



Similan Islands

The best that the Kingdom of Thailand has to offer

By Johan Boshoff | Underwater photographs by Adriano Trapani



After the devastation of the tsunami which hit in December 2004, Thailand is again back in its rightful place as a top tourist destination. A highlight for divers is a small group of islands, named the Similan Islands, which are situated almost 90 kilometres from Phuket. Similan Islands is a diver's paradise and allows one to experience one of the world's top 10 dive destinations.



Clown Fish





The kingdom of Thailand lies in the heart of South East Asia, making it a natural gateway to Indochina, Myanmar and Southern China. Thailand is divided geographically into four natural regions – firstly, the mountainous North, with its profusion of multi-coloured orchids, fascinating native handicrafts and winter temperatures which are sufficiently cool to permit cultivation of temperate fruits such as strawberries and peaches. The high North East Plateau still jealously guards its many archaeological and anthropological mysteries while the Central Plain is one of the world's most fertile rice and fruit-growing areas with colourful traditional culture as well as the sandy beaches of the East Coast and vibrant cosmopolitan Bangkok. The final region is the peninsular South where the unspoiled beaches and idyllic islands complement economically vital tin mining,

rubber cultivation and fishing.

The country's official name was Siam before, in 1949, the name Thailand was once again adopted. Thai is derived from the word Tai that has the meaning of free in the Thai language.

An 11 hour flight from Johannesburg will take you to the heart of Thailand – Bangkok. The city seethes with people on the east side of the Chao Phraya River – it is the 22nd most populous city in the world with more than six million people calling it home.

Bangkok is a magnet for foreigners escaping turmoil in their homeland or simply for business, yet many tourists still flock to the city primarily to enjoy its many wonders. It has long been the gateway to Asia for foreign interests seeking new markets. The city is a major economic and financial centre of South East Asia and has





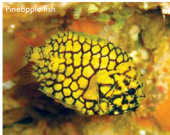
Leopard shark



Cattle fish



Pineapple fish



Porcelain crab



Nudibranch



Slipper Lobster

one of the fastest rates in the world for the construction of high rise buildings. The city is reportedly sinking at a rate of 5cm every year, but there's too much going on for that to get anyone down.

From Bangkok you have to then take a two hour flight to the pearl of the south – Phuket. Phuket is Thailand's largest, most populous and most visited island. A whirl of colours and cosmopolitanism, Thailand's only island province revolves around and thrives on tourism, but still retains a spark of the real Thailand. There are a hundred and one ways to pass the

day in Phuket. There are also more tourists here than on any other Thai island – it certainly knows how to cater to tourists' every whim. Most flock to the beaches on the south western side, which are loaded with amenities and entertainment options.

There are three seasons in Thailand, although many people would debate this fact. Summer runs essentially from March through to June, with temperatures between 33°C – 48°C in the day, and not below 27°C at night. The rainy/monsoon season runs from July through to November with frequent heavy rain usually

around 5pm. The temperatures range from 32°C during the day to 16°C at night. The cool season runs from November through to February with temperatures at 32°C during the day down to a bearable 16°C at night, although in the north, it could be as low as 12°C. This also doubles up as the dry season.

Thailand embraces a rich diversity of cultures and traditions. With its proud history, tropical climate and renowned hospitality, the Kingdom is a never-ending source of fascination and pleasure for international visitors.



Squid Lobster

Phuket is famed for its spectacular beaches, beautiful sea and magnificent underwater life. It's a diver's Mecca, with the Similan Islands Marine National Park north of Phuket voted one of the top 10 diving sites in the world. There are many dive sites off Phuket with spectacular coral and marine life, including Manta rays and Whale sharks. Numerous companies in Phuket offer day trips throughout the year to their closer islands, and between November and April, liveaboard trips can be done to the outer islands.

After a long journey by bus from Phuket to the small town of Tablamu on the mainland of Thailand, a liveaboard will pick you up for a four-day and four-night trip to Similan and the surrounding islands. Make sure that you get the right liveaboard because on these waters there

are more than 50 liveaboard operating at any given time – some very good and some very bad. One of the companies that I can recommend is the company that hosted me – West Coast Divers. They do both land-based and liveaboard trips and are one of the top operators on these islands.

After arriving at the Dive Boat M/V West Coast Explorer we set out for the Similan Islands, enjoying a spectacular tropical sunset as we ventured out to sea. We arrived at Similan just after midnight, so the next morning I woke up to some truly spectacular scenery – a haven with mountains in the middle of the ocean and the bluest water imaginable.

About 90 kilometres north west of Phuket lies this group of islands known as the Similans, from the Malay word



Barracuda



similan, meaning nine. They are, in fact, nine dramatic islands made up of granite with huge mounds of boulders both above and below the water. Topside some appear precariously balanced, ready to tumble down with the next strong gust of wind. Underwater though, they often form a network of dramatic swim through's and attract superb coral growth and an amazing variety of tropical fish. The water in the Similans is usually crystal clear and is also well known for attracting Manta rays and even Whale sharks. Here in the Andaman Sea, you will not only find giant rock formations, but also hard coral reefs and brilliant white sand.

