

# Pearls of the Andaman



Long-time Thailand resident Paul Lees presents a comprehensive overview of the topside and underwater attractions of the Andaman Sea

Photographs by **PAUL LEES**



**T**he Andaman Sea to the west of southern Thailand has much to offer the visiting diver and snorkeler. There's a vast range of exhilarating sites in many shapes and forms providing worthy distractions for avid recreational and technical divers, snorkelers and wannabes alike; the variety is phenomenal, with a host of fringing reefs, drop-offs, wrecks, caves, pinnacles and ocean seamounts to choose from - and all in warm waters averaging 28°C. Spectacular hard and soft corals abound, as does the diversity of marine life - from the minute to the massive - and there is plenty for all, regardless of qualification level or experience!

Over the last two decades, numerous beach and island destinations have firmly established themselves on the international diving map, including those now favoured by families - associated amenities and services have been introduced and increased to cater for the steady increase in demand; and why not, there's loads more to do and see above the surface. Furthermore, a number of the larger dive operators dotted around the Andaman Sea destinations have sensibly extended their range of customer services to cover logistics for the convenience of their guests' stay, including assistance with any accommodation required en-route, which opens up opportunities of experiencing what's on offer elsewhere and soak up a bit more of what Thailand has to offer. After all, it's a long way to come just to go diving, and better still they are all just a short journey away - that's one of the unique attractions to the country, you don't need to spend all that hard-earned cash and valuable holiday time travelling around!

Even though a handful of the larger of the southern diving destinations come complete with their very own international airport, the capital of Bangkok to the north can serve as a jumping-off



**Harlequin shrimp are a macro favourite**

point to all of Thailand's dive destinations and is a great starting point to anyone's holiday. For those stopping off for a day or two before (or even after) heading south, the rewards are many. A number of attractions and excursions await to wile away the hours; apart from traipsing around an endless regiment of shops, early mornings can be spent exploring the Floating Market, followed by brunch at one of the city's leading hotels. For the 'not so early' risers, a visit to the Grand Palace or one of



**The soft corals are often in pristine condition**



**Collared butterflyfish**



**Shoal of jacks**

the many temples, such as Wat Arun, punctuating the banks of the Chao Phraya, or maybe a river cruise to explore the series of twisting canals off the main flow.

It's the islands and beaches of southern Thailand that really appeal to tourists, with the best time to visit being between October and May, and whether you're looking for solitude or sophisticated nightlife, relaxation or adventure, there's plenty of locations at your beck and call.

The Andaman coastline, which extends from Myanmar in the north down to beyond the Malaysian border, has around 155 islands crowned by lush primary vegetation, tumbling down in parts to meet picture-postcard sandy beaches. The largest and best-known of the holiday island destinations is Phuket. The island has





Manta ray

“The Similans can certainly lay claim to being one of the Asia Pacific’s top dive destinations”



The SeeBees fleet hit all the major dive sites

The whip corals are home to an array of shrimps and crabs



its own international airport which can be directly accessed from a number of neighbouring countries, plus some in Europe. The western coastline is punctuated with beach resorts, each one being different from the next, both in style and character. Accommodation is literally everywhere, with something to suit all budgets and comfort levels.

The island’s diving facilities are comprehensive, with most being found on the main beaches, and range from small independently owned dive centres through large retail outlets and fully equipped dive resorts complete with state-of-the-art facilities.

The diving is divided into two categories, firstly multi-day liveboard excursions to the Similans and beyond, plus day trips to the local dive sites

and those around Phi Phi, with the latter option mostly comprising of two dives as they are two-to-three hours away.

