Editor's note (January 2026): This journey took place prior to recent changes in Myanmar. Today, access to the Mergui Archipelago is limited and carefully managed, with travel possible only on a small, expedition-style basis — a quiet reminder of how fragile and rare such places truly are. **Original German text by Thomas Schmid. English version edited and adapted for this website.**

Ranong, Thailand — In an age of global tourism, there are remarkably few destinations left on Earth that can still be described as genuinely "undiscovered". Yet one of these rare white patches on the tourist map lies practically on Thailand's doorstep: the Mergui Archipelago, locally known as the Myeik Archipelago.

The Mergui Archipelago comprises more than 800 islands scattered across the Andaman Sea. It stretches for several hundred kilometres, from south of the southernmost tip of Myanmar near the small port town of Kawthaung northwards to the town of Myeik — once known to British colonial rulers as Mergui.

When our group of journalists gathered in Kawthaung, none of us truly understood what kind of adventure lay ahead. Perhaps our own extensive travels had made us wary. After all, Thailand still boasts a number of attractive island destinations, yet the negative effects of mass tourism are painfully evident there. We assumed the Mergui Archipelago would prove little different.

We pictured beaches whose only traces of civilisation would be carelessly discarded plastic waste. Coral reefs struggling for survival under the trampling feet of tourist

hordes. “Secluded” bays where dozens of excursion boats drop anchor, spilling crowds of party-hungry holiday-makers onto the shore.

Our group included Forbes correspondent Ron Gluckman, New Zealand journalist Keith Lyons, American 3D cartographer Roren Stowell, Spanish correspondent Noel Caballero, photographer David van Driessche, and veteran Thailand travel writer Joe Cummings, author of the original Lonely Planet guide to the country.

First, however, after completing border and immigration formalities at Kawthaung pier, we boarded the MV Sea Gipsy, a converted former cargo junk that would be our home for the days ahead. At the bow, the vessel featured an open sun deck with comfortable loungers, cushioned seating, and a small, well-covered dining area. Sleeping arrangements consisted of a row of comfortable and spacious bunks, covered on the side by curtains. Two modest bathrooms were available on board, as well as a galley where our Burmese cook worked tirelessly. Snorkelling gear and kayaks were freely available for our use.

At an unhurried pace, the Sea Gipsy pulled away from the bustling harbour of Kawthaung, its engine settling into a steady rhythm as we turned northward into the evening.

The sky was still overcast, the weather slightly rainy — a climate typical of this region due to its mountainous topography. Yet through the haze, the outlines of the archipelago’s first islands soon emerged on the horizon ahead of us. About an hour after departure, mobile reception disappeared entirely. For the next six days, we would be largely cut off from the internet, explained Belgian-born Van Driessche. We welcomed the idea — at last, a chance to truly unwind.

It took roughly four hours to reach the first island, leaving ample time for a briefing. We gathered around the dining table as our guide explained that the archipelago had first been systematically charted by the British Admiralty in the second half of the 19th century. To this day, many islands still have no official names, instead being identified by topographical features. One of the first islands we would land on, for instance, still appears on modern nautical charts simply as “Island 115” — its highest point, a densely forested hill, rises exactly 115 feet (about 37 metres) above sea level. Another island, Shark Island, owes its name to the fact that its silhouette resembles a shark’s dorsal fin when viewed from afar.

Barely half an hour after leaving Kawthaung, the boat traffic had already thinned noticeably. Long before we even approached the first islands of the Mergui Archipelago, we found ourselves alone on waters that shifted from murky brown to deep azure and turquoise. Apart from a handful of larger islands in the far north near the town of Myeik, the archipelago is virtually uninhabited. There are no regular ferry or shipping connections — neither from the mainland nor between the islands. Throughout our entire expedition, we encountered just one other vessel: a small sloop crewed by a family from the indigenous Moken people.

These islanders are known as sea nomads, living a largely nomadic existence aboard their boats as they roam the archipelago in search of fishing grounds. Only during the monsoon season, between May and September, do they retreat to traditional stilt villages along the coast, as the sea becomes too rough and dangerous. In recent years, however, many Moken have been encouraged by the Myanmar government to settle more or less permanently in small communities found on roughly a dozen of the Mergui islands.

On our first evening, when the Sea Gipsy dropped anchor off one of the islands and the engines fell silent, an almost eerie stillness enveloped us. Slowly, the sun sank below the horizon, unleashing a breathtaking spectacle of rare beauty that sent our camera shutters clicking incessantly. Dinner featured fish that our cook had caught directly from the stern of the boat. While the crew retired early to their bunks, some of us remained on deck until well past midnight, sharing beers and brought-along bourbon whisky beneath dim, solar-powered lights. The heavenly calm was broken only by the gentle sound of waves lapping against the nearby shore.

After an entire day without seeing another vessel, the last traces of civilisation seemed to fade away completely. The coral sand of the first island we had briefly visited the previous day was still marred by plastic debris washed in from Thailand. But at our next stop — the previously mentioned, deeply hidden Island 115 — the beach consisted of little more than a few branches and scattered coconuts. Nothing else.

