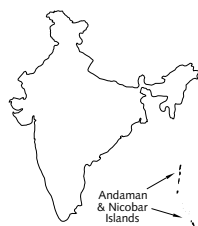


Andaman & Nicobar Islands



Once known as Kalapani – Black Waters – for their role as a feared penal settlement, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are now a relaxed tropical island outpost that belongs to India but is geographically closer to Southeast Asia. Superb, near-deserted beaches, incredible corals and marine life, an intriguing colonial past and the remnants of a Stone Age culture lure travellers to these mysterious islands, 1000km off the east coast of India in the Bay of Bengal.

Until the beginnings of colonial rule, the islands were populated mainly by indigenous peoples, but today the majority of the Andamans' population are mainland settlers or their descendants who live in and around Port Blair, the capital, on South Andaman. The territory comprises 572 tropical islands (of which 36 are inhabited), with unique wildlife and lush forests, although the Nicobar Islands are off-limits to tourists.

The islands are close to the epicentre of the undersea earthquake that caused the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, which, in turn, led to devastating loss of life and homes on the southerly Nicobar Islands and Little Andaman. Apart from flooding on low-lying areas of South Andaman Island and damage to the reefs near Wandoor, the main Andaman island group escaped major damage, though other islands such as Havelock and Interview noticeably tilted with the earth movement. Pre-tsunami, small-scale tourist infrastructure had been slowly developing but the almost total absence of tourists during 2005, coupled with the cost and energy of repairing the damage, demoralised many islanders and there's still much to do to revive these beautiful islands' tourism facilities.

ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS

HIGHLIGHTS

- Snorkel the reefs, lounge on the beaches and cruise through mangrove swamps on **Havelock Island** (p1118)
- Scuba dive among the coral and big fish of the islands' world-class sites, accessible from **Havelock Island** (p1119)
- Explore the ghosts of the colonial past on **Ross Island** (p1117) – the former 'Paris of the East'
- Take a road trip through the jungle heart of the Andamans to the quiet coastal beaches and islands around **Mayabunder** and **Diglipur** (p1121)
- Relive the horror of Port Blair's origin as a penal colony at the **Cellular Jail** (p1113)



History

It's not known when the first inhabitants arrived on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands but their presence was documented in the 2nd century by Greek astronomer Ptolemy, and again in the 7th century by Chinese monk Xuan Zang during his 17-year journey through India.

In the late 17th century, the islands were annexed by the Marathas, whose empire consumed vast areas of India. Two centuries later the British found a use for them as a penal colony, initially to detain 'regular' criminals from mainland India and later to incarcerate political dissidents – the freedom fighters for Indian independence. During WWII, the islands were occupied by the Japanese, who were regarded with ambivalence by the islanders. Some initiated guerrilla activities against them, while others regarded them as liberators from British colonialism.

Following Independence in 1947, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were incorporated into the Indian Union. Since then,

FAST FACTS

- Population: 356,265
- Area: 8248 sq km
- Telephone code: ☎ 03192
- When to go: December to early April

massive migration from the mainland has inflated the island population from only a few thousand to more than 350,000. During this influx, tribal land rights and environmental protection were disregarded to some extent, but now local lobby groups are becoming more vocal.

Climate

Sea breezes keep temperatures within the 23°C to 31°C range and the humidity at around 80% all year. The southwest monsoons come to the islands between roughly mid-May and early October, and the northeast monsoons between November and December. The best

