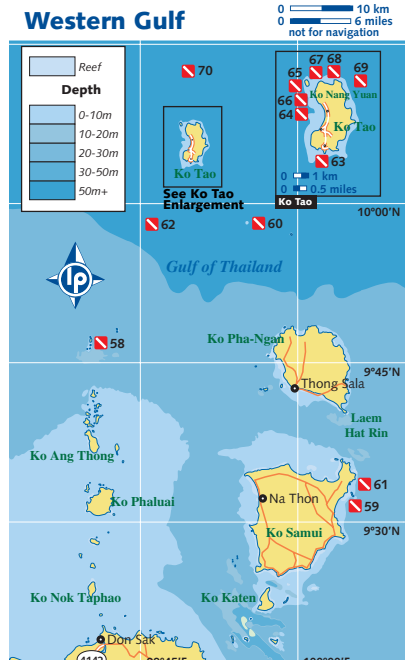


# Western Gulf



## KO SAMUI & KO PHA-NGAN

Once a backpacker-only island, the party island Ko Samui has long been the locale of choice for paradise-seeking voyagers of all stripes. Its turquoise waters and sun-bleached, sandy bays are lined with multiple bungalows and resorts, and a plethora of restaurants to satisfy hungry epicureans, while a thumping nightlife provides a soundtrack to the temperate, starry nights. A highway circumnavigates the island.

Just about every type of diving, accommodation and instruction can be had, and divers from here and the smaller, northerly Ko Pha-Ngan can get everything from introductory dives to instructor certification. A beautifully landscaped and busy little domestic airport serves tourists, and a beachside

ferry serves as a jumping on and off point for other popular dive centers like Ko Tao and quiet Ko Pha-Ngan.

There are some popular dives around Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan and many dive centers also make the run over to Ko Tao and Ko Nang Yuan for other popular and fishy sites.



### Ko Samui & Ko Pha-Ngan

	GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
58 FIVE ISLANDS		•		
59 AO CHAWENG	•			
60 ANG THONG NATIONAL MARINE PARK		•		
61 SAIL ROCK (HIN BAI)			•	



## 58 FIVE ISLANDS

**Location:** 4 nautical miles (10km) southeast of the Na Thon Pier

**Depth:** 16-79ft (5-24m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Novice



A group of five high, rocky islands to the southwest of Ko Samui provides the backdrop for some nice diving. The area's geographic formation means that there is usually a protected area year-round, so diving in monsoon season is still possible.

Dive training is also popular in the shallow sandy areas of this site where divers can practice their skills.

Since it is relatively shallow and not known for high visibility, divers should take it slow and easy here and look for small marine life like bulldozer shrimp and their gobies. There are also some coral gardens and nice sea fans. Look for sea anemones on the top of rocks with false and pink clownfish.



Video at a morning Ko Tao departure

## Gulf Coast Dive Sites

The Gulf of Thailand, a broad and relatively shallow expanse of water with numerous islands and national parks, is a hotbed for dive training. One main dive region comprises of the many islands of **Ang Thong Marine National Park**. Farther east are the popular dive islands of Ko Samui and Ko Tao. On the mainland and accessible from Bangkok is Chumphon. Diving is done from here but it is a ferry and shipment point, so it's not quite as tourism-oriented as some nearby islands. North and east is the tourist magnet of Pattaya Beach with its hotel rows and many attractions. This was the seat of diving in Thailand in the 1960s and many dive shops still thrive here. Dive sites are around Pattaya Beach and south and east to the Cambodian border. New sites are being explored off the Thai southeast coast. The Gulf of Thailand is quickly developing into a technical diving destination due to the many new and fairly deep shipwrecks found in the region in the past decade.



A moray eel peeks around an urchin

## 59 AO CHAWENG

**Location:** East coast of Ko Samui

**Depth:** 0-23ft (0-7m)

**Access:** Beach or Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Novice



Ao Chaweng can be done as a shore or boat dive and is also a popular training site. Dive shops conduct intro dives and specialized training at the sand's edge, making for a convenient way to dive and snorkel.

