

## Phuket & Phi Phi Area



### RACHA ISLANDS

These islands are considered 'going south' when leaving from the Phuket area. Comprising Ko Racha Yai and Ko Racha Noi, they offer a good variety of multi-level dives. Experienced divers are better off at some of the more challenging current-fed sites off Racha Noi, while every level of diver from snorkeler and novice through to experienced will find a Racha Yai experience a good one.

Generally good visibility and protected reefs, especially along Racha Yai's eastern coastline, make this a very popular check-out and training area, with shallow bays and sandy bottoms busy with divers and snorkelers most of the time.

There are some very pleasant resorts on these islands, so people can stay and dive right from Racha Yai; however, most come over on a day trip from the Phuket area.

Racha Islands	DIVER EXPERIENCE			
	GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
1 SOUTH TIP (RAY BAHN)	•			•
2 NORTH TIP	•			•
3 LUCY'S REEF	•	•		
4 STAGHORN REEF	•	•		
5 BUNGALOW BAY	•	•		
6 AO SIAM	•	•		
7 THE 'NOI' DIVES	•	•		



Safety sausages are a must in Thai waters, as boat traffic can be heavy

## 1 SOUTH TIP (RAY BAHN)

**Location:** 23 nautical miles (42km) south of Ao Chang  
**Depth:** 40-130ft (12-40m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Advanced and/or with guide



The south tip of Racha Noi is considered one of the better dive sites along this long island. If winds are blowing up from the south, captains may not attempt to make the haul down. Though if conditions are right this is a scenic spot with attractive coral gardens, boulders and pinnacles rising up around 40ft. Many-

hued soft corals appear anything from popsicle orange to ruby red, when using a light here to see their true colors.

Being the end of the island, currents can be strong as flows from both sides converge. Look here for schooling chevron barracuda, big rainbow runner schools and silvery jacks.

Down in the depths, look for the often-elusive leopard shark, along with big marbled stingrays; even whitetips have been seen resting when the currents are moving. This southern site also gets the occasional manta and a rare whale shark, but divers are more likely to see lionfish, scorpionfish, small schools of snappers and lots of fusiliers. Remember that the reeftop is at 40ft, so leave enough time for ascent and decompression.

## 2 NORTH TIP

**Location:** 18 nautical miles (34km) south of Ao Chang  
**Depth:** 16-118ft (5-36m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Advanced and/or with guide



Shallower than the south tip of Racha Noi, this site offers a lot of similar attractions with good soft coral growth and coral gardens nestled into the areas between the pinnacles and sloping terrain.



Beautiful soft corals thrive in the gentle currents

The North Tip is an advanced dive due to depth and occasional strong currents. While it may be a bit easier to avoid currents here than at **South Tip**, they can still be powerful, so be aware. A good location for pelagic life, chevron barracuda, dogtooth tuna and the occasional whitetip shark may make an appearance here.

As this site has been known to have down currents, it is best to follow your guide if the tide is changing to avoid areas where these prevail.

## The 2004 Tsunami

December 26, 2004 is a day that continues to haunt the lives of many residents and visitors. One of the most devastating tsunamis ever recorded in Asia swept across the Indian Ocean, affecting beach and resort areas from Thailand to Madagascar and the African continent. Thousands of people died and many more were left homeless in Thailand and across the region.

For the most part, rebuilding is now going strong with resorts in Thailand cleaned up and operating back near their pre-disaster pace. The powerful wave did affect some popular reef areas and these sites have largely been closed in favor of some exciting, newly-discovered sites.

While it may be hard to judge the long-term effects of the tsunami, nature appears to be adapting. Fish now have new habitat and the change in reef structure has opened up coastal areas for different invertebrate species and fish to move in.

Those who have not visited Thailand before would be hard-pressed to see much damage now, or discern any real change unless it was pointed out. Nature's capacity to rebuild and alter the ocean floor is evident here and the reefs are rebounding well, making for a rewarding diving experience.

### 3 LUCY'S REEF

**Location:** 13 nautical miles (25km) south of Ao Chang  
**Depth:** 16-90ft (4-28m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Novice



Divers of all levels will enjoy this site at Racha Yai, which features sloping reefs and a good mix of fish and other marine life.

Snorkelers who stay nearer the shore can actually go from this site to nearby **Staghorn Reef**. Care should be taken when finning though, as some coral patches grow right up to the shore and very near the surface, and can be easily damaged.

Orange-lined triggerfish, emperor angels and trumpetfish are among the fish that move around the coral outcrops and plating ledges that provide good habitat at Lucy's Reef. They are joined by lots of smaller creatures, such as nudibranchs, crabs and sea stars. There is usually just enough current here to keep things active and as a result fish life in the water column can be busy at times. Keep an eye out for jacks and other reef lurkers.

The reef also has a decent collection of sea anemones, along with accompanying clownfish, Clark's anemonefish and a few colorful *percula*. Sightings of the leaf-like cockatoo waspfish on the sea floor have also been made, along with some well-camouflaged frogfish. Ask your guide what types of marine life have been seen at this site recently and perhaps you'll be lucky enough to get a glimpse of something odd and unusual.

This dive is sometimes done as a point A to B dive instead of returning to the buoy, with the boat picking divers up at the end point.

### 4 STAGHORN REEF

**Location:** 13 nautical miles (25km) south of Ao Chang  
**Depth:** 16-90ft (4-28m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Novice



Another good snorkelers' reef, this site has big staghorn coral patches and lots of chromis, with small, colorful fish moving over, around and in the dense patches of brittle staghorn. Drop in at the reef's south end for the thickest growth areas.

Along with a slope of staghorn and other coral outcrops, there are white sandy patches that hold flounder, blue-spot stingrays, garden eels deeper where the current flows and some hunting octopi. Mantis shrimp are also seen here.

The staghorn patches attract butterflyfish, including the longnose butterflyfish (called the 'very longnose butterflyfish' in Thailand) and occasional marauding groups of red-tailed butterflyfish. Other fish include the toothy titan triggerfish and emperor angels.

Fire corals are also found here, mixed in with the staghorns. Avoid contact with these as contact feels much like touching a lit cigarette.

Both this site and **Lucy's** are protected most of the year from the southwest monsoon, as are most east coast sites in the Racha Islands.



Emperor angelfish



## 5 BUNGALOW BAY

**Location:** 13 nautical miles (25km) south of Ao Chang

**Depth:** 16-98ft (4-30m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Novice



Located on the scenic west side of the island, this is a huge magnet for snorkelers, lunch-breakers and intro divers. Be warned, that means LOTS of boat traffic. Experienced divers probably won't like dives inside the bay much, as it is noisy and the hard coral reefs aren't overly thick with anything colorful.

