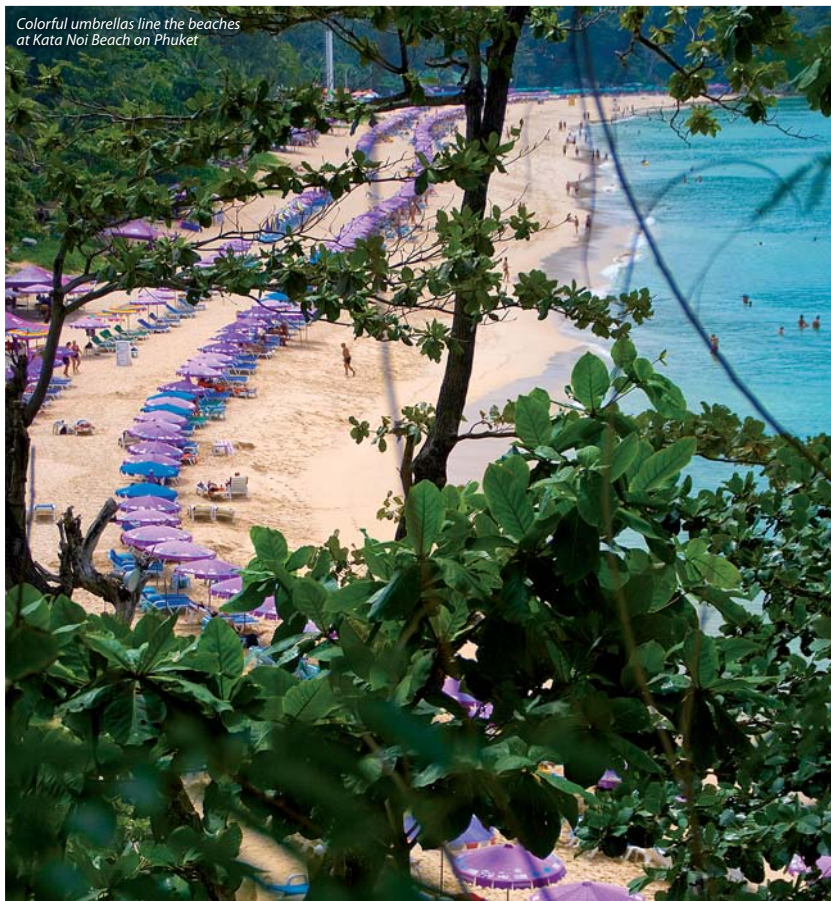
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Ko Tao and Ko Samui are instructional havens where every aspect of diving is taught and practiced on submerged pinnacles, rocky reefs and hard coral fantasylands. On the west coast, Phuket serves as a hub for divers wanting to experience some of the richest marine life in the Andaman Sea. Divers come to see flowing sea anemones, brilliant soft corals, and to chance a view of a leopard shark or a swim beside a behemoth whale shark.

Live aboard ships carry groups of divers north of Phuket to the hotspots in the Similan Islands and Surin Islands and

past the Thai border to newly pioneered dive sites in the Mergui Archipelago in rustic Myanmar (formerly Burma).

Virtually every dive destination within Thailand has its own set of dive sites that offer something special and fascinating. To list them all would create a book the size of the Bible. *Diving & Snorkeling Thailand* features some of the finest dives in Thailand and provides divers and snorkelers with a good feel for the country's finest underwater attractions. It is truly a bountiful destination ready to thrill and surprise visiting scuba buffs.





Facts about Thailand



A Thai lady arranges her fruit stand in Ko Tao

ues to develop at a rapid pace. Bangkok is one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities. Ethnic Thais make up over 70% percent of the country's population followed by Chinese, Malays and various tribe people. Even the minorities are most often Thai born, making the country a unified nation.

Tourism dominates the economic scene, and Thailand is a world leader in the industry. Diving tourism ranks high on the list. The country also specializes in health tourism, cultural tourism (like cooking classes) and agricultural tourism. Divers coming to Thailand are in for a treat.

HISTORY

The earliest civilization in Thailand is believed to have been that of the Mons in central Thailand, who brought their Buddhist culture from the Indian subcontinent. In the 12th century, this met a Khmer culture moving from the east, the Sumatran-based Srivijaya culture moving north, and citizens of the Thai state of Nan Chao, in what is now southern China, migrating south. Thai princes created the first Siamese capital in Sukhotha, followed by centers in Chiang Mai and, notably, Ayuthaya.

The 20th century brought great change to Thailand. In 1932, a peaceful coup converted the country into a constitutional monarchy, and in 1939 Siam became Thailand. During WWII, the Thai Government sided with the Japanese. After the war, Thailand was dominated by the military and experienced more than 20 coups and countercoups interspersed with short-lived experiments with democracy. Democratic elections in 1979 were followed by a long period of stability and prosperity as power shifted from the military to the business elite.

OVERVIEW

Thailand is a large country, with most of its northern and central landmass surrounded by Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar (formerly Burma). There are many destinations within this destination, but of most interest to divers are the areas in the Gulf of Thailand and to the west along the Andaman Sea. In recognizing that these areas have great tourist potential, combined with rich resources above and below the water, Thailand has moved to make many sites marine national parks and national parks.

Rich in culture, Thailand has long been involved in international trade, cultural exchanges and independent governance. Now considered one of Asia's main economic forces, it contin-

Rustic Ko Nang Yuan is a low-key escape



In 1997 the Thai baht (Thailand's currency) pretty much collapsed, dragging the economy (and many other Southeast Asian economies) down in a screaming heap. The unfinished skyscrapers around Bangkok are a legacy of this downturn. Politics and coups have been on the scene here for the last 20 years as well and remain part of the scene, although they rarely affect diving tourist areas.

In December 2004, the west-facing Andaman coast was hit by a tsunami, killing more than 5000 people. Worst affected were small family-run businesses and fishermen, whose buildings and boats were lost to the waters. Aside from areas like Ao Lo Dalam on Phi Phi Island and the Khao Lak/Takua Pa areas in Phang-Nga province, the majority of tourist-reliant areas reopened within weeks or even days of the event.

DIVING HISTORY

There seems to be a consistent story relating to the birth of Thailand's tourism and subsequent diving industry. On April 29, 1961, the first of about 100 American servicemen slated to join the Vietnam conflict arrived in Pattaya for a rest and relaxation break. They had a great time playing on the open beaches and snorkeling, and some tried scuba. The rest is history. Quiet little Pattaya became busy, booming Pattaya. It's now Thailand's premier and most successful beach resort, annually attracting tourists in their hundreds of thousands. The original number of dive shops could be counted on one hand (some are still in existence today) and have been joined by dozens of others offering a plethora of specialties.

Thai diving pioneers also looked west. The island of Phuket remained unconnected to the mainland for years. Thus, boat trips for tourists to visit and stay were infrequent at best. In the early '70s, the Sarasin Bridge was built, connecting Phuket to Phang Nga Province and

opening the way for those wanting to escape the big city of Bangkok. Winding roads, providing some breathtaking overlooks, were created through the mountains and paved the way for dive shops to start businesses in small hotels at the west coast beaches of Patong, Kata and Karon, now the upscale centers for tourism in southern Phuket.

Phuket's small domestic airport became an international airport in the 1990s as infrastructure expanded. Phuket is now the leading island holiday destination in Southeast Asia, with a number of 5-star rated dive shops and every level of instruction and dive experience offered. The first dive shops (that remain in business today) were started in about 1982 and include Ocean Divers, Fantasea Divers and Santana Diving.

As for recent history, Ko Chang is Thailand's new model for tourism, and diving shops are also getting very busy there.

The situation in the Gulf has been in a state of change since the terrible events of the December 2004 tsunami on the west coast. While that mess was being



Thai elephants are ready for feeding

Live aboard ships sit at scenic Ko Bon



cleaned up, divers looked to the Gulf. Always high on the list of backpackers learning to dive, the Gulf industry really only started taking off in the mid-'90s. Following the tsunami, the caliber of tourist visiting Ko Tao has escalated and island ferries have started delivering people with suitcases and laptops – some even with children. This was a rare occurrence prior to the tsunami and has created a bit of culture shock, with a major catch-up resulting in new resorts, better-equipped dive shops and even 24-hour electricity. Dive shops here have recently evolved from wooden shacks to full-blown dive camps.

The early Pattaya pioneers knew they were on to something and in a short few decades the world had agreed by sending upwards of 300,000 divers annually to the country. The good news is

that new sites are still being found and diving is driving conservation and environmental movements that promote healthy seas and protected reefs and their inhabitants.

GEOGRAPHY

Thailand borders Malaysia, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Laos and Cambodia, and has the Gulf of Thailand on its east coast and the Andaman Sea on its west coast. There are four main zones: the fertile central plains of the Chao Phraya River; the poorer region of the 300m (985ft) high northeast plateau; the fertile valley and mountains of Northern Thailand; and the rainforested southern peninsula. Doi Inthanon, at 2,596m (8,512ft) in Chiang Mai province, is the highest peak.

POPULATION, PEOPLE & CULTURE

Thailand has a population of approximately 65,000,000 people, roughly 95% of which is Buddhist, with about 4% Muslim. Religion and monarchy are the cornerstones of Thai culture and they permeate everyday life. It's the custom to stand for the royal anthem before films are shown, and the national anthem is played across towns, villages and even Bangkok Skytrain stations twice daily.

For the beach-holidaymaker and Bangkok fly-by-nighter, it is often easy to overlook the cultural subtleties of Thailand. The local people are a gregarious and accepting lot, but a little bit of respect goes a long way in finding out more about the country's people and culture.

Be modest in dress and actions. Be respectful in your dealings with Thai people and you will get along fine and have a pleasant experience in the country. If you don't blow your top, they won't blow theirs.

CLIMATE

Climate-wise, the best time for visiting Thailand is between November and February when it is not too wet and not too hot. The south is best visited when the rest of Thailand is miserably hot (March to May), and the north is best from mid-November to early December, or when it starts warming up again in February. Thailand's monsoons arrive around July and continue into November (the 'sticky season'). This is followed by a dry, cool period from November to mid-February, followed by much higher relative temperatures from March to June.

If you're spending time in Bangkok, be prepared to roast in April and do some wading in October – probably the most challenging two months, weather-wise, in the capital.



Rambutan fruit for sale in the market



A girl with sun protection in Burma

LANGUAGES

Thai is the official language of the kingdom. English is widely spoken and understood in almost every tourist venue. Thai is a complicated language with its own unique alphabet, but it's fun to try at least a few words. The main complication with Thai is that it is tonal: the same word could be pronounced with a rising, falling, high, low or level tone and could theoretically have five meanings! But give it a go anyway. *Sawadee* (saw-wah-day) means 'hello' and *kob-kuhn* (cob-coon) means 'thank you'. There, you're off to a flying start!

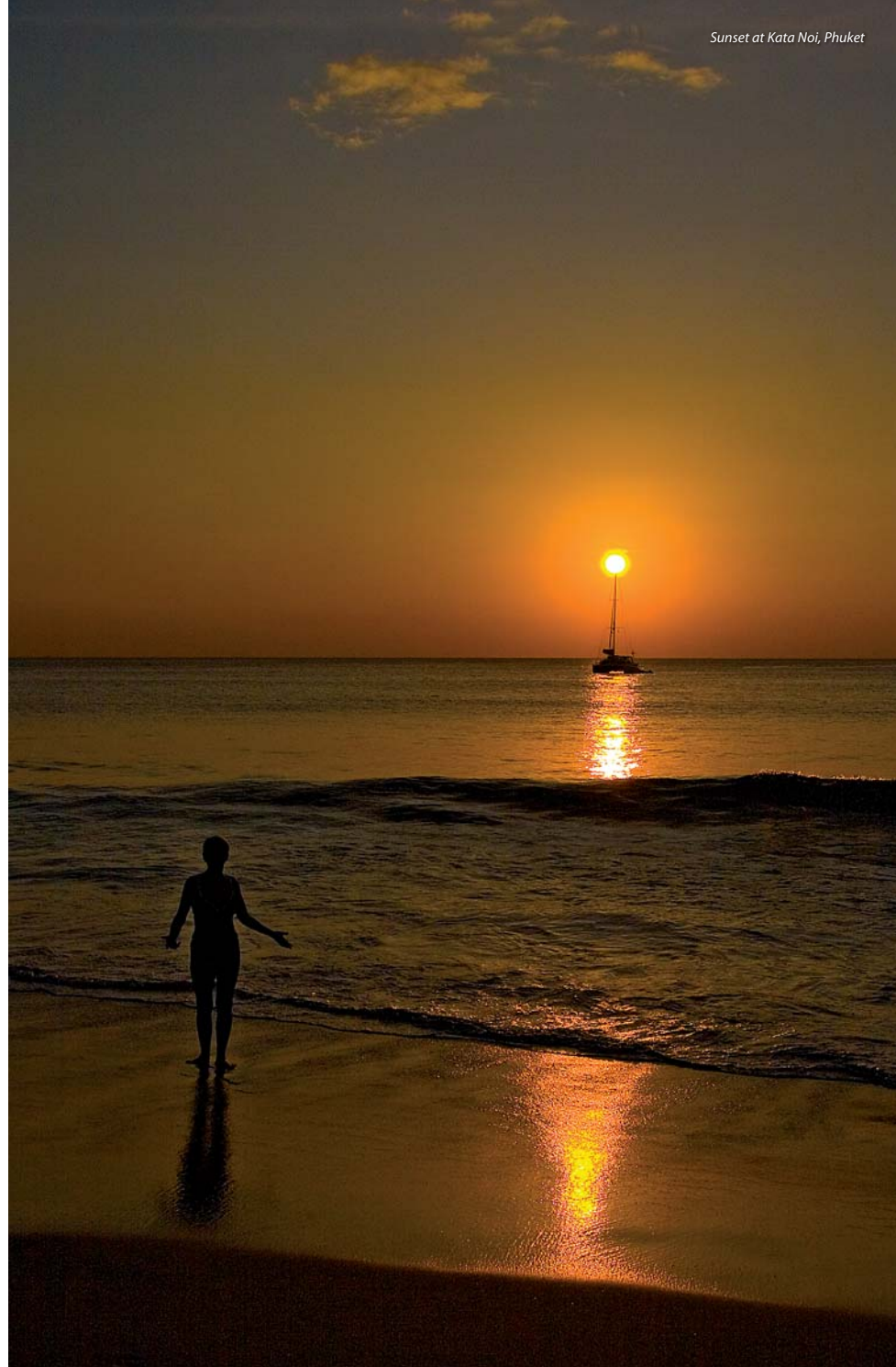
GATEWAY CITY

Dubbed the 'Pearl of the South' by the tourist industry, Phuket is Thailand's largest, most populous and most vis-

ited island. A whirl of color and cosmopolitanism, Thailand's only island province revolves around and thrives on tourism, but still retains a spark of the real Thailand.

There are a hundred and one ways to pass the day in Phuket, which certainly knows how to cater to tourists' every whim. Most flock to the beaches on the southwestern side, which are loaded with amenities and entertainment options.

There are plenty of flights to Phuket from Bangkok (about 80 minutes), operated by a number of domestic and international carriers. Flights are also available to other Thai tourist destinations, such as Ko Samui. As it's an international airport, direct flights to Phuket are also available from destinations outside Thailand including Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.



Author



TIM ROCK

Tim Rock attended the journalism program at the University of Nebraska–Omaha and has been a professional broadcast and print photojournalist for over 30 years. The majority of those years has been spent in the Western and Indo Pacific region reporting on environmental and conservation issues.

His television series, *Aquaquest Micronesia*, was an Ace Award finalist. He has also produced six documentaries on the history and undersea fauna of the region. Tim won the prestigious Excellence in the Use of Photography award from the Society of Publishers in Asia, amongst many other awards for photography and writing. He publishes a magazine and works as a correspondent for numerous Pacific Rim magazines. Tim is the author of many Diving & Snorkeling series guides, including *Bonaire*, *Cayman Islands*, *Thailand*, *Chuuk Lagoon-Pohnpei-Kosrae*, *Bali & Lombok*, *Guam & Yap*, *Palau*, *South Africa-Mozambique* and *Papua New Guinea*, and is a major contributor to *Philippines*.

FROM THE AUTHOR

The very first time I went scuba diving was in early 1972 in the warm, clear waters off Pattaya Beach. It was a mind-

blowing revelation seeing this new, strange and shockingly colorful world. It planted a seed that later led to a career. I was extremely happy to revisit this land and once again embrace its people and its rich underwater world.

A warm thank you to my wife, Larie, for putting up with my absences and, as always, helping out when asked. Special thanks to Hans and Sandy Ulrich for doing so much for me in all aspects of the book research. Thanks to Rene Balot for immense logistical assistance, Porn Songsta, Hans Tibboel, Prakit Phetcamto, Hin Peksuksri, Chalong Phumkliang, Somjet Sriprasit, Sutham Nonsi, Thira Thongmisuk, Wirot Sae-Lee, Charoen Khaikaew, Somnuek Lansin, Yaowapha Piyaprai, Pornpip Popa, Ruengamnat Chooduang, Kay Arsrairas, Peter De Pauw, Jane Wiwek, Matt Bolton, Supha 'Oi' Thamnam, Walter van Paassen, Toine Kokke, Mark Strickland, John Williams, Jamie Macleod, Stuart Oehl, Andrew Hewett, Alex Tyrrell, Elaine Taylor, Erwin Razenberg, Jamie Cox, Priaw Sukanya, Narongsak Tiasakul, Narong Chaimo, Boris De Fauconval and the people of Thailand for their hospitality and dedication to the preservation of the marine world that surrounds their beautiful island.

John Williams and Mark Strickland, the authors of the first Lonely Planet *Thailand* D&S guide book, were very generous in their help and information with this new volume.

PHOTO NOTES

Tim uses Nikon digital cameras, Aquatica underwater housings and Ikelite strobes. Tim's photographic work is represented by Lonely Planet Images (www.lonelyplanetimages.com), Double Blue Images (www.doubleblue.com) and other agents worldwide.

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Diving in Thailand



Dive tourism in Thailand is thriving. With a large base of dive retailers and operators, scuba diving is a cash cow for Thailand's tourism. More than 300,000 overseas visitors come to the country to dive each year, and there are also around 80,000 certified card-holding Thai scuba divers. Ko Tao is the designated destination for all dive beginners (30% of all dive certificates in the world are issued here).

Diving in Thailand is economical and available at all times of the year, although underwater visibility changes by season. In the Andaman Sea, the best time to dive is from October to April, and sites in the Gulf of Thailand are best dived from May to September.

Reputable dive shops are affiliated with PADI or other international dive bodies, and most hold courses in multiple languages. All over Thailand, you can expect modern amenities, international standard boats and professional facilities.

Groups and families can avail good live aboard operations which also cater to snorkelers and non-divers. Friends and family of divers can relax, swim,

snorkel and enjoy the food, trip, scenery and experience of cruising in some warm and beautiful seas.

WHEN TO GO

By far the best time to visit is from February to March when the weather is kind and the beaches are at their finest. The peak travel months are August, November, December, February and March, with secondary peak months in January and July. If your main objective is to avoid crowds and to take advantage of discounted rooms and low-season rates, you should consider traveling during the least crowded months (April, May, June, September and October).

Diving is available at all times of the year, although visibility changes according to the season. In the Andaman Sea, the best time to dive is from October to April, and in the Gulf of Thailand from May to September. At recommended dive sites in Thailand, the water is often so clear that the underwater world of whale sharks, manta rays, marlin, flying fish, dolphins and coral reefs is visible from the surface.

WHAT TO BRING

The climate in Thailand is best described as tropical with a range of seasons from very hot to mild (but still warm). The usual resort wear and light cotton clothing is best. Shorts, short dresses and T-shirts are the norm in most spots. If you are staying in a fancy hotel, check if there is any sort of dress code, especially for dining. Otherwise, relax. In December or January it can be cool in the evenings, so pack a thin jacket or pullover. The rest of the year is hot both day and night.

Use both a high DEET content sunscreen and long-sleeve pants, shirts and socks if you are in a malarial area. Most dive destinations aren't a problem in Thailand, but areas in the north of the

country, like Chiang Mai, can have malarial mosquitoes.

Some people travel light or arrive with near-empty suitcases in order to take advantage of Thailand's great tailors and shopping.



The Best Dives

Wreck Dive

The **HTMS Khram** was sunk especially for divers around Pattaya and is a great site for playing and training.

Shark Point



Shark Dive

The best chance to see a shark is at **Ko Bon**, where manta rays come in to clean

and an occasional whale shark may join in the fray. Leopard sharks rest in the sand at 100ft.

Reef Dive

Shark Point, near Phuket, is a real beauty with three pinnacles covered in sea life.

Pinnacle Dive

Western Rocky Island is an amazing formation that has macro life and tons of fish.

Critter Dive

There's lots going on all the time at **Richelieu Rock**, where frogfish, harlequin shrimp and mating cuttlefish are seen on a regular basis.



WHAT TO BRING DIVING

Thailand is a good dive destination because if you do forget something, there are many fully-equipped dive shops that offer equipment rental and sales, parts purchase (eg fin straps) and even regulator repairs. If you're not picky and don't want to carry dive gear, full rental of all kit is also available.

The water is tropical and generally clear with an average temperature of 68° to 74° Fahrenheit (26°C to 29°C) around the country, but it can be colder between November and February. This period also brings some unusual sightings, like guitar sharks. The water temperature is normally warmest from mid-March to late May. Usually all that is needed is a 1.5mm to 3mm wetsuit to remain very comfortable; heartier folks just wear skins or T-shirts. Those acclimated, like divemasters, wear 5mm to 7mm.

Normal scuba gear or snorkeling gear is fine for Thailand.

Don't forget your 'C' card and dive log to show your host dive shop. Nitrox is offered almost everywhere, so bring your mixed gas card if you are going to use it.

Tech diving, rebreather diving, rental and training is also available within Thailand.



DIVE TRAINING & CERTIFICATION

Thailand offers all levels of training, from snorkeling and basic scuba to full instructor courses. PADI is the main agency represented in Thailand. TDI technical diving courses are also offered and SSI also has good representation here. Check with your dive shop for information on the courses you can take. Thailand is perfect for advanced diving, rescue, basic underwater photography, nitrox, wreck certification, marine life courses and many other specialties.

IDCs (Instructor Development Courses) run almost weekly and can always be attended in some part of the country.

Most costs for diving are pretty much the same across Thailand. It is best to shop for what you want. Remember, the cheapest package may or may not be the best and safest training. Ask questions and shop for the best situation for your needs.

LIVE ABOARDS

There are currently many live aboards operating around Thailand which cater to all income groups and range from extremely basic to among the finest in the world. Trips range from as short as two days, which is basically an overnight at sea, to two-week expeditions. Ocean Rover, which operates out of Phuket, has been listed in the world's top 10 live boards.

Live aboard boats provide a superb way to see a lot and to dive frequently. As many as five dives a day can be offered (four day dives and a night dive) and divers can travel through the hot western spots and up into Myanmar (formerly Burma) for some unique diving experiences.

Live aboard diving generally provides a shared room, all meals, soft drinks, air, nitrox and experienced crew. It can

really enhance the diving experience to have a knowledgeable guide and crew, which make a real difference between an ordinary and excellent dive trip. A good live board will also have a well-stocked library and video selection of marine-related titles. Truly knowledgeable divemasters and cruise directors can give informed briefings and excellent post-dive discussions about the habits and habitat of marine critters. Ask around and make sure you're getting the most bang for your buck so your holiday dreams are fulfilled. Live aboards can't make whale sharks appear, however. Enjoy the experience of being out to sea in Thailand's rich environment and look upon big fish visits as a bonus if you do get lucky.

One disturbing thing about most Thai live aboards, however, is that they don't use tenders to move divers back and forth to the sites, resulting in big ships chasing divers down all over the site. This is both an unsafe situation and also causes a lot of irritating and unnecessary noise underwater. Try to find a ship that uses a small boat or zodiac-style dinghy to drop off and pick up divers.

It is by far the best way to go. If an operation inquires as to why you didn't choose them, let them know that lack of tender diving was a major factor.

SNORKELING

Thailand has many good venues for snorkelers, as the numerous small islands have beautiful fringing reefs. Snorkeling is a very popular pastime due to the usually clear water, easy access by boat or shore, and normally mild currents within inshore bays. Many people come to Thailand for the snorkeling alone. Be aware of the boat traffic on Thai beaches and snorkel away from the boat lanes. Most dive shops and even some beach huts have snorkel gear for rent if you don't want to bring your own. If you have never done it, this country is all about instruction. You can take lessons.

Most snorkelers can get to see a good portion of the reefs visited by live aboards. Although be aware that not all venues are good for snorkeling due to surge and currents or the depth of the submerged site.