The visibility is generally reasonable and perfectly adequate for enjoying the high representation and diversity of marine life. Shark Point consists of a series of hard and soft coral-covered pinnacles configured north to south. Leopard sharks rest here and many a diver has had the wonderful experience of observing at close hand this harmless bottom feeder. The site has many cleaning stations that are hosted by a multitude of cleaning fish and shrimps. Regular customers include a variety of snapper, jacks, trevally, mackerel and the occasional barracuda. The shallowest part of Anemone Reef is a mere 7m below the surface and is somewhat





The above-water scenery is equally as stunning

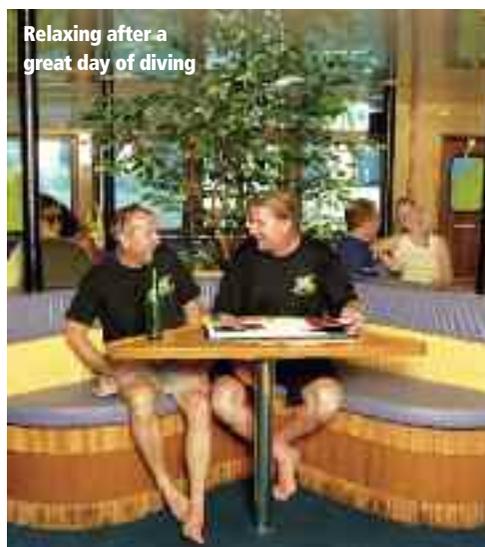


Pool training

Sunset over the Similan Islands



Relaxing after a great day of diving



blanketed by sea anemones hosted by numerous species of clownfish, anemone crabs and cleaner shrimps, only visible by their translucent internal organs. Soft corals provide the backdrop for prides of Indian lionfish, wrasse, parrotfish and fusiliers. The artificial reef of the King Cruiser car ferry wreck acts as a haven for schools of juvenile reef fish, which hover around the barnacle-encrusted frame. Although daylight penetrates the majority of the wreck, there are still a number of areas that have collapsed and should not be entered. The east wall of Koh Dok Mai features healthy seafans, barrel and encrusting sponges and sea whips. The marine life mainly consists of reasonably sized morays, black-banded sea kraits, honeycomb grouper and angelfish. The deeper waters around

Koh Racha Noi island offer good diving for the more-experienced divers and, alternately, the shallows lapping Koh Racha Yai are ideal for novices and those wishing to get acclimatised. Towards and away from the northern end of the Thai coastline, a series of granitic outcrops lie in deep, clear water with reefs descending to 25-30m and beyond in depth. These are the Marine National Parks of the Similan and Surin Islands, which includes the fabulous whaleshark magnet of Richelieu Rock, whose breathtaking underwater scenery and great diversity of marine life have gained them a considerable reputation in the diving community. Given their proximity to Phuket and Khao Lak, it's not surprising that these two island groups are among the country's most-popular destinations for day trips and liveaboard excursions.

The Similans can certainly lay claim to being one of the Asia Pacific's top dive destinations. The dramatic underwater terrain is highlighted by thriving reefs and abundant soft corals, and the tremendous diversity of marine life includes many larger visitors such as barracuda, giant trevally, rainbow runners and reef sharks. There's also a selection of rays, including eagle, marbled and manta. In general, the east-facing gently sloping reefs and drop-offs feature impressive gardens of sea anemones, flourishing hard and soft corals, and teeming fish populations - suitable for any level of diver, with many doubling up as being ideal for snorkelling. In contrast the archipelago's western sites are quite the opposite. Here giant boulders tumble down to the seabed in depths of 40m or more, with archways and caverns providing exciting swim-throughs, with the passing currents providing nutrients for a rich variety of hard and soft corals.

Khao Lak's casuarinas palm-fringed



**“ Leopard sharks rest here and many a diver has had the wonderful experience of observing at close hand this harmless bottom feeder ”**

# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...

## Thailand



### How to get there

There are numerous flights into Bangkok from the UK, and you can then get an internal flight down to Phuket or one of the other International Airports in the vicinity. Alternatively, there are some flights from mainland Europe that fly direct into Phuket.

### When to go

You can dive in Thailand all year round, but the best time to visit is from October to May.

“ There’s also a selection of rays, including eagle, marbled and manta ”

### Entry requirements

A valid passport with six months left to expiry, and a return ticket back home.

