

ANDAMAN DAY TRIPPER DAZZLERS

1

PAUL LEES ©2012

OVER THE YEARS, THE ANDAMAN SEA OFF THE WESTERN COASTLINE OF THAILAND HAS ESTABLISHED ITSELF AS A POPULAR DESTINATION FOR LIVEBOARD EXCURSIONS. BUT THERE'S ALSO PLENTY FOR DIVERS TO SEE ON THE DOORSTEP AT A NUMBER OF THE BEACH AND ISLAND DESTINATIONS THEMSELVES.

Dive trips depart daily to virtually all the nearby local sites, plus a handful of favourites further away which were previously only visited as part of a multi-day live-board excursion. However, nowadays with better and faster boats all the sites are at most, around ninety minutes away from those glorious beaches!

Although it can be possible to dive all year-round, the best diving conditions fall more predictably between late October and early May; hot and sunny skies, light winds and calm seas with an average temperature of 28°C. Diving during the other months of the year is scheduled, but common sense dictates that it be restricted to a number of the more nearer sites. During this time, expect schedules to be based on an 'on demand' basis and also best to add 'weather permitting' into the equation!

Divers are transferred to the dive sites onboard specifically built dive boats or



2



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4

1 Allied cowrie on soft corals at Koh Bida Nok, a favourite Phi Phi site. Image © Paul Lees

2 Tigertail seahorse in the Similans. Image © Paul Lees

3 Plenty of room for all on the dive deck. Image Courtesy Sea Bees Diving

4 A curious blenny on the wall at Ao Nui. Image © Paul Lees

- 5 A small seawhip goby on its namesake
Image © Paul Lees
- 6 The salon on MV Stingray
Image Courtesy Sea Bees Diving
- 7 Post dive refreshment in a Sea Bees cocktail
salon. Image Courtesy Sea Bees Diving
- 8 Gorgonian seafan in the Shark Point Marine
Sanctuary. Image © Paul Lees

RACHA NOI, RACHA YAI, ANEMONE REEF, KING CRUISER ARE TYPICAL DAY DIVES EX PHUKET. AND THEN THERE'S HIN DAENG AND HIN MUANG AS A TWO-DAY OPTION. POPULAR PHI-PHI ISLAND DIVES ARE AO NUI, (NUI BAY), BIDA NOK AND BIDA NAI, AND PHI PHI SHARK POINT.



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6

ones that have been converted for the purpose. All have shaded and sundecks with plenty of space to gear up and listen to the dive briefings and relax in between. Other onboard facilities that come as standard include toilets and shower. Some of the better boats also provide fresh water tanks for rinsing photographic equipment after a dive and dive gear while returning to port.

A buffet style lunch is served onboard between dives during a break which is long enough to fill out logbooks, get the dive planning done, as well as checking out photos while relaxing with a complimentary hot drink or chilled drinking water. Soft drinks are also available and are either included in the price of the trip or come as an added cost – best to check to avoid any nasty surprises!

The way the trips themselves are coordinated, along with the overall layout of the boats has been designed to suit all levels of divers including student divers and complete beginners. There's no need to fight for space before, during and after kitting up in order to acclimatise to the new surroundings! As many of the dive sites are near to each other it's not necessary for everyone to jump in at the same site at the same time, plus some won't be suitable for first-time divers or those having not dived for a while anyway!

Groups, each with their own dive leader or instructor, could very well be distributed to visit neighbouring sites which will be based on experience and abilities. The experienced divers or those not requiring any 'hand holding' will be treated as such, as there's nothing worse than being pushed into a group outside your comfort zone if it can be avoided. All in all very adaptable!

The local diving off Phuket visits specific sites on certain days of the week, allowing divers to plan their own timetables, schedules also differ between dive centres which helps to minimise the number of divers at the same site at the same time. The trips themselves ordinarily last a full day and comprise of two dives, however three are also available on specific trips. Guests are picked up and returned to their accommodation as part of the deal - a similar scenario takes place in the coastal resorts of Khao Lak, just up the road from Phuket International Airport and Pak Meng Beach to the south of Krabi. Details on local dive sites frequented from Phuket and Khao Lak appeared in the feature *The Big Dive Buzz* in the April/May 2012 issue of *Sport Diving* magazine.



7

The waters around Phi Phi generally experience a favourable visibility with, if any, mild currents and as all the local sites are only a few minutes away, they are visited twice daily. The first trip departs after breakfast and returns in time for lunch. The second departs at around 2pm. Not only is this a very comfortable routine, it also allows for the really avid divers to join both trips if they so wish. All trips offer two dives in different locations.

There are numerous sites around the islands, although three stand out from the crowd. The seascape found at Nui Bay can be divided into a couple of sections. The shallow waters off the eastern face are also ideal for snorkellers where there are colourful reef fish above sponge encrusted boulders and rocks, punctuated by Christmas tree worms and branches of soft corals. The western side of the site is more sheer, with sections of wall descending in places to depths in excess of 30m. The area hosts a wealth of marine life, including Giant moray eels, Indian lionfish and pairs of angelfishes. It's also well worth peering amongst the rocks as you could be rewarded with sightings of Harlequin ghost pipefish and seahorses.