Graceful mantas are a highlight of Thai diving

A snorkeler heads out from shore





Thailand's huge diversity makes it a photo paradise

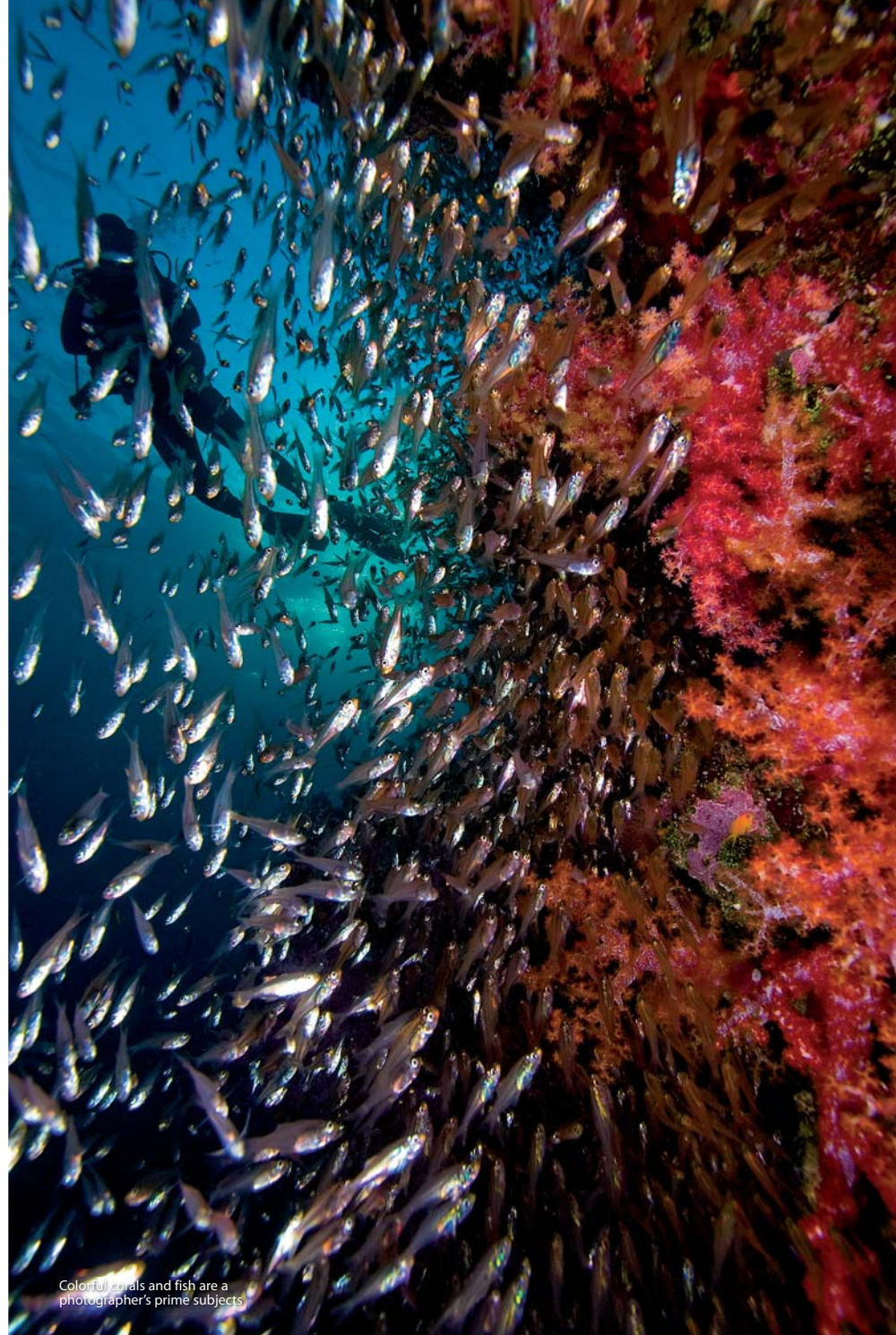
UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

Underwater photography is a favored activity for many divers traveling to Thailand. The brilliant soft corals, bright purple sea anemones and multitude of colorful invertebrates, combined with the chance to see and photograph something as huge as a whale shark, make this one of the premier underwater photography destinations in the world. Thailand is a great place for colorful wide angle lens work, medium focal length for fish and macro photography.

Most larger dive centers offer the PADI Underwater Photographer specialty course, which will teach you the basics of underwater photography, like composition and camera handling, with spe-

cial emphasis on practical techniques. Also included are sections on photography dive planning, organization, procedures, techniques, potential problems and how to care for and maintain camera equipment. This is frequently taught now using a digital camera, and usually comes with the use of a shop camera or you can bring your own.

For those with film, print film processing is still widely available. For those with slide film, proper E-6 processing is becoming harder to find as digital takes over. Bangkok is about the only option for professional results for film. Ask if your dive center offers processing before you go if you want on-the-spot results. A few live aboards may still do this, but it is phasing out rapidly.



Colorful corals and fish are a photographer's prime subjects

Many dive centers have personal video services and there are a few companies that also teach video technique and editing. Most will find it simpler to buy a DVD of the day's dives at a reasonable fee.

Doing boat dives with a good Thailand underwater guide who is familiar with working with a photographer is highly recommended. The longtime guides all talk and know one another and may relay information on the latest find of a frogfish, harlequin shrimp or ghost pipefish pair. It can make your photo experience much better in the long run.

In Thailand, you will find that underwater photographers are only marginally catered to. Most boats have fresh water buckets that can hold perhaps three housed point-and-shoot cameras and strobes (or one SLR system). Few boats have actual dedicated spaces for cameras, and many divers are novices or new to boat etiquette and don't necessarily look where they fling gear. Some may even approach you, dripping wet, when your housing is open and ask to see your photos from the last dive. It is prudent to be very defensive when doing some of the group dives. Also, most divers bring smaller point-and-shoot cameras. Those with SLRs should run through a bit of procedure on handling their camera going in and coming out so lens covers get replaced and chances for damage are kept at a minimum. Tanks dedicated to camera rinse can be rather crowded with both boat and shore divers sharing the same bin, and masks and fins allowed to be washed in the same water.

As most divers use wrist lanyards, a crowded rinse bin and boat rinse tub means that people can hastily pull their gear out and snag yours as well. This can cause latches to unlock and uncovered domes and ports to get scratched. While it seems like a good idea to keep your camera wet all the time, the lack of

enough boat basins and the overcrowding at the shop can be a problem.

One of the absolutely best thought-out and executed camera areas was found on the Ocean Rover live aboard. The all-around arrangements for photographers (both video and still) of all levels is one of the finest in the world. From dedicated work stations and charging areas to the handling of equipment before and after the dive, most operations could learn a bit from this ship's philosophy.

There are some nice beach dives, but fine sand can get into cameras during these dives. Night diving in Ko Tao is popular as is Karan Noi in Phuket. After beach dives, carefully check and clean your o-rings to ensure fine sand particles have not become lodged in the o-ring slots and on the rings themselves. A little preventive maintenance in the evenings can be worth many dollars and reduce the risk of a camera having to be replaced due to a housing flooded because of an errant speck of beach sand.



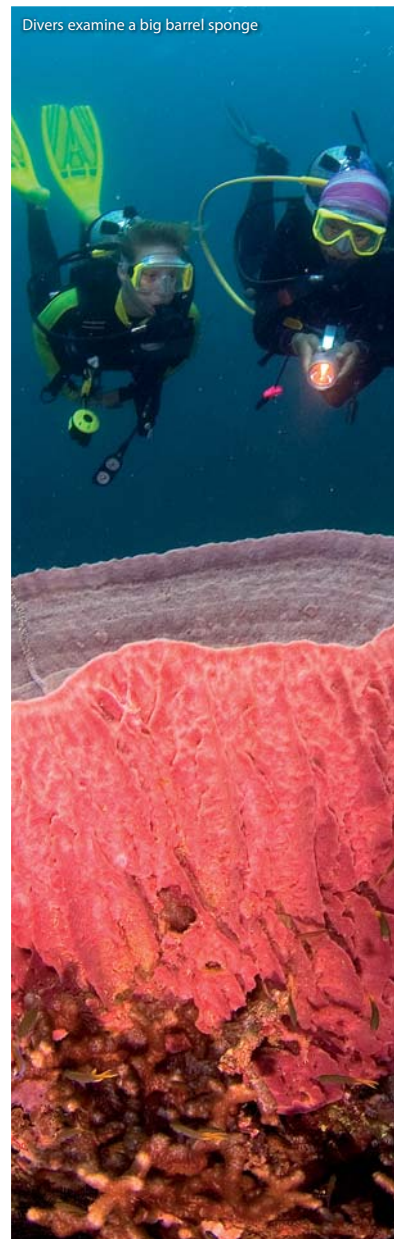
Dive shop videographers are normally on hand to record your experience

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Conservation

Divers examine a big barrel sponge



Thailand is a conservationist's dream, with over 100 national parks and dozens of marine parks. Similan Islands National Park, 70km from Phang-Nga town, is one of Thailand's most famous diving areas. This archipelago of nine islands, established after a year-long exploration by the Forestry Department, includes the islands of **Ko Bon**, Ko Bayu, Ko Similan, Ko Paya, Ko Miang (two adjoining islands), Ko Payan, Ko Payang and Ko Huyong. The park was expanded recently to include the remote islands of Ko Bon and **Ko Tachai**. Similan is a Malay or Yawi word that means nine.

Protected Species

Some species found in Thailand that are globally threatened and in danger of extinction include:

Corals & Marine Life

All types of soft and hard coral and sea fans – dead and alive – are locally and internationally protected by law. Coral reefs rival rain forests in their biological diversity. The magnificent array of reef fish and bottom-dwelling animals, such as crustaceans, that visitors enjoy observing all depend on the health of the coral reef. Marine mammals, such as whales, porpoises and dolphins, are fully protected both internationally and locally.

Sea Turtles

Sea turtles are completely protected, as are their nests and eggs, by both local and international law in Thailand. Turtles are threatened worldwide by overexploitation. It is prohibited to catch, kill, eat, possess, offer for sale, sell, buy, trade or give as a gift turtle meat or any other part of a turtle.

Health & Safety

Overall, Thailand is a healthy place to visit with some of the finest hospitals in the world. There are numerous decompression chambers for diving accidents located around the country, many also used to treat other illnesses.

In the north of the country, some cases of malaria have been reported. It is a serious and potentially fatal disease spread by mosquito bites, with symptoms ranging from fever, chills and sweating, headache, diarrhea and abdominal pains, to a vague feeling of ill-health. Seek medical help immediately if malaria is suspected. Without treatment, malaria can rapidly become more serious and can be fatal. Thailand's more susceptible areas for malaria include northern Kanchanaburi

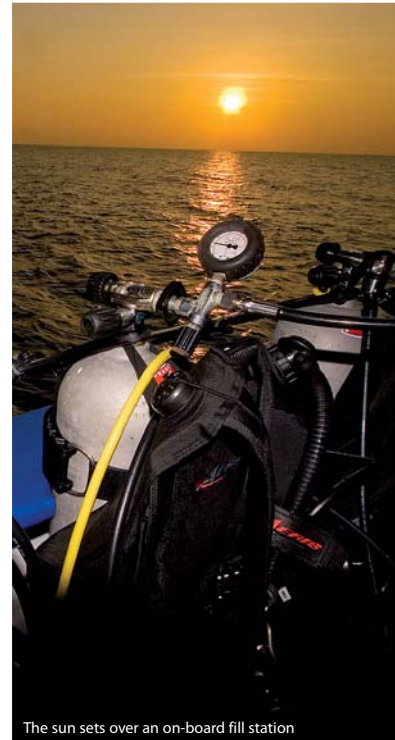
Province (especially Thung Yai Naresuan National Park) and parts of Trat Province along the Cambodian border (including Ko Chang).

Japanese B encephalitis, a mosquito-transmitted viral infection of the brain, is thought to be a very low risk for travelers and generally only a risk in rural, rice-growing areas. However, it can be fatal and may cause permanent brain damage in those who recover. There is an effective vaccine, and you should take measures to avoid mosquito bites.

Many animals can be infected with rabies (including dogs, cats, bats and monkeys). The saliva of the animal is infectious and any bite, scratch or even lick from a warm-blooded, furry animal should be cleaned immediately and thoroughly. Scrub with soap and running water, and then apply alcohol or iodine solution. Medical help should be sought promptly to receive a course of injections to prevent the onset of symptoms and death.

The *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which transmits the dengue virus, is most active during the day and is found mainly in urban areas in and around human dwellings. Signs and symptoms of dengue fever include a sudden onset of high fever, headache, joint and muscle pains, nausea and vomiting. A rash of small red spots sometimes appears three to four days after the onset of fever. Severe complications do sometimes occur. You should seek medical attention as soon as possible if you think you may be infected. A blood test can indicate the possibility of dengue fever. Aspirin should be avoided, as it increases the risk of hemorrhaging. There is no specific treatment, and there is no vaccine against dengue fever.

A listing of hospitals in Thailand can be found at www.khaosanroad.com/hospitals.htm



The sun sets over an on-board fill station

Rating System for Dives & Divers



Divers disembark a local longtail boat

The dive sites in this book are rated according to divers at a particular time diving at a particular place. These are not absolute ratings. For instance, someone unfamiliar with prevailing conditions might be considered a novice diver at one dive area, but an intermediate diver at another, more familiar location.

Novice:

A novice diver generally fits the following profile:

- basic scuba certification from an internationally recognized certifying agency
- dives infrequently (less than one trip a year)
- logged fewer than 25 total dives
- little or no experience diving in similar waters and conditions
- dives no deeper than 60ft (18m).

*An instructor or divemaster should accompany a novice diver on all dives.

Intermediate:

An intermediate diver generally fits the following profile:

- may have participated in some form of continuing diver education
- logged between 25 and 100 dives
- no deeper than 130ft (40m)
- has been diving within the last six months in similar waters and conditions.

Advanced:

An advanced diver generally fits the following profile:

- advanced certification
- has been diving for more than two years; logged over 100 dives
- has been diving within the last six months in similar waters and conditions.

Pre-dive Safety Guidelines

Regardless of skill level, you should be in good physical condition and know your limitations. If you are uncertain as to which category you fit, ask the advice of a local dive instructor. He or she is best qualified to assess your abilities based on the prevailing dive conditions at any given site. Ultimately, you must decide if you are capable of making a particular dive, depending on your level of training, recent experience and physical condition, as well as water conditions at the site. Remember that water conditions can change at any time, even during a dive.

PRE-TRIP PREPARATION

Shops in Thailand offer equipment for sale and rental, and also equipment repair. If you are using your own gear, get your regulator tuned up before leaving home if you haven't used it for over six months. Also consider doing some local check-out dives, even if just in a pool.

It's worth exercising prior to the trip in order to face the challenges of boat diving and the ins and outs and walks associated with shore diving. Swimming, hiking with a backpack and jogging will help increase fitness and stamina.

Make sure your passport is not about to expire or hasn't already expired. You can't get into Thailand without one and you can't get back home even if you do manage to get into Thailand.

MEDICAL & RECOMPRESSION FACILITIES

Hyperbaric recompression chambers are located strategically throughout Thailand, and more chambers are being introduced to treat other illnesses, making chambers widely available. A dedicated diving telemedicine consultation network provides high quality diving medicine and other specialized medical service on a 24-hour basis. Diving medicine centers operate in Bangkok, Ko Tao and Phuket, with each facility staffed by physicians and nurses trained and experienced in diving medicine and ready to provide hyperbaric treatments for unfortunate divers at short notice.

By international standards, the cost of medical treatment in Thailand is surprisingly low. Nevertheless, health and accident insurance is strongly recommended. Every major town in Thailand has a public hospital, but these can be poorly equipped and overcrowded. Private hospitals are recommended for easier communication and better service; ask for *long-piya-barn ekachon* (private hospital).

Your DAN affiliate should also be consulted in the event of a diving accident, or diving illness symptoms, as well as your dive shop manager so they can react to the emergency and set things in motion for treatment.

Emergency numbers are only useful if you can speak Thai. If you need help contact the Tourist Police on 1155. Please note that air evacuation is still very sketchy. Those on live aboard trips to remote sites should recognize this and dive conservatively.

DAN

Divers Alert Network (DAN) is an international membership association of individuals and organizations sharing a common interest in diving and safety. It operates a 24-hour diving emergency hotline in the US at ☎ 919-684-8111 or ☎ 919-684-4DAN (which accepts collect calls in a dive emergency). DAN does not directly provide medical care; however, it does provide advice on early treatment, evacuation, and hyperbaric treatment of diving-related injuries.

All divers should have DAN or some similar insurance. Some dive companies and live aboards actually require it, so take care of your diving insurance before you head to Thailand.



A Thai ambulance waits at a dock

*A diver examines a flowing sea anemone
with its 'Nemo' clown anemonefish*



Marine Life



Wentle traps eat tube coral and leave eggs in the coral skeleton

Thailand is blessed with a diverse population of fish and invertebrates that comprise both Indo Pacific dwellers and Indian Ocean species, plus quite a few endemic species. It is a great place for variety, but care must be taken with a few of these ocean creatures that use defense mechanisms harmful to divers.

Thailand is a superb place to get to know the ocean and its creatures. Most fish, crabs and other marine creatures have specific habitats. Getting to know where a certain subject likes to live, when it likes to feed, when and where it mates and all of the other routines of life under the sea will enable the diver to find the subject with greater ease. This enhances observation and also photography.

Colorful fish are perhaps the most sought after in the Thailand waters. Beautiful angelfish, parrotfish, basslets and triggerfish catch the eye of divers and snorkelers. But there are more mundane fish that are also worth watching for their unique coloration or ability to camouflage, like a seahorse or frogfish.

The invertebrate world around Thailand can't be dismissed. The amazing sponge formations on virtually every dive site give the reef form and color. Thailand's corals are healthy and very competitive, sometimes growing into or on top of one another. And crustaceans such as shrimp, crabs and lobsters all have unique homes and many have symbiotic relationships with other marine creatures.

HAZARDOUS MARINE LIFE

The diversity of marine life extends also to dangerous marine animals. Most of these are quite small and not ferocious, but highly venomous. There are cone shells, stonefish, scorpionfish, stingrays, hydroids, fire corals, urchins and many other creatures that can adversely affect a diver.

Divers should read or ask about which creatures will be commonly seen and should know first aid procedures in

the rare event a person is wounded by a marine animal. Be especially careful on night dives. Carrying proper antiseptic ointments greatly helps.



Coral Facts by Dee Scarr

The facts of life for coral:

- 1 Be aware that we use the word 'coral' for three things: the individual coral animal, called the polyp; the polyps and the skeleton they've secreted, also called a coral head; and the skeleton without its living polyps, also called coral rock. The first two of these are alive, while the last is not alive, which leaves a great deal of room for confusion.
- 2 A coral polyp (the living coral animal) is only three to four cell layers thick.
- 3 To create a model of coral tissue against its own skeleton, take a wet tissue and drape it across a bare razorblade.
- 4 Every individual coral animal in a coral head is a clone of every other coral animal in that coral head.
- 5 A coral head is started by a single coral larva which grows and begins to secrete a calcium-based skeleton, then clones itself, and repeats the process. Slowly.
- 6 A hemispherical coral head of 3ft diameter is two- to three-hundred years old.
- 7 The branching corals, elkhorn and staghorn grow more quickly than the 'head' corals, such as brain coral and star coral. They thrive in shallower waters, though, so are more likely to be broken by wave action.
- 8 Look at a star coral head, or a starlet coral head. Every single little mound or indentation – every single little circle in the whole coral head – is an individual coral animal.
- 9 Look at a brain coral head, or a sheet coral. The polyps aren't as easy to distinguish as they are in the star corals, but a careful look will reveal the mouths of the polyps, day or night.
- 10 The tissue of every coral polyp in a coral head is connected to all the polyps around it. The entire surface of a coral head is covered with living coral tissue.



Sharks

Sharks are encountered on few dives in Thailand. Attacks are rare and usually only occur in some misguided feeding attempt, or on fishermen spearing fish. In the event that a shark does become aggressive, it is sometimes wise to rise to a shallower depth to get out of its territory. If a shark comes too close, stop and face the animal and watch it closely and quietly. Be prepared to push it away with a camera, knife, spear or tank. Treatment for bites is to stop any bleeding, reassure the patient and treat for shock, and seek immediate medical treatment.

Lionfish

These fish are seen commonly around areas with lots of baitfish, where they hunt. They also prowl under ledges and in the open at night. They inject their venom with spines on their back and the wound can also be quite painful with a lot of swelling. To treat, wash the wound, immerse in water as hot as the victim can stand for 60 to 90 minutes and seek medical aid.

Fire Coral

It looks pretty with its caramel color, but it is like putting your hand on a cigarette. It actually has tiny 'hairs' that burn like crazy and can swell up afterward. This mechanism is to defend against munching parrotfish, but divers sometimes get tagged as well. If stung by their powerful nematocysts, the skin will burn and itch. Rinse with seawater or water and apply vinegar or methylated alcohol on the sting. In a severe case anti-histamines can help, and seek immediate medical treatment.

Jellyfish

The stings of a jelly are released by nematocysts contained in the trailing tentacles. The rule of thumb is the longer the tentacles, the more painful the sting. Keep an eye out for jellyfish while snorkeling. On the outer reefs, man-o-war and sea wasps are found. Most stings can be treated with vinegar. Some people do react adversely to jellyfish stings, similar to those who are allergic to bee stings. Be prepared to administer CPR and seek medical aid.



Tiny but still potent scorpionfish

Barracuda

Barracuda bites are also quite rare. The fish tend to be attracted to shiny objects and have been known to attack in murky water. Like sharks, this is normally a case of mistaken identity and invariably an accident.

On Thailand's reefs, small schools and individual blackbar barracuda will frequently be encountered. There are also a lot of the larger great barracuda. These fish should not be teased. Their bites can be damaging, so stop any bleeding, reassure the patient, treat for shock and seek immediate medical treatment.

Stonefish/Scorpionfish

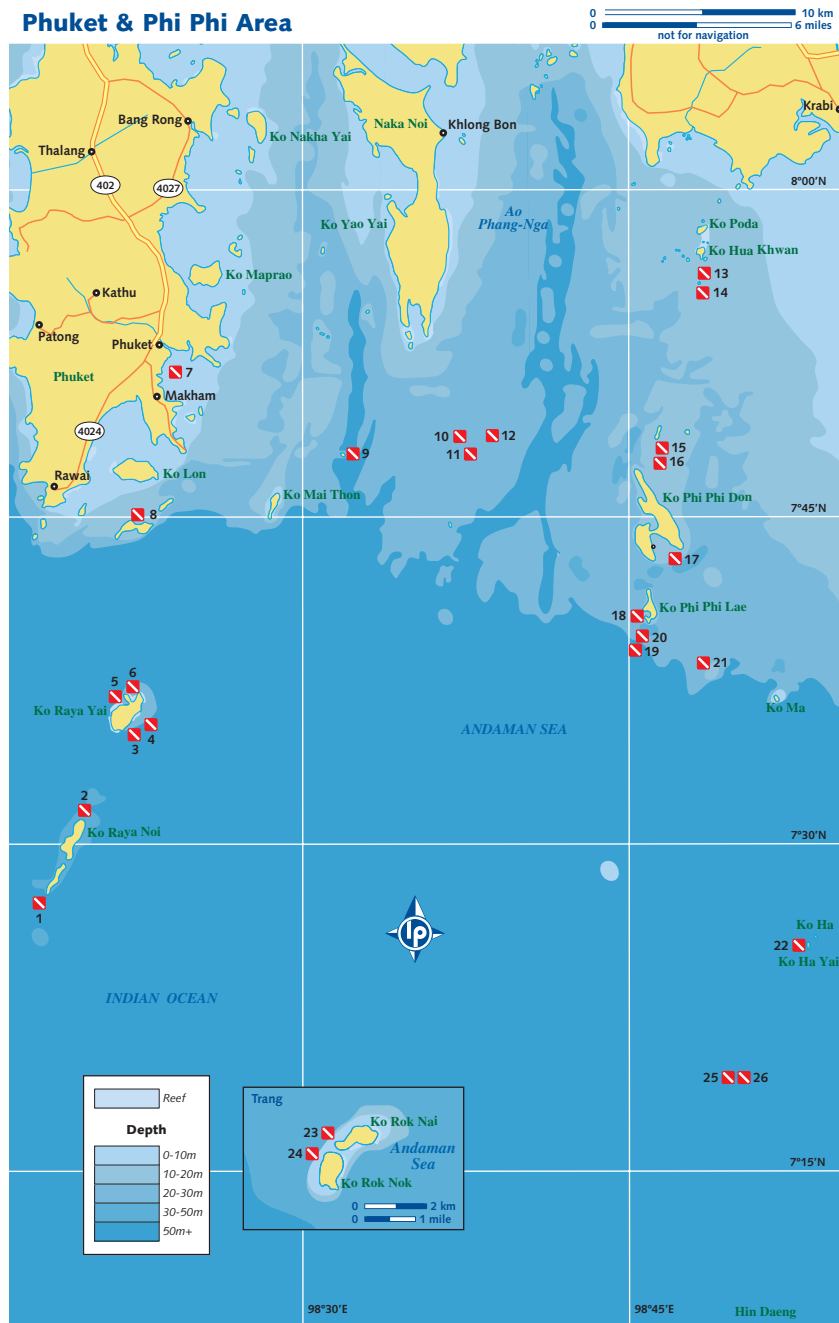
These fish will be seen commonly in sandy and rubble areas in Thailand's waters and on night dives. They inject their venom with spines on their back.

The wound can also be quite painful with a lot of swelling. To treat, wash the wound, immerse in water as hot as the victim can stand for 60 to 90 minutes and seek medical aid.

Sea Urchins

These spiny critters can be a real problem. The stings from the spines can range from irritating to highly intense. Spines can also break off inside the skin. Avoid contact with urchins and remain vigilant in the areas they frequent, especially at night. Treat by administering CPR until the pain subsides. Seek medical advice and use antibiotics where advised. For superficial pricks, use lemon or lime, as the acid will speed the dissolution of the spine remnants left under the skin. Deeper, larger spines may have to be surgically removed.

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Phuket & Phi Phi Area



RACHA ISLANDS

These islands are considered 'going south' when leaving from the Phuket area. Comprising Ko Racha Yai and Ko Racha Noi, they offer a good variety of multi-level dives. Experienced divers are better off at some of the more challenging current-fed sites off Racha Noi, while every level of diver from snorkeler and novice through to experienced will find a Racha Yai experience a good one.

