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By Keith Lyons – Jan 2, 2018 @ The Travel Magazine

Pictures of the world's most beautiful beaches never show the tourist hordes which now crowd their sandy shores. But what if the dream beach is still out there – and there is no one else around? Keith Lyons goes in search of the perfect stretch of sand on the Mergui Archipelago, and finds more on land and below water.

Sitting on a teakwood chair on the upper deck of the converted cargo boat, photographic location scout David van Driessche knew the ropes. “We are about to sail out of mobile reception range,” the Belgian told his partner back in Bangkok. It was now dawning on me as fast as the sun was setting on the horizon that the one-bar of signal on my phone was about to drop completely. We were off the grid, and almost off the map.



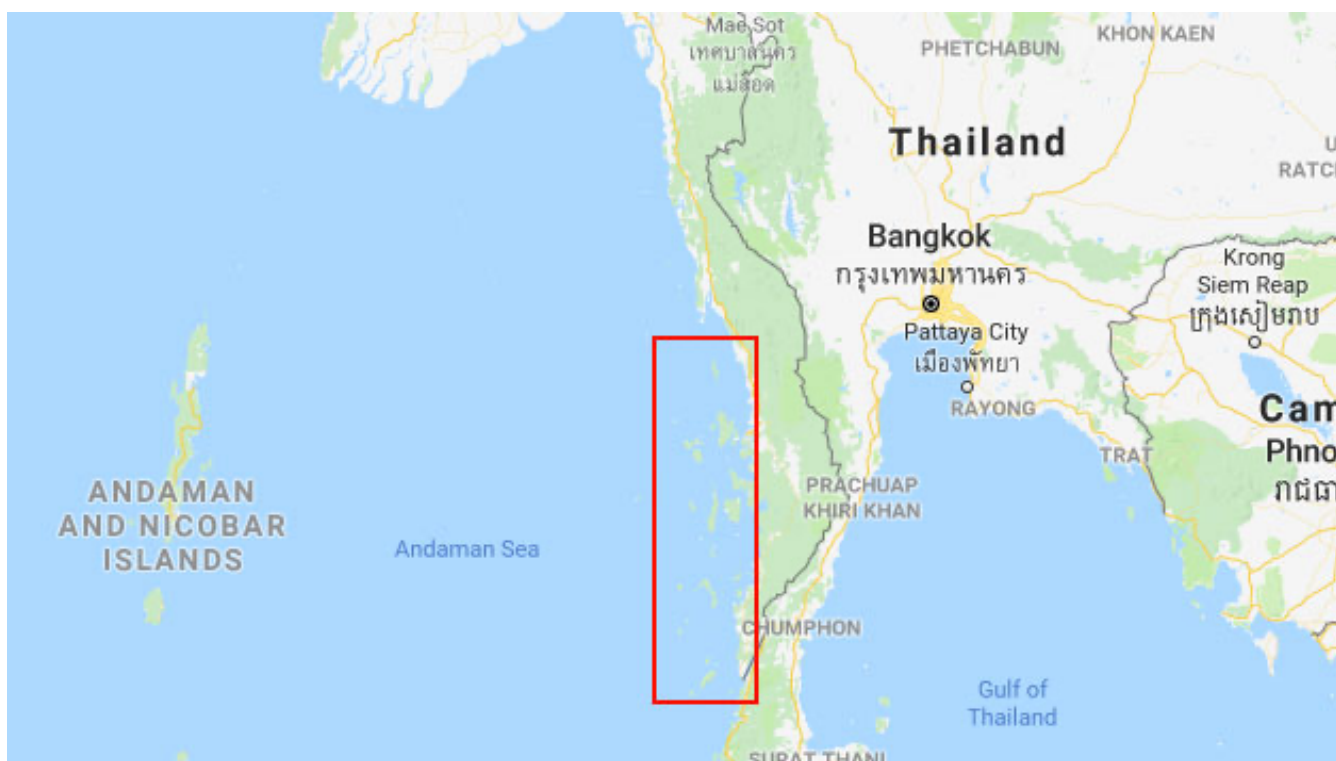
Off the grid and no WiFi

This trip exploring the Mergui Archipelago was into unknown territory for me. Would there be mobile coverage, electricity, wifi, or even air-con? I'd figured not. Yet, as the sunset below a layer of grey rain-leaden clouds and the world turned deep purple, I found some answers.

Below, on the main deck, our sleeping quarters were gazebos with rattan paneling and mahogany trim. After the diesel generator was turned off, nifty LED reading lights and cooling fans powered by the solar panels could be turned on.

We anchored for the evening, and even though we sat less than 10° north of the equator, sea breezes wafted through the partitioned quarters and I was lulled by the gentle rocking of the Andaman Sea. Around the dinner table that night there'd been talk from Bjorn Burchard, head of Moby Dick Tours, that in a few days' time we might get some of the holy grail of 21st travellers: WiFi.

