

# Andaman Coast



On 26 December 2004 a 9.5 magnitude earthquake on the Indian Ocean's floor unleashed a mammoth tsunami that first swallowed, and then spat out, the usually tranquil green Andaman Sea as a 15m-high raging wave. It flattened entire communities, claimed more than 6000 lives and shattered the region's tourism industry.

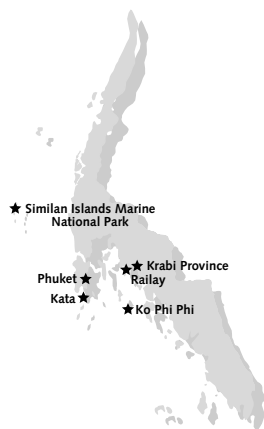
But even the world's second most powerful earthquake couldn't shake the Andaman Coast's super-sized natural beauty. With a face of soaring jagged limestone peaks, jade water for eyes and long sun-kissed golden beaches for legs, this bit of Thailand is positively dreamy.

The Andaman Coast encourages you to design your own adventure, with choices as endless as the sparkling sea. Surf Thailand's best breaks in Kata, Phuket, which dazzles with fine resorts, fine cuisine and fine beaches. Check out the otherworldly, underwater marine life on a live-aboard dive trip around the Similan Islands. Or really get off the beaten path and go to Ko Tarutao National Marine Park, where you can camp on wild, pristine beaches. For lazy beach days there's dramatic Ko Phi Phi or laid-back backpacker sweetheart Ko Lanta. And if you want to test your limits on some of the best rocks in the world, head to our favourite beach in Thailand, beautiful Railay. (Think water sparkling like an emerald brooch, specked with bits of sapphire and swirls of turquoise.)

Reminders of the tsunami linger. On Patong's streets one passes as many evacuation route signs as vendors toting fake Chanel. But while the clatter of construction is a constant, sadly, tourists are not. Which is a shame, because there is no reason not to visit. Residents are thinking forward, not back, and so should you.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Scaling limestone cliffs rising from emerald seas in pin-up-worthy **Railay** (p700)
- Riding morning waves at **Kata** (p683) then sipping Singha at a beachside bar, watching others wipe out worse than you
- Snorkelling crystal clear waters and lazing on honey-hued beaches at lovely **Ko Phi Phi** (p705)
- Doing the trash-with-cash thing in **Phuket** (p660), indulging your sinful side in Patong's seedy bars before bedding down at one of the island's luxury resorts
- Discovering the underwater world of the beautiful **Similan Islands Marine National Park** (p655), one of the planet's top dive sites



## Climate

A main concern when visiting Thailand's southern provinces is the weather. The Andaman coast receives more rain than the southern gulf provinces – with May to October being the months of heaviest rainfall. During this time passenger boats to some islands, such as the Surin, Similan and Ko Tarutao, are suspended. On the other hand, the southern gulf provinces are comparatively dry until October, with rainfall heaviest in November. The abundance of regional microclimates makes it difficult to generalise but, fortunately, the peninsula on which southern Thailand sits is somewhat narrow. If you find the weather on the Andaman coast unpleasant, you can easily travel to the other side and hope to find the sun shining.

## National Parks

This region has more than its share of national parks. Ao Phang-Nga (p659) offers limestone cliffs, islands and caves to explore by sea-kayaking, scuba-diving or snorkelling. Khao Lak/Lamru (p653) has lots of hiking past cliffs and beaches, while multiple islands and kilometre after kilometre of mangroves and jungle make Laem Son (p649) perfect for birding. The Similan Islands Marine National Park (p655) is a world-class diving and snorkelling destination. In the Surin Islands Marine National Park (p651) you'll find granite islands and coral reefs, and whale sharks and manta rays to dive or snorkel with. Hat Jao Mai (p721) has sand beaches, mangroves and coral islands, while Khao Phanom Bencha (p704) is a hiker's paradise with mountain jungle, tumbling waterfalls and monkeys. Wild islands, pristine beaches and azure seas provide plenty of opportunities for snorkelling and diving in remote Ko Tarutao Marine National Park (p730). Sa Nang Manora Forest Park (p658) has a fairyland setting of moss-encrusted roots and rocks, plus multilevel waterfalls. Than Bokkharani (p704) offers a similar setting – emerald waters, caves and cliffs. On the border between Thailand and Malaysia, Thaleh Ban has the region's best-preserved section of white meranti rainforest.

## Getting There & Away

Getting to the Andaman coast is straightforward. From Bangkok, the islands on the lower southern gulf and numerous other Thai destinations (as well as neighbouring Malaysia), it's easy to hop on a bus or train and then catch a ferry to the islands. Aeroplanes also ply the

## FAST FACTS

- **Best Time to Visit** November to April
- **Population** 4.7 Million

skies between Bangkok, Phuket and Krabi. Bus and train travel from Bangkok is generally cheap, relatively efficient and mostly takes place overnight. Almost any travel agency can sell you a combination bus or train and boat ticket to Ko Phi Phi or Ko Lanta, which should get you to your destination with little effort. Beware of the cheapest tickets as they often prove to be scams. Pay a few more baht, however, and you'll likely arrive with few hassles. For more information on getting into and out of the region, see the destination sections or check out the Transport chapter (p761).

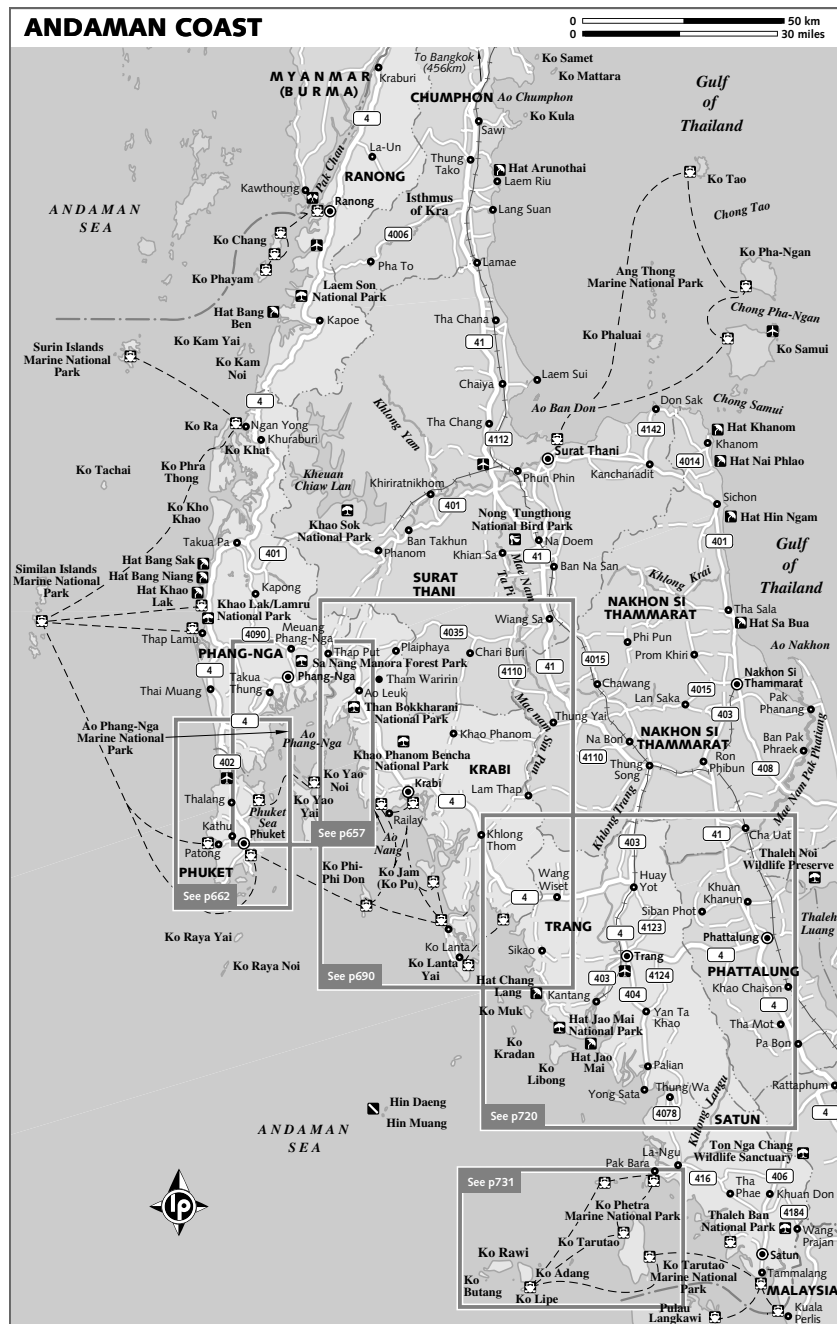
## Getting Around

An intricate public transportation network takes you almost everywhere. Numerous boats shuttle back and forth between Ko Phi Phi and Ko Lanta and other more far-flung islands. Boats to more remote destinations – like the Surin Islands, Similan Islands and Ko Tarutao Marine National Parks – only run during the dry season (that would be November through May). Minivans and buses to just about anywhere make frequent trips throughout the day (and sometimes night). Basically, if you need to get from one tourist hot spot to another, it will take very little planning. Cheap sawngthæw (small pick-up truck) and motorcycle taxis are also abundant and are used for short trips around the islands and mainland. If you want to drive yourself, motorcycles can be rented for about 250B to 300B per day. Car rental, at about 1500B per day, is another option.

# RANONG PROVINCE

Rising out of the murky, otherworldly waters of Myanmar's hinterland, Thailand's least populated province is also its most rainy, logging in with up to eight months of it per year. As a result the heavily forested and mountainous province is lush and green (although it's swampy near the coastline and mainland beaches are almost nonexistent).

There are really only two reasons to visit Ranong: visa runs to Myanmar or a trip to



### EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

In 2005, Thailand officially inaugurated a national disaster warning system, which was created in response to the country's lack of preparedness during the 2004 Asian tsunami. The Bangkok-based centre is staffed by a team of scientists and crisis-management staff who will evaluate the intensity of natural disasters and issue warnings to the general public. It is anticipated that a tsunami warning can be issued within 30 minutes of the event being detected by existing international systems that monitor seismic activity in the Pacific Ocean. The public will be warned via the nationwide radio network, Channel 5 army TV network, the state-operated TV pool, and SMS messages. For non-Thai speakers, the centre has installed warning towers along the high-risk beachfront areas that will broadcast pre-recorded announcements in various languages accompanied by flashing lights. The **call centre** (☎ 1860) also handles questions and tips from the public regarding potential or unfolding disasters.

the laid-back island of Ko Phayam, part of the Laem Son National Park, which includes the longest protected shoreline in the country.

### RANONG

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pop 24,500

On the east bank of the Chan River's tea brown estuary, the frontier town of Ranong is no more than a short boat ride – or a filthy swim – from Myanmar. In many ways, the capital of Ranong Province is a stereotypical border town: shabby, frenetic and ever so slightly seedy. But while most visitors roll into town for visa services, the town has a thriving Burmese population – keep an eye out for men wearing traditional *longyi* (Burmese sarong) – a clutch of natural hot springs and a handful of tumbledown historic buildings. In fact, even if you're not here to renew your visa, it's well worth taking the opportunity to have a cup of afternoon tea in Myanmar.

An increasing number of travellers are showing up specifically to dive the spectacular Burma Banks, 60km north of the Surin Islands. A number of dive operators have established themselves in Ranong (which does lend the city a bit of an expat feel), using it as a jumping-off point for live-aboard trips to the aforementioned Burma Banks.

### Orientation & Information

Most of Ranong lies just west of Hwy 4, about 600km south of Bangkok and 300km north of Phuket.

### BOOKSHOPS

**Chuan Aksam bookshop** (☎ 0 7781 1154; Th Ruangrat; ☎ 8am-9.30pm) Near the corner of Th Tha Meuang, it has some reading material in English.

### IMMIGRATION OFFICES

The main Thai immigration office is on the road to Saphan Plaa, about halfway between town and the main piers, across from a branch of the Thai Farmer's Bank. If entering Thailand from Myanmar via Kawthoung, you'll have to visit this office to get your passport stamped with a visa on arrival.

There is also a smaller immigration post in the vicinity of the Saphan Plaa pier. If you're just going in and out of Myanmar's Kawthoung for the day, a visit to the small post will suffice.

For details on renewing a visa or making a trip to Victoria Point (Myanmar), see p647.

### INTERNET ACCESS

**INet** (☎ 0 7882 2877; Th Ruangrat; per hr 40B; ☎ 9am-9pm)

### MONEY

Most of Ranong's banks are on Th Tha Meuang (the road to the fishing pier), near the intersection with Th Ruangrat, Ranong's main north-south street. Many have ATMs.

### POST

**Main post office** (Th Chonrau; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat)

### TRAVEL AGENCIES

Plenty of agencies along Th Ruangrat offer visa services, bus and boat tickets, make accommodation arrangements for the nearby islands of Ko Chang and Ko Phayam, and run day trips to Kawthoung (in Myanmar).

**Pon's Place** (☎ 0 7782 3344; Th Ruangrat; ☎ 7.30am-midnight) Also rents out motorcycles and cars.

**Tanatwan Tours** (☎ 0 7782 2807; tanatwan@hotmail.com; 16/8 Th Chonrau; ☎ 9am-8pm) Visa trips cost 350B (plus visa costs) per person and depart daily at 9am.

## Sights & Activities

### HOT SPRINGS

บ่อน้ำร้อน

Ranong may lack the sophisticated pizzazz of your typical spa town, but it is well known for its hot springs. You can sample the waters at Wat Tapotaram, where **Ranong Mineral Hot Springs** (Th Kamlangsap; admission 10B; ☎ 8am-5pm) offers pools hot enough to boil eggs in (65°C). Almost, but not quite, like the three bears of *Goldilocks* fame, the names of the three springs translate as Father Spring, Mother Spring and Baby Spring and each has its own distinct flavour (all horrid). The spring water is thought to be sacred, as well as having miraculous healing powers.

You can bathe in rustic rooms where you scoop water from separate hot and cool water

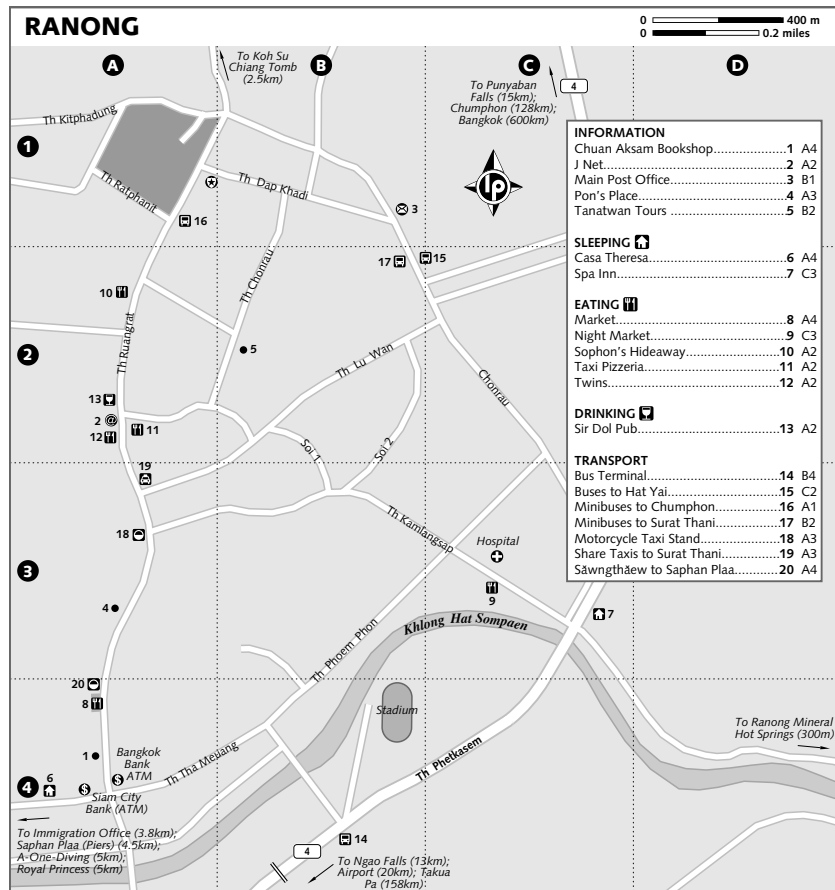
tanks and sluice the mixed water over your body Thai-style. Don't get inside the tanks and spoil the water. Several local hotels pipe water directly from the springs into rooms.

### WATERFALLS

Of the several well-known waterfalls in Ranong Province, **Ngao Falls** and **Punyaban Falls** are within walking distance of Hwy 4. Ngao is 13km south of Ranong, while Punyaban is 15km north. Just take a *sǎwngthǎew* in either direction and ask to be let off at the *nǎam tók* (waterfall).

### DIVING

Live-aboard diving trips run from Ranong to world-class bubble-blowing destinations



## RENEWING YOUR VISA AT VICTORIA POINT

The dusty, tumbledown port at the southernmost tip of mainland Myanmar was named Victoria Point by the British, but is known as Ko Song (Second Island) by the Thais. The Burmese appellation, Kawthoung, is most likely a corruption of the Thai name. Most travellers come here to renew their visas, but the place also makes an interesting day trip.

Fishing and trade with Thailand keep things ticking over, but Kawthoung also churns out some of Myanmar's best kick boxers. Nearby islands are inhabited by bands of nomadic *chao leh* (sea gypsies).

The easiest way to renew your visa is to opt for one of the 'visa trips' (from 350B per person plus visa fees) offered by travel agencies in Ranong, or you can do the legwork yourself.

When the Thai-Myanmar border is open, boats to Kawthoung leave from the pier at Saphan Plaa (Pla Bridge) about 5km from the centre of Ranong. Take *sǎwngthǎew* 2 from Ranong (10B) and get off at the **immigration office** (☎ 0 7782 2016; Th Ruangrat; ☎ 8.30am-6pm), 700m north of the pier, to get your passport stamped. From there, groups of people will be waiting to take you on a boat trip (one-way/return 50/100B) to Myanmar immigration. When negotiating the price, confirm whether it is per person or per ride, and one-way or return. At the checkpoint, you must inform the authorities that you're a day visitor – in which case you will pay a fee of US\$5 or 300B for a day permit. If you have a valid Myanmar visa in your passport, you'll be permitted to stay for up to 28 days.

If you're just coming to renew your Thai visa, the whole process will take a minimum of two hours. Bear in mind when you are returning to Thailand that Myanmar time is 30 minutes behind Thailand's. This has caused problems in the past for returning visitors who got through Burmese immigration before its 6pm closing time only to find the Thai office closed. Though the Thai immigration department seems to have changed its hours in order to avoid this unpleasantness, it's a good idea to double-check closing hours when leaving the country.

including the Burma Banks and the Surin and Similan Islands. Prices start at around US\$200 for a two-day, two-night package. Try **A-One-Diving** (☎ 0 7783 2984; www.a-one-diving.com; 77 Saphan Plaa).

## Sleeping

Ranong's hotels don't exactly get your blood racing; they are more likely to make it boil. Most offer little more than bare bones amenities.

The places on or near Th Phetkasem (Hwy 4) can be reached from town by *sǎwngthǎew* 2.

**Kiwi Orchid** (☎ 0 7783 2812; www.kiwiorchid.com; Th Phetkasem; r 250B) Right by the bus station – expect late night rumblings – this ramshackle backpacker place boasts plenty of greenery, guitars on the walls of the downstairs café and heavily tattooed staff. The atmosphere is good, but business is slow and the rooms are looking a little downtrodden.

**Spa Inn** (☎ 0 7781 1715; fax 0 7782 3384; 25/11 Th Phetkasem; r 300-500B; ☎) Walls here could do with a rubdown with the local mineral water, but this so-so hotel takes a step up the price (and quality) escalator, with large rooms and water pumped in from the springs. The back rooms look out on the lush green mountainside.

**Casa Theresa** (☎ 0 7781 1135; 119/18 Th Tha Meuang; r 200-700B; ☎) There's no question the beds here might be too firm for some people's tastes. However this clean off-the-street guesthouse redeems itself with quite authentic Thai massages and friendly, knowledgeable staff.

**Royal Princess** (☎ 0 7783 5240; www.royalprincess.com; r 800-1200B; ☎) Our choice for sleeping, although the amenities are better than the rooms (which are looking a bit tatty these days). The place has a pool and gym, and mineral water in the bathrooms. Rates vary with the wet and dry(er) seasons.

## Eating & Drinking

On Th Kamlangsap, not far from Hwy 4 and the Spa Inn, is a night market with several food stalls selling great Thai dishes at low prices; across the street is a modest noodle stand. The day market, on Th Ruangrat towards the southern end of town, offers inexpensive Thai and Burmese meals, as well as fresh produce, fish and meats. A cluster of decent eateries can also be found at the northern end of Th Ruangrat.

**Twins** (Th Ruangrat; mains 40-80B; ☎ dinner) Thai and Western dishes are served amid wind

### WHAT TO EXPECT ON THE ANDAMAN COAST

- Budget (under 600B)
- Midrange (600 to 2000B)
- Top End (more than 2000B)

High-season rates have been quoted. Ranong tends to be cheaper than other provinces of the Andaman Coast. Expect to pay between 150B and 600B for a budget bungalow or room. Midrange options go for around 600B to 800B while top-end places start at around 1000B.

In 2006, prices in tsunami-affected regions of Phang-Nga were still severely discounted (lots of places were still under construction). Budget places cost under 600B, midrange options go for 600B to 2000B and top-end places start at 2000B. Prices drop by 50% in the rainy season (when, frankly, the province can be pretty darn depressing. Save your visit here for the sunny season).

If you are coming from parts of the gulf during the high season, Phuket may seem a bit pricey. Budget digs on the beaches go between 400B and 600B on average. Midrange hotels go between 800B and 3500B, with top-end places costing more than 3500B per night. Phuket has some of the most luxurious resorts in Thailand. Prices can drop by as much as 50% during the low season. Accommodation on Phi Phi is ridiculously expensive compared with much of Thailand – a fan room in the low season costs 900B, double what it costs in Phuket!

chimes and the odd foreign football game on the TV at this timber alfresco joint. If you take a table at the back, you can just about sneak a view of green fields.

**Taxi Pizzeria** (☎ 0 7782 5730; Th Ruangrat; dishes 60-180B; ☺ lunch & dinner) Completed framed jigsaws provide the decoration at this spartan pizzeria. The food won't have mama amending her recipe book, but the chef does make an attempt at rustling up a reasonable margarita.

**Sophon's Hideaway** (☎ 0 7783 2730; Th Ruangrat; mains 60-200B; ☺ lunch & dinner) This little spot has everything, including internet access, a free pool table, a pizza oven, water features and rattan furnishings aplenty. The menu spans the East-West divide and cocktails are served come sundown.

**Sir Dol Pub** (☎ 0 9471 0884; Th Ruangrat; ☺ 8pm-2am) Proudly boasting a heritage stretching all the way back to the sepia-tint days of 1994, this parochial drinking den offers blacked-out windows, Thai tunes and live bands from 9pm.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

Ranong airport is 20km south of town, off Hwy 4. **Phuket Airlines** (☎ 0 7782 4591; www.phuketairlines.com) has two flights to Bangkok (one-way around 2700B) in the morning.

#### BUS

The bus terminal is on Th Phetkasem towards the southern end of town, though

some buses stop in town before proceeding to the terminal. Săwngthăew 2 (blue) passes the terminal.

**Tanatwan Tours** (☎ 0 7782 2807; tanatwan@hotmail.com; 16/8 Th Chonra; ☺ 9am-8pm) offers privately operated 2nd-class (360B, 11 hours, 10 daily), 1st-class (510B, 10 hours, 8am and 8pm) and 24-seat VIP (720B, 10 hours, 8pm) buses to Bangkok.

The bus terminal also has services to the following destinations:

#### BUSES FROM RANONG

Destination	Bus type	Price (B)	Duration (Hr)
Bangkok	VIP	389-515	10
	1st class	333	10
	2nd class ordinary	259	10
Chumphon	2nd class ordinary	185	10
	2nd class ordinary	70	3
Hat Yai	2nd class ordinary	50	3
	2nd class ordinary	300	5
Khuraburi	air-con	60	1½
	ordinary	40	1½
Krabi	air-con	106	6
Phang-Nga	ordinary	90	5
Phuket	air-con	185	5-6
	ordinary	103	5-6
Surat Thani	1st class	180	4-5
	2nd class	80	4-5

### Getting Around

From Ranong take a săwngthăew (15B) to Saphan Plaa pier. Motorcycle taxis will take you almost anywhere in town for 15B, to the hotels along Th Petchkasim for 20B and to the Saphan pier for boats to Ko Chang, Ko Phayam and Myanmar for 50B. **Pon's Place** (☎ 0 7782 3344; Th Ruangrat; ☺ 7.30am-midnight) can assist with motorcycle and car rentals.

### AROUND RANONG

#### Ko Chang

เกาะช้าง  
Ko Chang feels a world apart from most of Thailand's islands. There are no megaphone announcements for Thai boxing (even though some of the country's best fighters hail from Ranong Province), no streets designed entirely for *faràng*. No, Ko Chang isn't selling knock-off Ray-Bans and Playstation games. Its marketing scheme focuses squarely on seducing buyers with an older, slower version of Thailand. Electricity is sporadic, and tourists few and far between.

Pass the time exploring the island's tiny village capital (where boats dock during the dry season) or wind your way around the island on one of the dirt trails. Sea eagles, Andaman kites and hornbills all nest here and, if you're lucky, you'll catch sight of them floating above the mangroves. Keen sunbathers can lie out on one of the island's reasonable west coast beaches.

Bungalow operators can arrange boat trips to Ko Phayam and other nearby islands for around 250B per person (including lunch) in a group of six or more. Dive trips are also possible. **Aladdin Dive Cruise** (☎ 0 7782 0472; www.aladdindivecruise.de), on Ko Chang, runs PADI courses and offers a range of live-aboard dive safaris. A three-day live-aboard trip to the Surin Islands costs 11,250B; four-day trips to the Similan Islands cost 15,000B.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

Basic bungalows are the norm on rustic Ko Chang and, for the most part, they're only open from November to April. There is limited electricity and the cheaper rooms inevitably come with shared bathroom.

**Ko Chang Context** (☎ 0 7782 0118; bungalows 100-250B) North of the village, this spartan outfit is run by a welcoming Thai family and features basic bungalows on a rocky headland. It's homey and the beach is a stone's throw away.

**Hornbill Bungalow** (☎ 0 7783 3820; bungalows 150-250B) On an isolated beach in the island's north, this is a good spot for solitude seekers. It's a bit of a hike to get here, but the owner has a boat for ferrying guests around.

**Cashew Resort** (☎ 0 7782 4741; bungalows 200-600B) Cashew is Ko Chang's most venerable resort. Choose from cheap A-frame huts or larger, more robust bungalows.

**Eden Bistro Cafe** (☎ 0 7782 0172; bungalows 250-300B) Feast on a fab *phat thai* (thin noodles with vegetables, tofu and egg) in the café before falling into bed in one of the basic bungalows. Most of the digs come with shared bathroom, but there is one 'VIP' suite with attached shower. Eden is southwest of Ko Chang Context.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Ranong take a săwngthăew (15B) to Saphan Plaa pier, getting off at the PTT petrol station and toll booth. Look for the lane on the left just before the toll booth (there may be a sign referring to Ko Chang) and follow it down a few hundred metres, zigzagging along the way; turn left at the T-junction and walk about five minutes to reach the pier.

Two or three boats leave every morning from November to April; turn up around 9am to see when they're going, as they don't usually leave before this hour. During the high season (December to March) there's a regular noon departure daily. Boats return to Ranong at 8am the next day. The boat fare is 150B per person, but can be included in the cost of your accommodation if you book ahead.

### LAEM SON NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติแหลมสน

The **Laem Son National Park** (☎ 0 7782 4224; www.dnp.go.th; adult/child 200/100B) covers 315 sq km of the Kapoe district of Ranong and Khuraburi district in Phang-Nga. This area includes about 100km of Andaman Sea coastline – the longest protected shore in the country – as well as over 20 islands. Much of the coast here is covered with mangrove swamps, home to various species of birds, fish, deer and monkeys (including crab-eating macaques) often seen while driving along the road to the park headquarters.

The most accessible beach is **Hat Bang Ben**, where the park headquarters are. This long, sandy beach, backed by shady casuarinas, is said to be safe for swimming year-round.

From Hat Bang Ben you can see several islands, including the nearby Ko Kam Yai, Ko Kam Noi, Mu Ko Yipun, Ko Khang Khao and, to the north, Ko Phayam. The park staff can arrange boat trips out to any of these islands for 800B per boat per day. During low tide you can walk to an island just a couple of hundred metres from Hat Bang Ben.

**Ko Phayam** is a friendly, demure little island which supports about 500 inhabitants, mostly Thais and Burmese, with a smattering of expats and a few dozen ethnic *chao leh* (sea gypsies) thrown into the mix. While spotlighted by two main bays and their pretty beaches, Ko Phayam also has a couple of sizeable forested hills and plenty of scenic agricultural land to boot. Interesting fauna in the area include wild pigs, hornbills, monkeys and snakes. Locals support themselves prawn-fishing, farming cashews and working the rubber plantations.

The island has one 'village', where you will find the main pier, a couple of simple eateries, some small grocery stalls and a bar. From the pier area, motorcycle taxis scoot you to the 15 or so basic bungalow operations around the island, almost all of which are on the picturesque bay of Ao Khao Fai. A new motorcycle 'highway', running down the middle of Ko Phayam, augments smaller concrete roadways and dirt driveways.

**Ko Khang Khao** is known for a beach on its northern end, which is covered with colourful pebbles. Although underwater visibility isn't great here, it's a little better than on Ko Chang as it's further from the mouth of the Chan River. The beach on **Ko Kam Noi** has relatively clear water for swimming and snorkelling (April is the best month), plus the added bonus of fresh water year-round and plenty of grassy areas for camping. One island on the other side of Ko Kam Yai, which can't be seen from the beach, is **Ko Kam Tok** (also called Ko Ao Khao Khwai). It's only about 200m from Ko Kam Yai, and, like Ko Kam Noi, has a good beach, coral, fresh water and a camping ground. **Ko Kam Yai** is 14km southwest of Hat Bang Ben. It's a large island with some accommodation (camping and bungalows), a pretty beach and great snorkelling.

About 3km north of Hat Bang Ben, across the canal, is another beach, **Hat Laem Son**, which is almost always deserted. The only way to get here is to hike from Hat Bang Ben. In the opposite direction, about 50km south of Hat

Bang Ben, is **Hat Praphat**, very similar to Bang Ben, with casuarinas backing the long beach. Sea turtles lay eggs on Hat Praphat. There is a second park office here, which can be reached by road via Hwy 4 (Phetkasem Hwy).

In the canals you ford coming into the park, you may notice the large wooden racks that are used for raising oysters.

### Sleeping & Eating

It's best to stay in Ko Phayam if you're going to spend the night – the options are more appealing than the dingy national park bungalows at Hat Bang Ben. Fan cooled, rustic bungalows are the staple on Ko Phayam; electricity is usually only available from sunset to 10pm or 11pm. Most of the bungalow operations stay open throughout the year – although the shutters will come down if business becomes too slow – and many have attached eateries serving standard backpacker fare.

The following places are on Ao Yai, a pleasant 3km-long sweep of sandy beach, and Ao Khao Fai. The water tends to be choppy at Ao Yai than at Ao Khao Fai, which is a little further north. Though the beach is more sheltered at Ao Khao Fai, the bay is not quite as good for swimming and tides tend to be stronger. That said it's still a scenic spot for soaking up the sunshine and admiring the view.

**Vijit** (☎ 0 7783 4082; www.geocities.com/vijitbungalows; Ao Khao Fai; bungalows 100-200B) This place, towards the southern end of the bay, has about a dozen basic bungalows around a sandy lot planted with young trees. Each bungalow has been built in a slightly different style. At high tide, the beach here thins out. Contact the staff for free transport from Ranong.

**JPR** (Ao Khao Fai; bungalows 150-200B) Further north, JPR has nine simple bungalows spread out between trees, on a dusty hillside above the beach. It's friendly, pretty isolated and down a long driveway.

**Mountain Resort** (☎ 0 7782 0098; Ao Khao Fai; bungalows 350B) Located in a shady palm grove, this has some of the glossiest bungalows on the island – they are also some of the most pleasant. With only a handful of bungalows on offer, you can count on plenty of privacy and lashings of peace and quiet. Mountain Resort is at the northern end of the bay.

**Bamboo Bungalows** (☎ 0 7782 0012; Ao Yai; bungalows 100-500B) Opt for more expensive, but sturdier (read: monsoon-proof) concrete-

and-tile bungalows. It is run by an Israeli/Thai couple, offers oodles of atmosphere and attracts plenty of backpackers – when they are in town. There's a solid eatery, a pleasant, leafy garden and you can hire bodyboards if you fancy a boogie in the surf.

### Drinking

**Oscar's** (☎ 0 7782 4236; Ao Khao Fai; ☎ 10am-11pm) Located in the main village, this modern bar looks a little incongruous in its backwater setting. If you're after late-night (for a remote island) shenanigans, however, it is the place to go – the beer might even be cold.

### Getting There & Away

The turn-off for Laem Son National Park is about 58km from Ranong down Hwy 4 (Phetkasem Hwy), between the 657km and 658km markers. Buses heading south from Ranong can drop you off here (ask for Hat Bang Ben). Once you're off the highway, however, you'll have to flag down a pick-up truck going towards the park. If you can't get a ride all the way, it's a 10km walk from Hwy 4 to the park entrance. At the police box at the junction you may be able to hire a motorcycle taxi for 30B; the road is paved, so if you're driving it's a breeze.

See p649 for details on getting to Ranong's Saphan Plaa, from where boats head to Ko Phayam.

There are daily boats from Saphan Plaa to Ko Phayam's pier at around 8am and 3pm (100B, 1½ to two hours). From Ko Phayam back to Ranong the boats run at 9am and 2pm. During the high season there may be three runs daily. Long-tail boat charters to the island cost 1500B to 2000B.

There has been sporadic talk of a boat service running directly from Ranong to the two main bays on Ko Phayam (per person one way 100B), saving you a hefty motorcycle fare. This service would run from November to May only; ask around Ranong for the latest on this venture.

Boats out to the various islands can be chartered from the park's visitors centre; the general cost is 800B per day. You can arrange to go as far as the Similan or Surin Islands for 900B and 1200B per person, respectively.

### Getting Around

Motorcycle taxis provide the transport around Ko Phayam, there are no cars or trucks (yet), and roads are pleasantly motorcycle-sized. A

ride to your bungalow will cost 50B to 100B. Walking is possible but distances are long – it's about 45 minutes from the pier to Ao Khao Fai, the nearest bay.

Motorcycle rentals are available at **Oscar's** (☎ 0 7782 4236; per day approx 250B), the only bar in Ko Phayam's village – you can't miss it. Some of the bigger guesthouses might be able to arrange rentals, too.

## PHANG-NGA PROVINCE

More than anywhere else in Thailand, the Phang-Nga coastline is still reeling from the devastation of the 2004 tsunami. In fact about 6,000 of the deaths – well over half the national count – occurred along this section of the Andaman coast, particularly in the Thai Muang, Khao Lak, Bang Niang and Bang Sak regions.

From November to April the water is very clear, the sun shines, soda-white beaches beckon. In the rainy season, however, many places shut down and the area can feel a bit haunted and depressing.

Offshore, the Surin Islands and Similan Islands Marine National Parks harbour some of the world's top diving destinations.

For an overview on accommodation costs see the boxed text on p648.

### SURIN ISLANDS MARINE NATIONAL PARK (MU KO SURIN NATIONAL PARK)

อุทยานแห่งชาติหมู่เกาะสุรินทร์

The five gorgeous islands that make up **Surin Islands Marine National Park** (www.dnp.go.th; admission 400B; ☎ mid-Nov–mid-May) sit 60km offshore, just 5km from the Thai–Burma marine border. Healthy rainforest, pockets of white-sand beach in sheltered bays and rocky headlands that jut into the ocean characterise these granite-outcrop islands. The clearest of water makes for great marine life, with underwater visibility often up to 20m. The islands' sheltered waters also attract *chao naam* – sea gypsies – who live in a village onshore during the May–November monsoon season. Here they are known as Moken, from the local word *oken* meaning 'salt water'.

Ko Surin Nuea (north) and Ko Surin Tai (south) are the two largest islands. Park headquarters and all visitor facilities are at Ao Chong Khad on Ko Surin Nuea, near the jetty.

Khuraburi is the jump-off point for the park. The pier is about 9km north of town,

as is the mainland **national park office** (☎ 0 7649 1378; ☎ 8am-5pm) with good information, maps and helpful staff.

## Sights & Activities

### DIVING & SNORKELLING

Dive sites in the park include **Ko Surin Tai**, and **HQ Channel** between the two main islands. In the vicinity is **Richelieu Rock** (a seamount 14km southeast) where whale sharks are often spotted during March and April. Sixty kilometres northwest of the Surins – but often combined with dive trips to the park – are the famed **Burma Banks**, a system of submerged seamounts. The three major banks, **Silvertip**, **Roe** and **Rainbow**, provide five-star diving experiences, with coral gardens laid over flat plateaus and large oceanic and, smaller, reef marine species. There's presently no dive facility in the park itself, so dive trips (four-day live-aboards around 20,000B) must be booked from the mainland; see Getting There & Away, right, for more information.

Snorkelling is excellent due to relatively shallow reef depths of 5m to 6m, and most coral survived the tsunami intact. Two two-hour snorkelling trips by boat (per person 70B; gear per day 150B) leave island headquarters daily.

### WILDLIFE & WALKS

Around park headquarters you can explore the forest fringes, looking out for the crab-eating macaques (cheeky monkeys!) and some of the 57 resident bird species which include the fabulous Nicobar pigeon, endemic to the islands of the Andaman Sea. Along the coast you're likely to see the chestnut Brahminy kite soaring, and reef herons on the rocks. Twelve species of bat live here, most noticeably the tree-dwelling fruit bats, also known as flying foxes.

A rough-and-ready **walking trail** – not for the unsteady – winds 2km along the coast and through forest to the beach at **Ao Mai Ngam**, where there's good snorkelling. At low tide it's easy to walk between the bays near headquarters.

### OTHER ACTIVITIES

On Ko Surin Tai, the **Moken village** at Ao Bon welcomes visitors; take a long-tail boat from headquarters (80B). Post-tsunami, Moken have settled in this one sheltered bay where a major ancestral worship ceremony (Loi Reua) takes place in April. Painted *law bong* – protective totem poles – stand at the park entrance.

## Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation is simple and fine, but because of the island's short, narrow beaches it's very close together and can feel seriously crowded when full (around 300 people). For park accommodation, book online at [www.dnp.go.th](http://www.dnp.go.th) or with the **mainland park office** (☎ 0 7649 1378) in Khuraburi.

**Bungalows** (incl fan, bathroom & balcony 2000B) and **on-site tents** (1-person/2-person tents 300/450B) are available at Ao Chong Khad; tents should be available at Ao Mai Ngam from 2006. You can pitch your own **tent** (per night 80B). There's generator power until about 10pm.

A park **restaurant** (dishes from 60B) serves Thai food.

If you need to stay overnight in Khuraburi, try the new **Country Hut Riverside** (☎ 08 6272 0588; r from 300-500B; ☎) or long-standing **Tamarin Resort** (☎ 0 7649 1789; r from 300-500B; ☎). On either side of the bridge at the north end of town, each has clean, basic, tiny fan/air-con rooms. A more luxurious option, **Kuraburi Greenview Resort** (☎ 0 7640 1400; [www.kuraburigreenview.co.th](http://www.kuraburigreenview.co.th); d from 1900B; ☎) is 15km south of town, set among forest and river, with curious but comfortable wood, slate-and-cobblestone bungalows.

## Getting There & Away

A 'big boat' (return 1200B, 2½ hours one-way) leaves the Khuraburi pier at 9am daily, returning at 1pm. Tour operators use speed-boats (return 1600B, one hour one way) and will transfer independent travellers on their daily runs.

Several tour operators, all located near the pier, run day/overnight tours (around 2600/3500B) to the park; agencies in Khao Lak and Phuket can make bookings for these and for dive trips. In Khuraburi town, try the affable **Tom & Am Tour** (☎ 08 6272 0588; [www.surinislandtour.com](http://www.surinislandtour.com)) for on-spec bookings. Tour operators include transfers from Khao Lak in their prices.

Buses run three times daily between Phuket and Khuraburi (160B, 3½ hours) and between Khuraburi and Ranong (60B, 1½ hours).

## HAT BANG SAK

หาดบางสัก

Pre-tsunami the long, sleepy stretch of sand at Bang Sak had been attracting an ever-growing number of tourists striking north from the more heavily developed resorts of Phuket

and nearby Khao Lak. While most areas had recovered from the tsunami by the end of 2006, Bang Sak was still trying to rebuild its tourist infrastructure. Rehabilitation efforts will likely continue well into 2008. That said, the beach is open for business and the best way to help out the locals is to stop over for the night to get the economy rolling again. For the latest on the region's reconstruction, including details of the hotels that are open, visit [www.khaolak-info.net](http://www.khaolak-info.net).

There are just a few hotels along this pretty stretch of beach, making it an ideal romantic hideaway.

**Similana Resort** (☎ 0 7648 7166; [www.similanaresort.com](http://www.similanaresort.com); r from 1300B; ☎) is a unique resort getting rave reviews from guests. Each bungalow is a small work of art, with handcrafted furnishings, waxed dark-wood floors, cotton quilted bedcovers, bay windows and private decks with panoramic views. Try the traveller-recommended tree houses nestled in the forest, which descends into the sand. Similana is a romantic place that is rather secluded – if you don't have private transport it's a pricey (300B) taxi ride into Khao Lak. The beach here is lovely, however, and there's an on-site restaurant so there's little reason to leave.

The **Le Meridien Khao Lak Beach & Spa Resort** (☎ 0 7642 7500; [www.khaolak.lemeridien.com](http://www.khaolak.lemeridien.com); Hwy 4; r 3000-8000B; ☎) just may be the swankiest resort on the mainland Andaman Coast. Rooms are spacious and stylish, there's a fabulous spa for days of pampering and there's every amenity you could hope for.

Buses running between Takua Pa and Phuket will get you here; just ask to be let off at Hat Bang Sak.

## KHAO LAK

เขาสัก/บางงิ้ว/บางทอง

Post-tsunami construction and rebuilding are underway, but two years after the event, locals worry they've been forgotten. Hotels remain unfinished, restaurants empty and the lack of tourists is all too obvious.

It's a pity, because the beautiful diver's haven of Khao Lak was experiencing a tourist gold rush before the fateful events of December 2004 which washed away years of progress.

Backpacker accommodation predominates in the centre of town, where tourists congregate to rehash diving yarns in a string

of bars and restaurants. Grand resorts have set up shop on the outskirts of town, and offer some of the swankiest beds this side of Phuket.

Ready access to the Surin and Similan Islands Marine National Parks is one reason to visit Khao Lak, as these islands offer some of Thailand's most exhilarating diving. For shorter trips, a coral reef suitable for snorkelling lies 45 minutes offshore by long-tail boat, and many dive shops offer excursions.

## Orientation & Information

This area, which actually encompasses three main beaches (Khao Lak, Nang Thong, Bang Niang), is generally referred to as Khao Lak. Most businesses are concentrated on the beachfront, and along Highway 4 (Th Phetkasem, which runs parallel to the beach) in Nang Thong. Resorts and hotels are also found on Bang Niang beach to the north and Khao Lak beach proper, to the south. Khao Lak/Lamru National Park is just north of Khao Lak Beach.

There are numerous 'travel agencies' scattered about – many just a desk on the side of the road – and most of these do laundry and rent motorbikes for around 250B per day.

**Khao Lak Inn** (☎ 0 7642 3056; Th Phetkasem; per min 2B; ☎ 9am-9pm) Offers internet access.

**O.A.Sis Tour** (☎ 08 7644 3292, 0 7271 4326) Run by long-time Khao Lak resident Su, who speaks great English. She can arrange all sorts of lodging, transport and activities. Ring for her current location.

**Siam Commercial Bank** (Th Phetkasem; ☎ 9am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) On the main road; has ATM and change facilities.

**Tsunami Volunteer Center** (☎ 08 9882 8840; [www.tsunamivolunteer.net](http://www.tsunamivolunteer.net); Th Phetkasem) For information about the reconstruction effort in the surrounding area.

## Sights & Activities

The area immediately south of Hat Khao Lak has been incorporated into the 125-sq-km **Khao Lak/Lamru National Park** (☎ 0 7642 0243; [www.dnp.go.th](http://www.dnp.go.th); adult/child 200/100B; ☎ 8am-4.30pm), a beautiful collection of sea cliffs, 1000m hills, beaches, estuaries, forested valleys and mangroves. Wildlife seen in the park includes hornbills, drongos, tapirs, gibbons, monkeys and Asiatic black bears. The visitors centre, just off Hwy 4 between the 56km and 57km markers, has little in the way of maps or printed information, but there's a very nice

open-air restaurant perched on a shady slope overlooking the sea.