Generally good visibility and protected reefs, especially along Racha Yai's eastern coastline, make this a very popular check-out and training area, with shallow bays and sandy bottoms busy with divers and snorkelers most of the time.

There are some very pleasant resorts on these islands, so people can stay and dive right from Racha Yai; however, most come over on a day trip from the Phuket area.

Racha Islands	DIVER SKILL LEVEL			
	GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
1 SOUTH TIP (RAY BAHN)	•			•
2 NORTH TIP	•			•
3 LUCY'S REEF	•	•		
4 STAGHORN REEF	•	•		
5 BUNGALOW BAY	•	•		
6 AO SIAM	•	•		
7 THE 'NOI' DIVES	•	•		



Safety sausages are a must in Thai waters, as boat traffic can be heavy

1 SOUTH TIP (RAY BAHN)

Location: 23 nautical miles (42km) south of Ao Chang

Depth: 40-130ft (12-40m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Advanced and/or with guide



The south tip of Racha Noi is considered one of the better dive sites along this long island. If winds are blowing up from the south, captains may not attempt to make the haul down. Though if conditions are right this is a scenic spot with attractive coral gardens, boulders and pinnacles rising up around 40ft. Many-

hued soft corals appear anything from popsicle orange to ruby red, when using a light here to see their true colors.

Being the end of the island, currents can be strong as flows from both sides converge. Look here for schooling chevron barracuda, big rainbow runner schools and silvery jacks.

Down in the depths, look for the often-elusive leopard shark, along with big marbled stingrays; even whitetips have been seen resting when the currents are moving. This southern site also gets the occasional manta and a rare whale shark, but divers are more likely to see lionfish, scorpionfish, small schools of snappers and lots of fusiliers. Remember that the reeftop is at 40ft, so leave enough time for ascent and decompression.

2 NORTH TIP

Location: 18 nautical miles (34km) south of Ao Chang

Depth: 16-118ft (5-36m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Advanced and/or with guide



Shallower than the south tip of Racha Noi, this site offers a lot of similar attractions with good soft coral growth and coral gardens nestled into the areas between the pinnacles and sloping terrain.



Beautiful soft corals thrive in the gentle currents

The North Tip is an advanced dive due to depth and occasional strong currents. While it may be a bit easier to avoid currents here than at **South Tip**, they can still be powerful, so be aware. A good location for pelagic life, chevron barracuda, dogtooth tuna and the occasional whitetip shark may make an appearance here.

As this site has been known to have down currents, it is best to follow your guide if the tide is changing to avoid areas where these prevail.

The 2004 Tsunami

December 26, 2004 is a day that continues to haunt the lives of many residents and visitors. One of the most devastating tsunamis ever recorded in Asia swept across the Indian Ocean, affecting beach and resort areas from Thailand to Madagascar and the African continent. Thousands of people died and many more were left homeless in Thailand and across the region.

For the most part, rebuilding is now going strong with resorts in Thailand cleaned up and operating back near their pre-disaster pace. The powerful wave did affect some popular reef areas and these sites have largely been closed in favor of some exciting, newly-discovered sites.

While it may be hard to judge the long-term effects of the tsunami, nature appears to be adapting. Fish now have new habitat and the change in reef structure has opened up coastal areas for different invertebrate species and fish to move in.

Those who have not visited Thailand before would be hard-pressed to see much damage now, or discern any real change unless it was pointed out. Nature's capacity to rebuild and alter the ocean floor is evident here and the reefs are rebounding well, making for a rewarding diving experience.

3 LUCY'S REEF

Location: 13 nautical miles (25km) south of Ao Chang
Depth: 16-90ft (4-28m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



Divers of all levels will enjoy this site at Racha Yai, which features sloping reefs and a good mix of fish and other marine life.

Snorkelers who stay nearer the shore can actually go from this site to nearby **Staghorn Reef**. Care should be taken when finning though, as some coral patches grow right up to the shore and very near the surface, and can be easily damaged.

Orange-lined triggerfish, emperor angels and trumpetfish are among the fish that move around the coral outcrops and plating ledges that provide good habitat at Lucy's Reef. They are joined by lots of smaller creatures, such as nudibranchs, crabs and sea stars. There is usually just enough current here to keep things active and as a result fish life in the water column can be busy at times. Keep an eye out for jacks and other reef lurkers.

The reef also has a decent collection of sea anemones, along with accompanying clownfish, Clark's anemonefish and a few colorful *percula*. Sightings of the leaf-like cockatoo waspfish on the sea floor have also been made, along with some well-camouflaged frogfish. Ask your guide what types of marine life have been seen at this site recently and perhaps you'll be lucky enough to get a glimpse of something odd and unusual.

This dive is sometimes done as a point A to B dive instead of returning to the buoy, with the boat picking divers up at the end point.

4 STAGHORN REEF

Location: 13 nautical miles (25km) south of Ao Chang
Depth: 16-90ft (4-28m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



Another good snorkelers' reef, this site has big staghorn coral patches and lots of chromis, with small, colorful fish moving over, around and in the dense patches of brittle staghorn. Drop in at the reef's south end for the thickest growth areas.

Along with a slope of staghorn and other coral outcrops, there are white sandy patches that hold flounder, blue-spot stingrays, garden eels deeper where the current flows and some hunting octopi. Mantis shrimp are also seen here.

The staghorn patches attract butterflyfish, including the longnose butterflyfish (called the 'very longnose butterflyfish' in Thailand) and occasional marauding groups of red-tailed butterflyfish. Other fish include the toothy titan triggerfish and emperor angels.

Fire corals are also found here, mixed in with the staghorns. Avoid contact with these as contact feels much like touching a lit cigarette.

Both this site and **Lucy's** are protected most of the year from the southwest monsoon, as are most east coast sites in the Racha Islands.



Emperor angelfish



5 BUNGALOW BAY

Location: 13 nautical miles (25km) south of Ao Chang

Depth: 16-98ft (4-30m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



Located on the scenic west side of the island, this is a huge magnet for snorkelers, lunch-breakers and intro divers. Be warned, that means LOTS of boat traffic. Experienced divers probably won't like dives inside the bay much, as it is noisy and the hard coral reefs aren't overly thick with anything colorful.

Some disturbing anchor damage on the reefs is clearly visibly, caused by improperly thrown anchors that miss the sand patches and strike the coral. Always use a safety sausage around here when surfacing as well – you never know what's coming or going on the surface.



A snorkeler enjoys Bungalow Bay

The hard coral beds do hold puffers, crinoids, groupers, eels and lots of other reef fish. Look also for sea snakes winding their way through the reef looking for crustaceans. Divers usually dive along the rocky cliff face to the north; it gets deeper as one heads out to the bay's mouth.

Sandy areas here can be productive, with odd creatures sometimes showing up. Reports of Pegasus sea moths, razorfish and harlequin ghost pipefish (which look like a blade of sea grass), have all been sighted. Pipefish may just be hanging in the sand or perhaps hovering next to a palm frond, mimicking debris. Nudi-branch expert Mark Strickland reports that some species seldom seen elsewhere have been identified here.

6 AO SIAM

Location: 13 nautical miles (25km) south of Ao Chang

Depth: 20-65ft (4-19m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



This is a real fun dive with lots of divers' 'toys' to play with. The site was developed recently with artificial reef structures designed to attract fish and give corals some substrate for growth. Looking like a boxy, wild, underwater jungle gym, small hard corals are already beginning to sprout here, with small puffers, rays and lionfish making them home.

There are two buoys in the bay leading down to a rather unremarkable sandy sea floor at roughly 60ft. Aside from the artificial reef structures, the real bonus here is a life-sized temple entrance and two full-sized Thai elephants; one standing high on its back legs. These make great photographic props as divers can swim over and under the elephants and through the temple doors.

Divers can encounter full size elephants under the sea at Ao Siam



These sculptures also act as artificial reefs, with butterflyfish, schooling fusiliers and spotfin lionfish all using these pachyderms and holy gates as refuge.

When you tire of playing here, or run low on camera space, head inland toward the shallower reaches of this fun little bay. Shallower staghorn reefs in the 20 to 30ft range provide shelter for chromis and mantis shrimp. Frogfish are also sometimes seen here.

Depths reach just 30ft, allowing for nice, long dives with plenty of looking around, and currents are almost non-existent, making an ideal place for training dives.

Kata and Karon beaches are used during PADI dive courses and for a 'Discover Scuba Diving' experience, and are good for advanced training, in particular for navigation dives and night dives. Visibility isn't always great but is generally around 30ft to 50ft, and the reef has a good array of hard corals and tree worms.

Fish life is also good with schools of snapper always present, along with prowling and hiding lionfish, scorpionfish and puffers. For fish watchers and photographers, the real plus is the macro life that can be encountered by looking in the right habitats, including such oddities as seahorses, ghost pipefish, razor fish, flatheads and ribbon eels. Ribbon eels aren't too common in many places in Thailand, so those alone are a real plus.

As the guides are here daily to teach, they can help with finding good critter life.

7 THE 'NOI' DIVES

Location: Kata Noi & Kara Noi

Depth: 10-30ft (3-9m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: All levels



Just two minutes away from the Sea Fun Divers dive shops at the beachside hotels are the Kata Noi Beach and Karon Noi reefs. Sea Fun has developed these 'house reefs' for night diving and training, but they are of particular interest for macro photographers as well.



With luck, an endangered whale shark may appear in these waters

AO PHANG-NGA BAY

Known as Phang-Nga Bay, this broad and somewhat shallow expanse of water a little south and east of the Phuket resort area is home to some of the country's most famous and colorful dives. Visibility here isn't always that great, but the nutrient-rich waters feed the corals and invertebrate life, providing a superb variety of marine creatures from the shallows to the depths.

Everything from whale sharks to tiny pipefish have been reported here, and its convenient location in relation to the major resorts keeps people visiting these sites time after time. Day trips usually consist of two or three dives, getting one back to the land after a good day's diving between 1:30pm and 4:30pm – leaving plenty of time to shower and have a cool one while watching the sun go down from one of the Phuket beaches.

Most dive boats leave from the popular jetty at Chalong Bay, where elongated golf carts resembling safari vehicles run divers out to board. This is a good place to grab a morning coffee and any snacks or drinks you might require. The street leading down to the pier is a kind of 'diver's row' with numerous dive shops and equipment outlets located thereabouts. A few small hotels and pubs here can also be handy, if your goal is to dive the Phang-Nga and Racha Islands all week.

Ao Phang-Nga Bay		GOOD SNORKELING			
		NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED	
8	CORAL ISLAND (KO HI)	•	•		
9	KO DOK MAI	•	•		
10	ANEMONE REEF (HIM JOM)	•	•		
11	SHARK POINT (HIN MU SANG)	•	•		
12	KING CRUISER	•	•		

8 CORAL ISLAND (KO HI)

Location: 4 nautical miles (7.5km) south-southwest of Ao Chang
Depth: 1-69ft (0-21m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



Close proximity to the Ao Chalong pier area and shallow depths here make this spot a favorite for intro dives, instruction and novice divers. The generally calm waters and sheltered site area make it a sure thing.

Both beach and boat dives are done here. Visibility can be low, with a good day being 30 to 40ft. Local guides know their way around, so listen well to briefings and follow along to see good hard coral growth which holds plenty of hiding spots for invertebrates. Look also for Christmas tree worms on the corals and small eels hiding in some holes.

As it is a popular spot, the usual Thai boat traffic presents a hazard – follow your guide and surface at the moorings if at all possible. Snorkelers should wear bright suits and fins, and all divers entering from the beach should exit the same way to avoid boat traffic.



A soft coral-covered rock

9 KO DOK MAI

Location: 11 nautical miles (21km) east of Ao Chang
Depth: 0-108ft (0-33m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Often a first dive stop coming from Phuket, or a second or third dive heading back, this site is usually done as a drift, although there are protected areas to shelter and look at the smaller marine life. Also on offer are some areas with sheer walls – a feature not found at other area hotspots. This site, **Shark Point, Anemone Reef** and **King Cruiser** are all part of the 'no fishing, no collecting' zone of the Hin Mu Sang Fisheries Reserve and this protection shows in the great variety of marine life on offer here.

You'll be blown away from the start, with most entry points on the island offering a rather sheer wall and lots of fish to swim through. Clouds of fusiliers and glassfish can be found through the dive, and they often attract various jacks, mackerel and the occasional tuna when they swirl about in the water column.

But the real treat here is along the walls, extended ridges and sea floor. While the site isn't thick with marine growth, there's just enough to make it extremely diverse and colorful. Big barrel sponges house feather stars and make homes for chromis and basslets, while gorgonian sea fans, black coral and various forms of *Dendronephthya* soft corals add variety and color. Some ridges and walls have thick patches of these soft tree corals, so bring a light on this dive, as the colors can be stunning when illuminated. Look closely also at the various fan corals here, as ghost pipefish and tiger tail seahorses have been seen.

Around the many alcoves there are numerous types of anemones and anemone fish, along with nudibranchs, white-eyed morays, spotted groupers and baitfish. Large blue-ring angels and lionfish can also be seen here.

There are a couple of small caves, but as the bottom and top are both very silty, a diver's fins or bubbles can make these dangerous – penetration is not a safe move. While many divers drift quickly along the wall, it really pays to take your time if you want to see all that this site has to offer.

10 ANEMONE REEF (HIM JOM)

Location: 16 nautical miles (30km) east of Ao Chang
Depth: 13-79ft (4-24m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Anemone Reef is part of what could be dubbed the 'Scuba Triangle', along with **King Cruiser** and **Shark Point**. Located within close proximity of one another, three great dives can be made in one day out at this area, from either Phuket or Ko Phi Phi.

The reef is a series of submerged limestone pinnacles with the highest point 12 to 15ft below the surface, depending on the tide. It drops down to a sandy bottom around 80ft on most sides and 100ft further out.

The deeper reaches produce the occasional resting leopard shark, so it's worth gliding down to see if there are any of these beautiful creatures on the sand. These sharks normally like some semblance of a current and it can be anywhere from mild to strong out here. However, there is also enough protection in the form of terrain rises and smaller pinnacles that currents rarely pose a problem.

Look for lots of fish in and around the reef. Groupers roam the rocks and plenty of baitfish hover in crevices for protection. Lionfish are also here in big numbers, so it should be easy to get a nice photo of one of these hovering predators.

Giving the site its name, the top of the reef features carpets of flowing and blowing sea anemones, along with their respective clownfish. Most are magnificent anemones that hold *percula* 'Nemo'-type clownfish or the pink (or one-stripe) clownfish. Look also for the red saddleback anemone fish in some spots. Their bubble tip anemones will be a bit different. Many anemones here have brilliant purple undersides, while some are forest green. They're especially pretty when they close up, which can happen later in the afternoon.

This is a busy site, so surface with a safety sausage inflated or at the buoy. All of the 'Scuba Triangle' sites are open to wind and waves, so seas can be rough at certain times of the year. While this stirs things up a bit and reduces visibility, these sites are rich enough to be rewarding dives even in low visibility.



A blackspotted puffer

A nurse shark resting at Shark Point



11 SHARK POINT (HIN MU SANG)

Location: 16 nautical miles (30km) east of Ao Chang
Depth: 0-79ft (0-24m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



One of the sites within the Hin Mu Sang Fisheries Reserve, this is one of Thailand's best little dives with lots of beautiful anemones, clouds of small fish and color, color, color. One can easily spend the entire day here and not come away feeling as if you've seen it all.

The site is marked by moorings, a rock that breaks the surface and a marker on the rock itself. Down below, there are three different and distinct reef sites, but being so close together they are collectively called Shark Point. All three can be experienced in one dive with a bit of finning, or done as separate dives for more leisurely exploration of each rocky reef site.

The bottom falls off to no more than 80ft and currents are normally present, which is good as this accounts for the rich marine life. The leopard sharks (also called zebra sharks) which gave the site its name prefer the deeper portion of the reef, where the current flows over their bodies as they rest. Look for them on the rubble-strewn and sandy bottom, as well as wandering mantis shrimps.

When approaching leopard sharks move slowly and do not get too close,

to avoid startling them and making them move off. With care they can be observed at close distance for a long time, with the added possibility of seeing remoras move around their bodies and perhaps even a cleaner going over them. These beautiful sharks are not aggressive and eat invertebrates like crabs, lobsters and other crustaceans. Please do not try to touch them, pet them or pull their tails.

During a spell which saw an influx of colder water, some lucky divers saw a shovelnose ray (also called a guitar shark) here, and whale sharks have been seen on rare occasions.

Most of the reef is littered with spiny black urchins, so watch where you settle down to both avoid the spines and protect the marine life.

From the deepest part of the reef work your way up. Normally the current is not too bad, but if it's particularly strong, one can shelter behind the boulders and observe fish, beautiful sea fans and soft corals here.

The reef tops are stunning, with clouds of baitfish that include copper sweepers, glassfish and juvenile barracudas. This means the rest of the food chain is usually there as well. On the reef, look for scorpionfish, lionfish and spotted groupers lying in wait, while in the water column, jacks and snappers slash through the masses of fish.

Soft coral and numerous sea anemones in the shallower areas make this place vividly colorful; the purple undershirts of anemones combine with the oranges of one-stripe and *percula* clownfish make this site really come alive. Take plenty of time to enjoy this site; while visibility isn't always great the reef is so rich that there is plenty to see regardless of water clarity.

As it is a popular site, take care when surfacing; it's likely many boats will be in the area. Use a safety signal sausage or, if it isn't surgy, come up very close to the rocks.

12 KING CRUISER

Location: 17 nautical miles (32km) east of Ao Chang

Depth: 40-108ft (12-33m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Phuket area divers can experience a wreck specialty by heading out to the *King Cruiser* wreck and exploring the fish life and remains of this formerly well-used ferry. Originally a Japanese vessel, it was renamed (bad luck in marine lore) and doing its daily run when it went way off-course and hit the rocks of **Anemone Reef** in broad daylight in May 1997. All crew and passengers, some 561 people, were rescued, but the ship was too badly damaged to save. It sank upright – a bit of good luck for divers – and quickly became the region's premier wreck site.

Old timers talk of entering the wreck after it first sank and seeing navigation charts laid out on the bridge, along with various other items still in perfect place, despite the 100ft plummet to the sea floor. This situation has changed considerably as a decade of currents, divers and boats using it as a mooring have weakened the ship considerably, causing the forward bridge area to collapse and leaving the rest of the ship somewhat shaky in terms of penetration.

Frequent currents and an open bottom where it was holed have made it a fish magnet. Moorings are on the bow and stern, and divers can descend the lines down to the ship. There are some barnacles and marine growth on these, so take care and don't grip too hard.

These days, briefings suggest that a multi-level overswim is the best way to enjoy this wreck. If currents allow, start deep and move up. The car deck area is overgrown with some small encrusting

A diver examines the tube corals on the ferry's wreckage



sponges and tubastrea corals, and this type of growth covers most of the ship's outer area as well. Being a wreck, there are jagged metal pieces and sharp shell growth as well, so move slowly to avoid getting cut when exploring.

Moving up to the passenger deck area at roughly 60ft, the masses of fish life become apparent. The aft area also shows some signs of collapse, but the stern can be entered for a brief penetration amid a wall of snappers and cardinal fish. At the portside of the stern near the mooring line there are some toilets still intact.

Fish life is the wreck's most remarkable feature. Look for jacks and dogtooth tuna in the blue water, and there's also a resident school of chevron barracuda to be seen. On deck, look for lionfish on the prow. A keen-eyed divemaster may also find an occasional frogfish masquerading as sponge on the wreck. Check also for cleverly disguised scorpionfish laying in ambush. The side railings are mostly intact and have some coral and other growth.

Full-blown whale shark experiences, with divers spending up to half an hour with a friendly and curious shark, have been reported here. This is rare but it can happen, so glance into the blue every once in a while to see what's there – it might be your lucky day.

The majority of the wreck is now between 45ft and 60ft. Watch your bottom

time and ascend slowly for your safety stop. Currents seem to be stronger on the wreck than in the 15ft to 20ft level, so you may not have to hold the line while doing your deco stop, but it is a high traffic boat area.

Make sure your head is well below propeller range and that you're ascending to your boat.

Whale Sharks



Young whale shark in Thai waters

Thailand has become known as a good place to find whale sharks. Over-fishing in recent years has decreased the population of this creature, which is both the largest shark and largest fish on the planet. While Thailand doesn't allow fishing for whale sharks in its waters, most surrounding nations still fish for them, with many even having dedicated whale shark fisheries, despite coming under political fire from environmental groups.

Whale sharks have a broad range, so the threat of further depletion of their numbers worldwide remains. Seeing one of these big fish is a special experience, but the likelihood of increasing encounters can only occur when other nations cease hunting them.

Whale sharks are filter feeders and are considered harmless to divers. They use their huge mouths to eat planktonic creatures including masses of tiny crustaceans, and may also suck in other creatures, such as squid, sardines, jacks and tuna.

They have attained lengths of 45ft (14m) and weigh up to 20 tons. Older ones tend to be more single-minded and concentrate on feeding, and so in an encounter may swim right on by. Younger whale sharks have a tendency to be more curious and are usually the ones divers have longer encounters with.

Whale sharks are threatened by over fishing partly because it takes them so long to sexually mature. This does not occur until they reach about 30ft (9 meters) in length, meaning they have to live to about 30 years old to do so, with a natural lifespan of 60 to 100 years. Known as pups, whale shark babies are two-feet long at birth.

Found worldwide in most tropical and even temperate seas, some Thai dive operators say there is a definite season between February and May in their waters. However they can be seen pretty much year 'round – there is no real predictability. Enjoy your encounter and try to promote the conservation of these amazing fish.



KRABI & PHI PHI ISLANDS

All one really has to say here is *The Beach*. This area is the location of the famed movie that firmly put these eye-poppingly beautiful islands on the world map. But even without the Hollywood angle, the astonishing natural beauty here is pretty much unrivalled anywhere in the world.

Krabi is located on the mainland and is also the name of the province. Beautifully set in the mouth of a bay, it's surrounded by jungle and peaks, and offers splendid beaches.

The offshore islands, most notably Ko Phi Phi (Don) and Ko Phi Phi Lae of movie fame, are tourist magnets for backpackers and many other levels of tourist. Ko Phi Phi Don is the 'Kuta of the West' with lots of souvenirs and T-shirt stands, pirate CD and DVD shops,



The beach at Ko Phi Phi Don

jewelry stores, Internet cafes, massage parlors, dive shop after dive shop, and some very nice restaurants. At night the place is party central. People gather to watch (what else?) *The Beach* and first-run movies, then dance the night away.

By day, the beach, snorkeling, diving and all kinds of watersports and sightseeing tours see boats coming in and out of Ton Sai's Bay. Ferries full of backpacks and their owners arrive daily, picking up as many as they dump on the island.

Much of the island is steep limestone cliffs and protected jungle habitat – high, green and beautiful, with sea eagles and frigates soaring high overhead. A seemingly never-ending beach separates the large landmasses here, and accommodation ranges anywhere from a pitched tent to some very exclusive resorts along the eastern coastline.

Divers will find the visibility here not quite so stunning but still quite acceptable. There are dives for all levels here, and the terrain beneath the sea is great with walls, caves and swim-throughs, as well as hard coral reefs and soft corallined walls, and fish life is excellent and diverse. Live aboards offer anywhere from two- to five-day excursions in the area, with two-day special trips to the hotspots cramming in up to seven dives.

Krabi & Phi Phi Islands		GOOD SNORKELING			
		NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED	
13	KO SEE	•	•		
14	KO HA	•	•		
15	KO YUNG PINNACLE	•			•
16	KO YUNG	•	•		
17	HIN PAE (LONG BEACH)	•	•		
18	MAYA BAY & CORNER	•	•		
19	KO BIDA NOK	•		•	
20	KO BIDA NAI	•	•		
21	PHI PHI SHARK POINT (HIN BIDA)	•		•	

13 KO SEE

Location: 4.9 nautical miles (9km) south of Ao Nang
Depth: 0-59ft (0-18m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



This dramatic limestone rock island is the largest in the region, and is one of the closest dives to Ao Nang and Krabi. The site is used for training, with those dives normally done at slack tide to avoid currents, so the time of day you dive here is tide-driven to an extent.

For the more experienced, the tide also brings leopard sharks who like to rest on the bottom and let the current run over their bodies, pumping water through their gills.

Even though the island is the biggest in the region, you can't go below 60ft, so there's enough bottom time to swim

around this limestone pillar and enjoy the corals, soft corals and sea fans that cling to its base. Sea whips form where there is strong current, so use these to see where the current runs most frequently. The northwest side of the island has the best wall formation.

Snorkelers will enjoy the shallow areas around the island and may also have the opportunity to find some of the blacktip sharks that are seen here. Around divers they are normally quite shy, but since snorkelers don't make the same level of noise as bubble-blowing divers, the sharks may approach close enough to get a good look.



Helping the Reefs

In recent years, the pioneering of scuba diving and snorkeling has attracted millions of visitors to the coral reefs, and the pressure on them is starting to show. Studies have shown that on reefs open to the public, live coral cover is three times lower than on reefs that are designated 'no-use zones'.

At present, a number of reef restoration methods are being developed around the world, including reef balls, Biotech and the transplanting of coral fragments. At one time it was safe to assume that coral reefs would take care of themselves as they had done for millions of years. Disasters such as hurricanes and tsunamis have always been a natural threat, but the added pressure caused by mankind through fishing, destruction of coastal habitats, construction and tourism have made the outlook for the continued existence of reefs look grim.