Some disturbing anchor damage on the reefs is clearly visibly, caused by improperly thrown anchors that miss the sand patches and strike the coral. Always use a safety sausage around here when surfacing as well – you never know what's coming or going on the surface.



A snorkeler enjoys Bungalow Bay

The hard coral beds do hold puffers, crinoids, groupers, eels and lots of other reef fish. Look also for sea snakes winding their way through the reef looking for crustaceans. Divers usually dive along the rocky cliff face to the north; it gets deeper as one heads out to the bay's mouth.

Sandy areas here can be productive, with odd creatures sometimes showing up. Reports of Pegasus sea moths, razorfish and harlequin ghost pipefish (which look like a blade of sea grass), have all been sighted. Pipefish may just be hanging in the sand or perhaps hovering next to a palm frond, mimicking debris. Nudi-branch expert Mark Strickland reports that some species seldom seen elsewhere have been identified here.

## 6 AO SIAM

**Location:** 13 nautical miles (25km) south of Ao Chang

**Depth:** 20-65ft (4-19m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Novice



This is a real fun dive with lots of divers' 'toys' to play with. The site was developed recently with artificial reef structures designed to attract fish and give corals some substrate for growth. Looking like a boxy, wild, underwater jungle gym, small hard corals are already beginning to sprout here, with small puffers, rays and lionfish making them home.

There are two buoys in the bay leading down to a rather unremarkable sandy sea floor at roughly 60ft. Aside from the artificial reef structures, the real bonus here is a life-sized temple entrance and two full-sized Thai elephants; one standing high on its back legs. These make great photographic props as divers can swim over and under the elephants and through the temple doors.

Divers can encounter full size elephants under the sea at Ao Siam



These sculptures also act as artificial reefs, with butterflyfish, schooling fusiliers and spotfin lionfish all using these pachyderms and holy gates as refuge.

When you tire of playing here, or run low on camera space, head inland toward the shallower reaches of this fun little bay. Shallower staghorn reefs in the 20 to 30ft range provide shelter for chromis and mantis shrimp. Frogfish are also sometimes seen here.

Depths reach just 30ft, allowing for nice, long dives with plenty of looking around, and currents are almost non-existent, making an ideal place for training dives.

Kata and Karon beaches are used during PADI dive courses and for a 'Discover Scuba Diving' experience, and are good for advanced training, in particular for navigation dives and night dives. Visibility isn't always great but is generally around 30ft to 50ft, and the reef has a good array of hard corals and tree worms.

Fish life is also good with schools of snapper always present, along with prowling and hiding lionfish, scorpionfish and puffers. For fish watchers and photographers, the real plus is the macro life that can be encountered by looking in the right habitats, including such oddities as seahorses, ghost pipefish, razor fish, flatheads and ribbon eels. Ribbon eels aren't too common in many places in Thailand, so those alone are a real plus.

As the guides are here daily to teach, they can help with finding good critter life.

## 7 THE 'NOI' DIVES

**Location:** Kata Noi & Kara Noi

**Depth:** 10-30ft (3-9m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** All levels



Just two minutes away from the Sea Fun Divers dive shops at the beachside hotels are the Kata Noi Beach and Karon Noi reefs. Sea Fun has developed these 'house reefs' for night diving and training, but they are of particular interest for macro photographers as well.



With luck, an endangered whale shark may appear in these waters

## AO PHANG-NGA BAY

Known as Phang-Nga Bay, this broad and somewhat shallow expanse of water a little south and east of the Phuket resort area is home to some of the country's most famous and colorful dives. Visibility here isn't always that great, but the nutrient-rich waters feed the corals and invertebrate life, providing a superb variety of marine creatures from the shallows to the depths.

Everything from whale sharks to tiny pipefish have been reported here, and its convenient location in relation to the major resorts keeps people visiting these sites time after time. Day trips usually consist of two or three dives, getting one back to the land after a good day's diving between 1:30pm and 4:30pm – leaving plenty of time to shower and have a cool one while watching the sun go down from one of the Phuket beaches.

Most dive boats leave from the popular jetty at Chalong Bay, where elongated golf carts resembling safari vehicles run divers out to board. This is a good place to grab a morning coffee and any snacks or drinks you might require. The street leading down to the pier is a kind of 'diver's row' with numerous dive shops and equipment outlets located thereabouts. A few small hotels and pubs here can also be handy, if your goal is to dive the Phang-Nga and Racha Islands all week.

Ao Phang-Nga Bay		GOOD SNORKELING			
		NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED	
8	CORAL ISLAND (KO HI)	•	•		
9	KO DOK MAI	•	•		
10	ANEMONE REEF (HIM JOM)	•	•		
11	SHARK POINT (HIN MU SANG)	•	•		
12	KING CRUISER	•	•		

## 8 CORAL ISLAND (KO HI)

**Location:** 4 nautical miles (7.5km) south-southwest of Ao Chang  
**Depth:** 1-69ft (0-21m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Novice



Close proximity to the Ao Chalong pier area and shallow depths here make this spot a favorite for intro dives, instruction and novice divers. The generally calm waters and sheltered site area make it a sure thing.

Both beach and boat dives are done here. Visibility can be low, with a good day being 30 to 40ft. Local guides know their way around, so listen well to briefings and follow along to see good hard coral growth which holds plenty of hiding spots for invertebrates. Look also for Christmas tree worms on the corals and small eels hiding in some holes.

As it is a popular spot, the usual Thai boat traffic presents a hazard – follow your guide and surface at the moorings if at all possible. Snorkelers should wear bright suits and fins, and all divers entering from the beach should exit the same way to avoid boat traffic.



A soft coral-covered rock

## 9 KO DOK MAI

**Location:** 11 nautical miles (21km) east of Ao Chang  
**Depth:** 0-108ft (0-33m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



Often a first dive stop coming from Phuket, or a second or third dive heading back, this site is usually done as a drift, although there are protected areas to shelter and look at the smaller marine life. Also on offer are some areas with sheer walls – a feature not found at other area hotspots. This site, **Shark Point, Anemone Reef and King Cruiser** are all part of the 'no fishing, no collecting' zone of the Hin Mu Sang Fisheries Reserve and this protection shows in the great variety of marine life on offer here.

You'll be blown away from the start, with most entry points on the island offering a rather sheer wall and lots of fish to swim through. Clouds of fusiliers and glassfish can be found through the dive, and they often attract various jacks, mackerel and the occasional tuna when they swirl about in the water column.

But the real treat here is along the walls, extended ridges and sea floor. While the site isn't thick with marine growth, there's just enough to make it extremely diverse and colorful. Big barrel sponges house feather stars and make homes for chromis and basslets, while gorgonian sea fans, black coral and various forms of *Dendronephthya* soft corals add variety and color. Some ridges and walls have thick patches of these soft tree corals, so bring a light on this dive, as the colors can be stunning when illuminated. Look closely also at the various fan corals here, as ghost pipefish and tiger tail seahorses have been seen.