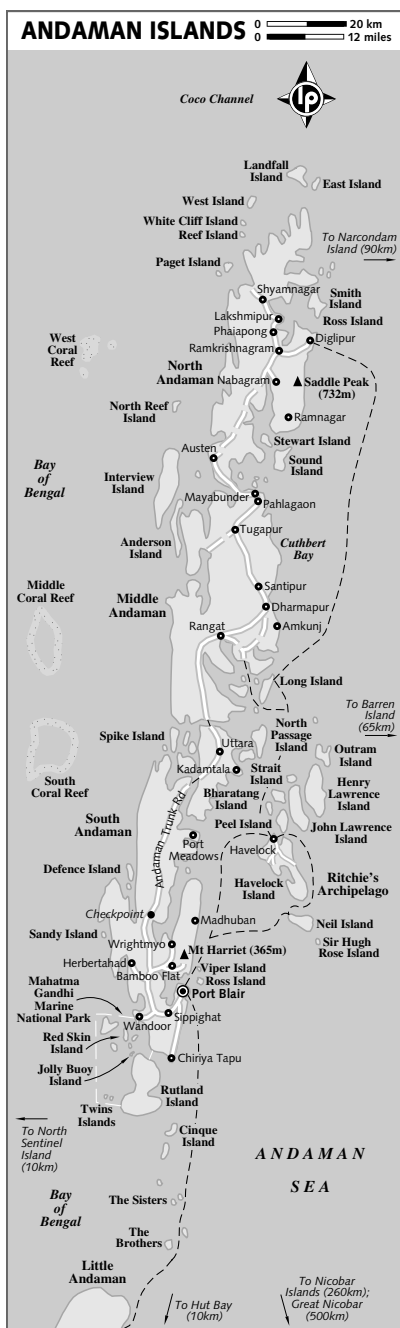
EARTHQUAKES & AFTERSHOCKS

The Andaman and Nicobar Island chain is no stranger to earthquakes and tremors. In 1941 an earthquake measuring 7.7 on the Richter scale rocked South and Middle Andaman, destroying many buildings and causing the British administrative centre on Ross Island to be abandoned. A resulting tsunami wave of about 1m reportedly reached the east coast of India, and more than a dozen earthquakes and aftershocks were felt over the next six months on the islands.

It was a far more devastating event at 7.58am on 26 December 2004, when an undersea earthquake measuring 9.0 occurred off the northeastern tip of Sumatra (Indonesia). It was not the tremors that caused the most damage, but the powerful tsunami that swept across the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, devastating parts of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, the Maldives, Thailand and the Nicobar Islands. Soon after, a massive aftershock occurred beneath the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, causing more damage and uplifting several islands along the west coast of the Andaman chain (including Interview Island) by as much as 2m. The tsunami's effect on the low-lying Nicobar Islands was severe. When the wave hit the islands, including Great Nicobar, Car Nicobar, Little Andaman, Nancowrie, Katchall and many smaller islands, thousands were caught in its wake. Official figures show 6100 confirmed dead, many more missing and thousands left homeless, evacuated to relief camps in Port Blair. Initial access to some islands proved difficult, so many people were left stranded for days, without food or water, waiting for help. The islands' tribal people suffered few fatalities; responding to signs in the natural world, most had moved to higher ground before the wave hit.

Fortunately the northerly and more densely populated Andaman Island chain was largely spared. Low-lying parts of South Andaman were flooded, leaving many homeless, and water surged into shore areas of Port Blair and islands such as Havelock, but with little lasting damage.

British geologist Dr Mike Searle says some 1300km of the boundary between the Indian plate to the west and the Burma-Andaman-Sumatra plate to the east, was ruptured, while the Indian plate is presently pushing under the Burma-Andaman-Sumatra plate to the east. While such a catastrophe will hopefully never again be seen again, these remote islands are clearly a seismic hotspot.



time to visit is between December and early April, when the days are warm, but not oppressive, and the nights pleasant.

Geography & Environment

The islands form the peaks of a vast sub-merged mountain range that extends for almost 1000km between Myanmar (Burma) and Sumatra in Indonesia. The majority of the land area is taken up by the Andamans at 6408 sq km. The Nicobar Islands begin 50km south of Little Andaman.

The isolation of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands has led to the evolution of many endemic species of both plants and animals. Of 62 identified mammals, 32 are unique to the islands. Among these are the Andaman wild pig, the crab-eating macaque, the masked palm civet and species of tree shrews and bats. Almost 50% of the islands' 250 bird species are endemic, and include eagles, ground-dwelling megapodes, swiftlets (*hawabill*), doves, teals and hornbills. The isolated beaches provide excellent breeding grounds for turtles. While dolphins are frequently sighted, the once abundant dugongs have all but vanished.

Mangroves are an important aspect of the landscape, offering a natural protective barrier to both land and sea. Further inland the tall evergreen and moist deciduous forests contain many important tree species, including the renowned padauk – a hardwood with light and dark colours occurring in the same tree.