In order to be proactive, the Ko Phi Phi-based dive camp has embarked on some reef saving actions. Initially focusing on large patches of dead coral in Loh Da Lum Bay, the main technique used involves taking specifically chosen dead coral boulders, cleaning them in saltwater solution, attaching live coral samples with special marine glue, then inserting them into strategic areas.

In order to maintain the site, it will be necessary to create a boat lane, cordon off work areas and educate people accessing the reef area. Long-term changes will be recorded and documented regularly, and it is hoped that with time and care this will enable the regeneration of a once healthy coral reef.



Thailand is famous for its large variety of colorful nudibranchs

14 KO HA

Location: 5 nautical miles (9.5km) south of Ao Nang
Depth: 16-66ft (5-20m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



This shallow site is good for all levels of diver, with interesting marine life and depths that allow one to circumnavigate the little island in one dive.

A combination of sandy areas and some coral-covered rocks and ridges offer soft corals and a decent collection of sea anemones. This is also a good place to observe bubble corals, which sometimes host small shrimp and orangutan crabs. These commensals aren't seen here as frequently as farther north, however. Blue-spot stingrays like the sandy patches, as do banded snake eels, which resemble sea snakes.

This site is also good for leopard sharks, which like the currents and sandy areas. When the tide changes, currents make the anemones flow like mops in a stream. A dive later in the day sometimes allows divers to see them close up into colorful balls.

15 KO YUNG PINNACLE

Location: North Ko Phi Phi Don, 2.2 nautical miles (4km) from Laem Tong
Depth: 20-118ft (6-36m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Advanced



This is a superb advanced dive which isn't done all that often, due to depth and strong currents that can make it tricky for the less experienced. However, the healthy, current-fed soft corals, big rays and fish make it worth the effort.

The site drops down to nearly 120ft and this is the best place to start and then work up. Marble rays like the deep water around the pinnacle's base, while beautiful white antipathes and bottle brush black corals are a sight to behold. Look too for crinoids and small oysters living inside them.

Visibility of 70ft is considered good here and combined with the varied and sometimes extremely strong currents running every which way, it's not for the faint of heart. However, pelagic action, including tuna and sharks, plus the amazing coral colors, are enough to entice some divers to brave this wild spot.

16 KO YUNG

Location: North Ko Phi Phi Don, 2.2 nautical miles (4km) from Laem Tong

Depth: 16-90ft (4-28m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



The southeast side of Ko Yung Island is a tamer dive than the open ocean pinnacle. A good snorkeling site, this is also great for novice diving with some coral cover and patches of staghorn corals. Plate corals and some swirling lettuce coral thrive here as well.

The staghorn gardens will entertain both divers and snorkelers as the fish life is diverse, with lots of small reef fish very active over, in and around the coral beds. Look also for some nudibranchs and roaming octopi in this area. Be careful of the spiny urchins if you settle down to watch the fish life; they are plentiful and large.

This is usually a good place to see leopard sharks as well. Just be aware of the ocean's forces, as currents can quickly turn a dive into a drift here.

An anemone colony with red saddleback anemonefishes



Blacktip Shark Adventure



Blacktip reef sharks

If you like seeing both sharks and the sunrise, sign up for the Adventure Club at Ko Phi Phi Don. This eco-oriented operation strives to use the resources provided by Mother Nature to create original eco-friendly adventure tours. It emphasizes education and the preservation of the area's natural resources.

Only six persons at a time can rise with the roosters and head out on normally glassy calm seas to certain reef areas where blacktip sharks are known to cruise – these graceful little sharks like the reef flats and inner reef zones, as well as the outer reef.

Experienced guides who are familiar with the area and its marine life accompany each group, and the whole excursion is done on snorkel, with chances normally good that a blacktip will be seen. They are actually rather shy sharks and one must move through the water slowly and quietly in the hopes that they may approach for a long, close look. Adventure Club (www.phipiadventureclub.com) is located on Ko Phi Phi and has a refreshing emphasis on respect to the environment and its preservation.



An anemone colony with red saddleback anemonefishes

17 HIN PAE (LONG BEACH)

Location: 650ft (200m) west of Long Beach on Ko Phi Phi Don

Depth: 6-40ft (2-12m)

Access: Boat or shore

Expertise Rating: Novice



This beautiful little gentle drop-off area in just 40ft of water is used for daily dives, dive training and snorkeling. Majestic island cliffs rise up in the distance and birds soar overhead, making it a great spot close to the beach, but far enough away to enjoy the experience.

Sometimes lessons are given on the beach which becomes a shore dive, but a boat is still required to get to the shore in the first place.

Fish at this site are friendly and there is a good bed of hard coral with different kinds of surgeonfish and damselfish. A bunch of curious groupers can also often be found here.

As well as the beach, there's an inner reef nearby. Blacktips are sometimes seen along this reef as it drops off into deeper water, while the current that runs through the shallows and then down into deeper water attracts plenty more. Look in the sand and around the hard coral bommies for invertebrates like hermit crabs as well.

Tsunami Clean-up & Restoration

It is hard to imagine the devastation and aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami. The wave originally hit from a mainly westerly direction. In the case of Phi Phi Don island, it traveled into the open mouth of Loh da Lum Bay and met with the headland on the east side of the bay. The wave was then forced to curve around the bay, so that it was traveling due south/southwest, by the time it reached the beach.

At the same time, the wave was also entering Tonsai Bay from the south; however, its size was reduced by the land mass on the west side of Phi Phi Don.

Eventually, the larger wave from Loh da Lum Bay met with the smaller wave from Tonsai Bay in the middle of the peninsular. The larger of the two continued across the land and carried everything in its path into Tonsai Bay. As the wave hit the shallow reefs, it picked up large pieces of coral and deposited them onto the shallow flats of the bay. It also took hundreds of tons of sand from the beaches and peninsular and deposited this into Tonsai Bay.

Heavier and denser debris, including steel, concrete and large objects such as roof tops, traveled less distance from the shore and sank in larger piles, while lighter and more buoyant debris, such as timbers and plastics, traveled a greater distance before sinking further spread out.



Artificial reefs will cultivate corals and marine life
photo: A. Hewett

The Phi Phi dive camp was created and organized by long term Phi Phi island resident Andrew Hewett. After seeing his home and business of 12 years destroyed, he took the initiative to create a project outline to help raise the capital to start a clean-up campaign.

In February of 2005 the first of many donations arrived and on February 18 the dive camp started its project. The work started slow with about 20 volunteers a day, however, as news spread of the volunteer work on Phi Phi Island, many divers, snorkelers and other people started to arrive. By mid-April there were 60 to 90 people working per day.

Some thought they were crazy, and some told them they were wasting their time, but in the first six months the project provided badly needed jobs for many local people, recovered 300 tons of debris, attracted over 4,000 volunteers to the island, collected and logged hundreds of important forms of identity, and found one of the many missing people.

Although the main objective was to clean the island up, a secondary one was to provide jobs for the many local people that no longer had any other opportunities. Many other businesses wound up benefiting indirectly through the income brought in by dive camp volunteers.

At present, work is being done on the next phase of the operation, which involves an artificial reef and a floating coral nursery.

A volunteer project by long-term residents that live on Phi Phi island, the primary benefit of the artificial reef is as a teaching aid for educating the general public, to help them become aware of the stresses that coral reefs are facing. It is hoped that by educating snorkelers, divers, fishermen and anyone else that uses the oceans, they may gain a better understanding of what corals actually are and what role they play in our lives.



Maya is the island made famous by *The Beach* movie

18 MAYA BAY & CORNER

Location: Southwest of Ko Phi Phi Lae

Depth: 0-100ft (0-30m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice for bay/
advanced for cave



Hollywood was here. This is the island made famous by *The Beach* and ol' Leonardo DiCaprio. In cinematic times long past, 'Bond, James Bond' was also here. You won't find the tranquil unknown beach depicted in the movies, but even with crowds of day boats, beach goers and snorkelers, it's still pretty darn good-looking. While the natural beauty can't be beaten above water, beneath there's some great coral for snorkelers and an underwater cavern for divers, plus lots of swim-throughs and boulders scattered about.

Hard coral heads and a sandy bottom make diving in the bay easy and good for training and new divers. Look here for Moorish idols and parrotfish. Outside of the bay on the west side and a little to the south is Maya Corner, while the southwest point holds Maya Cave. This

area is normally calm when the big island cliffs can protect the sites from wind and waves, which is most of the year.

The reef here has some real attractions, including a steep wall that drops to a bottom of 100ft and is adorned in sponges and fans, with plenty of small fish and schools of fusiliers. The rest of the site is filled with coral-covered rocks that are home to soft corals with anthias and chromis, coral groupers, scorpionfish, red saddleback anemonefish and their anemones.

With depths on the outside rising up to only 15ft near the island, this fascinating site is a great place for a multi-level dive whilst following a good guide, as there are all kinds of twists and turns.

The other site here, Maya Cave, starts with a big cavern and then goes into a series of chambers. This cave system should only be dived by qualified cave divers carrying all the proper gear for penetration. If you happen to come upon this cavern mouth, just take a look in and then move on. Don't try to go it alone or with recreational scuba gear, as it's just asking for trouble.

Although always very busy, except early morning and late afternoon, this site is worth a look as it really is stunningly beautiful. It's obvious to see why Hollywood likes this place so much.

19 KO BIDA NOK

Location: South of Ko Phi Phi Lae**Depth:** 0-108ft (0-33m)**Access:** Boat**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate

This is a very active and diverse dive site with many interesting features, including walls, overhangs, coral beds and gentle slopes. It can easily be dived a couple of times, as the macro life is quite good and there are also numerous wide angle possibilities.

Rugged and pretty with sea birds circling overhead, the island itself rises from the sea about 150ft with cliffs covered in greenery. Divers enter the water via a small cove on the island's east side. Below is a small and delicate coral garden of staghorns, some rocky outcrops with sea fans and some soft coral growth. In this area, look for small marine life such as tiger tail seahorses by the fans, or frogfish nestled in the staghorns.

There is a wall area where the currents and fish life are more prevalent. Take a right here and drift along a tubastrea-covered wall, or take a left along a sandy patch that has urchins and other small invertebrate life. Look for blue-spotted stingrays here as well.

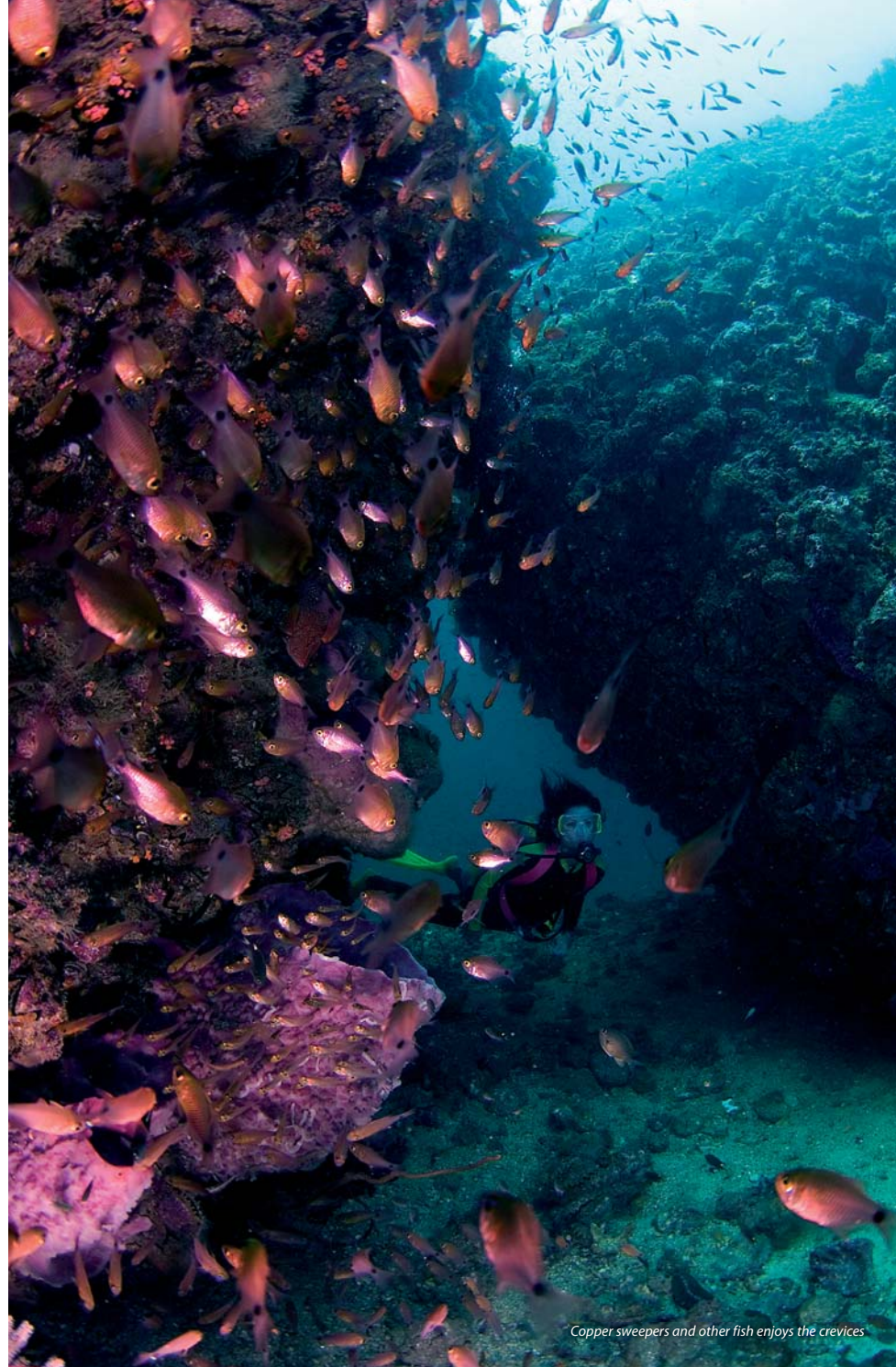
As the dive continues to circumnavigate the rock, it eventually gets into more interesting terrain with large boulders and clouds of fish. Depths can range from 20 to 90ft and the deeper rocks have very attractive sea fan cover, beautiful red dendronephthya soft corals and fusiliers galore.

While writing this book, we visited the site in January. Having been told that whale sharks and occasional manta rays have been known to come here from December into early March, we experienced considerable excitement when a 20ft whale shark swooped in on a group of divers and snorkelers before coming over to us, whereupon we swam with it for a few minutes before it headed back out into the blue. So while there can be nice macro life here, it's worth keeping an eye out – and up – just in case a big shark makes a visit. Topping that experience, even pilot whales have been seen on scuba here.

Finish this dive by enjoying the shallower parts of the reef at Ko Bida Nok, including the overhangs which are shielded by huge baitfish schools and adorned in tubastreas.

There is a lot of traffic here in the mornings, so ascend using a safety sausage and await boat pickup in the open sea away from the rock. That way the boat doesn't have to come in too close over other divers.

Sharpnose barracuda



Copper sweepers and other fish enjoys the crevices



Ko Bida Nai rises majestically from the sea

20 KO BIDA NAI

Location: Southeast of Ko Phi Phi Lae
Depth: 0-72ft (0-22m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



Just across the channel from **Ko Bida Nok**, this site is full of fish life and has some fun swim-throughs and interesting terrain. The usual diver drop zone is a little protected cove on the southeast. There are table corals and lots of sea urchins, so take care as you descend to the sea floor. Some dive classes are taught at 30ft to 35ft in the sand off this site.

Head south where there is a good swim-through under a huge slab of rock. This area has a couple of very large and reclusive marbled groupers hiding in the recesses, while blue-ringed angels and copper sweepers also stay in this passage.

The channel goes to about 85ft and can have a good current running be-

tween the islands. A series of three big rocks and corals sit in the channel collecting the current and holding interesting marine life.

Divers occasionally find frogfish and ghost pipefish out here. Also, keep a lookout for bigeye and one-spot snapper schools. Depths range from 50ft to 80ft with lots of schooling fish and hard corals.

Head around the corner to a shallower area via another swim-through, which is full of copper sweepers, cardinalfish, razor clams, barrel sponges and blue-lined angels.

The upper part of the reef is covered with sea anemones and pink anemonefish. The undersides of these anemones are largely royal purple, making them very photogenic. Head back around staying shallow and swim back through the first tunnel; on the other side is another good array of sea anemones with red saddleback anemonefish.

Do your deco stop whilst admiring the table corals and come up next to the scenic rock, where you may see a sea eagle flying overhead.

21

PHI PHI SHARK POINT (HIN BIDA)

Location: 3.2 nautical miles (6km) southeast of Ko Bida Nok
Depth: 3-70ft (1-21m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This submerged rocky reef area normally has some current, and visibility isn't always the greatest. A single mooring buoy leads down to a reef-top area of rocks and sand before then sloping deeper. There's a good chance of seeing the graceful leopard sharks that give this 'other' Shark Point its name, either moving along the reef with swaying tail movements or on the sandy bottom which ranges from about 60ft at the south end of the site down to 70ft at the north end.

Start deep here and work your way up. The sharks like to sleep or rest where

the currents flows over them, so look off the reef in the sand for them. If they are resting, please don't chase them away but approach slowly and observe. You may also encounter blue-spot stingrays and larger blackspot rays in this sand and rubble – look under the edges of boulders.

The rocks are great hiding places for other marine life besides sharks. Those liking the shelter include both white-eyed and golden moray eels, as well as octopi and an occasional cuttlefish. Fusiliers, sweetlips and schooling snappers can all be seen here, along with blue-lined angels and some emperor angels. The staghorn coral holds clouds of chromis and damsels which are very active when the current is running.

This site isn't nearly as popular as the famous **Shark Point**, and as a consequence is normally considerably less crowded. This is sometimes done in conjunction with a dive at **Ko Bida Nok**, and is one of the best places in the area to give yourself a good chance of seeing leopard sharks.



A remora clings to a resting nurse shark

TRANG & SOUTHERN SITES



the cave is very open and easy to exit, and usually has lots of light. Divers can even fin in and surface so as to see the cave roof 100ft up, where stalactites are still attached.

Photographers will appreciate the light here and the way it plays with hues and shades of blue like an immense neon portal. Some construction has been done here, its supposed protection as part of a national marine park.

Ko Ha Noi, the north island, is probably the most popular as it has great coral cover down a nice slope with both varied hard coral formations and colorful soft coral scenery. Visibility is normally good for the area and current is rarely a problem, so divers can start deep then move up, enjoying the marine life on the way.

Many rocks and undercuts provide habitat for fish, such as the beautiful juvenile emperor angel. This place excels for unusual finds, so take your time as it can offer some very strange and hard-to-find fish. Several species of ghost pipefish can be found, including the pretty and ornate ghost pipefish. Another rare find here has been the *Rhinopius*, or lacey scorpionfish. This is one of the Holy Grails of fish finds, so look closely and you might get lucky – these sometimes sit in amongst, and resemble, crinoids or lacey sea fans.

Banded sea snakes and hawksbill turtles also like the area. Look in the sandy gravel for sea moths moving slowly across the sea floor.

22 KO HA ISLANDS

Location: 20 nautical miles (36km) south of Ko Phi Phi Don
Depth: 16-118ft (4-36m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This grouping of five isles is not normally crowded and offers a couple of unique dive sites. The islands themselves ensure that some area of the reef is sheltered at any time, so diving here is always possible, and unusual formations and marine life highlight the dives in this area.

Ko Ha Yai is famous for a gaping underwater cathedral of a cave that has two huge windows to the sea. The deepest entrance is at 50ft, while the shallower is found at 16ft. Once inside,

Trang & Southern Sites		GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
22	KO HA ISLANDS	•		•	
23	KO ROK NAI	•	•		
24	KO ROK NOK	•	•		
25	HIN MUANG	•			•
26	HIN DAENG	•			•

23 KO ROK NAI

Location: 16 nautical miles (30km) south of Ko Lanta
Depth: 16-40ft (5-12m)
Access: Boat or live aboard
Expertise Rating: All levels



The shallower of the twin islands of Ko Rok Nai (inside island) and **Ko Rok Nok** (outside island), this is often thought of as a snorkel destination, but it has a good shallow reef area where underwater photographers and fish watchers can have a great time.

These two islands are separated by a channel that is only 50ft deep. With their beaches facing each other, it creates another of Thailand's scenic natural settings. Snorkelers will particularly enjoy

the northeast coral beds, as the water tends to be clear most of the time and the big limestone cliffs facing the open beach make this an idyllic setting.

For divers, the choice site is outside along the north coast, where a cove is the entry point to see a very good selection of hard corals and a plethora of reef fish, including bigeye snappers, parrotfish and a few surgeonfish species.

At the larger end of the spectrum, there are large groupers hiding in some of the cracks and crevices, while smaller critters include seahorses and painted frogfish. Tridacna clams like this sandy setting, as the shallow water allows them to solar feed and thrive.

This place can have its busy days, so keep an eye out for boat traffic when snorkeling or diving. There is also a park ranger station located on this otherwise uninhabited island for the Ko Lanta National Marine Park.



24 KO ROK NOK

Location: 16 nautical miles (30km) south of Ko Lanta
Depth: 16-75ft (5-23m)
Access: Boat or live aboard
Expertise Rating: Novice



A beautiful dive that allows for a drift along a wall, divers can start at the island's north tip and coast along the west side to an area with coral gardens below and a great variety of fish. A more current-driven dive can be made west at some pinnacles.

Either way, divers are likely to see a solid selection of fish life, healthy hard corals, some areas decorated in soft corals and possibly even a resting leopard shark. Blacktip sharks have also been seen in the shallower parts of the reef.

The deeper reaches hold big morays, common and spotfin lionfish and sometimes a sea turtle. Bigeye jacks and chevron barracuda have also been reported at this site. The north tip drift down the west wall is a good place for newer divers to experience a gentle drift. Due to the overall variety, all levels of divers can enjoy this dive.



A goby sits on a sea star

25 HIN MUANG

Location: 27 nautical miles (50km) south of Ko Lanta
Depth: 25-130ft (8-40m)
Access: Boat or live aboard
Expertise Rating: Advanced



Hin Muang or 'Purple Rock' is host to countless sea anemones and pink anemonefish. The site's name is derived from the purple undersides of most of the magnificent anemones, but just about every spectrum in the rainbow is represented here.

The other reason for the name is the red soft corals, which appear purple underwater due to loss of part of the color spectrum.

Often described as a bread loaf-shaped ridge, it somewhat resembles French bread, being elongated with steep sides that drop deep into the sea. There are normally currents present here that account for the profusion of marine life and stunning invertebrate coloration.

The soft corals and many sea fans here attract clouds of glassfish, making small ecosystems that attract other predators, such as spotted groupers, scorpionfish and lionfish. Keep an eye out for both swimming and resting zebra sharks, great barracuda and dogtooth tuna in the blue.

Many types of jacks roam at Hin Muang, swooping through the water column at schools of smaller fish. Along with the zebra sharks, marbled rays also like to nestle into the sea floor.

The water here is normally fairly clear and there is also usually somewhere to take refuge from the currents. Once a major haunt of whale sharks, there is still a good chance they could appear, so keep that in mind as you roam the reef.



Anemones and clownfish have a symbiotic relationship

26 HIN DAENG

Location: 27 nautical miles (50km) south of Ko Lanta
Depth: 0-130ft (0-40m)
Access: Boat or live aboard
Expertise Rating: Advanced



There aren't a lot of true wall dives in Thailand, but this is one of them, with sometimes strong currents. The southern side has the most serious drop, while the east has a sloping wall with extended ridges.

Hin Daeng is a great dive for the pelagic fish lover. Big stuff here includes schools of fast moving rainbow runners,

large marbled groupers and some really big morays – keep an eye out for the beautiful honeycombed moray. Sea turtles often hide in cover at this site, and the count of different jack species roaming here is also impressive.

Small stuff isn't left out either. There's a good variety of nudibranchs in the shallows, soapfish and cleaning wrasse have set up stations that attract lots of hard coral dwelling reef fish, and even boxer shrimp have been sighted here. Look in the shelter of corals for juvenile emperor angelfish.

There is a good shallow area near the rock island for a deco stop. Move out and away from the island so as not to get banged by the surge and also to make it easier for tender pickup once the stop is finished.

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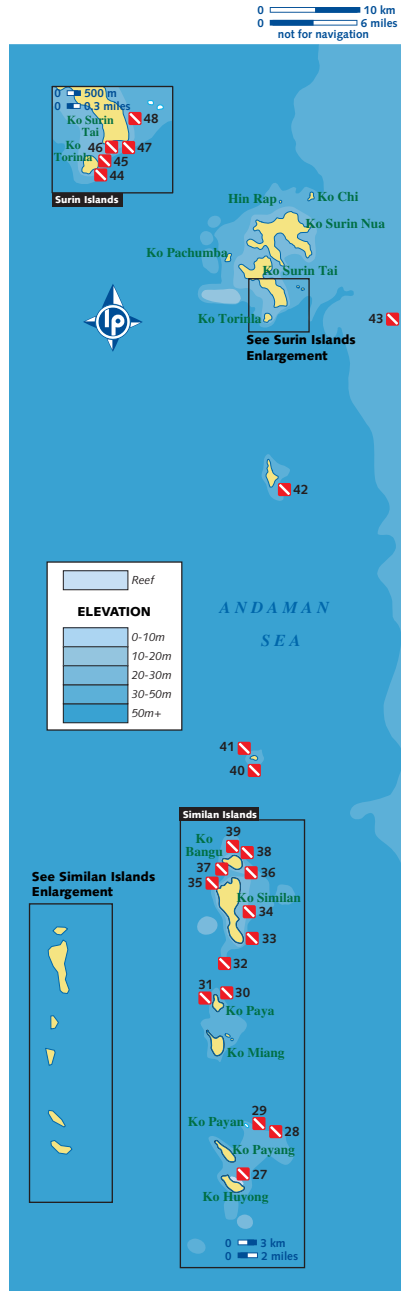
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Similan & Surin Islands



Similan & Surin Islands



SIMILAN ISLANDS

The Similan Islands National Park is a series of strikingly beautiful granite and jungle islands with some stunning beaches and great undersea diversity. Diving here normally originates from Phuket and is done by liveaboards running anywhere from two-day to two-week trips. The water clarity and healthy reefs make these islands the focal point of regional diving.