Around the many alcoves there are numerous types of anemones and anemone fish, along with nudibranchs, white-eyed morays, spotted groupers and baitfish. Large blue-ring angels and lionfish can also be seen here.

There are a couple of small caves, but as the bottom and top are both very silty, a diver's fins or bubbles can make these dangerous – penetration is not a safe move. While many divers drift quickly along the wall, it really pays to take your time if you want to see all that this site has to offer.

## 10 ANEMONE REEF (HIM JOM)

**Location:** 16 nautical miles (30km) east of Ao Chang  
**Depth:** 13-79ft (4-24m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



Anemone Reef is part of what could be dubbed the 'Scuba Triangle', along with **King Cruiser** and **Shark Point**. Located within close proximity of one another, three great dives can be made in one day out at this area, from either Phuket or Ko Phi Phi.

The reef is a series of submerged limestone pinnacles with the highest point 12 to 15ft below the surface, depending on the tide. It drops down to a sandy bottom around 80ft on most sides and 100ft further out.

The deeper reaches produce the occasional resting leopard shark, so it's worth gliding down to see if there are any of these beautiful creatures on the sand. These sharks normally like some semblance of a current and it can be anywhere from mild to strong out here. However, there is also enough protection in the form of terrain rises and smaller pinnacles that currents rarely pose a problem.

Look for lots of fish in and around the reef. Groupers roam the rocks and plenty of baitfish hover in crevices for protection. Lionfish are also here in big numbers, so it should be easy to get a nice photo of one of these hovering predators.

Giving the site its name, the top of the reef features carpets of flowing and blowing sea anemones, along with their respective clownfish. Most are magnificent anemones that hold *percula* 'Nemo'-type clownfish or the pink (or one-stripe) clownfish. Look also for the red saddleback anemone fish in some spots. Their bubble tip anemones will be a bit different. Many anemones here have brilliant purple undersides, while some are forest green. They're especially pretty when they close up, which can happen later in the afternoon.

This is a busy site, so surface with a safety sausage inflated or at the buoy. All of the 'Scuba Triangle' sites are open to wind and waves, so seas can be rough at certain times of the year. While this stirs things up a bit and reduces visibility, these sites are rich enough to be rewarding dives even in low visibility.



A blackspotted puffer

A nurse shark resting at Shark Point



## 11 SHARK POINT (HIN MU SANG)

**Location:** 16 nautical miles (30km) east of Ao Chang  
**Depth:** 0-79ft (0-24m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



One of the sites within the Hin Mu Sang Fisheries Reserve, this is one of Thailand's best little dives with lots of beautiful anemones, clouds of small fish and color, color, color. One can easily spend the entire day here and not come away feeling as if you've seen it all.

The site is marked by moorings, a rock that breaks the surface and a marker on the rock itself. Down below, there are three different and distinct reef sites, but being so close together they are collectively called Shark Point. All three can be experienced in one dive with a bit of finning, or done as separate dives for more leisurely exploration of each rocky reef site.

The bottom falls off to no more than 80ft and currents are normally present, which is good as this accounts for the rich marine life. The leopard sharks (also called zebra sharks) which gave the site its name prefer the deeper portion of the reef, where the current flows over their bodies as they rest. Look for them on the rubble-strewn and sandy bottom, as well as wandering mantis shrimps.

When approaching leopard sharks move slowly and do not get too close,

to avoid startling them and making them move off. With care they can be observed at close distance for a long time, with the added possibility of seeing remoras move around their bodies and perhaps even a cleaner going over them. These beautiful sharks are not aggressive and eat invertebrates like crabs, lobsters and other crustaceans. Please do not try to touch them, pet them or pull their tails.

During a spell which saw an influx of colder water, some lucky divers saw a shovelnose ray (also called a guitar shark) here, and whale sharks have been seen on rare occasions.

Most of the reef is littered with spiny black urchins, so watch where you settle down to both avoid the spines and protect the marine life.

From the deepest part of the reef work your way up. Normally the current is not too bad, but if it's particularly strong, one can shelter behind the boulders and observe fish, beautiful sea fans and soft corals here.

The reef tops are stunning, with clouds of baitfish that include copper sweepers, glassfish and juvenile barracudas. This means the rest of the food chain is usually there as well. On the reef, look for scorpionfish, lionfish and spotted groupers lying in wait, while in the water column, jacks and snappers slash through the masses of fish.

Soft coral and numerous sea anemones in the shallower areas make this place vividly colorful; the purple undershirts of anemones combine with the oranges of one-stripe and *percula* clownfish make this site really come alive. Take plenty of time to enjoy this site; while visibility isn't always great the reef is so rich that there is plenty to see regardless of water clarity.

As it is a popular site, take care when surfacing; it's likely many boats will be in the area. Use a safety signal sausage or, if it isn't surgy, come up very close to the rocks.

## 12 KING CRUISER

**Location:** 17 nautical miles (32km) east of Ao Chang

**Depth:** 40-108ft (12-33m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



Phuket area divers can experience a wreck specialty by heading out to the *King Cruiser* wreck and exploring the fish life and remains of this formerly well-used ferry. Originally a Japanese vessel, it was renamed (bad luck in marine lore) and doing its daily run when it went way off-course and hit the rocks of **Anemone Reef** in broad daylight in May 1997. All crew and passengers, some 561 people, were rescued, but the ship was too badly damaged to save. It sank upright – a bit of good luck for divers – and quickly became the region's premier wreck site.

Old timers talk of entering the wreck after it first sank and seeing navigation charts laid out on the bridge, along with various other items still in perfect place, despite the 100ft plummet to the sea floor. This situation has changed considerably as a decade of currents, divers and boats using it as a mooring have weakened the ship considerably, causing the forward bridge area to collapse and leaving the rest of the ship somewhat shaky in terms of penetration.

Frequent currents and an open bottom where it was holed have made it a fish magnet. Moorings are on the bow and stern, and divers can descend the lines down to the ship. There are some barnacles and marine growth on these, so take care and don't grip too hard.

These days, briefings suggest that a multi-level overswim is the best way to enjoy this wreck. If currents allow, start deep and move up. The car deck area is overgrown with some small encrusting

A diver examines the tube corals on the ferry's wreckage



sponges and tubastrea corals, and this type of growth covers most of the ship's outer area as well. Being a wreck, there are jagged metal pieces and sharp shell growth as well, so move slowly to avoid getting cut when exploring.

Moving up to the passenger deck area at roughly 60ft, the masses of fish life become apparent. The aft area also shows some signs of collapse, but the stern can be entered for a brief penetration amid a wall of snappers and cardinal fish. At the portside of the stern near the mooring line there are some toilets still intact.