Guided treks along the coast or inland can be arranged through Poseidon Bungalows, as can long-tail boat trips up the scenic **Khlong Thap Liang** estuary. The latter afford opportunities to view mangrove communities of crab-eating macaques. Between Khao Lak and Bang Sak is a network of sandy beach trails – some of which lead to deserted beaches – which are fun to explore on foot or by rented motorcycle. Most of the hotels in town rent out motorbikes for 250B per day.

Since both the Surin and Similan islands are relatively far from the mainland – around 60km away – most dive shops offer live-aboard trips. These trips cost around 3700/9000/12,000B for one-/two-/three-day packages. Trips to local coral reefs start at around 1300B.

**Sea Dragon Dive Center** (☎ 0 7642 0420; www.seadragondivecenter.com; Th Phetkasem), on the main road through Khao Lak, is extremely helpful, with Western staff and a range of packages on offer. Poseidon Bungalows also organises live-aboard **snorkelling tours** (2 nights 6500B) to the Similan Islands, departing on Tuesday and Friday from November to May. If you are not a certified diver, this is a great opportunity to sample many of the best underwater sights from the surface.

About 2.5km north of Hat Khao Lak, **Hat Bang Niang** was also flattened by the tsunami, but is well worth a trip if you are looking for a little more peace and quiet.

## Sleeping

Khao Lak was hard hit by the tsunami and most of the beachfront hotels were destroyed. By late 2006, the reconstruction effort was well underway, but some of the seaside outfits had yet to open for business – they were scheduled to open over the course of 2007.

## BUDGET

**Jai Restaurant & Bungalow** (☎ 0 7642 0390; Th Phetkasem; r 350-500B) Shack up at Jai's if you don't need air-con or other frills to survive, and are just looking for a cheap place to lay your head. A thatched, leafy eatery serves tasty local fare in front; the bungalows are out back.

**Happy Lagoon** (☎ 0 7642 3408; bungalows 600B; 🍷) The best part about Happy Lagoon is the fabulous old-fashioned bar. The garden area

is also great; full of tucked-away benches and gnarled old trees. Just a short hop from the beach, the bungalows are spartan, but large and perfectly comfortable, at a very reasonable price. When it's busy, Happy Lagoon has great personality.

**Khao Lak Inn** (☎ 0 7642 3056; juju311@hotmail.com; Th Phetkasem; s/d 600/700B; 🍷 🍷) Above a row of shops on the main road at the southern edge of town, Khao Lak Inn is hardly glamour incarnate, but offers comfy, backpacker-friendly digs in tidy surrounds.

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Poseidon Bungalows** (☎ 0 7644 3258; www.similantour.com; bungalows 900B) On the other side of the headland of Khao Lak/Lam Ru National Park, about 5km south of Hat Khao Lak, this quiet spot has huts discreetly dispersed among huge boulders and coastal forest, affording quiet and privacy. The proprietors dispense information on the area and organise boat excursions and dive trips to the local reef and to the Similan Islands.

**Suwan Palm Resort** (☎ 0 7648 5830; www.suwanpalm.com; Hat Nang Thong; r from 1500B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Rechristened after the tsunami (it used to be the Khaolak Orchid Resort), this hotel has rooms with floor-to-ceiling glass doors opening onto a patio overlooking the water. Beautiful! The rooms are tastefully decorated with light teak furniture. The sheets are not too scratchy, but beds seem ultrafirm and the air-con can be a tad noisy. The on-site restaurant and Irish pub add lively ambience come dark. There is free internet (only one computer though).

**Khao Lak Countryside Resort & Spa** (☎ 0 7648 5474; www.khalak-countryside.com; Hat Nang Thong; bungalows 1600B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) A medium-sized resort on grassy grounds; rates drop by half in the low season. Done in a country Thai style, rooms come in various shapes and sizes and feature lovely blue-tiled baths. Check out the large pool with the water spouts shaped as dolphins.

**Khao Lak/Lam Ru National Park Bungalows** (☎ 0 2562 0760; reserve@dnp.go.th; bungalows 1200-2000B) There are a handful of four- and six-bed bungalows in the national park. Standards are basic, but the setting will suit those after the nature experience. Perfect for rambblers.

**Khao Lak Seaview Resort** (☎ 0 7642 9800; www.khaolak-seaviewresort.com; Hat Nang Thong; r from 3500B; 🍷 🍷) Completely rebuilt after the tsu-

nami, this upmarket resort features beautiful grounds draped with sculptures of elephants and laced with decorative canals. Check out the sunken tubs in the bathroom, and elegant dark-wood floors, teak furniture and firm beds in the spacious, fresh abodes. We liked the raised pool. There is an on-site restaurant, bar and spa.

**Khao Lak Baan Krating Resort** (☎ 0 7642 3088; www.baankrating.com; Hwy 4; r 1600-4000B; 🍷 🍷) Spacious, gracious and stylish, this boutique-style outfit is perched on the cliffs to the south of Khao Lak, just 50m from the ocean. It gets rave reviews from visitors, many of whom use 'beautiful' when describing the place, and we concur. There's a restaurant with views and a lovely pool. Very good low-season rates are often offered to those who haggle.

**Khao Lak Merlin** (☎ 0 7642 8300; www.merlinphuket.com; Hwy 4; r 2500-5000B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Brand new and sparkling, this is one of the Merlin chain's flagship properties. It features a maze of swimming pools, well-maintained, stylish rooms and creature comforts aplenty. It was very quiet at the time of research, but as the tourists flood back, this is bound to become something of a favourite. Look for it 7km south of town.

## Eating

Eating options are limited in the area, but more restaurants are opening each season. Independent restaurants are concentrated on Th Phetkasem and nearly all hotels and guesthouses have some kind of eating establishment attached.

**Discovery Café** (Th Phetkasem; mains 50-200B; breakfast, lunch & dinner) Chill here on a rainy day. The chairs are covered with pillows, so bring a book and get comfortable. Pizza, pasta and breakfast options, along with the usual Thai staples (cooked for foreign palates) fill the long menu. There are loads of cocktails to start with.

**Viking Steakhouse** (☎ 0 7642 0815; Th Phetkasem; mains 50-300B; 🍷) breakfast, lunch & dinner) A long-standing favourite, it offers a fine line in pizza, pasta and Nordic meat feasts. The cosy, open-fronted interior features all sorts of welcome trimmings, including...wait for it...tablecloths and candles. There's also a little bar for a pre- or post-dinner tippie.

Two good choices (even if you're not staying) are the Le Meridien Khao Lak Beach &

Spa Resort (p653) in Bang Sak and Khao Lak Baan Krating Resort (left). Both places offer gourmet dining – a mixture of Thai and international cuisine – in congenial environs. Prices for dishes range from 200B to 600B.

## Getting There & Away

Any bus running along Hwy 4 between Takua Pa (30B, 45 minutes) and Phuket (60B, two hours) will stop at Hat Khao Lak if you ask the driver (for the latter, look for Sea Dragon Dive Center on the eastern side of the highway). Buses will also stop near the Merlin resort and the Khao Lak/Lam Ru National Park headquarters.

If you're heading to Poseidon Bungalows, your best bet is to get off the bus at Thap Lamu and then take a motorcycle taxi from there (40B).

## SILIMAN ISLANDS MARINE NATIONAL PARK (MU KO SIMILAN NATIONAL PARK)

อุทยานแห่งชาติหมู่เกาะสิมิลัน

Renowned by divers the world over, beautiful **Similan Islands Marine National Park** (www.dnp.go.th; admission 400B; 🗓 Nov-May) is 70km offshore. Its smooth granite islands are as impressive above water as below, topped with rainforest, edged with white-sand beaches, and fringed with coral reef.

Two of the nine islands, Ko Miang (Island 4) and Ko Similan (Island 8), have ranger stations and accommodation; park headquarters and most visitor activity centres on Ko Miang. 'Similan' comes from the Malay word *sembilan*, meaning nine, and while each island is named they're just as commonly known by their numbers.

Khao Lak is the jump-off point for the park. The pier is at Thap Lamu, about 10km south of town, where you'll find a cluster of tour operators. The **mainland park office** (☎ 0 7659 5045; 🗓 8am-4pm) is about 500m before the pier, but there's no information in English available.

## Sights & Activities

### DIVING & SNORKELLING

The Similans offer exceptional diving for all levels of experience, at depths from 2m to 30m. There are seamounts (at **Fantasy Rocks**), rock reefs (at **Ko Payu**) and dive-throughs (at **Hin Pousar** or 'Elephant-head'), with marine life ranging from tiny plume worms and soft





a night at this basic, Thai-Muslim outfit? The food is good, the prices are excellent and the crowds are boisterous.

**Phang-Nga Satay** (184 Th Phetkasem; satay 40B; lunch & dinner) Two doors down from Chai Thai (past the wedding dress store), this tiny shack specialises in Malay-style satay; the shrimp satay is particularly good.

Several food stalls on the main street of Phang-Nga sell delicious *khànom jiin* (thin wheat noodles) with chicken curry, *nám yaa* (spicy ground-fish curry) or *nám phrik* (spicy sauce). *Rotii kaeng* (fried flatbread dipped in mild curry sauce, served with jam or fruit fillings) is available from the morning market, which is open daily from 5am to 10am. There's also a small night market on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings just south of Soi Lohakit.

### Getting There & Around

If you're arriving in the Ao Phang-Nga area from Krabi on Hwy 4, you can go two ways. After Thap Put, you can either continue straight on Hwy 4 or go left onto Hwy 415. Turning onto 415 will keep you on the shorter, straighter path, while staying on Hwy 4 will take you onto a narrow, very curvy and pretty stretch of highway that is 5km longer than the direct route. It's your choice between boring but straight or pretty but longer.

Phang-Nga's bus terminal is located just off the main street on Soi Bamrung Rat. Buses between Bangkok and Phang-Nga include VIP (685B, 12 hours, once daily), 1st class (441B to 459B, 12 to 13 hours, twice daily) and 2nd class (357B, 12 hours, three to four daily). There are several other services available:

#### BUSES FROM AO PHANG-NGA

Destination	Price (B)	Frequency (hr)	Duration
Hat Yai	200	2 daily	6
Ko Pha-Ngan	400	2 daily	6
Ko Samui	240	2 daily	5
Krabi	65	frequent	1½
Phuket	50	frequent	1½
Ranong	100	4 daily	5
Satun	225	2 daily	6
Surat Thani	110	9 daily	3
Trang	145	frequent	3½

### AROUND PHANG-NGA Sa Nang Manora Forest Park

สวนป่าสระนางมโนราห์

The fairyland setting at this beautiful and little-visited **park** (admission free) is nothing short of fantastic. Moss-encrusted roots and rocks, dense rainforest and rattan vines provide a delicious backdrop for swimming in pools beneath multilevel waterfalls. Primitive trails meander along (and at times through) the falls, climbing level after level, and seem to go on forever – you could easily get a full day's hiking in without walking along the same path twice. Bring plenty of drinking water – although the shade and the falls moderate the temperature, the humidity in the park is quite high.

The park's name comes from a local folk belief that the mythical Princess Manora bathes in the pools when no one else is around. Facilities include some picnic tables, plus a small restaurant. To get here, catch a motorcycle taxi from Phang-Nga (50B). If you have your own wheels head north out of town on Hwy 4, go 3.2km past the Shell petrol station, then turn left and go down a curvy road another 4km.

### Wat Tham Suwankhuha

วัดถ้ำสุวรรณคูหา

About 10km south of Phang-Nga is **Wat Tham Suwankhuha** (Heaven Grotto Temple; admission 10B), a cave wat full of Buddha images. The shrine consists of two main caverns: a larger one containing a 15m reclining Buddha and tiled with *laikhraam* and *benjarong* (two-coloured patterns more common in pottery) and a smaller cavern displaying spirit flags and a *rishi* (*reusii*; Hindu sage) statue. Royal seals of several kings, including Rama V, Rama VII and Rama IX – as well as those of lesser royalty – have been inscribed on one wall of the latter cave. Monkeys hang around the area, so lock your car doors or they'll break in to get at your snacks.

To get here without your own transport, hop on any *sàwngthàew* running between Phang-Nga and Takua Thung (20B). The wat is down a side road.

On this same side road, about 6km beyond the cave wat, is **Raman Forest Park** (admission free), a pretty little park with a beautiful waterfall running through a small valley. Follow the gorgeous trail running alongside this cascade for about 3km, and refresh yourself with a dip in a couple of the pools along the way.

The park is relatively isolated, so it's difficult to get here without your own transport. Try hitching from the cave wat or you could rent a motorcycle in Phang-Nga; however, because you'd be riding along the busy highway, ensure you have decent riding skills.

### Ao Phang-Nga Marine National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติอ่าวพังงา

Established in 1981 and covering an area of 400 sq km, **Ao Phang-Nga Marine National Park** (admission 200B) is noted for its classic karst scenery, created by mainland fault movements that pushed massive limestone blocks into geometric patterns. As these blocks extend southward into Ao Phang-Nga, they form more than 40 islands with huge vertical cliffs. The bay itself is composed of large and small tidal channels that originally connected with the mainland fluvial system. The main tidal channels – Khlong Ko Phanyi, Khlong Phang-Nga, Khlong Bang Toi and Khlong Bo Saen – run through vast mangroves in a north-south direction and today are used by fisher folk and island inhabitants as aquatic highways. These mangroves are the largest remaining primary mangrove forest in Thailand. The Andaman Sea covers more than 80% of the area within the park boundaries.

The biggest tourist spot in the park is so-called James Bond Island, known to Thais as **Ko Phing Kan** (Leaning on Itself Island). Once used as a location setting for *The Man with the Golden Gun*, the island is now full of vendors hawking coral and shells that should have stayed in the sea, along with butterflies, scorpions and spiders encased in plastic.

The Thai name for the island refers to a flat limestone cliff that appears to have tumbled sideways to lean on a similar rock face, which is in the centre of the island. Off one side of the island, in a shallow bay, stands a tall slender limestone formation that looks like a big rock spike that has fallen from the sky. There are a couple of caves you can walk through and a couple of small sand beaches, often littered with rubbish from the tourist boats.

Please remember to take only pictures and leave only footprints, ie make sure to dispose of your used water bottles and other rubbish in bins – if you can't find a bin, wait until you return to your bungalow to get rid of it. Improve your trash karma and pick up someone else's junk on the beach.

About the only positive development has been the addition of a concrete pier so that tourist boats don't have to moor directly on the island's beaches, but this still happens when the water level is high and the pier is crowded with other boats.

For information on Ko Yao, which is part of Ao Phang-Nga Marine National Park, see p689.

Two types of forest predominate in the park: limestone scrub forest and true evergreen forest. The marine limestone environment favours a long list of reptiles, including the Bengal monitor, flying lizard, banded sea snake, dogface water snake, shore pit viper and Malayan pit viper. Keep an eye out for the two-banded (or water) monitor (*Varanus salvator*), which looks like a crocodile when seen swimming in the mangrove swamp and can measure up to 2.2m in length (only slightly smaller than the Komodo dragon, the largest lizard in the Varanidae family). Like its Komodo cousin, the water monitor (called *hía* by the Thais, who generally fear or hate the lizard) is a carnivore that prefers to feed on carrion but occasionally preys on live animals.

Amphibians in the Ao Phang-Nga area include the marsh frog, common bush frog and crab-eating frog. Avian residents of note are the helmeted hornbill (the largest of Thailand's 12 hornbill species, with a body length of up to 127cm), the edible-nest swiftlet (*Aerodramus fuciphagus*), osprey, white-bellied sea eagle and Pacific reef egret.

Over 200 species of mammal reside in the mangrove forests and on some of the larger islands, including the white-handed gibbon, serow, dusky langur and crab-eating macaque.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**National Park Bungalows** (☎ 0 2562 0760; reserve@dnpp.go.th; bungalows 700-900B; 🚻) The cheaper bungalows sleep four and are fan-cooled; the pricier air-con bungalows sleep two. Camping is permitted in certain areas within park boundaries but you should ask permission at the bungalow office first.

There's a small, clean restaurant in front of the bungalow office with views over the mangroves.

### GETTING THERE & AROUND

From the centre of Phang-Nga drive south on Hwy 4 about 6km, then turn left onto Rte

## ROCK ART

Many of the limestone islands in Ao Phang-Nga feature prehistoric rock art painted or carved onto the walls and ceilings of caves, rock shelters, cliffs and rock massifs. In particular you can see rock art on Khao Khian, Ko Panyi, Ko Raya, Tham Nak and Ko Phra At Thao. Khao Khian (Inscription Mountain) is probably the most visited of the sites. The images are of human figures, fish, crabs, shrimp, bats, birds and elephants, as well as boats and fishing equipment – it's obvious this was some sort of communal effort tied to the all-important harvesting of sustenance from the sea. Some drawings also contain rows of lines thought to be some sort of cabbalistic writing. The rock paintings don't fall on any one plane of reference; they may be placed right side up, upside-down or sideways. Most of the paintings are monochrome, while some have been repeatedly traced several times over in orange-yellow, blue, grey and black.

4144 and go 2.6km to the park headquarters; 400m beyond here is the visitors centre. Without your own transport you'll need to take a *sǎwngthǎew* to Tha Dan (20B).

Plenty of private boats, ready to zoom off on Ao Phang-Nga tours, await your bargaining skills (1000B, four-person maximum for a two- to three-hour tour).

## PHUKET PROVINCE

pop 82,800

Hedonistic Phuket seduces honeymooners, heiresses, surfer babes and middle-aged men trying to score with a smooth blend of ostentation and seediness. Thailand's largest and most popular island, Phuket is as colourful as it is cosmopolitan and one of the world's most famous dream destinations. Phuket (*poo-gei*) boasts some lush inland vistas, including a few remote swathes of rainforest, but the island really comes into its own along its western shoreline, where hunter-green foliage meets the turquoise waters of the Andaman Sea. The mile upon sandy mile of coastline boasts tons of water sports, delectable restaurants and decadent resorts. In fact, travellers named four of Phuket's hotels among the world's best in a recent magazine poll.

Heavily developed, Phuket can, at times, feel a little like Bangkok-on-Sea, a Costa del Farang, with all the hubbub and brouhaha of a Club 18-to-30 sundowner sing-along. High-rise developments bear testament to the hegemony of the holiday buck, package tourists dramatically outnumber independent travellers and if you stick to the well-worn highways, quiet corners are few and far between.

But if you can do without the beer halls and girlie bars of Patong, Phuket's uber-resort, there's a whole other island to discover. Whether it's swanky resorts of the Laguna complex, the relaxed surfer vibe at friendly Kata, or the night markets of old Phuket Town, Phuket has something to satisfy every appetite. Just don't forget your Speedos.

### Information

#### INTERNET RESOURCES

**Phuket.com** ([www.phuket.com](http://www.phuket.com)) All sorts of information, including accommodation on the island.

**Phuket-Info.com** ([www.phuket-info.com](http://www.phuket-info.com)) You'll find more info on Phuket Province here.

**Phuket.Net** ([www.phuket.net](http://www.phuket.net)) An internet service that provides forums for tourism and business-oriented exchange, and has limited listings.

#### MEDIA

The weekly English-language *Phuket Gazette* (20B) publishes lots of information on activities, events, dining and entertainment in Phuket Town, as well as around the island. It can be accessed online at [www.phuketgazette.net](http://www.phuketgazette.net). The same publisher issues *Gazette Guide* (140B), a sizeable tome listing businesses and services on the island.

#### MEDICAL SERVICES

Both hospitals listed are equipped with modern facilities, emergency rooms and outpatient-care clinics. For dive-related medicine, see opposite.

**Bangkok Phuket Hospital** (Map p662; ☎ 0 7625 4425; Th Yongyok Uthit) Reputedly the favourite with locals.

**Phuket International Hospital** (Map p662; ☎ 0 7624 9400, emergency 7621 0935; Airport Bypass Rd) International doctors rate this hospital as the best on the island.

## Dangers & Annoyances

Drownings are common on Phuket's beaches, especially on the western coast (Surin, Laem Singh and Kamala). Red flags are posted on beaches to warn bathers of riptides and other dangerous conditions. If a red flag is flying at a beach, don't go into the water. Especially during the May to October monsoon, the waves on the western coast of Phuket sometimes make it too dangerous to swim. Hat Rawai, on the southern edge of the island, is usually a safe bet at any time of year.

Keep an eye out for jet-skis when you're in the water. Although the Phuket governor declared jet skis illegal in 1997, the ban didn't seem to be enforced in 2006.

Renting a motorcycle can be a high-risk proposition. Thousands of people are injured or killed every year on Phuket highways. Some have been travellers who weren't familiar with riding motorcycles and navigating the island's roads, highways and traffic patterns. If you must rent a motorcycle, make sure you at least know the basics and wear a helmet.

## Activities

### DIVING & SNORKELLING

Although there are scores of dive sites around Thailand, Phuket is at the heart of the Thai

scuba-diving industry and is one of the world's top 10 dive destinations. Good-to-excellent dive sites ring the island, including several small islands to the south – Ko Hae, Ko Raya (Noi and Yai), Hin Daeng and Hin Muang – and to the east – Ko Yao (Noi and Yai). Live-aboard excursions to the fantastic Surin and Similan islands, or to the Burma Banks/Mergui Archipelago off the southern coast of Myanmar, are also possible from Phuket.

Phuket has heaps of 'dive' shops – at last count there were over 100, though most of them are the equivalent of a booking agency. The more serious ones often operate their own boat(s) while others send you off with another operator, so ask if you're concerned. And it doesn't hurt if an operator is a five-star PADI dive centre, though this isn't always the best criterion for dive shops. Many of these operations are centred at Hat Patong or Ao Chalong, though the smaller beach towns certainly have their share. Some of the bigger (but not necessarily better) places have multiple branch offices all over Phuket.

Typical one-day dive trips to nearby sites cost 1600B to 2500B. This includes two dives and equipment. Nondivers (and snorkellers) are permitted to join such dive trips for a significant

### DETOUR: KO PANYI

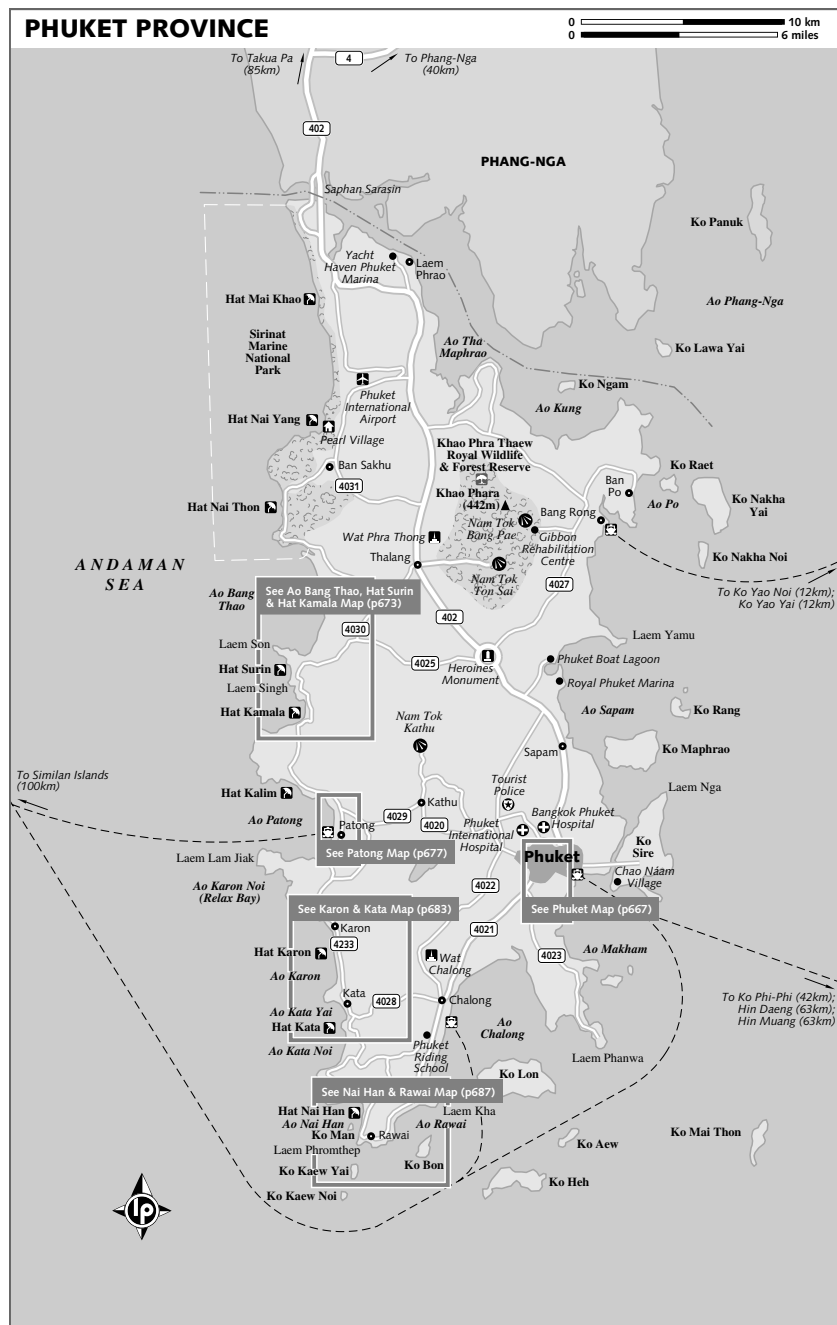
Home to one of Thailand's most extraordinary Muslim fishing villages, Ko Panyi makes an interesting detour if you've had your fill of Phuket's glitzy beach life. Built on stilts in a nook in the limestone cliffs, it's something of a tourist trap during the day. Stay overnight, however, and you will sample the best of its unique charms.

The 200 households here – home to perhaps a total of 2000 people – are said to descend from two seafaring Muslim families who arrived from Java around 200 years ago. Besides alcohol, dogs and pigs are also forbidden on the island. Houses mixed in with the shops vary from grubby little shacks to homes with fancy tile fronts and curtained windows. The people are generally quite friendly, especially if you can speak a little Thai. Village men often gather to gossip and watch the sunset over the western side of the village near the turquoise mosque.

There are a few places to stay on the island. **Thawisuk Hotel** (r 100-150B), near the island's northern pier, is a slightly tatty budget hideaway.

Along with the more expensive seafood restaurants built out over the sea in front of the village (which are generally open for lunch only), there are some smaller cafés and restaurants along the interior alleys where locals eat. *Khao yam* (southern-Thai rice salad) and *rotii* (fried flatbread) are available in the morning. The villagers raise grouper in floating cages, selling them to the island and mainland restaurants. A local culinary speciality is *khānom bǎo lǎng*, a savoury dish made with black sticky rice, shrimp, coconut, black pepper and chilli steamed in a banana leaf – a breakfast favourite.

You can organise a tour from Phuket or Krabi, or from the bus terminal in Phang-Nga. To go solo, take a *sǎwngthǎew* from the bus terminal to Tha Dan pier (10B) and then catch a long-tail boat (30B, 25 minutes) to Ko Panyi.



discount. A four-day PADI Open Water certification course costs around 9000B to 12,500B.

It's very wise to obtain your own private diving insurance before travelling. PADI or DAN is best – regular insurance doesn't often cover diving accidents or decompression costs, but you could check with your insurance representative. Your dive shop will also have some insurance, but some shops have better insurance than others; ask.

There are three hyperbaric chambers on Phuket. **Wachira Hospital** (Map p667; ☎ 0 7621 1114) and **Phuket International Hospital** (Map p662; ☎ 0 7624 9400, emergency ☎ 0 7621 0935) are both just outside Phuket Town; a private **hyperbaric chamber** (Map p677; ☎ 0 7634 2518; 231-233 Th Rat Uthit) is in Patong. The chamber at Phuket International Hospital is considered the best of the three. Dive shop affiliation with the private hyperbaric chamber in Patong mostly means that clients who need to use that chamber will be charged US\$200 rather than US\$800 per hour of treatment (five-hour minimum), though if a dive shop has the right kind of insurance it will cover much of this cost. Again, ask for specifics if you're concerned.

Snorkelling is best along Phuket's western coast, particularly at the rocky headlands between beaches. Mask, snorkel and fins can

be rented for around 250B a day. As with scuba diving, you'll find better snorkelling, with greater visibility and variety of marine life, along the shores of small outlying islands such as Ko Raya Yai and Ko Raya Noi.

The best diving months are December to May, when the weather is good and the sea is at its clearest (and boat trips are much safer).

There are numerous dive shops with equipment supplies.

**All 4 Diving** (☎ 0 7634 4611; 5/4 Th Sawatdirak, Patong) This is Phuket's largest dive store.

**Andaman Sea Sport** (☎ 0 7621 1752; 69 Th Phuket, Phuket Town) Stocks diving and snorkelling supplies.

**Dive Supply** (Map p677; ☎ 0 7634 2513; www.divesupply.com; 189 Th Rat Uthit, Patong) Has a great variety of diving equipment and offers a good service in several languages.

### HORSE RIDING

**Phuket Riding School** (☎ 0 7628 8213; horsy\_maliwan@yahoo.com.hk), near Chalong, offers one-hour (per person 650B) and two-hour (1250B) rides in the jungle and along nearby beaches.

### KAYAKING

Several companies based in Phuket offer canoe tours of scenic Ao Phang-Nga.

In Phuket Town, **Sea Canoe Thailand** (Map p667; ☎ 0 7621 2172; www.seacanoen.net; 367/4 Th Yaowarat) was

### WHICH DIVE SHOP TO PICK?

Choosing the right dive shop can be an intimidating business. After all, there are so many flashy storefronts advertising the wonders of the diving world – over 100 in Phuket alone. How on earth can you be sure you're making the right choice?

When choosing a dive company in Phuket (or anywhere in Thailand, for that matter) there are a few key questions you should ask. For example, how long has the dive shop existed? How many divers will be on the boat? Does the shop have access to a hyperbaric chamber should an accident occur (you'd be surprised to know some smaller shops are not linked up with a hospital)? What is the dive instructor-to-client ratio? What kind of insurance do they have and what does it cover? Is it a licensed Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) operator? If it's a live-aboard trip, is there oxygen on board?

Talk to the staff: how experienced are they and how much of this experience is local? Do they make you feel comfortable and confident? If you're taking a class, what kind of certification do the instructors have? And do they speak your language well enough that you understand each other? One last thing: look at the equipment – is it in good shape and well maintained?

Perhaps the best way to choose an excellent dive operation, however, is to get a glowing recommendation from other divers who've already done the underwater deed. Word-of-mouth is often the best indicator of the quality of a company – and in the competitive diving world, a good reputation can really make or break a business.

Also of note, check out how eco-friendly a dive shop is. Questions to ask include, do you encourage wreck dives (these are super-friendly to the environment as you are not interacting with coral)? Do you allow divers to wear gloves (another no-no, as gloves allow divers to touch coral they otherwise wouldn't lay a hand on, something which is really bad for already-suffering reefs)?

the first and is still the most famous. The kayaks are able to enter semi-submerged caves (which Thai fishermen have called *hawng* or 'room' for centuries) inaccessible by long-tail boats. A day paddle costs 3200B per person and includes meals, equipment and transfer; also available are all-inclusive, three-day (from 9500B) camping trips.

Another canoe company with an excellent reputation is **Paddle Asia** (☎ 076240952; www.paddleasia.com; 19/3 Th Rasdanusom), also based in Phuket Town. It caters to beginners and those who don't enjoy being surrounded by noisy tour groups. Groups are small (two to six people) and multiday tours are offered. Prices are similar to Sea Canoe Thailand.

## YACHTING

Phuket is one of Southeast Asia's main yacht destinations, and you'll find all manner of craft anchored along its shores – from 80-year-old wooden sloops that look like they can barely stay afloat to the latest in hi-tech motor cruisers. Marina-style facilities with year-round anchorage are presently available at a few locations.

The US\$25 million **Royal Phuket Marina** (Map p662; ☎ 076239762; www.royalphuketmarina.com) is located just south of Phuket Boat Lagoon. Luxury villas, townhouses and a hotel join 190 berths and a spa here.

**Phuket Boat Lagoon** (Map p662; ☎ 076239055; fax 076239056) is located at Ao Sapam, about 10km north of Phuket Town on the eastern shore. It offers an enclosed marina with tidal channel access, serviced pontoon berths, 60- and 120-tonne travel lifts, hard stand area, plus a resort hotel, laundry, coffee shop, fuel, water, repairs and maintenance services.

**Yacht Haven Phuket Marina** (Map p662; ☎ 076206705; www.yacht-haven-phuket.com) is at Laem Phrao on the northeastern tip. The Yacht Haven boasts 130 berths and a scenic restaurant, and also does yacht maintenance.

If you need sails, **Rolly Tasker Sailmakers** (☎ 076280347; www.rollytasker.com; 26/2 Th Chaofa, Ao Chalong) can outfit you with these; riggings, spars and hardware are also available.

Port clearance is rather complicated; the marinas will take care of the paperwork (for a fee of course) if notified of your arrival in advance. For information on yacht charters (both bareboat and crewed), yacht sales and yacht deliveries, contact the following:

**Faraway Sail & Dive Expeditions** (☎ 076280701; www.far-away.net; 112/8 Muu 4, Th Taina, Hat Karon)

**SEAL** (☎ 076340406; www.seal-asia.com; 225 Th Rat Uthit, Hat Patong)

**Sunsail Yacht Charters** (☎ 076239057; www.sun sailthailand.com; Phuket Boat Lagoon)

**Thai Marine Leisure** (☎ 076239111; www.thaimarine.com; Phuket Boat Lagoon)

**Yachtpro International** (☎ 076232960; www.sailing-thailand.com; Yacht Haven Phuket Marina)

Expect to pay from US\$300 per day for a high season, bareboat charter.

The **TAT office** (Map p667; ☎ 076212213; www.tat.or.th; 73-65 Th Phuket; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) in Phuket Town also has an extensive list of yacht charters and brokers. For insurance purposes, it's a good idea to see if the boat you want to charter is registered in Thailand.

## Tours

**Siam Safari** (☎ 076280116) and **Adventure Safaris** (☎ 076341988) combine 4WD tours of the island's interior with short elephant rides and hikes for around 2200B per day. Half-day trips are also available, although the difference in price is not that great.

For a bird's-eye view of the island, **Blue Water Air** (☎ 076351438; www.bluewaterair.com; Phuket International Airport) offers scenic flights (per person from 2000B), as well as charters to Ko Phi Phi (3000B per person one-way) and Ko Yao Noi (per person one way 3000B).

## Courses

**Pat's Home** (☎ 015388276, 076263366; thaicookingclass@hotmail.com) Pat, who worked as a chef at a Thai restaurant in California for six years, offers Thai cooking courses at her home just outside Phuket Town. Half-day courses for either lunch or dinner cost 1200B.

**Pum Thai Cooking School** (Map p662; ☎ 076346269, 015218904; info@pumthaifoodchain.com; 204/32 Tha Rat Uthit, Hat Patong) Runs Thai restaurants in both Phuket and France; at the Phuket branch you can learn *haute cuisine* the Thai way, starting at 900B for a 1½-hour, three-dish class, and up to 3750B for a six-hour, five-dish class.

## Accommodation

Phuket's beaches used to be some of Thailand's most expensive, but post-tsunami it seems like many places are still slashing their prices and deals abound at even the ritziest resorts.

Overbuilding has made it easier to find bargains at midrange and top-end places, especially from May to October – try booking via websites like www.sawasdee.com or www

## THE LOW DOWN ON THE BEST RUB DOWN

The Thais are known for splendid massages and Phuket is known for posh pampering, so it's no surprise the country's number one island is home to some number one spas. There seems to be a spa of sorts on every corner in Phuket. Most are low-key family affairs where traditional Thai massage goes for about 250B per hour, and a basic pedi-mani costs around 100B – a real steal. The quality of service at these places varies, and changes rapidly as staff turnover is high. Try asking exiting customers about the quality of the massage. Most of the places in this price range offer similar services and massages can be tailored to *farang* tastes (less strong).

If you're looking for a more Westernised spa experience, head to one of Phuket's plentiful spa resorts. These places are often affiliated with a ritzy hotel (but nearly all are open to nonguests). They are haute couture affairs with gorgeous Zen designs – Thai massage is after all a spiritual affair. Proper spas offer a range of massages, including Thai, along with a host of treatments. Aromatherapy, steam baths, facials, relaxation therapies and rejuvenation packages are just a few. Prices vary depending on location, but treatments generally start at around 1000B and go up from there.

We've listed our top five Phuket spas below.

- At the new JW Marriott resort (p672), the **Mandara Spa** is perfect for couples. There are 10 couples' treatment suites that include indoor and outdoor space. The Healing Hot Stones massage (US\$175) is one of the signature treatments. Resident Thai massage therapist Upadee Tansom is also excellent.
- The **Six Senses Spa** at the Evason Resort & Spa (p688) is the kind of back-to-nature place you go to do yoga on a platform in a pond with water lilies. It also has great treatments. Try the Sensory Spa Journey (90 minutes, 8000B), which includes a four-hand massage (two therapists), luxurious footbath and goody bag of product samples used in your treatment.
- Try the signature three-hour Royal Banyan treatment (US\$195) at the **Banyan Tree Spa** at the Banyan Tree Phuket (p673). It includes a mint footbath, a cucumber and lemongrass rub, Thai herbal massage and a soak in a flower-filled tub.
- One of Phuket's first spas, **Hideaway Day Spa** (p672) still enjoys an excellent reputation. More reasonably priced than many hotel counterparts, the Hideaway offers traditional Thai massage, sauna and mud body wraps in a tranquil wooded setting at the edge of a lagoon. Treatments start at 1500B. It also has its own line of spa products, which make perfect birthday gifts for the girls back home.
- As posh as it gets: at the **Trisara Spa** at Trisara (p672) six over-the-top private treatment suites face the ocean and open onto breezy pavilions surrounded by ponds. Try one of the holistic oil massages (from 2000B). The oils used were made without chemicals or preservatives.

planetoholiday.com to score swank properties for as little as 2000B! Also check the hotel websites themselves or try Lonely Planet's Haystack booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com. During the holidays, prices can zoom skywards, although when we checked in late December 2006 the same property was still at just 2200B. It seems, for now at least, post-tsunami low prices are sticking.

Haggling over walk-in rates during low season is not unheard of – ask for a discount if the place is empty. If the price is still too high, ask if you can take the room without breakfast, it usually saves around 300B.

For accommodation costs see the boxed text on p648.

## PHUKET TOWN

ภูเก็ต

Centuries before Phuket began attracting sand-and-sea hedonists, it was an important centre for Arab, Indian, Malay, Chinese and Portuguese traders who came to exchange goods for tin and rubber with the rest of the world. Francis Light, the British colonialist who made Penang the first of the British Straits Settlements, married a native of Phuket and tried unsuccessfully to pull this island into the colonial fold. Although this polyglot, multicultural heritage has all but disappeared from most of the island, a few vestiges can be seen and experienced in the province's *amphoe meuang* (provincial capital), Phuket.

As in many growing Thai towns, homogeneity is now the buzzword and you'd have to drink long and hard from the nostalgia potion to get a sense of the city's multicultural heyday. That doesn't mean Phuket Town isn't worth a visit. Evocative traces of Sino-Portuguese architecture remain and the city streets, which move to the rhythm of everyday Thai life, feel a long way from the prefabricated hubbub of Patong. If you fancy a glimpse of the Phuket behind the tourist traps, go-go bars and beaches, this isn't a bad place to start.

**Information**

**BOOKSHOPS**

**Books** (☎ 0 7621 1115; www.thebookspuket.com; 53-55 Th Phuket; ☎ 8.30am-9.30pm) Offers English-language magazines, guidebooks and novels.

**EMERGENCY**

**Police** (☎ 191, 0 7622 3555; cnr Th Phang-Nga & Th Phuket)

**INTERNET ACCESS**

**i-Business** (☎ 0 9119 4779; Th Takua Pa; per hr 20B; ☎ 8am-10pm)

**Phuket CAT office** (Th Phang-Nga; per hr 30B; ☎ 8am-midnight)

**MAPS**

There's really no need to buy Phuket maps; nearly all hotels and restaurants offer free tourist maps. These are of surprisingly high quality and generally include most businesses. If you'd rather purchase one, *Phuket Island* (1:100,000) by Periplus is a good bet for navigating your way around the island and costs 125B.

**MEDIA**

**Phuket Gazette** (www.phuketgazette.net) Posts articles and updated information along with its searchable Gazette Guide on its website.

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

**Bangkok Phuket Hospital** (☎ 0 7625 4425; www.phukethospital.com; Th Yongyok Uthit) This private hospital is the best bet within easy reach of Phuket Town.

**Boots** (☎ 0 7623 0083; Th Tilok Uthit; ☎ 10am-10pm) An outlet of the British pharmacy.

**MONEY**

Several banks along Th Phuket and Th Ranong offer exchange services and ATMs.

**Bangkok Bank** (Th Ranong; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

**Bank of Asia** (Th Phuket; ☎ 9.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri)

**POST**

**DHL World Wide Express** (☎ 0 7625 8500; 61/4 Th Thepkasatri) Swift and reliable courier service (everything goes by two-day delivery), but rates are about 25 percent higher than at the post office.

**Main post office** (Th Montri; ☎ 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat)

**TELEPHONE**

**Phuket CAT office** (Th Phang-Nga; ☎ 8am-midnight) Home Country Direct dialling service.

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

**TAT office** (☎ 0 7621 2213; www.tat.or.th; 73-65 Th Phuket; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Maps, information brochures, a list of standard sawngthaw fares out to the various beaches, and also the recommended charter costs for a vehicle.

**TRAVEL AGENCIES**

**Phuket Centre Tour** (☎ 0 7621 2892; centre@e-mail.in.th; Th Rasada; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat) Car-hire, airline ticketing and tour packages.

**Sights**

Phuket's historic **Sino-Portuguese architecture** is the town's most evocative sight: stroll along Ths Thalang, Dibuk, Yaowarat, Ranong, Phang-Nga, Rasada and Krabi for a glimpse of some of the best on offer. The most magnificent examples in town are the **Standard Chartered Bank** (Th Phang-Nga), Thailand's oldest foreign bank; the **THAI office** (Th Ranong); and the **old post office building**, which now houses the **Phuket Philatelic Museum** (Th Montri; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm), a first-stop for stamp boffins. The best-restored residential properties are found along Th Dibuk and Th Thalang.

For a bird's-eye view of the city, climb up pretty **Khao Rang** (Phuket Hill), northwest of the town centre. It's at its best during the week, when the summit is relatively peaceful, but keep an eye out for the mobs of snarling dogs. If, as many people say, Phuket is a corruption of the Malay word *bukit* (hill), then this is probably its namesake.

Phuket's main **day market** (Th Ranong) is worth a wander and is the spot to invest in the requisite Thai and Malay sarongs, as well as baggy Shan fishermen's pants.

A handful of Chinese temples inject some added colour into the area. Most are standard issue, but the **Shrine of the Serene Light** (Saan Jao Sang Tham; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm), tucked away at the end of a 50m alley near the Bangkok Bank of Commerce on Th Phang-Nga, is

**PHUKET**

**INFORMATION**

Bangkok Bank	1 C3	Royal Phuket City Hotel	20 D3
Bank of Asia	2 C4	Talang Guest House	21 C3
Books	(see 16)	Thavorn Hotel	22 C3
Boots	3 D4		
DHL World Wide Express	4 C2	<b>EATING</b>	
i-Business	5 C3	Ka Jok See	23 C3
Immigration Office	6 D5	Khana Sutra	24 C4
Main Post Office	7 D3	Mae Porm	25 C3
Phuket CAT Office	8 C3	Natural Restaurant	26 B4
Phuket Centre Tour	9 C3	Ruanjai	27 B3
Police	10 C3	Salvatore's	28 C3
Tourism Authority of Thailand Office	11 C3	<b>DRINKING</b>	
Wachira Hospital	12 B1	Jammin' Music Club	29 B4
		O'Malleys	30 D3
		Timber Rock	31 C2

**SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**

Phuket Philatelic Museum	13 D3	<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b>	
Shrine of the Serene Light	14 C3	Alliance Française	32 B4
		Boxing Stadium	33 D5
		Paradise Cinemas	34 D4

**SLEEPING**

Crystal Inn	15 D4	<b>SHOPPING</b>	
Imperial Hotel	16 C3	Day Market	35 B3
Metropole Phuket	17 D4	Municipal Market	36 D4
On On Hotel	18 C3	Robinson Ocean Plaza	37 D4
Phuket Resotel	19 D2		

**TRANSPORT**

Bangkok Airways	38 C2
Bus Terminal	39 D3
Dragonair	40 D3
Malaysia Airlines	41 C2
Pure Car Rent	42 C3
Silk Air	43 D3
Singapore Airlines	(see 43)
Sawngthaw to Beaches	44 B3
Thai Airways International	45 B3

a cut above the rest. Here, you will find plumes of incense smoke, dazzling décor and peaceful ambience. The shrine, which has been restored, is said to be nearly 200 years old and the sense of history is tangible.