Information

Even though they're 1000km east of the mainland, the Andamans still run on Indian time. This means that it can be dark by 5pm and light by 4am. The peak season is December and January, and in September and October domestic holidaymakers can fill literally every bed in Port Blair; book accommodation in advance if you're travelling at these times.

Andaman & Nicobar Tourism (A&N Tourism; Map p1114; ☎ 232747; www.tourism.andaman.nic.in; Port Blair; ⓧ 8.30am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat) is the main tourism body for the islands.

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation choices and standards are on the way up in the Andamans, despite the slow progress of tourism recovery after the tsunami. Just a few years ago the only places to stay outside Port Blair were tatty government guesthouses and basic forest rest houses.

FESTIVALS IN THE ANDAMAN ISLANDS

The 10-day **Island Tourism Festival** is held in Port Blair, usually in January. Dance groups come from surrounding islands and the mainland, and various cultural performances are held at the Exhibition Complex. One of the festival's more bizarre aspects is the Andaman dog show, but there's also a flower show, a baby show and a fancy-dress competition! For information, check the website of **A&N Tourism** (www.tourism.andaman.nic.in).

These days you can stay in cheap bamboo huts or a handful of romantic upmarket resorts on Havelock and Neil Islands. Although taxes are low, accommodation is expensive by Indian standards – some of the midrange and top-end places in Port Blair are grossly overpriced for the quality – but budget travellers can find a cheap lodge in Port Blair or a simple hut by the beach on Havelock for less than Rs 150.

Prices shoot up in the peak season (15 December to 15 January). Prices given in this chapter are for midseason (1 October to 30 April, excluding peak). May to September is low season.

Camping is currently not permitted on public land or national parks in the islands.

PERMITS

Most senior civil servants come to Port Blair on two-year postings from the mainland. With such a turnover of staff, be aware that rules and regulations regarding tourism and permits are subject to sudden changes.

All foreigners need a permit to visit the Andaman Islands, and it's issued free on arrival. The 30-day permit (which can be extended to 45 days), allows foreigners to stay in Port Blair. Overnight stays are also permitted on South and Middle Andaman (excluding tribal areas), North Andaman (Diglipur), Long Island, North Passage, Little Andaman (excluding tribal areas), Havelock and Neil Islands.

The permit also allows day trips to Jolly Buoy, South Cinque, Red Skin, Ross, Narcondam, Interview and Rutland Islands, as well as The Brothers and The Sisters.

To obtain the permit, air travellers simply present their passport and fill out a form on arrival at Port Blair airport. Permits are usu-

ally issued for as long as you ask, up to the 30-day maximum.

Boat passengers will probably be met by an immigration official on arrival, but if not should seek out the immigration office at Haddo Jetty immediately – you won't be able to travel around without the permit (police will frequently ask to see it, especially when disembarking on another island, and hotels may also need the details). Check current regulations regarding boat travel with:

A&N Tourism office (Map p1114; ☎ 232747; <http://tourism.andaman.nic.in>; Port Blair; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat)

Foreigners' Registration Office (Chennai (Madras; ☎ 044-28278210); Kolkata (Calcutta; ☎ 033-22473300)

Shipping Corporation of India (SCI; www.shipindia.com) (Chennai (☎ 044-25231401; Rajaji Salai); Kolkata (☎ 033-22482354; 1st fl, 13 Strand Rd); Port Blair (Map p1114; ☎ 233347; Aberdeen Bazaar)

National Parks & Sanctuaries

Additional permits are required to visit some national parks and sanctuaries. To save a lot of running around, take advantage of the 'single window' system for permits and information at the A&N Tourism office (see opposite) in Port Blair, where there's now also a **Forestry Department Desk** (☎ 8.30-11am & 3-5pm, closed Sun). Here you can find out whether a permit is needed, how to go about getting it, how much it costs and whether it is in fact possible to get one (it's not always).

If you plan to do something complicated, you'll be sent to the **Chief Wildlife Warden** (CWW; Map p1114; ☎ 233549; Haddo Rd; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) where your application should consist of a letter stating your case, the name of the boat and the dates involved; all things being equal, the permit should be issued within the hour.