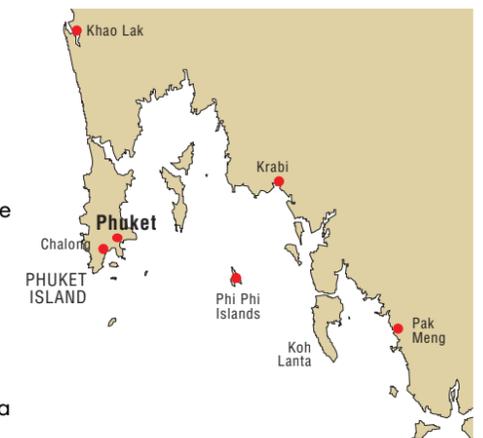
The two large rocky karsts of Koh Bida Nai (Inner) and Nok (outer) feature many Gorgonian seafans, sea whips and colourful soft corals, and at all depths! Bearded scorpionfish merge with the rocky background whilst lionfish hover above, both employing their own technique of hunting prey. Leopard



8

sharks share the sandy bottom with a variety of blennies and gobies! Mantas and whale sharks are also frequently spotted in the shallower waters here, particularly during late April and early May when they are drawn in to feed on plankton blooms which are present in the then more warmer waters.

Setting a fine example in all the above destinations are Sea Bees Diving, with their particular attention to fine detail. Their efficiently designed boats are very airy and include such extra niceties' as a fully stocked cocktail salon and bar, reference library and plenty of space for photographers. Another nice touch is that all passengers are welcomed onboard





9 Just one of the Sea Bees daytrip boats MV Aragon
Image Courtesy Sea Bees Diving
10 All the day trip boats have a shower in one form or another, Image Courtesy Sea Bees Diving

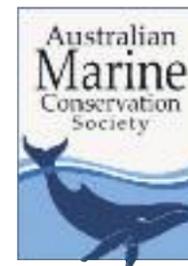
with a lavish breakfast spread, comprising of a choice of fruits, yoghurts, cereals, breads and pastries and fry-up favourites. All round comfort before the days diving!

The onboard lunch menu is also a very tasty affair; expect a variety of local favourites accompanied by rice or noodles. There's also a salad bar and vegetarian selection. Those with religious or special dietary needs are also catered for, as are those with any allergies – however, it's highly recommended to notify the dive centre of any special

requirements in advance to avoid any unnecessary hunger!

At the end of the day, it has to be said that the Andaman Sea draws in numerous divers every year, lured in by its underwater splendours and economical diving services in which to enjoy them. And, they keep coming back year after year for more, so Sea Bees Diving must be doing something right!

Northern Territory Marine campaign has 'bight'



GOOD NEWS! THE NORTHERN TERRITORY'S SEAFLOOR IS SAFE FOR NOW. Recently we told you of a new and worrying threat to the Northern Territory's



The waters surrounding Maria Island and along the Limmen Bight coastline in the far background, are to be protected in the a new 88,000ha marine park. Image by David Hancock.

marine environment from seabed mining companies targeting manganese beneath the waves.

The good news is that following a short but effective coordinated campaign by environment groups, Aboriginal Traditional Owners

and recreational fishing organisations, the Northern Territory Government has announced an Australian first – a moratorium on all seabed mining.

The moratorium will put a halt on all seabed mining activities in Territory coastal waters until 2015, pending the outcome of a comprehensive assessment by the Environmental Protection Authority and Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority.

While this is an important first step towards safeguarding our Northern sealife and the habitats they depend upon, we now call on the NT government to make the ban permanent. We need laws that forever rule out this damaging and dangerous activity.



The challenge for conservationists will be to ensure that critical feeding and breeding areas in these Gulf of Carpentaria waters will be protected in marine sanctuaries.

EVEN BETTER NEWS!
A NEW 88,000 HA MARINE PARK IN LIMMEN BIGHT.

While the seabed mining ban is a great start, even better news is the announcement by the NT government that they have set wheels in motion to declare the Territory's second marine reserve; an 88,000ha marine park to safeguard the rich shallow waters of Limmen Bight in the south west corner of the Gulf of Carpentaria.



Map of the proposed outer boundaries of the marine reserve and the adjoining Limmen Bight National Park.

Limmen Bight's extensive seagrass meadows are home to an internationally significant population of dugongs. They provide a nursery for young prawns and habitat for rare seahorses and pipefish. Limmen's waters are also a haven for fish, with more than one hundred different species recorded, including the threatened freshwater sawfish.

The park, (the first in the NT in nearly 30 years), extends along the Limmen coast and encircles Maria Island. The Marra Aboriginal Traditional Owners of these waters will be involved in jointly managing the park, if that is their wish, as they have a unique role to play in caring for sea country.

Described by the government as 'fishing friendly', the challenge for conservationists will be to ensure that critical feeding and breeding areas in the proposed reserve are effectively safeguarded in marine sanctuaries.

Nonetheless the new park represents a significant breakthrough in the Northern Territory marine campaign, however more marine parks are needed if the NT is to establish its long promised world-class network of marine protected areas.

This encouraging announcement also paves the way for the Federal Environment Minister Tony Burke to lift his ambition for marine conservation in the Commonwealth waters across Northern Australia.

www.marineconservation.org.au

"BECAUSE DIVERS MAKE THE WORLD OF DIFFERENCE!"

HOWEVER YOU LOOK AT IT...IT'S FREE TO YOU!