## Festivals & Events

The **Vegetarian Festival** ([www.phuketvegetarian.com](http://www.phuketvegetarian.com)) is Phuket's most important event and usually takes place during late September or October. The TAT office in Phuket prints a helpful schedule of events for the Vegetarian Festival. If you plan to attend the street processions, consider bringing earplugs to make the noise of the firecrackers more tolerable.

## Sleeping BUDGET

**Phuket International Youth Hostel** (☎ 0 7628 1325; [www.phukethostel.com](http://www.phukethostel.com); 73/11 Th Chao Fa, Ao Chalong; dm 180B; r 360-440B; ♿) 'Reliable' is the buzzword at this Hostelling International hostel offering comfortable digs in slightly sterile surrounds. It is 7km south of Phuket Town.

**Talang Guest House** (☎ 0 7621 4225; [talanggh@phuket.ksc.co.th](mailto:talanggh@phuket.ksc.co.th); 37 Th Talang; r 250-420B; ♿) This decrepit shophouse is something of an architectural classic. Creature comforts are at a premium, but it bags extra points for character and charm. If you really want to soak up the atmosphere, check in to the 3rd-floor room overlooking the street. It's a fan room with a large veranda and is ideal for nostalgia junkies.

**On On Hotel** (☎ 0 7621 1154; 19 Th Phang-Nga; r 150-400B; ♿) This crumbly old-timer is still managing to capitalise on its success portraying a shifty Thai hotel in 2000's *The Beach*. Six years after the flick was released, On On remains popular with those searching for budget authenticity they can taste and smell. Yet despite musty rooms, peeling paint, sagging beds and squeaky fans, it retains a whiff of Old Phuket.

**Thavorn Hotel** (☎ 0 7621 1333; fax 0 7621 5559; 74 Th Rasada; r 230-550B; ♿) From the outside this city-centre giant looks like a monument to architectural Stalinism. On the inside things are better. The lobby houses the self-styled 'Phuket Museum' – a collection of intriguing local bric-a-brac. Upper-floor rooms cater to a variety of budgets. The cheapest fan rooms are round the back of the main building.

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Imperial Hotel** (☎ 0 7621 2311; [www.imperialphuket.com](http://www.imperialphuket.com); 51 Th Phuket; r 800B; ♿) Piped music, chintzy

décor and sparkling surfaces come standard at this reliable midrange option. Trimmings include colour televisions and hair dryers.

**Phuket Resotel** (☎ 0 7622 0965; [phuketresotel@yahoo.com](mailto:phuketresotel@yahoo.com); r 650-1000B; ♿) This roomy place plays it safe, with functional décor and the homogenous, but inoffensive, ambience of a business hotel. Fans of US motels should feel right at home, but may find the staff a little inanimate.

**Crystal Inn** (☎ 0 7625 6789; [www.phuketcrystalinn.com](http://www.phuketcrystalinn.com); 2/1-10 Soi Surin, Th Phuket; r from 1400B; ♿) It may not age well, but for now this is a slick midrange option, with attractive, comfy rooms Rothkoesque murals and modern, if not outright stylish, décor are themes throughout this hotel (the brochure waxes lyrical about the yin and yang of modern design).

**Metropole Phuket** (☎ 0 7621 5050; [www.metrophuket.com](http://www.metrophuket.com); 1 Soi Surin, Th Montri; r 2000-3200B; ♿) The Metropole fancies itself as another big-hitter. The seahorse fountain is a little kitsch, the rooms are a little frumpier and the staff a little slower, but this is another good bet for those looking for city-centre comforts.

**Royal Phuket City Hotel** (☎ 0 7623 3333; [www.royalphuketcity.com](http://www.royalphuketcity.com); 154 Th Phang-Nga; r 3500-8500B; ♿) The slickest offering in Phuket Town, it's where to go when you need soothing after one too many sandy bungalow nights. Sheets are smooth, beds don't sag, there's a pool, a sauna and even a zebra-print disco. Expect smiling and attentive staff, CNN or the BBC on your telly and a great night's sleep.

## Eating

Some would argue Phuket Town is worth staying in just for the chow. And indeed there's good food to be found here. Another plus is meals cost as much as 50% less than at beachfront restaurants.

**Mae Porn** (☎ 0 7621 1389; cnr Th Phang-Nga & Soi Pradit; dishes 10-150B; ☎ 9am-9.30pm) In a casual, open location, this popular eatery attracts both *faràng* and Thais. It has both indoor and outdoor tables, and cooks up some mean seafood at nice prices. Curries and other Thai specialities are on the menu as well.

**Natural Restaurant** (☎ 0 7622 4287; 62/5 Soi Phuthon; dishes 50-200B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Travel round the world in 80 plates at this dazzlingly green Phuket eatery. The décor is nature oriented – all pot plants and bamboo – and the picture menu promises everything from wiener schnitzel to Singapore noodles and green curry.

**Ruamjai** (☎ 0 7622 2821; Th Ranong; dishes 50-200B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Delicious veggie eats are offered at this spartan, open-fronted Chinese restaurant. It's a bit noisy with the background traffic noise, and very popular. The service is quite swift, some say too swift.

**Khana Sutra** (☎ 0 7625 6192; 18-20 Th Takua Pa; dishes 80-250B; ☎ lunch & dinner; ♿) Rumour has it the curries here have aphrodisiac properties. Either way, they are authentically Indian and are served among the decorative jiggery-pokery of an authentic Delhi diner.

**Ka Jok See** (☎ 0 7621 7903; [kajoksee@hotmail.com](mailto:kajoksee@hotmail.com); 26 Th Takua Pa; dishes 180-480B; ☎ dinner Tue-Sun) Dripping old Phuket charm and creaking under the weight of the owner's fabulous trinket collection, this atmospheric little eatery offers great food, top-notch music and – if you're lucky – some sensationally camp cabaret. Enjoy your dinner, sip down some wine and then dance the night away. Book ahead.

**Salvatore's** (☎ 08 9871 1184; 15 Th Rasada; dishes 140-620B; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun; ♿) This authentic (read: check tablecloths, giant pepper-grinders, opera and a portly owner) Italian restaurant cooks up all of mama's favourites, from a mean pizza to a sizzling fillet steak.

Southeast of the centre, on Th Ong Sim Phai, is the town's municipal market where you can buy fresh fruit and vegetables. Around three sides of this market you'll find a night market that features Thai and Chinese food.

## Drinking

Phuket Town is no Mecca for nightlife junkies. The major hotels, however, have discos and/or karaoke clubs.

**Zanzibar** ([www.royalphuketcity.com](http://www.royalphuketcity.com); 154 Th Phang-Nga) For a full-blown boogie, try this spot in the Royal Phuket City hotel (opposite).

**O'Malleys** (☎ 0 7622 0170; 2/20-21 Th Montri; ☎ 4pm-1am) Travelling thousands of miles to sink a Guinness in an Irish pub always feels a little daft, but Phuket's homesick flock to this cosy Celtic watering hole for pool and assorted shenanigans. It has a generally welcoming atmosphere and the interior is almost authentic, if a little too clean.

**Jammin' Music Club** (☎ 0 7622 0189; 78/28-29 Th Krung Thep; ☎ 8pm-2am) Gun owners and under-20s are prohibited entry, but this live-music venue is a good bet for a late night knees-up. Expect bands playing everything from rock and pop to jazz, but call ahead to see what's

on. The action usually kicks off around 10pm and Thai youngsters are at the heart of it.

**Timber Hut** (☎ 0 7621 1839; 118/1 Th Yaowarat; ☎ 6pm-2am) This red-brick spot features Wild West décor and live music from 10pm. The tunes can be deafeningly loud but it's popular with Thai 20-somethings and there's usually plenty of entertainment on offer.

**Collector's Pub** (☎ 0 7621 1333; 74 Th Rasada; ☎ 6pm-midnight) Drink amid relics at this little bar in the Thavorn Hotel. It's full of museum pieces and is a good bet for a quieter tipple.

## Entertainment

**Paradise Cinemas** (☎ 0 7622 0174; Th Tilok Uthit; tickets 80B) For those addicted to celluloid, Paradise plays English-language blockbusters.

**Alliance Française** (☎ 0 7622 2988; 3 Soi 1, Th Phat-tana; ☎ 2.30-6pm Mon, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Weekly screenings of French films (subtitled in English); it also has a library and a TV with up-to-date news broadcasts.

**Boxing Stadium** (tickets 500/700/1000B) Thai boxing can be seen Tuesday and Friday nights at 8pm. Ticket prices vary depending on where you sit and include one-way transport. The stadium is at the southern edge of town near the pier; a tük-tük (motorised pedicab) costs 70B. Get your tickets at the On On Hotel (opposite).

## Shopping

There's some reasonable shopping in the provincial capital.

**Day Market** (Th Ranong) Near the town centre, this market can trace its history back to the days when pirates, Indians, Chinese, Malays and Europeans traded in Phuket. You might still find some Southeast Asian fabrics, though for the most part it sells food now.

**Municipal Market** (Th Ong Sim Phai) Southeast of the centre, the focus of this market is on fresh produce and other things to eat.

**Robinson Ocean Plaza** (36 Th Tilok Uthit; ☎ 9am-10pm) Look for this air-con shopping mall near the municipal market.

## Getting There & Around TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

There are direct international flights to Phuket from Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Osaka. All other international flights arrive via Bangkok. Many of these (if you are coming from North America or are routed through Tokyo in particular) arrive in Bangkok too late to connect with an outgoing domestic flight

to Phuket. This means even if you buy tickets directly to Phuket you will likely have to spend one night in Bangkok first – it will likely appear as a layover on your ticket. The good news is there are a number of hotels near the airport in Bangkok where you can shack up for the night (p148).

Phuket Airport is about 45 minutes from Patong, Kata and Karon beaches. There is a minibus service at the airport that will take you into Phuket Town for 80B per person; trips to Patong, Kata and Karon beaches cost 120B. If you would rather not wait for the minibus, grab a metered taxi from the rank outside – skip the set-price taxi booth inside as it is much more expensive. It costs about 500B to go from the airport to Kata, Karon or Patong.

Thailand's budget airline, **Air Asia** ([www.airasia.com](http://www.airasia.com)) had some of the cheapest flights out of Phuket at the time of research. Daily flights include Bangkok (one-way from 1600B) and Kuala Lumpur (one-way from 2200B). The later is great if you want to visit the Andaman Coast and lower southern gulf before heading to Malaysia but no longer want to go by train due to the violence in the deep south (see boxed text, p636).

## BUS

You'll find the **bus terminal** (☎ 076211977) just to the east of the centre, within walking distance of the many hotels. Services from here include the following:

### BUSES FROM PHUKET

Destination	Bus type	Fare (B)	Duration (hr)
Bangkok	air-con	400-500	13-14
	VIP	900	13
Chumphon	air-con	250	6½
Hat Yai	ordinary	150	8
Ko Samui	air-con	210-270	6-7
		260	8 (bus & boat)
Krabi	air-con	120	3½
Nakhon Si Thammarat	air-con	175-200	7
Phang-Nga	air-con	100	2½
Ranong	air-con	185	5
Surat Thani	air-con	160-170	5
Takua Pa	air-con	110	3
Trang	air-con	150-200B	5

## CAR

There are cheap car rental agencies on Th Rasada near Pure Car Rent. Suzuki jeeps go for about 1600B per day (including insurance), though in the low season the rates can go down to 1100B. If you rent for a week or more, you should get a discount.

The rates are always better at local places than at the better-known international agencies, though you may be able to get deals with the familiar companies if you reserve in advance.

**Avis Rent-A-Car** (☎ airport 0 7635 1243; [www.avis-thailand.com](http://www.avis-thailand.com)) Charges a premium (around 1500B per day) but has outlets at some bigger resort hotels.

**Pure Car Rent** (☎ 0 7621 1002; [www.purecarrent.com](http://www.purecarrent.com); 75 Th Rasada) A good choice in the centre of town.

## MOTORCYCLE

You can rent motorcycles on Th Rasada near Pure Car Rent, or from various places at the beaches. Costs are between 250B and 350B per day, and can vary depending on the season. Bigger bikes (over 125cc) can be rented at a couple of shops in Patong and Karon.

Take care when riding a bike and use common sense. People who ride around in shorts, T-shirt, a pair of thongs and no helmet are asking for trouble – a minor spill while wearing reasonable clothes would leave you bruised and shaken, but for somebody clad in shorts it could result in enough skin loss to end your travels right there. If you do have an accident, you're unlikely to find that medical attention is up to international standards.

Phuket now has a helmet law that police claim will be enforced without exception: those caught not wearing one will be fined 300B. When we last visited there still seemed to be plenty of 'exceptions', but then again, it's just stupid to ride without a helmet so don't take the risk (on your wallet and life).

## SÄWNGTHÄEW & TUK-TUK

Large bus-sized säwngthäew run regularly from Th Ranong near the market to the various Phuket beaches for 50B per person – see the respective destination for details. These run from around 7am to 5pm; outside these times you have to charter a tük-tük to the beaches, which will set you back 250B to Patong, 300B to Karon and Kata, and 350B for Nai Han and Kamala. You'll probably have to bargain. Many drivers will ask you to make

a stop at a gem shop for a discount (they get a gas voucher from the shop for this). If you do, be clear about how many stops (one is enough) and for how long you'll be stopping. Beware of tales about the tourist office being 5km away, or that the only way to reach the beaches is by taxi, or even that you'll need a taxi to get from the bus terminal to the town centre (it is more or less in the town centre). For a ride around town, tük-tük drivers should charge 25B, although with rising petrol prices many won't go for less than 50B.

Motorcycle taxis around town should cost about 25B, but like tük-tüks fares are sometimes inflated based on petrol prices (or so we were told).

## Khao Phra Thaew Royal Wildlife & Forest Reserve

อุทยานสัตว์ป่าเขาพระเทพ

This mountain range, in the northern interior of the island, protects 23 sq km of rainforest (evergreen monsoon forest). There are nice jungle hikes in this reserve and a couple of waterfalls, **Ton Sai** and **Bang Pae**. The falls are best seen in the rainy season between June and November; in the dry months they slow to a trickle. Because of its royal status, the reserve is better protected than the average Thai national park.

A German botanist, Dr Darr, discovered a rare and unique species of palm in Khao Phra Thaew about 50 years ago. Called the white-backed palm or langkow palm, the fan-shaped plant stands 3m to 5m tall and is found only here and in Khao Sok National Park. The highest point in Khao Phra Thaew Royal Wildlife & Forest Reserve is 442m **Khao Phara**.

Tigers, Malayan sun bears, rhinos and elephants once roamed the forest here, but nowadays resident mammals are limited to humans, gibbons, monkeys, slow loris, langurs, civets, flying foxes, squirrels, mouse-deer and other smaller animals. Watch out for cobras and wild pigs.

Near Nam Tok Bang Pae (Bang Pae Falls) is the **Phuket Gibbon Rehabilitation Centre** (☎ 0 7626 0492; [www.wartha.org/projects](http://www.wartha.org/projects); admission by donation; ☎ 9am-4pm). Financed by donations and run by volunteers, the centre cares for gibbons that have been kept in captivity and reintroduces them to the wild. Visitors who wish to help may 'adopt' a gibbon for 1500B, which

will pay for one animal's care for a year. The programme includes keeping you updated on your adopted gibbon's progress throughout the year of adoption. Check the website for more information.

## HAT NAI THON, HAT NAI YANG & HAT MAI KHAO

หาดในทอน/หาดในยาง/หาดไม้ขาว

If you're looking for isolation, then the remote beaches of Phuket's northwestern coast might be your tonic.

Near the northwestern tip of Phuket, Hat Mai Khao is Phuket's longest beach. Sea turtles lay their eggs here between November and February each year. Please respect the turtles and do not touch them or their eggs. A visitors centre with toilets, showers and picnic tables is found at Mai Khao. Here you'll also find some short trails through the casuarinas to a steep beach. Take care when swimming here, as there's a strong year-round undertow. Except for weekends and holidays you'll have this place almost entirely to yourself; even during peak periods, peace and solitude are usually only a few steps away, as there's so much space here.

About 5km to the south, improved roads to Hat Nai Thon have brought only a small amount of development to this broad expanse of pristine sand backed by casuarinas and pandanus trees. Down on the beach, umbrellas and sling chairs are available from vendors. Swimming is quite good here except at the height of the monsoon, and there is some coral near the headlands at either end of the bay. The submerged remains of a wrecked 50m-long tin dredger lie further off the coast near tiny Ko Waew at a depth of 16m. Naithon Beach Resort at Hat Naithon can arrange dive trips in the vicinity.

Hat Nai Yang is renowned for snorkelling and it is very popular with Thai tourists. About 1km off Nai Yang is a large reef at a depth of 10m to 20m. Snorkelling and scuba equipment can be hired at many resorts so check for best prices and quality.

## Sleeping & Eating

### HAT NAI THON

**Tien Seng Guest House** (Th Surin; r 400-800B; ☎) This so-so place has rooms in a modern shophouse building, just south of the Naithon Beach Resort, and is the best bet in its price bracket. There is also a restaurant that serves Thai and

Chinese dishes. The more expensive rooms come with air-con.

**Naithon Beach Resort** (☎ 0 7620 5379; fax 0 7620 5381; 22/2 Th Surin; cottages 1000-1500B; (☞) Nov-May; (☞)) This resort has large, tastefully designed wooden cottages. A small restaurant serves sandwiches and Thai food. The resort closes in the rainy season. It is on the opposite side of the access road from the beach.

**Trisara** (☎ 0 7361 0100; www.trisara.com; villas from US\$565; (☞) (☞) (☞)) If you can afford to stay here, do so. A tranquil oasis far removed from Patong's chaos, ultra-exclusive Trisara became a hit the minute it opened. Must have been something about the villas coming with private pools and steam rooms (for the spa review see p665). Honeymoon, anyone? We loved the true infinity pool, which blends effortlessly into the sea.

#### HAT NAI YANG & HAT MAI KHAO

Camping is allowed on both Nai Yang and Mai Khao beaches without any permit.

**Phuket Camp Ground** (tents per person 100B) Privately operated, this camp site rents out tents with rice mats, pillows, blankets and a torch. A light mangrove thicket separates the camp site from the beach, but the proprietors don't mind if you move the tents out to the beach crest. A small outdoor restaurant-bar provides sustenance. Other amenities include a shower and toilet, hammocks, sling chairs, beach umbrellas and a campfire ring.

**Golddigger's Resort** (☎ 0 7632 8424; crown@phuket.com; 72/12 Th Surin; r 1100-1600B; (☞) (☞)) Despite its unsavoury name, Golddigger's is one of the best midrange options on this beach. The Swiss-run hotel has just 16 rooms, and their décor, spaciousness and choice furniture take them a step above most beachside joints in this price bracket. A poolside bar and a restaurant serving great Thai and international fare are other bonuses. Don't bother spending more on air-con; the fan rooms are often just as cool, thanks to ocean breezes. Prices don't vary between seasons.

**Nai Yang Beach Resort** (☎ 0 7632 8300; nai\_yang@phuket.ksc.co.th; 65/23-24 Th Hat Nai Yang; bungalows 650-1800B; (☞)) This resort is clean, quiet and near the beach. It sets itself apart from the hundreds of other bungalows looking exactly like it by pulling together a great nightly barbecue.

**JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa** (☎ 0 7633 8000; www.marriott.com; 231 Moo 3; r from US\$400; (☞) (☞) (☞))

This hot new Marriott was named one of the best hotels in the world in 2006 by readers of *Condé Nast Traveler*. Among the most appreciated assets are mammoth rooms boasting superior sea views, raised *sāalaa* (open-sided resting place) areas, triangular back cushions, massage mats and polished wood floors. A cooking school and pub with live music round out the deal. Don't miss the spa (see boxed text, p665).

Along the dirt road at the very southern end of Hat Nai Yang is a seemingly endless strip of seafood restaurants and, as always, tailor shops. There is a small minimart near the entrance to the Indigo Pearl Resort.

#### Getting There & Away

Sāwngthāw from Phuket cost 50B per person and run between 7am and 5pm only. If you're coming from the airport a taxi costs about 250B. There is no regular sāwngthāw stop for Mai Khao but a tūk-tūk charter from Phuket Town costs about 300B.

#### AO BANG THAO

อำเภอบางท่าว

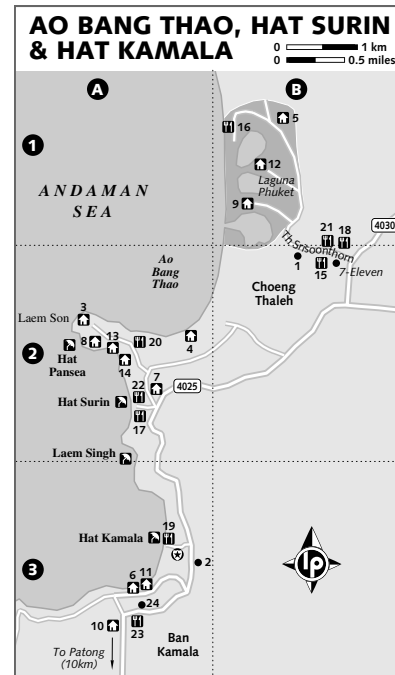
Home to some of the islands mega-resorts (serious pampering at serious prices), Ao Bang Thao laps against a lovely 8km-long crescent of white-sand beach on Phuket's western coast. A steady breeze makes the bay ideal for windsurfing; since 1992 the annual **Siam World Cup windsurfing championships** have been held here in January. A system of lagoons inland from the beach has been incorporated into Laguna Phuket, a complex of five upmarket resorts dominating the central portion of the beach. Even if you can't afford to stay, the beach makes a nice day trip.

#### Activities

**Hideaway Day Spa** (☎ 0 7627 1549; (☞) 11am-9pm) offers traditional Thai massage, sauna, mud body wraps and other treatments beginning at 1500B for a 90-minute massage. The facility is nicely laid out in a tranquil wooded setting next to one of Bang Thai's lagoons. Reservations for any treatments are recommended. Look for Hideaway about 800m west of Hwy 4030.

#### Sleeping

With one exception (although this may change in the near future), Bang Thao is strictly for the rich. The resorts in Laguna Phuket have more



#### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Hideaway Day Spa.....	1	B2
Phuket Fantasea.....	2	A3

#### SLEEPING

Amanpuri Resort.....	3	A2
Bangtao Lagoon Bungalows.....	4	A2
Banyan Tree Phuket.....	5	B1
Benjamin Resort.....	6	A3
Capri Beach Resort.....	7	A2
Chedi.....	8	A2
Dusit Laguna Resort.....	9	B1
Kamala Beach Hotel.....	10	A3
Kamala Dreams.....	11	A3
Sheraton Grande Phuket Laguna.....	12	B1
Surin Bay Inn.....	13	A2
Twin Palms.....	14	A2

#### EATING

English Pub.....	15	B2
Lotus Restaurant.....	16	B1
Mr Crab.....	17	A2
Peppers.....	18	B1
Seafood Restaurants.....	19	A3
Silk.....	20	A2
Tatonka.....	21	B1
Twin Brothers.....	22	A2
Voyage One Word.....	23	A3

#### TRANSPORT

Andaman Car Rental.....	(see 8)	
Via Rent-A-Car.....	24	A3

than 1100 rooms and 30 restaurants between them (the gargantuan Sheraton Grande alone has 335 rooms and eight restaurants). The complex also boasts an 18-hole golf course. Guests at any one of the resorts can use the dining and recreation facilities at all of them. Frequent shuttle buses make the rounds of all the hotels, as do pontoon boats (via the linked lagoons).

**Bangtao Lagoon Bungalows** (☎ 0 7632 4260; www.phuket-bangtaolagoon.com; Ao Bang Thao; bungalows 400-1800B; (☞) (☞) (☞)) It's still looking a bit ramshackle from the tsunami, but Bangtao Lagoon is toughing it out and remains the only cheapie in the region. Fabulously friendly staff, and a location on an almost deserted stretch of beach make up for the slightly worn, but passable, rooms.

**Dusit Laguna Resort** (☎ 0 7632 4324; r US\$150-280, ste US\$250-400; (☞) (☞) (☞)) There are 226 guest rooms and suites offered at this well-appointed luxury resort (although it's nowhere near as swanky as the Banyan Tree), as well as a spa, fitness centre and tennis courts, and free use of sailboards and sailboats.

**Sheraton Grande Laguna Phuket** (☎ 0 7632 4101; www.starwoodhotels.com; r US\$200-1000; (☞) (☞) (☞)) At the other end of the atmosphere scale, the Sheraton will appeal to a livelier, more active crowd. With plans for further expansion, it already features a gigantic 323m pool, water sport facilities galore and 335 rooms.

**Banyan Tree Phuket** (☎ 0 7632 4374; www.banyan-tree.com; villas US\$550-2500; (☞) (☞) (☞)) One of Asia's finest hotels, the Banyan Tree Phuket is an oasis of sedate, understated luxury. Accommodation is in private villas – many with private pools and massage areas – and the on-site spa is one of the continent's best (see boxed text, p665). In 2006 the Banyan Tree Phuket was once again voted one of the world's best places to stay by readers of *Condé Nast Traveler*.

#### Eating & Drinking

Despite what some local hoteliers would have you believe, there is good food to be had outside the confines of Bang Thao's luxury hotels. You will find much of it just outside Laguna's main gate.

**Lotus Restaurant** (dishes 50-100B; (☞) lunch & dinner) A clean, breezy and friendly open-walled eatery serving an amazing assortment of live crab, shrimp, lobster, fish and other visual and culinary delights in quite well-tended tanks. Look for Lotus 500m west of the entrance to



Banyan Tree Phuket. It is the first in a row of beachside Thai and seafood restaurants that stretches to the south.

**Tatonka** (☎ 0 7632 4349; Th Srisoonthorn; dishes 250-300B; 🍴 dinner Thu-Tue) This is the home of 'globetrotter cuisine', which owner-chef Harold Schwarz developed by taking fresh local products and combining them with cooking and presentation techniques learned in Europe, Colorado and Hawaii. The eclectic, tapas-style selection includes creative vegetarian and seafood dishes. There's also a tasting menu (per person 750B, minimum two people) which lets you try a little of everything. Call ahead in the high season. Tatonka arranges free transportation for guests of the resort complex.

**English Pub** (☎ 08 9872 1398; Th Srisoonthorn; dishes 100-300B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This timber and thatch watering hole is the most authentic English pub on the island – even the toilets smell. It has a sunny beer garden, a snug interior, a good range of beers and some decent pub grub. Shoot darts or kick back with Premier-ship footy.

**Peppers** (☎ 0 7632 5112; Th Srisoonthorn; dishes 150-400B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) A spicier take on the Hard Rock Café theme, Peppers features bare, red-brick walls, a pool table, music memorabilia and a splash of neon. Food is Tex-Mex meets Thai and there's cold beer on tap.

## Getting There & Away

A sawngthāew between Bang Thao and Phuket Town's Th Ranong costs 50B per person. Tùk-tùk charters are 250B.

## HAT SURIN

หาดสุรินทร์

Little more than a gear change and a slow right-hander north from Laem Singh, Hat Surin is on the up and up. Showcasing a trio of top-end resorts, as well as a starburst of cheap imitators, this busy beach is big on variety. Trees line the shore and dozens of cheap food shacks (offering some of the best-value seafood on Phuket) take shelter beneath them. Money is pouring in, new places are opening all the time and the murmur among expats is that this is the beach to watch.

The downside of all this, of course, is ever-growing crowds. Hat Surin is extremely pretty, but stretches have already become a car crash of snack stalls and souvenir salesmen. For the celebrities, at least, the only way to do Surin

today is from behind the guarded gates of the exclusive Amanpuri.

Expect big, dangerous seas during the monsoon – swimmers beware.

## Sleeping

Budget digs are at a real premium, but there are some excellent midrange operations and several fabulous luxury choices.

**Surin Bay Inn** (☎ 0 7627 1601; r 1000-1500B; 🍴 📺) Right next to Capri Beach, this is another welcoming midrange option. There's an eatery serving fabulous breakfasts below; clean, spacious rooms above (although a sea view costs 400B extra); and a useful book exchange.

**Twin Palms** (☎ 0 7631 6500; www.twinpalms-phuket.com; r US\$160-1200; 🍴 📺 📺) There is a youthful vibe about this seductive spa hotel; there are lots of clean lines to its contemporary, stylish façade and minimalist décor in its posh rooms. If you want A-grade pampering without paying the earth, this is one of Phuket's best bets (hint: it's a great alternative to the nearby Laguna Beach complex, on an equally appealing beach).

**Capri Beach Resort** (☎ 0 7627 0597; www.phuket.com/theapri; r 600-2200B; 🍴 📺) A little yellow temple to Italian kitsch, this welcoming spot offers great home cooking, snug rooms and more Italiana than you can likely stomach. Expect opera, giant pepper grinders and high standards. It's a short hop from the beach.

**Chedi** (☎ 0 7632 4017; www.ghmhotels.com; r 7200-15,200B; 🍴 📺) Boasting one of the best private beaches on Phuket, the Chedi offers a range of chi-chi bungalows scattered across a forested hillside. Facilities are a little limited, but there is a restaurant, the requisite infinity pool and a small bar.

**Amanpuri Resort** (☎ 0 7632 4333; www.amanresorts.com; villas US\$700-8200; 🍴 📺 📺) Phuket's number one celebrity magnet, the Amanpuri offers lashings of glamour and palatial luxury (what else would you expect from the former Shah of Iran's winter palace architect?) With a staggering three-and-a-half members of staff assigned to every guest, this is exclusive service with bells. Accommodation is in private villas and you can even book your own maid and cook.

## Eating

There are plenty of excellent restaurants in and around Surin. For cheap seafood, your first stop should be the seafront snack stalls on the main beach.

**Twin Brothers** (☎ 0 9591 1274; mains 40-200B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Another of Hat Surin's more substantial food shacks, this airy eatery specialises in Australian steaks, pizzas and antipasto. The tables come clothed and there's a sign telling you how far it is to home – apparently, it's 9887km to London.

**Mr Crab** (☎ 0 7632 5000, ext 1710; mains 50-200B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Crab cooked every way imaginable is offered at this no-frills beachfront joint. You pay by the weight and gobble it down in front of fabulous seaside vistas.

**Silk** (☎ 0 7627 1705; Rte 4025; mains 200-450B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Expats from across Phuket flock to Silk for a hip cocktail amid burgundy walls and exotic flowers. The menu focuses on beautifully executed Thai specialities. The expansive, stylish restaurant is one of several upmarket dining options in Surin Plaza, just east of the beach, on Rte 4025.

## Getting There & Away

A regular sawngthāew from Phuket Town's Th Ranong to Hat Surin costs 50B per person, and tük-tük or sawngthāew charters cost 250B to 350B.

Rent cars from **Andaman Car Rental** (☎ 0 7632 4422; 🍴 9am-9pm), opposite the entrance to the Chedi. A jeep costs from 1200B per day.

## HAT KAMALA

หาดกมลา

This photogenic bay is one of Phuket's prettiest, but recovery has been a little slower here than elsewhere on the island. And while it is now business as usual, Kamala has lost ground – in terms of tourist arrivals – to nearby Patong and Hat Surin. As a result, Kamala is a pretty good deal. Resorts are newer and the beaches are quieter than almost anywhere else on Phuket – make the most of it now, before it gets rediscovered.

## Sights & Activities

Local beach bums will tell you that **Laem Singh**, just north of Kamala, is one of the best capes on the island. Walled in by cliffs, there is no road access so you have to park on the headland and clamber down a narrow path. You could camp here and eat at the rustic roadside seafood places at the northern end of Singh or in **Ban Kamala**, a village further south. If you're renting a motorbike, this is a nice little trip down Rte 4025 and then over dirt roads from Surin to Kamala.

**Phuket Fantasea** (☎ 0 7638 5000; www.phuket-fantasea.com; admission with/without dinner 1600/1100B; 🍴 5.30-11.30pm Wed-Mon) is a US\$60 million 'cultural theme park' found just north of Hat Kamala. Despite the billing, there aren't any rides, but there is a truly magical show that manages to capture the colour and pageantry of traditional Thai dance and costumes and combine them with state-of-the-art light-and-sound techniques rivalling anything found in Las Vegas (think 30 elephants). All of this takes place on a stage dominated by a full-scale replica of a Khmer temple reminiscent of Angkor Wat. Kids especially will be captivated by the spectacle. There is a good collection of souvenir shops in the park offering Thai handicrafts. The Thai buffet dinner is surprisingly good. Tickets can be booked through most hotels and tour agencies.

Don't bother bringing your camera to catch the splendour and spectacle on film – they are not allowed and if you do bring it, you'll have to deposit it for safekeeping before you enter.

Back in Kamala, you can organise diving through expat-run **Scuba Quest** (☎ 0 7627 9016; www.scuba-quest-phuket.de).

## Sleeping

Kamala is seeing a fair bit of development as small places expand and go upscale.

**Benjamin Resort** (☎ 0 7638 5145; www.phuketdir.com/benjaminresort; r 350-600B; 🍴 📺) This aging hotel with a laid-back air has the best budget digs in town. Air-con rooms are particularly good value (some of the cheapest on the island). Aside from appalling pink bedspreads in some rooms, there's little to complain about.

**Kamala Dreams** (☎ 0 7629 1131; www.kamala-beach.net; r 1200-1800B; 🍴 📺) This old-timer, only a few seconds from the beach, is looking slick again thanks to a massive renovation project. Rooms are spotless, floors are made from cool tiles, walls have bright new paint and everything sparkles.

**Kamala Beach Hotel** (☎ 0 7627 9580; www.kamala-beach.com; r 1800-3900B; 🍴 📺 📺) The best bet in its price range, Kamala Beach offers spacious well-kitted rooms, a couple of glassy pools and more than one restaurant. Service is commendable.

## Eating

**Aew Seafood** (☎ 0 7627 9843; dishes 70-200B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Settle in at this breezy eatery where fresh fish steals the limelight. Whether you

are in the mood for a plate of cuttlefish or grilled king prawns, simple home cooking has a fabulous fresh taste.

**Voyage One World** (☎ 0 5787 6515; dishes 200-400B; ☺ lunch & dinner) A moderately priced French restaurant that gets good reviews. Voyage One World offers an early-bird special between 5.30pm and 7pm featuring a three-course set menu (price varies). The à la carte menu is small but varied, split nearly evenly between seafood and meat. There's chocolate fondue for dessert.

### Getting There & Away

A regular sawngthàew from Kamala to Patong costs 50B per person, while a sawngthàew charter (necessary after dark) costs 250B. You can rent vehicles in Hat Kamala at **Via Rent-A-Car** (☎ 0 7638 5718; www.via-phuket.com; various locations).

### PATONG

ปาทอง

Chaotic Patong's beautiful curved beach sparks with frenetic electricity. The steamy streets seethe with souvenir shops, girlie bars, pricey seafood restaurants, dive shops, travel agencies, hotels and everything in between. Scantily clad golden-brown travellers pay homage to the neon gods, dancing the night away to booming sound systems in sweaty, pulsating clubs, or sipping Singha under the stars at sandy beachside bars. Demurely dressed diners dine on giant prawns and Italian wines at decadent, romantic restaurants where the views are as worthwhile as the food.

Hat Patong is the island's most popular beach, and it seems to be trying to become the next Pattaya – the streets are filled with flashy fluorescent signs lighting the night sky with a lurid red glow – but it's not nearly as creepy and by day it's quite fine for kids. The sort of people drawn to this teeming, neon-lit atmosphere will adore Patong, while the more peace-loving souls (you know who you are) might want to stay far, far away.

Although most of Patong has been spruced up, some reconstruction continues.

### Information

Money-exchange booths and internet cafés are commonplace. There are two post offices in Patong; one is towards the northern end of Th Rat Uthit, the other is near the centre of Th Thawiwong.

**Bookazine** (☎ 0 7634 5833; 18 Th Bangla; ☺ 9.30am-11.30pm) Head here to buy English-language maps, guidebooks, magazines and newspapers.

**Immigration office** (☎ 0 7634 0477; Th Kalim Beach; ☺ 10am-noon & 1-3pm Mon-Fri) Does visa extensions.

**Tourist police** (☎ 0 7634 0244) At the beach road's intersection with Th Bangla.

### Activities

Patong is a diving centre on the island. For a list of established dive shops, see p661. Yachts, sailboats and catamarans sometimes can be chartered here, with or without crew. To find out more on this, see p664.

### Sleeping

While Patong was once Phuket's most expensive beach, prices are stabilising as the local accommodation market becomes saturated with new places to stay.

### BUDGET

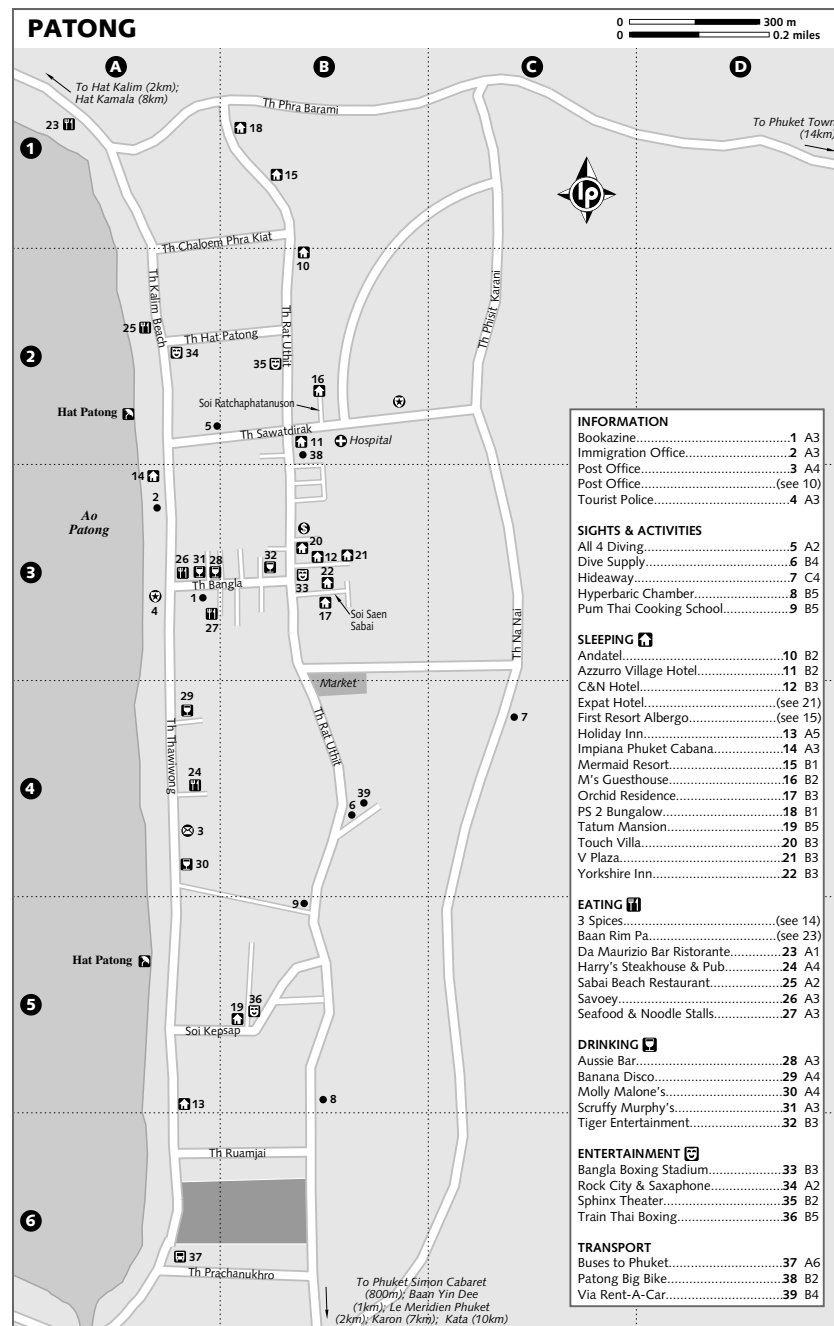
On the beach there is nothing in the budget range, but on and off Th Rat Uthit, especially in the Paradise Complex and along Soi Saen Sabai, there are several nondescript guesthouses with rooms for 300B to 500B.

**Touch Villa** (☎ 0 7634 4011; touchvilla@hotmail.com; 151/4 Th Rat Uthit; r 350-600B; ☺) A slightly crumbly spot with a twee garden setting and holiday-camp ambience. It's cheap, cheerful and refreshingly un-seedy. The pricier rooms have air-con.

**M's Guesthouse** (14/13 Soi Ratchaphatanuson; r 400-800B; ☺) There is nothing subtle about M's gaudiness: it sports verandas with pink porcelain balusters and there is glazed tile covering nearly all flat surfaces. Rooms have all the mod cons, but share baths and porches. Check out the outlandishly furnished common area. It's a 10-minute walk from the beach.

**Tatum Mansion** (☎ 0 7634 4332; tatumansion@hotmail.com; 66/7-8 Soi Kepsap; r from 600-1200B; ☺) On a street packed with budget offerings, this expat-owned outfit comes up trumps. You get cable TV and a bed that won't groan when you clamber into it. You can also get the low-down on town from the management.

**C&N Hotel** (☎ 0 7634 5949; www.cnhotelpatong.com; r 800-1200B; ☺) The original features (it looks like it might once have posed as a spa hotel) are now looking a bit hung over, but this remains solid value for the price. The rooms feel almost cosy with wood panels on some



walls and American-motel style polyester bedspreads. The pool is a plus.

**PS 2 Bungalow** (☎ 0 7634 2207; www.ps2bungalow.com; 21 Th Rat Uthit; r 400-1500B; 🍷 🍷) There's a dearth of gloss at this slightly dowdy budget offering. The pink paint job could do with a facelift, but the rooms are modern and reasonably priced, if a little scruffy. Prices vary greatly depending on season and whether you want a fan or air-con.

#### MIDRANGE

Prices in this category can usually be negotiated down substantially during the rainy season.

**Yorkshire Inn** (☎ 0 7634 0904; www.yorkshireinn.com; 169/16 Soi Saen Sabai; r 800B; 🍷 🍷) This is one of a string of unabashedly British outfits, courting visitors that insist on putting the home in their comforts. This one offers a flicker of homey B&B charm and can at least put together a mean fry-up...the Yorkshire pudding is a little less successful. The rooms are spotless and come with cable TV.

**First Resort Albergo** (☎ 0 7634 0980; firsthotel@hotmail.com; 19/12 Th Rat Uthit; r 800B; 🍷 🍷) This pleasant, Italian-run spot is solid as mama's bust and offers stylish rooms around a pool. There's TV, a terrace restaurant (expect pizza and bolognese made with Thai basil) and plenty of warm Mediterranean hospitality.

**Azzurro Village Hotel** (☎ 0 7634 1811; 107 Th Rat Uthit; r 900B; 🍷) Also offering the odd nod to Mediterranean design, Azzurro features slightly over-priced, comfortable rooms in a quiet courtyard. The owners are multilingual and there is a little on-site eatery.

**Expat Hotel** (☎ 0 7634 0300; expat@loxinfo.co.th; r 490-1200B; 🍷) At the end of a small bar-packed alley, this hotel is surprisingly quiet, at least in the daytime. Popular with young foreigners, there's a communal, buddy-buddy feeling between staff and guests. Monthly rates are available, too.

**Orchid Residence** (☎ 0 7634 5176; www.orchid-residence.com; 171/22 Soi Saen Sabai; r 580-1700B; 🍷 🍷) Spread across both sides of the lane, this orchid is now looking a little droopy. That said, there's certainly plenty of choice, from relatively spartan fan rooms to much swankier air-con offerings. Check it out if other places are full.

**Andatel** (☎ 0 7629 0489; www.andatelhotel.com; 419 Th Rat Uthit; r 1000-1800B; 🍷 🍷) Andatel is a good-looking place and one of the best deals in its price range. It offers great rooms with patios or balconies, and some creative touches in the traditional peaked Thai buildings. There is a pool to splash around in, plus an attractive restaurant out the front.

**V-Plaza** (☎ 0 7629 2556; www.valhalla-th.com; 163/24 Soi Sunset; r 800-2000B; 🍷) This place is pretty darn

unique; think of it as a mini Viking-theme park. In a large indoor space, there are 13 comfortable rooms facing the restaurant/bar area (could be noisy at night), highlighted by a giant Viking helmet. All have TV and fridge; two come with private whirlpool (700B extra). Expect to see some hookers hanging out with Western men here: the place advertises that 'there are no additional costs for overnight visitors' – hey at least they're honest, most hotels allow prostitutes inside, you just have to pay a 1000B extra...

**Mermaid Resort** (☎ 0 7634 5670; www.mermaid-resort.com; Th Rat Uthit; r 1200-2200B; 🍷 🍷) The piped music echoing through the marble lobby is a little cheesy, but the rooms offer the kind of reliability you can expect from a chain three-star hotel. Count on a minibar, mini shampoo bottles, cable TV and a rather garish, shiny bedspread.

#### TOP END

**Holiday Inn** (☎ 0 7634 0608; Th Rat Uthit; r 3200-5200B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This brand new resort is a little glitzy than your run-of-the-mill Holiday Inn, offering all the usual amenities, plus one or two extra. There's a glossy spa featuring a smorgasbord of restorative treatments and the open-air bar faces out on the street for fashionable people watching.