For most day permits it's not the hassle of getting it but the cost that hurts. For areas such as Mahatma Gandhi Marine National Park, and Ross and Smith Islands near Diglipur, the permits cost Rs 50/500 for Indians/foreigners. For Saddle Peak National Park, also near Diglipur, the cost is Rs 25/250.

Students with valid ID often only pay minimal entry fees, but must produce a letter from the Chief Wildlife Warden in Port Blair authorising the discount.

The Nicobar Islands are normally off limits to all except Indian nationals engaged in research, government business or trade.

Activities

DIVING

Crystal-clear waters, superb coral, kaleidoscopic marine life and some virtually undiscovered sites make the Andaman Islands a world-class diving destination.

Dive Operators

There are currently two professional dive outfits based on Havelock Island, and the main dive season – depending on the monsoon – runs from about November to about April. The centres offer fully equipped boat dives, Discover Scuba Diving courses (around US\$100), open water (US\$350) and advanced courses (US\$270), as well as Divemaster training. Prices vary depending on the location, number of participants and duration of the course, but diving in the Andamans is not cheap (compared with Southeast Asia) at around US\$45/70 for a single/double boat dive. In national parks there's an additional cost of Rs 1000 per person per day payable directly to the park.

Barefoot Scuba (Map p1118; ☎ in Port Blair 237656; www.barefootindia.com) Based at Café del Mar at No 3 Village in Havelock, this dive operation is connected with Barefoot at Havelock resort.

Dive India (Map p1118; ☎ 282187; www.diveindia.com) Based at Island Vinnie's Tropical Beach Cabanas, midway between Villages No 3 and 5, this operator offers a variety of dive and accommodation packages.

Another long-term dive operator, **Andaman Dive Club** (Map p1118; ☎ 282002; www.andamandiveclub.com), is based at No 1 Village, though he's been off-island for a while. If around, he's also recommended.

Dive Sites

Much of the Andamans' underwater life can be seen between 10m and 20m, and there are sites suitable for all levels of dive experience. The greatest range of options is off Havelock Island where sites include Mac Point, Aquarium, Barracuda City, Turtle Bay, Seduction Point, Lighthouse, The Wall, Pilot Reef and Minerva Lodge. Neil Island sites are also visited on day-dives from Havelock. Check out www.diveindia.com for detailed information on these and other dive sites.

SNORKELLING

Much easier and cheaper to arrange than diving, snorkelling can be highly rewarding.

Snorkelling gear – though not always good gear – is available for hire, but you may prefer to bring your own or buy some from Port Blair (or the Indian mainland, where it's cheaper and the choice is greater). Havelock Island is one of the best, and certainly easiest, places for snorkelling as many accommodation places organise boat trips out to otherwise inaccessible coral reefs and islands, and you can snorkel offshore on Neil Island.

The closest place to Port Blair for snorkelling is North Bay. Other relatively easily accessible snorkelling sites include Red Skin and Jolly Buoy, near Wandoor.

SURFING & FISHING

Intrepid surfing travellers have been whispering about **Little Andaman** since it first opened up to foreigners several years ago. Although the island is still quite remote, surfers continue to drift down there for the reliable waves off the east coast. **SEAL** (<http://seal-asia.com>) offers a couple of live-aboard surfing charters a year, with pick-up and drop-off in Port Blair, between mid-March and mid-May.

The Andamans also have game fishing opportunities. The occasional charter boat out of Phuket makes **live-aboard trips** (www.andaman-island-fishing.com), usually around March.

Getting There & Away

Getting to the Andamans can be an adventure in itself if you take the boat from Chennai or Kolkata. It's a long journey and you'll need to plan ahead as there's usually only one or two sailings a fortnight from each mainland city. Flying from Chennai, Kolkata or Delhi is relatively quick and easy but book ahead to ensure a seat in high season.

AIR

Indian Airlines (Chennai ☎ 044-2855201; Kolkata ☎ 033-22110730; Port Blair Map p1114; ☎ 233108; ✈ 9am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Sat) flies daily to Port Blair from Chennai (US\$230) and Kolkata (US\$245). **Jet Airways** (Chennai ☎ 044-28414141; Port Blair ☎ 236922; ✈ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun) flies at least once daily from Chennai (US\$235). Air Deccan flies daily from Chennai, and Air Sahara flies daily from Delhi; their airport counters open to coincide with flights.