Although it is a sandy beach with sea green water trailing into a bluer turquoise, this doesn't usually translate into great visibility. Try to dive or snorkel at high, incoming tide to maximize the best visibility. Look out for sea cucumbers, colorful parrotfish, butterflyfish, wrasse and groupers among the corals. Beware of scorpionfish that may be well-camouflaged.

## 60

## ANG THONG NATIONAL MARINE PARK

**Location:** 9.7 nautical miles (18km) west of Ko Samui

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

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Novice with guide



Forty-two islets comprise this very beautiful area of limestone cliffs and jungle reminiscent of popular Ko Phi or the Palau Rock Islands. It is largely uninhabited and its beauty, favorable currents and varied undersea terrain have made the area popular for training and easy diving. These islands are just plain pretty and offer nice, shallow dives, many interesting snorkeling spots and a nice diversion from the crowds.

When arriving or between dives or snorkels, look for wildlife, such as the langur, an Asian long-tailed monkey,

A foraging lionfish



hair-nosed otters, pacific reef egrets, sea eagles, land tortoises and even pythons.

Ko Wao and Hin Yipoon have shallow caves and soft corals. Ko Yipoon and Ko Yipoon Yai, the northernmost of the park islands, have reputations for minimal currents and good visibility. Yai has a series of small caves, healthy coral and some arches that divers like to enjoy in fairly shallow water.

Look for sea snakes, hawksbill sea turtles, large snappers and sweetlips, great barracuda and blue-stripe fusilier schools. The area is also the major spawning ground for the short-bodied mackerel.

Snorkelers may wish to see Thale Nai. It is an inland saltwater marine lake found on Ko Mae Koh.

## 61 SAIL ROCK (HIN BAI)

**Location:** 17 nautical miles (32km) north of Ko Samui

**Depth:** 0-108ft (0-33m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



This large and popular rock protrudes above sea then drops 110ft or so below the surface. Most dive companies prefer to venture here on good seas with experienced divers, as Sail Rock and **Chumphon Pinnacle** are the prime dive sites for these islands.

The best way to dive this vertical site is to drop down deep and look for gray

## Full Moon Madness

Don't expect to get a room without major advance reservations around the time of the full moon (every month) at Ko Pha-Ngan. The famous full moon parties, which attract as many as 20,000 people to all-nighters on Haad Rin's Beach, are now part of the island's international claim to fame. Paradise Bungalows, the site of the original full moon party, consistently puts on an inspired show with wild decor and a combination of superb resident and international guest DJs. Paint yourself in UV colors, dance under the black light and go wild to techno, trance, goa, drum n' bass, dub, reggae, commercial hits, house and even blues music. In all, there are roughly 15 sound systems blasting all night long at Haad Rin Beach. People gather and meet others from all corners of the globe at small tables all along the beach – just order drinks and food from the restaurants and bars. There's even an 'after party' now. The good news is that if you do go to bed early, you may have the dive boat all to yourself if you do dive the next day after the full moon party. Everyone else will be nursing a hangover.

reef and sleeping leopard sharks. The deeper reaches also have large growths of ever-green tube coral trees, black coral and moustache triggerfish nesting areas.

As you move up the rock exploring the yellow tubastrea coral growth, nudibranchs, white-eyed morays, golden morays and various nooks and crannies for eels, keep an eye out in the blue.

Guides like to lead guests up through a vertical shaft, often referred to as 'The Chimney', from 60ft to 20ft. It's not big, so listen carefully to instructions during the briefing and keep a lookout for raggy scorpionfish.

At the rock's top there are anemones galore with pink anemonefish and some anemone crabs. Look also for blue-ring angels, rabbitfish, fusiliers and batfish schools that like to loll in the current. Blue water action also includes chevron barracuda and many types of jacks.

Currents can be strong here at times. There is a buoy line up to the surface, but be careful of unmoored boats in the area.



Schooling bigeye snapper



Bluestripe fusiliers exit a deep crevasse



Urchins and tube corals adorn a pinnacle

### KO TAO & KO NANG YUAN

Ko Tao, meaning 'Turtle Island', was all but uninhabited in the 1950s, though you'd never know it nowadays. Though it's growing and improving rapidly, seemingly month-to-month, it is still small enough to be laid-back and a bit cozy. A large turtle in front of Crystal Dive near the Mae Haad town pier greets aspiring divers, and a road that doesn't even go halfway around the beautifully hilly island keeps things close and personal.