Fish life is the wreck's most remarkable feature. Look for jacks and dogtooth tuna in the blue water, and there's also a resident school of chevron barracuda to be seen. On deck, look for lionfish on the prow. A keen-eyed divemaster may also find an occasional frogfish masquerading as sponge on the wreck. Check also for cleverly disguised scorpionfish laying in ambush. The side railings are mostly intact and have some coral and other growth.

Full-blown whale shark experiences, with divers spending up to half an hour with a friendly and curious shark, have been reported here. This is rare but it can happen, so glance into the blue every once in a while to see what's there – it might be your lucky day.

The majority of the wreck is now between 45ft and 60ft. Watch your bottom

time and ascend slowly for your safety stop. Currents seem to be stronger on the wreck than in the 15ft to 20ft level, so you may not have to hold the line while doing your deco stop, but it is a high traffic boat area.

Make sure your head is well below propeller range and that you're ascending to your boat.

## Whale Sharks



Young whale shark in Thai waters

Thailand has become known as a good place to find whale sharks. Over-fishing in recent years has decreased the population of this creature, which is both the largest shark and largest fish on the planet. While Thailand doesn't allow fishing for whale sharks in its waters, most surrounding nations still fish for them, with many even having dedicated whale shark fisheries, despite coming under political fire from environmental groups.

Whale sharks have a broad range, so the threat of further depletion of their numbers worldwide remains. Seeing one of these big fish is a special experience, but the likelihood of increasing encounters can only occur when other nations cease hunting them.

Whale sharks are filter feeders and are considered harmless to divers. They use their huge mouths to eat planktonic creatures including masses of tiny crustaceans, and may also suck in other creatures, such as squid, sardines, jacks and tuna.

They have attained lengths of 45ft (14m) and weigh up to 20 tons. Older ones tend to be more single-minded and concentrate on feeding, and so in an encounter may swim right on by. Younger whale sharks have a tendency to be more curious and are usually the ones divers have longer encounters with.

Whale sharks are threatened by over fishing partly because it takes them so long to sexually mature. This does not occur until they reach about 30ft (9 meters) in length, meaning they have to live to about 30 years old to do so, with a natural lifespan of 60 to 100 years. Known as pups, whale shark babies are two-feet long at birth.

Found worldwide in most tropical and even temperate seas, some Thai dive operators say there is a definite season between February and May in their waters. However they can be seen pretty much year 'round – there is no real predictability. Enjoy your encounter and try to promote the conservation of these amazing fish.



## KRABI & PHI PHI ISLANDS

All one really has to say here is *The Beach*. This area is the location of the famed movie that firmly put these eye-poppingly beautiful islands on the world map. But even without the Hollywood angle, the astonishing natural beauty here is pretty much unrivalled anywhere in the world.

Krabi is located on the mainland and is also the name of the province. Beautifully set in the mouth of a bay, it's surrounded by jungle and peaks, and offers splendid beaches.

The offshore islands, most notably Ko Phi Phi (Don) and Ko Phi Phi Lae of movie fame, are tourist magnets for backpackers and many other levels of tourist. Ko Phi Phi Don is the 'Kuta of the West' with lots of souvenirs and T-shirt stands, pirate CD and DVD shops,

The beach at Ko Phi Phi Don



jewelry stores, Internet cafes, massage parlors, dive shop after dive shop, and some very nice restaurants. At night the place is party central. People gather to watch (what else?) *The Beach* and first-run movies, then dance the night away.

By day, the beach, snorkeling, diving and all kinds of watersports and sightseeing tours see boats coming in and out of Ton Sai's Bay. Ferries full of backpacks and their owners arrive daily, picking up as many as they dump on the island.

Much of the island is steep limestone cliffs and protected jungle habitat – high, green and beautiful, with sea eagles and frigates soaring high overhead. A seemingly never-ending beach separates the large landmasses here, and accommodation ranges anywhere from a pitched tent to some very exclusive resorts along the eastern coastline.

Divers will find the visibility here not quite so stunning but still quite acceptable. There are dives for all levels here, and the terrain beneath the sea is great with walls, caves and swim-throughs, as well as hard coral reefs and soft corallined walls, and fish life is excellent and diverse. Live aboards offer anywhere from two- to five-day excursions in the area, with two-day special trips to the hotspots cramming in up to seven dives.

Krabi & Phi Phi Islands		GOOD SNORKELING			
		NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED	
13	KO SEE	•	•		
14	KO HA	•	•		
15	KO YUNG PINNACLE	•			•
16	KO YUNG	•	•		
17	HIN PAE (LONG BEACH)	•	•		
18	MAYA BAY & CORNER	•	•		
19	KO BIDA NOK	•		•	
20	KO BIDA NAI	•	•		
21	PHI PHI SHARK POINT (HIN BIDA)	•		•	



## 13 KO SEE

**Location:** 4.9 nautical miles (9km) south of Ao Nang  
**Depth:** 0-59ft (0-18m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Novice



This dramatic limestone rock island is the largest in the region, and is one of the closest dives to Ao Nang and Krabi. The site is used for training, with those dives normally done at slack tide to avoid currents, so the time of day you dive here is tide-driven to an extent.

For the more experienced, the tide also brings leopard sharks who like to rest on the bottom and let the current run over their bodies, pumping water through their gills.

Even though the island is the biggest in the region, you can't go below 60ft, so there's enough bottom time to swim

around this limestone pillar and enjoy the corals, soft corals and sea fans that cling to its base. Sea whips form where there is strong current, so use these to see where the current runs most frequently. The northwest side of the island has the best wall formation.

Snorkelers will enjoy the shallow areas around the island and may also have the opportunity to find some of the blacktip sharks that are seen here. Around divers they are normally quite shy, but since snorkelers don't make the same level of noise as bubble-blowing divers, the sharks may approach close enough to get a good look.



### Helping the Reefs

In recent years, the pioneering of scuba diving and snorkeling has attracted millions of visitors to the coral reefs, and the pressure on them is starting to show. Studies have shown that on reefs open to the public, live coral cover is three times lower than on reefs that are designated 'no-use zones'.

At present, a number of reef restoration methods are being developed around the world, including reef balls, Biotech and the transplanting of coral fragments. At one time it was safe to assume that coral reefs would take care of themselves as they had done for millions of years. Disasters such as hurricanes and tsunamis have always been a natural threat, but the added pressure caused by mankind through fishing, destruction of coastal habitats, construction and tourism have made the outlook for the continued existence of reefs look grim.

In order to be proactive, the Ko Phi Phi-based dive camp has embarked on some reef saving actions. Initially focusing on large patches of dead coral in Loh Da Lum Bay, the main technique used involves taking specifically chosen dead coral boulders, cleaning them in saltwater solution, attaching live coral samples with special marine glue, then inserting them into strategic areas.