### Currency

Thai baht (£1 = 48 baht).

### Where to eat and meet

Wherever you stay in Thailand, you will find a rich selection of bars in which to sip an après-dive beverage, and when it comes to restaurants you will find every variation you could want, from western, Indian and Chinese to Mexican, French and, of course, Thai.

### The local brew

Chang beer - but don't have too many on your final night, otherwise you'll get a 'Chang-over'...



Thailand offers much for all levels of diver, from raw novice to seasoned veteran, but it is also ideal for non-divers and families.



Chilling out on the roof of the dive boat

coastline is in complete contrast to its southern neighbour of Phuket, with its international airport only a 45-minute drive away. Although rich with accommodation and resort facilities, they are not 'right in your face'. They are all there but discreetly, the whole area has managed to keep its distance from high-rise construction and full-on night life! Behind the glorious beaches are palm and rubber plantations, which continue to meet green foothills and mountainous terrain divided by cascading waterfalls.

Aside from offering liveboard and day-trip diving to the Similans, Surin and Richelieu Rock, Khao Lak has a couple of wrecks of tin-mining boats just off the coast and both can be a real treat to dive. All manner of marine life can be encountered, from tiny and endemic nudibranchs up to, on the odd occasion, whalesharks.

To the south of Phuket, the islands of Koh Phi Phi are easily accessed from Phuket or Krabi International Airports. The island's palm-fringed beaches make an extremely popular dive base. Services on the island are good, with plenty of restaurants, accommodations and necessary tourist amenities, all within a short walk apart, to serve its many visitors. The local waters experience great visibility complemented with a rich variety of corals and marine life; shallow fringing and patch reefs are an added attraction for snorkellers. Phuket's dive sites are also visited daily and those to the south of Koh Lanta are also offered.

To the east, and back on the mainland, the beaches around Krabi have also planted their place on the tourist map and, again, it's not as established as Phuket, although it does have its own International Airport and a tremendous selection of tourist-related amenities all geared up to welcome its visitors, from independent travellers to families. The area features some of the most-stunning landscapes, and the beaches are

some of the most-sought-after in not only Thailand, but the world. These landscapes do not just appeal aesthetically; the backdrop of limestone karsts are a prime venue for adventurous rock climbers. Krabi's waters are an excellent place for novice divers and also diver training, as they are relatively shallow but do feature a rich diversity of marine life. Local diving concentrates on the fringing reefs around the rocky outcrops in Ao Nang Bay, all of which are accessible in well under an hour. Phuket and Phi Phi's local sites are also scheduled daily.

The most-southerly established dive sites in the country are found in the Mu Koh Lanta Marine National Park, to the south of Koh Lanta. They feature pristine corals and spectacular fringing reefs in potentially excellent visibility. Here are some of the finest dive sites in the country, such as Hin Mouang, which features the deepest drop-off in Thailand, with depths in excess of 70m, and Hin Daeng, one of the few remaining dive sites where both manta rays and whalesharks are regularly encountered, as are a wealth of macro opportunities. Other sites include the Koh Ha Yai group, with its variety of walls, fringing reefs, and a couple of caves to explore, all of which are all easily accessed as day trip excursions from the dive centres on Koh Lanta Yai, or the Amari Resort in Pak Meng on the mainland. ■

### Tour operators

Aquatours	<a href="http://www.aquatours.com">www.aquatours.com</a>
Dive Worldwide	<a href="http://www.diveworldwide.com">www.diveworldwide.com</a>
Divequest	<a href="http://www.divequest.co.uk">www.divequest.co.uk</a>
Equator Diving	<a href="http://www.equatordiving.com">www.equatordiving.com</a>
Oonasdivers	<a href="http://www.oonasdivers.com">www.oonasdivers.com</a>
Regaldive	<a href="http://www.regaldive.co.uk">www.regaldive.co.uk</a>
Scuba Travel	<a href="http://www.scuba.co.uk">www.scuba.co.uk</a>
Snooba	<a href="http://www.snooba.com">www.snooba.com</a>