**Impiana Phuket Cabana** (☎ 0 7634 0138; www.impiana.com; Th Thawiwong; r 3000-7500B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) A small village of opulent bungalows set on the sand, the Impiana Phuket Cabana has one of the best locations in Patong. The gorgeous cabanas fuse Thai and Balinese styles and privacy is of utmost importance. It's very easy to wander from your cabana, through a tropical garden to the beach without seeing a soul. Don't miss the 3 Spices restaurant (right).

**Baan Yin Dee** (☎ 0 7629 4104; www.baanyindee.com; 7/5 Th Muean Ngen; r US\$180-490; 🍷 🍷) On a hill overlooking town, this is Patong's premier boutique getaway. It's small but perfectly put together. Spacious rooms come with balconies, magazine-worthy styling and a trickle of beautiful young things hanging out around the pool. If you're partying all night, come here to repair your soul (plus there's a fabulous restaurant providing hangover-curing culinary delights).

**Le Meridien Phuket** (☎ 0 7634 0480; www.lemeridien.com; r US\$230-250; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Just outside town, this swanky resort has everything the international globetrotter could ask for – from

tennis courts and swimming pools (both very much in the plural), to fabulous restaurants and palatial rooms. There's even volleyball, minigolf and a climbing wall. It remains one of Phuket's most popular great escapes.

#### Eating

Patong has stacks of restaurants, some of them quite good. Patong's most glamorous restaurants are in a little huddle above the cliffs on the northern edge of town. Back in town, expect the usual spread of expat diners.

**Sabai Beach Restaurant** (dishes 70-120B; 🍷) breakfast, lunch & dinner) The tables are set right on the sand at this beachfront place run by a friendly Thai staff. The fried rice and calamari dishes are good, but so are the Western choices. If you are craving a good, simple meal, the food is better than average. We liked the spaghetti with garlic and chilli.

**Savoey** (☎ 0 7634 1171; 136 Th Thawiwong; dishes 120-350B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) A perennially popular seafood haunt, it subscribes to the 'slay 'em and weigh 'em' fish restaurant philosophy. Cast an eye over the mountain of seafood piled up on ice outside, or the fish gulping away in tanks inside, point out your prey and then take a seat to enjoy your quarry. If you want something more upscale, try the swank, white-tableclothed new addition next door featuring a smaller menu of mostly seafood.

**Baan Rim Pa** (☎ 0 7634 4079; dishes 215-475B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Soft piano music sets the mood for a romantic evening at this restaurant built high above a thicket of mangrove trees. It offers stunning ocean-view tables (make reservations) and specialises in Thai cuisine that's only slightly toned down for foreign palates. Dress accordingly to dine at this high-class restaurant.

**Harry's Steakhouse & Pub** (☎ 0 1787 3167; 110/2 Soi Big One; dishes 100-495B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) There are no surprises at Harry's; it's the usual air-conditioned tourist boozery. If you fancy a slab of steak in fresh, clean surrounds, however, you could do a lot worse than a table here.

**3 Spices** (☎ 0 7634 2100; Impiana Phuket Cabana; dishes 175-600B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Part of the newly opened Impiana Phuket Cabana resort, 3 Spices serves sumptuous food in a fun location right on Patong's busy main beach road. Chow down on gourmet fusion like New Zealand green shell mussels in a sweet chilli and cilantro sauce served on dill-mashed potatoes,

#### GAY PRIDE IN PHUKET

Although there are big gay pride celebrations in Bangkok and Pattaya, the **Phuket Gay Festival** is considered by many to be the best in Thailand, maybe even Southeast Asia.

The first Phuket Gay Festival started as a small community project in November 1999, in response to plans for similar events in the capital and in Pattaya. When the festival proved to be very successful, the planners realised Phuket would be competing with the other similar festivals across the country so it was moved from November to February – a drier month in Phuket anyway. Since then, in early February the whole island, but the town of Patong in particular, has been packed with (mostly male) revellers from the world over.

Although Bangkok and Pattaya both have prominent gay scenes, Phuket's is possibly the most pleasing, for both the scenery and the light-hearted, open and friendly atmosphere. In recent years, the festival has also included social responsibility campaigns, such as HIV awareness, staying clean and sober, and the fight against child prostitution.

The main events of the four-day party are a huge beach volleyball tournament and, of course, the Grand Parade, featuring floats, cheering crowds and beautiful costumes in the streets of Patong.

Pre-festival parties start happening in late January, and include things such as **Gay Diving** and **Gay Sea Canoeing**. Great package tours can be booked through many companies, including **Utopia Tours** (www.utopia-tours.com), which specialises in gay/lesbian trips in Southeast Asia.

For updates on future festivals, or to sign up for the spectacular volleyball tournament, go to www.phuketgaypridefestival.com.

while checking out the hustle and bustle on the street. Meals are complemented by live music played at conversation level.

**Da Maurizio Bar Ristorante** (☎ 0 7634 4079; dishes 450-950B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Another very classy and romantic restaurant, this one serves delicious Italian cuisine. Call for reservations and a complimentary ride to the restaurant. It's set down on the rocks.

Bargain seafood and noodle stalls pop up across town at night – try the lanes on and around Th Bangla.

## Drinking

Some visitors may find that Patong's bar scene is enough to put them off their *phat thai*, but if you're in the mood for plenty of beer, winking neon and short skirts, it is sure worth sampling.

Th Bangla is Patong's beer-and-bar girl Mecca, featuring a number of spectacular, go-go extravaganzas, where you can expect the usual mix of gyrating Thai girls and red-faced Western men. The music is loud – expect techno – the clothes are all but non-existent and the décor is typically slapstick – expect plenty of phallic imagery. That said, the atmosphere is more carnival than carnage and you'll find plenty of Western girls pushing their way through the throng to the bar.

**Molly Malone's** (☎ 0 7629 2771; Th Thawiwong; 🍴 noon-2am) Wildly popular with tourists and *farang*, this pub rocks with Irish gigs every night at 9.45pm. There's a good atmosphere, lots of pub food and some great tables out the front from which to admire the ocean and legions of tourist passers-by. Guinness is available for a mere 349B per pint.

**Tiger Entertainment** (☎ 0 7634 5112; Th Bangla; 🍴 noon-2am) The strangest building in Phuket features a concrete cave styling and a menagerie of unsettling – and extremely well endowed – anthropomorphic tigers. More a congregation of go-go bars – topped with a nightclub – than a single entity, this is the first, and often last, stop on any odyssey through Patong's bar scene.

**Scruffy Murphy's** (☎ 0 7629 2590; 5 Th Bangla; 🍴 noon-2am) This place competes with Molly Malone's by offering its own live Irish music and cover bands at 9.45pm. It's also clean and air-conditioned. It cooks up pub grub and Thai food and offers big screens for watching sports. Although it's located amid the strips of cheap girlie bars, the older male *farang*

clientele that frequent the place seem more interested in flirting with young *farang* women than Thai prostitutes. Still, it can be harmless fun and you may find yourself here more than once in a span of days.

**Aussie Bar** (Th Bangla; 🍴 noon-2am) This Australian-style bar is bedecked with kangaroos and is a good spot for a pre-wiggle tippie.

**Banana Disco** (☎ 0 1271 2469; 96 Th Thawiwong; admission 200B) Phuket's most sophisticated nightclub was closed for renovations when we stopped by, but it's bound to look great when it reopens (we dug the spiral metal staircase and brightly painted murals we viewed while peeking through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows.)

## Entertainment

Once you've done the go-go, there's plenty more to see. Cabaret and Thai boxing, in particular, are something of a speciality here.

**Phuket Simon Cabaret** (☎ 0 7634 2011; www.phuket-simoncabaret.com; admission 550B) About 300m south of town on Th Sirirach, this cabaret offers entertaining transvestite shows. The 600-seat theatre is grand, the costumes are gorgeous and the ladyboys are convincing. It's often a full house. Performances are at 7.30pm and 9.30pm nightly – book ahead.

**Sphinx Theatre** (☎ 0 7634 1500; 120 Th Rat Uthit; admission 350B) There's more cabaret on offer at the Sphinx, where shows kick off at 9pm and 10.30pm daily.

**Rock City & Saxophone** (Th Kalim Beach Rd) These two new venues, next door to each other, have nightly live music. Rock City, well rocks, with local and Western hard-rock bands. Saxophone focuses on jazz, funk and soul, and books acts from Bangkok on a regular basis.

**Bangla Boxing Stadium** (☎ 0 7275 6364; Th Bangla; admission 1000B) You can't miss this stadium's match advertising – announcements are blasted every few minutes from giant speakers in passing pick-up trucks. The announcements are so annoying they may turn you off, but if you're into *muay thai* (Thai boxing), boxing bouts are held a few times per week (usually Wednesday and Sunday) at 8.45pm.

**Train Thai Boxing** (☎ 0 7629 2890; Soi Kepsap; 🍴 8am-9pm) *Muay thai*/mixed martial arts fighting is taking off in a big way on television screens across the world. Learn a few moves of your own at Train Thai Boxing. Cost for a 90-minute lesson? A lot of bruises plus 300B. Cool quotient with your friends back home? Priceless.

## Getting There & Around

Túk-túk around Patong should cost 25B per ride – the driver may try to charge you more as a *farang*, so it's best to have the money already out before he or she can say anything. There are numerous places to rent 125cc motorcycles and jeeps – you'll find them at nearly every street corner. **Patong Big Bike** (☎ 0 7634 0380; Th Rat Uthit) rents proper motorcycles (per day 500B to 1000B), not scooter/motorbikes, as well as off-road motorbikes (per day 350B). Keep in mind that the helmet law is strictly enforced in Patong. For car rental, **Via Rent-A-Car** (Map p677; ☎ 0 7638 5718; www.via-phuket.com; 189/6 Th Rat Uthit, Patong) is a good choice and can deliver cars to anywhere on the island.

Sáwngtháew to Patong from Phuket Town leave from Th Ranong, near the day market and fountain circle; the fare is 50B. The after-hours charter fare is 250B. Buses from Patong to Phuket Town leave from the southern end of Th Thawiwong and cost 50B.

## KARON

PHUKET

Karon's gorgeous beachfront is developing rapidly, but the area still has an isolated feel. The beach road, once nearly void of development, now features a string of mainly top-end resorts. Luckily, most are tasteful and set far enough back from the sand to blend into the background hills. Karon is just a few minutes' taxi ride from Kata, but has none of Kata's noisy buzz. If you want to slumber in quiet, without being too far from the party, Karon is the beach for you.

During the monsoon season the surf is too rough for swimming here, so you'll have to head to Kata for that as well. As a result Karon's hotels are absurdly cheap during the rainy season: we're talking luxury resorts for 2000B.

You'll find most of the restaurants in the village of Karon, just north of the beachfront where many hotels are clustered. Karon is still a fairly peaceful place and relatively devoid of the overwhelming commercialisation, neon lights and loud music found on nearby Patong, although you're still likely to be propositioned by the ladyboys hanging outside the restaurants come dark.

## Sights

If you're looking for fun away from the sand, or are travelling with the kids, try **Dino Park** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 0625; adult/child 120/90B, incl use of golf

course 240/180B; 🕒 10am-midnight), next to Marina Phuket. It features an 18-hole minigolf course and a fake waterfall, among other things. The theme is Flintstones – the staff dress in cave-man outfits, the restaurant serves Bronto Burgers and you can drink at the Dino Bar.

## Sleeping

Hat Karon is lined with inns and deluxe bungalows, along with some cheaper places. Karon sees a disproportionately large number of guests from Scandinavia and as a result the beach is home to quite a few Scandinavian run simple hotels. These places tend to be clean and cheap, and most have attached restaurants specialising in fare from these northern finger countries.

## BUDGET & MIDRANGE

Less expensive places will naturally be found well off the beach, often on small hillocks to the east of the main road.

**Karon Guest House** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7639 6860; r 400-500B; 🍴 📺 📺) Furniture is of the scratched mismatched variety and bathrooms are tiny, but this family-run hotel is very cheap, the staff is friendly and beds are firm. It offers free left-luggage service and safe deposit, plus satellite TV in the lobby. Guests have pool privileges at the nearby Golden Sands Hotel.

**Bazoom Hostel** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7639 6914; www.bazoomhostel.com; 64/76-77 Th Patak East; dm 240B, r 500B; 🍴 📺 📺) One of Phuket's bona fide backpacker haunts, Bazoom offers plenty of banter and staff who are savvy with the intricacies of doing Phuket on the cheap. The dorm is basic (with 14 beds), or you can opt for one of the no-frills, but still comfy rooms. Air-con is available in the pricier doubles. Sáwngtháew drivers may pretend they've never heard of this place, as Bazoom doesn't pay them commissions – be adamant. From Phuket Town, you can catch the Kata/Karon bus (25B). Alternatively, call for a pick-up (150B).

**Fantasy Hill Bungalow** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 0106; bungalows 200-1000B; 🍴 📺) Sitting in a lush garden on a hill, the bungalows here are good value and of the type that's pretty much disappeared from this beach. Fantasy Hill isn't a fancy spot, but it's somewhat better than average for the price.

**Best Western Phuket Orchid Resort** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7639 6599; www.bestwestern.com; 562 Th Patak; r from 1000B; 🍴 📺 📺) This Best Western, with sleek architecture effortlessly blending into the hill upon which it sits, gives you more than your

money's worth. The amenities, along with the spacious, posh rooms feel as if they belong at a much pricier place. The hotel is family oriented, with babysitting services. The pool is the most popular hangout for sunbathers.

### TOP END

Many of the remaining places to stay in Karon are newer resort-type hotels with all the posh amenities.

**Woraburi Resort & Spa** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7639 6638; www.woraburiphuket.com; 198-200 Th Patak West; r from 2200B; 🏠 🚿 🚿) We loved this gorgeous southern Thai styled resort for offering five-star amenities at three-star prices. Everything about the Woraburi was impeccable, from the smiling, ultra-attentive staff to the large, beautifully appointed rooms featuring richly coloured silk pillows and bed runners and polished dark-wood furnishings. The gorgeously tiled bathrooms have big tubs and separate showers with great water pressure. The 207 rooms are in low-rise buildings that melt into the lush environment surrounding the beachfront property. The swimming pool is a work of art, resembling a cross between a lazy river and a Venetian canal complete with a swim-up bar. The morning buffet breakfast (included in the room rate) is immense, tasty and served in a giant open-air pavilion. The Woraburi consistently gets rave reviews from guests.

**Movenpick** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7639 6 139; www.moevenpick-hotels.com; 509 Th Patak West; r from 3500B; 🏠 🚿 🚿) Grab a secluded villa and choose from a private plunge pool or outdoor rainforest shower; alternatively chill in the cubelike rooms with huge floor-to-ceiling glass windows (in some cases covering two entire walls) in the swank ultramodern white hotel. Besides a prime location across the street from a pretty stretch of the beach, the Movenpick offers artistic décor, top-end linens, a big pool with swim-up paposo bar, spa and an alfresco restaurant and bar with a giant selection of wood-fired pizzas.

### Eating & Drinking

As usual, almost every place to stay has a restaurant. There are a few cheap Thai and seafood places off the Th Patak roundabout (including beachside seafood stalls 100m north), but overall you'll find a better selection further south at Hat Kata Yai and Hat Kata Noi.

**Red Onion** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7639 6827; dishes 80-160B; 🍷 4-11pm) This shotgun eatery in half of a garage with a tin roof is a bona fide *faràng* magnet. There is Thai food on the menu, along with Western tidbits like schnitzel and spaghetti. Cocktails and wine selections complement the meals, so try to forget the bad music. Dine at cheery red-clothed tables, on chairs padded with silk pillows. It's about 300m east of the roundabout – look for the coloured lights.

**Karon Seafood** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7639 6797; cnr Th Patak East & Th Vitak; dishes 80-250B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Bright coloured lights woo you towards this popular seafood joint that also does pizza, steak and vegetarian dishes. You'll find both Thais and Westerners dining here. Choose your dinner from the pictures on the huge seafood menu. There are daily drink specials to wash down the shrimp and crab.

**Little Mermaid** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7639 6580; 643 Th Patak East; dishes 80-300B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Scandinavia rules the roost at this eatery. The menu features pretty much everything from schnitzel and baked beans to *phat thai* and *tom yum* (hot and sour soup), but beer (and plenty of it) tends to be the drink of choice. A bar atmosphere prevails as the night wears on, but you are guaranteed a lively ambience and a steady stream of slightly bored-looking local girls.

**Harry's Pub** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7635 7656; Th Patak East; dishes 100-300B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Harry's is at its best in high season, when it is one of the area's most popular watering holes. Whenever the doors are open though, you can count on big portions of anything that comes with fries. The beer's good, if a little expensive.

**Buffalo Steak House** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 3013; Th Patak West; dishes 80-450B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) At the southern end of the town, this old-timer swears it serves the best steak in Phuket. It's not wildly off the mark and if you fancy large slabs of red meat, this is your place. The open front keeps the air fresh, and wood décor brings a taste of the Wild West to the table.

**Bang Bar II** (Th Patak East; Map p683; 🍷 noon-midnight) Built from flotsam and jetsam collected on the beach, this chilled-out bar is perfect for sundowners. It features your standard brand of Rastafarian décor and a collection of surfboards. A sun-bleached tarpaulin provides shelter during monsoon downpours.

### Getting There & Away

For details on transport to Karon, see p686.

## KATA

📍 📍

With a sunny disposition and an all around good-time vibe, unpretentious Kata is our pick for Phuket's best beach. Don't confuse unpretentious with not being prestigious: Kata boasts some of the isle's most swank hotels and gourmet restaurants. Plus with the only sets of waves in Thailand, Kata has a burgeoning surf culture (the surfing is best from April to November). Fly-by-night board shops have set-up on the beach, and the ocean is littered with surf virgins and pros trying to hang ten.

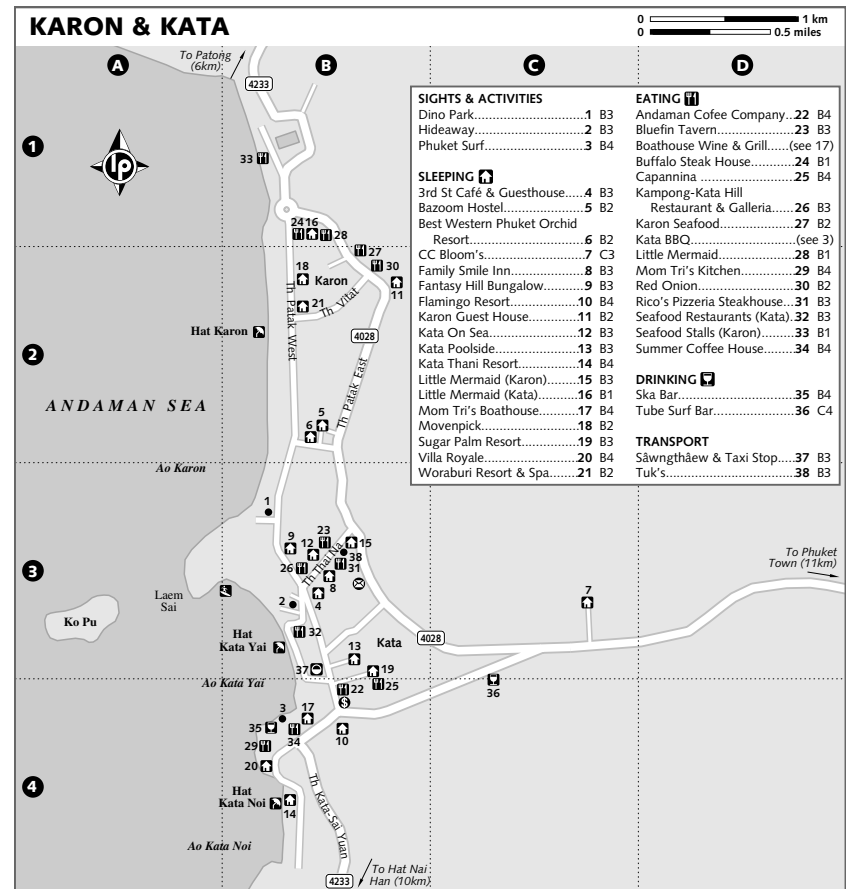
The beach here is actually divided into two distinct parts, separated by a rocky headland: Hat Kata Yai to the north and Hat Kata Noi to the south. Both offer plenty of soft, golden

sand and attract a more bohemian crowd than neighbouring Karon.

### Orientation & Information

The main commercial street of Th Thai Na is perpendicular to the shore and has most of the restaurants and shops, along with some cheaper places to stay. Expats have moved into the area in large numbers, but Scandinavians appear to be holding most of the best cards and you won't get five paces without passing a 'Viking' this or a 'Horned Helmet' that.

The second main part of town is concentrated behind Hat Kata Yai, around the Kata Beach Resort. Here you'll find more upmarket hotels and resorts, numerous restaurants and tailor shops, and hundreds of stalls and vendors



selling fake Chanel sunglasses, Louis Vuitton wallets and pirated DVDs. This is our favourite part of Kata and it's very easy to spend an entire afternoon browsing the side streets.

Both places have numerous ATMs to grab cash.

### Activities

If you feel like firing up the stove, **Mom Tri's Boathouse** (☎ 0 7633 0015; www.boathousephuket.com; Th Patak West) offers a popular two-day Thai cooking class each weekend for 3200B per person; one-day courses are 2000B. The first day focuses on appetisers and salads, the second on mains and desserts. A total of 10 recipes are taught during the half-day sessions, and you get to eat your creation.

Rather just get pampered? The **Hideaway spa** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 0914) has a branch here.

If you're visiting during the rainy season, we'd suggest **surfing**. There are loads of places to rent a board on Kata's beach, and the waves are often gentle enough for beginners (avoid red flag days when there are powerful undertows). Board rental costs 150B for one hour or 600B for the whole day. Lessons can also be arranged. For more on surfing, see opposite.

### Sleeping

In general, the less expensive places tend to be off the beach between Kata Yai (to the north) and Kata Noi (to the south) or well off the beach on the road to the island interior. The places below are recommended, but are by no means an exhaustive list of good lodging options in Kata.

### BUDGET

**Kata On Sea** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 0594; bungalows 300-800B; 🍷) Bargain hunters should make the steep 100m climb to this clutch of 29 modest bungalows dotting a quiet green hilltop. The bungalows are large with giant windows (in some cases covering two walls), which make them seem even bigger. The furniture isn't splashy, but it's adequate and the mattresses don't sag too badly. The mini fridge is a real score for keeping beer and water cold on scorching hot days. The only downer is the shower, which is not separated from the rest of the bath. The owner speaks good English.

**Flamingo Resort** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 0776; www.flamingo-resort.com; 5/19 Th Patak West; bungalows 600-1000B; 🍷) This resort is just a few minutes walk from the scene at Hat Kata Yai (a rarity in

this price bracket). It offers a handful of large, pleasantly decorated bungalows on a hillside. Most have fridges, sizeable verandas and good views. There is a restaurant downstairs.

**Little Mermaid** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 0730; www.littlemermaidphuket.net; 94/23-25 Th Thai Na; r 465-665, bungalows 700-1500B; 🍷 📺 🚿) Not to be confused with the other Little Mermaid in Karon, this guesthouse is an eclectic, brightly painted spot. Accommodation is of the mismatched furniture, slightly saggy mattress variety, although the bungalows facing the pool are slightly more upscale. Bathrooms in the main house can feel claustrophobic. Popular with male German tourists (and in many cases their female Thai escorts), it has a big pool and a raucous (though not sleazy) party vibe that will appeal to some and send others running. It's next to a gym, if you feel the need to pump iron.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Family Smile Inn** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 9268; www.familyinnphuket.com; 147-151 Th Thai Na; r 1000-1500B; 🍷) Great value, especially in the low season when rooms go for just 600B. The beds are big, although the mattresses aren't as firm as they could be and the sheets are a little thin. But the multistorey hotel is void of sand and feels comfortable and secure.

**3rd St Café & Guesthouse** (Map p683; www.3rdstreetcafe.com; 100 3/4 Th Patak West; r 2000B) The six rooms are each styled differently at this personality-rich guesthouse with a knack for decorating. Walls are done up in muted earthy tones with lots of bright modern art. Furniture and fixings are classy, and make use of natural materials like rich red Thai silk. The guesthouse is just minutes from the beach. An American breakfast is included.

**Kata Poolside** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 3175; www.katapoolside.com; 36/38 Th Kata; r 2000-3800B; 🍷 📺 🚿) Rooms are big and with lots of lounging space. Chill on the day bed to keep the starched white sheets from getting sandy. Beds are on raised dark-wood modern platforms whose colour matches the wood trim and other furnishings; tile floors are made from real stone. Bathrooms are large and when you shower the lip is high enough not to soak the room! The only downside was too-firm beds.

**CC Bloom's** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 3322; www.beaches.thairesort.com; 84/21 Th Patak; r 3900-5000B; 🍷 📺 🚿) This American-run gay-friendly boutique hotel (strangely named after Bette Midler's

### SURF'S UP, THAILAND

During the monsoon season (May to October), the rocky headland at the northern end of Hat Kata Noi makes a clean right point break and attracts numerous surfers. Although a long-time favourite beach destination, Thailand hasn't really been associated with surfing in the same way as other countries, such as South Africa, Australia, Hawaii and Indonesia. But the surf is definitely looking up for wave runners in Hat Kata in early September. That's when the annual surfing competition comes to town. The four-day event offers three types of contest for amateur surfers – shortboard, longboard and longboard paddling race. The entry fee is around 500B and if you think you've got the skills, you can register at www.phuketsurf.com, which also has info about the local surfing community. **Phuket Surf** (Map p683; ☎ 08 1002 2496; www.phuketsurf.com), on Hat Kata Yai's southern cove, offers surf lessons starting at 1500B, as well as board rentals. Look for it on the beach next to Kata BBQ.

Speaking of Hat Kata Yai, the main beach is a great place to catch beginner breaks on a long foam board (experienced surfers will have fun riding here as well, especially on big wave days). Phuket Surf has plenty of rentals for all levels, but if you don't see a board to your liking there are plenty of other vendors offering similar goods all along the beach. The southern cove is the best place to catch waves, but watch out for the gnarly rocks on the extreme southern edge.

character in the movie *Beaches*) has a fab location overlooking Kata. Stylish rooms are done up in creamy Indochina yellow with crimson silk panels draped from the ceiling. They are festooned with orchids and face out onto a small pool decorated with a waterfall. The layout is conducive to lounging poolside by day then curling up in bed with a Singha and a movie picked from the huge in-house library – DVD players are available free on request. If you tire of the isolation (it is a bit of a hike from the beach) a free shuttle makes multiple runs to the waves. Rooms go for as little as 2400B during the rainy season.

**Sugar Palm Resort** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7628 4404; www.sugarpalmphuket.com; 20/10 Th Kata; r 1800-6100B; 🍷 📺 🚿) One of Kata's newest boutique ventures, Sugar Palm is as sugary as its name and bound to become popular with trendsetters. The ultramod design is reminiscent of Miami Art Deco with glittery purple panels and clean white lines centred about a U-shaped swimming pool with Jacuzzi and swim-up bar. All rooms come with private balconies overlooking the pool and the sweetest ones have direct access. Digs are spacious with hip designs and feature very sleepable mattresses.

**Kata Thani Resort** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 0124; www.katathani.com; 14 Th Kata Noi; r US\$140-220; 🍷 📺 🚿) An enormous, three-storey, 530-room resort that commands most of the beach at Kata Noi, this place sits on one of the choicest bits of beach anywhere along Karon or Kata. Rooms are upmarket and stylish, and the grounds are beautifully landscaped with tennis courts,

four swimming pools, a fitness centre and six restaurants.

**Mom Tri's Boathouse** (☎ 0 7633 0015; www.theboatphuket.com; 2/2 Th Patak West; r 4000-7500B; 🍷 📺 🚿) For Thai politicians, pop stars, artists and celebrity authors, the intimate boutique Boathouse is still the only place to stay on Phuket. Rooms were remodelled after the tsunami and are spacious, gorgeous affairs, some sporting large breezy verandas. Critics complain the Boathouse is a bit stiff-lipped old-fashioned for this century, but no one can deny that the main reason to sleep at the Boathouse is for the food. The three on-site restaurants are the best on the island.

**Villa Royale** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 3568; www.villaroyalphuket.com; ste incl breakfast from 11,500B; 🍷 📺 🚿) Tucked away in a secluded Kata Noi location with the grandest of views, Villa Royale (the newest venture by the folks from the Boathouse) opened in 2006 to nearly instant acclaim. The romantic place with fabulous food offers beautiful rooms straight out of the pages of *Architectural Digest*. Guiltless pleasures include an attached spa and a saltwater pool, if you deign to a tamer version of the real thing – which is just steps away.

### Eating

If none of the places listed here sound appealing, there are plenty more eateries on Th Thai Na, which has more than its share of Italian and Scandinavian restaurants. A cluster of affordable, casual seafood restaurants can be found on Th Patak West near the shore,

though unfortunately they're not within view of the sea.

**Summer Coffee House** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7628 4584; Th Patak West; cakes 50B; ☕ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Lounge music, cappuccinos, wi-fi – this is where passing media types come to download new tracks for their iPod and get their daily vanilla frappuccino lift. The menu is pretty much limited to cakes and coffee, but it does serve the biggest croissants on the planet.

**Andaman Coffee Company** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7628 5180; dishes 40-80B; ☕ breakfast, lunch & dinner; 📺) The frozen coffee concoctions are delish at this Western-style coffeeshop with muted colours and lots of computers. Buy a cup of Java and get 15 minutes of free internet access – not a bad deal. It has a big selection of espresso drinks and tea as well as light snacks. The sidewalk seating is good for people watching.

**Kata BBQ** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 0989; dishes 60-150B; ☕ lunch & dinner) The terrace is a prime spot to watch the surfers play or just chill out with a cocktail from the loooooonnnnggg list – the place even has pastis! The seafood is what to order. It's prepared in every manner you can imagine – from crab with pineapple and ginger to barbecued shrimp. We loved the fried squid. Spaghetti, pizza, egg breakfasts and baguette sandwiches round out the menu.

**Bluefin Tavern** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 0856; dishes 40-165B; ☕ 3-11pm) A popular restaurant and bar, it grills up surprisingly palatable Tex-Mex like quesadillas and tacos along with pizza, burgers, steak and, of course, Thai food. Come for dinner, or just for a margarita – either way the small front deck is nice and laid-back.

**Kampong-Kata Hill Restaurant & Galleria** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 0103; Th Patak West; dishes 80-260B; ☕ lunch & dinner) Choc-a-block with Thai antiques and serving some fabulous local dishes, this excellent little eatery is up a long stairway. Finding good, well-priced Thai food in these parts can be a bit of a headache – this is a great place to start.

**Rico's Pizzeria Steakhouse** (Map p683; www.ricos.se; Th Thai Na; mains 90-300B; ☕ lunch & dinner) The smartest kid on the Th Thai Na block features fine New Zealand steaks, pizzas and a huge collection of black-and-white film star snaps (very 1980s). Everything, from the door handles to the sparkling condiment trays, is spotless and – guess what? – the chefs are Scandinavian.

**Capannina** (Map p683; dishes 150-350B; ☕ lunch & dinner) We just couldn't get enough of this Italian eatery tucked away amid the venues.

With warm red accents, an open kitchen and a wood-fired oven, Capannina has intimate ambience and delicious food. Garlic- and chilli-infused pasta dishes, tender grilled calamari in a rich marinara and homemade stuffed ravioli are just a few of the treats. Wash it all down with a glass of rough country grappa.

**Mom Tri's Kitchen** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 0015; Th Kata Noi; dishes 180-500B; ☕ lunch & dinner) Another link in the Boathouse chain, this delightful restaurant offers more of the same. Fine wines and *haute cuisine* are served in gorgeous grounds and the atmosphere is a little less formal than its slightly stuffer cousin.

**Boathouse Wine & Grill** (Map p683; ☎ 0 7633 0015; www.boathousephuket.com; Th Patak West; mains 450-850B; ☕ lunch & dinner) The perfect place to wow a fussy date, the Boathouse is the pick of the bunch for most local foodies. The atmosphere can be a little stuffy – this is the closest Phuket gets to old-school dining – but the food is fabulous, the wine list is expansive and the sea views are sublime.

## Drinking

Kata's nightlife tends to be pretty mellow.

The super-mellow Ska Bar, tucked into the rocks at Kata's southernmost cove, is our choice for oceanside sundowners. It's also one of the coolest bars we've ever seen, literally built around, and seemingly intertwined with, the trunk of a sturdy old tree. It's a very simple spot with ramshackle stools and delicious piña colodas. Pot-leaf flags, Reggae music and dreadlocked Thai bartenders all add to Ska's funky Rasta vibe. It stays open late.

**Tube Surf Bar** (Map p687; ☎ 0 7285 4718; dishes from 30B) This surf bar gets going on Tuesday and Friday nights (in particular), when surf videos are screened and all-you-can-eat barbecues (150B) or chilli nights (100B) for a bottomless bowl of chilli, plus a beer) take place. If you're looking to find out more about local surfing culture, this is where to head. It's sometimes closed on seemingly random nights. It's a bit difficult to find – if you get lost ask for directions (during the day) from Phuket Surf (which runs the Tube), next to the Ska Bar.

## Getting There & Around

Sāwngthāew and buses to both Kata and Karon (per person 50B) leave frequently from the Th Ranong market in Phuket from 7am to 5pm. The main sāwngthāew stop is in front of Kata Beach Resort.

Taxis from Kata go to Phuket Town (300B), Patong (250B) and Karon (150B).

Motorcycle rentals are available at **Tuk's** (☎ 0 7628 4049) for 300B.

## NAI HAN

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Rimming a picturesque bay only a few kilometres south of Kata, this beach at the near southern tip of the island is less developed than neighbouring strips of sand. This is partly due to topography, but also to the presence of **Sammak Song Nai Han**, a monastic centre in the middle of the beach that claims most of the beachfront land. The Meridien resort occupies other prime seaview property not owned by the monks, so to make up for the lack of saleable beachfront, developers started cutting away the forest on the hillsides overlooking the beach. Recently, however, the development seems to have come to a halt. This means that Nai Han is usually one of the least crowded beaches on the southern part of the island.

Hat Nai Han can be a dangerous place to swim in the monsoon season (May to October), but it really varies according to daily or weekly

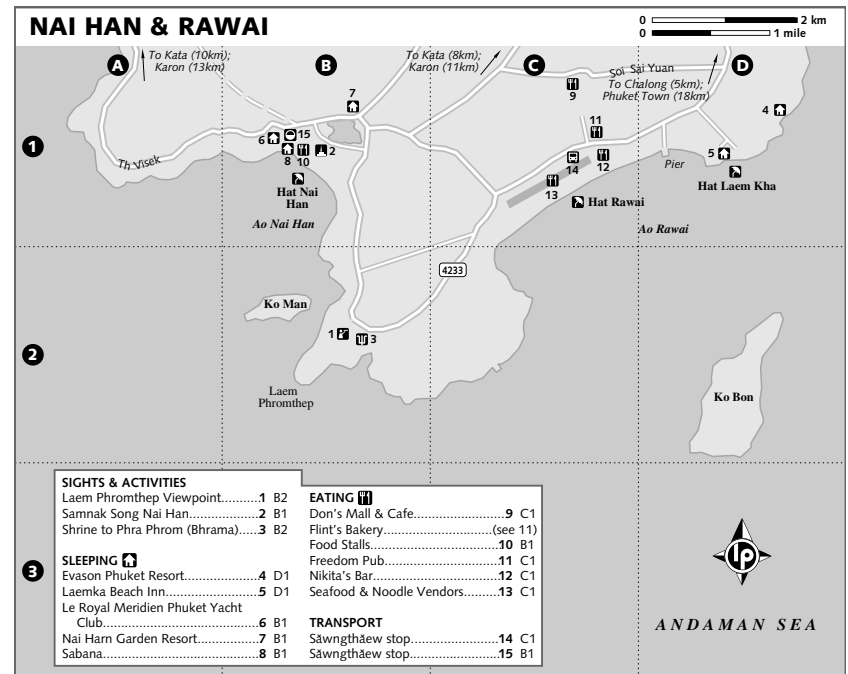
weather changes – look for the red flag, which means dangerous swimming conditions. Beach chairs and umbrellas can be rented for 60B.

## Sleeping & Eating

Except for the Le Royal Meridien, there's not much accommodation with views of the beach.

**Nai Harn Garden Resort** (Map p687; ☎ 0 7628 8319; www.naiharnresort.com; 15/12 Muu 1 Th Viset; r 800-2000B; 📺 📺 📺) Back from the beach, on the far side of the reservoir, this resort offers a range of bungalows and villas in a spacious garden setting. The atmosphere is a little suburban cul-de-sac, but standards are high, there are plenty of masseuses at hand – massage is something of a hotel speciality – and prices are reasonable.

**Sabana** (Map p687; ☎ 0 7628 9327; www.sabana-resort.com; 14/53 Muu 1 Th Viset; r 2000-6500B; 📺 📺 📺) If Le Meridien's full, Sabana is a great back up option. The décor is all primary colours and Thai motifs and, while the cheaper rooms are a little ordinary, the pricier 'Thai Sala' options are beautifully designed. There's also an on-site spa.



**Le Royal Meridien Phuket Yacht Club** (Map p687; ☎ 0 7638 0200; www.lermeridien.com; 23/3 Muu 1 Th Viset; r US\$190-500; 🚗 🚗 🚗) There's not a yacht in sight, but Le Meridien's signature Phuket property is grand indeed. Rooms feature fabulously large terraces and stunning bay views, and there's every creature comfort you can imagine somewhere on site. If you can cadge one of the low-season discounts, it really is excellent value.

Le Meridien's restaurants cater for expensive appetites, while a handful of beachside food stalls will fill you up for a pittance.

### Getting There & Away

Nai Han is 18km from Phuket Town and a sawngthæw (leaving from the intersection of Phuket Town's Th Krung Thep and the fountain circle) costs 50B per person. Tùk-tùk charters are about 250B one way. From Nai Han to Rawai, expect to pay about 25B in a tùk-tùk.

### RAWAI

ราวไ

Okay, we won't lie, there's really no reason to stay on Rawai unless you're booked in at Evason, spa resort extraordinaire. Frankly, the beach here kind of sucks compared to Patong or Kata (it can be really narrow at spots). Rawai was one of Phuket's first tourist developments, but this was due more to its proximity to Phuket Town than because it was beautiful. As better beaches were discovered, tourist travel to Rawai dwindled and today it's a quiet spot.

It's not altogether without redemption. There is good **snorkelling** off Laem Phromthep at the southern tip of Phuket Island, and it's easy to charter boats (prices vary, ask around and haggle) for offshore **diving** and snorkelling trips. **Laem Phromthep** is also a popular viewing point at sunset, when busloads of Thai tourists come to pose for photos and enjoy the view. On a hill next to the viewpoint is a **shrine to Phra Phrom** (Brahma).

### Sleeping

**Laemka Beach Inn** (Map p687; ☎ 0 7638 1305; fax 0 7628 8547; Hat Laem Ka; bungalows 500-1200B; 🚗) Good-value accommodation in 30 thatched bungalows spread among coconut groves above a beach. Only the more expensive bungalows have air-con but all have screen doors and windows (a rare bonus in these parts). The

shoreline along the rounded cape is an interesting mix of clean sand and large boulders, with good swimming. Many speedboats depart from here for nearby islands, and it's a favourite local picnic spot.

**Evason Phuket Resort** (Map p687; ☎ 0 7638 1010; www.sixsenses.com; 100 Th Viset; r 4500-38,000B; 🚗 🚗 🚗) Hip, smartly designed and offering copious amounts of luxury, Evason appeals to rock stars and moneyed media types. Expect beautiful people tapping away at their wireless gadgetry beside the infinity pool and immaculately turned-out staff. For a review of its spa see p665.

### Eating & Drinking

Besides the restaurants attached to the resorts in Rawai, there are oodles of seafood and noodle vendors along the roadside near Hat Rawai. The following listings are sit-down restaurants.

**Flint's Bakery** (Map p687; ☎ 0 7628 9210; Hat Rawai; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Cakes, coffees and pizzas are on offer at this little bakery. It's right next door to Freedom Pub.

**Freedom Pub** (Map p687; ☎ 0 7628 7402; Hat Rawai; dishes 80-200B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) More watering hole than eatery, this Rawai boozier features outdoor seating, a pool table, live music on the weekends, a free barbecue on Friday night and – strangely – an on-site tattoo parlour.

**Nikita's Bar** (Map p687; ☎ 0 7628 8703; Hat Rawai; dishes 80-225B) With quirky décor and good food, Nikita's is very popular in the evening. In addition to food – the usual Thai and Western melee – and booze, the restaurant serves espresso drinks. It's on the main road through town.

**Don's Mall & Cafe** (Map p687; ☎ 0 7638 3100; 48-5 Soi Sai Yuan; dishes 100-650B) A Texan-run café with a fun vibe, the menu stars hearty American meals like steak and ribs barbecued over a mesquite-wood fire. It also has an extensive wine list, freshly baked goods and a separate bar, the **Longhorn Saloon**. It's super popular, and many folks come here from round the island to eat and socialise. From Rawai, drive past the Wall and turn right at the next two main intersections (about 3.4km total from the beach). To get there from Phuket Town (and many people make the trip just for the food), turn right onto Th Sai Yuan, just south of the Chalong roundabout, and proceed for 3km; you can't miss it.

### Getting There & Away

Rawai is about 18km from Phuket Town and getting there costs 50B by sawngthæw from Phuket's fountain circle at Th Ranong. Tùk-tùk charters cost at least 250B from Phuket Town. The tùk-tùk trip from Rawai to Nai Han should be around 25B.

Long-tail boats are available for charter right along Hat Rawai – a charter to Ko Phi Phi costs 3500B (maximum six passengers).

### KO YAO

เกาะยาว

Ko Yao Yai (Big Long Island) and Ko Yao Noi (Little Long Island) are actually part of the Ao Phang-Nga Marine National Park, but are more easily accessible from Phuket. Together they encompass 137 sq km of forest, beach and rocky headland with views of the surrounding karst formations characteristic of Ao Phang-Nga.

In spite of being smaller, **Ko Yao Noi** is the main population centre of the two. Fishing as well as coconut, rice and rubber cultivation sustain the locals. **Hat Pa Sai** and **Hat Tha Khao**, both on Yao Noi, are the best beaches. **Ta Khai**, the largest settlement on the island, is a subdistrict seat and a source of minimal supplies.

#### DETOUR: ISLANDS AROUND PHUKET

There are several islands off the coast of Phuket that make for quieter, more romantic getaways. **Ko Heh** (also known as Coral Island and sometimes spelled Ko Hae) is a few kilometres south of Ao Chalong. It's a good spot for diving and snorkelling (the coral is beautiful) if you don't plan on going further out to sea, although jet skis and other pleasure craft can be an annoyance. The island gets lots of day-trippers from Phuket, but at night it's pretty quiet. **Coral Island Resort** (☎ 0 7628 1060; fax 0 7638 1957; coral.island.resort@phuket.com; bungalows 1500-3000B; 🚗 🚗) is about the only place to stay on the island. Most of the 64 concrete bungalows are arranged around the swimming pool, but you can pay extra for a seaside cabin. There's a pool and karaoke lounge, and cable TV in the lobby (in case you can't live without your daily dose of CNN International).

Southeast of Laem Phanwa you'll stumble across the similar, but smaller, **Ko Mai Thon**. Again, there is only one place to stay, and it's a whopper. **Maiton Resort** (☎ 0 7621 4954; fax 0 7621 4959; maiton@phuket.com; bungalows 2800-4000B; 🚗 🚗 🚗) offers semi-luxurious hillside or beachside bungalows, two pools (indoor and outdoor), a sauna, fitness centre, tennis court and five restaurants. This is the kind of self-contained place that could be anywhere, and lacks charisma.

**Ko Raya Yai** and **Ko Raya Noi**, about 1½ hours south of Phuket by boat, are also known as Ko Racha Yai/Noi. They are highly favoured by divers and snorkellers for their hard coral reefs, which are found in both shallow and deep waters, making it a good area for both novices and pros. Accommodation is available on both islands.

Most people use travel agencies in Phuket Town to get to these islands. If you want to go it alone, boats leave Ao Chalong and Hat Rawai for Ko Heh; the trip takes 30 minutes and costs 80B. You can also charter a long-tail boat or speedboat from Rawai or Ao Chalong for 600B to 1500B.

**Songserm Travel** (☎ 0 7622 2570) runs passenger boats to Ko Raya Yai from Phuket Town port every morning. The trip takes 30 minutes and costs 350B one way or 750B return. **Pal Travel Service** (☎ 0 7634 4920) runs a similar service. Both companies suspend service from May to October.

Ko Yao Yai is more isolated and rustic than its smaller sister island. Please remember to respect the Muslim culture on both islands by wearing modest clothing outside beach areas.

Boat trips to neighbouring islands, bird-nest caves and *chao nám* funeral caves are possible. **Ko Bele**, a small island east of the twin Ko Yao, features a large tidal lagoon, three white-sand beaches, and easily accessible caves and coral reefs.

### Sleeping

Ko Yao Noi has only a handful of places to stay.