The fact that we were likely the only visitors in days, if not months, was evident inland as well. Even the high-tide line, usually a highway of foot traffic on Thai islands, bore no trace of human presence.

While each of us passed the time in our own way — some swimming in the crystal-clear sea, others sunbathing on the pristine shore or climbing the forested hill — the crew prepared a delicious lunch beneath the shade of broad-canopied coastal trees.

After the meal, every scrap of paper napkin was dutifully collected and taken back on board.

Our next stop was Shark Island, where another dreamlike, untouched beach unfolded against a backdrop of lush jungle, offering a perfect photographic motif. Slowly, the *Sea Gipsy* continued deeper into an increasingly dense maze of islands. We landed here and there, and each time the scene was the same: a completely unspoiled, breathtakingly beautiful corner of the world. On the second night, the full moon rose above the sea, so close it felt as though one could touch it from the railing with an outstretched arm. In Thailand, the Loy Krathong festival was being celebrated. Here, we celebrated our isolation.

The third day dawned, and we all crawled from our bunks at the first hint of sunlight. Just as unforgettable as the sunsets in the Mergui Archipelago are its sunrises, which must not be missed. After a generous breakfast on board, we set the tender ashore at Ba Wei Island, a rugged place shaped by steep rock cliffs connected by a narrow sandbank. Another distinctive feature of the island is a grassy rock plateau, accessible only via a ladder-like climbing route. An alpine meadow in the Indian Ocean, so to speak. Off the coast of Ba Wei Island, a

remarkable rock formation rose against the deep blue, cloudless sky — pierced at its centre by a heart-shaped hole, a chance and astonishing whim of nature.

We continued our journey and reached one of the few islands inhabited by the Moken shortly after lunch. As the Sea Gipsy approached, several dugout canoes — known among the Moken as kabang — paddled out from the shore, some of them occupied by children. We were thus greeted by a small welcoming committee. Van Driessche urged us emphatically to respect the Moken's privacy once ashore, explaining that they are extremely shy towards outsiders — advice we took very much to heart.

The village itself consisted of a cluster of wooden houses built on stilts into the shallow bay, interconnected by a labyrinth of raised walkways. Everywhere we looked, fish were laid out or hung up to dry — including the pufferfish that are particularly common throughout the archipelago. From time to time, he explained, these are purchased by traders and exported primarily to China, where they are sought after as ingredients in traditional medicinal preparations. For the otherwise very poor Moken, this trade represents a welcome source of income. With the money earned, they are able to stock up on food and basic household goods at the village's only shop. After a brief visit to the village's Buddhist temple, we set off again toward our next destination.

Even simple snorkelling is enough to make one's eyes widen in disbelief. Just centimetres below the water's surface, the sea teems with brightly coloured fish of every imaginable kind. This explosion of life characterises reefs throughout the archipelago, many of them in remarkably healthy condition.

It was on one of the islands that we crossed paths with a research team studying the area's biodiversity. According to marine ecologist Matija Drakulić from Croatia, the archipelago ranks as "one of the last truly untouched natural paradises on Earth." Over time, his and other initiatives have documented more than 400 different fish species and around 30 species of coral. Among them are the crown-of-thorns starfish, the brain coral, as well as manta rays, dugongs, and whale sharks. "The defining feature of the archipelago is its extraordinarily high biodiversity," Drakulić explained, "characterised by the sheer number of species and the consistently healthy coral reefs."

The next two days passed almost in a blur, filled with excursions to various islands, each more breathtaking than the last. Every one of them felt entirely our own, allowing us to swim and snorkel undisturbed in gently sloping bays of mirror-like water. During jungle hikes that led us high up to several spectacular viewpoints, we also discovered that the virgin forest itself is teeming with life — including several species of falcon, sea eagles, and the highly endangered Nicobar pigeon.

Afterword

More than once, my colleagues and I found ourselves discussing whether we could, in good conscience, publish articles and photographs about the Mergui Archipelago in the international press at all. Too many places around the world have been irreversibly damaged after reports attracted the attention of profit-driven developers, only to be followed by hastily erected hotel complexes and waves of tourists descending in overwhelming numbers. Today, the forces shaping the archipelago's future extend beyond tourism alone — a quiet reminder that fragility can take many forms, not all of them environmental.

The consequences of irresponsible mass tourism can already be observed everywhere in neighbouring Thailand, where entire stretches of coastline have been disfigured by indiscriminately constructed hotel fortresses, and once-lovely islands have degenerated into boiling commercial hubs. This process continues unchecked, as Thailand now aims to host as many as 50 million foreign visitors per year in the near future.

Despite our initial misgivings, however, we ultimately decided not to withhold the paradisiacal Mergui Islands from our readers. After all, it is unlikely that more than a determined few will ever come to know these corners of the Earth, given the complicated journey required and the considerable financial outlay involved.

As mentioned earlier, there are no public boat connections within the archipelago, and very limited accommodation options.

For now, the isolation of the archipelago has inadvertently acted as its shield. We can only hope that the authorities will continue to limit commercial expansion in the future and not allow themselves to be seduced by the lure of quick tourism profits. The Mergui Archipelago deserves our collective protection — for the benefit of generations yet to come.