Varied and full of color, the southern islands are numbered one through nine and host a number of liveaboards that launch from the western Thai coast. These numerous islands are balanced by the large northern islands of **Ko Bon**, a beautiful piece of limestone, and **Ko Tachai**, which has attractive sand beaches and some good offshore dives.

Since the tsunami, the eastern coasts have been the favored aspect of these islands to dive. The terrain features stunning hard corals, soft corals, sea fans and immense coral heads, and they range from shallow to quite deep, and from no currents to pretty brisk ones. An extremely photogenic place, this is where many of the signature Thailand

diving images are made, especially those with wide angle vistas and big gorgonian sea fans.

Fish are also well-represented, with anything from mantas and leopard sharks to ornate ghost pipefish, blue spotted jawfish, Andaman sweet lips and nudibranchs to be found.

Similan Islands

	GOOD SNORKELING			
	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED	
27 CORAL GARDENS	•	•		
28 BOULDER CITY	•	•		
29 SHARK FIN REEF (HIN PAE)	•	•		
30 EAST OF EDEN	•	•		
31 WEST OF SWEDEN	•	•		
32 ELEPHANT'S HEAD (HIN PUSAR)	•	•		
33 BEACON POINT	•	•		
34 BEACON BEACH	•	•		
35 TURTLE ROCK			•	
36 SNAPPER ALLEY	•	•		
37 BOMMIES	•	•		
38 SONGRAKI REEF			•	
39 THE PINNACLE				
40 KO BON				•
41 KO BON PINNACLE				•
42 KO TACHAI				•



Blue-spotted stingray

27 CORAL GARDENS

Location: North side of Similan #1 (Ko Huang)
Depth: 1-80ft (0-24m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Novice



Both snorkelers and divers will like this spot, as the reef runs along the island's beach area and produces opportunities for rewarding snorkeling or a nice, long dive whilst checking out the variety of marine life on show.

Just about every dive destination seems to have a 'Coral Gardens' dive site,

and this is the Similans' entry. A great variety of acropora corals, such as stag-horns and table corals, mix with other plating and hard corals to form large life-filled patches and colorful scapes from deep to very shallow.

The deeper sandy areas hold blue-spotted stingrays that throw up clouds of sand as they dig for crustaceans. Swaying in the currents are garden eels, which disappear if you breathe too quickly or move too closely. They feed on current-driven morsels mostly too small for the eye to see. Move up to see more hard corals and fish life, like angels, parrotfish and lots of butterflyfish.

This site was closed by the park authority at the time of writing, but check to see if it has re-opened.

28 BOULDER CITY

Location: 1.6 nautical miles (3km) southeast of Similan #3 (Ko Payan)
Depth: 40-130ft (12-40m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This is a deeper site with a couple of moorings leading down to a series of large boulders. Close to **Shark Fin Reef**, it's a good area to poke around in the deep at first, to see if there are any leopard sharks or mantas down at the southern end, before checking for other fish life among the boulders while working back up to shallower waters.

The bottom can be as deep as 130ft in the south, with sandy areas 70ft to 80ft and boulders rising to within 40ft to 60ft of the surface.

Coral growth here is pretty, with sea fans and lots of glassy fish attracting

Yellowback fusiliers thrive at Boulder City



lionfish and scorpionfish. Look also for various groupers, including big marbled groupers, coral groupers and peacock groupers. Finish up by heading back toward the center of the site, where the shallowest rock provides some fish watching before heading to the deco stop.

29 SHARK FIN REEF (HIN PAE)

Location: 0.87 nautical miles (1.6km) southeast of Similan #3 (Ko Payan)
Depth: 0-95ft (0-30m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Southeast of Ko Payan, this is a well-visited site that has pretty coral gardens in the northwest and boulders, fish and swim-throughs farther south. The mooring is near the mid-point of these two features and divers can proceed either way.

For those who want to see fusiliers, you've come to the right place. Seemingly endless schools of various types, including yellowback, neon and yellowtails, all roam the boulders in huge schools. These boulders also offer passages that are enjoyable to dive around and through. Look for stands of ever-green tubastrea corals with lots of small damsels, growing atop the boulders. Where the rocks pierce the surface in three places, they are said to resemble shark fins, giving the reef its name. Schools of five-line snapper also enjoy this environment.

There can be some current here, which the big rocks deflect. The reef is more open to the north, with good coral gardens and fish diversity. At about 90ft whitetip and leopard sharks can sometimes be seen in the deeper sandy areas. The site also has some big coral heads and large boulders in the channels.

Anthias enjoy the thick reef cover



30 EAST OF EDEN

Location: East side of Similan #7 (Ko Payu)

Depth: 10-118ft (3-36m)

Access: Live aboard

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Considered one of the must-do dives in the area, thanks to a beautiful coral bommie that rises from the deep, along with clear water and prolific coral growth, this site has two moorings toward the end of Ko Payu, on the east side.

There is lots of hard coral here on a graduated slope. Many coral heads and small rocks are attractively decorated with an artist's palette of soft coral colors and large sea fans. Manta rays have also been seen here on occasion, so it doesn't hurt to glance out into the blue every once in a while.

Sport divers may want to start at the mooring closest to the point for a longer, more leisurely dive along the coral gardens, while photographers should

head down to the bigger bommies to get some of the very pretty reef shots this site has to offer. Look for shoals of glassfish and other small fish covering well-landscaped coral heads. Spotted groupers and lionfish are in heaven here with all the readily-available food, while deeper down look for fire gobies and blue-spotted stingrays in the sand.

Coral cover runs up into the shallows, making this an interesting multi-level dive. Table corals with small damselfish, sheets of plate corals with nudibranchs underneath and both star and brain corals all dot the reef.

Up top a long deco stop in a beautiful coral garden is available. Some rubble patches may be the result of decades-old dynamite damage, but these are slowly being overtaken by broad branching coral patches that hold refuge for many reef fish, including leaf fish and juvenile emperors.

The site has a good collection of anthias and basslets, including jewel fairy basslets. Look as well for the toothy moustache triggerfish that nest in some areas, groups of red-tailed butterflyfish roaming over the staghorn beds and schools of bigeye snappers.

This makes for a good third of fourth dive that can be done at a leisurely pace, to observe and absorb everything to be found.

Seahorses

The seahorses found around Thailand aren't always that easy to see. They don't move much and hide in layered sea fans and near small reef sponges, making them easily overlooked by the casual diver. The most common type is the tiger tail seahorse (*Hippocampus comes*), which gets its name from the tiger-like banding on their tails. If you do find any, males tend to be black or dark in color with some yellow splotches, while females are yellow.



A damselfish watches from a gorgonian sea fan



Red-tailed butterflyfish forage at sunset

31 WEST OF SWEDEN

Location: North Tip of Similan #7 (Ko Payu)

Depth: 0-130ft (5-40m)

Access: Live aboard

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



The name of this site is a good example of Thai humor. Located west of the **East of Eden** site, local dive guides discovered this site around 2004 and started diving it frequently after the tsunami in December of that year trashed several of the popular area reefs.

There are some small- to medium-sized granite boulders, as well as a well-lit swim-through near the reef top that starts at 15ft and exits at about 40ft. There can be some currents and upwellings at this site that make the water a bit chilly at times. (This is generally true of dives at islands 7 and 8 in the Similans.) Divers have the opportunity

to go quite deep here, as rocky ridges run west and drop from 35ft down past 140ft.

Some beautiful orange gorgonian sea fans can be seen here, as well as bommies with sea whips, fans and soft corals. From about 40ft to 70ft there are some good patches of hard corals. Deeper down the ridge in the sand, look for whip corals, along with beautiful little harp or candelabra corals in shades of deep red. Small boulders and bog coral heads have some very pretty soft pink, purple and white corals.

Keep a look out also down deep in the south end at the sand alley for whitetip reef sharks. Currents may bring in giant and bluefin trevally, as well as an occasional visit by a manta or sea turtle. Schooling butterflyfish, red tooth triggerfish and lined surgeonfish can all be seen here, as can neon and yellowback fusiliers.

Smaller sea life found here includes frogfish and ghost pipefish. Ribbon eels are also seen poking from the sea floor and crevices.

32 ELEPHANT'S HEAD (HIN PUSAR)

Location: Between Similan #7 (Ko Payu) & Similan #8 (Ko Similan)

Depth: 16-118ft (5-36m)

Access: Live aboard

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This is the area's ultimate novelty dive, with huge boulders stacked across the ocean floor and protruding from the sea. These form an amazing maze of huge proportions which holds a lot of marine life and is a blast to swim over, under, around and through.

Fish life includes whitetip sharks and occasional leopard sharks on the deeper outer reef areas, which are mostly sand and rubble. But it's in around the rocks that the fish variety here becomes apparent. Whitetips also like to hide under cracks and deep overhangs here, and guides usually know where they hang out. These crevices are also hiding places for the solitary great barracuda. Some corals have attached to the boulders; look for small fans, soft corals and some



Ring angelfish peck at the wall

big table corals that appear to be cleaning stations for blue-stripe wrasse.

Pretty fish include powder-blue tangs and the odd unicornfish. Blue-lined angelfish and titan triggerfish also like to swim along the upper parts of the boulders, and a few sea anemones with pink anemonefish are also to be found at shallow depths.

One can follow the slope of the elephant's head giant boulder from below all the way up to where it breaks the surface. The sides are kept clean by grazing surgeonfish and other herbivores. A fun dive with lots to see and lots of finning to cover the area, it really takes a couple of dives to see it all.

33 BEACON POINT

Location: Southeast end of Similan #8 (Ko Similan)

Depth: 16-118ft (5-36m)

Access: Live aboard

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



At the south end of the more sedate **Beacon Beach**, Beacon Point can be a deeper dive. Head down a long sloping drop-off to a sandy bottom at 115ft, where there are usually stingrays hiding in the sand or foraging for food.

One can then work back up the slope whilst checking the hard corals for invertebrate and fish life, including Moorish idols and the similar looking bannerfish. Trumpetfish and lined snapper are also found on the reef, and the current may also bring schools of smaller fish, such as damselfish and chromis. Look also for the cleaning stations that often feature one or more fish hanging in parallel while cleaner wrasse pick over them.

When finning along here, it is best to surface or head back to the shallows before going around the point of the island.



Huge table corals adorn the top of a bommie

34 BEACON BEACH

Location: East side of Similan #8 (Ko Similan)

Depth: 20-100ft (6-30m)

Access: Live aboard

Expertise Rating: Novice



This site offers a broad variety of corals and good fish life, thanks to the artificial reef here which until 2002 was the charter boat *Atlantis X*. The boat's captain had tried to beach it when it took on water, but it eventually sank and settled away from the beach in 50ft to 105ft of water.

Coral and encrusting sponges, some crinoids and other marine life are gradually forming on the ship. Batfish, who seem to like shipwrecks, along with some lionfish, have also found their way here and set up home. The ship's ribs are still intact and it has had some algae growth on it however, it's not as pretty as some shipwrecks.

The reef area is a hard coral slope with good lettuce corals, plating corals and bubble corals. Once hit by a crown-of-thorns starfish invasion, the area has bounced back well, showing how this natural occurrence can cull corals and leave space for new growth in a competitive reef.

Bigeye snappers, goatfish, nervous hawkfish and roaming trumpetfish are all part of the fish scene at this site, which every level of diver can enjoy.

35 TURTLE ROCK

Location: Northwest side of Similan #8 (Ko Similan)

Depth: 30-100ft (9-30m)

Access: Live aboard

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Located just off Ko Similan, some nice hard coral gardens here offer divers and snorkelers the opportunity for a good dive in a healthy coral environment. A turtle-shaped rock gives the site its name, as opposed to regular turtle sightings. However you will encounter lots of reef fish, including lined triggers, various parrotfish species and small schools of bannerfish.

There are some nice anemones with pink anemonefish here, along with blue-ringed and emperor angels, parrotfish and some grazers, such as surgeonfish. The reef has lots of branching coral beds and chromis are thick in the water column above, retreating to the safety of the beaches whenever a diver fins past or a jack slashes through their mass.

Nearby Donald Duck Bay (or Campbell's Bay) is often reserved for a night

Thailand's Dolphins

The dolphins commonly seen around Thailand are spinner dolphins (*Stinella longirostris*). They can normally be seen while on boat dives going to and from sites, or coming in to play with the bow of a large live-aboard – often they will try to ride the bow wave or play in rolling wake waves. Lucky divers have seen them in large schools, but any encounter with a dolphin underwater, especially on scuba, is a special event.

Other marine mammals commonly seen include melonhead, minke, blue and false killer whales.

Dive the Big Five – Clownfish, That Is!

In Africa, if you look for the Big Five on safari, or dive the Big Five, you're either looking for wild game or sharks. But Thailand too has its own Big Five, in the form of five different species of clownfish that live on its reefs.

They are the orange anemonefish, sometimes called a pink anemonefish (*Amphiprion sandaracinos*), the False Clownfish (*Amphiprion ocellaris*), the Red Saddleback anemonefish (*Amphiprion ephippium*), Clark's anemonefish (*Amphiprion clarkii*) and the Sebae anemonefish (*Amphiprion sebae*).

Take a good look at the beautiful anemones and anemone colonies that adorn the many hot spots in Thailand and to see one of these fish living symbiotically with them. Find all five, and you've mastered the 'Nemo' anemonefish list.

dive and can also be good for snorkelers. It's a popular mooring site for all sizes of live aboard and sailboats, so be aware of the traffic.

36 SNAPPER ALLEY

Location: Southwest tip of Similan #9 (Ko Bangu)

Depth: 20-118ft (6-36m)

Access: Live aboard

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



A formation of granite boulders makes a pleasant dive site, ranging from quite deep to more manageable depths. Evergreen tube corals (with attendant black damselfs) like to grow on the boulders and reef bottom in the currents. Black coral trees can also be found, while current-fed areas have good soft corals.

Sheltered undercuts of coral heads and boulders also make good refuges for some rather large lobsters and crabs. Look in the same area for lazy puffers and resting whitetip sharks.

Lots of beautiful lined snappers form golden shoals over the upper reef here, giving the site its name. Enjoy them and the schooling yellowback fusiliers as you complete the shallower section at the end of this dive.



A wall of yellow snapper greet a diver

37 BOMMIES

Location: South side of Similan #9 (Ko Bangu)

Depth: 59-80ft (18-25m)

Access: Live aboard

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Drop down to a series of five large coral heads (or bommies) which rise up from a beautiful and reflective white sand floor, at this lovely little spot along southern Ko Bangu.

Like some of the other well-decorated Surin Island sites, this park dive also has a good array of sea fans and soft corals in red, orange and yellow hues. Look under the bommies for nudibranchs and small crabs, but be careful to watch your bubbles so they don't rise up too close to the corals and scour them.



Night dives here produce gorgonian crabs, spindle cowries and feather stars in the sea fans, and also bring out the odd sponge crab and decorator crab.

38 SONGRAKI REEF

Location: Northeast side of Similan #9 (Ko Bangu)

Depth: 40-140ft (12-35m)

Access: Live aboard

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



One of Thailand's newest sites, this holds some of the healthiest and best-looking hard coral cover of any reef in the Similans. Sometimes called Three Trees, it is located off the northeast tip of Ko Bangu and consists of a series of pinnacles and granite boulders that step down into the sea past 130ft.

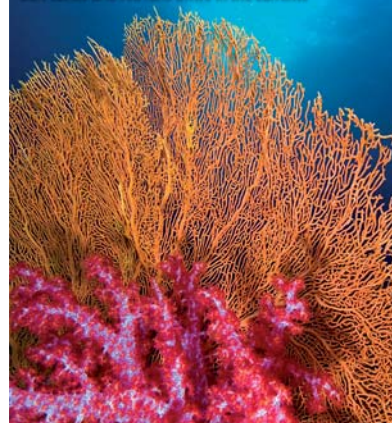
Brain, mushroom, staghorn and table corals that start in 40ft and are scattered around the slope and sandy bottom are contrasted by soft corals and white-polyped gorgonian sea fans. Loads of tiny baitfish hover over this seascape.

This site also makes for a great multi-level dive. Some of the mushroom corals are massive, starting in 70ft and rising up to top out at 40ft.

Fish life includes schools of longfin batfish and chevron barracuda, and even an occasional manta. Whitetips and zebra sharks are frequently seen in the deep and on the bottom, and even reef blacktips have been seen roaming about. More than six species of butterflyfish have been observed here, making the reef bright and colorful with their presence. In the shallower parts of the reef, look for milkfish schools and wandering spearing mantis shrimp. This is also a favorite haunt of hawksbill sea turtles.

New and exciting, this reef will please virtually every level of diver.

Soft corals and sea fans thrive in the currents



39 THE PINNACLE

Location: North of Similan #9 (Ko Bangu)

Depth: 16-110ft (5-32m)

Access: Live aboard

Expertise Rating: Intermediate

This site is located north of Ko Bangu with a mooring leading to large rocks that extend down to 100ft, surrounded by a sand and hard coral environment.

Coming as close as 18ft to the surface, the rocks and reef are stepped down, and the site features a very healthy and active *Acropora* or staghorn coral patch full of small tropicals, butterfly and angelfish, anthias and chromis.

There are orange sea fans to observe and the site has a good collection of scattered large barrel sponges. There is even tubastrea coral growth in some areas of the reef.

A small hawksbill turtle is seen here on most dives and the endemic (and sometimes solitary) Andaman sweetlips is also found on the reef. Lots of fusiliers keep the site lively, and mantas have been seen here as well.

40 KO BON

Location: 11 nautical miles (21km) north of the Similan Islands

Depth: 15-130ft (5-40m)

Access: Live aboard

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Ko Bon has become very popular in recent years, as there are a couple of manta ray cleaning stations on the reef, along with an area where these creatures like to feed and play. There seems to be a lot of boat traffic at times, but most divers swim/fin a lot here. It's best to find a spot near the beautiful staghorn coral gardens on the west side, or just at the end of the sloping ridge at the south, then wait for big rays to swim in. Stay very low and breathe lightly, and you'll be able to watch some very big (and somewhat shark-bitten) mantas cleaning, feeding and playing.

Most dives start near a blowhole just prior to the southwest point, where the water churns into a froth. With reef on the right, one can swim out to the point and follow the ridge down past 100ft, where a small promontory offers hard coral cleaning stations and lots of current-driven fish life. Crevalle jacks, a ribbon-like yellowtail snapper school, big marbled groupers, longfin pompano and dogtooth tuna all ply these waters, as well as mantas and even a whale shark on occasion.

Shallower areas on the west side and along the ridge have small soft corals and big table corals, bommies with lionfish and sweepers galore, orange-lined triggerfish and moray eels.

On the southeast side there's a sandy plain at 90 to 100ft where one can either hide from the current or catch it and drift to the ridge. Look for Andaman sweetlips along the rocky cuts and plates here.



Ko Bon is known for its manta rays

Hanging at the west side, the staghorn bed is very rewarding. There's a manta cleaning station and lots of chromis. Stay low and mantas will circle many times as they get cleaned by blue-stripe and bluehead wrasses. The place is really fun at dusk with jacks and groupers wreaking havoc on the staghorn bed. Five species of trevally roam here individually or in packs, and moray eels and sea snakes can also be seen on the hunt. The site also has leopard sharks, lionfish, cuttlefish and even mating octopi.

If there is no surge, try to come up close to the blowhole where boat traffic is low. As many as a dozen boats and ships have been counted here at one time, so use your head when it comes to surfacing and keep plenty of air on hand so you can swim to a safe ascent point. If you do get caught in an open-water drift here, use a safety sausage.

Sitting far north, almost to the Thai and Burmese border, **Ko Bon** and **Ko Tachai** used to be considered a kind of no-man's land, and have only recently been included in the Similans.

41 KO BON PINNACLE

Location: 11 nautical miles (21km) north of the Similan Islands
Depth: 60-130ft (18-40m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Advanced



This site isn't for the faint hearted and it doesn't hurt to be fit here either, as it can be tricky just reaching the top of the pinnacle when the currents are strong. You have to get down quickly and hope you've timed it well-enough to let the currents carry you to this deep site. A reef hook certainly doesn't hurt when diving here.

What makes it all worthwhile is the big fish action. Divers have reported as many as seven mantas and a mobula all swimming around the pinnacle on one dive, and whale sharks are known to come here as well, on a less frequent basis.

The more regular 'usual suspects' are huge fusilier schools, batfish, bigeye jacks in large schools and rainbow runners. The pinnacle itself, being so current-swept, is somewhat barren, and there are also fishing net remnants in some places, so be careful not to get caught up. On the plus side, there are small soft corals, some sea fans and some hard and hearty corals to be seen. Nudibranchs can also be found here, for the invertebrate lovers.

Overall, this is a good place to beat the crowds, provided you're fit and experienced.

42 KO TACHAI

Location: 12 nautical miles (23km) north of the Ko Bon
Depth: 40-118ft (12-36m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



The best diving at this northern Similan island is in the south, where two moorings lead to a ridge starting at 40ft and falling off to around 120ft at the sandy bottom.

Known as Twin Peaks, the formation has a pinnacle on the north end and a big, round bommielike structure at the south. This attracts manta rays that come in to clean and do some feeding. One may have to hide to see some of the action, as this place can be rather currenty, but when the mantas are at the cleaning area it can be beautiful, with low-lying coral gardens and lots of chromis and basslets giving life and color to the reef. Some of the nearby corals have good fans and soft corals growing on them as well.

This is also a good place to see sponge life with big barrels filtering current-supplied nutrients. There's an especially eye-catching neon green sea

anemone at the south end at around 60ft, with Clark's anemonefish and nice whitecap shrimp. Ghost pipefish, frogfish and leopard blennies are sometimes seen here as well, and sleeping leopard sharks are also a possibility in deeper areas.

Look too for some great schools of fusiliers, batfish and chevron barracuda, along with pelagics like rainbow runners and dogtooth tuna. Pairs of red-tailed butterflyfish, small schools of grunts and silver sweetlips all like to face into the current here. Visibility can be quite good, but occasionally a thermocline of colder and lower visibility water will rush in, reducing visibility considerably. But it does seem to increase fish activity when this happens and particularly right before it happens.

This is a very active spot and can be enjoyed over multiple dives. Deco stops are often done at the mooring lines, or sometimes by drifting with the current for an open-water decompression – if that's the case, be sure to use a safety sausage.



Currents feed rich soft corals in the area

A harlequin shrimp makes its way across coral polyps



THE SURIN ISLANDS

The Surin Islands are protected by a Thai national marine park just south of Burmese border and a short three- to four-hour run by boat north of the Similans. The popular area comprises five islands – two large and three small – and quite a few exposed and hidden granite rocks, with hotspots like **Richelieu Rock** and other rocky outcrops.

This area is remote and has few inhabitants, and has been left naturally beautiful with forest cover and bird life. Fishermen still come here, so shark life and big fish aren't as plentiful as in past years. It was once quite famous as a whale shark magnet, though they're not as common now either. Smaller marine life, coral cover and invertebrates are all excellent with great diversity on the reefs and the offshore boulders. Moken

people, known as sea gypsies, inhabit a village on Ko Surin Thai Island in the Mu Ko Surin National Park.

Reef dives are done mainly on fringing reefs along eastern coastlines, while the rocky dives actually hold many profiles, from walls to swim-throughs to sandy slopes, depending where one dives at the site.

The Surin Islands		GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
43	RICHELIEU ROCK	•	•		
44	KO TORINLA RIDGE	•	•		
45	KO TORINLA		•		
46	SWIFT PASSAGE			•	
47	SURIN SOUTH POINT			•	
48	TURTLE LEDGES	•	•		

43 RICHELIEU ROCK

Location: 9 nautical miles (17km) north of the Ko Bon

Depth: 0-118ft (0-36m)

Access: Live aboard

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Richelieu Rock is known as one of Thailand's and Asia's best dive sites. The limestone rock lies nine nautical miles east of the Surin Islands and can be seen at low tide, but is otherwise totally submerged.

Perhaps the most striking and obvious image that first hits the diver is the amazing fish action taking place. Richelieu Rock and other small pinnacles are alive with sea life – both macro lovers and wide angle photographers will thrive here. One descends through clouds of fusiliers, and there are schools of bigeye jacks, circling chevron barracuda, colorful bigeye snappers, yellow-tail jacks and dogtooth tuna. Smaller fish in the water column and over the reef include redbar anthias, chromis and damselfish.

The rock and reef area has a thick and colorful cover of magnificent and bubble sea anemones with one-stripe, percula and red saddleback anemonefish in them. There are also some hidden edged anemones, some with Clark's anemonefish in them.

The rocks are also coated in soft corals in reds, oranges and yellows. Trees of *Dendronephthya* make the reef a colorful habitat for layers of baitfish, and gorgonians hide ornate ghost pipefish. Look also for tiger tail seahorses at the base of the fans. Stonefish, lionfish and spotted groupers all hang near the baitfish for easy pickings. Malabar groupers can also be found.