There's been talk for some years about direct flights from Phuket (Thailand) to Port Blair, but these seem to have been shelved after the tsunami, and at least until the airport

ISLAND INDIGENES

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands' indigenous peoples constitute just 12% of the population and, in most cases, their numbers are decreasing.

Onge

Two-thirds of Little Andaman's Onge Island was taken over by the Forest Department and 'settled' in 1977. The 100 or so remaining members of the Onge tribe live in a 25-sq-km reserve covering Dugong Creek and South Bay, and were (temporarily) relocated to refugee camps in Port Blair following the tsunami. Anthropological studies suggest that the Onge population has declined due to demoralisation through loss of territory.

Sentinelese

The Sentinelese, unlike the other tribes in these islands, have consistently repelled outside contact. Every few years, contact parties arrive on the beaches of North Sentinel Island, the last redoubt of the Sentinelese, with gifts of coconuts, bananas, pigs and red plastic buckets, only to be showered with arrows, although in recent years encounters have been a little less hostile. About 250 Sentinelese remain.

Andamanese

Now numbering only about 40, it seems impossible that the Andamanese can escape extinction. There were around 7000 Andamanese in the mid-19th century but friendliness to the colonisers was their undoing, and by 1971 all but 19 of the population had been swept away by measles, syphilis and influenza epidemics. They've been resettled on tiny Strait Island.

Jarawa

The 350 remaining Jarawa occupy the 639-sq-km reserve on South and Middle Andaman Islands. In 1953 the chief commissioner requested an armed sea plane bomb Jarawa settlements and their territory has been consistently disrupted by the Andaman Trunk Rd, forest clearance and settler and tourist encroachment. Hardly surprisingly, most Jarawa remain hostile to contact although encounters with outsiders are becoming more common.

Shompen

Only about 250 Shompen remain in the forests on Great Nicobar. Seminomadic hunter-gatherers who live along the riverbanks, they have resisted integration and avoid areas occupied by Indian immigrants.

Nicobarese

The 30,000 Nicobarese are the only indigenous people whose numbers are not decreasing. The majority have converted to Christianity and have been partly assimilated into contemporary Indian society. Living in village units led by a head man, they farm pigs and cultivate coconuts, yams and bananas. The Nicobarese, who probably descended from people of Malaysia and Myanmar, inhabit a number of islands in the Nicobar group, centred on Car Nicobar, the region worst affected by the tsunami.

is upgraded to full international status. Check the tourism department's **website** (<http://tourism.andaman.nic.in>) for updates.

BOAT

There are usually four to six sailings a month between Port Blair and the Indian mainland –

fortnightly to/from Kolkata (56 hours) and weekly (in high season) to/from Chennai (60 hours) on four vessels operated by **SCI** (Map p1114; ☎ 233347; www.shipindia.com; Aberdeen Bazaar, Port Blair). The schedule is erratic, so check with the SCI in advance or see the **A&N Tourism** (www.tourism.andaman.nic.in) website, which usually posts an

up-to-date schedule. Also, take the sailing times with a large grain of salt – travellers have reported sitting on the boat at Kolkata harbour for up to 12 hours, or waiting to dock near Port Blair for several hours. So with hold-ups, and variable weather and sea conditions, the trip can take three full days or more. The service from Chennai goes via Cap Nicobar once a month, taking an extra two days, but only residents may disembark. There is usually a service once a month from Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh (see p953 for more details).

If you're buying your return ticket in Port Blair, go to the 1st floor of the A&N Tourism office where they can reserve you a berth under the tourist-quota system; you then take the approval letter to the Directorate of Shipping Services' ticket office at Phoenix Bay Jetty. This process can take some days, so it's simpler to arrange return tickets on the mainland when purchasing your outward ticket.

Ships currently in use are the MV *Nancowry* and MV *Swarajdweep* from Chennai, the MV *Nicobar* and MV *Akbar* from Kolkata, and MV *Harshavardan* from both ports.