The first dive is traditionally in a relatively shallow and easy spot, but that doesn't mean that you'll be missing out. The aptly named Breakfast Bend is a



gently sloping hard coral reef ideal for your first taste of the Similan Islands. Clouds of Glass fish, bright red blue Spotted groupers, Big eyes and Squirrelfish are waiting for you on your first dive. Watch out for Garden eels on the white sandy bottom and the occasional turtle or two. Then, during your four dives a day, including a night dive, be ready to experience a phenomenal range of aquatic creatures.

The Similan Islands is justly famous for its enormous range of fish species. From the smallest creatures such as shrimps and nudibranchs, right through to the larger pelagics, it's fascinating to watch the natural cycle of 'who's eating who' unfold. But don't worry, you won't be included, for the sharks you will see are passive reef dwellers like Whitetip sharks, Tawny nurse sharks and my personal favourite, the Leopard shark.

Some 50 nautical miles north of the Similan Islands lies one of the best known dive sites in Asia. Just breaking the surface at low tide, Richelieu Rock is probably your best chance to have a Whale shark experience. Some years ago, this site was regarded as a 'Whale shark magnet', and while this is somewhat of an exaggeration, they still visit regularly. Other large pelagics, such as Eagle and Manta rays are common visitors. The site is huge and most liveaboards will schedule more than one dive here. The sheer variety of life is amazing – huge schools of Trevallies and barracudas cruise the currents, and many tiny critters such as Frogfish, Ghost pipefish and sea horses can be found hiding in cracks and crevices. Richelieu Rock is one of the finest sites in Thailand.

Koh Bon is only a short cruise north of the Similan Islands and is without doubt the best site for Manta rays. The dive site follows a ridge, covered in pastel shaded soft corals, which drops to depths of 35-40m. Mantas are often spotted over the ridge or in the deep water to the south. Leopard sharks are also common in the deeper water and this is a good location to find the elusive Purple fire goby.

The island of Koh Tachai lies about 20 nautical miles south of Richelieu Rock and can be another great spot for Manta rays. The dive site is a submerged sea mount with depths from 14-35m and currents which can be quite strong. The top of the reef is a beautiful mixture of hard corals, while deeper regions consist of scattered boulders and sea fans. Leopard sharks are commonly found resting on the bottom, while schools of barracuda and Batfish cruise around the reef.

If you have the right liveaboard you can see the best that Thailand has to offer underwater in just four days, but you could spend months diving this site and still not see everything that the Similan Islands has to offer.

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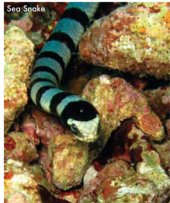
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Where to stay

Set just 10m across the white sandy Karon Beach (Long Beach), in the centre of the tourism hub in Phuket, Karon Sea Sands Resort has magnificent landscaped gardens and is conveniently close to both Patong Beach and bustling entertainment centre. The resort is designed to provide guests with the finest service and facilities – guests can make use of four excellent food and beverage outlets, a state-of-the-art fitness centre and the fantastic massage facilities.

You can step right into the free form pool from the terrace of your room (which

is spacious and offers all facilities that you could think off), and swim up to the pool bar to enjoy your favorite drink.

Travelling tips

No visa is required to enter Thailand, but passports should be valid for 12 months after your return to South Africa. Spoken and written Thai is largely incomprehensible to the casual visitor, however, English is widely understood, particularly in Bangkok where it is almost the major commercial language.

All tourist destinations and provincial capitals have hospitals and clinics staffed by well-trained doctors and nurses. In the case of an emergency, an ambulance can be summoned from any private hospital.

Buses are a sterling way to get around. Motorbikes are popular, but if you want to take to the roads, even in a car, beware of the anarchic Thai traffic. A better option is to take one of the many forms of taxis – there are cars, rickshaws (both the motorised and the people-powered varieties), and small pick-ups.

As in most other countries, visitors do not require vaccinations unless coming from or passing through a designated contaminated area.

Visitors should dress neatly in all religious shrines. They should never go topless, or in shorts, hot pants or other unsuitable attire. It is acceptable to wear shoes when walking around the compound of a Buddhist temple, but not inside the chapel where the principal Buddha image is kept.

Thai peoples don't normally shake hands when they greet one another, but instead press the palms together in a prayer-like gesture called a wai. Thai nationals regard the head as the highest part of the body, literally and figuratively. Therefore, avoid touching people on the head and try not to

point your feet at people or an object. It is considered very rude.

Despite the fact that the authorities have made efforts to make tap water meet World Health Organization standards, very few people drink the tap water in Thailand, even the local population. Bottled water is widely used instead.

The electricity in Thailand is 220 volts and has two prongs, missing the third earth prong at the bottom.

Information supplied by Phuket Tourism and West Coast Divers



Sea Horse