**Sabai Corner Bungalow** (☎ 0 1892 7827; bungalows 350-550B) Sturdy thatch-and-wood bungalows with small verandas are offered here. The restaurant is pretty good and comes with fabulous views.

**Tha Khao Bungalow** (☎ 0 1676 7726; bungalows 500-1200B) On Hat Tha Khao, this small place features five solid thatch-and-wood bungalows, including two family-size ones (with three bedrooms). The small restaurant does tasty food and also rents out bicycles and kayaks – a recommended way to explore the area.



**Long Beach Village** (☎ 0 7659 7472; bungalows 500-1500B; 🏠) The 40 fan and air-con bungalows are typical of Thai beach bungalows (think wooden walls, creaky beds, wooden nightstands and slightly grungy baths), but the grounds are lush and tropical. Plus it feels very friendly.

**Koyao Island Resort** (☎ 0 1606 1517; www.koyao.com; villas from 4000B; 🏠) With some of the most glamorous beds on the island, this outfit features slick service, luxurious villas and a fine line of sundowners at the bar. If you're fed up with the stunning views (unlikely), you can always go and watch satellite TV and crank up the air-con.

On Ko Yao Yai there are three places to stay that have very similar, basic wood-and-thatch fan bungalows:

**Halawee Bungalows** (☎ 0 1607 3648; bungalows 400B)

**Thiw Son** (☎ 0 1956 7582; bungalows 350-500B)

**Long Island Family Bungalows** (☎ 0 1979 2273; bungalows 500B)

## HOMESTAY

**Koh Yao Noi Eco-Tourism Club** (☎ 0 7659 7409, 0 1089 5413; www.koh-yao-noi-eco-tourism-club.com), in partnership with Responsible Ecological Social Tours Project (REST), a Bangkok-based NGO, has developed a model ecotourism project on the Muslim fishing island of Ko Yao Noi. Participants stay with a host family and learn about small-scale fishing methods and local ecology. With postcard views of Ao Phang Nga's limestone mountains, the island is poised between a traditional way of life and a mushrooming tourist industry. Through the homestay programme visitors can contribute to the island's economic development without undermining the village atmosphere. A night of accommodation costs 400B per person and includes meals. A 100B mandatory donation, towards a fund for helping preserve the island's environment, is also required.

## Getting There & Around

Although both islands fall within the Phang-Nga Province boundaries, the easiest places to find boat transport are Phuket Town and Ao Leuk and Ao Nang (both in Krabi Province). In Phuket, catch a *sáwngháew* from in front of the day market to Bang Rong (on Ao Po) for 50B. From the public pier there are up to four boats (50B, one hour) at 11am, noon, 2.30pm and 5pm. Between departures or after

hours you can charter a long-tail boat for about 1000B one way.

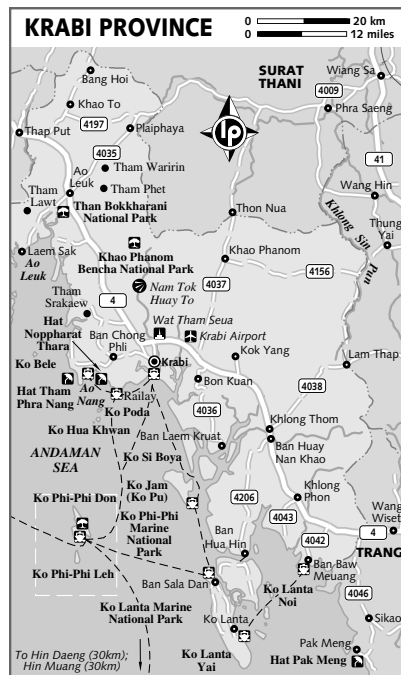
To go from Ko Yao Noi to Ko Yao Yai, catch a shuttle boat from Tha Manaw (20B, 15 minutes). On the islands, *túk-túk* provide transport for about 50B.

# KRABI PROVINCE

Krabi is the most beautiful province in Thailand. It's the kind of place that comes to mind when you're daydreaming about paradise. A fairytale creation of dramatic giant karst formations juxtaposed, and sometimes enveloped, by a warm emerald silk sea.

Krabi is always up for a good adventure, and it attracts a mixed bag of travellers. Not-to-be-missed destinations in Krabi include Ko Phi Phi and Railay. The latter boasts some of the world's best rock climbing and our favourite beach in all of Thailand.

December to March are the best times to visit and hotels and bungalows tend to fill up during these months. During the rainy season (June to November), accommodation prices



can drop by 50 percent, places are a lot less crowded and you may luck out with windows of decent weather – it usually rains for four or five days and then you get two or three absolutely gorgeous days.

Along with coastal beaches, Krabi has over 150 attractive islands. Once the favourite hide-outs of Asian pirates, today these islands offer excellent recreational opportunities. Many of the islands belong to Hat Noppharat Thara/Ko Phi Phi Marine National Park, including Ko Phi Phi Don (probably the most popular island in this region).

The interior of the province, noted for its tropical forests and the Phanom Bencha mountain range, has barely been explored.

## KRABI

กระบี่

pop 29,300

Most travellers just breeze through Krabi (gra-bee), using the provincial capital as a jumping-off point for wonderful surrounding destinations – Ko Lanta to the south, Ko Phi Phi to the southwest and Ao Nang, Railay and Tham Phra Nang to the west. Although Krabi isn't high on many travellers' priority lists, some folks are charmed enough by the friendly people, delicious food and lack of tourists to want to stay the night.

The town sits on the western bank of the Mae Nam Krabi, about 1000km from Bangkok and 180km from Phuket. The eastern bank of the river is covered in dense mangroves and north of town are the twin limestone massifs of Khao Khanap Nam, which emerge from the water like breaching whales. The population is mainly Taoist-Confucianism and Muslim, and Krabi is an important transport hub for ferries to the islands along the coast.

## Orientation & Information

Th Utarakit is the main road into and out of Krabi and most places of interest are on the *soi* (lanes) that branch off it. Ferries to Ko Phi Phi and Ko Lanta leave from a passenger jetty at Khlong Chilat, about 5km north of town. Krabi's bus terminal is 4km north of the centre at Talat Kao, near the junction of Th Utarakit and the main Trang to Phang-Nga road.

Many Krabi budget travel agencies and restaurants offer internet access for 40B to 60B per hour. There are numerous banks and ATMs. **Pakaran** (☎ 0 7561 1164; 151 Th Utarakit; 🕒 9am-8pm) Good place to stock up on second-hand books before

you head for the islands. Has a large selection in English and many European languages, as well as some quality handicrafts and antiques.

**Immigration office** (☎ 0 7561 1350; Th Chamai Anuson; 🕒 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri) Handles visa extensions.

**Krabi Hospital** (☎ 0 7561 1210; Th Utarakit) It is 1km north of town.

**Krabi You & I Travel** (☎ 0 7883 6399; www.krabiinformaion.com; 181 Th Utarakit) Travel agency offering air, boat and bus tickets, tours and island-accommodation booking.

## Sights & Activities

Krabi does activities better than sights. If you want to paddle, check out **Sea Kayak Krabi** (☎ 0 7563 0270; www.seakayak-krabi.com; 40 Th Ruen Rudee), which offers a wide variety of sea-kayaking tours, including to Ao Thalee (half-/full-day 700/1200B), which has looming sea cliffs; Ko Hong (full day 1500B), famed for its emerald lagoon; and Ban Bho Tho (full day 1500B), which has sea caves with 2000- to 3000-year-old cave paintings. All rates include guides, lunch, fruit and drinking water.

**Reefwatch Worldwide** (☎ 0 1979 0535; www.reefwatchworldwide.com; Th Utarakit) is one of the few in-town dive shops and has two-dive packages to local islands (2600B) and to Phi Phi (3200B). It also runs Open Water courses (11,900B).

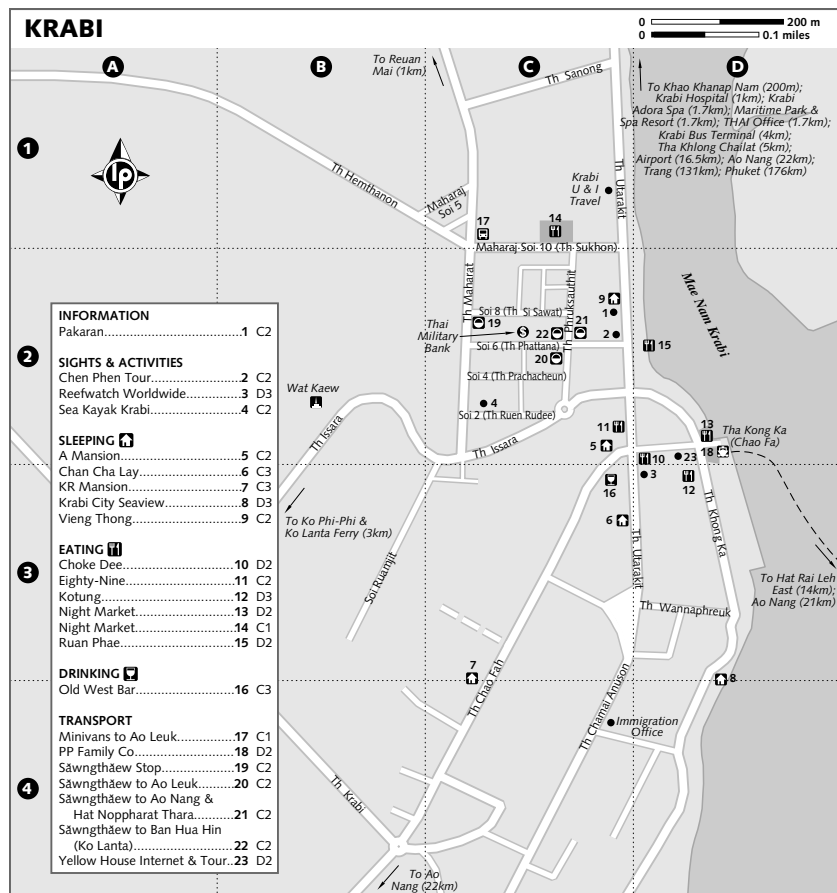
Krabi town also has two wonderful spas, worth visiting if you're looking for a luxurious treatment with a slightly less than luxurious price tag. The **Adora Spa** (☎ 0 7562 0028) at the posh Krabi Maritime Park & Spa Resort offers its signature Aromatic Adora Massage (a Thai massage blend that costs 1500B for 60 minutes) in outdoor garden pavilions around a peaceful lake with mountain vistas.

The **Kantanwan Spa** (☎ 0 7562 3362; Th Maharat) is also good. Try its Coco scrub; the one-hour (1500B) treatment includes a herbal application to open pores followed by a stimulating aromatic body scrub.

## Tours

**Chen Phen Tour** (☎ 0 7561 2004; Th Utarakit) and others offer bird-watching tours in the mangroves around Krabi for about 500B per boat per hour (early morning is best); alternatively, you can hire a boat at the main pier for around 300B per hour. Keep an eye out for fiddler crabs and mudskippers on the exposed mud.

Various companies offer day trips to Khlong Thom, about 45km southeast of Krabi on Hwy 4, taking in some nearby hot springs and freshwater pools. Expect to pay around 950B,



including transport, lunch and beverages; bring a swimsuit and good walking shoes. Various other 'jungle tour' itineraries are available.

## Sleeping

New guesthouses are appearing all over Krabi and most offer large, clean, tiled rooms with windows and shared bathrooms.

**A Mansion** (☎ 0 7563 0511; fax 0 7563 0513; 12/6 Th Chao Fah; r from 300B; 📶) Another friendly spot, this relative newcomer offers modern, clean and beautiful (if very pink) rooms, with TV. There's a café, bar and laundry nearby.

**KR Mansion** (☎ 0 7561 2761; krmansion@yahoo.com; 52/1 Th Chao Fah; r 280-450B; 📶) There's a great funky rooftop beer garden with panoramic views over Krabi, just perfect for a sundowner.

The rooms in this bright-pink building are quite comfortable.

**Chan Cha Lay** (☎ 0 7562 0952; www.geocities.com/chan\_cha\_lay; 55 Th Utarakit; r 200-500B; 📶) This place has very helpful staff, and its relaxing white and baby blue décor has an appealing Mediterranean feel. The tiled rooms are immaculate and the café has dainty trimmings, artistic photos and other bits of art on the walls. It's a great place to stay.

**Vieng Thong** (☎ 0 7562 0020; fax 0 7561 2525; 155 Th Utarakit; r 550-1000B; 📶) Attracting a mixture of tourists and Thai businessmen, the Vieng Thong is an acceptable (but unremarkable) choice in this range. It has quite good facilities, however, including a tour desk and large restaurant. Rooms are simple but spacious

with private bathrooms, TVs and phones. Prices vary throughout the year.

**Krabi City Seaview** (☎ 0 7562 2885; krabicityseaview@hotmail.com; 77/1 Th Khong Kha; r 600-1200B; 📶) The best midrange hotel in town, it offers beautifully modern rooms that are tastefully decorated; the better rooms are larger and sport views of the water. It's an excellent place in a quiet part of town, but still within walking distance of the centre. There is a very chilled lounge downstairs that faces out on the river.

**Krabi Maritime Park & Spa Resort** (☎ 0 7562 0028, ☎ Bangkok 0 2719 0034; www.maritimeparkandspa.com; r from 4500B; 📶) On lovely riverside grounds, this swanky hotel about 2km from Krabi town proper is the area's best bet. It sports a nightclub, stylish pool, fitness centre, spa and even a lake on which you can pedal swan-shaped boats. Rooms are classy and the balconies sport impressive views. Promotional rates of 1500B are usually available. There are free shuttle buses to Krabi town and Ao Nang, and shuttle boats to Railay. It may actually be smart to stay here, instead of Railay or Ao Nang, in the high season as it's better value for money and you can easily make day trips to the aforementioned beaches.

## Eating & Drinking

Some might say the town's less than appetising, but they don't say the same about the food. Krabi offers a number of quality venues.

**Night market** (Th Khong Kha; meals 20-50B; 🍷 dinner) Found near the Khong Kha pier, this is one of the best places to eat. The menus are in English but the food is authentic and excellent. Stalls here sell papaya salad, fried noodles, *tôm yam kung* (prawn and lemon-grass soup with mushrooms), fresh seafood and all manner of things on satay sticks, plus sweet milky Thai desserts. There's a similar night market just north on Th Sukhon, near the intersection with Th Phruksaithit.

**Choke Dee** (nr Th Chao Fah & Utarakit; dishes 45-70B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) There's a good backpacker vibe at Choke Dee, where you can dine on Thai and Western dishes at outdoor tables amid lots of potted plants.

**Kotung** (☎ 0 7561 1522; 36 Th Khong Kha; dishes 40-80B; 🍷 dinner) Locals mob this excellent and reasonably priced Thai-Hainanese restaurant every evening for *tôm yam kung*, *khào man kài* (Hainan-style chicken with rice), *khào mêu daeng* (red pork with rice), *küaytiaw* (wide rice noodles) and *bà-mii* (wheat noo-

dles). It has a selection of fresh seafood laid out on ice so you can select your own dish.

**Eighty Nine** (Th Chao Fah; dishes 40-80B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner; 📺) Most travellers end up in this pleasant eatery at the end of the evening to watch free video movies. The food is unusually good for this kind of place and there's a popular internet café.

**Ruan Pae** (☎ 0 7561 1956; Th Utarakit; dishes 60-150B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This old-fashioned floating restaurant is a fine place to watch the evening mist gather around the mangroves, though the atmosphere is sometimes better than the food. Mosquitoes can be a problem in the evening.

**Old West Bar** (Th Chao Fah; 🍷 1pm-2am) Bamboo and wood inside and out, this Wild West-themed bar booms music nightly and is one popular place for a tippie. There's a lively scene most nights and the cocktail list is long enough to keep you sampling for a while.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Thai Airways International** (THAI; ☎ 0 7562 2439; Th Utarakit) has four daily flights between Bangkok and Krabi (one-way around 3500B, 1½ hours). The THAI office is at the entrance to the Krabi Maritime Park & Spa.

### BOAT

Boats to Ko Lanta and Ko Phi Phi leave from the new passenger pier at Khlong Chilat, about 3km southwest of Krabi. Travel agencies will arrange free transfers when you buy a boat ticket with them.

The largest boat operator is **PP Family Co** (☎ 0 7561 2463; Th Khong Kha), which has a ticket office right beside the pier in town. In the high season, there are boats to Ko Phi Phi (300B, 1½ hours) at 9am, 10.30am and 2.30pm. In the low season, boats run at 9am and 2.30pm only.

From September to May, there are boats to Ko Lanta (300B, 1½ hours) leaving Krabi at 10.30am and 1.30pm. These can also stop at Ko Jam (one hour), where long-tails will shuttle you to shore (though you'll pay the full 300B fare). During the off season, boats to Ko Lanta are replaced by air-con vans (250B, 2½ hours), which leave at 9am, 11am, 1pm and 4pm.

If you want to get to Railay, long-tail boats leave from Krabi's Khong Kha pier to Hat Rai Leh East from 7.45am to 6pm (150B, 45 minutes) – from Hat Rai Leh East it is only a five-minute walk along a paved path to the more appealing Hat Rai Leh West. The boatmen will

wait until they can fill a boat with 10 people before they leave; if you want go before then you can charter the whole boat for 1000B.

## BUS

### Government Buses

With fewer eager touts and guaranteed departure times, taking a government bus from the **Krabi bus terminal** (☎ 07561 1804; cnr Th Utarakit & Hwy 4) in nearby Talat Kao, about 4km from Krabi, is an altogether more relaxing option than taking a private bus. Air-con government buses leave for Bangkok (451B to 567B, 12 hours) at 7am, 4pm and 5.30pm. There's a very plush 24-seat VIP bus to Bangkok (850B) departing at 5.30pm daily. From Bangkok's Southern bus terminal, buses leave at 7.30am and between 7pm and 8pm.

Other services for regular, air-con government buses:

### BUSES FROM KRABI

Destination	Price (B)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Hat Yai	173-203	5	frequent
Nakhon Si Thammarat	89	3	frequent
Phang-Nga	60-78	2	hourly
Phuket	105-135	3½	hourly
Ranong	150-180	6	2 hourly
Surat Thani	103-130	2½	frequent
Trang	85-106	2	frequent

## Minivan

Dozens of travel agencies in Krabi run air-con minivans and VIP buses to popular tourist centres throughout southern Thailand, but staff can be very pushy and you may end up crammed cheek to jowl with other backpackers. Destinations from Krabi:

### MINIVANS FROM KRABI

Destination	Price (B)	Duration (hr)
Ao Leuk	40	1
Hat Yai	250	3
Ko Lanta	200-250	1½
Phuket	250	2-3
Satun	420	5
Trang	250	2

## SĂWNGTHĂEW

Useful *săwngthăew* run from the bus station to central Krabi and on to Hat Noppharat Thara (40B), Ao Nang (40B) and the Shell Cemetery at Ao Nam Mao (50B). There are services from 6am to 6.30pm. In the high season there are less frequent services until 10pm for 70B. For Ao Leuk (50B, one hour) there are frequent *săwngthăew* from the corner of Th Phattana and Th Phruksauthit; the last service leaves at around 3pm. Occasional *săwngthăew* to Wat Tham Sua leave from opposite the 7-Eleven (on Th Maharat) and cost 25B.

## Getting Around

Downtown Krabi is easy to explore on foot, but the bus terminal and airport are both a long way from the centre. A taxi from the airport to town will cost 500B. In the reverse direction, taxis or *túk-túk* cost 400B. Agencies in town can also arrange minivans to the airport for 150B. *Săwngthăew* between the bus terminal and downtown Krabi cost 20B.

## CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Most of the travel agencies and guesthouses in town can rent you a Honda Dream motorcycle for around 150B per day. **Yellow House Internet & Tour** (☎ 07562 2809; 5 Th Chao Fa) hires out reliable bikes and provides helmets. A few of the travel agencies along Th Utarakit rent out small 4WDs for 1200B to 2000B per day.

## MINIVAN

Minivans are booked through travel agencies in town. Prices can vary widely; shop around to get an idea. Some sample fares are Ao Leuk (40B, one hour), Hat Yai (200B, three hours), Ko Lanta (180B, 1½ hours), Trang (220B, two hours) and Satun (350B, five hours). Minivans leave when full.

## SĂWNGTHĂEW

Services to Ban Hua Hin (the ferry pier for Ko Lanta) leave from the intersection of Th Phattana and Th Phruksauthit. They run fairly frequently, cost 40B and take 40 minutes.

## AROUND KRABI Wat Tham Sua

วัดถ้ำเสือ

Thailand has a lot of wats, but **Wat Tham Sua** (Tiger Cave Temple), in the forest 8km northeast of Krabi, is pretty unique. The main *wihăan* (hall) is built into a long, shallow lime-

stone cave. On either side of the cave, dozens of *kūti* (monastic cells) are built into various cliffs and caves. You may see a troop of monkeys roaming the grounds.

The most shocking thing about Wat Tham Sua is found in the large main cave. Alongside large portraits of Ajahn Jammien Silasettho, the wat's abbot who has allowed a rather obvious personality cult to develop around him, are close-up pictures of human entrails and internal organs, which are meant to remind guests of the impermanence of the body. Skulls and skeletons scattered around the grounds are meant to serve the same educational purpose.

Ajahn Jammien, who is well known as a teacher of Vipassana (insight meditation) and Metta (loving kindness), is said to have been apprenticed at an early age to a blind lay priest and astrologer who practised folk medicine, and has been celibate his entire life. On the inside of his outer robe, and on an inner vest, hang scores of talismans presented to him by his followers – altogether they must weigh several kilograms, a weight Ajahn Jammien bears to take on his followers' karma. Many young women come to Wat Tham Sua to practise as eight-precept nuns.

The best part of the temple grounds can be found in a little valley behind the ridge where the *bôt* (central sanctuary) is located. Walk beyond the main temple building keeping the cliff on your left and you'll come to a pair of steep stairways. The first leads to a truly arduous climb of over 1200 steps – some of them extremely steep – to the top of a 600m karst

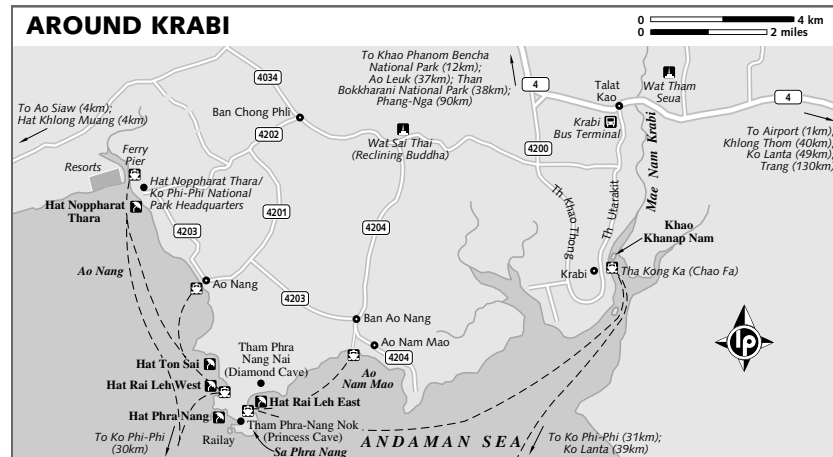
peak. The fit and fearless will be rewarded with a Buddha statue, a gilded stupa and great views of the surrounding area; on a clear day you can see well out to sea.

The second stairway, next to a large statue of Kuan Yin (the Mahayana Buddhist Goddess of Mercy), leads over a gap in the ridge and into a valley of tall trees and limestone caves. Enter the caves on your left and look for light switches on the walls – the network of caves is wired so that you can light your way, chamber by chamber, through the labyrinth until you rejoin the path on the other side.

If you go to the temple, please dress modestly: pants down to the ankles, shirts covering the shoulders and nothing too tight. Travellers in beachwear at Thai temples don't realise how offensive they are and how embarrassed they should be.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Take a *săwngthăew* from Krabi's Th Utarakit to the Talat Kao junction for 20B, then change to any bus or *săwngthăew* heading east on Hwy 4 towards Trang – these can be rather infrequent, so if you can drive a motorcycle it may be best to rent one in Krabi for the 8km drive. Get off at the road on the left just past the small police station – if you're on the *săwngthăew* tell the driver 'Wat Tham Sua'. Motorcycle taxis hang out here and charge 25B to the wat, or you can walk 2km straight up the road. Private taxis to the wat from Krabi cost 250B each way; *túk-túk* charge about 200B.



## AO NANG

อำเภอ

pop 12,400

Ao Nang attracts the two-week jet-set pack to its showy resorts, which outshine the beaches. Sadly, the beach is nothing spectacular and the wide 'European'-style esplanade that tourism-boasters boast about is really just one large mall with souvenir shops, tailors and restaurants. Still, there are some spiffy midrange and top-end resorts with lovely garden pools, appealing enough to make the location irrelevant.

Ao Nang serves as the main jumping-off point for Railay, only a 20-minute long-tail ride away. For your money, Railay is a heaps nicer place to stay. Ao Nang is appealing, however, if you want to partake in popular island-hopping tours or sea-kayaking adventures, as most companies are based here. Plus, if having booze with meals is paramount, Ao Nang will do a better job quenching your thirst: many of Railay's resorts are Muslim owned and don't serve alcohol in their restaurants (although you can buy beer at the local store and bring it into restaurants that don't serve).

## Orientation & Information

Ao Nang is not a very large place, and most services and hotels are crammed along either the main beach road or on short side streets. Basically, Hwy 4203 heads west into town, then runs north along the beach about 500m and then heads back inland for a bit before curving towards the coast again at Hat Noppharat Thara.

All the information offices on the strip are private tour agencies and most offer international calls and internet access for around 1B per minute. Several banks have ATMs and foreign-exchange windows on the main drag, open from 10am to 8pm daily. For more extensive services, including medical emergencies, you will need to head into Krabi.

## Activities

Loads of activities are possible at Ao Nang, and children under 12 typically get a 50% discount. **Elephant trekking** is a popular activity in Ao Nang, and most tour operators arrange jungle excursions. Before you participate, however, make sure the elephants don't look abused.

## KAYAKING

At least seven companies offer sea-kayaking tours to mangroves and islands around Ao Nang. Popular destinations include the lofty sea cliffs and wildlife-filled mangroves at Ao Thalane (half-/full-day 700/1000B), and to the sea caves and 2000- to 3000-year-old paintings at Ban Bho Tho (1000B) – the caves are also filled with layers of archaeological shell formations. All rates include lunch, fruit, drinking water, sea kayaks and guides. **Sea Canoe Thailand** (☎ 0 7569 5387) and **Ao Nang Group** (☎ 0 7563 7660/1) are two recommended companies.

## DIVING & SNORKELLING

Ao Nang has numerous dive schools offering trips to dive sites at nearby Railay's Laem Phra Nang. It costs about 2200B for two dives. Ko Mae Urai is one of the more unique local dives, with two submarine tunnels lined with soft and hard corals. Other trips run further a field to sites around Ko Phi Phi or Hin Daeng and Hin Muang, southwest of Ko Lanta (2900B for two dives). A PADI Open Water course will set you back 13,000B to 15,000B. Reliable dive schools include **Phra Nang Divers** (☎ 0 7563 7064; www.pndivers.com) and **Aqua Vision Dive Center** (☎ 0 7563 7415; www.aqua-vision.net). Dive companies can also arrange snorkelling trips in the area.

## Courses

About 10km from Ao Nang between Wat Sai Thai and Ao Nam Mao, **Krabi Thai Cookery School** (☎ 0 7569 5133; www.thaicookeryschool.net; 269 Muu 2, Ao Nang, Rte 4204) offers one-day Thai-cooking courses for 1000B; transfers are included in the price.

## Tours

Any agency worth its salt can book you on one of the popular four-/five-island tours, which cost between 400B and 500B for a day trip. Several tour agencies offer tours to **Khlong Thom**, including visits to freshwater pools, hot springs and the **Wat Khlong Thom Museum**; the price per adult/child is 750/400B. So-called 'mystery tours' visit local snake farms, rural villages, crystal pools and rubber, pineapple, banana and papaya plantations and cost around 900/450B. Tour agencies also offer trips to attractions around Ao Phang-Nga and to a number of dubious animal shows around Ao Nang.

You can also arrange day tours to Ko Phi Phi on the **Ao Nang Princess** (per adult/child

1100/850B). The boat leaves from the Hat Noppharat Thara National Park headquarters at 9am and visits Bamboo Island, Phi Phi Don and Phi Phi Leh.

## Sleeping

Ao Nang has become rather overdeveloped in recent years and the strip is creeping upmarket, though a few budget options are hanging on further back from the seafront. Prices at all these places drop by 50% during the low season.

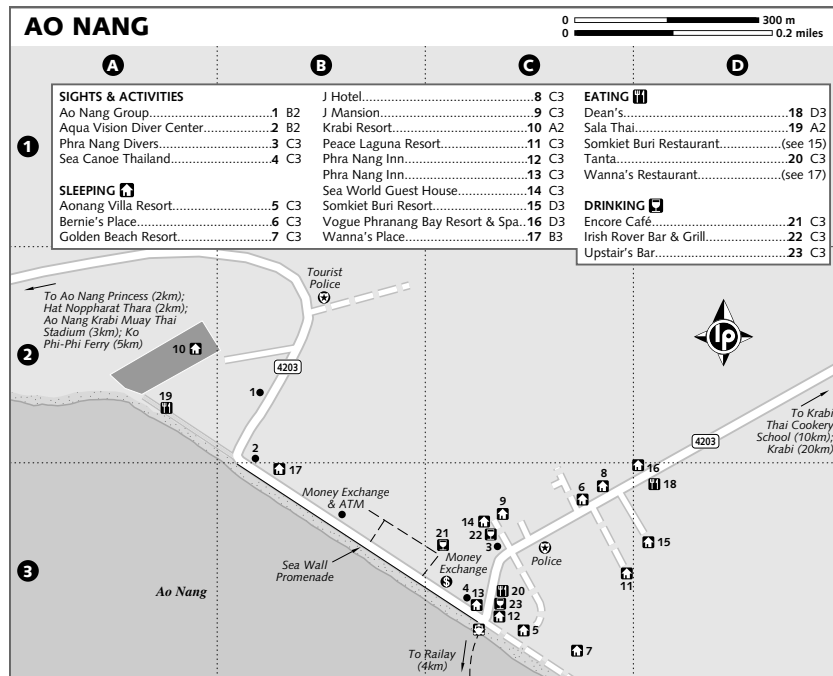
## BUDGET

There are several guesthouses that are tightly crammed together in a small alley. You'll find them just up from the beach at the eastern end of the strip.

**Bernie's Place** (☎ 0 7563 7093; r 200-600B) Bernie's will excite the penniless in high season – rooms max out at just 600B. You'll have to share a bathroom, but the rooms themselves are actually quite decent considering the price. They are big and bright with ceiling fans. The mattresses were ultrasoft, but we'll take saggy over claustrophobic any day. Bernie's was advertising heavily when we stopped by, and truthfully, pretty empty. But the big bar and backpacker priced buffets (all you can eat for 190B) mean it will likely have a travellers' vibe once word gets out.

**J Mansion** (☎ 0 7563 7876, 7569 5128; j\_mansion10@hotmail.com; r 350-1500B; 📶 📺 📺) You know a place is doing something right when it's fully booked in low season. Rooms at J Mansion are big and spotless and let in lots of light; top-floor digs have sea views. The rooftop is the best asset. Head up here with a few beers at sunset and check out fabulous views across to Railay (constant breezes make it almost as cool as swimming in a pool). J Mansion also runs an honest, fairly priced travel agency and does day trips to Ko Phi Phi on its speedboat for 1400B (low season 1000B). These include a buffet lunch, guide, snorkelling and hotel pick-up.

**J Hotel** (☎ 0 7563 7878; j\_hotelo@hotmail.com; r 350-1800B; 📶 📺 📺) J Mansion's sister property (owned by the same friendly family), J Hotel is nearly as good as the original and just up the street. Rooms in an old shophouse are huge, atmospheric and endearingly shabby chic. Our mattresses were a bit too soft for our liking, but everything else was top-notch for the price.



**MIDRANGE & TOP END**

Most accommodation at Ao Nang falls into this bracket. The following places are recommended, but they are by no means your only options; there are dozens more.

**Peace Laguna Resort** (☎ 0 7563 7345; www.peace.lagunaresort.com; r 1300-2200B, bungalows 2500-6000B; 🍷 🍷) Looks a little like Eden. Sweet, modern cottages, some boasting polished ceramic floors, sit around a large lagoon on gorgeous, well-maintained grounds while a limestone cliff basks in the background. The priciest rooms (deluxe and superior cottages) have open-air Balinese style showers, in-room Jacuzzis and huge windows. You can score great deals in the off-season.

**Somkiet Buri Resort** (☎ 0 7563 7320; www.somkiet.buri.com; r 2000-3000B; 🍷 🍷) This place just might inspire you to slip into a yoga pose. The lush jungle grounds are filled with ferns and orchids, while lagoons, streams and meandering wooden walkways guide you to the 26 large and creatively designed rooms. A great swimming pool is set amid it all – balconies either face this pool or a peaceful pond. The service everywhere is first rate.

**Phra Nang Inn** (☎ 0 7563 7130; phranang@sun.phuket.ksc.co.th; r incl breakfast 2300-5500B; 🍷 🍷) The beautiful interior décor – a unique bamboo theme with eclectic designs in shell and tilework – is Phra Nang's forte. There are two pools, and a second, similarly designed branch is across the road from the original.

**Vogue Phranang Bay Resort & Spa** (☎ 0 7563 7635; www.vogueresort.com; r 2100-6800B; 🍷 🍷) Rooms have big windows – ask for one facing the sea – and mix tiles and wooden floors in a Zen architectural collage. Baths have separate showers (complete with doors – rare here). The only fault was the softness of the mattress. We really liked the grounds, however. They were peaceful with lots of jungle foliage. There is a big round swimming pool, with sea and sunset views.

**Krabi Resort** (☎ 0 7563 7030, in Bangkok 0 2208 9165; www.krabi-resort.com; r & bungalows 4200-8900B; 🍷 🍷) The original Ao Nang luxury resort is ageing gracefully, maintaining quality rooms and luxury bungalows on peaceful, landscaped grounds, some right near the beach. There is an on-site dive school, a restaurant and a bar.

**Golden Beach Resort** (☎ 0 7563 7870-74; www.krabi.goldenbeach.com; r 4500-6000B, bungalows 6000-10,000B; 🍷 🍷) This swanky modern resort is made up of large hotel blocks and stylish bunga-

lows arranged in a tidy garden around a big pool. The outdoor restaurant is lit up like a Christmas tree at night and hosts slightly cheesy live music (think electric keyboards and '80s covers).

Also recommended:  
**Sea World Guest House** (☎ 0 7563 7388; seaworld999@hotmail.com; r 500-1000B; 🍷 🍷) A clean budget choice.

**Wanna's Place** (☎ 0 7563 7322; www.wannasplace.com; r 1875-1975B, bungalows 2290-2390B; 🍷 🍷) It's quite popular.

**Aonang Villa Resort** (☎ 0 7563 7270; www.aonang.villaresort.com; r 3400-7500B; 🍷 🍷) A swank seaside joint.

**Eating**

At the western end of the beach is Soi Sunset, a narrow alley housing a number of identical seafood restaurants. They all have bamboo seating abutting the ocean, and model boats at the entrance showing off the day's catch. For other options, check out the restaurants listed below.

**Wanna's Restaurant** (dishes 45-110B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Casual and inexpensive, it's worth stopping by for the variety of food on offer – everything from burgers to cheese selections to Swiss specialities, along with Thai cuisine and breakfast.

**Somkiet Buri Restaurant** (☎ 0 7563 7574; dishes 60-220B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Located at the resort of the same name, it cooks up great Thai food and has very attentive service. The lush open-air dining pavilion is an added bonus.

**Tanta** (☎ 0 7563 7118; dishes 60-250B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) The thin-crust pizza is delicious and not too doughy, the service is discreet (you get your meal but aren't pushed to order every 10 minutes). Tanta offers a great selection of Thai and international dishes. It's a popular modern place with a raised covered terrace and wood accents.

**Sala Thai** (dishes 60-300B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) The best (and most popular) of a series of seafood restaurants on decks overlooking the beach. Crab, lobster, prawns and fish are on display for your selection. This restaurant – along with its neighbours – has a wonderfully romantic atmosphere with open wooden deck, sea breezes and great views.

**Dean's Restaurant** (dishes 80-300B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Locals recommend this restaurant for its mishmash menu of authentic northeastern Thai specialities along with Scandinavian and

European favourites. A low-key place with pleasant outdoor seating, Dean's makes its own bread and imports fresh meat.

**Drinking**

Have a drink; there's no shortage of bars in Ao Nang.

Upstairs Bar, a 2nd-floor bar next to Tanta, is woven around an old tree and feels like the kind of place hobbits would gather for a round of mojitos (which, coincidentally, are delicious here). It's a mellow place with pebble floors, wooden tables and for some reason a song list of American top 40 hits dubbed into Spanish. Peanuts are served with cocktails (picked off a long menu), and these go for just 100B during nightly happy hour.

**Irish Rover Bar & Grill** (☎ 0 7563 7607) Readers like this typical Irish pub specialising in draught Guinness and Kilkenny, along with brews like Singapore's Tiger and Thailand's high-alcohol content (but headache inducing) Chang. Sports fans will appreciate the telly broadcasting English footy matches and South African cricket. The place also features live music, tropical cocktails and pool tables.

**Encore Café** (🍷 4pm-2am in high season) Very popular with holidaying Thais, this live-music club is a fun and modern spot. It has pool tables and special themed evenings – from ladies' night to speed pool. Readers like the Tex-Mex pub food.

**Aonang Krabi Muay Thai Stadium** (☎ 0 7562 1042; admission 500B, ringside incl 1 beer 1000B) If you get tired of the beach-bars and video movies on the strip, this place has boisterous *muay thai* (Thai boxing) bouts on during multiple nights each week from 8.45pm. A free *sāwngthāew* runs along the strip at Ao Nang, collecting punters before the bouts. You won't be able to miss knowing about upcoming events, as a truck outfitted with massive speakers roars up and down the streets announcing matches.

**Getting There & Around**

A ferry service to Ko Phi Phi runs year-round (350B, two hours, 9am) and includes a ride to/from the pier in nearby Hat Noppharat Thara.

Long-tail boats to the Hat Rai Leh area run daily in good weather and cost 50B. In bad weather take a *sāwngthāew* to Ao Nam Mao (10B) and then a long-tail boat (30B), which runs even in choppy weather. Long-tail

boats from Ao Nang to Krabi (50B) run only in high season.

A good way to get around is by *sāwngthāew*. Destinations include Krabi (25B), Hat Noppharat Thara (15B) and Ao Nam Mao (15B). Look for them on the main road. Taxis from Ao Nang to Krabi airport cost 500B, but from the airport can cost up to 800B.

**HAT NOPPHARAT THARA**

หาดนพรัตน์ธารา

About 4km from Ao Nang, at the end of Rte 4203, this appealing casuarina-backed beach is the headquarters for Ko Phi Phi Marine National Park – a popular picnic spot on weekends. There is little development along this northern part of the coastline and exploring leisurely can be a welcome antidote to Ao Nang's mass tourism. There's a small visitors centre with displays on coral reefs and mangrove ecology, labelled in Thai and English.

**Laughing Gecko** (☎ 0 7569 5115; bungalows 100-500B) is one of several basic bungalow operators down a lane just before the national park office. It features uber-rustic rooms and an artistically decorated restaurant filled with chattering backpackers.

At the other end of the scale, **Sabai Resort** (☎ 0 7563 7791; www.sabairesort.com; r 1100-2600B; 🍷 🍷) is an upmarket Italian-run place with a very neat garden and solid little bungalows. There's a restaurant serving hearty, authentic Italian dishes cooked up by the mama of the family.

The **Government bungalows** (☎ 0 7563 7200; 2-6-person tents 300B, 2-person bungalows 600B, 6-8-person bungalows 1200B or per person 200B) at park headquarters are another option. Well maintained, they come with fans, bathrooms and mosquito nets on the windows. Tents are also available if you want the full primitive experience. A small canteen serves meals in the evenings.

Around the national park headquarters there are several restaurants serving snacks such as fried chicken and papaya salad.

*Sāwngthāew* between Krabi and Ao Nang stop in Hat Noppharat Thara; the fare is 30B from either Krabi or Ao Nang. From October to May the *Ao Nang Princess* runs between Ko Phi Phi Marine National Park headquarters and Ko Phi Phi (300B, two hours). The boat leaves from the national park jetty at 9am, returning from Ko Phi Phi at 3.30pm. It also stops at Railay's Hat Rai Leh West. This boat can also be used for day trips to Ko Phi Phi. During the high season

there's also a direct boat to Phuket, leaving from the same pier at 3.30pm (450B).

## RAILAY

ไร่เลย์

Hiding behind a layer of impenetrable cliffs, the gorgeous isthmus of Railay (also spelled Rai Leh) could easily serve as a fantasy cover for a Harlequin romance. It is possibly the most stunning beach location in all of Thailand, home to emerald silk water punctured by surreal limestone formations, honey-hued beaches and psychedellic sunsets. Railay may be just around the corner from Ao Nang and Krabi but it feels oceans away. Accessible only by boat, for now it remains a mellow place where serenity trumps chaos, there is no motorised transport and the beach is free of stalls selling knock-offs. Life is changing quickly. Construction was in full swing when we visited, and we doubt it will be long before Railay becomes Thailand's new superstar.

For adventure seekers Railay is best known for the hundreds of excellent rock-climbing routes up the surrounding cliffs. Loads of climbing shops cater to visitors wishing to scramble up the karsts, providing equipment rental and instruction for beginners and advanced climbers alike.

## Information

The website [www.railay.com](http://www.railay.com) has lots of information about Railay. There are now a couple of ATMs in Railay – an easy one is on the path between Hat Rai Leh West and Hat Rai Leh East. Several of the bigger resorts can also change cash and travellers cheques. Internet access is available at Sand Sea Resort, on Hat Rai Leh East, for a whopping 180B per hour, but the connections are unreliable; you may be better off checking your email in Ao Nang or Krabi town. For minor climbing injuries there's a small clinic at Railay Bay Resort on Hat Rai Leh West.

## Sights

### BEACHES

The more alluring beach is **Hat Rai Leh West**. It's also the best place to watch the sun go down (bring a camera, sunsets can be orgasmic). Tastefully designed midrange resorts line a long stretch of golden sand beach and dozens of long-tail boats make pick-ups and drop-offs from here to nearby Ao Nang. The water is perfect for swimming (even at low tide it's deep

enough), and we'd suggest floating on your back, staring up at the cliffs and contemplating life for a while – it's very Zen. At the southern end of the beach is the mighty Thaiwand Wall, a sheer limestone cliff offering some of the most challenging routes at Railay.

Boats from Krabi arrive at **Hat Rai Leh East**. The shallow, muddy beach is lined with mangroves and is not really suitable for swimming, but there are plenty of bungalows, bars and facilities onshore. It's only a short walk (less than five minutes) across the deer neck of Laem Phra Nang to Hat Rai Leh West, so don't feel you're trapped on this beach if you're arriving from Krabi.

**Hat Ton Sai** is the backpacker retreat and is reached by long-tail (either directly from Ao Nang or from Hat Rai Leh West) or by a sweaty 20-minute scramble over limestone rocks. While the beach here is mediocre, the dozens of cheap bungalow outfits and excellent access to some of the best climbs around keeps it lively with climbers and backpackers. There are occasional full-moon parties here during the high season.

Near the tip of the peninsula is **Hat Phra Nang**, a splendid strip of whispering white sand, framed by looming cliffs. If you just want to sunbathe, Hat Phra Nang is the spot to go – it's the most beautiful beach around and just a few minutes' walk from Hat Rai Leh East. The plush Rayavadee resort dominates the eastern end of the beach but the rest of Hat Phra Nang is untouched. A huge cavern punches straight through the cliffs at the western end of the beach, emerging halfway up Thaiwand Wall. Immediately offshore are Happy Island and Ko Rung Nok (Bird Nest Island), which offer some good snorkelling.

### OTHER SIGHTS

At the eastern end of Hat Phra Nang is **Tham Phra Nang** (Princess Cave), an important shrine for local fishermen. Legend has it that a royal barge carrying an Indian princess foundered in a storm here during the 3rd century BC. The spirit of the drowned princess came to inhabit the cave, granting favours to all who came to pay respect. Local fishermen – Muslim and Buddhist – place carved wooden phaluses in the cave as offerings in the hope that the spirit will provide plenty of fish.

About halfway along the path from Hat Rai Leh East to Hat Phra Nang, a crude path leads up the jungle-cloaked cliff wall to a hidden

lagoon known as **Sa Phra Nang** (Holy Princess Pool). There's a dramatic viewpoint over the peninsula from the nearby cliff top, but be warned that this is a strenuous hike with some serious vertigo-inducing parts.