Classes vary slightly between the boats, but the cheapest class of accommodation is bunk (Rs 1510), which can be difficult to get. Next up is 2nd or B class (Rs 3870, 16 berths), 1st or A class (Rs 4860, four to six berths) and deluxe cabin (Rs 5880). Food (tiffin for breakfast, and thalis for lunch and dinner) costs around Rs 150 per day. Almost everyone complains; bring something (fruit in particular) to supplement your diet. Some bedding is supplied, but if you're travelling bunk class, bring a sleeping sheet and be prepared for fetid toilets. Many travellers take a hammock to string up on deck.

Getting Around

All roads – and ferries – lead to Port Blair, but getting around the islands can be a slow process, particularly to outlying islands. The main island group – South, Middle and North Andaman – is connected by road, with ferry crossings and bridges. Buses run south from Port Blair to Wandoor, and north to Bharatang, Rangat, Mayabunder and finally to Diglipur, 325km north of the capital. But don't expect to cover any more than 30km an hour, even in a taxi.

Of course, a boat is the only way to reach most islands and both the rigour and romance

of ferry travel is alive and well here – you'll often see flying fish and even dolphins from crowded decks. It's relatively quick and easy to get to Havelock and Neil Islands, and there are regular ferries to Rangat, Mayabunder and Diglipur among others. The best source of information about inter-island ferry schedules is in the daily newsheets in Port Blair; the *Andaman Herald* and *Daily Telegrams* list sailing times up to a week in advance.

A subsidised inter-island helicopter service, launched in 2003, remains in service to destinations including Havelock Island (Rs 850; twice weekly) and Diglipur (Rs 2125; once weekly). Bookings must be made at the islands' **Secretariat** (☎ 230093) in Port Blair.

Indian mainland train bookings can also be made in the Secretariat complex, at the **Railway Bookings Centre** (☎ 8am-12.30pm & 1-2pm) which is very useful for onward travel plans.

PORT BLAIR

pop 100,186

The green, ramshackle capital sprawls around a harbour on the east coast of South Andaman and is the administrative nerve centre of the islands. There's plenty to see in town relating to the islands' colonial past plus a couple of interesting museums, and as this is the only place to change money, reliably access the internet and book (and wait for) onward transport, most travellers will spend at least a couple of days here. If you want to experience the more natural beauty of the Andamans – above and below the water – book a ferry and move on to Havelock or one of the other islands.

Orientation

Most of the hotels, the bus station and inter-island ferries from Phoenix Bay Jetty are around or above the Aberdeen Bazaar area. The airport is about 4km south of town.

Information

EMERGENCY

Aberdeen Police Station (☎ 233077, 32100; MG Rd)

GB Pant Hospital (☎ 232102; GB Pant Rd)

INTERNET ACCESS

Browsenet@Hitech (MA Rd; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 8.30am-9.30pm, closed Sun)

Net Across (Junglighat Main Rd; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 9am-10pm) Next door to the India Tourism office.

Samsuva's Internet (MG Rd; per hr Rs 40; ☎ 9am-8pm) Between post office and YMCA.

MONEY

Port Blair is the only place in the Andamans where you can change cash or travellers cheques, and find an ATM.

ICICI ATM (cnr Foreshore & MA Rds)

Island Travels (☎ 233358; islandtravels@yahoo.com; Aberdeen Bazaar; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) This is one of several travel agencies with foreign-exchange facilities.

State Bank of India (MA Rd; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-3pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat) Travellers cheques and foreign currency can be changed here.

UTI Bank (cnr MG Rd & MA Rd, Aberdeen Bazaar) Near the youth hostel.

POST

Main post office (MG Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

A&N Tourism office (☎ 232747; www.tourism.andaman.nic.in; Kamaraj Rd; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat) This is the main island tourist office and the place to book government accommodation.

India Tourism (☎ 233006; 2nd fl, 189 Junglighat Main Rd; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) Formerly the Government of India tourist office, it has little information about mainland India but its staff are eager to help.

Sights & Activities**CELLULAR JAIL NATIONAL MEMORIAL**

Built by the British over a period of 18 years from 1890, and preserved as a shrine to India's freedom fighters, the **Cellular Jail National Memorial** (GB Pant Rd; admission Rs 5, camera/video Rs 10/50; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-5pm; closed Mon) is well worth a visit to understand the islands' colonial past and its significance in the memory of the Indian people. Originally seven wings containing 698 cells radiated from a central tower, but only three remain. These remnants, however, give a fair impression of the 'hell on earth' that the prisoners here endured. There's an art gallery, museum, martyrs' memorial, the original gallows, and good views from what was once the central tower.