In order to maintain the site, it will be necessary to create a boat lane, cordon off work areas and educate people accessing the reef area. Long-term changes will be recorded and documented regularly, and it is hoped that with time and care this will enable the regeneration of a once healthy coral reef.



Thailand is famous for its large variety of colorful nudibranchs

## 14 KO HA

**Location:** 5 nautical miles (9.5km) south of Ao Nang  
**Depth:** 16-66ft (5-20m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Novice



This shallow site is good for all levels of diver, with interesting marine life and depths that allow one to circumnavigate the little island in one dive.

A combination of sandy areas and some coral-covered rocks and ridges offer soft corals and a decent collection of sea anemones. This is also a good place to observe bubble corals, which sometimes host small shrimp and orangutan crabs. These commensals aren't seen here as frequently as farther north, however. Blue-spot stingrays like the sandy patches, as do banded snake eels, which resemble sea snakes.

This site is also good for leopard sharks, which like the currents and sandy areas. When the tide changes, currents make the anemones flow like mops in a stream. A dive later in the day sometimes allows divers to see them close up into colorful balls.

## 15 KO YUNG PINNACLE

**Location:** North Ko Phi Phi Don, 2.2 nautical miles (4km) from Laem Tong  
**Depth:** 20-118ft (6-36m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Advanced



This is a superb advanced dive which isn't done all that often, due to depth and strong currents that can make it tricky for the less experienced. However, the healthy, current-fed soft corals, big rays and fish make it worth the effort.

The site drops down to nearly 120ft and this is the best place to start and then work up. Marble rays like the deep water around the pinnacle's base, while beautiful white antipathes and bottle brush black corals are a sight to behold. Look too for crinoids and small oysters living inside them.

Visibility of 70ft is considered good here and combined with the varied and sometimes extremely strong currents running every which way, it's not for the faint of heart. However, pelagic action, including tuna and sharks, plus the amazing coral colors, are enough to entice some divers to brave this wild spot.

## 16 KO YUNG

**Location:** North Ko Phi Phi Don, 2.2 nautical miles (4km) from Laem Tong

**Depth:** 16-90ft (4-28m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Novice



The southeast side of Ko Yung Island is a tamer dive than the open ocean pinnacle. A good snorkeling site, this is also great for novice diving with some coral cover and patches of staghorn corals. Plate corals and some swirling lettuce coral thrive here as well.

The staghorn gardens will entertain both divers and snorkelers as the fish life is diverse, with lots of small reef fish very active over, in and around the coral beds. Look also for some nudibranchs and roaming octopi in this area. Be careful of the spiny urchins if you settle down to watch the fish life; they are plentiful and large.

This is usually a good place to see leopard sharks as well. Just be aware of the ocean's forces, as currents can quickly turn a dive into a drift here.

*An anemone colony with red saddleback anemonefishes*



## Blacktip Shark Adventure



*Blacktip reef sharks*

If you like seeing both sharks and the sunrise, sign up for the Adventure Club at Ko Phi Phi Don. This eco-oriented operation strives to use the resources provided by Mother Nature to create original eco-friendly adventure tours. It emphasizes education and the preservation of the area's natural resources.

Only six persons at a time can rise with the roosters and head out on normally glassy calm seas to certain reef areas where blacktip sharks are known to cruise – these graceful little sharks like the reef flats and inner reef zones, as well as the outer reef.

Experienced guides who are familiar with the area and its marine life accompany each group, and the whole excursion is done on snorkel, with chances normally good that a blacktip will be seen. They are actually rather shy sharks and one must move through the water slowly and quietly in the hopes that they may approach for a long, close look. Adventure Club ([www.phipiadventureclub.com](http://www.phipiadventureclub.com)) is located on Ko Phi Phi and has a refreshing emphasis on respect to the environment and its preservation.

*An anemone colony with red saddleback anemonefishes*



## 17 HIN PAE (LONG BEACH)

**Location:** 650ft (200m) west of Long Beach on Ko Phi Phi Don

**Depth:** 6-40ft (2-12m)

**Access:** Boat or shore

**Expertise Rating:** Novice



This beautiful little gentle drop-off area in just 40ft of water is used for daily dives, dive training and snorkeling. Majestic island cliffs rise up in the distance and birds soar overhead, making it a great spot close to the beach, but far enough away to enjoy the experience.

Sometimes lessons are given on the beach which becomes a shore dive, but a boat is still required to get to the shore in the first place.

Fish at this site are friendly and there is a good bed of hard coral with different kinds of surgeonfish and damselfish. A bunch of curious groupers can also often be found here.

As well as the beach, there's an inner reef nearby. Blacktips are sometimes seen along this reef as it drops off into deeper water, while the current that runs through the shallows and then down into deeper water attracts plenty more. Look in the sand and around the hard coral bommies for invertebrates like hermit crabs as well.

## Tsunami Clean-up & Restoration

It is hard to imagine the devastation and aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami. The wave originally hit from a mainly westerly direction. In the case of Phi Phi Don island, it traveled into the open mouth of Loh da Lum Bay and met with the headland on the east side of the bay. The wave was then forced to curve around the bay, so that it was traveling due south/southwest, by the time it reached the beach.

At the same time, the wave was also entering Tonsai Bay from the south; however, its size was reduced by the land mass on the west side of Phi Phi Don.

Eventually, the larger wave from Loh da Lum Bay met with the smaller wave from Tonsai Bay in the middle of the peninsular. The larger of the two continued across the land and carried everything in its path into Tonsai Bay. As the wave hit the shallow reefs, it picked up large pieces of coral and deposited them onto the shallow flats of the bay. It also took hundreds of tons of sand from the beaches and peninsular and deposited this into Tonsai Bay.

Heavier and denser debris, including steel, concrete and large objects such as roof tops, traveled less distance from the shore and sank in larger piles, while lighter and more buoyant debris, such as timbers and plastics, traveled a greater distance before sinking further spread out.



Artificial reefs will cultivate corals and marine life  
photo: A. Hewett

The Phi Phi dive camp was created and organized by long term Phi Phi island resident Andrew Hewett. After seeing his home and business of 12 years destroyed, he took the initiative to create a project outline to help raise the capital to start a clean-up campaign.

In February of 2005 the first of many donations arrived and on February 18 the dive camp started its project. The work started slow with about 20 volunteers a day, however, as news spread of the volunteer work on Phi Phi Island, many divers, snorkelers and other people started to arrive. By mid-April there were 60 to 90 people working per day.

Some thought they were crazy, and some told them they were wasting their time, but in the first six months the project provided badly needed jobs for many local people, recovered 300 tons of debris, attracted over 4,000 volunteers to the island, collected and logged hundreds of important forms of identity, and found one of the many missing people.