Mergui Archipelago – the least visited place on earth



Before the first rays of sun had illuminated the tops of the jungled Barwell Island and its neighbouring islets, the cheery crew helped me launch a sit-in kayak for a paddle on the calm waters around the 100 foot vessel, newly repainted in cream, green and red. I capped off the dawn jaunt by taking a quick dip in the deep waters, pleasantly-warm.

The Mergui Archipelago is one of the least-visited places on earth, and it is only recently that the region with its 800 or so islands has slowly opened up to visitors, who come searching for some of the best dive spots in Asia with rays and sharks, as well as the diversity of coral reefs which sit off many of the white powdery sand beaches.

Not only is it difficult to access, the area has been prohibitively expensive. A few of the islands' bays are slated for luxury resort development, though only at the outer Boulder Island is there anything which could be regarded as appropriate eco-tourism.

Island Safaris, which runs relatively inexpensive 5 day/4 night island-hopping excursions, promote the "small is better" philosophy, undertaking slow travel which allows more time for beach time, swimming, snorkelling, kayaking, hiking and even night fishing.

Exploring mangrove forests by kayak, or visiting villages where the indigenous Moken 'sea gypsies' reside or trade provide rare glimpses into places and peoples who have been left behind in the rush to modernity.

“I guess I have a sweet tooth for islands,” confesses Burchard to me, who has been in South East Asia since he left Norway when he was 19. During the voyage, he has been pointing out to me various beaches, each worthy candidates for the perfect beach. “That one, it is better than Phuket,” he says pointing to a 5km-long beach. Another, has a band of macaques foraging for crabs.

The next dazzling white sand beach seems idyllic. Burchard looks up from his binoculars and frowns. “Sandflies.” All the beaches we see during our trip have one common denominator: there are no people.

Even when we land by inflatable runabout at Boulder island’s main beach one of my companions turns to me and asks, “Where is the place we are staying? I can’t see anything here.” Tucked behind the coastal fringe vegetation, the Boulder Bay Eco-Resort is striving to have a minimal footprint while serving as an example of sustainable tourism.

Exploring the waters at Moken beach

The resort is supporting the work of marine biologists from Project Manaia to survey and map the coral and fishlife at the islands four beaches. We don masks, snorkels and flippers and venture out offshore at Moken beach to where a trial reef restoration project is using old fishing cages to re-build the reef – already coral is reviving and fish life are visiting the perfect new habitat.

... and Boulder Bay

After another kayaking trip off Boulder Bay, riding the swells and gliding around the iconic balancing boulder which sits within sight of my thatched bungalow, I return to the sea as the light fades at the end of another full day. Floating on my back, I am suspended by the lukewarm saltwater, the night’s stars appear faintly at first, and I wonder to myself if this is really the perfect beach. How would I know? And then a tiny green glow, brighter than any phone screen, dances in an arc above me. A firefly. And then I knew.

Fact file

GET THERE: Many airlines make the 11-hour direct flight from Europe to Bangkok (BKK) each day, with one-stop routes starting at £470 return with Eurowings. From Bangkok’s smaller cross-town Don Mueang Airport (DMK) there are 2 or 3 flights a day south with NokAir and AirAsia from £14 one-way to the Thai hotspring town of Ranong (UNN), located a short drive and boat trip from Kawthaung in Myanmar. Alternatively, you can fly into Phuket and go by taxi or bus 5 hours north to Ranong. Travellers already in Myanmar can fly from Yangon to Kawthaung (around US\$160-170 one way), though flights are less frequent.

VISA: Most passport holders under the Thailand Tourist Visa Exemption programme are granted a visa waiver stamp on international arrival into Thailand, valid for 30 days, though overland crossings such as from Kawthaung to Ranong may only be given 15 days. If the Mergui archipelago is your only foray into Myanmar, a special visa is obtainable on arrival for \$30 and two photos. For further travel in Myanmar, a 28-day tourist visa is required, easily obtainable online for US\$50.

GETTING AROUND AND STAYING: a 5 day/4 night boat trip on the MV Sea Gipsy (islandsafarimergui.com) costs US\$1,110 per person (double occupancy), while a 7 day/6 night trip is US\$1,530 per person. The price includes gazebo bed, meals, non-alcoholic drinks, guiding, and use of kayaking and snorkelling equipment.

At Boulder Island Eco-Resort (boulderasia.com) 3 day/2 night packages start from US\$480 per person (double occupancy) for standard bungalows, while 7 day/6 night packages start at US\$912 per person. Packages include airport/port pick up, boat transfers to Boulder island, meals, equipment and water sport base use.

Boat safaris and resort stays must be booked in advance, in order for the necessary paperwork to be completed. Payment is usually in US dollars. In Kawthaung both Myanmar kyat and Thai baht may be used, and only Euro, US dollar, and Singapore dollar can be changed at banks and money changers.

TIP: *Fresh, new crisp US dollar bills are required for payment of marine park entry fees, which range from US\$30 to US\$120. Bring a camera, sunblock, sunhat, sunglasses, swimming gear, sandals for beaches and walking shoes for the hiking trails.*