In the late 1980s the first Samui-based dive operators began running overnight live aboard trips to Ko Tao. The popularity of the island as a dive destination grew, as water clarity tends to be better here and the coral and marine diversity is good. Realizing there was a wealth of untouched beauty, dive operations began relocating to Ko Tao.

More than 3% of the divers in the world are now certified here annually, and courses at all levels are nearly always available.

Hillside bungalows in niche resorts and basic dive camps run the gamut of accommodation. Virtually all have dive facilities and most have numerous classrooms. Good restaurants abound, too. Shops have first-rate, new rental gear, and there's even a full service dive supply store right off the ferry pier. Nights

are spent gathered for happy hour at a dive shop beach pub, followed by a review of the day's dive adventures videoed by local shop professionals. Everywhere you look, something dive-related is happening. Many people spend the morning diving and then relax and watch the sun go down from a beautiful stretch of sand called Sairee Beach.

Nearby and part of the scenic offering of many of the island's northern viewpoints is Ko Nang Yuan, a tiny island formation comprising three landmasses connected by a central spit of sand. Many nice, shallow dives and snorkeling spots are accessible from the island, which also has a hotel.

If you want to dive, this is the place to come.

<i>Ko Tao &amp; Ko Nang Yuan</i>		GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
62	SOUTHWEST PINNACLE			•	
63	RED ROCK (SHARK ISLAND)		•		
64	HIN WONG PINNACLE			•	
65	JAPANESE GARDEN			•	
66	WHITE ROCK	•	•		
67	TWINS (BAY #1)		•		
68	MANGO BAY		•		
69	GREEN ROCK		•		
70	CHUMPHON PINNACLE				•



Silver sweetlips

## 62 SOUTHWEST PINNACLE

**Location:** 4 nautical miles (7km) southwest of Ko Tao  
**Depth:** 20-108ft (6-33m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



Southwest of Ko Tao, this site is one of the Gulf's premier diving destinations, with depths ranging as deep as 100ft. The site features a series of seven under-sea pinnacles, the highest of which rises to about 20ft from the surface. There are two moorings here.

On the upper levels of the pinnacles is a field of anemones and abundant whip corals, and large sea fans along the reef edges that feed in the currents passing along the walls. Look into the blue for jacks and tuna.

Fish life includes schools of bigeye snappers, Moorish idols and 4ft-long great barracuda. Cleaning stations are prevalent, and angels, parrotfish and many species of butterflyfish come in to clean, while bannerfish, scrawled filefish and even some spiny puffers are seen around the reef. Look also for large saddleback groupers.

To the southeast of the main site lies a smaller pinnacle which is home to two resident - if somewhat shy - reef whitetip sharks. Currents here can be tricky at times, so be aware of what's happening.

## 63 RED ROCK (SHARK ISLAND)

**Location:** 0.5 nautical miles (1km) southeast of Ko Tao  
**Depth:** 0-79ft (0-24m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Novice



It seems there are a lot of 'Shark Islands' in Thailand, and this is Ko Tao's entry into the fray. A granite peak drops down to the sand, with various levels and lots of coral heads and rocks to poke about. The depth here is only about 70ft to the sand, so a nice long dive with reasonable bottom time can be made. A great dive at the island's south end, anything can and sometimes does show up here.

The currents here can be mild to strong and they feed sea fans, wire corals and a very good collection of hard corals. Divers see the namesakes here as well, with whitetip and leopard sharks occasionally making an appearance, and even whiptail rays. Look also in the sand and under corals for blue spotted rays. The fish of note are scrawled filefish, starry puffers and titan triggers (give them wide berth when they are nesting), along with parrotfish and giant morays. Keep an eye out for resting hawksbill turtles during your dive.

This site presents good opportunities for underwater photographers, particularly at a spot at the north end of the site called 'fish junction' which is especially active and great for 35mm to 50mm photos of fish and some invertebrates.



Ringed angelfish



Bannerfish move across the reef

## 64 HIN WONG PINNACLE

**Location:** South of Laem Hin Wong, east of Ko Tao  
**Depth:** 10-98ft (3-30m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



Hin Wong Bay is a laid-back beach destination reachable by a bumpy ride over the island's central and rocky ridge and down to the east coast. A boat ride is much more pleasant and to dive the pinnacle, a boat is needed.