Above Hat Rai Leh East is another large cave called **Tham Phra Nang Nai** (Inner Princess Cave; adult/child 20/10B; ☎ 5am-8pm), also known as Diamond Cave. A wooden boardwalk leads through a series of illuminated caverns full of beautiful limestone formations, including a splendid 'stone waterfall' of sparkling gold-coloured quartz.

## Activities

### ROCK CLIMBING

With nearly 700 bolted routes and unparalleled cliff-top vistas, it's no surprise these dramatic rock faces are among the top climbing spots in the world. There are routes here ascending to the roofs of massive caverns and following cascades of stalactites up 300m-high cliffs. Climbing options are so plentiful, ranging from beginner routes to challenging advanced climbs, that you could spend months climbing and exploring – and many people do.

Most climbers start off at **Muay Thai Wall** and **One, Two, Three Wall**, at the southern end of Hat Rai Leh East, which have at least 40 routes graded from 4b to 8b on the French system. The mighty **Thaiwand Wall**, a sheer limestone cliff, sits at the southern end of Hat Rai Leh West and has some of the most challenging climbing routes. For a list of some of the best climbs here see the boxed text, below.

The going rate for climbing courses is 800B to 1000B for a half-day and 1500B to 2000B for a full day. Three-day courses (5000B to 6000B) involve some lead-climbing (where you clip into bolts on the rock face as you ascend) as well as multipitch routes. Experienced climbers can hire lead kits from any of the climbing schools for 600/1000B for a half-/full day – the standard kit consists of a 60m rope, two climbing harnesses, two pairs of rock boots, a belaying device and 12 quick-draws. You could consider bringing your own climbing boots and a collection of loose slings, nuts and cams to provide extra protection on thinly bolted routes. If you leave anything at home, all the climbing schools sell imported climbing gear.

Several locally published books detail climbs in the area, but the *Thailand Rock Climbing Guidebook* (800B), published by a local climbing school called **Rock Shop** (☎ 0 1978 3023; Hat Ton Sai), is one of the more popular guides. The book focuses on Railay and has great sketches of each climbing route. There are at least six other climbing shops at Railay – when choosing which to go with, the best thing to do is take a walk around and find one that appeals to you.

**Hot Rock** (☎ 0 7562 1771; [www.railayadventure.com](http://www.railayadventure.com); Hat Rai Leh West) is one school with a good reputation and is run by friendly Luang, one of the granddaddies of Railay climbing, and his Swedish wife Saralisa. Luang arrived in the area in the 1980s, before there was much of a scene. He lived for a while in a cave he reached by climbing, before descending back onto the

### TOP FIVE CLIMBS

With 700 climbs to choose from, picking a few of the best ones is no easy task – here's a list we've whittled down. Grades are based on the French grading system.

Climb	Grade	Height	Description
Groove Tube	6a	25m	A great climb for beginner to intermediate levels; lots of big gaps and pockets to grab.
Humanality	6a-6b	120m	This multipitch scramble is one of the most popular here; you may have to queue to climb it.
Lion King	6b+	18m	A good, challenging climb, with a slight overhang and zigzags up a crack; requires lots of strength and agility.
Narsillion	6c+	30m	Accessible only at low tide, this climb has a steep wall with small pockets. The beach below this rock is lovely.
Ao Nang Tower	6b-6c	68m	You have to start this climb from a long-tail boat! The last 6c stretch here is a long one so save your strength.

sand where he began guiding the few tourists trickling in for the climbing. The sport took off in the 1990s, and Luang founded Hot Rock in 1994. If you run out of steam halfway up a cliff, you can contact Luang and his staff for free-of-charge emergency rescue.

### WATER SPORTS

Several **dive** operations in Railay run trips to Ko Poda and other neighbouring sites. **Krabi Divers** (☎ 07562 1686/7; www.viewpointresort66.com; Hat Rai Leh East), at Railay Viewpoint Resort, charges 1500B for two local dives and 2500B for dives at outlying islands. A three- or four-day PADI Open Water dive course is 9900B.

**Snorkelling** trips to Ko Poda and Ko Hua Khwan (Chicken Island) can be arranged through any of the resorts for about 600B by long-tail or 900B by speedboat. Longer multi-island trips cost 800/1500B per half-/full-day. If you just want to snorkel off Railay, most resorts can rent you a mask set and fins for 50B each.

The Flame Tree Restaurant/Bobo's Bar at Hat Rai Leh West, rents out **sea kayaks** for 150B per hour, or 400B for four hours. Overnight trips to deserted islands can be arranged with local boat owners but you'll need to bring your own camping gear and food.

### Sleeping & Eating

Many resorts in Railay are owned or managed by Muslims and do not serve alcohol. Most places will, however, let you bring your own booze in. You can buy takeaway drinks at one of the beach bars (although unless you have alcohol with you, you'll be limited mostly to takeaways like beer or bottles of Thai rice whiskey – unless of course you want to haggle, and then shell out big baht, for an entire bottle of imported gin).

### HAT RAI LEH WEST

Railay's first developed beach faces west, so the sunsets are fabulous. It's all pretty much midrange and top-end options on this beach, but rates can drop by 30% in the low season. All the resorts have decent restaurants.

**Sand Sea Resort** (☎ 07562 2170; www.krabisandsea.com; bungalows 1300-4000B; 🍷 📺 🚿) Solid, well-appointed concrete bungalows with verandas line a snaking, foliage-laced pathway. A full buffet breakfast at the hotel restaurant is included; non-guests should stop by at lunch or dinner, as the food is quite good. We

especially liked the garlic and pepper squid (100B). You'll need to pick up beer at the Flame Thrower Bar two doors down; Sand Sea is alcohol free.

**Railay Bay Resort & Spa** (☎ 07562 2571; www.railaybayresort.com; bungalows 2000-4000B; 🍷 📺) It's worth staying here for the pool alone. The amoeba shaped sparkling blue creation faces onto the best bit of the beach so you can easily switch between salt and fresh water. In the middle of major renovations when we stopped by, it has expanded and now stretches between Hat Rai Leh East and West. Digs are in swank bungalows with big glass windows and white walls. The restaurant was closed for redecorating when we visited, but we remember its yummy pizzas from the last trip. The spa, which also overlooks the sea, offers a host of treatments at very reasonable prices.

**Railay Princess Resort & Spa** (☎ 07562 2571; www.railaybayresort.com; bungalows 2500-4000B; 🍷 📺) Railay Bay Resort's sister property has refreshing rooms with teak framed beds, Thai silk runners and crisp white linens. Muted lighting, big windows and a creamy colour scheme lend a serene touch. And bungalows look out onto a peaceful Lotus pond. Private ferry service to Krabi or Ao Nang, a minimart, restaurant, spa and travel agency round out this new luxury resort's amenities. You'll want for nothing.

**Railei Beach Club** (☎ 07562 2582; www.raileibeachclub.com; houses 3700-9000B) Hidden away in forested grounds at the northern end of the beach, this is a collection of beautiful Thai-styled homes, each unique in size, style and design. The Beach Club is a conglomerate of foreign-owned houses: the owners rent out their vacation property when they are back home. Each place comes with patio and kitchen. Some houses sleep up to eight people. You'll need to book well in advance for the high season.

**Flame Tree Restaurant/Bobo's Bar** (dishes 70-150B) Some people call this place Bobo's; others refer to it by the new sign out front – Flame Tree. Whatever you call it, it's the only real bar in Hat Rai Leh West and serves dripping ice-cold beers alongside a long list of cocktails. After dark, sit on a mat on the sand and drink by candlelight. Flame Tree/Bobo's does a short menu of Thai and Western pub grub including good brekkies and real espresso drinks.

### HAT RAI LEH EAST

Often referred to as Sunrise Beach, the beach along here tends towards mud flats during low tide. It's not too big of a deal though, as Hat Rai Leh West is just a five-minute walk away. The resorts on the hillside above the beach get sea breezes, but down by the water it can feel like a sauna in the evenings. The following rates drop by half in the low season.

**Rapala Bungalows** (☎ 07562 2586; bungalows 400B) The delightful bamboo bungalows sit atop a hill, far removed from the whirl of long-tail boats below, and many have winning sea views. This is budget accommodation at its best, but don't expect anything too flash. The intricately woven bungalows feature mattresses on the floor and hammocks on the porch, but that's about it. There's a cushion-lined restaurant that's perfect for chilling – it serves Thai and Indian food that guests have raved about.

**Railay Highland Resort** (☎ 07562 1732; bungalows 750B) This respectable resort sits in the middle of a natural basin above Hat Rai Leh East (it's about a 10-minute walk to the water), surrounded by immense cliffs. There's a very stylish bar and restaurant raised high on stilts in the centre, surrounded by thoughtfully designed wood-and-bamboo bungalows. In low season bungalows go for just 300B.

**Diamond Private Resort** (☎ 07562 1729; www.diamondprivate-railay.com; r 2000-4000B; 🍷 📺) This resort has a pool high on the hilltop with a deck that sports great views of the bay below. The rooms and bungalows come with TVs, hot showers and minibars, and are set in well-landscaped gardens.

**Sunrise Tropical Resort** (☎ 07562 2599; www.sunrise-tropical.com; bungalows 4000-5500B; 🍷 📺) Likely the first place you'll come across after disembarking from the Krabi boat (look for it just beyond the mooring area). Sunrise has stylish Thai villas with neat décor and very swanky bathrooms. Breakfast is included. The restaurant does not serve alcohol.

### HAT PHRA NANG

There's only one place to stay on this beautiful beach.

**Rayavadee** (☎ 07562 0740; www.rayavadee.com; r42,000-55,000B; 🍷 📺) Yes, you read those prices right. But if you have serious baht to burn, this exclusive colonial-style five-star resort monopolises 26 acres of stunning beachfront property. Seven types of luxury bungalow dot

the perfectly landscaped grounds; all are two-storey and fabulously decked out in a traditional Thai style. Champagne breakfast, afternoon tea and dinner are included, as are water sports and airport transfers. There's a luxurious pool and great security – guards won't let you enter the area to 'just have a look around'.

### HAT TON SAI

The beach here isn't much to look at but with so many good climbs all around, most people don't mind. With the cheapest digs on the isthmus, Ton Sai has become Railay's backpacker ghetto, and there's a fun vibe in high season. Despite the number of places to sleep, Hat Ton Sai has managed to retain a peaceful unspoiled atmosphere, and its resorts lie hidden away among the trees behind the beach. In the low season, rates for bungalows plummet as low as 150B.

There are also a couple of very basic bungalow operations along the beach, though none have huts with sea views. The other resorts at Ton Sai, Dream Valley and Andaman Nature Resorts, are tucked behind the beach on the path next to Ton Sai Bungalows. There are a few other similar resorts along this path offering bamboo bungalows with bathrooms for around 500B.

**Mambo** (☎ 09652 1862; bungalows 500B) The most organised of the basic beach bungalows, Mambo's huts are bare bones – fan, mattress and toilet – with little in the way of decoration, but they are clean. The seaside restaurant is really popular (although the food isn't so great), and the place has a lively energy. In low season prices plummet to 200B, but electricity is often available only at night.

**Andaman Nature Resort** (☎ 07562 1667; fax 07561 1842; bungalows 200-500B) Offering the usual bungalow deal, the big attraction here is the popular multilevel restaurant – it's huge, shady and made of funky knotted wood.

**Ton Sai Bungalows** (☎ 07562 2584; bungalows 700-1200B; 🍷) The pricier bungalows are wood and concrete affairs painted a bright mustard colour, and are some of the nicest digs on Ton Sai. There's also a diving centre, climbing school and minimart here.

**Dream Valley Resort** (☎ 07562 2583; iad16@hotmail.com; r400-1200B; 🍷) This old-style wooden place has a variety of trim and proper wooden bungalows, as well as a restaurant serving decent seafood. There's a minimart and a motorcycle taxi to transfer you to the beach with your bags.

## Drinking

Although many of the resorts don't serve alcohol, there are a few places on the beaches where you can get nicely inebriated.

**Rock Bar** (Hat Rai Leh East) Up the hill towards the Railway Highland Resort, the Rock has an awesome setting under a massive climbing wall, is enveloped by jungle and has a drinking gazebo perched atop a boulder. This place also has yoga most mornings or afternoons and one of the better nightly fire-shows around.

**Bamboo Bar** (Hat Rai Leh East) One of several bars scattered around this beach, Bamboo Bar has comfy cushions and a driftwood design ethos that makes for interesting décor. It hosts the occasional glass-blowing demonstration, and the staff is fun and helpful.

**Flame Thrower/Bobo's** (Hat Rai Leh West) The place for a sunset cocktail at Hat Rai Leh West. Flame Thrower (or Bobo's, as it's also called) has cushions and candles on the sand and a long cocktail menu. You can buy takeaway beer here.

**Chillout Bar** (Hat Ton Sai) Climbers like to chill here after a long day on the rocks. The place flies Rasta colours and serves cold beers as fast as you can drink them.

## Getting There & Around

The only way to get to Railay is by long-tail boat, either from Tha Kong Ka (Chao Fa) in Krabi or from the seafront at Ao Nang. Boats between Krabi and Hat Rai Leh East leave every 1½ hours from 7.45am to 6pm (100B, 45 minutes).

Boats to Hat Rai Leh West or Ton Sai (60B, 15 minutes) leave from the eastern end of the promenade at Ao Nang during daylight hours. After dark you'll pay 100B. If seas are rough, boats leave from a sheltered cove just west of Krabi Resort in Ao Nang. You can be dropped at Hat Phra Nang or Hat Ton Sai for the same fare.

During exceptionally high seas, the boats from both Ao Nang and Krabi stop running, but you may still be able to get from Hat Rai Leh East to Ao Nam Mao (30B, 15 minutes), where you can pick up a sawngthæw to Krabi or Ao Nang. Even if boats are running all the way to Ao Nang, you can expect a drenching on any boat ride during the monsoon.

From October to May, the *Ao Nang Princess* runs between Hat Noppharat Thara National Park headquarters and Ko Phi Phi with a stop in Hat Rai Leh West. Long-tails run

out to meet the boat at around 9.15am from in front of the Sand Sea Resort; the fare from Railay is 250B.

## KHAO PHANOM BENCHA NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติเขาพนมเบญจา

This 50-sq-km **park** (admission 200B) protects a dramatic area of virgin rainforest along the spine of 1350m-high Khao Phanom Bencha, just 20km north of Krabi. The name means Five-Point Prostration Mountain, a reference to the mountain's profile, which resembles a person prostrate in prayer, with hands, knees and head touching the ground.

The park is full of scenic waterfalls, including the 11-tiered **Nam Tok Huay To**, just 500m from the park headquarters. Close by and almost as dramatic are **Nam Tok Huay Sadeh** and **Nam Tok Klong Haeng**. On the way into the park, you can visit **Tham Khao Pheung**, a fantastic cave with shimmering mineral stalactites and stalagmites. Numerous trails snake through the park providing excellent opportunities for hiking. You can discover lesser-known streams and waterfalls, too.

Clouded leopards, black panthers, tigers, Asiatic black bears, barking deer, serow, Malayan tapirs, leaf monkeys, gibbons and various tropical birds – including the helmeted hornbill, argus pheasant and extremely rare Gurney's pitta – make their home here.

There is no public transport to the park, and it doesn't offer any lodging or eating options. But the park is an easy day trip from Krabi by hired motorcycle; just follow the signposted turn-off from Hwy 4. Alternatively, you can hire a tük-tük for around 300B return.

## THAN BOKKHARANI NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติธารโบกขรณี

If you visit this national park just after the monsoons, you'll be treated to a lush and surreal experience – almost like you've stepped onto the set of a Disney movie. At the park headquarters, close to the small town of Ao Leuk and 46km northwest of Krabi, emerald-green waters flow out of a narrow cave in a tall cliff and into a large lotus pool, which spills into a wide stream and then divides into many smaller rivulets. At each rivulet there's a pool and a little waterfall; the effect is magical. The park was established in 1991 and protects a large area of islands, mangroves and limestone caves throughout the Ao Leuk area.

This from Ao Leuk come to bathe at these pools on weekends, when it becomes full of people playing in the streams – and shampooing their hair, which seems to be a favourite activity here. During the week there are only a few people about – mostly kids fishing. Vendors sell noodles, excellent roast chicken, delicious battered squid and *sôm-tam* (green papaya salad) under a roofed area to one side.

## Activities

**Caving** is the name of the game in this park. Among the protected caves scattered around the Amphoe Ao Leuk, one of the most interesting is **Tham Hua Kalok** (also called Tham Pee Hua Toe or Big-Headed Ghost Cave), reached by long-tail boat or sea kayak from the pier at Ban Bho Tho, 7km south of Ao Leuk. Set in a limestone hill, legend has it that a huge human skull was found in the cave, but the ghost story probably has more to do with the 2000- to 3000-year-old paintings of human and animal figures that adorn the cave walls.

Nearby **Tham Lawt** (Tube Cave) is distinguished by the navigable stream flowing through it and can also be reached by boat. Both caves are popular destinations for sea-kayaking tours from Krabi or Ao Nang, but you can also hire sea kayaks and guides at Tha Bho Tho for 800B. Long-tails are available for 300B.

There are no less than seven other similar limestone caves in the park, including **Tham Sa Yuan Thong**, a few kilometres southeast of Ao Leuk, which has a natural spring bubbling into a pool at its mouth. The park also includes the uninhabited island of **Ko Hong**, with fine beaches, jungle-cloaked cliffs and a scenic hidden lagoon. Sea kayak and long-tail boats come here from Ao Nang.

## Sleeping

Ao Leuk has a few places to bed down, or you can camp with permission from the park headquarters.

**Ao Leuk Resort** (☎ 0 7568 1133; r 300-500B; 📶) Right beside the park headquarters, this place has old rooms with bathrooms and TVs in a motel-like block.

**PN Mountain Resort** (☎ 0 7568 1554; r 400-1200B; 📶 📶) This is a newer place with modern rooms and a dramatic backdrop: a lush limestone cliff wall with a hole in the middle. It's on Hwy 4, 1km north of the park turnoff.

## Getting There & Away

Than Bok, as the locals call it, is near the town of Ao Leuk. The park headquarters is about 1.5km south of Ao Leuk town along Rte 4039. Buses and sawngthæw from Krabi cost 25B and stop on Hwy 4. From here you can walk about 1.3km to the park headquarters or take a motorcycle taxi for 15B. The easiest way to visit the caves is to join a sea-kayaking tour from Krabi or Ao Nang (that way you don't have to worry about transportation).

To get to Ban Bho Tho from Ao Leuk on your own steam (to organise your own sea-kayak tour), take a motorcycle taxi (50B) to the 'Tham Phee Huato' turn-off on Rte 4039. From the junction it's about 2km to Ban Bho Tho along the first signposted road on the left.

## KO PHI PHI DON

เกาะพีพีดอน

Ko Phi Phi is quickly returning to its pre-tsunami status as Thailand's Shangri-la: a hedonistic paradise where tanned couples frolic in glassy green seas and snap pictures of colourful long-tails puttering between craggy slate cliffs.

Unlike other tsunami-affected regions, this island seems to have had less trouble getting the word out. Following a massive rebuilding effort, bungalows are once again fully booked between December and March, and tourists are returning to the curving bays, white sand-beaches and dense tropical jungle that made Ko Phi Phi the darling of the Andaman Coast in the first place.

Prior to the tsunami, the island was growing too rapidly for its existing infrastructure and fragile ecosystem to sustain. Immediately following the tsunami the Thai government put on hold any rebuilding on the island's sand bar, and it was hoped, with the slate wiped clean, that lessons could be learned from past mistakes. Several local agencies attempted to educate developers and residents about sustainable growth, and rumours circulated that the area would be turned into a public park.

But none of these things came to pass and Ao Ton Sai now looks almost exactly as it did before 24 December 2004. In the Tourist Village, street vendors and souvenir shops are back in full swing, as are dozens of booking agencies, restaurants and dive operators. On most of the other bays, it's business as usual.



Expat James Hood, owner of the new 007 Bar, explained it this way:

'It isn't like anyone actually has permission from the government to build, but it is happening anyway, and no one is doing anything to stop it. One family has a lot of influence on the island and in the provincial government in Krabi,' he said.

There seems to be light at the end of the tunnel, however. A new water-treatment plant, opened in 2006, should eliminate water-supply issues for now. Trash is starting to head into rubbish bins – a local bar owner has taken it upon himself to place bins on the main tourist beaches. Do you part in recycling – look for the new rubbish bins and deposit as much garbage as you can find.

And while Phi Phi may look the same as it did pre-tsunami, it certainly doesn't cost the same.

'Ko Phi Phi is changing, there has been a drop in the backpacker population and an increase in the suitcase brigade,' Hood said. 'Backpackers can't afford to stay here anymore.'

It's true. Although Ko Phi Phi retains a mellow backpacker vibe, cheap bungalows are few and far between, and those that exist seem overpriced for the cramped, dark and dank environs you get. The outlook is only slightly less dismal in the midrange and top-end bracket – expect to pay nearly double what you would on the mainland, for half the amenities and swankness. Why is Phi Phi so expensive these days?

For two reasons, Hood says. First, electricity is hugely expensive on Phi Phi because the island is not supplied with electricity from the mainland and has to rely on generators. Ferry and long-tail boat prices are also increasing – rates are tied to the price of petrol, so if petrol prices drop drastically in the next two years, expect prices to go down (we wish!).

On the plus side, Phi Phi is building sounder structures these days (probably another reason prices are going up). Instead of fly-by-night bungalows, Western style buildings, constructed to withstand a tsunami, are going up. Designs include open-air staircases people can use to climb onto the roof in a hurry.

And even though Ko Phi Phi will seem expensive compared to the rest of Thailand, if you compare it to other gorgeous islands around the planet, we think you'll discover this paradise actually comes pretty damn cheap.

## Orientation & Information

Ko Phi Phi Don (usually just referred to as Ko Phi Phi) is part of the Ko Phi Phi Marine National Park, which also includes uninhabited Ko Phi Phi Leh. Development is forbidden on Phi Phi Don's little sister, but it can be visited on immensely popular day trips.

Ko Phi Phi Don is actually two islands joined by a narrow isthmus with the prized beaches **Ao Ton Sai** and **Ao Lo Dalam** on either side. It's here that the tsunami wreaked the most havoc. Boats dock at the large concrete pier at Ao Ton Sai and a sandy path, crammed full of tour operators, bungalows, restaurants, bars and souvenir shops, stretches along the beach towards **Hat Hin Khom**. The maze of small streets in the middle of this sand bar is equally packed and is called 'Tourist Village'. **Hat Yao** (Long Beach) faces south and has some of Phi Phi Don's best coral reefs and one of its most impressive swimming beaches. The beautifully languid and long eastern bays of **Hat Laem Thong** and **Ao Lo Bakao** are reserved for several top-end resorts while the smaller bays of **Hat Phak Nam** and **Hat Ranti** play host to a few simple, low-key bungalow affairs.

Prices vary wildly by season on Ko Phi Phi Don. As soon as you arrive at the pier you'll be assaulted by touts trying to book you into one of the bungalow operations (they all give the same spiel about it being the last available bungalow on the island in your price range; it's usually not). The touts will direct you to an official-looking info desk at the pier (in reality

it's just a private tourist booking office) and try to force you into booking a room. Unless you're travelling alone with tons of luggage and desperately need someone to carry your luggage – Ko Phi Phi is vehicle free, so luggage is transported by porters pushing wheeled carts; travellers hike alongside or if you're staying further from the pier you may both go by long-tail boat – don't book here. It's not that the prices are worse, but you'll be forced to pay in advance, thus will be unable to see your room first. As prices in Ko Phi Phi are ridiculously high and quality isn't always great, it's best to see what you're booking first (unless you book in advance over the internet, when you'll likely get a lower rate; or it's the holiday season and it really might be the last room. If the boat's half empty in October though, hoof it).

Scattered throughout Ao Ton Sai are numerous ATMs and internet cafes, and travel agencies that can book day trips and onward tickets.

## Activities

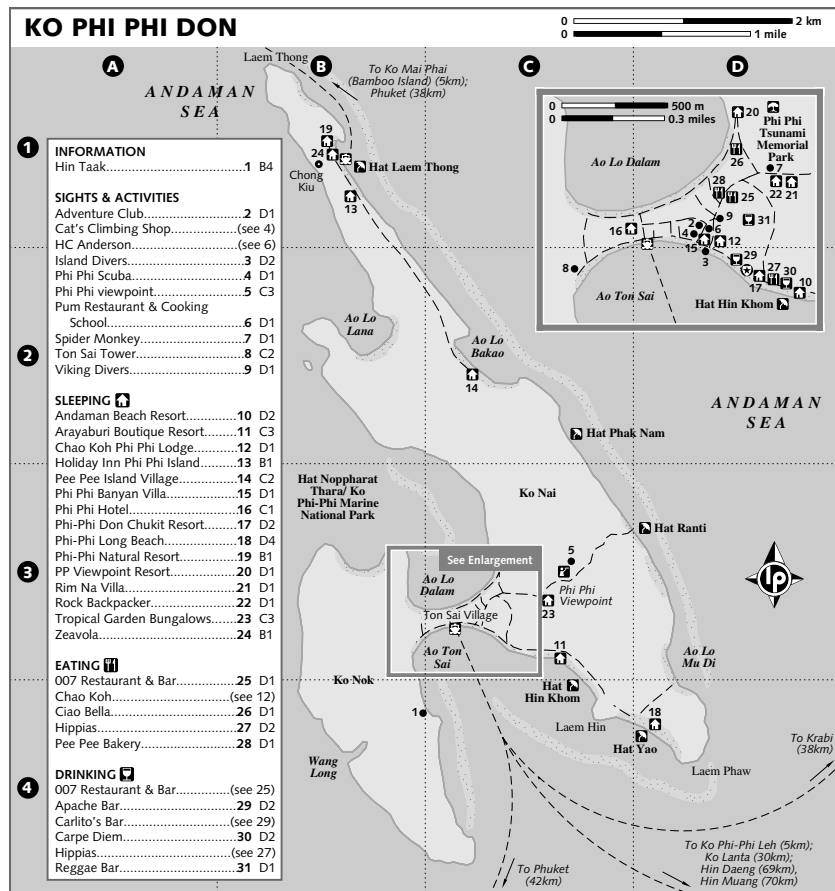
The strenuous climb to the **Phi Phi viewpoint** is a rewarding short hike. The trail is off the path to the dam – look for Phi Phi Dream (heading towards the dam, the resort will be on your right) and take the path on the opposite side of the road. Follow the signs from here. The viewpoint is reached via a 1000ft vertical climb that includes hundreds of steep steps and narrow twisting paths. The hike will get your blood pumping and sweat pouring, but it's worth the effort. The views from the top are amazing – the marine park vistas stretch on forever, resembling a shimmering tapestry of aqua and emerald, turquoise and jade.

## DIVING & SNORKELLING

With crystal-clear water, abundant coral and tons of fish, Ko Phi Phi is a kick-ass place to dive. In fact, when it comes to Thailand's best scuba sites, many say only the Similans rate above Ko Phi Phi.

Phi Phi's dive shops all charge the same price – an Open Water certification course costs 12,500B, while the standard two-dive trips cost 2200B, or 3200B if you want to visit the *King Cruiser* wreck. A Discover Scuba dive (for those not certified) costs 3100B.

**Phi Phi Scuba** (☎ 0 7561 2665; www.ppscuba.com) and **Island Divers** (☎ 075 601 082; www.islanddiverspp.com) are the biggest operators. Both churn out dive certifications by the boatload, and some



folks complain about the less-than-personalised service. On the plus side, Island Divers, in particular, pushes ecofriendly scuba – the company encourages wreck dives and doesn't allow clients to touch the coral. Both shops have access to a hyperbaric chamber. **Viking Divers** (☎ 0 1719 3375; www.vikingdiversthailand.com) is a much smaller outfit that helped with the post-tsunami clean-up of the reefs and comes with good recommendations. A friendly Brit, who is married to a local woman, owns the place.

Snorkelling around Ko Phi Phi is equally amazing, especially off Ko Phi Phi Leh. It is worth shelling out the 600B to 2000B (depending on whether you want a long-tail or speedboat, and the duration of the trip) to join a day trip. Most trips include lunch and take you to a number of spots around the marine park. Popular destinations include Ko Mai Phai (Bamboo Island), north of Phi Phi Don. There's a shallow area here where you may see small leopard sharks (very common in this area). All travel agencies can arrange snorkelling day trips. Many snorkelling tours on bigger boats include short kayaking side trips, but some of these tours use mini cruise ships that carry up to 100 people at a time – peace and quiet on these behemoths may not be an option.

If you're going on your own, most bungalows and resorts rent out a snorkel, mask and fins for 100B to 150B per day. There is good snorkelling along the eastern coast of **Ko Nok**, near Ao Ton Sai, and along the eastern coast of **Ko Nai**.

### ROCK CLIMBING

Yes, there are good limestone cliffs to climb on Ko Phi Phi, and the view from the top is spectacular. The main climbing areas are **Ton Sai Tower**, at the western edge of Ao Ton Sai, and **Hin Taak**, a short long-tail boat ride around the bay. There are at least six good climbing shops on the island and most places charge around 800B to 1000B for a half-day of climbing or 1500B for a full day, including instruction and gear. **Spider Monkey** (☎ 0 9728 1608) is a tiny new climbing shop run by Soley, one of the most impressive climbers on Phi Phi. One of the bigger outfits around is **Cat's Climbing Shop** (☎ 0 1787 5101; www.catsclimbingshop.com) in the Tourist Village. Cat's gets good reports for safety and service.

### Courses

Thai-food fans can take cooking courses at the newly renovated **Pum Restaurant & Cooking School** (☎ 0 1521 8904; www.pumthaifoodchain.com; full

### WORKING & DIVING IN KO PHI PHI

The dive sites around Ko Phi Phi are filled with marine life. Leopard sharks and hawksbill turtles are very common; whale sharks sometimes make cameo appearances around Hin Bida (Phi Phi Sub Shark Point) and Ko Bida Nok in February and March.

The top five dives at Ko Phi Phi:

Dive Site	Depth	Features
Hin Bida (Phi Phi Sub Shark Point)	15-30m	Submerged pinnacle with hard coral, turtles, leopard sharks and occasional whale sharks.
Ko Bida Nok	18-22m	Karst massif with gorgonians, leopard sharks, barracuda and occasional whale sharks.
Anemone Reef	17-26m	Hard coral reef with plentiful anemones and clownfish.
Hin Musang (Phuket Shark Point)	19-24m	Submerged pinnacle with a few leopard sharks, grouper, barracuda and moray eels.
Phi Phi Leh	5-18m	The whole island rim is covered in coral and oysters where you can see moray eels and seahorses, and do lots of swim-throughs.

Nearly all the dive shops are Western run. By law, unless you are American – don't ask, it's the result of an obscure treaty – foreigners cannot be full owners of businesses in Thailand, so many companies operate under Western-Thai partnerships. Most hire *faràng* to work as touts and dive instructors. If you're interested in work, stop by one of the shops. Both Island and Viking Divers told us they are usually hiring, and interested travellers should stop in and chat with the manager – there didn't seem to be much worry about having work permits. Dive instructors make around 30% of the price of the course they teach.

### HELPING HANDS ON PHI PHI

Nigel and Christine Clifford chose to honeymoon in Ko Phi Phi instead of Bali because they wanted to support the local economy. Holding hands at a beachside bar on a warm October night in 2006, they talked with a group of travellers about their decision.

'We thought about going to Bali, but then we decided on Ko Phi Phi because we just wanted to do something to help. (A local) rugby team had visited Ko Phi Phi because one of their players was killed in the tsunami, so we had heard about a school here that they were helping...so we came here and tomorrow we're going to go to the school and give them this money. It's not much but it's what we have,' Nigel Clifford says.

The Clifford's story of compassion is only one of thousands. Weeks after the tsunami washed through the heart of Ko Phi Phi Don, the island remained nearly deserted and covered in shoulder-high rubble. Survivors were in shock at the devastation and loss of lives. In those early stages, international aid agency help and government funding were still thin on the ground and much of the island was shut down. Those who stayed – locals, expat residents and tourists alike – decided to take matters into their own hands and began the monumental task of cleaning up Ko Phi Phi Don. Word was sent to locals, volunteers and Thai workers from the mainland, and over the following months more than 2000 international volunteers came to lend Phi Phi residents a hand. People stayed from one day to several months. Regular visitors to the island and first-time tourists decided that it was time to give something back.

**Help International Phi Phi** (www.hiphipi.com) was set up as an umbrella group that coordinated the volunteer and early aid efforts across the island. By July much of the debris had been removed, shops were renovated and opening again for business, and volunteers kept arriving to help out. The **Phi Phi Dive Camp** (www.phiphidivecamp.com) was set up to direct clean-up operations underwater – it organised volunteer divers in a huge effort to remove the debris that had swept into the sea.

Phi Phi is looking good these days, but there is still work to be done. If you're interested in volunteering, contact either of the above organisations or simply show up and ask around.

For updates on reconstruction efforts and how you can help, see www.lonelyplanet.com/tsunami/thailand.

day 2500B) in the Tourist Village. You'll learn to make some of the excellent dishes that are served in its restaurant.

### Tours

As well as the popular long-tail tours to Phi Phi Leh and Ko Mai Phai (Bamboo Island), tour agencies can arrange sunset tours to Monkey Bay and the beach at Wang Long (500B to 650B).

**Adventure Club** (☎ 0 1895 1334; www.phi-phi-adventures.com) is a green organisation that was instrumental in helping clean up Phi Phi's underwater habitat after the tsunami. It runs educational, eco-focused tours and dive trips, including shark-watching snorkelling trips, reef restoration dive trips, cliff jumping and hiking.

### Sleeping

Finding accommodation on this ever-popular island has never been easy, and now with a reduced number of facilities you can expect

serious room shortages during peak holiday times. It's best to book ahead if possible; otherwise be prepared for some legwork once you get here. If you choose to go with the touts meeting incoming boats, be sure to find out where the accommodation is, or you may end up on a remote part of the island – which may be just what you're after.

For accommodation costs see the boxed text on p648. The prices quoted here are for high season they drop between 25% and 50% in the low season.

### AO TON SAI & AO LO DALAM

Business in Ao Ton Sai and the Tourist Village is pretty much normal again. Redevelopment of Ao Lo Dalam has been slower. There are still lovely, long stretches of sand devoid of bungalow operations, although this could change at any moment.

**Rock Backpacker** (☎ 07561 2402; therockbackpacker@hotmail.com; dm 350B, r 800B) Backpackers looking for company will like this place. The funky

restaurant, on a boat dry-docked on the hillside, is conducive to mingling. The 16-bed dorm room is a real rarity on Ko Phi Phi, and digs are clean, if rather cramped. Rock Backpacker is inland, but close to Ao Lo Dalam.

**Tropical Garden Bungalows** (☎ 0 9729 1436; r 800B; 🏠) If you don't mind walking 10 minutes to eat, drink or sunbathe, then you'll find Tropical Garden fabulous value. At the far end of the main path from Ao Ton Sai, it feels pretty isolated in its fragment of flourishing hillside jungle. The great cabins are frontier-style log affairs and there's even a lofty pool, surrounded by flora, halfway up the hill.

**Rim Na Villa** (☎ 0 1894 2668; bungalows 600-1500B; 🏠) Local expats consistently recommend this long-time backpacker favourite to those looking for cheap digs. Be aware though, the bungalows, while clean, are rickety old affairs that are not particularly comfortable – it's best to use them just for sleeping. Insect repellent is a must as the mosquitoes can be vicious.

**Chao Koh Phi Phi Lodge** (☎ 0 7562 0800; www.chaokohphiphi.com; bungalows 1000-2800B; 🏠) There's no way you can miss these concrete duplex bungalows with powder-green paint jobs, gaudy Corinthian columns and oversized A-frame roofs. Interiors are clean and come with TV and personal safes, but are a bit deficient in the charm stakes – the artwork is downright garish. Baths are good though. The tub is separate from the shower. Plus the fan bungalows are a steal for this beach, considering the swimming pool.

**Phi Phi Hotel** (☎ 0 7561 1233; www.phiphi-hotel.com; r 1800-3000B; 🏠) Guests love this hotel that has all the amenities of a posh place and amazing views from your balcony – choose mountain or sea. The place can't be missed – it's a three-storey monolith – but it's tastefully decorated and the rate includes a big breakfast.

## SHELL OUT

Numerous souvenir shops on Ko Phi Phi Don sell seashells, but these are poached from the surrounding marine national parks. Shell species are becoming extinct here faster than you can say 'she sells seashells', so please don't buy souvenirs made from tropical shells.

## TIP: GOING ECOFRIENDLY UNDERWATER

Ko Phi Phi's reef isn't as healthy as it used to be, and divers often contribute to the problem (they bump against, or blatantly touch the coral, which can be fatal for this fragile living organism). If you want to be positive you're not contributing to the reef's demise, opt for a wreck dive. You'll be away from the coral, but still get to explore some pretty cool stuff. There's something adventurous and slightly chilling (but in a good way) about snooping around the hulking body of a wrecked ship.

**Phi Phi Banyan Villa** (☎ 0 7561 1233; www.phiphi-hotel.com; r 2500-3300B; 🏠) There are lots of rooms snaking inland from the beach here, but even so, the place doesn't feel too squishy. The comfy quarters have all the mod cons and some have a balcony overlooking a garden-lined path. There's a seaside restaurant and the hotel's namesake, a large gnarled banyan tree, sits out front.

**PP Viewpoint Resort** (☎ 0 7562 2351; www.phiviewpoint.com; bungalows 1500-8000B; 🏠) At the far end of Ao Lo Dalam, this place rests on a rise with marvellous views of the bay. Wooden bungalows sit high on stilts and share the views. There is a small swimming pool that practically drops into the ocean below and a glass-walled tower with 360-degree views where you can pamper yourself with a Thai massage.

## HAT HIN KHOM

Although the beach here was never Phi Phi's best, the abodes in this area are generally far enough removed (although still easily accessible) from Ao Ton Sai's bustle to get a quiet night's sleep. Stunning Hat Yao is also nearby.

**Andaman Beach Resort** (☎ 0 7562 1427; www.andamanbeachresort.com; bungalows 1450-2550B; 🏠) A U-shape of neat, tiled huts sits around a large spartan lawn. The best asset is the small amoeba-shaped pool with great Phi Phi Leh views. The fan bungalows are a good deal – large, airy and modern with oscillating fans that keep the room relatively cool (even if they are rather loud). The air-con digs come with TV, fridge and a teal colour scheme. The baths are a bit grimy, but the bungalows themselves

are roomy. Mattresses are just soft enough and breakfast is included. Staff can be surly.

**Arayaburi Boutique Resort** (☎ 0 7628 1360; www.phiphibayview.com; bungalows 2700-4300B; 🏠) This, formerly Bay View Resort, recently swallowed a neighbouring resort and now offers a cornucopia of huts straddling the lush hill and rocky headland of the coast. Most of the bungalows are modern in design, come stacked with amenities and have excellent ocean views from their front decks. Breakfast is included.

**Phi Phi Don Chukit Resort** (☎ 0 7561 8126; ppdonchukit@yahoo.com; bungalows 2000-5000B; 🏠) One Australian couple described Don Chukit's most expensive bungalows as 'the equivalent of staying in a five-star motel room.' The huts are roomy, face the water and have marble floors. The cheapest bungalows (even those with ocean views) are less memorable. Although these have nice porches, it's cramped and right on a noisy street. The huts themselves are tiny with too-soft mattresses. Breakfast is included.

## HAT YAO

Hat Yao (also known as Long Beach) takes effort to reach. You'll either have to take a boat (80B) or hike 45 minutes from Ao Ton Sai village. Do so and you'll be rewarded with a stunning stretch of white sand seashore and perfect swimming water. Budget travellers will appreciate some of Phi Phi's best cheap accommodation (although you will be limited when it comes to nightlife, as it's a long way to the nearest bar).

**Phi Phi Long Beach** (☎ 0 1510 6541; bungalows 300-600B; 🏠) The wooden bungalows at Phi Phi Long Beach are looking a little rundown, but it's certainly cheap and has a bit of a vibe, with an internet café, restaurant and dive school (free accommodation if you take its dive course). If you'd rather go for a hike, ask staff for walking directions to beautiful and secluded Ao Lo Mu Di.

## AO LO BAKAO

Ao Lo Bakao is a beautiful and secluded beach on Phi Phi's remote northeastern shore. The palm-backed sand is ringed by dramatic hills and home to just one resort. Ao Lo Bakao can only be reached by boat. Pee Pee Island Village arranges transfers for guests. If you want to visit for the day, charter a long-tail taxi in Ao Ton Sai. Expect to pay around 500B (one way). Try to negotiate a return rate.

**Pee Pee Island Village** (☎ Phuket 0 7621 5014, Bangkok 0 2276 6056; www.ppisland.com; bungalows from 5300B; 🏠) This place really is a village unto itself: its whopping 104 bungalows take up much of the beachfront with only a few lonely palms swaying between them. This is the full-service deal with all the trimmings – it's particularly popular with the Japanese jet set.

## HAT LAEM THONG

At the northern end of Ko Nai, the beach here is long and pretty with several showy resorts. There's also a small *chao leh* (sea gypsy) settlement of corrugated metal shacks at the end of the beach. A long-tail charter from Ao Ton Sai costs 600B. The following resorts can arrange transfers.

**Phi Phi Natural Resort** (☎ 0 7561 3010, in Bangkok 0 2982 7575; www.phiphinatural.com; bungalows 1900-5850B; 🏠) At the northern end of the beach, this is a laid-back resort with spacious grounds, a pool and shipshape wooden bungalows with either sea or mountain views. Be sure to look up at the peaked wooden roof of the huge restaurant complex; it provides a habitat for a range of wild birds. The resort runs daily boats to Phuket and Krabi in the high season.

**Holiday Inn Phi Phi Island** (☎ 0 7521 1334; www.phiphi-pambeach.com; bungalows 5500-8000B; 🏠) At the southernmost point of the beach, this tastefully decorated resort has large Thai/Malay-style bungalows on 2m-high stilts spread over spacious, landscaped grounds with lots of coconut palms. Bungalows come with neat little details, such as pots of fresh water in which to clean your feet before entering. On the grounds are tennis courts, a spa, dive centre, restaurant and hilltop bar.

**Zeavola** (☎ 0 7562 7024; www.zeavola.com; bungalows 16,000-37,000B; 🏠) If you have money to burn, let this be your pyre. Gorgeous teak bungalow mansions incorporate traditional Thai style with simple, sleek modern design. Each comes with glass walls on three sides (with remote-controlled bamboo shutters for privacy), beautiful 1940s fixtures and antique furniture, a patio and impeccable service. Some villas have a private pool. There's a 25% discount if you book online. This place was formerly known as Phi Phi Coral Resort.

## Eating

Most of the resorts, hotels and bungalows around Phi Phi have attached restaurants. One of the cheapest eating options is at the

Thai pancake stalls scattered about Ao Ton Sai. The thin crepe-style pancakes (20B) are served savoury or sweet, and stuffed with everything from ham and cheese to banana and honey.

**Pee Pee Bakery** (dishes 40-150; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) It's best at breakfast, when you'll be lucky to find an open table at which to sip your espresso. Also on tap are pizza, steak and Thai food. The atmosphere is modern and movies are shown on the tube. The bakery has two branches; one is on the main walkway east of the piers, while the other is further inland near PP Pavilion Resort.

**007 Restaurant & Bar** (dishes 100-200B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Owned by a talkative Scot named James, 007 is the unique choice on the island. It features ultramodern chrome tables, red cushion booths and, of course, all the Bond paraphernalia you could want. There's a big selection of beer (including British favourites) on tap, and solid food cooked in a very clean kitchen. Pies, salads, fish-and-chips and baked potatoes are on the menu. Sport is shown on the TV by day; the latest blockbusters are played at night. James has plans to open an Indian restaurant, called the Hot Spot, on the ground floor.

**Hippies** (☎ 0 1970 5483; dishes 80-250B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Rebuilt after the tsunami, Hippies is once again a laid-back beachfront hang-out spot serving food from around the globe. It offers tables on the beach or in its thatched restaurant. Hippies serves spicy and non-spicy Thai dishes, along with lots of brekkies, Israeli food, pizza and pasta. The Thai choices are better than the Western offerings. Skip the pizza.

**Chao Koh** (☎ 075 601 083; dishes 80-300B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Right on the beach, this is an open-air seafood place that displays its freshly caught critters on ice. It's popular and offers well-priced and tasty food. A self-service salad bar is included with most entrées.

**[Ciao Bella** (dishes 150-300B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Italian-run Ciao Bella is our favourite place to eat on Ko Phi Phi. It's a long-time expat and traveller fave that recently reopened after extensive post-tsunami renovations. The pizza, pasta and seafood dishes are authentic and as mouth-watering as the super romantic location by the sea. At night, twinkling candles and stars provide the atmosphere for alfresco dining, while lapping waves provides the soundtrack. Ciao Bella is in Ao Lo Dalam.

**HC Anderson** (☎ 0 1894 5287; dishes 90-200B, steaks 320-280B; ☎ lunch & dinner) A very reliable Scandinavian restaurant serving delicious imported New Zealand steaks, among other creative dishes. It's on the most easterly path from Ao Ton Sai to Ao Lo Dalam.