The site is very good for cephalopods – mating and roaming octopi are

common, and sightings of mating and fighting cuttlefish are possible. You will see the male sheltering the female from other males and aggressively guarding his lady. Morays have many representatives as well, with white-eyes, giant green eels, snowflakes and zebras.

Smaller critters are also boundless, with harlequin shrimp, carpets of striking red hingebeaks, tiger cowries, marbled hawkfish and lots of wentletrap action near the tube corals. Even burfish can be seen! The list is truly endless and many dives can be made here without getting bored. Bring a large fish checklist with you as you are sure to fill it! And remember, there is always a chance that a whale shark will show up. Keep an eye out in the blue for one.



Schooling fish engulf a diver

44 KO TORINLA RIDGE

Location: 9 nautical miles (17km) north of the Ko Bon
Depth: 27-115ft (8-33m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Only about 100ft wide and 300ft long, this is a very fishy dive due to currents running along the ridgetop and making for good conditions to see a lot of marine life. The ridge runs to the southeast and has a sloping side that runs down at varied levels with healthy corals and a plethora of marine creatures.

This is one of the few sites on which divers may encounter gray reef sharks in the water column as they cruise looking for a stray jack or some other meal. These beautiful swimmers like to hang off reef areas in the water column and can be identified by the black marking that runs down most of the tail. Keep an eye out in the blue for them. Whitetip reef sharks are also seen prowling here and resting in the sand down deep.

Look also for giant groupers, which can attain good size and may have pilotfish accompanying them. Large morays, big trevallies, a wide variety of sweetlips, bluespot coral groupers and hawksbill turtles are also found in the area.



Black coral provides cover for a damsel

45 KO TORINLA

Location: Northeast side of Ko Torinla
Depth: 0-60ft (0-18m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



On the northeast side, Ko Torinla is a popular dive spot with moorings and a nice beach. The site isn't that deep, with a slope going down to a sandy sea floor in only about 60ft of water. Keep an eye out for stingrays, resting leopard sharks and whitetips.

The coral along the slope is home to many fish species and there are attractive little gardens and outcroppings with gorgonian sea fans, plating and big Medusa-like coral heads. Look around some of these sanctuaries for sea turtles, clouds of baitfish and spotted groupers.

Bumphead parrotfish have been seen grazing in the area. If you are doing a morning dive, you may see a group of them as they like to sleep in a school at night and then clean early before spreading out to eat during the height of the day. Check for crinoids and their accompanying squat lobsters and shrimp in the shallower staghorn coral gardens.



Whale shark appears in blue water to greet snorkelers



Three-spot damselfish hide in the polyps of a green tubastrea coral

46 SWIFT PASSAGE

Location: Southeast end of Ko Surin Tai
Depth: 40-90ft (12-27m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Just float along at your desired depth and let the current do the work on this drift dive between the islands of Ko Surin Tai and Ko Torinla. You'll see schools of batfish, silvery jacks and feeding mackerel, and possibly whitetip and blacktip reef sharks.

Sea turtles really seem to like this site, with hawksbills seen on a regular basis. You can also slow down and hide behind the shelter of hard corals to watch the action in the blue. Schooling fusiliers and jacks can be seen in the open water.

47 SURIN SOUTH POINT

Location: South end of Ko Surin Tai
Depth: 6-60ft (2-18m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Surin South Point is located at the end of the **Turtle Ledges** dive site, but the terrain and marine life is very different from the northern site. This area has some big boulder clusters with a rubble or sandy bottom and makes for a good site on which to take your time to look around at the good variety of creatures. The sand is home to blue spotted sting-rays hunting for food, whip rays, (possibly buried in the sand) and ribbon eels in all phases (black, yellow and blue). Robust ghost pipefish may also mimic a piece of grass debris along the sandy bottom, and ornate ghost pipefish like

this site as well. Jawfish, some with eggs aerating in their mouths, can be seen poking up from sandy holes, while mantis shrimp roam the sea floor and both the smashing and the slashing mantis shrimps are present.



A sea cucumber

Look on the corals for spindle cowries and tiger cowries. Spiny lobsters like the rock undercuts and coral shelters.

Schooling fish include groups of eight to 15 blubberlip sweetlips and schooling jacks and snappers. This site can be currenty at times, which increases the schooling fish activity and sometimes draws in manta rays and even whale sharks. This can be an exciting dive site, so expect a bit of everything.

48 TURTLE LEDGES

Location: East side of Ko Surin Tai
Depth: 0-80ft (0-24m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Turtles Ledges is also a very good Surin area dive. The excellent fish diversity and easy diving conditions make it a photographer's delight. The reasonably long reef starts very near the surface and slopes down gently to around 80ft, making for a nice, easy multi-level dive looking at different habitats as you start deep and move up.

Fish here include the beautiful yellow-mask angelfish and the seldom seen barramundi cod. Also look around for the juvenile of these fish as they are quite pretty with flowing fins. Juvenile pinnate batfish can also be sighted, usually sheltered deep in the branching corals.

Hawksbill turtle sightings have given the site its name; they munch on algae and hydroids here or rest on the coral shelters. Please do not try to grab or ride a sea turtle. As they are air breathers, this stresses them and can even cause them to drown. If you approach a resting or grazing turtle slowly and low to the reef, you may be able watch them and swim with them for a long time as they are normally quite curious.

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Myanmar



Myanmar (Formerly Burma)

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MERGUI ARCHIPELAGO

Western Myanmar is bordered by the Andaman Sea. Countless island, reef and rocky pinnacles fill the coastline and offer countless dive sites, many of which are still waiting to be discovered. The gateway city here is Kawthaung. Golden reclining Buddhas and temple spires greet ships coming into the straits to the city.

Diving in Myanmar is done by live aboard. It is normally a quick stop with a set fee, and entry and exit handled by your live aboard cruise director. Officials there will keep your passport until you return.

Once the formalities are done, your boat will head up to some beautiful islands and pinnacle dive sites. There are an estimated 800 islands in the 14,000 square mile region that is part of the vast Mergui Archipelago. It is much less developed here and there are also more small 'long tail' fishing boats around.

The Mergui Archipelago, a group of over 200 islands in the Andaman Sea, is where the Isthmus of Kra divides it from the lowland forests of the Sundaic region. The flora and fauna of these two regions overlap and as there has been no commercial, and low residential, development, the islands maintain a high level of natural biodiversity. Some of the wildlife has been exposed to poachers and illegal logging, but birdlife is still very good with hornbills, colorful king-

fishers, parrots, flycatchers and sunbirds all found here. Monkeys, snakes and fruit bats also thrive in the forests. Ground creatures include wild boars, monkeys, sea otters, monitor lizards and even wild elephants.

The islands thrive from this peninsular rainforest. Nutrients filter into coastal mangrove swamp that sends nutrients far out to sea.

The region's sites have only recently been explored and mapped by live aboard dive operators from Phuket, such as Fantasea's *Ocean Rover*, which went through countless negotiations and were allowed to dive here and pioneer new sites incredibly recently in 1997.

Much farther west, trips are now being made to the far reaches of the Andaman Sea and the Andaman Islands. Midway between Thailand and India, the peaks of a submerged mountain range create the Andaman and Nicobar Island chains.

Dive tourism is still in development stages in Andaman and Nicobar but new dive sites are being found on a seasonal basis. A few times a year, live aboards board passengers from Phuket, Thailand or from Port Blair, India.

Myanmar		GOOD	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
		SNORKELING			
49	WESTERN ROCKY ISLAND	•	•	•	•
50	FAN FOREST PINNACLE	•	•	•	•
51	NORTHERN ROCKY PINNACLE	•	•	•	•
52	MOULIN ROUGE	•	•	•	•
53	NORTH TWIN ISLAND (WEST RIDGE)	•	•	•	•
54	NORTH TWIN PLATEAU	•	•	•	•
55	THREE ISLETS	•	•	•	•
56	BLACK ROCK	•	•	•	•
57	NORTHEAST LITTLE TORRES ISLAND	•	•	•	•

A Taste of Kawthaung

Myanmar offers a rich and thrilling cultural mix, with dozens of different languages and peoples, and is a natural draw for the adventurous. Going to Myanmar is more complicated than just buying a ticket and visitors should read up a little before making a decision many later claim as a bad one. Firstly, this is not a democratic country. The government used forced labor to create or finish off the tourist-related sights and services, most of which are government run, and to many, international tourism is seen as a stamp of approval to the Myanmar Government. Also, the government forbids travel to many areas, particularly areas inhabited by minority groups. It's fairly impossible to visit without some money going to the military junta.

But the live aboard experience is a completely different animal. Tourists are not really considered to be in the country and must stay on their boat, even though the lush islands may look inviting. Some islands and rock dive sites do occasionally go 'off limits' for security reasons, but for the most part, divers are free to enjoy the comfort of their boat and the natural of the underwater world.

When leaving the country, divers are allowed to visit the city of Kawthaung, a vibrant little place a bit like a small Indian city. The stay is usually only for an hour, but

allows you to see some beautiful temples, enjoy the color of the streets, visit a market and buy some local sarongs or snacks. You can also make cell phone calls. There's really no point in trying to use the Internet or email while in Myanmar – it's often painfully slow if anything works at all.

Transport is mainly by motorbike, but most of the sites of interest can be covered on foot from the pier.

Diving tourists give locals, many of whom speak and understand English, access to a small bit of income and communication with the outside world and other cultures. The Burmese are very friendly and the vast majority of locals want you there. Also, the country's human-rights abuses are less likely to occur in areas that tourists frequent.

After a tour of the city, usually accompanied by some smiling and rather knowledgeable youngsters, divers get back on the boat and head back to Thai waters.



Kwathaung harbor

49 WESTERN ROCKY ISLAND

Location: 42 nautical miles (78km)

west-southwest of Kawthaung

Depth: 0-118ft (0-36m)

Access: Live aboard

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This is one of the finest dives in the region, with just about everything for everyone – an arch, a wall, lots of fish and

soft corals, and great little critters like ghost pipefish.

Most of the diving is done around a main limestone island. The site also has some smaller pinnacles and outcroppings that can be dived, depending on the currents. The south side is a rough u-shaped bay protected on both sides, and is a good area to drop in. The sheer side of the colorfully encrusted rock drops down to about 80ft, then on to 100ft. In the deep reaches, keep an eye out for resting nurse sharks and leopard sharks.

Finning west, you will see a huge arch. This whole area is rich in smaller marine life and has some beautiful black corals (which actually appear white) on its floor. Soft corals, sea fans and other varied corals hold lots of tiny marine life. Look for glass shrimp, ornate ghost pipefish, an assortment of nudibranchs (including *Halgerda stricklandi*), flatworms, harlequin shrimp and painted frogfish. Take your time and look around. As the depths are somewhat deep, start low and work your way up as the various levels, exploring the many cracks and crevices. Multiple dives are usually done here, providing the opportunity for both wide angle and macro photography.

The huge arch usually has clouds upon clouds of baitfish at its entry and inside. This is the passageway to the western wall that holds some stunningly large and colorful soft corals and golden gorgonian sea fans. Keep an eye out for the pelagic life beyond the wall. Currents may be strong here; if there is no current, you can continue around the corner and explore the rest of the island.

Prior to reaching the arch, you'll see a cavern opening to the right along the south wall. This can be an interesting place to poke around – and it actually runs through to the other side of the island. But due to a silty bottom, the 80ft depth, a small north side exit and the presence of currents, this cavern should only be explored on a planned dive by advanced cavern divers.

The fish life here is prolific, with a resident school of yellowtail scad, golden trevallies, beautiful coachwhip jacks, clown triggerfish (somewhat of a rarity in these parts), red snappers, oriental sweetlips and Andaman sweetlips among the many others.

Work your way up the wall and look for the many scorpionfish, morays in the cracks (including giant, bartail, snowflake and white-eyes) and octopus.



A smaller male and female ornate ghost pipefish

50 FAN FOREST PINNACLE

Location: 5.4 nautical miles (10km) north of Western Rocky Island
Depth: 16-130ft (5-40m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This submerged limestone site is close to Western Rocky. Drop down to about 18ft to the top of the pinnacle and then descend to a forest of sea fans at 100ft or so. Down deep, look for marble rays and resting whitetip reef sharks.

The fish life is good and the cephalopods are numerous here with amorous octopus and mating cuttlefish a common sight. Bigger fish include great barracuda, blue-lined angelfish, lurking lionfish and bluespot stingrays.

This is a great dive for nudibranch lovers with *Glossodoris cincta* and the cryptic *Elysia ornata* found, among many others.



A male cuttlefish protects his female

51 NORTHERN ROCKY PINNACLE

Location: 38 nautical miles (72km) west-southwest of Kawthaung
Depth: 0-100ft (0-30m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Rocks and boulders offer great habitat to poke around in for smaller creatures. The south side of the island has a sloping sandy reef area with sea anemones and coral cover. Look for tiger tail sea-horses, decorator crabs and the occasional ribbon eel. Branching corals hold spindle cowries and feather stars.

The wall is full of cracks holding white-eye morays, painted spiny lobsters, devil scorpionfish and giant morays.

Net remnants and blast pots suggest fishermen visit this spot frequently. Yet it's still fishy, with great barracuda, rainbow runners, tall-fin spadefish and golden trevally on view.



An octopus moves along the wall while foraging near sunset



A tiny crab hitches a ride in the folds of a free-floating jellyfish

52

MOULIN ROUGE (SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?)

Location: 38 nautical miles (72km) west-southwest of Kawthaung
Depth: 0-118ft (0-36m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This new site off the tip of St Matthews Island has one visible rock and a drop to 90ft that offers lots of current, but also a chance to see schooling pelagic fish and good marine activity. The secondary name of 'Should I Stay or Should I

Go?' comes from the at-times wicked currents on an outgoing tide. Visibility can be good and also drop during the dive. Thus, one has to reach the decision to hang on for dear life or drift along – and off – the site.

Look for large shoals of fish attracted by the currents and nutrients passing through. Jacks, barracuda and various snappers, as well as sweetlips and drum are found in the water column, and dog-tooth tuna also roam in.

The soft corals are brilliant and there's also very good invertebrate life. Seek shelter behind some of the outcrops and look for small marine life, including very colorful nudibranchs, tubastrea corals and sea anemones.

Bombing the Reefs

Blast fishing has unfortunately been practiced in Myanmar (in many cases by Thai fishermen), and many reefs show some kind of blast damage. Divers may spot a ceramic urn on the bottom and think it the relic of an old shipwreck. These are actually used to hold combustibles for blast fishing.

The areas that have been hit show amazing resilience. Perhaps it's the nutrient-rich water and tidal flow that help so much. Soft corals, anemones, sea fan and smaller marine life like nudibranchs, cuttlefish, eels and migratory fish seem to keep the reefs alive and extremely diverse. In many cases, those not looking for specific damage would not be aware it had occurred.

Blast fishing has stopped for now, following a government raid on the bomb storage areas in Ranong. The increase in violence in the south of Thailand makes it improbable that the Thai government will let civilians to have caches or arms around, which is good news for the reefs.

It's hoped increased interest in eco-tourism and live aboard diving, and the money it brings, will be a real plus for the overall marine environment.



A leopard moray peeks from its lair

53

NORTH TWIN ISLAND (WEST RIDGE)

Location: 67 nautical miles (124km) northwest of Kawthaung
Depth: 16-118ft (5-36m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Most live aboards visit the western side of this island and a site called West Ridge. Here a pinnacle comes to within 15ft of the surface and slopes in a long plain to 120ft or so.

Follow the ridge on the north for the most fish action. The currents feed a good selection of gorgonian fans, colorful soft corals and hard corals that seem to have escaped the bombing that has cleared them from other reefs.

Fish can include barracuda, feeding Spanish mackerel, tallfin spade-fish schools and a variety of angelfish. Whitetip reef sharks are sometimes seen as well.

The anemones here have a good number of porcelain crabs living with them, while giant morays and roaming octopus can be seen in the shallower parts of the reef.



54 NORTH TWIN PLATEAU

Location: 1 nautical mile (1.9km) northwest of North Twin Island
Depth: 50-130ft (15-40m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



North Twin Plateau can have strong currents, but the marine life is also quite active and varied.

There are plenty of places to hide from the current here, as the plateau has scattered boulders and a sandy bottom. It is a big reef, so start deep and toward the end with stronger currents to increase your chances of seeing activity. Deeper parts of the site have been known to hold white tips and resting leopard sharks.

Move up, admiring the many fan and soft corals. Rainbow runners, mackerel, queenfish and jacks all frequent the site, while schooling rainbow runners sweep in and mangrove red snappers make this reef home.

55 THREE ISLETS

Location: 53 nautical miles (99km) northwest of Kawthaung
Depth: 0-90ft (0-27m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



The three rock islets, one small and two large, break the water's surface. The underwater topography and various little eco-systems here make for a good dive with plenty to see, both big and small. Well-suited for multi-level dive profiles, it takes several dives to take it all in. Live aboards frequently spend a full day, or a good portion of a full day, here.

One fascinating feature of the middle island is a large canyon which starts rather wide on the north end then narrows into what is all but a box canyon. A fairly wide-open tunnel at 50ft goes through to the other side of the island. However, the current can really flow through here, so make sure to go through the tunnel with the current (not against it). Large, fat nurse sharks feast on the spiny lobsters that hole up here and are sometimes found by the first divers coming through.

Resident grey reef sharks are also often found in this canyon. Normally open-water sharks that like the edges of reef walls, they probably like the ease of coasting with the inner current and drifting back again, similar to what they do on the open reef. The schooling fish may also make easy meals for predators in this confined area.

Close to the entrance of the tunnel is an arch covered with bright yellow sponges and often more large schools of juvenile fish.

The rocks and fissures on the outer walls of the islet are riddled with cracks and crevices that provide shelter and holdfasts for an enormous volume of



A Blenny sits in colonial tunicates



fish and invertebrate life. Large jellies drift by with tiny passengers like juvenile filefish, tiny jacks, transparent shrimp and large crabs.

To list everything that can be seen at this site would almost create a book in itself. The more unusual species include burrfish, Andaman mimic filefish, longsnout and Schultz's pipefish, frogfish, tiger tail seahorses, mating and egg-laying cuttlefish, squid, octopus, banded sea kraits, orangutan spider crabs, a whole array of nudibranchs, bartail, snowflake and giant moray eels and several species of shrimp (hinge-beak shrimp are thick at most cleaning stations).

Harp corals are found in the sandy areas near the rocky reef. Photographers should do some wide angle and then switch to macro trying different focal lengths on each dive. The result will be a kaleidoscope of colorful and unusual images.

56 BLACK ROCK

Location: 103 nautical miles (190km) north-northwest of Kawthaung
Depth: 10-130ft (3-40m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Advanced



The name Black Rock pretty much says it all. Above water there's a big, black rock and just below the waterline to way down deep is a site full of marine life. It's a superb site and a macro photographer's dream with a tremendous amount of life, including a large variety of nudibranchs (and swimming nudis), small sea hares, porcelain crabs, harlequin, barber pole, white-banded and ghost boxer shrimps, spindle cowries, filament wrasse and leopard moray eels.

The outer reaches of the rock can be exposed to currents so take care, but this often attracts fish shoals (like big schools of snapper, jacks and chevron barracudas) to swirl just off the reef. Leopard sharks, marble rays, wahoo, white-tip reef sharks, spotted eagle rays and even manta rays have been reported cruising along the reef. One of the Holy Grail of fishes – a purple *Rhinopias frondosa* – was also found at Black Rock.



57 NORTHEAST LITTLE TORRES ISLAND

Location: 123 nautical miles (228km) north-northwest of Kawthaung
Depth: 30-130ft (10-40m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This small island is surrounded by deep water. Schooling fish frequent the area and most dives are done along a submerged ridge on the west end. The deeper parts of the reef, at 100ft, hold nice sea fans and some hard corals. The blue water area is active with lots of fusiliers and fish schools moving about,

and the island is also known for occasionally producing mobula rays which like to school and swim in groups. They don't usually come in to the reef like their larger manta cousins, but will be in blue water. Their front feeding fins are closer together.

Divers can swim out to a point and then work back up either side, depending on the current, to see clouds of silversides hovering over sea anemones and hard coral formations. Look out for ornate ghost pipefish as well.



Burma Banks

The Burma Banks were once a main reason to go to Myanmar. Shark action here, especially schooling silvertips, made it a shark junkie's dream. However, one suspects that fishing companies must have someone employed to read diving magazines and guide books, find the good shark dives and wipe out anything with teeth for the insidious Asian shark fin trade. Pioneered by Ocean Rover as far back as 1990, the Banks are now not so sharky. Some tawny nurse sharks and whitetip reef sharks remain, but these can be seen at other sites.

Assess the pros and cons of heading out to the Banks, as this area and its sites are a series of totally submerged seamounts. At the shallowest point, the top of one seamount is at 50ft, while the rest are deeper, somewhat current-swept and not heavily overgrown with coral or other big marine life. All around, the ocean floor drops to 1400ft in wide open sea and international waters (still part of the Myanmar 200-mile EEZ) with no protection from weather. It is a long haul from the popular dive areas farther south and east in Burmese waters.

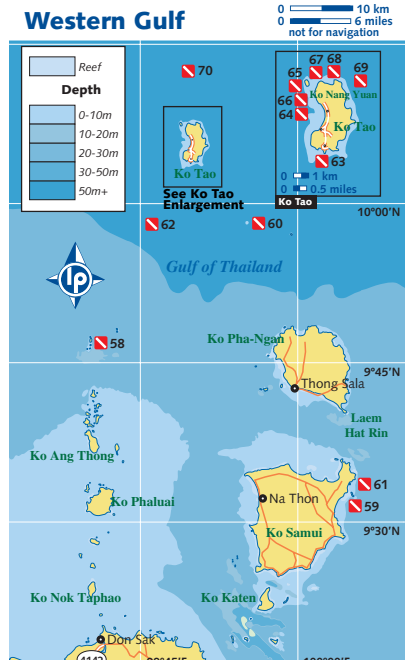
Getting to Burma Banks also chews up quite a bit of travel time. As they are 60 to 70 miles from the nearest dive sites, one may want to forego the trip in favor of more time at the shallower and more productive dives that have a much greater diversity of species and corals.

That said, visibility out here is normally superb with gin clear water, and the site offers some beautiful wide angle photography opportunities, including large table corals, fish schools and the chance to see predators like dogtooth tuna. The rare Strickland's triggerfish has also been found at Burma Banks.

There are no mooring buoys; the current can be very strong and most dives start around 60ft to 80ft at the sea mount tops, making the dives short and open-water decompression a must. This is definitely experienced diver country. Enjoy this unique area of the sea if you go. If not, you will have plenty to see at the Myanmar inshore sites.

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Western Gulf



KO SAMUI & KO PHA-NGAN

Once a backpacker-only island, the party island Ko Samui has long been the locale of choice for paradise-seeking voyagers of all stripes. Its turquoise waters and sun-bleached, sandy bays are lined with multiple bungalows and resorts, and a plethora of restaurants to satisfy hungry epicureans, while a thumping nightlife provides a soundtrack to the temperate, starry nights. A highway circumnavigates the island.

Just about every type of diving, accommodation and instruction can be had, and divers from here and the smaller, northerly Ko Pha-Ngan can get everything from introductory dives to instructor certification. A beautifully landscaped and busy little domestic airport serves tourists, and a beachside

ferry serves as a jumping on and off point for other popular dive centers like Ko Tao and quiet Ko Pha-Ngan.

There are some popular dives around Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan and many dive centers also make the run over to Ko Tao and Ko Nang Yuan for other popular and fishy sites.



Ko Samui & Ko Pha-Ngan

	GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
58 FIVE ISLANDS		•		
59 AO CHAWENG	•			
60 ANG THONG NATIONAL MARINE PARK		•		
61 SAIL ROCK (HIN BAI)			•	



58 FIVE ISLANDS

Location: 4 nautical miles (10km) southeast of the Na Thon Pier

Depth: 16-79ft (5-24m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



A group of five high, rocky islands to the southwest of Ko Samui provides the backdrop for some nice diving. The area's geographic formation means that there is usually a protected area year-round, so diving in monsoon season is still possible.

Dive training is also popular in the shallow sandy areas of this site where divers can practice their skills.

Since it is relatively shallow and not known for high visibility, divers should take it slow and easy here and look for small marine life like bulldozer shrimp and their gobies. There are also some coral gardens and nice sea fans. Look for sea anemones on the top of rocks with false and pink clownfish.



Video at a morning Ko Tao departure

Gulf Coast Dive Sites

The Gulf of Thailand, a broad and relatively shallow expanse of water with numerous islands and national parks, is a hotbed for dive training. One main dive region comprises of the many islands of **Ang Thong Marine National Park**. Farther east are the popular dive islands of Ko Samui and Ko Tao. On the mainland and accessible from Bangkok is Chumphon. Diving is done from here but it is a ferry and shipment point, so it's not quite as tourism-oriented as some nearby islands. North and east is the tourist magnet of Pattaya Beach with its hotel rows and many attractions. This was the seat of diving in Thailand in the 1960s and many dive shops still thrive here. Dive sites are around Pattaya Beach and south and east to the Cambodian border. New sites are being explored off the Thai southeast coast. The Gulf of Thailand is quickly developing into a technical diving destination due to the many new and fairly deep shipwrecks found in the region in the past decade.



A moray eel peeks around an urchin

59 AO CHAWENG

Location: East coast of Ko Samui

Depth: 0-23ft (0-7m)

Access: Beach or Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



Ao Chaweng can be done as a shore or boat dive and is also a popular training site. Dive shops conduct intro dives and specialized training at the sand's edge, making for a convenient way to dive and snorkel.