Although the main objective was to clean the island up, a secondary one was to provide jobs for the many local people that no longer had any other opportunities. Many other businesses wound up benefiting indirectly through the income brought in by dive camp volunteers.

At present, work is being done on the next phase of the operation, which involves an artificial reef and a floating coral nursery.

A volunteer project by long-term residents that live on Phi Phi island, the primary benefit of the artificial reef is as a teaching aid for educating the general public, to help them become aware of the stresses that coral reefs are facing. It is hoped that by educating snorkelers, divers, fishermen and anyone else that uses the oceans, they may gain a better understanding of what corals actually are and what role they play in our lives.



Maya is the island made famous by *The Beach* movie

## 18 MAYA BAY & CORNER

**Location:** Southwest of Ko Phi Phi Lae

**Depth:** 0-100ft (0-30m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Novice for bay/  
advanced for cave



Hollywood was here. This is the island made famous by *The Beach* and ol' Leonardo DiCaprio. In cinematic times long past, 'Bond, James Bond' was also here. You won't find the tranquil unknown beach depicted in the movies, but even with crowds of day boats, beach goers and snorkelers, it's still pretty darn good-looking. While the natural beauty can't be beaten above water, beneath there's some great coral for snorkelers and an underwater cavern for divers, plus lots of swim-throughs and boulders scattered about.

Hard coral heads and a sandy bottom make diving in the bay easy and good for training and new divers. Look here for Moorish idols and parrotfish. Outside of the bay on the west side and a little to the south is Maya Corner, while the southwest point holds Maya Cave. This

area is normally calm when the big island cliffs can protect the sites from wind and waves, which is most of the year.

The reef here has some real attractions, including a steep wall that drops to a bottom of 100ft and is adorned in sponges and fans, with plenty of small fish and schools of fusiliers. The rest of the site is filled with coral-covered rocks that are home to soft corals with anthias and chromis, coral groupers, scorpionfish, red saddleback anemonefish and their anemones.

With depths on the outside rising up to only 15ft near the island, this fascinating site is a great place for a multi-level dive whilst following a good guide, as there are all kinds of twists and turns.

The other site here, Maya Cave, starts with a big cavern and then goes into a series of chambers. This cave system should only be dived by qualified cave divers carrying all the proper gear for penetration. If you happen to come upon this cavern mouth, just take a look in and then move on. Don't try to go it alone or with recreational scuba gear, as it's just asking for trouble.

Although always very busy, except early morning and late afternoon, this site is worth a look as it really is stunningly beautiful. It's obvious to see why Hollywood likes this place so much.

## 19 KO BIDA NOK

**Location:** South of Ko Phi Phi Lae**Depth:** 0-108ft (0-33m)**Access:** Boat**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate

This is a very active and diverse dive site with many interesting features, including walls, overhangs, coral beds and gentle slopes. It can easily be dived a couple of times, as the macro life is quite good and there are also numerous wide angle possibilities.

Rugged and pretty with sea birds circling overhead, the island itself rises from the sea about 150ft with cliffs covered in greenery. Divers enter the water via a small cove on the island's east side. Below is a small and delicate coral garden of staghorns, some rocky outcrops with sea fans and some soft coral growth. In this area, look for small marine life such as tiger tail seahorses by the fans, or frogfish nestled in the staghorns.

There is a wall area where the currents and fish life are more prevalent. Take a right here and drift along a tubastreas-covered wall, or take a left along a sandy patch that has urchins and other small invertebrate life. Look for blue-spotted stingrays here as well.

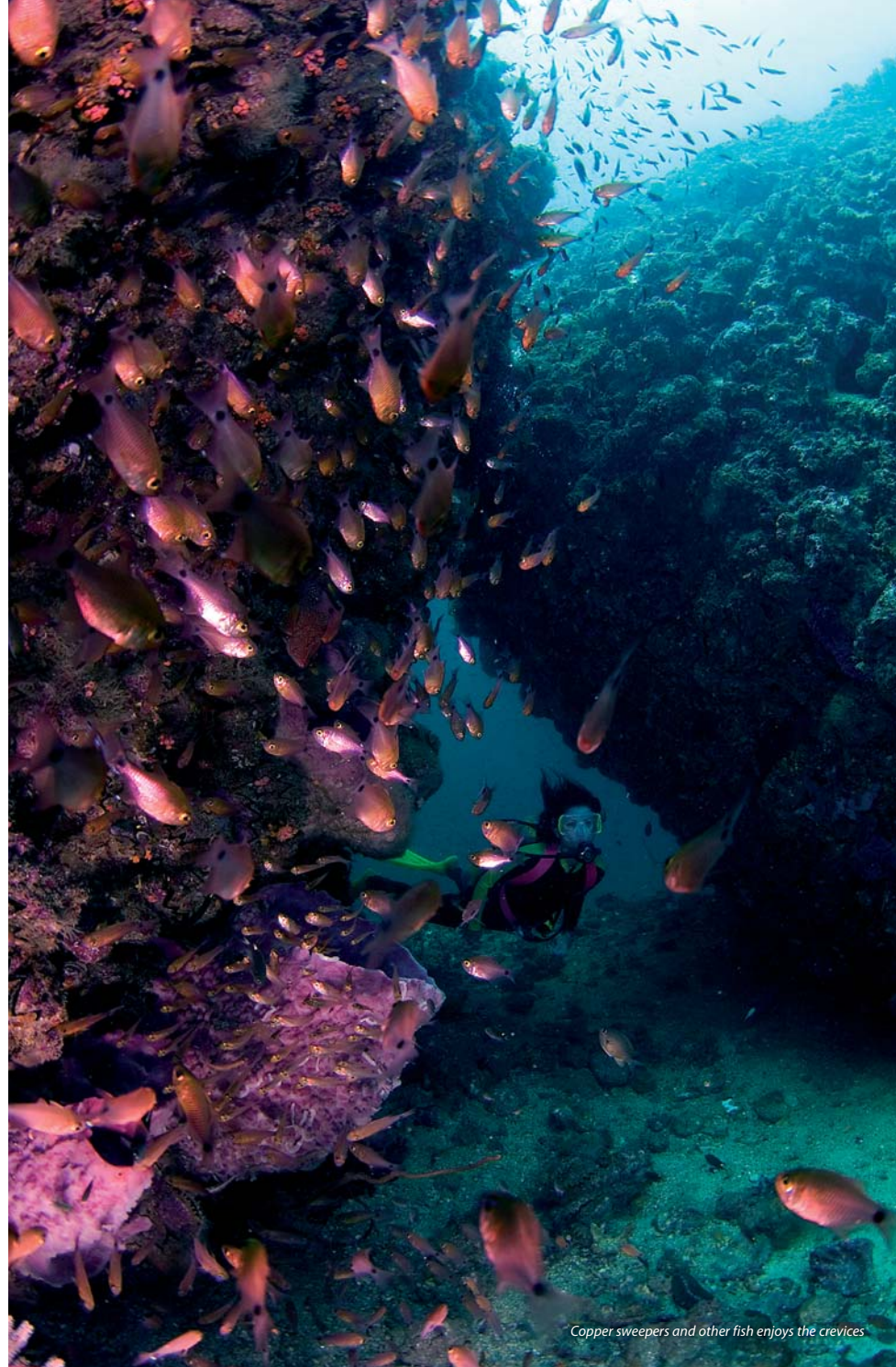
As the dive continues to circumnavigate the rock, it eventually gets into more interesting terrain with large boulders and clouds of fish. Depths can range from 20 to 90ft and the deeper rocks have very attractive sea fan cover, beautiful red dendronephthya soft corals and fusiliers galore.