### Drinking & Entertainment

Most of Phi Phi's old-school watering holes have reopened and nightlife on the island is raging.

If you need distraction with your drink 007 Restaurant & Bar shows nightly movies; see Eating, left.

**Carpe Diem** (☎ 048 401 219; Hat Hin Khom) Sit on pillows in the upstairs lounge and watch the sun go down (locals say this is the best spot on the island for sundowners). Carpe Diem rocks well into the night with fire shows, dance parties and live music on the beach. It's very popular, and an easy spot for mingling if you're travelling alone.

**Reggae Bar** (Tourist Village; ☎ 10pm-late) The most popular nightspot on the island recently expanded. It has three floors of Rasta colours, drinking competitions, a *muay thai* boxing ring with regular show bouts (where you can fight for free booze) and the occasional *kàthoey* (ladyboy) cabaret – you either love it or hate it.

**Apache Bar** (Ao Ton Sai) With a strange Native American theme (think Indian from the *Village People*) lit by fluorescent lights, this pre-and-post tsunami favourite is definitely campy. Happy hour is from 4pm to 10pm. It fills up quickly and blasts loud music to all hours (to the annoyance of people sleeping nearby).

**Carlitos** (☎ 0 9927 3772; Ao Ton Sai) This fairy-lit beachside bar, which puts on impressive fire shows, attracts *faràng* seeking beers and a chair in the sand. It gets rowdy and packs in major crowds on dance-party nights. We like how Carlitos does its bit for the environment by recycling.

**Hippies** (☎ 0 1970 5483; Hat Hin Khom) Hippies is a good place to end the evening. There are candle-lit tables on the beach and chill-out tunes on the sound system. Moon parties are thrown throughout the month.

### Getting There & Away

Ko Phi Phi can be reached from Krabi, Phuket, Ao Nang and Ko Lanta. Most boats moor at Ao Ton Sai, though a few from Phuket use the

isolated northern pier at Laem Thong. The Phuket and Krabi boats operate year-round while the Ko Lanta and Ao Nang boats only run in the October to April high season.

Boats depart from Krabi for Ko Phi Phi at 9.30am, 10.30am and 2.30pm (500B, 1½ hours). From Phuket, boats leave at 8.30am, 1.30pm and 2.30pm, and return from Ko Phi Phi at 9am, 2.30pm and 3pm (550B to 650B, 1¼ to two hours). To Ko Lanta, boats leave Phi Phi at 11.30am and 2pm, and return from Ko Lanta at 8am and 1pm (300B, 1½ hours). A boat departs from the Ko Phi Phi Marine National Park headquarters jetty at 9am, returning from Ko Phi Phi (via Railay) at 3.30pm (550B, two hours). Prices may drop by 50B in the low season.

### Getting Around

There are no roads on Phi Phi Don so transport is mostly by foot. If you want to visit a remote beach, long-tails can be chartered at Ao Ton Sai (for prices see the relevant beach in the Sleeping section). Speedboats can be chartered at a cost of 4000B to 6500B for six hours. Chartering a long-tail boat costs 900B for three hours or 1800B for the whole day.

### KO PHI PHI LEH

เกาะพีพีเล็ก

Rugged Ko Phi Phi Leh is the smaller of the two islands and protected on all sides by soaring cliffs. The island's translucent water and gorgeous coral reefs teeming with marine life make snorkelling here phenomenal. Two gorgeous lagoons lie in wait in the island's interior – **Pilah** on the eastern coast and **Ao Maya** on the western coast. Ao Maya became famous in 1999 after producers used it as the setting for *The Beach*, based on the popular novel by Alex Garland. It remains wildly popular to this day.

At the northeastern tip of the island, **Viking Cave** (Tham Phaya Naak; admission 20B) is a major collection point for swiftlet nests. Bamboo scaffolding reaches its way to the roof of the cave as nimble collectors scamper up to gather the nests built high up the cliffs. Before ascending the scaffolds, the collectors pray and make offerings of tobacco, incense and liquor to the cavern spirits. This cave gets its misleading moniker from the 400-year-old graffiti made by crews of passing Chinese fishing junks.

There are no places to stay at on Phi Phi Leh and most people come here on one of the

ludicrously popular day trips out of Phi Phi Don. Tours last about half a day and include snorkelling stops at various points around the island, with detours to Viking Cave and Ao Maya. Long-tail trips cost 400 to 650B depending on season and demand; by motorboat you'll pay around 2000B.

### KO JAM (KO PU) & KO SI BOYA

เกาะจำ(ปู)/เกาะศรีบอยา

If you're yearning to escape the crowds, Ko Jam (also called Ko Pu) and its neighbour Ko Si Boya might just be your tonic. Both offer kicked-back, small-island ambience and plenty of solitude. There's not much to do other than swim and sunbathe, and the focus here is on relaxation. If you get tired of reading, wander around the small fishing villages. Most locals are Muslim, so please respect their customs – don't go topless here.

Public transport to Ko Jam and Ko Si Boya is very limited in the low season so most resorts close down between May and November.

### Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation on Ko Jam is spread out along the beaches at the southern end of the island. Some places rent out sea kayaks and most have a restaurant on the grounds. Ko Si Boya has one place to stay, Siboya Bungalows, on the western coast just south of the main village, Ban Lang Ko.

**Siboya Bungalows** (☎ 0 7561 8026; www.siboyabungalows.com; bungalows 150-300B, occasional private houses 400-1200B) The well-designed huts sit on a lush lawn and are covered in heaps of shade by expansive palm and rubber trees. Verandas and hammocks come as standard, and there are also a couple of self-contained houses that are ideal for long-term rentals.

**Woodland Lodge** (☎ 0 1893 5330; www.woodland-koh-jum.tk; bungalows 300-800B) The bamboo huts sit on shaded grounds and come with shiny, polished wood verandas and mosquito netting. The friendly owners organise boat-tours and fishing trips and run a cooking course in the high season. The lodge has larger family bungalows priced from 400B to 1300B and it stays open year round. At night oil lamps light the property.

**Joy Bungalow** (☎ 0 1464 6153; www.andaman-island-hopping.com/hotels/joybungalow.htm; bungalows 1000-2000B) On the southwestern coast of Ko Jam, Joy has great thatch-and-wood stilt bungalows on grassy, palm-shaded grounds. The beach

restaurant here has a good vibe but the popularity of this place has become a turnoff for some (prices have also skyrocketed in the last few years).

### Getting There & Away

From October to May, boats between Krabi and Ko Lanta can drop you at Ko Jam, but you'll pay full fare (350B, one hour). There are also small boats to Ko Jam and Ko Si Boya a few times a day from Ban Laem Kruat, a village about 30km from Krabi, at the end of Rte 4036, off Hwy 4. The cost is 60B to Ko Si Boya and 70B to Ban Ko Jam.

### KO LANTA

เกาะลันตา

pop 20,000

A long-time sweetheart with the intrepid backpacking crowd, Ko Lanta is steadily changing, with upmarket resorts replacing the cheap bungalows. The carefree, hippiesque backpacker vibe still prevails, for now, although the laid-back atmosphere has been kicked up a notch, and you'll find plenty of bars blaring the latest hits late into the night, along with a string of *faràng* restaurants showing the newest blockbusters. Travellers pour in daily, ferried from Krabi by a convoy of air-con minivans, or boats in the high season.

Beaches on Lanta's western shores are pleasantly soft, flat and sunny, and in isolated spots there's still some of that 'get away from it all' atmosphere that started attracting travellers in the first place. In recent years the island has been playing catch-up in the development stakes and now has loads of accommodation for pockets of all depths. However, Ko Lanta remains a friendly, relaxing place to stay. The 20,000 residents are mixed descendants of Muslim Malay and seafaring *chao leh*.

Ko Lanta is an *amphoe* (district) within Krabi Province that consists of 52 islands, of which 12 are inhabited. The geography here is typified by stretches of mangrove interrupted by coral-rimmed beaches, rugged hills and huge umbrella trees. Other than tourism, the main livelihood for the local folk includes the cultivation of rubber, cashews and bananas, along with a little fishing. When travellers refer to Ko Lanta, they are referring to Ko Lanta Yai. There's also a Ko Lanta Noi – just off Yai's northeastern tip – but it holds little interest for travellers, as it's ringed with mangroves rather than beaches.

During the wet season rain drenches Ko Lanta and the tide washes right up to the front of the resorts, bringing plenty of driftwood and rubbish with it. Only a few resorts remain open during this time and transport connections get thin on the ground.

### Orientation & Information

Ban Sala Dan, a dusty two-street town at the northern tip of the island, is Ko Lanta's largest settlement with restaurants, minimarts, internet cafés, souvenir stores, travel agencies, dive shops, motorcycle rentals and even a 7-Eleven. There's a petrol station just outside town. There is one ATM at the bank and another at the 7-Eleven. However, it's still a good idea to bring money with you to the island. There are more restaurants and internet cafés along the island's main road.

### Sights

Although Ko Lanta is primarily a beach destination, there are some interesting sights to explore inland if you tire of the sea and sand.

### KO LANTA MARINE NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติเกาะลันตา

Established in 1990, this **marine national park** (adult/child 200/100B) protects 15 islands in the Ko Lanta group, including the southern tip of Ko Lanta Yai. However, the park is increasingly threatened by the runaway development on the western coast of Ko Lanta Yai. The other islands in the group have fared slightly better – **Ko Rok Nai** is still very beautiful, with a crescent-shaped bay backed by cliffs, fine coral reefs and a sparkling white-sand beach. Camping is permitted on Ko Rok Nok and nearby **Ko Ha**, with permission from the national park headquarters. On the eastern side of Ko Lanta Yai, **Ko Talabeng** has some dramatic limestone caves that you can visit on sea-kayaking tours. The national park fee applies if you visit any of these islands.

The **national park headquarters** is at Laem Tanod, on the southern tip of Ko Lanta Yai, reached by a steep and corrugated 7km dirt track from Ao Nui. There are some basic hiking trails and a **scenic lighthouse**, and you can hire long-tails here for island tours during the low season.

### BAN KO LANTA

Halfway down the eastern coast, **Ban Ko Lanta** (Lanta Old Town) was the island's original port and commercial centre, and provided

a safe harbour for Arabic and Chinese trading vessels sailing between the larger ports of Phuket, Penang and Singapore. Some of the gracious and well-kept wooden stilt houses and shopfronts here are over 100 years old and are a pleasure to stroll through. A few pier restaurants offer up fresh catches of the day and have prime views over the sea.

A few kilometres past the hospital lies the **Gypsy House**, a Bohemian driftwood creation replete with ponds and traditional music, where artisans sell handicrafts and jewellery. There are a few pamphlets here on the *chao leh* of Ko Lanta, but it's mainly just a pleasant waterside chill-out space.

### THAM KHAO MAIKAE0

ถ้ำเขาไม้แก้ว

Monsoon rains pounding away at limestone cracks and crevices for millions of years created this complex of forest caverns and tunnels. There are chambers as large as cathedrals, dripping with stalactites and stalagmites, and tiny passages that you have to squeeze through on hands and knees. There's even a subterranean pool you can take a chilly swim in. Sensible shoes are a must and total coverage in mud is almost guaranteed.

Tham Khao Maikae0 is reached via a guided trek through the jungle. A local family offers guided treks to the caves (with torches) for around 200B. The best way to get here is by rented motorcycle, or most resorts can arrange transport.

Close by, but reached by a separate track from the dirt road leading to the marine national park headquarters, **Tham Seu** (Tiger Cave) also has interesting tunnels to explore; elephant treks run up here from Hat Nui.

### Activities

Horse riding, sea kayaking and deep-sea fishing can be arranged through resort tour desks or travel agencies in Ban Sala Dan.

### DIVING & SNORKELLING

Several dive shops run two-dive trips to local sights for 2800B, while PADI Open Water courses cost 12,500B. The best diving is around Ko Phi Phi and the undersea pinnacles at **Hin Muang** and **Hin Daeng**, about 45 minutes from Ban Sala Dan by speedboat. These world-class dive sites have lone coral outcrops in the middle of the sea and act as important feeding stations for large pelagic fish such as

sharks, tuna and occasionally whale sharks and manta rays. Dive trips out here cost 3300B for two dives. The sites around **Ko Ha** have consistently good diving conditions, depths of 18m to 34m, plenty of marine life and a cave known as 'the Cathedral'. Reliable dive companies include **Laguna Fun Divers** (☎ 0 9291 4311; www.lagunafundivers.com) and the Scandinavian-run **Lanta Diver** (☎ 0 7568 4208; www.lantadiver.com; Ban Sala Dan). November to April is the best season for diving at Ko Lanta; the rest of the year most dive shops close down.

Numerous tour agencies along the strip can organise snorkelling trips out to Ko Rok Nok, Ko Phi Phi and other nearby islands. **Petpailin Co** (☎ 0 7568 4428), near the passenger jetty at Ban Sala Dan, offers day trips to Ko Phi Phi for 700B and four-island tours to Ko Muk, Ko Kradan, Ko Ngai and Ko Cheuk in Hat Chao Mai National Park for 800B.

### Courses

**Time for Lime** (☎ 0 7568 4590; www.timeforlime.net), on Hat Khlong Dao, has a huge, professional kitchen with plenty of room to run amok. It offers cooking courses with a slightly more exciting selection of dishes than most cookery schools in Thailand; half-day courses cost from 1400B to 1800B.

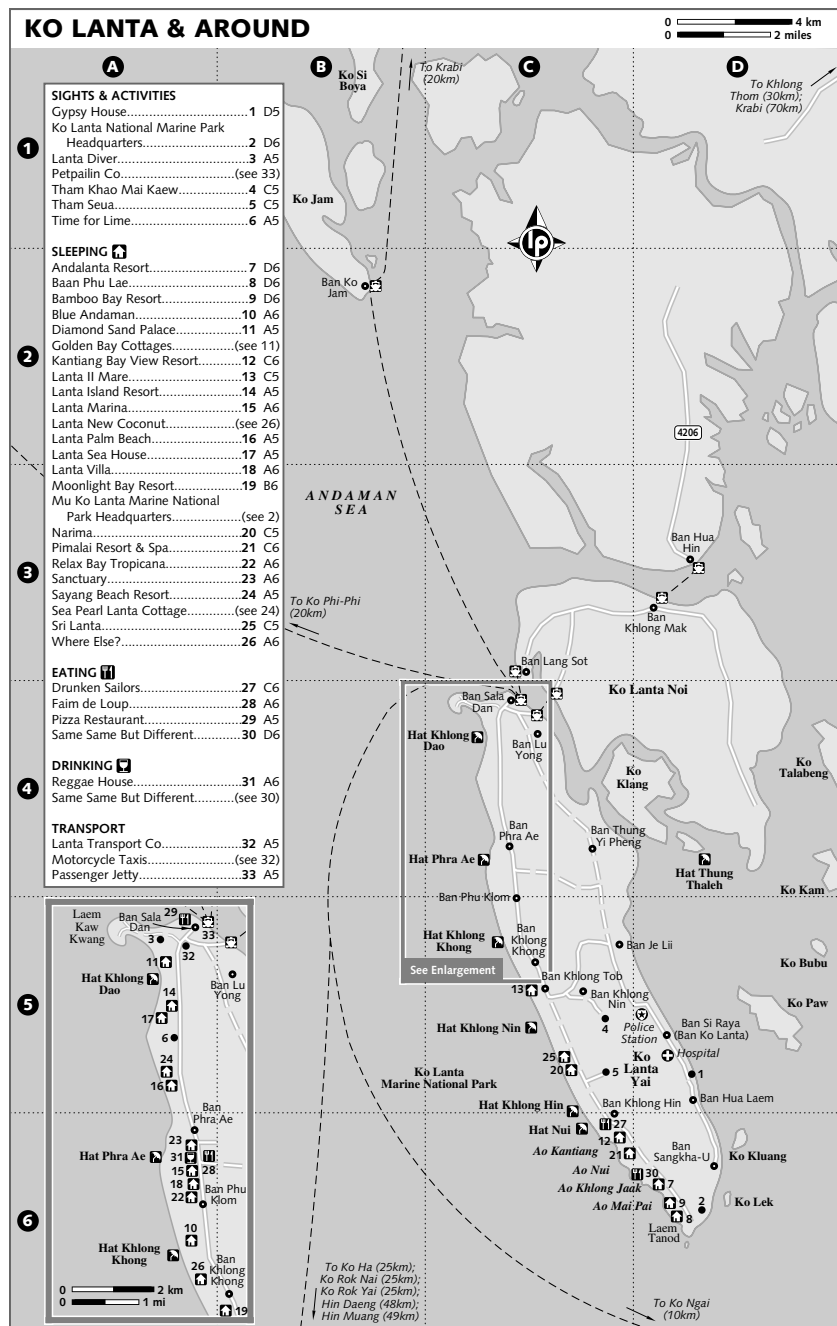
### Sleeping

Ko Lanta has many long stretches of good-looking beach packed with accommodation. However, because of the island's size, you don't get the feeling of 'peak hour' on the sand – even at busy times. Only the west coast is developed for tourism and, while Hat Khlong Dao can feel like package-tour mania, the further south you go the less crowded things get. Many resorts close during the May to October low season; those which stay open discount rooms by as much as 50%. Most places have restaurants and tour-booking facilities.

### HAT KHLONG DAO

With perfect white sand stretching for over 2km, it's no wonder this was one of the first beaches to attract tourists and developers. There are numerous small lanes snaking from the main road towards the beach, all chock-a-block with bungalows offering similar facilities and charging midrange prices. The beach here is great for swimming.

**Southern Lanta Resort** (☎ 0 7568 4174-7; www.southernlanta.com; bungalows incl breakfast 1600-2200B; ☎ ☎ )



Loads of shade in the tropical garden and a good-sized beachfront. The pool has a water-slide and the bungalows come with TVs, hot showers and minibars. The resort is family friendly and you can organise horse riding from here for 600B per hour.

**Golden Bay Cottages** (☎ 0 7568 4161; www.krabidir.com/goldenbaycottage; bungalows 1200-2700B; 🏠 🚗 🚲) One of the better options on this beach. The trim little cottages surround a leafy courtyard and come in various sizes. The air-con bungalows on the beach are nicest and offer the best bang for your baht. Skip the overpriced fan bungalows. Breakfast is included.

The following places are recommended.

**Diamond Sand Palace** (☎ 0 7568 4135; bungalows 700-1000B; 🏠 🚗 🚲) Oct-Apr; 🏠 🚲)

**Lanta Villa** (☎ 0 7568 4129; www.lantavillaresort.com; bungalows 1500-1800B; 🏠 🚗 🚲)

**Lanta Sea House** (☎ 0 7568 4073/4; www.lanta.de/sea; bungalows 2000-3800B; 🏠 🚗 🚲)

**Lanta Island Resort** (☎ 0 7568 4124-7; www.lanta.islandresort.com; bungalows 400-2000B; 🏠 🚗 🚲)

#### HAT PHRA AE

The beach at Hat Phra Ae is only mediocre, but the ambience is lively. A large travellers' village has set up camp and there are loads of *farang*-oriented restaurants, beach-bars, internet cafés and tour offices.

**Sanctuary** (☎ 0 1891 3055; bungalows 400-800B) A delightful place to stay. There are artistically designed wood-and-thatch bungalows with lots of grass and a hippyish atmosphere that's low-key and friendly. The restaurant offers Indian and vegetarian eats among the Thai usuals. The resort holds yoga classes and has a small art gallery displaying local talent.

**Sea Pearl Lanta Cottage** (☎ 0 1737 0159; seapearl.lanta@hotmail.com; bungalows 250-900B) Despite facing a sandy car park, Sea Pearl manages to remain atmospheric with decent thatch-and-bamboo bungalows under shady palms. A cool restaurant sits by the beach.

**Lanta Marina** (☎ 0 1677 4522; lantamarina@hotmail.com; bungalows 600-1000B; 🏠 🚗 🚲) Oct-Apr) For something different check out these giant bungalows, which almost look like towering hay bales. It has a tribal feel: breezy sleeping options have bamboo crossbars for windows and are linked by an elevated boardwalk.

**Relax Bay Tropicana** (☎ 0 7568 4194; www.relaxbay.com; bungalows 900-1600B; 🏠 🚗 🚲) Oct-Apr; 🏠 🚲) This French-run place is spread out over a tree-covered headland, by a small beach. It's pretty

funky and has great wooden bungalows on stilts with large decks overlooking the bay, and a huge bar and restaurant.

Also recommended:

**Sayang Beach Resort** (☎ 0 7568 4156; bungalows 500-1000B; 🏠 🚗 🚲) Oct-Apr; 🏠 🚲)

**Lanta Palm Beach** (☎ 0 1606 5433; bungalows 700-1500B; 🏠 🚗 🚲) Oct-Apr; 🏠 🚲)

#### HAT KHLONG KHONG

Only the resorts at the northern end of this rather rocky beach are worth looking at.

**Lanta New Coconut** (☎ 0 1537 7590; bungalows 250B) The coconut has a small farm of simple huts surrounded by swaying palms. It's not much, but it's darn cheap.

**Blue Andaman** (☎ 0 1719 4951; bungalows 500-1000B; 🏠 🚗 🚲) Oct-Apr; 🏠 🚲) Blue Andaman's friendly staff put lots of effort into making your stay memorable. The brick bungalows are chintzy but comfortable. They all feature balconies and are set around a well-tended garden.

**Where Else?** (☎ 0 1536 4870; www.whereelse-lanta.com; bungalows 500-1500B) Make your way here for Ko Lanta's little slice of Bohemia. The bungalows may be a bit shaky but there is great mojo here and the place swarms with backpackers. The restaurant is a growing piece of art in itself, but the bamboo and coconut knick-knacks are threatening to take over. The pricier bungalows are all unique, multilevel abodes sleeping up to four people.

**Moonlight Bay Resort** (☎ 0 7568 4401; www.mlb-resort.com; bungalows 3000-6900B; 🏠 🚗 🚲) A Scandinavian resort that plays up the eco-resort angle with natural materials, simple Nordic design and gorgeous bungalows either along a lush river, facing verdant greenery, or right on the beach. It's on a private rocky cove where most of the flora is labelled for your edification.

#### HAT KHLONG NIN

Halfway down the island the tarmac road turns inland towards Ban Khlong Nin and is replaced by a corrugated dirt track that continues south along the coast to the marine national park headquarters at Laem Tanod. The first beach here is lovely Hat Khlong Nin, which gets progressively nicer the further south you travel.

**Lanta II Mare** (☎ 0 1540 7257; www.lantariversand.com; bungalows 1200-1900B, f 4500B; 🏠 🚗 🚲) The bungalows are fairly deluxe deals with pretty verandas surrounded by garden greenery. The resort has an intimate feel that's often missing

from larger places. Lanta II sits on one of Hat Khlong Nin's best swimming beaches.

**Sri Lanta** (☎ 0 7569 7288; www.srilanta.com; villas 3200-5500B; 🍷 🍴 🚶) On the southern (and best) bit of the beach, this sophisticated, upmarket resort consists of roomy wooden villas in a hillside garden, set back from the shore. There's a very stylish beachside area with a restaurant and pool. Head to the shaded private pavilions for a traditional Thai massage or to stretch them bones at the daily yoga class. Breakfast is included.

#### HAT NUJ

There are several small beaches around here with upmarket places to stay.

**Narima** (☎ 0 7560 7700; www.narima-lanta.com; bungalows 1800-2900B; 🍷 🍴 🚶) This is an excellent, eco-sensitive resort run by an exceptionally friendly woman. The large huts are made from natural materials and feature funky bamboo furniture. The wooden restaurant is lit by lanterns and has some massive gnarled wood furniture. There's also a kiddie pool and a Jacuzzi.

#### AO KANTIANG

This bay's tip-top beach has a good sprinkling of sand, and several nearby tour offices provide internet access and rent out motorcycles.

**Kantiang Bay View Resort** (☎ 0 1787 5192; bungalows 400-1500B; 🍷 🍴 🚶) Sharing the bay's fantastic beach, this resort has tidy, modern, concrete air-con bungalows with tiled roofs and a stand of old-fashioned wooden bungalows with bathrooms and fans. There's a beachside restaurant and bar, and lots of tours can be arranged. It's popular even in the low season.

**Pimalai Resort & Spa** (☎ 0 7560 7999; www.pimalai.com; r 11,500-15,500B, ste 22,000-31,000B; 🍷 🍴 🚶) The sprawling, manicured gardens are interspersed with splendid water features and fountains. The Thai villas all have slick, modern Thai furnishings and excellent views of the beautiful bay below. There are several pools and restaurants on the grounds, a spa and small library.

#### AO KHLONG JAAK

There's a splendid beach here at Ao Khlong Jaak and the namesake waterfall is inland along Khlong Jaak.

**Andalanta Resort** (☎ 0 1836 4877; www.andalanta.com; bungalows 2200-4500B; 🍷 🍴 🚶) You'll find comfortable and modern air-con bungalows

(some with loft) and some simple fan-cooled ones made of bamboo and wood, which face the sea. The garden is a delight, there's an alluring restaurant and the waterfall is a 30- to 40-minute walk away; this resort was formerly Waterfall Bay Resort. Call ahead and the staff will pick you up at Ban Sala Dan.

#### AO MAI PAI

There are only three resorts on this lovely isolated beach.

**Bamboo Bay Resort** (☎ 0 7561 8240; www.bamboo-bay.net; bungalows 700-1000B) Clinging to the hillside above Ao Mai Pai beach, this place has a variety of brick and concrete bungalows on stilts and a fine restaurant down by the beach. The best bungalows come with balconies and grand sea views – it's worth paying the extra baht to stay in one.

**Baan Phu Lae** (☎ 0 1201 1704; www.baanphulae.co.th; bungalows 400-1500B; 🍷 🍴) The restaurant and many of the bungalows sit right on a private beach and have perfect sunset views. The thatch bungalows come with bamboo-framed beds and rustic porches made for slinging up a hammock. You can rent mountain bikes here.

#### LAEM TANOD

The road leading to the marine national park headquarters fords the *khlong* (canal), which can get quite deep in the wet season. Be careful if you're driving.

**Mu Ko Lanta Marine National Park Headquarters** (☎ Bangkok 0 2561 4292; camping with own tent per person 40B, camping with tent hire 200-300B) The secluded grounds of the national park headquarters are a serene place to set up camp – the sound of the ocean lapping up the rocks will lull you to sleep. The flat camping areas are shaded and sit in the wilds of the tropical jungle. There are toilets and running water, but you should bring your own food. You can also get permission for camping on Ko Rok Nok or Ko Ha here. National park entry fees apply.

#### Eating

The best places to eat are the seafood restaurants along the little lane at the northern end of Ban Sala Dan. With tables on verandas over the water, they offer fresh seafood sold by weight (which includes cooking costs). Expect to pay 600B per kilo for prawns and 300B per kilo for squid, fish and crabs. The best option is Rimnum Seafood, but come early if you want to get a table.

Most restaurants close in the low season.

**Drunken Sailors** (☎ 0 7011 0683; mains 40-90B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Run by two friendly sisters, this hip, ultra-relaxed, octagonal pad is decked out with beanbags. It serves basic Thai and Western dishes and yummy, refreshing drinks like the banana-choc frappé (40B) – Starbucks, eat your heart out.

**Faim de Loup** (Hat Phra Ae; mains 50-100B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This little French bistro serves real filtered coffee and baguette sandwiches, as well as Thai food.

**Same Same But Different** (☎ 0 1787 8670; Ao Khlong Jaak; mains 50-120B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) In a perfect seaside setting, with tables right on the sand, you can sample some of the tastiest Thai cuisine on the island. Driftwood furniture and pieces of art pop up all over the place and the ambience is hard to beat.

**Pizza Restaurant** (Ban Sala Dan; pizzas from 140B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) At the western end of the alley, this friendly place serves convincing pizzas and has quirky knick-knacks on the walls. There's also a bar and pool table.

#### Drinking & Entertainment

During the high season Ko Lanta has a positively buzzing nightlife, but this fizzles out almost completely during low season when everything shuts down.

**Reggae House** (Hat Phra Ae) A perennial favourite, Reggae House is one of dozens of beach-bars along the strip, particularly around Hat Phra Ae, pumping out boisterous reggae and dance anthems at peak times.

**Same Same But Different** (☎ 0 1787 8670) The lantern-lit open-air pavilions and chilled music make this a star choice if you are looking for a quiet evening of drinks and conversation.

#### Getting There & Away

Most people come to Ko Lanta by boat or air-con minivan. If you're coming under your own steam, you'll need to use the vehicle ferries between Ban Hua Hin and Ban Khlong Mak (Ko Lanta Noi) and on to Ko Lanta Yai. These run frequently between 7am and 8pm daily (motorcycle and driver 10B; car/4WD and driver 50/100B).

#### BOAT

There are two piers at Ban Sala Dan. The passenger jetty is about 300m from the main strip of shops; vehicle ferries leave from a second jetty that's several kilometres further east.

Passenger boats between Krabi's Khlong Chilat passenger pier and Ko Lanta run from September through May and take 1½ hours. Boats depart from Ko Lanta at 8am and 1pm (350B). In the reverse direction boats leave at 10.30am and 1.30pm. These boats will also stop at Ko Jam (for the full 350B fare).

Boats between Ko Lanta and Ko Phi Phi run as long as there are enough passengers, which means that services peter out in the low season. Boats usually leave Ko Lanta at 8am and 1pm (400B, 1½ hours); in the opposite direction boats leave Ko Phi Phi at 11.30am and 2pm.

There's also a high-season boat to Ko Ngai (400B, two hours), in Trang Province, that leaves Ban Sala Dan at 8.30am and returns from Ko Ngai at 3pm.

#### MINIVAN

This is the main way of getting to/from Ko Lanta: vans run year-round. **Lanta Transport Co** (☎ 0 7568 4121) and others have daily minivans to Krabi between 7am and 8am (250B, 1½ hours). Check for afternoon services at 1pm and 3.30pm. From Krabi vans depart at 9am, 11am, 1pm and 4pm. **KK Tour & Travel** (☎ Trang 0 7521 1198) has several daily air-con vans between Trang and Ko Lanta (220B, two hours).

#### Getting Around

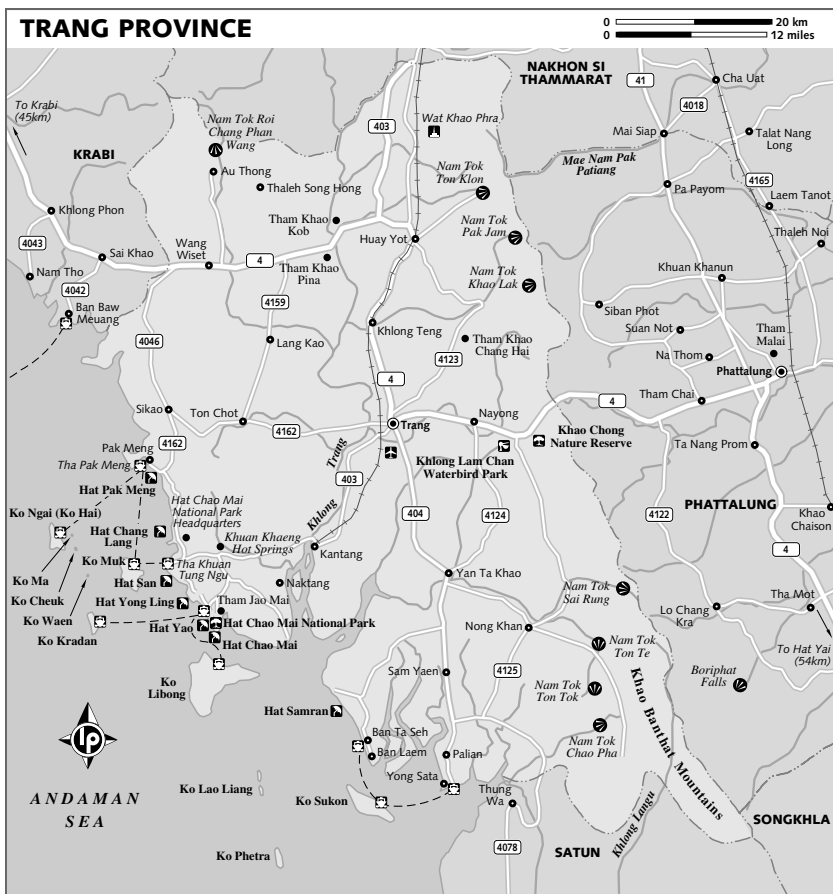
Most resorts send vehicles to meet the ferries and you'll get a free ride to your resort. In the opposite direction expect to pay 50B to 100B. Alternatively you can take a motorcycle taxi from opposite the 7-Eleven in Ban Sala Dan; fares vary from 50B to 150B depending on distance.

Motorcycles can be rented at most resorts, restaurants, shops, farms, private houses... you name it. Unfortunately very few of these places provide helmets and none provide insurance, so take extra care on the bumpy roads. The going rate is 250B per day.

Lanta Transport Co is one of several places renting out small 4WDs for around 2000B per day, including insurance.

## TRANG PROVINCE

Trang has mellow islands that offer good-value accommodation and the chance to escape the peak-season crowds. You're more likely to see tall rubber plantations here than rows of vendors selling the same T-shirts.



**TRANG**

ตรัง  
pop 77,200

Chances are you'll have to come through Trang at least once if venturing to or from the islands. The sprawling metropolis doesn't have much in the way of must-see attractions, it's more of a transport hub and important trading centre for fish (locally caught), palm oils and rubber. There are, however, lots of travel agencies in town dedicated to helping you hop to your island of choice as fast as possible. Many of the Trang island resorts maintain satellite offices here that can assist with bookings and transfers to their island. Trang often wins awards for being the 'Cleanest City in Thailand' and is also popular for Thais to tie

the knot before heading off to honeymoon in nearby Hat Chao Mai National Park.

**Information BOOKSHOPS**

**Ani's** (☎ 0 1397 4574; 285 Th Ratchadamnoen; 🕒 9am-10pm) Stock up on English and European language titles here.

**INTERNET ACCESS**

There are internet cafés on Th Praram IV. **Tosit** (285 Th Visetkul; per hr 20B) Fast computers, knowledgeable staff and a café serving real coffee.

**POST**

**Post office** (cnr Th Praram VI & Th Kantang) Also sells CAT cards for international phone calls.

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

**TAT office** (☎ 0 7521 5867; tattrang@tat.or.th; Th Ruenrom) New tourist office located near the night market.

**TRAVEL AGENCIES**

As well as resort offices, Trang has some good travel agencies that can arrange tours.

**Chaomai Tour** (☎ 0 7521 6380; 15 Th Praram IV)

**Libong Travel** (☎ 0 7521 4676; 59/1 Th Tha Klang)

**Trang Travel Co** (☎ 0 7521 9598/9; 9 Th Praram IV)

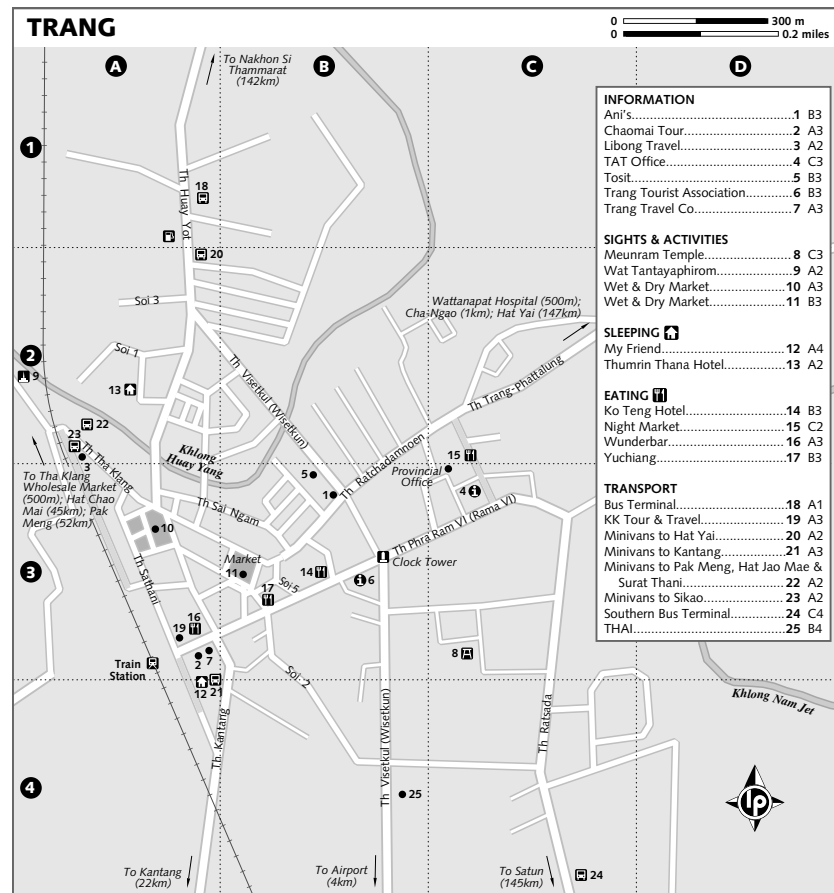
**Sights**

Trang is more of a business centre than a tourist town. If you need to kill time, stroll over to **Wat Tantaiyaphirom** (Th Tha Klang). The huge white chedi enshrining a Buddha footprint is mildly interesting. The Chinese **Meunram Tem-**

**ple**, between Soi 1 and Soi 3, sometimes sponsors performances of southern Thai shadow theatre, which are worth seeing. You'll have to stop in to check the schedule. It's also worth strolling around the large **wet & dry markets** on Th Ratchadamnoen and Th Sathani.

**Activities**

Boat trips to **Hat Chao Mai National Park** start at 700B per person and take in Ko Muk, Ko Cheuk and Ko Kradan, with lunch and drinks thrown in. National park fees are extra. There are also **sea-kayaking** tours to Tham Chao Mai (850B), where you can explore mangrove forests and canoe under commanding stalactites. **Snorkelling** trips to Ko Rok (1200B to 1500B) and minivan trips to local **caves** and **waterfalls** (850B) can also



ANDAMAN COAST

ANDAMAN COAST



be arranged by most agencies. For a cultural fix you can spend a day trekking in the **Khao Banthat Mountains** to visit villages of the mountain Sa Kai people (1500B). This includes a visit to waterfalls, lunch and a knowledgeable local guide. Most of these trips need at least two to three people; otherwise you may have to pay extra.

### Sleeping

A number of hotels grace the city's two main thoroughfares, Th Praram VI and Th Visetkul, which intersect at the clock tower.

**Ko Teng Hotel** (☎ 0 7521 8148; 77-79 Th Praram VI; s/d 180/300B, with TV 280/380B; 🍽️) The undisputed king of backpacker lodgings in Trang. The corridors may look a little dank, but the rooms here have the magic combination of being big, spick *and* span. There's also a very good restaurant downstairs.

**My Friend** (☎ 0 7522 5447; 25/17-20 Th Sathani; r 430B; 🍽️ 📺) A hip newcomer to the scene, all the pristine rooms have air-con and TV, but not all have windows – check first. There are some quirky decorative flourishes (bubble wall-mounted aquarium, anyone?) and free tea, coffee and biscuits in the morning, served in the bright downstairs café.

**Thumrin Thana Hotel** (☎ 0 7521 1211; www.thumrin.co.th; 69/8 Th Huay Yot; r 1200-1600B; ste 3000-5000B; 🍽️ 📺) The town's most posh option has a gleaming marble lobby, three restaurants (one serves Japanese) and even its own bakery! Rooms are comfortable, well kept and offer amenities like cable TV and room service. Airport transfers are included in the rate.

### Eating

There are several Muslim restaurants on Th Sathani that serve tasty and cheap Malay dishes, such as *rotii* with curry, if you need a quick meal before catching a train out of town.

**Night market** (noodles per bowl 10B) This excellent market has stalls selling the local delicacy of *khànmò jiiin* (Chinese noodles with curry) – you can pick from three spicy curry sauces and spruce up your soup with chopped vegetables and leaves.

**Ko Teng Hotel** (☎ 0 7521 8622; 77-79 Th Praram VI; dishes 40-70B; 🍽️) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Serves some of the best *kaeng kari* *kài* (mild, Indian-style curry with chicken) in the city. The environs are nothing to write home about.

**Wunderbar** (☎ 0 7521 4563; 24 Th Sathani; mains 40-100B; 🍽️) breakfast, lunch & dinner) This *faràng*-owned

place by the train station serves good Thai dishes and convincing European food, plus cold beer in the evening.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

THAI operates daily flights from Bangkok to Trang (around 3500B), but there have been some problems with landing at this airport in rain. The **THAI office** (☎ 0 7521 9923; 199/2 Th Visetkul) is open weekdays only. The airport is 4km south of Trang; air-con minivans meet flights and charge 80B to town. In the reverse direction a taxi or *túk-túk* will cost 100B to 150B.

#### BUS

Public buses leave from the well-organised Trang **bus terminal** (Th Huay Yot). Air-con buses from Trang to Bangkok cost 449B to 578B (12 hours, morning and afternoon). More comfortable are the VIP 24-seater buses at 5pm and 5.30pm (895B). From Bangkok, VIP/air-con buses leave between 6.30pm and 7pm. Buses to Satun and La-Ngu depart from the **Southern bus terminal** (Th Ratsada).

Other services:

#### BUSES FROM TRANG

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency
Hat Yai	100B	3hr	frequent
Krabi	120B	2hr	frequent
Phang-Nga	210B	3½hr	hourly
Phuket	250B	4hr	hourly
Satun	100B	3hr	frequent

#### MINIVAN & SHARE TAXI

There are share taxis to Krabi (180B, two hours) and air-con minivans to Hat Yai (160B, two hours) from offices just west of the Trang bus terminal. Hourly vans to Surat Thani (200B, 2½ hours) leave from a **depot** (Th Tha Klang), just before Th Tha Klang crosses the railway tracks. There are also departures directly to Ko Samui (220B) and Ko Pha-Ngan (320B) every day at 12.30pm and 3pm from the same depot. **KK Tour & Travel** (☎ 0 7521 1198; 40 Th Sathani), opposite the train station, has several daily air-con vans to Ko Lanta (220B, two hours).

Local share taxis can be hired for custom trips from depots; sample fares include 500B to Pak Meng, 700B to Hat Yao or Hat Chang Lang and 800B to Hat Samran.

Local transport is mainly by air-con minivan rather than *sàwngthàew*. For Ko Sukorn there are air-con vans from Th Ratsada to the jetty at Palian (45B). Alternatively, take a van to Yanta Khao (30B) and change to a Ban Ta Seh *sàwngthàew* (50B); boats can be chartered on the shore at Ta Seh.

#### TRAIN

Only two trains go all the way from Bangkok to Trang: the express 83, which leaves from Bangkok's Hualamphong station at 5.05pm and arrives in Trang at 7.35am the next day; and the rapid 167, which leaves from Hualamphong station at 6.20pm, arriving in Trang at 10.11am. From Trang, trains leave at 1.45pm and 5.30pm. Fares are 1280B/731B for a 1st-/2nd-class air-con sleeper and 521B for a 2nd-class (fan) sleeper.

### Getting Around

*Túk-túk* can be found near the intersection of Th Praram VI and Th Kantang and charge 30B for local trips. Motorcycles can be rented at travel agencies or at **Ani's** (285 Th Ratchadamnoen) for about 200B per day. Most agencies can also help you arrange car rental for around 1500B per day.

### TRANG BEACHES & ISLANDS

Trang Province has a string of delightful sandy beaches along the coast. The coast here gets some of Thailand's biggest surf (probably the source of Trang's original unshortened name, 'City of Waves'), but it's really only worth investigating in March or after big storms during the rainy season – you'll also need to bring your own board.

There are dozens of tropical islands off-shore and transport connections are improving yearly. Some islands here are protected by the Hat Chao Mai National Park, including Ko Muk, Ko Kradan and Ko Cheuk. The beaches of Hat Pak Meng to Hat Chao Mai also fall under its jurisdiction.

#### Hat Pak Meng

หาดปากเมง

Thirty-nine kilometres from Trang in Sikao District, Hat Pak Meng serves as the main jumping-off point for the nearby island of Ko Ngai. There's a wild-looking stretch of coastline here, with a couple of so-so pockets of sand, but much of the seashore is rather marred by a big concrete sea wall. The main

pier is at the northern end of the beach, where Rte 4162 meets the coast. There are good fresh seafood restaurants in the vicinity.

Four agencies at the jetty and the Lay Trang Resort organise one-day boat tours to Ko Muk, Tham Morakot (Emerald Cave, on Ko Muk), Ko Cheuk, Ko Ma and Ko Kradan for 750B per person (minimum three people), including lunch and beverages. There are also snorkelling day tours to Ko Ngai (650B) and Ko Rok (1000B to 1200B, plus national park fees).

Run by a staunch supporter of the Thai royal family, **Lay Trang Resort** (☎ 0 7527 4027/8; www.laytrang.com; bungalows 1000-1500B; 🍽️) boasts smart bungalows in a tidy garden and a very good patio restaurant.

There are several daily boats from Pak Meng to Ko Ngai at 10am, returning from Ko Ngai between 8am and 9am. You have a choice of a 30-minute ride by speedboat (350B) or a slower ride by 'big boat' (150B, one hour).