Although it is a sandy beach with sea green water trailing into a bluer turquoise, this doesn't usually translate into great visibility. Try to dive or snorkel at high, incoming tide to maximize the best visibility. Look out for sea cucumbers, colorful parrotfish, butterflyfish, wrasse and groupers among the corals. Beware of scorpionfish that may be well-camouflaged.

60

ANG THONG NATIONAL MARINE PARK

Location: 9.7 nautical miles (18km) west of Ko Samui

Depth: 0-100ft (0-30m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice with guide



Forty-two islets comprise this very beautiful area of limestone cliffs and jungle reminiscent of popular Ko Phi or the Palau Rock Islands. It is largely uninhabited and its beauty, favorable currents and varied undersea terrain have made the area popular for training and easy diving. These islands are just plain pretty and offer nice, shallow dives, many interesting snorkeling spots and a nice diversion from the crowds.

When arriving or between dives or snorkels, look for wildlife, such as the langur, an Asian long-tailed monkey,

A foraging lionfish



hair-nosed otters, pacific reef egrets, sea eagles, land tortoises and even pythons.

Ko Wao and Hin Yipoon have shallow caves and soft corals. Ko Yipoon and Ko Yipoon Yai, the northernmost of the park islands, have reputations for minimal currents and good visibility. Yai has a series of small caves, healthy coral and some arches that divers like to enjoy in fairly shallow water.

Look for sea snakes, hawksbill sea turtles, large snappers and sweetlips, great barracuda and blue-stripe fusilier schools. The area is also the major spawning ground for the short-bodied mackerel.

Snorkelers may wish to see Thale Nai. It is an inland saltwater marine lake found on Ko Mae Koh.

61 SAIL ROCK (HIN BAI)

Location: 17 nautical miles (32km) north of Ko Samui

Depth: 0-108ft (0-33m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This large and popular rock protrudes above sea then drops 110ft or so below the surface. Most dive companies prefer to venture here on good seas with experienced divers, as Sail Rock and **Chumphon Pinnacle** are the prime dive sites for these islands.

The best way to dive this vertical site is to drop down deep and look for gray

Full Moon Madness

Don't expect to get a room without major advance reservations around the time of the full moon (every month) at Ko Pha-Ngan. The famous full moon parties, which attract as many as 20,000 people to all-nighters on Haad Rin's Beach, are now part of the island's international claim to fame. Paradise Bungalows, the site of the original full moon party, consistently puts on an inspired show with wild decor and a combination of superb resident and international guest DJs. Paint yourself in UV colors, dance under the black light and go wild to techno, trance, goa, drum n' bass, dub, reggae, commercial hits, house and even blues music. In all, there are roughly 15 sound systems blasting all night long at Haad Rin Beach. People gather and meet others from all corners of the globe at small tables all along the beach – just order drinks and food from the restaurants and bars. There's even an 'after party' now. The good news is that if you do go to bed early, you may have the dive boat all to yourself if you do dive the next day after the full moon party. Everyone else will be nursing a hangover.

reef and sleeping leopard sharks. The deeper reaches also have large growths of ever-green tube coral trees, black coral and moustache triggerfish nesting areas.

As you move up the rock exploring the yellow tubastrea coral growth, nudibranchs, white-eyed morays, golden morays and various nooks and crannies for eels, keep an eye out in the blue.

Guides like to lead guests up through a vertical shaft, often referred to as 'The Chimney', from 60ft to 20ft. It's not big, so listen carefully to instructions during the briefing and keep a lookout for raggy scorpionfish.

At the rock's top there are anemones galore with pink anemonefish and some anemone crabs. Look also for blue-ring angels, rabbitfish, fusiliers and batfish schools that like to loll in the current. Blue water action also includes chevron barracuda and many types of jacks.

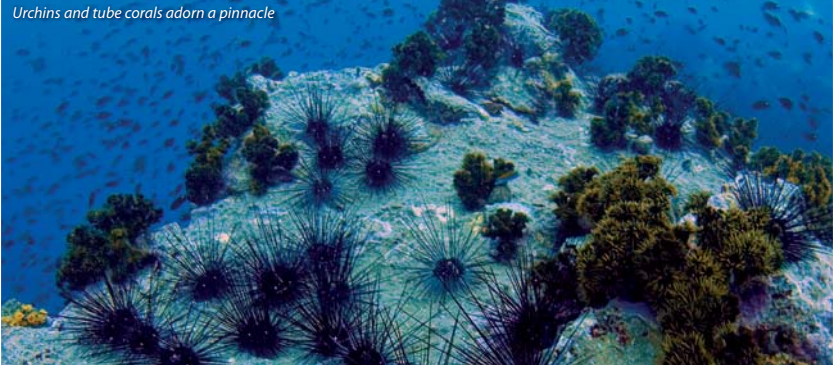
Currents can be strong here at times. There is a buoy line up to the surface, but be careful of unmoored boats in the area.



Schooling bigeye snapper



Bluestripe fusiliers exit a deep crevasse



Urchins and tube corals adorn a pinnacle

KO TAO & KO NANG YUAN

Ko Tao, meaning 'Turtle Island', was all but uninhabited in the 1950s, though you'd never know it nowadays. Though it's growing and improving rapidly, seemingly month-to-month, it is still small enough to be laid-back and a bit cozy. A large turtle in front of Crystal Dive near the Mae Haad town pier greets aspiring divers, and a road that doesn't even go halfway around the beautifully hilly island keeps things close and personal.

In the late 1980s the first Samui-based dive operators began running overnight live aboard trips to Ko Tao. The popularity of the island as a dive destination grew, as water clarity tends to be better here and the coral and marine diversity is good. Realizing there was a wealth of untouched beauty, dive operations began relocating to Ko Tao.

More than 3% of the divers in the world are now certified here annually, and courses at all levels are nearly always available.

Hillside bungalows in niche resorts and basic dive camps run the gamut of accommodation. Virtually all have dive facilities and most have numerous classrooms. Good restaurants abound, too. Shops have first-rate, new rental gear, and there's even a full service dive supply store right off the ferry pier. Nights

are spent gathered for happy hour at a dive shop beach pub, followed by a review of the day's dive adventures videoed by local shop professionals. Everywhere you look, something dive-related is happening. Many people spend the morning diving and then relax and watch the sun go down from a beautiful stretch of sand called Sairee Beach.

Nearby and part of the scenic offering of many of the island's northern viewpoints is Ko Nang Yuan, a tiny island formation comprising three land-masses connected by a central spit of sand. Many nice, shallow dives and snorkeling spots are accessible from the island, which also has a hotel.

If you want to dive, this is the place to come.

<i>Ko Tao & Ko Nang Yuan</i>		GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
62	SOUTHWEST PINNACLE			•	
63	RED ROCK (SHARK ISLAND)		•		
64	HIN WONG PINNACLE			•	
65	JAPANESE GARDEN			•	
66	WHITE ROCK	•	•		
67	TWINS (BAY #1)		•		
68	MANGO BAY		•		
69	GREEN ROCK		•		
70	CHUMPHON PINNACLE				•



Silver sweetlips

62 SOUTHWEST PINNACLE

Location: 4 nautical miles (7km) southwest of Ko Tao
Depth: 20-108ft (6-33m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Southwest of Ko Tao, this site is one of the Gulf's premier diving destinations, with depths ranging as deep as 100ft. The site features a series of seven under-sea pinnacles, the highest of which rises to about 20ft from the surface. There are two moorings here.

On the upper levels of the pinnacles is a field of anemones and abundant whip corals, and large sea fans along the reef edges that feed in the currents passing along the walls. Look into the blue for jacks and tuna.

Fish life includes schools of bigeye snappers, Moorish idols and 4ft-long great barracuda. Cleaning stations are prevalent, and angels, parrotfish and many species of butterflyfish come in to clean, while bannerfish, scrawled filefish and even some spiny puffers are seen around the reef. Look also for large saddleback groupers.

To the southeast of the main site lies a smaller pinnacle which is home to two resident - if somewhat shy - reef whitetip sharks. Currents here can be tricky at times, so be aware of what's happening.

63 RED ROCK (SHARK ISLAND)

Location: 0.5 nautical miles (1km) southeast of Ko Tao
Depth: 0-79ft (0-24m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



It seems there are a lot of 'Shark Islands' in Thailand, and this is Ko Tao's entry into the fray. A granite peak drops down to the sand, with various levels and lots of coral heads and rocks to poke about. The depth here is only about 70ft to the sand, so a nice long dive with reasonable bottom time can be made. A great dive at the island's south end, anything can and sometimes does show up here.

The currents here can be mild to strong and they feed sea fans, wire corals and a very good collection of hard corals. Divers see the namesakes here as well, with whitetip and leopard sharks occasionally making an appearance, and even whiptail rays. Look also in the sand and under corals for blue spotted rays. The fish of note are scrawled filefish, starry puffers and titan triggers (give them wide berth when they are nesting), along with parrotfish and giant morays. Keep an eye out for resting hawksbill turtles during your dive.

This site presents good opportunities for underwater photographers, particularly at a spot at the north end of the site called 'fish junction' which is especially active and great for 35mm to 50mm photos of fish and some invertebrates.



Ringed angelfish



Bannerfish move across the reef

64 HIN WONG PINNACLE

Location: South of Laem Hin Wong, east of Ko Tao
Depth: 10-98ft (3-30m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Hin Wong Bay is a laid-back beach destination reachable by a bumpy ride over the island's central and rocky ridge and down to the east coast. A boat ride is much more pleasant and to dive the pinnacle, a boat is needed.

Hin Wong Pinnacle, in the bay, has a steady stream of divers who come to see what marine life this barely submerged table topped rock has to offer. It bottoms out at 100ft, so it's a good spot for all levels of divers.

Known for beautiful soft corals, the reef below has black coral trees and gorgonian sea fans at depth. Look around all of the rocks at the site for unusual creatures and nudibranchs. There is a good chance of seeing hawksbill sea turtles. There are two buoys on the site, which can be dived as long as the wind isn't coming in from the northeast. It is sometimes done as a night dive, so that divers can look for sleeping turtles.

65 JAPANESE GARDEN

Location: East of Ko Nang Yuan**Depth:** 20-50ft (4-15m)**Access:** Boat**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate

Nestled in the scenic bay between the two islands of Ko Nang Yuan and Ko Tao, the reef has a beautiful natural landscape and thus has been dubbed a Japanese Garden. Shallow and harboring a nice selection of hard and soft corals, a relaxed dive looking at the marine life can be made here.

This is also a popular site for training dives, as the bottom in many spots is only 30ft to 40ft deep. Fusiliers dominate the upper water column, while parrotfish, blue ring angels, blue spotted rays and moustache triggerfish can be seen regularly. Look for caves and short swim-throughs at the site's south end.

66 WHITE ROCK

Location: Between Ko Tao & Ko Nang Yuan**Depth:** 6.5-72ft (2-22m)**Access:** Boat**Expertise Rating:** Novice

White Rock is an interesting site commonly done as a second dive on the way back from **Chumphon Pinnacle**. It complements the exciting Chumphon dives well, has lots to see and is shallow enough for a nice long bottom time. Highlighted by a shallow granite pinnacle and deeper pinnacle, with other boulders and coral heads scattered about, the cover is perfect for many kinds of marine life.

White-eye morays hide in the cracks and crevices. Chromodoris and other nudibranchs lay eggs on the side of the rocks. This is actually a very good site for macro photography. The rubbly sand is a favored habitat for bulldozer shrimp and their accompanying watchdog gobies. You can settle gently into the sand and watch as these industrious shrimp keep the burrow clean while the sentry guards the hole.

This dive may be the Christmas tree worm capitol of Thailand. Some sites are covered with multi-colored tree worms so thick it's hard to see the actual hard coral head. There is also a nice selection of sea anemones with one-stripe clownfish in only 30ft of water to the west.

This is a favored training site and a good night dive. The parrotfish form a bubble around themselves at night here and the shell life is good, particularly when cones and cowries come out.



The feathery gills of a nudibranch

Crystal Dive homage to its patron.
Ko Tao means Turtle Island



67 TWINS (BAY #1)

Location: West of Ko Nang Yuan
Depth: 33-59ft (10-18m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



South of **Japanese Garden** are the two main pinnacles of Twins and a smaller, deeper one. This is another fun dive site at Ko Tao, with reasonable depths, good marine life and excellent areas for dive training.

The pinnacles are surrounded by soft, white sand dotted with the unusual symbiotic relationships of goby fish and their blind-shrimp housemates. There are large groupers, blue-ring angelfish and brilliant yellow and black masked raccoon butterflyfish. The anemone count is also high. There is a famous carpet anemone here in the sand out to the south. Mork and Mindy is a pair of the rather uncommon saddleback clownfish. Flatworms, nudibranchs and pipefish all like this habitat.

The east has the best safety stop on the island, with a healthy school of curious yellowtail barracuda.

68 MANGO BAY

Location: North end of Ko Tao
Depth: 6-54ft (2-16m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



Only accessibly by boat, Mango Bay is a secluded sand-bottomed bay at the north end of Ko Tao. Nestled in the tropical beauty of coconut palms and other hillside hardwoods, this is a good place to snorkel, undertake a dive

instruction or Discover Diving course, and also have a leisurely shallow dive among the many coral clusters.

Schools of squid are often seen in the upper water column and may get quite curious if you stop and watch them. If you swim toward them, they will swim away. The site is also known for small hawksbill turtles, along with butterflyfish, parrotfish and Titan triggers, a nice selection of sea anemones and some soft corals.

Be aware the center of the bay is sometimes busy with boat traffic in and out of the beach. Try to confine your dive to the east side, which is probably the most interesting with varied corals and formations. The west has some good hiding spots for turtles.



A beautifully colored, ornate ghost pipefish



New divers descend for a Chumphon Pinnacle dive

69 GREEN ROCK

Location: North of Ko Nang Yuan

Depth: 13-92ft (4-28m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



One of the outlying dive sites found to the north of Ko Nang Yuan is a place named Green Rock. Ko Nang Yuan looks picturesque from the two-buoy site marker.

Many brightly colored soft corals and sponges cling to the insides of swim-through caverns and the undersides of outcroppings here. You also might scare up a resting whitetip shark or two hiding by day under the outcrops.

This is a good spot to see invertebrates like nudibranchs and flatworms. The sand also has tube anemones that host glass shrimp – look closely to see if these transparent shrimp are on the hosts. White-eye and yellow margin morays are also resident, while the outer parts of the site host shoals of electric blue damselfish dancing in the current.

70 CHUMPHON PINNACLE

Location: 2.7 nautical miles (5km)

northwest of Ko Nang Yuan

Depth: 0-108ft (0-33m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Northwest of Ko Tao, the Chumphon Pinnacle is widely regarded as one of the Gulf's premier dive sites. The site itself is comprised of one huge, main granite pinnacle and a series of smaller pinnacles rising from the bottom. Buoys lead down to the main pinnacle and divers meet the top of the reef at 45ft. The pinnacle bottoms out at its deepest at the south end at 120ft.

For the best diving, go early before it gets too crowded with divers and boats, or wait until the late afternoon. Head down to the south end and go deep to see if there are any gray reef sharks in the 100ft to 120ft range. They don't usually come very close, but can be close enough to see. The lower depths here can also be subject to thermoclines, so it can be clear and warm on top, and cold and dark down deeper. Or the opposite can also occur. A small, deep set of rock off the south end can be seen when it's very clear.

Keep a watch into the blue here as this site can have its world-class days. There have been reports of baleen whales, whale sharks, broadbill swordfish and vast shoals of bigeye jacks.

Head back up from the south, stopping at the two pinnacles and small canyons that hold large marbled groupers, tubastrea corals, sea anemones, lots of spiny urchins and many scorpionfish in the rocks.

Finish back at the mooring at about 60ft, where batfish like to play in the current and circle divers. Huge schools of yellowstripe fusiliers swoop through

the open water here. Remember to keep plenty of air to ascend, as the top of the pinnacle is still deep.

Going Tech

The quest for deep wreck diving is being realized in Thailand by the Trident Team of Jamie Macleod and Stuart Oehl, who run a dive center and also a live aboard with dedicated tech wreck diving charters.

Technical diving is new to Ko Tao and Thailand as a whole. As Thailand's waters, especially in the Gulf, aren't considered to be overly deep by tech standards, this has not been a tech hotbed like Bikini Atoll. However, the depths are still considerably beyond safe sport diving limits and new finds have put a spotlight on tech endeavors here.

Having a huge area of relatively shallow water to explore, it is gaining in popularity. The gulf has been a major shipping route for hundreds of years and the wrecks so far found and explored include wooden Chinese pottery wrecks, WWII ships, planes, submarines and modern wrecks. The USS *Lagarto* was the most publicized find, and landed the MV *Trident* pair on US national news and the *Undersea Detectives* TV show. The USS *Lagarto* is a Balao class fleet submarine sunk by Imperial Japanese Navy mine-layer *Hatsutaka* in May 1945 with all 86 hands lost. She sits upright and fully intact in 235ft of water, and is a demanding dive.

Japanese records apparently state that 179 marus (merchant vessels) were lost in the Gulf of Thailand in WWII. The coordinates of many of these virgin wrecks are known, and exploratory expeditions are run on a regular basis. Although there's no guarantee of a great new wreck every trip, the success rate is very high.

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Eastern Gulf



PATTAYA

The bustling resort area of Pattaya was Thailand's hotbed of diving back in the 1970s. A favorite R&R spot for Vietnam soldiers, this bay had a few pioneer dive shops and some small hotels that hosted soldiers during their week-long break from the war and also the military and their families stationed in Thailand.

Things have changed. Pattaya is now a world-class mass tourism center in the order of Hawaii's Waikiki or Australia's Gold Coast, with all of the top hotels and something for virtually everyone to do. This of course includes diving. The handful of dive shops has burgeoned to now include full-service PADI 5-star shops and those of other agencies totally equipped to outfit any diver and teach most any course.

The majority of the diving done here is introductory scuba and basic to advanced training. But many other specialties, including tech diving and instructor training courses, all take place around this hotbed of the east. Many of the nearby sites are somewhat shallow

training sites, but there are some nicer reefs away from the main tourist area. For the most part, it isn't considered a destination for a full-blown dive vacation. It is more of a place to get in some dives while enjoying all of the other activities that Pattaya has to offer, by both day and night.

This area is also known to have some good shipwrecks with more being found on a regular basis. The east is better known for wrecks than the west-side of the country. From ancient ships to recent sinkings, there is a pretty wide gamut to be seen by 'wreckies'.

Eastern Gulf		GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
71	HTMS KHRAM	•	•		
72	HTMS KUT			•	
73	KO KHROK			•	
74	KO RIN	•	•	•	
75	PETCHBURI BREMEN			•	
76	HARDEEP	•	•		

71 HTMS KHRAM

Location: 300m off Ko Phai
Depth: 50-100ft (15-30m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Advanced



The HTMS *Khram*, a decommissioned US warship, was sunk on 1 February 2003 by the Thai navy. It now sits in 100ft of water near Ko Phai and Ko Larn islands off Pattaya and has quickly become an excellent artificial reef.

It is officially the USS *LSM-469* but was given to the Thai Navy by the USA and renamed HTMS *Khram*, way back in May of 1962. Once it fell out of use, the idea of sinking her came about and the Thai Navy went through environmental procedures, drained it of oil, removed wiring and cut large passageways for divers to easily navigate. (This has also been done with great success to two Australian decommissioned destroyers farther south along the Australia west coast.)

These days the ship sits upright with the bridge area coming into view at 50ft. Two moorings lead down to the ship aft and bow. If the water is clear, it is possible to go down the mooring and then swim to the center of the ship when the bridge comes into sight. Visibility is typically low on the wreck, however.

Soft corals and other encrusting marine life have already taken hold. The water here is very silty and that has also already covered the wreck, so penetration dives must be done with care to avoid silt kicks causing a white-out. The passageways are open and well-lit and divers are not usually out of the natural light. It has been noted that a few of the rooms have steel watertight doors still fitted, which could be locked easily with a diver inside.

The Eastern Gulf

The Ko Chang area near the Cambodian border is being explored and developed as a dive destination. The islands here have excellent beaches and natural beauty, and the offshore pinnacles are producing sites with good marine life. Ko Chang is a boom town right now, with the range of accommodation extending from economically priced bungalows to luxury resorts. Construction has been limited to the height of a coconut tree, so there is an attempt being made to retain the natural aesthetics of the place.

Offshore rocky pinnacles are home to rays and some sharks, and the coral cover is beautiful with good fish variety. Live aboard diving is opening to this area and some dive shops are now located in Ko Chang, Ko Rang and Ko Kut. They have sites like the Ko Rang Pinnacles, Ko Wai Reef and Hin Luk Bat Reef. These sites commonly have visibility ranging from 20ft to 45ft with mild currents and hard corals.

Roughly 85% of Ko Chang, along with about 50 smaller islands, is part of the Ko Chang Marine National Park.

Divers can enter the bridge of the ship, which is open and devoid of any old navigation equipment. Because the HTMS *Khram* was a troop carrier, there is a large open deck which was used for vehicles and equipment and launching troops onto a beach zone. The aft engine room is also accessible, although the engines have been removed and there is also a lot of light here due to cut-out access ways. (Pattaya dive operations use this for tech training.) This area is also silty, so movement should be slow and easy.

Outside the ship there are a lot of soft corals, sponges, fish life and particularly baitfish. A batfish school has already called the HTMS *Khram* home.

72 HTMS KUT

Location: Northeast tip of Ko Sak, southwest of Pattaya
Depth: 40-108ft (12-32m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Advanced



Very similar to sister ship HTMS *Khram*, HTMS *Kut* is the most recent of Pattaya's growing fleet of undersea wrecks that now support artificial reefs. Its sinking on 17 September 2006 was a success, as the wreck sits upright with moorings stern and fore. It also underwent preparations by the Royal Thai Navy, so provides a similarly safe dive site. Munitions, engines, oil and pollutants were removed, while large holes in the deck allow divers to easily enter the passageways and engine rooms.

This ship sits on a bit of a slope with the bow at about 108ft and the stern at about 90ft in the sand. Marine life and encrusting invertebrates are starting to take hold, and schooling fish have already made the ship home. Visibility is only about 20ft to 30ft on a good day, so try diving at slack tide.

73 KO KHROK

Location: 4 nautical miles (7km) southwest of Pattaya
Depth: 0-66ft (0-20m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



This site has a coral bed that runs down a slope to around 65ft. Lots of hard corals thrive here and a gentle current keeps things healthy. The current can allow for shallow drift diving or drift snorkeling if there's a surface current. Look for staghorn, brain and star corals. The shoals of chromis and damsels are found around the staghorns, while cleaning stations for parrotfish, butterflyfish and other tropical species are staffed by cleaner wrasse at the hard coral heads.

During Pattaya's meteoric development, the corals suffered a great deal from runoff and other neglect due to infrastructure and construction work. This area has now been targeted by Pattaya and Bangkok environmentalists to bring awareness to a new Pattaya Region Environmental and Use Policy, and aid in coral growth.



Anemone colonies

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The detail of a scorpionfish fin

74 KO RIN

Location: 13 nautical miles (24km) southwest of Pattaya
Depth: 0-46ft (0-14m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Considered one of Pattaya's best coral dives with a nice selection of hard corals on a shallow and rocky reef and good visibility being the norm. This is also

very popular as a day trip for divers and snorkelers.

Though shallow, there are canyons between rocks, swim-throughs and hard coral formations – some shallow enough for snorkelers to enjoy. Black coral can be found in just 40ft of water, and big barrel sponges host hundreds of tiny, white sea cucumbers clinging to their outer surface. The fact that this site has some occasional current also helps the invertebrate count, with nudibranchs, flatworms and anemones all present. Fish include harlequin sweetlips, lionfish, squirrelfish and ember parrotfish.

75 PETCHBURI BREMEN

Location: Between Ko Khram Yai & Sattahip
Depth: 62-82ft (19-25m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



The *Bremen* is in a fairly poor state due to its use as a demolition target for the Royal Thai Navy at one time. Its parts cover an area across about 300ft of the sea floor. Some wreck exploring can be done, as parts of the ship still remain upright. Its biggest plus may be that it is a very good artificial reef that schools of yellowtail snapper, barracuda and jacks gather around.

The ship went down due to an engine room fire in the 1930s near the village of Sattahip, just south of Pattaya. Its depth and low visibility make it a good training site for advanced divers who can navigate the ship and the sandy bottom while getting the depth requirement out of the way.

It isn't used that much for wreck diving courses as penetration isn't really safe due to its broken condition. The newer HTMS wrecks are actually the shipwrecks of choice these days for a lot of Pattaya wreck diving. The good news is that it tangles up fishing nets, so net fishermen stay away from the jag-



A jewel box urchin

ged ship. When the current is running, look for the school of resident eagle rays that favor this site.