While writing this book, we visited the site in January. Having been told that whale sharks and occasional manta rays have been known to come here from December into early March, we experienced considerable excitement when a 20ft whale shark swooped in on a group of divers and snorkelers before coming over to us, whereupon we swam with it for a few minutes before it headed back out into the blue. So while there can be nice macro life here, it's worth keeping an eye out – and up – just in case a big shark makes a visit. Topping that experience, even pilot whales have been seen on scuba here.

Finish this dive by enjoying the shallower parts of the reef at Ko Bida Nok, including the overhangs which are shielded by huge baitfish schools and adorned in tubastreas.

There is a lot of traffic here in the mornings, so ascend using a safety sausage and await boat pickup in the open sea away from the rock. That way the boat doesn't have to come in too close over other divers.

*Sharpnose barracuda*



*Copper sweepers and other fish enjoys the crevices*



*Ko Bida Nai rises majestically from the sea*

## 20 KO BIDA NAI

**Location:** Southeast of Ko Phi Phi Lae  
**Depth:** 0-72ft (0-22m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Novice



Just across the channel from **Ko Bida Nok**, this site is full of fish life and has some fun swim-throughs and interesting terrain. The usual diver drop zone is a little protected cove on the southeast. There are table corals and lots of sea urchins, so take care as you descend to the sea floor. Some dive classes are taught at 30ft to 35ft in the sand off this site.

Head south where there is a good swim-through under a huge slab of rock. This area has a couple of very large and reclusive marbled groupers hiding in the recesses, while blue-ringed angels and copper sweepers also stay in this passage.

The channel goes to about 85ft and can have a good current running be-

tween the islands. A series of three big rocks and corals sit in the channel collecting the current and holding interesting marine life.

Divers occasionally find frogfish and ghost pipefish out here. Also, keep a lookout for bigeye and one-spot snapper schools. Depths range from 50ft to 80ft with lots of schooling fish and hard corals.

Head around the corner to a shallower area via another swim-through, which is full of copper sweepers, cardinalfish, razor clams, barrel sponges and blue-lined angels.

The upper part of the reef is covered with sea anemones and pink anemonefish. The undersides of these anemones are largely royal purple, making them very photogenic. Head back around staying shallow and swim back through the first tunnel; on the other side is another good array of sea anemones with red saddleback anemonefish.

Do your deco stop whilst admiring the table corals and come up next to the scenic rock, where you may see a sea eagle flying overhead.

21

## PHI PHI SHARK POINT (HIN BIDA)

**Location:** 3.2 nautical miles (6km) southeast of Ko Bida Nok  
**Depth:** 3-70ft (1-21m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



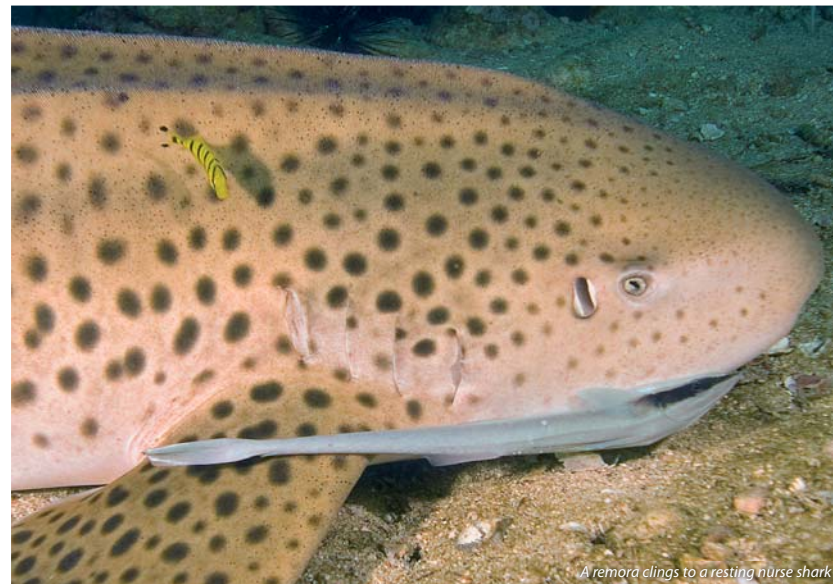
This submerged rocky reef area normally has some current, and visibility isn't always the greatest. A single mooring buoy leads down to a reef-top area of rocks and sand before then sloping deeper. There's a good chance of seeing the graceful leopard sharks that give this 'other' Shark Point its name, either moving along the reef with swaying tail movements or on the sandy bottom which ranges from about 60ft at the south end of the site down to 70ft at the north end.

Start deep here and work your way up. The sharks like to sleep or rest where

the currents flows over them, so look off the reef in the sand for them. If they are resting, please don't chase them away but approach slowly and observe. You may also encounter blue-spot stingrays and larger blackspot rays in this sand and rubble – look under the edges of boulders.

The rocks are great hiding places for other marine life besides sharks. Those liking the shelter include both white-eyed and golden moray eels, as well as octopi and an occasional cuttlefish. Fusiliers, sweetlips and schooling snappers can all be seen here, along with blue-lined angels and some emperor angels. The staghorn coral holds clouds of chromis and damsels which are very active when the current is running.

This site isn't nearly as popular as the famous **Shark Point**, and as a consequence is normally considerably less crowded. This is sometimes done in conjunction with a dive at **Ko Bida Nok**, and is one of the best places in the area to give yourself a good chance of seeing leopard sharks.



*A remora clings to a resting nurse shark*

## TRANG & SOUTHERN SITES



the cave is very open and easy to exit, and usually has lots of light. Divers can even fin in and surface so as to see the cave roof 100ft up, where stalactites are still attached.

Photographers will appreciate the light here and the way it plays with hues and shades of blue like an immense neon portal. Some construction has been done here, its supposed protection as part of a national marine park.

Ko Ha Noi, the north island, is probably the most popular as it has great coral cover down a nice slope with both varied hard coral formations and colorful soft coral scenery. Visibility is normally good for the area and current is rarely a problem, so divers can start deep then move up, enjoying the marine life on the way.