Hin Wong Pinnacle, in the bay, has a steady stream of divers who come to see what marine life this barely submerged table topped rock has to offer. It bottoms out at 100ft, so it's a good spot for all levels of divers.

Known for beautiful soft corals, the reef below has black coral trees and gorgonian sea fans at depth. Look around all of the rocks at the site for unusual creatures and nudibranchs. There is a good chance of seeing hawksbill sea turtles. There are two buoys on the site, which can be dived as long as the wind isn't coming in from the northeast. It is sometimes done as a night dive, so that divers can look for sleeping turtles.

## 65 JAPANESE GARDEN

**Location:** East of Ko Nang Yuan**Depth:** 20-50ft (4-15m)**Access:** Boat**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate

Nestled in the scenic bay between the two islands of Ko Nang Yuan and Ko Tao, the reef has a beautiful natural landscape and thus has been dubbed a Japanese Garden. Shallow and harboring a nice selection of hard and soft corals, a relaxed dive looking at the marine life can be made here.

This is also a popular site for training dives, as the bottom in many spots is only 30ft to 40ft deep. Fusiliers dominate the upper water column, while parrotfish, blue ring angels, blue spotted rays and moustache triggerfish can be seen regularly. Look for caves and short swim-throughs at the site's south end.

## 66 WHITE ROCK

**Location:** Between Ko Tao & Ko Nang Yuan**Depth:** 6.5-72ft (2-22m)**Access:** Boat**Expertise Rating:** Novice

White Rock is an interesting site commonly done as a second dive on the way back from **Chumphon Pinnacle**. It complements the exciting Chumphon dives well, has lots to see and is shallow enough for a nice long bottom time. Highlighted by a shallow granite pinnacle and deeper pinnacle, with other boulders and coral heads scattered about, the cover is perfect for many kinds of marine life.

White-eye morays hide in the cracks and crevices. Chromodoris and other nudibranchs lay eggs on the side of the rocks. This is actually a very good site for macro photography. The bubbly sand is a favored habitat for bulldozer shrimp and their accompanying watchdog gobies. You can settle gently into the sand and watch as these industrious shrimp keep the burrow clean while the sentry guards the hole.

This dive may be the Christmas tree worm capitol of Thailand. Some sites are covered with multi-colored tree worms so thick it's hard to see the actual hard coral head. There is also a nice selection of sea anemones with one-stripe clownfish in only 30ft of water to the west.

This is a favored training site and a good night dive. The parrotfish form a bubble around themselves at night here and the shell life is good, particularly when cones and cowries come out.



The feathery gills of a nudibranch

Crystal Dive homage to its patron.  
Ko Tao means Turtle Island



## 67 TWINS (BAY #1)

**Location:** West of Ko Nang Yuan  
**Depth:** 33-59ft (10-18m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Novice



South of **Japanese Garden** are the two main pinnacles of Twins and a smaller, deeper one. This is another fun dive site at Ko Tao, with reasonable depths, good marine life and excellent areas for dive training.

The pinnacles are surrounded by soft, white sand dotted with the unusual symbiotic relationships of goby fish and their blind-shrimp housemates. There are large groupers, blue-ring angelfish and brilliant yellow and black masked raccoon butterflyfish. The anemone count is also high. There is a famous carpet anemone here in the sand out to the south. Mork and Mindy is a pair of the rather uncommon saddleback clownfish. Flatworms, nudibranchs and pipefish all like this habitat.

The east has the best safety stop on the island, with a healthy school of curious yellowtail barracuda.

## 68 MANGO BAY

**Location:** North end of Ko Tao  
**Depth:** 6-54ft (2-16m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Novice



Only accessibly by boat, Mango Bay is a secluded sand-bottomed bay at the north end of Ko Tao. Nestled in the tropical beauty of coconut palms and other hillside hardwoods, this is a good place to snorkel, undertake a dive

instruction or Discover Diving course, and also have a leisurely shallow dive among the many coral clusters.