76 HARDEEP

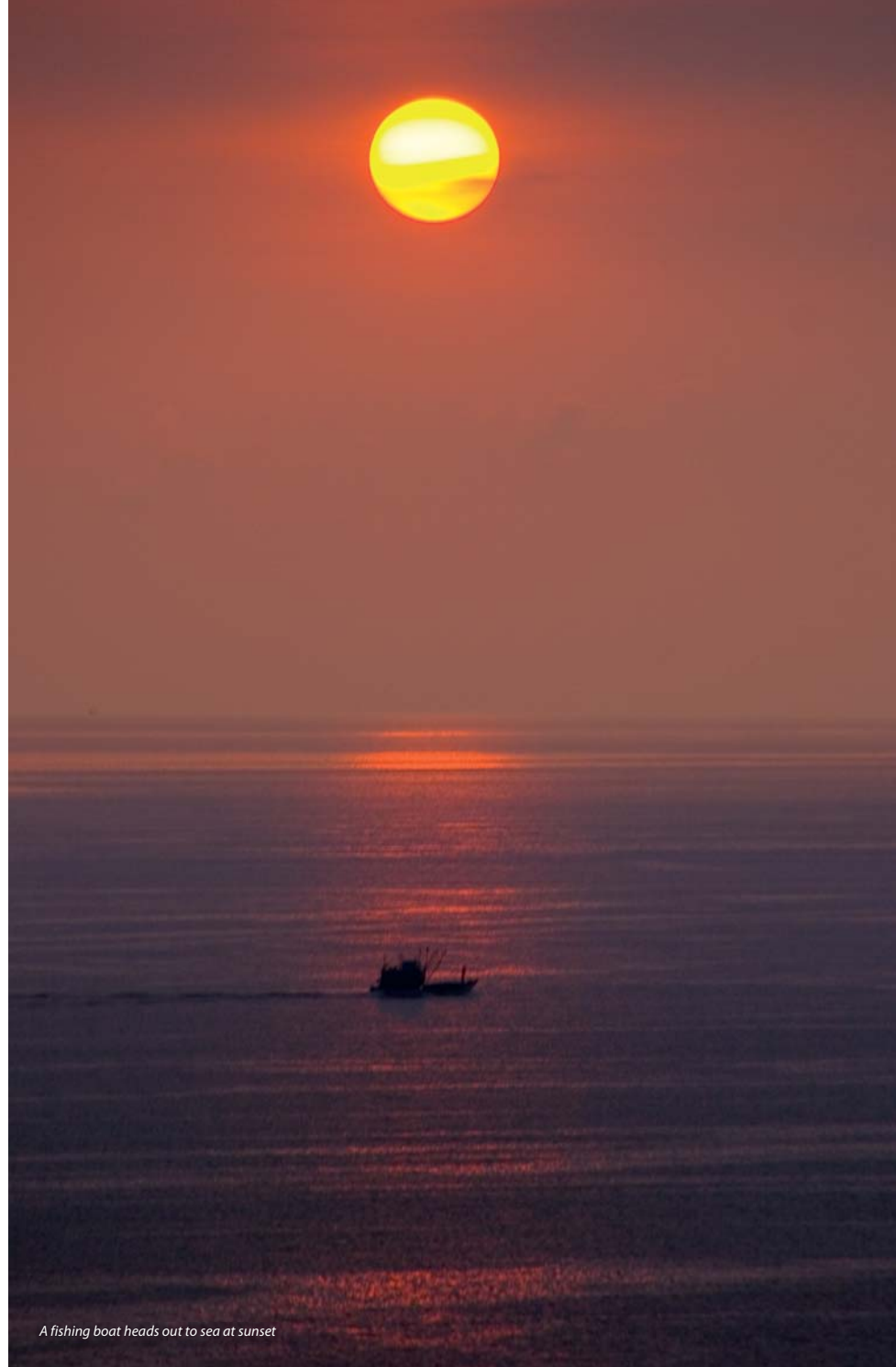
Location: Between Ko Samae San & Ko Chuang
Depth: 50-85ft (16-26m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



The *Hardeep* is a better wreck for those wanting to see a WWII victim. This Indonesian freighter was sunk in 1942 (some accounts say 1943) by Allied bombs. Only about 200ft long, she sits on her port side on a sandy sea floor in depths ranging from 50ft to 85ft, and can be covered in one dive. Encrusted with sponges of brilliant orange and bright yellow tubastrea corals, she has been a fish magnet for decades. The ship is also decked out with large gorgonian sea fans, barrel sponges and wire corals, and resident schooling fusiliers, snappers and longnose barracuda. Blue-spotted stingrays like the sandy areas around the ship.

Divers normally follow the descent line down, as visibility can be low and the wreck is small. Thus, currents can easily push those free descending off the wreck. One line goes down by the forward hold while the other is aft near the stern. It is wise to note where the line is and use it on the way back up as well. There are open hold areas and the bridge that can be entered. But some of the deeper parts of the ship are starting to deteriorate and are not really safe for mass swim-throughs with a group of divers.

One can find more ship parts, including the mast and funnel, in the sandy area around *Hardeep*. There are also two large bombs close by.



A fishing boat heads out to sea at sunset

Travel Facts

A guide snaps a holiday shot



GETTING THERE

Many international airlines service Thailand on a daily basis. There are plenty of bargain-basement flights to take advantage of for domestic flights in Thailand, and also for onward travel. Bear in mind that flights in and out of Thailand are often overbooked, so confirm and reconfirm.

A host of international carriers land at Don Muang, Bangkok's major airport terminal. Flights in and out of Thailand can be overbooked, so it's imperative to reconfirm ongoing flights as soon as you arrive. This can be done at the airport. A good option is to bypass the Bangkok madness and fly directly into Phuket. Keep in mind that when leaving the small Phuket airport, things can bog down – even getting in the door past a checkpoint can cause a major bottleneck. Get there early to save the bother. It's a nice enough airport inside and has some good food stands.

Divers, especially those with diving photography gear, will be well-catered for on flights originating in the US, as baggage restrictions allow for a reasonable amount of gear and equipment. Usually two 50-pound bags are

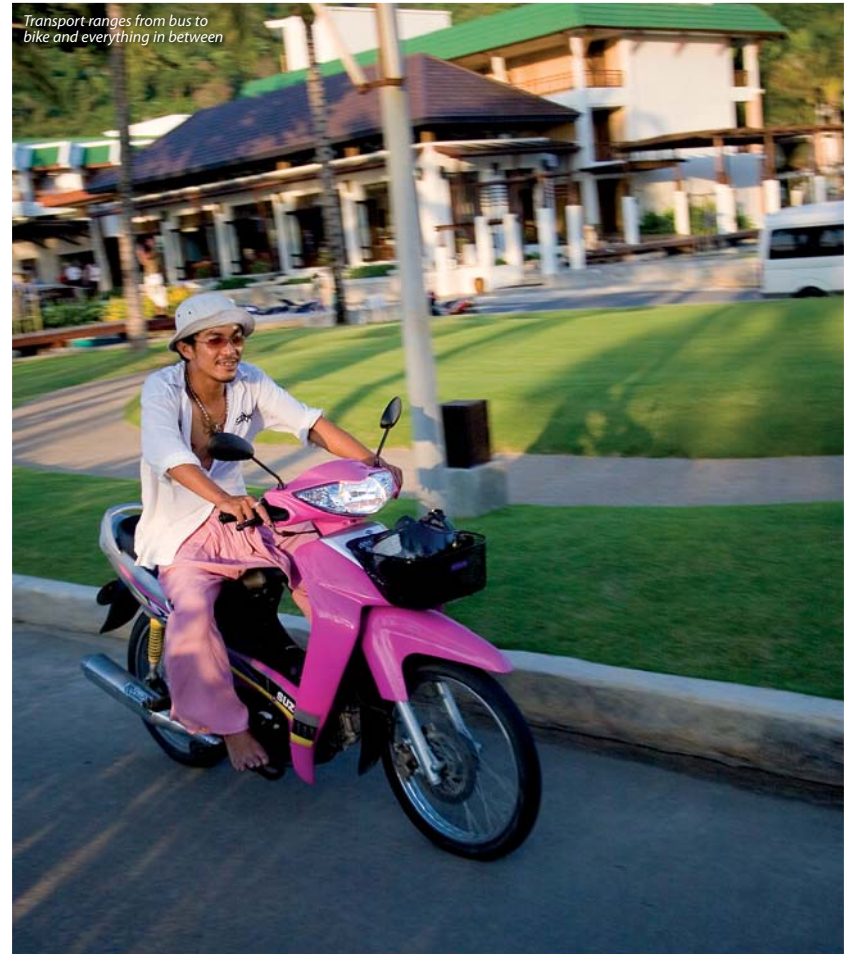
allowed for check-in, plus a carry on and a computer. Some divers now carry their housings.

If you're flying in from Asia or Australia, prepare to pay through the nose or not bring anything of substance. The baggage allowance is only 20kg, with maybe an extra 10kg if you're lucky. (Strangely, only golfers can bring extra baggage without charge.) Extra baggage fees can often add up to more than the ticket. Also, be aware that if you travel through Hong Kong you may be confronted with haggling over a carry-on bag being a centimeter too long in as you enter customs and security. Most airlines will only cover up to US\$2500 (usually less), which may just cover a single camera, so explain the circumstance and insist on taking a bag with your digital gear and computer on board. Make as many advance preparations for this as possible and work with the airlines.

There are plenty of land entry points into Thailand from Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia.

There is a Bt500 departure tax for all international departures. Transit passengers (those in the country for less than 12 hours) and children under two years of age are exempt.

Transport ranges from bus to bike and everything in between



GETTING AROUND

An intricate network of good roads makes it easy to get around Thailand.

Depending on the arrangements you have made with your hotel or dive shop, you will be picked up at the airport or need to grab a cab. Dive shops and live aboards provide pick up and drop off services before and after your trip. Day trip divers will be picked up at the hotel, taken to a pier to meet the ship, and met on the ship's return.

So the only thing needed is interim transport, of which there is plenty. Local taxis, tuk-tuks and motorbikes can ferry you about. If you like to live dangerously, you can also rent a motorbike and cheat death.

Flights within Thailand are usually cheap and plentiful from Thai Air and Bangkok Air. Ferries run daily to places like Ko Samui and Ko Tao. Tickets are available at travel agents and even convenience stores with travel and activities counters.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Visitors from 39 different countries can stay for 30 days without a visa. Check with a Thai embassy or consulate to check the requirements relating to your nationality if you plan on arriving without a visa, or visit www.mfa.go.th/web/12.php.

Your passport must be valid for six months beyond your intended length of stay. This is required by all except: holders of a Hong Kong certificate of identity bearing a Thai visa issued in Hong Kong, and holders of a Singapore certificate of identity issued in Singapore with a visa.

Get a haircut. Entry may be refused to people with long, untidy-looking hair who are dressed in a manner considered by the authorities to be 'like a hippie' or offensive.

CUSTOMS

Like most countries, Thailand prohibits the importation of illegal drugs, firearms and ammunition (unless registered in advance with the Police Department), and pornographic media. Electronic goods, such as personal stereos, calculators and computers, can be a problem if the customs officials have reason to believe you're bringing them in for resale. As long as you don't carry more than one of each, you should be OK.



Thai Air

Diving photographers can ease this transition by carrying an equipment list and giving a copy to customs just in case they ask about the purpose of your gear. They are fairly used to seeing divers come in here.

A reasonable amount of clothing for personal use, toiletries and professional instruments are allowed in duty free, as are one still or one movie/video camera, with five rolls of still film or three rolls of movie film or videotape. This is the law, but in reality they don't pay much attention to it.

Up to 200 cigarettes, or other smoking materials to a total of up to 250g, can be brought into the country without paying duty. One liter of wine or spirits is allowed in duty-free.

It is officially illegal to insult the Royal Family. So no King or Queen jokes while standing in the customs line, or anywhere else for that matter.

Thailand's drug laws are not at all lenient. Don't try it.



Late afternoon at Nai Ham Beach

Shell & Coral Products

Shells and natural artifacts and other items using shells and marine creatures can be found. Gross things like shark jaws (no wonder we see fewer on the reefs), dried balloonfish and dried seahorses (supposedly an aphrodisiac) are all sold in tourist stalls and even nicer hotels gift shops.

If you are offered a wildlife product or natural item for sale, ask questions about the product's origin. If the vendor seems poorly informed, think twice about purchasing the item. Chances are extremely good it wasn't raised on a fish farm. Your purchase could encourage continued illegal trade in wildlife, and be confiscated either before you leave Thailand or on your return home.

When in doubt, don't buy and don't take. Leave it. Follow the sustainable motto: If in doubt – leave without.

MONEY

US dollars are the most readily acceptable currency for buying baht, and travelers checks get a better rate than cash. British pounds are the next-best option. Banks or legal money-changers offer the best rates.

Credit cards are becoming increasingly accepted in quality shops, hotels and restaurants. Visa/PLUS is the most useful, followed by MasterCard/Cirrus; American Express cards are not as widely accepted. ATMs that accept Visa, MasterCard and other credit cards are easily found in the larger cities. Also, many exchange booths will give you a cash advance on your credit card.

The baht comes in denominations of 20 (green), 50 (blue), 100 (red), 500 (purple) and 1000 (beige) notes. There are 100 sàtàang in one baht; coins include 25-sàtàang and 50-sàtàang pieces, and one, five and 10 baht.

DEPARTURE TAX

There are no sales taxes in Thailand.

There is a Bt500 departure tax for all international departures. Transit passengers (those in the country for less than 12 hours) and children under two years of age are exempt.

TIME ZONE

Thailand's time zone is GMT +7 hours. During winter months, this means that Bangkok is exactly seven hours ahead of London, 12 hours ahead of New York, 15 hours ahead of Los Angeles, three hours behind Australia and five hours behind New Zealand.

ELECTRICITY

All electricity in Thailand is 220 volts AC, 50Hz. American- and European-style two-pin plugs are in use. Converters are not commonly found. Bring chargers that accept 220V or bring your own current converter. Make sure you have a current converter and not just an adapter plug, or your 110V charger or appliance will fry in seconds.



Ko Tao fruit stand



Name your color in island footwear



Open markets feature fresh produce

WEIGHTS & MEASURES

The system of metric weights and measures is used. There are a lot of European operators, so depths are registered in meters and also feet, and weights normally just in kilos. A lot of sale and rental dive gear is oriented this way. See our quick conversion scale on the back inside cover.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Email outlets and Internet cafes are prevalent all over this backpackers' paradise. Many cafe computers now have SKYPE headsets and even on-line cameras, so you can talk to and see those freezing at home while they can see the palm trees behind you and the beads of sweat rolling down your brow. Many hotels have computer centers, business centers and even wireless weeklong packages.

In Myanmar (formerly Burma), most Internet places can use a few alternate sites to login to Gmail or Hotmail. Change your password before you go, then change it back when you return, because these sites are a bit sketchy. Very occasionally, places can bypass the government servers altogether and you can browse the Internet normally at extremely slow connections.

Most major post offices have special offices or booths for overseas calls. Highly recommended is using Hatari PhoneNet prepaid cards – available at convenience stores – to access an account via a toll-free number. Better hotels have direct-dial (IDD), long-distance telephone services. Hotels add a surcharge to local and long-distance calls.

To make international calls from Thailand, first dial 00 and then the country code, the area code and number. For Directory Assistance, dial ☎ 1133; the operators normally speak English.

POSTAL

Thailand's postal system is very reliable and quite fast, albeit not cheap for air mail to the US or Europe. For post cards, the local post office is just fine. (During the research of this guide, the post office was used to send home dive suits, regulators, books and some extra clothes, all arriving intact in the US in less than 10 days.)

Thailand also has DHL, FedEx and UPS offices, based in Bangkok. Call to find out where the closest satellite office is. Rely on FedEx or DHL if you are sending anything valuable that requires tracking or time-sensitive delivery.

ACCOMMODATION

There are hotels for every budget and desire, but since most divers have equipment and often pricey photo gear, it is best to seek out the more upscale hotels to avoid problems. Each dive operation will generally have a selection of hotels

it deals with to fit your budget. Many dive shops have their own hotels and dive camps that you can stay in as part of a training or dive holiday package.

Most lodgings are generally safe, but it never hurts to use caution when leaving valuables in hotel safes. Take a photo of your valuables or get the hotel to give you a list of what you gave them. If something does go missing, then you have a record. Hotel rooms should be locked at night, and cheap, thin-walled rooms checked for strategic peepholes.

Some beautiful boutique hotels can be found at just about every locale that offers diving.

The level of live aboard comfort normally corresponds directly with the price of the trip. Ask for references and the ship layout in advance. Some ships are quite luxurious and feature superb meals and roomy staterooms with large, en suite bathrooms. Others are somewhat bare bones. Check in advance so you're not expecting one and getting the other.

DINING & FOOD

This is one of the few places in the world where you may find just about every cuisine. There are taco joints on tiny Ko Tao and Japanese restaurants in the heart of old Phuket city. Fine dining is always available, but don't forget to try some banana pancakes from a roadside cart. The whole gamut is here.

Tipping is not customary in Thailand, although Thais are getting used to the idea of it in upmarket hotels and eateries. Ten percent is usually fine if you feel like tipping.

There is a countrywide ban on smoking in restaurants. If a restaurant is part of a bar, expect there to be smoking and non-smoking sections.

Bottled water is sold everywhere and it is highly recommended that visitors use bottled water for drinking and even brushing teeth. If dining in more remote areas, ask if the water for ice in drinks was boiled. It usually is.

SHOPPING

There are many gift shops, souvenir stands and even first-class shopping centers in Pattaya, Bangkok and Phuket. You can shop 'til you drop. Spending options diminish with the scarcity of luxury accommodation and quality restaurants when you get off the beaten track. But even in tiny Ko Tao there are some good little T-shirt shops and CD joints. Thailand is famous for jewelry and gems, batiks and beautiful sarongs, carvings and surf wear.

Divers are pretty well covered in Thailand. There are major dive supply stores with top name brand gear in the major cities and even on Ko Tao. There is a wealth of surf gear (mostly clothing), as well as tailors. This is a real plus for divers. Ever dreamed of having that custom fitted wetsuit? This is your chance to pick one up at a much more reasonable cost than ordering one from

a manufacturer. Get fitted on your first day and you may have it to use halfway through your week. Many Thai divemasters have their suits made and the quality is often excellent. Ask at your dive shop for recommendations.

Credit card scams are on the rise here. Don't let your card details out of your sight and keep, shred or burn any receipts. Also, be wary of strangers who offer to take you to jewelry shops (or any other shop) or even buy you a drink. This is most likely to occur near a tourist site. Just say no and move on.

ACTIVITIES & ATTRACTIONS

There are plenty of things to do in Thailand besides dive, and the country's menu of action and casual sports is rapidly expanding. Diving, snorkeling, rock climbing, trekking, kayaking, Thai cooking classes, plant and agricultural tourism, elephant treks and a host of other activities are all available. Almost every kind of adventure or sightseeing excursion can be arranged through the hotels, dive shops and activities desks in many small stores.

There are also many local festivals and celebrations. Phuket celebrates Songkran, the water festival, on Thai New Year in April, a highlight of which is the splashing of water on anyone close. It's all good-natured, but carry your camera in a plastic bag on those days.

WILDLIFE

Thailand appears to be well-developed, but it still has a nice selection of wild creatures. Most of the better dive sites are within marine national parks. Divers will likely see kites, frigates or sea eagles soaring over high, rocky islands that hold many marine treasures.

If land animals are something you'd like to see, Thailand has more than 100 national parks. For those diving in the Western Gulf, Khao Sok National Park is



Kata Thani sunset



Boutique hotels offer hillside dining in Ko Tao

highly regarded. It has soaring waterfalls, hiking trails, rivers and plenty to see.

Wild elephants, leopards, tigers, Malayan sun bears, banteng, dusky langurs and 180 bird species are all found here. It also holds many botanical gems, including the quite rare *bua phut* (wild lotus), the world's largest flower. Look out for leeches.

SAFETY

Overall, traveling in Thailand is considered generally safe. In Bangkok, unlicensed taxis, recognizable by their black and white license plates, should be avoided. This is most relevant for solo women traveling at night. Look for licensed taxis that have yellow and black license plates. Be aware that the number of drink spiking incidents in Bangkok is on the rise. This can happen with food as well, so be wary of free food offers.

Many travelers suffer heat exhaustion and dehydration during the warmer months, so stay sun smart and keep up the fluids throughout the day.

A lot of holidays are ruined by motorbike wipe-outs. It may seem like fun,



Photographing a sea eagle



Elephant trekking

but know what you're doing and be especially careful on wet roads.

Violence perpetrated by Muslim insurgents in the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Songkhla continues to make the area bordering Malaysia unsafe. Recent attacks have targeted restaurants and shopping areas and tourists have been killed. Travelers should avoid these regions.

TOURIST OFFICE

The Tourism Authority Thailand (☎ +66 2250 5500; www.tourismthailand.org) is located at 1600 New Phetburi Road, Makkasan, Rajatevee, Bangkok 10310, and is open 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri (closed public holidays).



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Listings



SELECTING A DIVE OPERATOR

Thailand has a lot of dive operations to choose from run by a multitude of nationalities including local Thais. Question everything when looking for the dive operation with which you're going to spend your hard-earned holiday time and money. Get satisfactory answers about the operation you are planning to dive with. Ask about safety. Ask about the type of equipment, the type of boat and its maintenance, the divemasters' experience, insurance coverage, the cost of diving, the knowledge of the travel agent you are booking with. Check the Internet as well. Send plenty of emails.

That said, it is comforting to know there are many reputable operators in Thailand. PADI is very strong in this country and ensures its facilities are properly run or they lose their affiliation. Both PADI and SSI has in-country offices and representatives that check things constantly. But Thailand's recent boom into tourism and the popularity of scuba diving means there are also a few shoestring operations where proper

training and equipment maintenance is a secondary concern. For your own safety, peace of mind, value for the dollar and quality of holiday, it pays to be a wise consumer in Thailand and anywhere else in the diving world.

PHUKET

Sea Bees Diving

☎ +66 76 381765
www.sea-bees.com

Andaman Scuba

☎ +66 76 398331
www.andamanscuba.com

Dive Asia

☎ +66 76 330598
www.diveasia.com

Scuba Cat Diving

☎ +66 76 293120
www.scubacat.com

Aqua Master Co Ltd

☎ +66 76 286190
info@aquamaster.net

Pro-Tech Dive College

☎ +66 76 286112
www.protechdivers.com

Dive Community

☎ +66 04838 7051
www.dive-community.com

West Coast Divers

☎ +66 76 341673
info@westcoastdivers.com

Crocodive Co. Ltd

☎ +66 0874 190 357
fogarasii@ibcnet.hu

Ocean Lovers

☎ +66 76 286471
info@phuket-diving.com

Colona Group Co.,Ltd

☎ +66 76 283445
info@diving-phuket.com

Racha Seamaster Divers

☎ +66 76 280811
www.rachaseamaster.com

Sea World Dive Team

☎ +66 76 341595
www.seaworld-phuket.com

Santana Diving

☎ +66 76 294220
www.santanaphuket.com

Phuket William Diving Co, Ltd

☎ +66 76 345338
phuketwilliam@hotmail.com

South East Asia Liveboards Co, Ltd

☎ +66 76 340406
www.seal-asia.com

ART Scuba Divers

☎ +66 81 7881065
artdivers@gmail.com

Aqua Divers Mai Khao

☎ +66 (0) 1 956 1101
www.aquadivers.com

Blue Dolphin's

☎ +66 (0) 959 10420
www.bluedolphin-phuket.com

All 4 Diving

☎ +66 76-344611
www.all4diving.com

Andaman Divers Co, Ltd

☎ +66 76 341126
andadive@phuket.ksc.co.th

Aqualand Co, Ltd.

☎ +66 76 294094
aqualand@loxinfo.co.th

Aquamarine Divers Co. Ltd

☎ +66 76 355367
admin@philkade.com

Blue Marine Services

☎ +66 76 284282
bluem@loxinfo.co.th

Blueone Divers

☎ +66 76 381404
blueonedivers@hotmail.com

Calypso Divers Co, Ltd

☎ +66 76 330869
www.calypsophuket.com

Coral Grand Divers

☎ +66 76 383699
www.similandivers.com

D.K.B Scuba

☎ +66 076 283360
iceprincejoy@yahoo.co.kr

Devilsdivers

☎ +66 1 891 3702
jimmy1203@hanmail.net

Dive Chalong Sea Sport

☎ +66 76 280533
www.chalongseasport.com

Dive Supply Co. Ltd

☎ +66 76 3834146
www.divesupply.com

Dive The World Phuket

☎ +66 76 344736
www.@dive-the-world.com

Eden Divers

☎ +66 76 290474
www.edendivers.com

Fantasea Divers - Ocean Rover Cruises

Myanmar Live Aboard Cruises
☎ +66 76 281388
www.ocean-rover.com

H2O Sportz Co, Ltd

☎ +66 76 270379
www.diveh2osportz.com

Hippo Divers

☎ +66 1 8940853
hippodivers@hotmail.com

Kata Diving Service

☎ +66 76 330392
info@katadiving.net

Leisure Dive Center Co. Ltd

☎ +66 76 236268
mamphiphi@hotmail.com

Marina Divers

☎ +66 76 330272
marinath@phuket.ksc.co.th

Marine Project

☎ +66 76 294023
dive@marineproject.jp

Marine Quest Divers Co. Ltd

☎ +66 76 292124
www.marinequestphuket.com

Moby Dick Co. Ltd

☎ +66 76 393 364
lisa@liveaboard.com

Nautica Divers

☎ +66 1 9561101, 76 328023
www.nauticadivers.com

Oceanic Divecenter

☎ +66 76 333043
www.oceanicdivecenter.com

Ocean Lovers

☎ 66 (0) 76 286471
www.phuket-diving.com

Paradise Diving Asia Co. Ltd

☎ +66 76 328278
www.dive-paradise.com

Phuket Divers Co. Ltd

☎ +66 76 215738
info@phuketdivers.com

Phuket Pro Dive & Sail Co. Ltd

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Phuket Scuba Club

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Raya Divers Co. Ltd

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rachada@naver.com

Sea Fun Divers Co Ltd

Kata Thani & Kata Noi
☎ +66 76 281299
www.seafundivers.com

Seafarer Divers Co. Ltd

☎ +66 76 280644
www.seafarer-divers.com

South Siam Divers

☎ +66 76 286016-17
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Scuba Tec

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