There are very regular air-con minivans from Th Kha Klang in Trang to Hat Pak Meng (80B, 45 minutes). You may have to take a motorcycle taxi from the Rte 4162 junction to the pier. Heading south from Pak Meng, the coast road passes Hat Chang Lang, Hat Yao and Hat Chao Mai National Park.

#### Ko Ngai

เกาะไหง(ไห)

To live out the Robinson Crusoe deserted-island fantasy, head to Ko Ngai (Ko Hai). It's a fetching island with a dramatic interior and squeaky-clean sandy beach along its eastern coast. There is no indigenous population on the island, but there are a few spiffy resorts. A ring of bright coral, excellent for snorkelling, circles Ko Ngai and the visibility in the turquoise water is excellent. Mask and snorkel sets and fins can be rented from resorts for 50B each, or you can take half-day snorkelling tours to nearby islands (per person 650B). Trips to Ko Rok Nok, 29km southwest of Ko Ngai, cost 1200B by speedboat (plus the marine national park fee).

Even though it's technically a part of Krabi Province, the island is most easily accessible from Pak Meng.

#### SLEEPING

There's little here for budgetarians, most places are decidedly midrange and come with restaurants and 24-hour electricity. The boat pier is at Koh Ngai Resort, but if you book

ahead, resorts on the other beaches will arrange transfers.

**Koh Hai Villa** (☎ 0 7520 3263; bungalows 500-800B) Pretty much the only budget place on offer, the bungalows here are starting to show their age and the staff seem ambivalent about the whole endeavour. The wooden rooms have a little more character than the featureless concrete ones and all come with fans, bathrooms and mosquito nets.

**Thapwarin Resort** (☎ 0 1894 3585; www.thapwarin.com; bungalows 1550-3500B; ♿) This place has a small village of very gracious huts made from natural materials – it's rustic done with style. Only the top options offer air-con, but all rooms have chic bathrooms filled with rock and plant features. The 1940s-style fans are a nice touch. It also rents sea kayaks for 150B per hour.

**Koh Ngai Resort** (☎ 0 7520 6924; bungalows 1500-3600B; ♿) In a separate cove at the southern end of the island, this resort has its own private jetty and elegant wooden bungalows with huge verandas. The garden is immense and the resort has a small beach all to itself.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

The resorts provide daily boats from Hat Pak Meng to Koh Ngai at 10am, returning from Koh Ngai between 8am and 9am. Speedboat transfers cost 350B (30 minutes), while the slower

'big boats' cost 150B (one hour). Unless you're staying at Koh Ngai Resort you'll have to take a long-tail for the ship-to-shore ride (80B) or arrange for one of the other resorts to provide transfers. You can also privately charter a long-tail from Pak Meng for 1200B (up to three people). In the high season, Koh Ngai Resort has boats to Ban Sala Dan on Koh Lanta at 3pm (350B), returning from Koh Lanta at 8.30am.

#### Ko Muk

เกาะมุก

Ko Muk has several appealing beaches along with good-value accommodation. The interior is filled with soaring rubber plantations.

The main development action is based around the west coast beach of **Hat Faràng** (Hat Sai Yao), where one continually growing resort dominates much of the beachfront. Good **snorkelling** opportunities lie offshore and one of the island's star attractions, **Tham Morakot** (Emerald Cave), hides at the northern end of the island. This cave is a beautiful limestone tunnel that leads 80m to a sea lagoon. You have to swim through here at high tide, part of the way in pitch blackness, to a small concealed white-sand beach surrounded by lofty limestone, with a chimney that lets in a piercing shaft of light around midday. Boats can enter at low tide and the cave features on most tour itineraries, so it can get pretty crowded.

#### GETTING BUZZED IN TRANG

Trang is famous for its coffee shops (*rán kaa-fae* or *rán ko-pii*), which are usually run by Hokkien Chinese. These shops serve real filtered coffee (called *kaafae thung* in the rest of the country) along with a variety of snacks, typically *paa-thwng-kòh*, *saalaapao* (Chinese buns), *khánóm jiiip* (dumplings), Trang-style sweets, *mũu yáng* (barbecued pork) and sometimes noodles and *jók* (thick rice soup).

When you order coffee in these places, be sure to use the Hokkien word *ko-pii* rather than the Thai *kaafae*, otherwise you may end up with Nescafé or instant Khao Chong coffee – the proprietors often think this is what *faràng* want. Coffee is usually served with milk and sugar – ask for *ko-pii dam* for sweetened black coffee, *ko-pii dam, mǎi sài nám-taan* for black coffee without sugar or *ko-pii mǎi sài nám-taan* for coffee with milk but no sugar. A few of our favourite shops are listed below.

- Atmospheric **Yuchiang** (no roman-script sign; Th Praram VI; dishes 20-30B) is a beautiful, hard-core and classic Hokkien coffeeshop with marble-topped round tables in an old wooden building. Food counters sit in front. Yuchiang roasts its own pork, so the pork *saalaapao* are particularly tasty here.
- Next to the train station, **Sin Ocha Bakery** (Th Sathani; dishes 25-50B) is the most convenient *rán ko-pii* around and is very popular with travellers. Simple Thai dishes and breakfast are served, along with huge coffee drinks (10B to 40B) and teas. Décor is pleasantly unpretentious, though the service could use a shot in the arm.

Between Koh Muk and Koh Ngai are the small karst islets of **Ko Cheuk** and **Ko Waen**, which have good snorkelling and small sandy beaches. Boats to Koh Muk leave from the new Kuantungku pier just south of the Hat Chao Mai National Park headquarters, docking at Hua Laem on the eastern coast. Hat Faràng is a 60B motorcycle taxi ride across the island.

#### SLEEPING

The following places are a short walk north from the pier on a shallow beach. Note that much of Koh Muk shuts down in the low season.

**Ko Mook Resort** (☎ in Trang 0 7520 3303; www.koomookresort.com; 45 Th Praram VI; bungalows 400-800B) These comfortable huts are excellent value and lie concealed in a thick garden covered with wild-looking ferns. The design here is unadorned and the tropical isolation is perfect for those searching for a romantic getaway. There's a free daily boat to Hat Faràng and snorkelling can be arranged for 300B.

**Ko Mook Charlie Beach Resort** (☎ 0 7520 3281-3; www.kohmook.com; bungalows 700-2400B; ♿) This place has become so big of late that it's trying to change the name of the beach from Hat Faràng to Hat Charlie. There's a bunch of different bungalow options, ranging from basic shacks to swish air-con deals with little decorations and big porches. It's starting to get a little crowded, but the beach here is lovely. Staff can organise snorkelling tours to Tham Morakot and other islands for 850B to 1050B. It's open year-round.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Boats to Koh Muk now leave from the pier at Kuantungku, a few kilometres south of the national park headquarters. There are several ferries to Koh Muk leaving around noon and returning at 8am (80B, 30 minutes). A chartered long-tail from Kuantungku to Koh Muk costs from 700B (800B to Hat Faràng). Air-con vans run frequently from Trang to Kuantungku for 150B (one hour).

It's also possible to charter a long-tail to Koh Muk from either Pak Meng or Hat Yao for around 1000B to 1500B; resorts can arrange cheaper transfers for guests.

#### Hat Yao

หาดยาว

A laid-back fishing hamlet just south of Hat Yong Ling, Hat Yao is sandwiched between the sea and imposing limestone cliffs. A rocky

headland at the southern end of Hat Yao is pockmarked with caves and there's good snorkelling around the island immediately offshore. The best beach in the area is the tiny **Hat Apo**, hidden away among the cliffs; you can get here by long-tail or wade around from the sandy spit in front of Sinchai's Chaomai Resort.

Apparently pirates used to hoard their treasure south of Hat Yao at **Tham Chao Mai**, a vast cave, full of crystal cascades and impressive stalactites and stalagmites, which can be explored by boat. To visit Tham Chao Mai, you can charter a long-tail for 300B per hour from Yao pier. Haad Yao Nature Resort offers sea-kayaking trips to the cave, including lunch, for around 700B to 900B per person, including guide. You can also rent a kayak and self-explore the cave for 500B (map included).

Just south of the headland in Ban Chao Mai is the new concrete Yao pier, the main departure point for Koh Kradan and Koh Libong. Currently there are a few boats offering day trips to Koh Kradan and other islands in the bay for 700/450B per adult/child, or you can make arrangements with local long-tail boatmen.

The **Haad Yao Nature Resort** (☎ 0 1894 6936; www.trangsea.com; r 300-500B, bungalows 800B; ♿) is run by enthusiastic naturalists and offers a variety of environmental tours in the region. Very orderly and homey bungalows come with shared baths, while the better self-contained bungalows have verandas and frilly extras. There's also a great pier restaurant here where you can watch the fishermen ply their trade over tasty Thai victuals.

**Sinchai's Chaomai Resort** (☎ 0 7520 3034; bungalows 300-1500B; ♿) is an activity oriented place that offers a handful of bungalows nestled under the rocky cliffs at the northern end of Hat Yao. The family that owns it arranges kayaking tours (600B), rents mountain bikes (per day 100B) and runs multiday-tour packages around Trang and the Andaman coast – prices vary.

#### GETTING THERE & AROUND

From Hat Yao you can charter a long-tail to Koh Kradan (1200B, one hour) or catch one of the regular long-tail boats to Koh Libong (80B to 70B, 20 minutes). A charter to Koh Libong is 300B.

Motorcycles can be rented for 250B per day – ask at your hotel. Sinchai's Chaomai Resort rents mountain bikes for 100B per day.

## Ko Kradan

เกาะกระดาน

The remote Ko Kradan may well be the jewel in the crown of Trang Province. The beach here is spectacular and has sweeping views over aqua waters to the other islands scattered about the Andaman. There are great, untouched coral reefs just offshore, and rubber plantations fill large tracts of the island's core. Ko Kradan is part of Hat Chao Mai National Park and has so far been spared major developments. At the moment there is only one place to stay on the island, though plans are in the wind for a huge-scale top-end Amari resort – visit while you can. Camping is possible with permission from the national park staff.

Unfortunately Ko Kradan's sole resort, **Koh Kradan Paradise Beach** (☎ 0 7521 1391; www.kradanisland.com; bungalows with bathroom 600-1200B; 🚻), is overpriced. The wooden bungalows lined up behind the main beach are far from charming.

It's probably best to visit Ko Kradan, as most people do, on a snorkelling tour from Hat Yao or Ko Muk. The Koh Kradan Paradise Beach resort provides a daily transfer bus and boat from its **office** (☎ 0 7521 1391) opposite the train station in Trang (300B). A chartered long-tail from Hat Yao costs around 1000B one way.

## Ko Libong

เกาะลิบง

Trang's largest island is just 15 minutes by long-tail from Hat Yao. Less visited than neighbouring isles, Ko Libong is known for its flora and fauna as much as for its beaches. The island is home to a small Muslim fishing community and has a few resorts on the lovely isolated beaches of the western coast. The sensitive development here is a real breath of fresh air compared with other islands in the bay.

On the eastern coast of Ko Libong at **Laem Ju Hoi** is a large area of mangroves protected by the Botanical Department as the **Libong Archipelago Wildlife Reserve** (☎ 0 7525 1932). The sea channels here are one of the last habitats of the rare dugong, and around 40 of them graze on the sea grass that flourishes in the bay. The nature resorts in Hat Yao and Ko Libong offer dugong-spotting tours by sea kayak, led by trained naturalists, for 900B. Sea kayaks can also be rented at most resorts for 100B per hour.

If you want to spend the night, try **Libong Nature Beach Bungalow** (☎ 0 1894 6936; www.trangsea

.com; bungalows 600-1000B; 🚻). Set on a lovely grassy garden and surrounded by rubber plantations, this place is owned by the same friendly and environmentally conscious people running the nature resort in Hat Yao. There's a simple restaurant with tasty food and the owners run excellent sea-kayaking tours of the mangroves. The resort is closed in the low season.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Long-tail boats to Ban Ma Phrao on the eastern coast of Ko Libong leave regularly from Hat Yao (per person 60B to 70B) during daylight hours; the long-tail jetty at Hat Yao is just before the new Yao pier. On Ko Libong, motorcycle taxis run across to the resorts on the western coast for 70B. A chartered long-tail directly to either resort will cost 500B each way.

## SATUN PROVINCE

If you're dying to explore uncharted territory, get off the beaten path and head to Satun. Bumped up against Malaysia, the Andaman coast's southernmost region is too far off the tourist trail to see much action. The largely undeveloped Ko Tarutao Marine National Park encompasses some of the most pristine untamed islands in the Andaman, all drenched in luxuriant greenery and edged by stereotypically splendid tropical beaches. Plucky explorers willing to put forth the effort it takes to get there will not be disappointed.

Until 1813 Satun was a district of the Malay state of Kedah, but the region was ceded to Britain in 1909 under the Anglo-Siamese Treaty and became a province of Siam in 1925. Largely Muslim in make-up, Satun has seen little of the political turmoil that plagues the neighbouring regions of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat. Around 60% of people here speak Yawi or Malay as a first language, and the few wat in the region are small, impoverished and vastly outnumbered by mosques.

## SATUN

สตุน

pop 33,400

Lying in a valley surrounded by limestone cliffs, the isolated town of Satun is a relaxing, if slightly ordinary, coastal settlement that makes a good base for visiting surrounding sights. The nearby Tammalang pier has boats to Kuala Perlis and Pulau Langkawi in Malaysia.

Housed in a lovely old Sino-Portuguese mansion just off Th Satun Thaneer, the excellent **Ku Den Museum** (Satun National Museum; Soi 5, Th Satun Thaneer; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Wed-Sun) is the only real attraction in Satun. The building was constructed to house King Rama V during a royal visit and the museum has exhibits and dioramas with soundtracks in Thai and English, covering every aspect of southern Muslim life.

### Sleeping & Eating

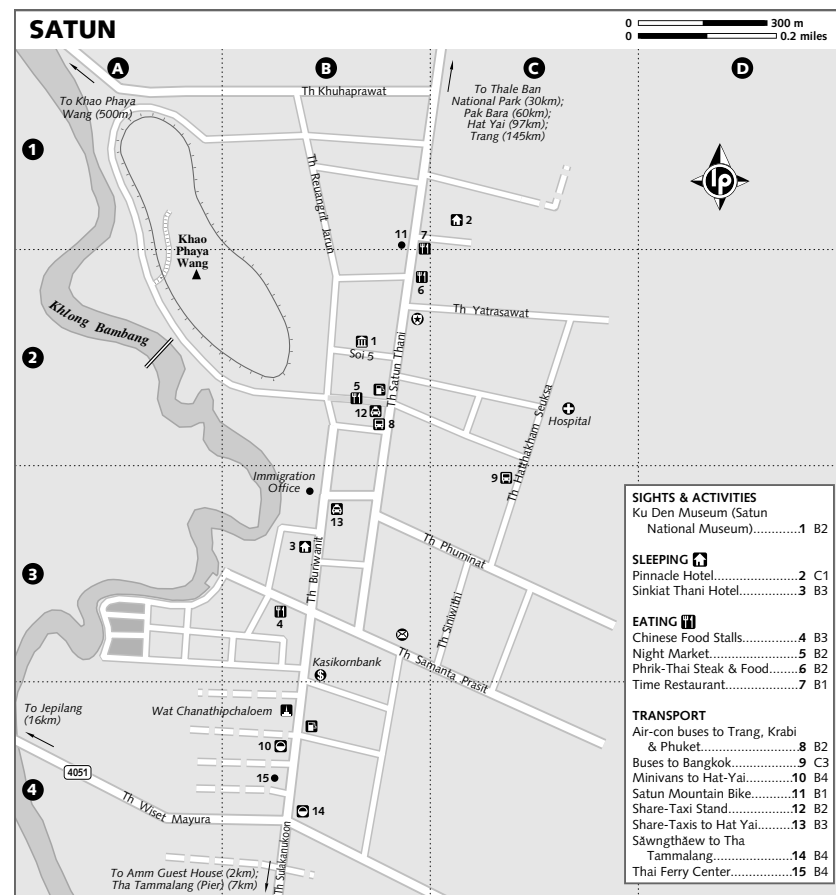
There are various Chinese and Muslim restaurants on Th Burivanich and Th Samanta Prasit that will do for a basic, cheap meal. The Chinese food stalls specialise in *khào mǔu daeng* (red pork with rice), while the Muslim

restaurants offer *rotii* with southern-style chicken curry (around 50B each).

**Sinkiat Thani Hotel** (☎ 0 7472 1055-8; fax 0 7472 1059; 50 Th Burivanich; r 450-665B; 🚻) It is housed in a tall building with amiable rooms right in the middle of town. Rooms come with TVs and hot showers, and are decent value. There's a good restaurant downstairs serving Thai food from an extensive English menu.

**Pinnacle Wangmai Hotel** (☎ 0 7471 1607/8; 43 Th Satun Thaneer; r 500-1200B; 🚻) Satun's best sleeping bet, it runs the gamut of rooms – from simple fan to a big block of spiffier abodes with air-con. Try for a room in the back; they're a little quieter.

**Phrik-Thai Steak & Food** (☎ 0 7472 3777; Th Satun Thaneer; meals 50-180B; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) If



steak with garlic-butter sauce and fries is what you're craving, look no further. It also serves plenty of Thai dishes either in its smart air-con restaurant or at outside tables.

**Time** (☎ 0 7478 1176; 43 Th Satun Thane; dishes 80-220B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This highly recommended air-con restaurant has a TGI Friday thing going on, with chirpy staff and a fun atmosphere. It serves the best Thai food in town.

**Night market** (Th Satun Thane) This excellent market, just north of Satun Thane Hotel, comes to life around 5pm and serves great Thai fast food, including southern-style curries – spicy!

## Getting There & Away

### BOAT

Boats to Malaysia and Tarutao leave from Tammalang pier, about 7km south of Satun along Th Sulakanukoon. Large long-tail boats run regularly to Kuala Perlis in Malaysia (200B, one hour) between 8am and 2pm. From Malaysia the fare is RM\$20. A chartered boat to Kuala Perlis costs around 2000B for up to 15 people.

For Pulau Langkawi in Malaysia, boats leave from Tammalang pier daily at 8am, 9am, 1.30pm and 4pm (250B, 1½ hours). In the reverse direction, boats leave from Pulau Langkawi at 9am, 10am, 2pm and 4pm and cost RM\$25. Remember that there is a one-hour time difference between Thailand and Malaysia. You can buy tickets in Satun town at the **Thai Ferry Center** (☎ 0 7473 0511; Th Sulakanukoon), near Wat Chanathipchaloem.

Due to lack of tourist demand, the boats that usually depart to Ko Tarutao and Ko Lipe from Tammalang pier now only run from Pak Bara (see opposite), though you may want to confirm this with the Thai Ferry Centre before you arrive.

### BUS

Buses to Bangkok leave from a small depot on Th Hatthakham Seuksa, just east of the centre. Air-con services (522B to 671B, 14 hours) leave at 7am and half-hourly from 2.30pm to 4pm. A single VIP bus leaves at 4.30pm (1030B). From Bangkok's Southern bus terminal, buses leave at 6pm and 6.30pm. Ordinary and air-con buses to Hat Yai (60B, two hours) and Trang (80B, 1½ hours) leave regularly from in front of the 7-Eleven on Th Satun Thane.

## MINIVAN & SHARE TAXI

There are regular vans to the train station in Hat Yai (80B, one hour) from a depot just south of Wat Chanathipchaloem on Th Sulakanukoon. Occasional minivans run to Trang, but buses are much more frequent. If you're arriving by boat at Tammalang pier, there are direct air-con vans to Hat Yai (100B), Hat Yai airport (180B) and Trang (180B).

Share taxis can be hired from next to the Masjid Mambang Satul to Pak Bara (350B, 45 minutes), La-Ngu (240B, 30 minutes) or Hat Yai (350B, one hour).

## Getting Around

Small orange sawngthæw to Tammalang pier (for boats to Malaysia) cost 40B and leave every 20 minutes or so between 8am and 5pm from a depot opposite the Thai Ferry Centre. A motorcycle taxi from the same area costs 50B.

## AROUND SATUN Pak Bara

ປາກບາຣາ

The coast northeast of Satun has a few small towns that serve as jumping-off points for the islands in the Mu Ko Phetra and Ko Tarutao Marine National Parks, but the small fishing community of Pak Bara is the main transit point. Tourist facilities are slowly improving as Pak Bara becomes increasingly busy with travellers discovering these dazzling isles in the south Andaman. The peaceful town has some decent sleeping options and great seafood and is even turning into a popular place to hang out for a while.

The main road from La-Ngu terminates at the pier where there are several travel agencies, internet cafés, cheap restaurants and shops selling beach gear. There's a **visitors centre** (☎ 0 7478 3485) for Ko Tarutao National Park just back from the pier, where you can book accommodation and obtain permission for camping. Travel agencies here can arrange tours to the islands in the national park.

## TOURS

There are several travel agencies near the pier that will vie for your transport custom. **Adang Sea Tours** (☎ 0 1276 1930; www.adangseatur.com) is one of the more reliable agencies in town; it also runs one of the boat services to Ko Tarutao. The friendly owner, Decha, is very helpful and also has day trips kayaking through the impressive caves at Tham Chet Khok (per

person including lunch 1500B); and two-day snorkelling and island-hopping tours around the region (per person from 2300B). You can arrange car hire here for 1000B per day.

In the high season, the **Satun Pakbara Speedboat Club** (☎ 0 7478 3643-5; www.tarutaoisland.com) runs speedboat tours to Ko Tarutao, Ko Bulon Leh and Ko Lipe – visit the website for the latest details.

## SLEEPING & EATING

Both of these guesthouses have restaurants attached.

**Bara Guest House** (☎ 0 9654 2801; r 200B) On the beach and just up from the pier, the rooms here are colourful, if a little bare, and sit off a green path leading to the ocean. It's the groovy touches and hippy feel to the rooms, and beachside restaurant, that earn this place its biggest thumbs up.

**Best House Resort** (☎ 0 578 3058; bungalows 450-590B; ☺) This place has tidy new concrete bungalows around a pond. They almost look like moored boathouses.

There are several basic restaurants near the Pak Bara pier that serve good Malay Muslim food for 30B to 50B; the best of these is next to Andrew Tour, just back from the pier.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are hourly buses from Hat Yai to the pier at Pak Bara (80B, 2½ hours) between 7am and 4pm. Coming from Satun, you can take an ordinary bus towards Trang and get off at La-Ngu (40B, 30 minutes), continuing by sawngthæw to Pak Bara (25B, 15 minutes). You can also charter a taxi to Pak Bara from Satun for 350B.

Air-con minivans leave hourly for Hat Yai (120B, two hours) from travel agencies near Pak Bara pier. There are also vans to Trang (250B, 1½ hours) and Krabi (400B, four hours).

There are boats directly to Ao Pante Malacca on Ko Tarutao at 10.30am and 3pm (250B, 1½ hours); in the reverse direction, boats leave at 9am and 11.30am. The 10.30am boat also continues on to Ko Lipe. For Ko Bulon Leh and Ko Lipe, boats depart at 1.30pm, arriving in Ko Bulon Leh one hour later (350B) and at Ko Lipe at 3.30pm (450B to 550B). These boats return from Ko Lipe at around 9am. A different, big-boat service runs to Ko Bulon Leh at around 2pm if there are enough takers (250B). None of these services

## IT'S A NICE DAY FOR A WET WEDDING

Each Valentine's Day, Ko Kradan is the setting for a rather unusual wedding ceremony. Around 35 brides and grooms don scuba gear and descend to an underwater altar amid the coral reefs, exchanging their vows in front of the Trang District Officer. How the couples manage to say 'I do' underwater has never been fully explained, but the ceremony has made it into the Guinness Book of Records for the world's largest underwater wedding. Before and after the scuba ceremony, the couples are paraded along the coast in a flotilla of motorboats. If you think this might be right for your special day, visit the website [www.underwaterwedding.com](http://www.underwaterwedding.com).

run in the low season when the national park is officially closed.

## Ko Bulon Leh

เกาะบุโหลนเล

Now is the time to visit Ko Bulon Leh. This gorgeous island, 23km west of Pak Bara, is surrounded by the Andaman's signature clear waters and has its share of faultless white-sand beaches with swaying casuarinas. Gracious **Ko Bulon Leh** is in that perfect phase of being developed enough to offer comfortable facilities, yet not so popular that you have to book umbrella beach-time days in advance.

The southern part of the island is where you'll find the alluring beaches of **Mango Bay**, while in the north there is a rocky bay that's home to small settlements of *chao leh*. The island is perfect for hiking – the interior is interlaced with tracks and trails. The tracks are lined with rubber plantations that are thick with birds, and you can reach most places on the island within half an hour. There are some bizarre rock formations along the coastline reminiscent of a Salvador Dali dream. A fine golden-sand beach runs along the eastern coast of the island with good coral reefs immediately offshore.

Resorts can arrange **snorkelling** trips to other islands in the Ko Bulon group for around 900B, and **fishing** trips for 300B per hour. You can also rent masks and snorkels (100B), fins (70B) and **sea kayaks** (150B per hour).

**SLEEPING & EATING**

Most places here shut down in the low season, though during the swing season between rainy and dry the caretakers at some resorts might rent you a room at a discount rate – although it can be slightly creepy having a whole place to yourself, especially after it's been closed up for months.

**Bulone Resort** (☎ 0 1897 9084; www.bulone-resort.com; bungalows 500-900B) The pick of the bunch when it comes to budget options, Bulone has airy cottages in various sizes, all with plenty of shade under the tall casuarinas that line the northern part of the beach. It's a simple affair – not all rooms have attached bathroom – but the restaurant here comes highly recommended.

**Marina Resort** (☎ 0 9811 3072; www.marina-kobulon.com; bungalows 500-1000B) Inland from Pansand Resort, this unique place is built from natural materials, and has lovely thatched huts on stilts and a funky castaway-style restaurant with tables on a large bamboo veranda.

**Pansand Resort** (www.pansand-resort.com; 82-84 Th Visetkul; cottages 1200-1700B) Hands down the best place to stay on Bulon Leh, Pansand sits on the island's prime bit of beach. There are amiable colonial-style bungalows, cottages lined up along green grounds and a well-kept garden, and breakfast is included. The restaurant here is great and staff can arrange snorkelling trips to White Rock Island (1500B for up to eight people). It's popular – call ahead. Book through First Andaman Travel (☎ 0 7521 8035) on Th Visetkul in Trang.

There are a few local restaurants and a small shop in the Muslim village next to Bulon Viewpoint.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Big boats to Ko Bulon Leh leave from Pak Bara between 2pm and 3pm daily in the high season if there are enough takers; the fare is 250B. In the reverse direction, the boat moors in the bay in front of Bulone Resort at around 9am; you may have to wave your arms around to get the pilot's attention. In the low season these boats often stop altogether. If you must get to the island, you can charter a long-tail from Pak Bara for 2000B.

From November to May there are also boats to Ko Bulon from Ko Lipe in Ko Tarutao Marine National Park; these leave from Ko Lipe at 9am, reaching Ko Bulon at 10am (350B, one hour) and then continuing on to Pak Bara (350B, one hour). In the opposite direction,

boats leave from Pak Bara at 1.30pm, stopping at Ko Bulon Leh one hour later.

**KO TARUTAO MARINE NATIONAL PARK**

อุทยานแห่งชาติหมู่เกาะตะรุเตา

Protected partly by its national park status, and mostly by its relative inaccessibility, **Ko Tarutao Marine National Park** (☎ 0 7478 1285; adult/child under 14 200/100B; ☽ mid-November–April) is one of the most exquisite and unspoiled regions in Thailand. This massive park encompasses 51 islands covered with well-preserved virgin rainforest teeming with fauna, as well as sparkling coral reefs and radiant beaches.

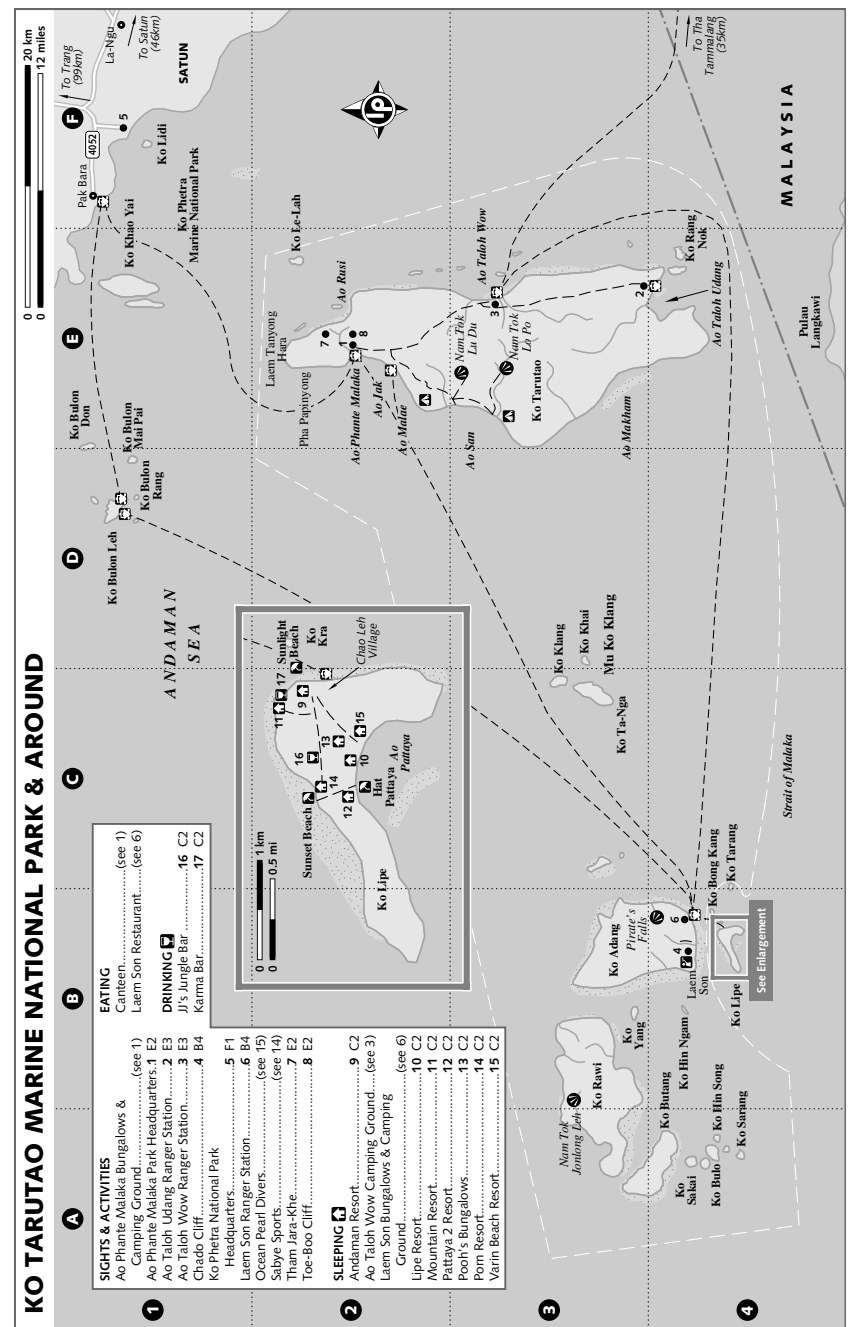
One of the first marine national parks in Thailand, Ko Tarutao is the epitome of environmentally sound tourist management. The only accommodation in the park involves small, ecofriendly government-run cabins and longhouses, and great emphasis is placed on preserving the natural resources of the area. Pressure from big developers to build resorts on the islands has so far been mercifully ignored, though concessions were made for the filming of the American reality-TV series *Survivor* in 2001. Within the islands of the park you can spot dusky langurs, crab-eating macaques, mouse deer, wild pigs, sea otters, fishing cats, water monitors, tree pythons, Brahminy kites, sea eagles, hornbills and kingfishers.

Ko Tarutao is the biggest and most visited island in the group and home to the park headquarters and government accommodations. Many travellers choose to stay on Ko Lipe, which has managed to evade the park's protection and is fast becoming a popular resort with tourist facilities and bungalows aplenty. Long-tail tours to other outlying islands can be arranged through travel agencies in Satun or Pak Bara, through the national park headquarters on Ko Tarutao or through resorts and long-tail boat operators on Ko Lipe. Note that there are no foreign exchange facilities at Ko Tarutao – you can change cash and cheques at travel agencies in Pak Bara and there's an ATM at La-Ngu. The park officially closes in the low season (May through early November), when all boats stop running.

**Ko Tarutao**

เกาะตะรุเตา

Most of Ko Tarutao's whopping 152 sq km is covered in dense, old growth jungle that rises sharply up to the park's 713m peak. Mangrove swamps and typically impressive

**KO TARUTAO MARINE NATIONAL PARK & AROUND**

EATING	
Capteen.....	(see 1)
Laem Son Restaurant.....	(see 6)

DRINKING	
J's Jungle Bar.....	16 C2
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Ao Phante Malaka Bungalows & Camping Ground.....	(see 1)
Ao Phante Malaka Park Headquarters.....	1 E3
Ao Taloh Uduang Ranger Station.....	2 E3
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Toe-Boo Cliff.....	8 E2

SLEEPING	
Andaman Resort.....	9 C2
Ao Taloh Wow Camping Ground.....	(see 3)
Laem Son Bungalows & Camping Ground.....	(see 6)
Lipe Resort.....	10 C2
Mountain Resort.....	11 C2
Pattaya 2 Resort.....	12 C2
Poom Resort.....	13 C2
Yarn Beach Resort.....	14 C2
	15 D2

limestone cliffs circle much of the island, and the western coast is lined with quiet white-sand beaches.

Tarutao has a sordid history that partly explains its great state of preservation today. Between 1938 and 1948, more than 3000 Thai criminals and political prisoners were incarcerated here, including interesting inmates like So Setabutra, who compiled the first Thai-English dictionary while imprisoned on Tarutao, and Sittiporn Gridagon, son of Rama VII. During WWII, food and medical supplies from the mainland were severely depleted and hundreds of prisoners died from malaria. The prisoners and guards mutinied, taking to piracy in the nearby Strait of Malacca until they were suppressed by British troops in 1944.

#### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The overgrown ruins of the camp for political prisoners can be seen at **Ao Taloh Udang**, in the southeast of the island, reached via a long overgrown track. The prison camp for civilian prisoners was over on the eastern coast at **Ao Taloh Waw** where the big boats from Tammalang pier now dock. A concrete road runs across the island from Ao Taloh Waw to **Ao Pante Malacca** on the western coast, where you'll find the park headquarters, bungalows and the main camping site. Boats travel between Ao Pante Malacca and Pak Bara on the mainland.

Next to the visitors centre at Ao Pante Malacca, a steep trail leads through the jungle to **Toe-Boo Cliff**, a dramatic rocky outcrop with fabulous views towards Ko Adang and the surrounding islands.

Ao Pante Malacca has a lovely alabaster beach shaded by pandanus and casuarinas. If you follow the large stream flowing through here inland, you'll reach **Tham Jara-Khe** (Crocodile Cave), which was once home to deadly saltwater crocodiles. The cave is navigable for about a kilometre at low tide and can be visited on long-tail tours from the jetty at Ao Pante Malacca.

Immediately south of Ao Pante Malacca is **Ao Jak**, which has another fine sandy beach; and **Ao Molae**, which also has fine white sand and a ranger station with bungalows and a camp site. A 30-minute boat ride or 8km walk south of Ao Pante is **Ao Son**, an isolated sandy bay where turtles nest between September and April. You can camp here but there are

no facilities. Ao Son has decent snorkelling, as does **Ao Makham**, further south. From the small ranger station at Ao Son you can walk inland to **Lu Du Falls** (about 1½ hours) and **Lo Po Falls** (about 2½ hours).

#### SLEEPING & EATING

All the formal park accommodation on Ko Tarutao is around the park headquarters at Ao Pante Malacca and at Ao Molae. The accommodation (open mid-November to mid-May) is far more sensitive to the environment than the average Thai resort. Water is rationed, rubbish is transported back to the mainland, lighting is provided by power-saving light bulbs and electricity is available between 6pm and 7am only. Accommodation can be booked at the **park office** (☎ 0 7478 3485) in Pak Bara, or through the **Royal Forest Department** (☎ 0 2561 4292/3) in Bangkok.

There are spacious fan-cooled **cabins** (r 600-1200B) with two or three rooms at the foot of Toe-Boo Cliff, while at Ao Molae there are 10 recently constructed deluxe **bungalows** (up to 4 people 1000-2000B). There are also simple **long-house rooms** (r 500B) at Ao Pante Malacca, with four mattresses on the floor (you must take a whole room). All rooms have mosquito nets, but bring some repellent as backup. National park entry fees can be paid at Ao Pante Malacca or Ao Taloh Waw.

Camping is permitted under casuarinas at Ao Pante Malacca, Ao Molae and Ao Taloh Waw, where there are toilet and shower blocks, or on the wild beaches at Ao Son, Ao Makham and Ao Taloh Udang, where you'll need to be totally self-sufficient. The cost is 50B per person with your own tent, or you can hire tents for 100B to 300B. Camping is also permitted on Ko Adang and other islands in the park, with permission.

The park authorities run an excellent **canteen** (dishes 40-120B) at Ao Pante Malacca. The food is satisfying and tasty and you can even get cold beer. If you stay at Ao Taloh Waw you can eat at the small canteen by the jetty.

#### GETTING THERE & AROUND

From Pak Bara there are boats directly to Ao Pante Malacca at 10.30am and 3pm (200B, 1½ hours); in the reverse direction, boats leave at 9am and 11.30am. Satun Ferry and **Adang Sea Tours** (☎ 0 1276 1930; www.adangseatur.com) runs several boats, all departing at around the same time; Satun Ferry is a little pricier. Note that

most boat transport stops from mid-May to mid-November, when the park is officially closed.

During the high season you can also come here on speedboat day-tours from Pak Bara for 2000B, including national park fees, lunch, drinks and snorkelling. It's possible to charter a long-tail boat for the same price from Pak Bara, or from little Jepilang pier, 13km west of Satun (30km from Tarutao).

Long-tails can be hired from the jetty at Ao Pante Malacca for trips to Tham Jara Khae or Ao Son for around 600B. To Ao Taloh Udang you'll pay about 1500B for a round-trip.

#### Ko Khai & Ko Klang

เกาะไข่/เกาะกลาง

Between Ko Tarutao and Ko Adang is a small cluster of three islands collectively known as **Muu Ko Klang** (Middle Island Group). Most interesting is **Ko Khai**, which has a very neat white-sand beach and a scenic rock arch. The coral here has suffered a bit due to boat anchors, but both Ko Khai and **Ko Klang** have crystal-clear water for swimming. You can get here by chartered long-tail from either Ao Pante Malacca on Ko Tarutao, or Ko Lipe; a round-trip will cost around 1500B from either end.

#### Ko Lipe

เกาะหลีเป๊ะ

Encircled by sandy beaches and filled with mountainous woodland, Ko Lipe is home to a 700-strong community of *chao leh* villagers and a growing legion of private developers. Falling outside the protection of the national park (but grouped here for simplicity), partly because of the entrenched local population, this little isle is rapidly emerging as the tourist centre for the far-southern Andaman. However, things are still a lot more low-key than at islands like Ko Lanta or Ko Phi Phi.

#### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Most of the developments are either at **Hat Pattaya** on the southern coast or near the *chao leh* village on the eastern coast. Luckily, the rest of Ko Lipe is still very mellow, with peaceful jungle trails and some delightful secluded beaches that have a romantic *Gilligan's Island* feel. Probably the most beautiful is **Sunset Beach**, which has fabulous views to Ko Adang. A footpath leads here from behind the village school. Another nifty spot is the northern end

of **Sunlight Beach**, where a lovely curved sand bar carves out a tranquil, translucent cove of emerald water.

There are no banks or ATMs on the island, though several of the bigger resorts can change travellers cheques, cash or do advances on credit cards – all for a hefty fee. It's also a good idea to stock up on necessities such as insect repellent before you arrive, as things can be quite pricey on the island.

There's good coral all along the southern coast and around **Ko Kra**, the little island opposite the *chao leh* village. Most resorts rent out mask and snorkel sets and fins for 50B each and can arrange long-tail trips to Ko Adang and other coral-fringed islands for around 1500B. On Sunset Beach **Sabye Sports** (☎ 0 7412 8026; www.sabye-sports.com) offers PADI Open Water dive courses for about 1200B, and day trips with two dives for 2500B. **Ocean Pearl Divers** (☎ 0 9733 8068) is based out of the Varin Beach Resort and does similar trips.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

All resorts on Ko Lipe close from May through October, when the boats stop running. Most restaurants have their own restaurants but the village also has several rustic local restaurants. Hat Pattaya is a great spot, despite being crammed with resorts.

**Porn Resort** (☎ 0 7472 8032; bungalows 350-450B) This lovely old-fashioned bamboo place is the only resort on the comely Sunset Beach – the restaurant is highly recommended. Its bungalow verandas are ideal for admiring the sun's nightly dip into the ocean.

**Andaman Resort** (☎ 0 7472 8017; camping per site 50B, tent hire 150B, bungalows 350-700B) Just north of the village, this place has plain wooden bungalows under the shade of casuarinas, as well as rather incongruous blue-roofed concrete bungalows closer to the village. The beach here is pretty average.

**Pooh's Bungalows** (☎ 0 7472 8019; www.poohlpe.com; r 450-900B; ☎) The rooms here – two per bungalow – have no beach view, and are in a rather breeze-less spot inland from Hat Pattaya. However, they're popular because of easy access to Pooh's accommodating restaurant, dive shop, travel agent and internet café.

**Mountain Resort** (☎ 0 7472 8131; bungalows 450-1200B; ☎) This big resort has outstanding views from its hillside location. Winding wooden walkways lead down to the beach, where you'll find a terraced restaurant with

equally spectacular vistas. The huts are intricately designed from thatch and wood and come with verandas, some right on the beachfront. It's best avoided during Thai holidays, when it can be overcrowded.

**Varin Beach Resort** (☎ 0 1543 0505; www.varinbeachresort.com; bungalows 500-1200B; 🏠) This new enterprise has, you guessed it, thatch and wooden bungalows, near the beach, with varying levels of comfort. Look for the big blue marlin monument.

**Pattaya Song** (☎ 0 7472 8034; www.pattayasongresort.com; bungalows 1000-1500B) Above the rocks at the western end of the beach, this Italian-run pad has decent wood and concrete huts strung out either along the ocean or a little way up the hill. The Pattaya Seafood restaurant here serves excellent food and the resort can organise fishing and island-hopping trips around the area.

**Lipe Resort** (☎ 0 7472 4336; bungalows 600-2000B) The biggest player at Hat Pattaya, Lipe has a slightly haphazard selection of wood-and-concrete bungalows and a large bamboo restaurant on the beach. The top rooms here have massive windows looking out to sea, but the restaurant doesn't get great reviews.

#### DRINKING

**Karma Bar** (☎ 0 5199 3101) This bar lies nestled against the base of a limestone cliff below Mountain Resort and serves fresh cocktails, cold beer and toasties (jaffles) while spinning a great selection of MP3s.

A little bit inland, JJ's Jungle Bar is another good place for a tippie.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

The boats from Pak Bara (see p729) are currently the only way to reach Ko Lipe. The 10.30am boat from Pak Bara to Ko Tarutao continues on to Ko Lipe (450B, two hours). Other boats leave Pak Bara for Ko Lipe at 1.30pm (from 450B to 550B), stopping on the

way at Ko Bulon Leh. These boats return from Ko Lipe at around 9am. The fare between Ko Lipe and Ko Bulon Leh is 300B (one hour). None of these services run in the low season, but you can charter a boat to Ko Lipe from Pak Bara for a hefty 4000B each way.

#### Ko Adang & Ko Rawi

เกาะอาดัง/เกาะราวี

The island immediately north of Ko Lipe, **Ko Adang**, has brooding, densely forested hills, white-sand beaches and healthy coral reefs. Lots of snorkelling tours make a stop here but there are mooring buoys to prevent damage from anchors. Inland are jungle trails and tumbling waterfalls, including **Pirate's Falls**. Legend has it pirates used the waterfalls as a freshwater source, hence the name. There are great views from **Chado Cliff**, above the main beach, and green turtles lay their eggs here between September and December. The only accommodation is provided by the national park service, near its ranger station at **Laem Son** in the southeast of the island. There are **bungalows** (3-9 people 300-1500B), **longhouses** (4-bed r 400B) and facilities for **camping** (camping with own tent per person 20B, camping with tent hire 100-300B). A small restaurant provides basic meals.

**Ko Rawi** is 11km west of Ko Adang and has similar limestone hills and dense jungle, with first-rate beaches and large coral reefs offshore. Wild camping is allowed, with permission from the national park authorities. Other excellent snorkelling spots include the northern side of **Ko Yang** and tiny **Ko Hin Ngam**, which is known for its unique stripy pebbles. Legend has it that the stones are cursed and anyone who takes one away will experience bad luck until the stones are returned to their source.

You can get to Ko Adang on any of the boats that run to Ko Lipe (see left) and for the same fare; just tell the boat driver that you want to go to Ko Adang.