Many rocks and undercuts provide habitat for fish, such as the beautiful juvenile emperor angel. This place excels for unusual finds, so take your time as it can offer some very strange and hard-to-find fish. Several species of ghost pipefish can be found, including the pretty and ornate ghost pipefish. Another rare find here has been the *Rhinopius*, or lacey scorpionfish. This is one of the Holy Grails of fish finds, so look closely and you might get lucky – these sometimes sit in amongst, and resemble, crinoids or lacey sea fans.

Banded sea snakes and hawksbill turtles also like the area. Look in the sandy gravel for sea moths moving slowly across the sea floor.

### 22 KO HA ISLANDS

**Location:** 20 nautical miles (36km) south of Ko Phi Phi Don  
**Depth:** 16-118ft (4-36m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



This grouping of five isles is not normally crowded and offers a couple of unique dive sites. The islands themselves ensure that some area of the reef is sheltered at any time, so diving here is always possible, and unusual formations and marine life highlight the dives in this area.

Ko Ha Yai is famous for a gaping underwater cathedral of a cave that has two huge windows to the sea. The deepest entrance is at 50ft, while the shallower is found at 16ft. Once inside,

Trang & Southern Sites		GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
22	KO HA ISLANDS	•		•	
23	KO ROK NAI	•	•		
24	KO ROK NOK	•	•		
25	HIN MUANG	•			•
26	HIN DAENG	•			•

### 23 KO ROK NAI

**Location:** 16 nautical miles (30km) south of Ko Lanta  
**Depth:** 16-40ft (5-12m)  
**Access:** Boat or live aboard  
**Expertise Rating:** All levels



The shallower of the twin islands of Ko Rok Nai (inside island) and **Ko Rok Nok** (outside island), this is often thought of as a snorkel destination, but it has a good shallow reef area where underwater photographers and fish watchers can have a great time.

These two islands are separated by a channel that is only 50ft deep. With their beaches facing each other, it creates another of Thailand's scenic natural settings. Snorkelers will particularly enjoy

the northeast coral beds, as the water tends to be clear most of the time and the big limestone cliffs facing the open beach make this an idyllic setting.

For divers, the choice site is outside along the north coast, where a cove is the entry point to see a very good selection of hard corals and a plethora of reef fish, including bigeye snappers, parrotfish and a few surgeonfish species.

At the larger end of the spectrum, there are large groupers hiding in some of the cracks and crevices, while smaller critters include seahorses and painted frogfish. Tridacna clams like this sandy setting, as the shallow water allows them to solar feed and thrive.

This place can have its busy days, so keep an eye out for boat traffic when snorkeling or diving. There is also a park ranger station located on this otherwise uninhabited island for the Ko Lanta National Marine Park.



## 24 KO ROK NOK

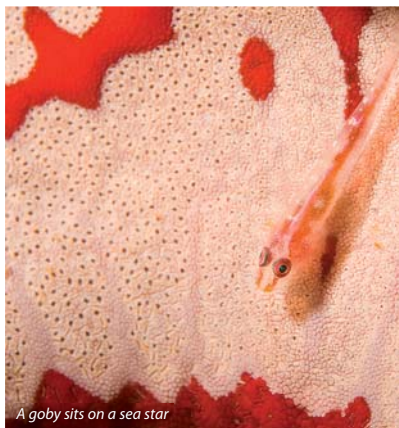
**Location:** 16 nautical miles (30km) south of Ko Lanta  
**Depth:** 16-75ft (5-23m)  
**Access:** Boat or live aboard  
**Expertise Rating:** Novice



A beautiful dive that allows for a drift along a wall, divers can start at the island's north tip and coast along the west side to an area with coral gardens below and a great variety of fish. A more current-driven dive can be made west at some pinnacles.

Either way, divers are likely to see a solid selection of fish life, healthy hard corals, some areas decorated in soft corals and possibly even a resting leopard shark. Blacktip sharks have also been seen in the shallower parts of the reef.

The deeper reaches hold big morays, common and spotfin lionfish and sometimes a sea turtle. Bigeye jacks and chevron barracuda have also been reported at this site. The north tip drift down the west wall is a good place for newer divers to experience a gentle drift. Due to the overall variety, all levels of divers can enjoy this dive.



A goby sits on a sea star

## 25 HIN MUANG

**Location:** 27 nautical miles (50km) south of Ko Lanta  
**Depth:** 25-130ft (8-40m)  
**Access:** Boat or live aboard  
**Expertise Rating:** Advanced



Hin Muang or 'Purple Rock' is host to countless sea anemones and pink anemonefish. The site's name is derived from the purple undersides of most of the magnificent anemones, but just about every spectrum in the rainbow is represented here.

The other reason for the name is the red soft corals, which appear purple underwater due to loss of part of the color spectrum.

Often described as a bread loaf-shaped ridge, it somewhat resembles French bread, being elongated with steep sides that drop deep into the sea. There are normally currents present here that account for the profusion of marine life and stunning invertebrate coloration.

The soft corals and many sea fans here attract clouds of glassfish, making small ecosystems that attract other predators, such as spotted groupers, scorpionfish and lionfish. Keep an eye out for both swimming and resting zebra sharks, great barracuda and dogtooth tuna in the blue.

Many types of jacks roam at Hin Muang, swooping through the water column at schools of smaller fish. Along with the zebra sharks, marbled rays also like to nestle into the sea floor.

The water here is normally fairly clear and there is also usually somewhere to take refuge from the currents. Once a major haunt of whale sharks, there is still a good chance they could appear, so keep that in mind as you roam the reef.



Anemones and clownfish have a symbiotic relationship

## 26 HIN DAENG

**Location:** 27 nautical miles (50km) south of Ko Lanta  
**Depth:** 0-130ft (0-40m)  
**Access:** Boat or live aboard  
**Expertise Rating:** Advanced



There aren't a lot of true wall dives in Thailand, but this is one of them, with sometimes strong currents. The southern side has the most serious drop, while the east has a sloping wall with extended ridges.

Hin Daeng is a great dive for the pelagic fish lover. Big stuff here includes schools of fast moving rainbow runners,

large marbled groupers and some really big morays – keep an eye out for the beautiful honeycombed moray. Sea turtles often hide in cover at this site, and the count of different jack species roaming here is also impressive.

Small stuff isn't left out either. There's a good variety of nudibranchs in the shallows, soapfish and cleaning wrasse have set up stations that attract lots of hard coral dwelling reef fish, and even boxer shrimp have been sighted here. Look in the shelter of corals for juvenile emperor angelfish.

There is a good shallow area near the rock island for a deco stop. Move out and away from the island so as not to get banged by the surge and also to make it easier for tender pickup once the stop is finished.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'