

TRAVEL | EXPLORER

# Sailing Among Myanmar's Islands of Mystery

By MIKI MEEK MARCH 14, 2013



Taking a dip off the deck and from a rope at sunrise. Credit Miki Meek for The New York Times

I arrived on a chaotic pier in the border town of Ranong, Thailand, feeling as if I was about to throw up as I watched three-story fishing boats chug by. I had persuaded my two younger brothers and eight girlfriends to fly across the world and pool a large chunk of money so we could charter a live-aboard boat. The plan was to sail for six days through the [Mergui Archipelago](#), a chain of 800 islands off [Myanmar's](#) coast that's become the holy grail of sublime, empty beaches.

It sounded simple enough. But I had major, gut-wrenching anxiety because this trip, which cost us almost \$10,000 in cash and wired funds (not including the cost of the flights there) was so off the grid that it couldn't have been organized by a mainstream outfitter that would have sent a representative there an hour in advance, holding a piece of cardboard aloft with our names on it. I was on a pier waiting for a man I didn't know to take me on a boat to another boat that we would live on.

The feeling that you're winging it is only natural for this sort of journey. While the number of foreign travelers to mainland Myanmar has jumped nearly 30 percent over the last year, this mostly uninhabited region spread out over 250 miles in the Andaman Sea has remained on the fringe because of government restrictions and a lack of detailed travel

information, even in the most recent guidebooks. Only tour boats with special permits and a government minder are allowed in.

After combing through online discussion boards, I chose one company based in Yangon called Moby Dick because its e-mails were thorough and prompt, and I could always reach it on Skype. Still, a constant loop of “What if no one picks us up? What if there isn’t even a boat?” ran in my head until a middle-age Burmese man in a ball cap and blue plaid shorts walked up and shook my hand. He introduced himself as our guide, Thaingar.

We walked to the end of the pier and got into a couple of wooden longboats waiting on the Pakchan River, a natural border between Thailand and Myanmar, that would take us to our live-aboard. As we waited for a mini-traffic jam of goods, families and construction workers commuting between the two countries to clear, a monk stepped into our boat and pulled a cellphone from the folds of his orange robe. He snapped a picture of us, then wrote down his phone number and said to call if we needed anything. I decided to take this as an auspicious omen for what still felt like an unknown trip.

AS WE ENTERED the port of Kawthaung, the southernmost tip of Myanmar and the main jumping-off point to the Mergui Archipelago, the silhouette of our liveaboard, a Burmese-style junk boat, came into view. It was set against a mash-up of wooden houses on stilts, decrepit buildings with names like Honey Bear Hotel and gold stupas peeking out of jagged, green hills. I had been expecting a pretty bare-bones setup, but the boat was actually nice. A hundred feet long, it had a fresh coat of green paint, teak lounge chairs shaded by a white canopy, and cozy, open-air sleeping cabins. Myanmar’s flag, decorated with a white star, waved from the mast.

With our ship in sight, we still had an entry process ahead of us. The archipelago officially opened to tourists in 1997, but the government tightly monitors who travels in because of military operations on a handful of off-limit islands. Tour boat companies must submit the names of passengers to the country’s capital, Naypyidaw, several weeks before departing, and can travel only to approved areas. Still, Thaingar had to collect our passports and take them — along with a \$40 travel visa fee and a \$140 entry fee each — to the immigration office in Kawthaung. When he returned about an hour later, it was with the news that immigration was holding on to five of my friends’ passports until we finished the trip and returned to Kawthaung. On the upside, immigration did not send a minder to join our trip because their office had run out of them that day.

So we proceeded, unaccompanied, heading northwest into the inky blue Andaman Sea. We cracked open and passed around cold, green cans of Myanmar Lager Beer. I squeezed between my brothers, Josh and Jeremy, near the bow where the captain had placed white mums, rice grains and a bowl of ripe fruit, offerings for a safe journey.

We continued for a couple of hours, past rocky outcroppings backlit by the final pink rays of the sun. Once it was dark, the captain, Kyaw Naing, stopped the boat for the night to avoid running into fishing traps, which resembled bamboo fortresses on water. We ate a quick dinner of pork with basil and a brothy soup with chicken on the bone. Plates of crisp, sliced rose apples appeared for dessert. The generator then went off, and we unrolled our blankets for bed, while in the distance, boats hunting squid gave off a white glow. Bright lights lure squid to the surface.

This began a cycle of days and nights that now bleed together in my memory.

Early mornings in the Mergui Archipelago reveal a monochromatic sky and sea, melded into a cerulean blue. We marked the time by the land that we passed. The captain navigated around small islands covered with thick jungle and rimmed with white beaches. Around the 40-mile mark, I saw a newly built jetty for a resort set to open in a year or two that is reportedly owned by U Tay Za, a tycoon that the U.S. Treasury labeled as a crony of the country's former military regime. (For now, the only operating hotel is the 22-room Myanmar Andaman Resort on Macleod Island, a two-hour speedboat ride from Kawthaung.)

We arrived on a huge swath of deserted beach on Nyaung Wee Island as dark clouds started rolling in. Clear blue waters from high tide left patterns of lines that extended for more than a mile, and mist hovered around treetops that looked like giant, green yawning monsters. The only sign that someone had been there before was a plastic Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle my friend Jen found, curiously buried in the sand. I put on snorkel gear and circled around, but gave up when I couldn't find much coral or marine life.

