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Adventure

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Diving in Thailand

by: Bill Benson



When most scuba divers research Thailand they usually learn of its certification factory at Koh Tao off Eastern Thailand, but there is a more adventurous side of diving in Thailand, in the West, on the other side. There the Andaman Sea rolls its way from India to the western shores of Thailand but before it reaches those beaches it meets several islands that teem with life. Far offshore islands and swift currents equal pelagics, the ocean going big boys of the sea. Translation, lots of big fish.

The best way to dive the Andaman is by means of a liveaboard dive boat. Sea Dragon Dive Center has three vessels that overnight in the area, bringing divers out of Khao Lak to the Similan and Surin Islands. The M/V Andaman has a thirteen dive, four day trip that is stellar. The boat is comfortable but not posh. If you're there to dive, great. If you want luxury, look elsewhere. The dive masters were excellent and helpful, and the food absolutely delicious (Thai style of course - the best Curry Calamari I've ever had). Our passenger list was diverse for certain. Thais, Japanese, Germans, Austrians, Danes, Poles, Swedes, Brits, Aussies and a Yank (me). And we all got along great. There's something about living on the open sea that brings people together like no other. Then again maybe it was the many post-dive Singha beers.

On the very first splash you'll realize the Andaman Sea is no beginner check dive. The currents that surround the sites can really rock and roll. Sometimes that means a nice easy ride for 55 minutes but half the time there will be some serious fining to get into or out of the proper current direction. It's work, but worth the effort. Those fast currents bring lots of the little stuff, plankton, which attracts the really big stuff, mantas. At the Similan Islands we saw two giant manta rays. At Koh Bon we saw six of the majestic and gothic creatures. One visitor had a wingspan a dozen feet across and a few of the mantas swam around us as if they were even more curious than we were. While exploring the exciting swim-throughs and underwater canyons we also found some huge bumphead wrasse, feisty moray eels and giant schools of Jacks.



The currents also brought one of the wonders of the sea, a bait ball. Tens of thousands of small silverside fish schooled together for protection, taking up an area as far as the 60 feet of visibility would provide. Seeing a tremendous mass of fish explode in a defensive scatter or quickly react left and right as one single organism is a truly remarkable experience. If only there were a few predators around to really bunch them together. Maybe next trip.

Our last dive, Richelieu Rock, was famous for its whale shark sightings but those are few and far between these days. Sharks in general were scarce with the only viewing being a lonely gray swimming off in the distance. We can thank the Chinese demand for shark fin soup for that I'm afraid. We did however find other rare and interesting creatures like a ghost pipe fish, lionfish, frog fish, miniature sea horses, octopi, scorpion fish, a ribbon eel and a boatload of the ever popular clown anemone fish. The abundant and neon colored soft and hard coral wasn't too bad either.



The diving was epic but the surface intervals were almost as wonderful. Between dives you can go ashore the Similan Islands Marine National Park and feel every bit the stereotype of Robinson Crusoe, Tom Hanks Castaway or the passengers from Lost. Some islands are completely uninhabited and surpass any tropical island scene one could imagine. Baby powder beaches, mind bending blues

and lush emerald jungles. On Koh Miang you can climb a dreamlike rock formation to view an even more surreal sunset. Absolute paradise, if only for an hour or two. The last surface stop is a visit to the Surin Islands near Burma to discover a Moken Sea Gypsy village. For centuries these nomads have sailed from island to island as the seasons change in beautiful handcrafted wooden longtail boats. It's an interesting glimpse into a forgotten world.

On arrival back in Khao Lak you realize you have experienced fantastic diving, gorgeous scenery, ancient culture and made a dozen new dive buddies. Then you'll know for certain there is a lot more to Thai diving, on the other side.

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- [Central America](#) (25)
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