Schools of squid are often seen in the upper water column and may get quite curious if you stop and watch them. If you swim toward them, they will swim away. The site is also known for small hawksbill turtles, along with butterflyfish, parrotfish and Titan triggers, a nice selection of sea anemones and some soft corals.

Be aware the center of the bay is sometimes busy with boat traffic in and out of the beach. Try to confine your dive to the east side, which is probably the most interesting with varied corals and formations. The west has some good hiding spots for turtles.



A beautifully colored, ornate ghost pipefish



New divers descend for a Chumphon Pinnacle dive

## 69 GREEN ROCK

**Location:** North of Ko Nang Yuan

**Depth:** 13-92ft (4-28m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Novice



One of the outlying dive sites found to the north of Ko Nang Yuan is a place named Green Rock. Ko Nang Yuan looks picturesque from the two-buoy site marker.

Many brightly colored soft corals and sponges cling to the insides of swim-through caverns and the undersides of outcroppings here. You also might scare up a resting whitetip shark or two hiding by day under the outcrops.

This is a good spot to see invertebrates like nudibranchs and flatworms. The sand also has tube anemones that host glass shrimp – look closely to see if these transparent shrimp are on the hosts. White-eye and yellow margin morays are also resident, while the outer parts of the site host shoals of electric blue damselfish dancing in the current.

## 70 CHUMPHON PINNACLE

**Location:** 2.7 nautical miles (5km)

northwest of Ko Nang Yuan

**Depth:** 0-108ft (0-33m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



Northwest of Ko Tao, the Chumphon Pinnacle is widely regarded as one of the Gulf's premier dive sites. The site itself is comprised of one huge, main granite pinnacle and a series of smaller pinnacles rising from the bottom. Buoys lead down to the main pinnacle and divers meet the top of the reef at 45ft. The pinnacle bottoms out at its deepest at the south end at 120ft.

For the best diving, go early before it gets too crowded with divers and boats, or wait until the late afternoon. Head down to the south end and go deep to see if there are any gray reef sharks in the 100ft to 120ft range. They don't usually come very close, but can be close enough to see. The lower depths here can also be subject to thermoclines, so it can be clear and warm on top, and cold and dark down deeper. Or the opposite can also occur. A small, deep set of rock off the south end can be seen when it's very clear.

Keep a watch into the blue here as this site can have its world-class days. There have been reports of baleen whales, whale sharks, broadbill swordfish and vast shoals of bigeye jacks.

Head back up from the south, stopping at the two pinnacles and small canyons that hold large marbled groupers, tubastrea corals, sea anemones, lots of spiny urchins and many scorpionfish in the rocks.

Finish back at the mooring at about 60ft, where batfish like to play in the current and circle divers. Huge schools of yellowstripe fusiliers swoop through

the open water here. Remember to keep plenty of air to ascend, as the top of the pinnacle is still deep.

## Going Tech

The quest for deep wreck diving is being realized in Thailand by the Trident Team of Jamie Macleod and Stuart Oehl, who run a dive center and also a live aboard with dedicated tech wreck diving charters.

Technical diving is new to Ko Tao and Thailand as a whole. As Thailand's waters, especially in the Gulf, aren't considered to be overly deep by tech standards, this has not been a tech hotbed like Bikini Atoll. However, the depths are still considerably beyond safe sport diving limits and new finds have put a spotlight on tech endeavors here.

Having a huge area of relatively shallow water to explore, it is gaining in popularity. The gulf has been a major shipping route for hundreds of years and the wrecks so far found and explored include wooden Chinese pottery wrecks, WWII ships, planes, submarines and modern wrecks. The USS *Lagarto* was the most publicized find, and landed the MV *Trident* pair on US national news and the *Undersea Detectives* TV show. The USS *Lagarto* is a Balao class fleet submarine sunk by Imperial Japanese Navy mine-layer *Hatsutaka* in May 1945 with all 86 hands lost. She sits upright and fully intact in 235ft of water, and is a demanding dive.

Japanese records apparently state that 179 marus (merchant vessels) were lost in the Gulf of Thailand in WWII. The coordinates of many of these virgin wrecks are known, and exploratory expeditions are run on a regular basis. Although there's no guarantee of a great new wreck every trip, the success rate is very high.



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