It began to pour, and we took cover under leaves, then ran back into the warm ocean. There cannot be a better way to swim or float on your back than this. It stopped only when lightning started, and we had to make our way back to the boat.

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THE IDYLL ENDED soon enough. The next day, Thaingar had scheduled an early-afternoon stop at Bo Cho Island, a place I felt uneasy about after reading this description in the itinerary: "Observe the daily life of the almost extinct sea-Gypsies." This was a reference to the Moken, a nomadic ethnic group of about 2,000 that has lived on boats in the archipelago for at least 250 years. Expert divers and beachcombers, they roamed around the Andaman Sea subsisting on fish, sea cucumbers, mollusks and sandworms.

But in the late 1990s, the government settled some Moken on Bo Cho Island. A Buddhist monk arrived soon after, built a gold pagoda that houses a live crocodile and started to evangelize. Burmese fishermen moved in, too, resulting in a small village with a sandy path, littered with plastic bottles, running through the middle of it.

I felt foolish standing around the village in a sun hat during the hottest part of the day with no real reason to be there. A boy in a red shirt adorned with an image of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's pro-democracy leader, ran up to each of us and asked in English: "Hello, what is your name? Where do you come from?"

Most of the adults observed us indifferently from small restaurants, boat-repair shops and thatched-roof homes with satellite dishes. But two women eventually motioned for me to come sit with them on their porch. We could not talk with each other, so I shared some of my old family photos from the 1980s that I had stored on my phone. Those caused some laughs. When Thaingar rounded us up an hour later and took us back to the boat, I felt torn about the visit. The zoo-like aspect of it was unsettling, but I also felt that skipping it would have meant taking a stance that basically said, "We love visiting all your beautiful beaches, but we'd rather not see the human impact of your formerly oppressive government's policies."

I later connected with Jacques Ivanoff, an anthropologist who studies the Moken and who is trying to build a museum dedicated to them in Myanmar. He told me he has had to change his views over the years. "Even if I don't really like it, if foreigners come respectfully and aren't asking the Moken to recreate ceremonial traditions, maybe it means that more people will become aware." Still, he fears that Myanmar's Moken will end up with the same

fate that befell a population of Moken the Thai government settled in the Surin Islands. They're now a tourist attraction.

THE REST OF OUR STAY was dominated by the water and beaches that most people travel all this way for. We stopped by a seahorse-shaped island that forms the core of Lampi Island Marine National Park, Myanmar's first and only marine park. It's covered with thick forests of old-growth mangroves and is surrounded by clear, shallow waters. Sandbars give the illusion that you can stand on the surface of the ocean a half-mile out from land.

We snorkeled around the park, and as in a few other spots, I noticed ashy, gray coral and few fish. Thaingar explained it by pointing out a sign posted on the beach that read "No Dynamite Fishing." For years, fishing boats have been dropping explosives into the water as a way to quickly gather large catches. But there's never been a real authority in place to crack down on it, even in the national park. "It's a constant challenge, looking for places where the coral isn't dead," Thaingar told me over dinner. "And then in places where the coral is coming back, we have to ask fishermen to be careful about where they drop anchors." We finally found places where the living coral outnumbered the dead over the next couple of days as we hopped around islands with names like Tar Yar, Shark and Red Monkey. Schools of angelfish swam over black sea urchins and giant clams. Pink sea anemones swayed with the current. The backs of our legs and arms burned from swimming with our heads down for too long. We never ran into other travelers.

That isolation ended one evening when we started heading back south and pulled into Great Swinton Island, a small trading port where we stopped to sleep and pick up fresh water. I took a kayak out with my brother Jeremy and we couldn't help but paddle closer to a massive red fishing boat that looked as if it had just escaped the end of the world. Twenty-five mostly shirtless men hung out on the back. A man with tattoos spread across half his chest then leaned down and handed me a squid. I thanked him, and with nowhere else to put it, dropped it on my lap. We gave the squid to the cook onboard, who hung it up by a tentacle to dry. From his kitchen, I could see a small rubber plantation on Great Swinton, next to an empty patch where trees had been logged. On the other side of the island, a resort may be built, possibly displacing a seasonal fishing village that runs along the beach.

Our journey through this remote region was beginning to not feel so distant. That night, three of us ditched our beds and lay on deck, staring straight up at a half moon and stars that looked like pinholes punched out of the sky. Our soundtrack was a boat nearby, filled with fishermen giving their all to karaoke versions of Burmese pop songs. Small waves rocked us slightly from side to side.

Peace, and sleep, were fleeting.

## **HOW EXTREME**

Rankings are from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very).

## **REMOTENESS**

Reachable by boat from southern Myanmar or Thailand November through April. Monsoon season closes the archipelago the rest of the year.

## **CREATURE DISCOMFORTS**

Sand flies on some beaches; occasional stings from plankton in the water.

## **PHYSICAL DIFFICULTY**

The hardest (but most enjoyable) task was swimming from our boat to beaches every day.

A version of this article appears in print on March 17, 2013, on Page TR10 of the New York edition with the headline: Setting Sail Among Islands of Mystery. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)