An informative and atmospheric **sound-and-light show** (adult/child Rs 20/10) depicts the jail's brutal history. It's in Hindi nightly at 6pm and usually in English at 7.15pm but check this, as language and timing vary depending on numbers of local and overseas visitors in town. No refunds for bad weather!

SAMUDRIKA MARINE MUSEUM

Run by the Indian navy, this interesting **museum** (☎ 232012, ext 2214; Haddo Rd; adult/child Rs 10/5,

camera/video Rs 20/40; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) is a good place to get a handle on the islands' eco-system. Across several galleries you'll find informative displays on the islands' tribal communities, plants, animals and shells (check out the giant clam shell), as well as rooms dedicated to corals and marine archaeology.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL MUSEUM

With excellent displays of tools, clothing and photographs of the indigenous islanders, this **museum** (☎ 232291; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/50; ☎ 9am-1pm & 1.30-4.30pm, closed Thu) helps unlock the mysteries of local tribal cultures. There are authentic reconstructions of tribal dwellings with decent – if old fashioned – information in English, and a small selection of Andaman-related books in the gift shop.

MINI-ZOO

Some of the 200 animal species unique to the islands can be seen in rusting cages at the small and rather sad **zoo** (Haddo Rd; adult/child Rs 2/1; ☎ 8am-5pm, closed Mon). These include the Nicobar pigeon, the Andaman pig (the staple diet of some tribal groups) and the crab-eating macaque. Feeding time is 8.30am to 9am, and there's a short film shown at 10am and 3pm.

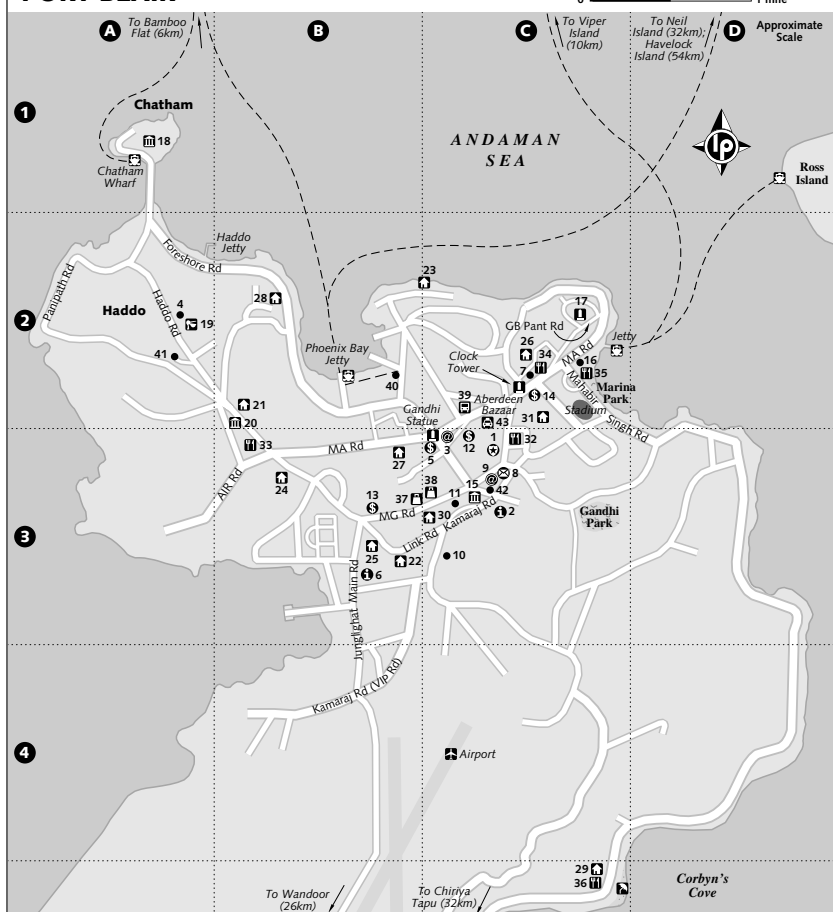
FOREST MUSEUM & CHATHAM SAW MILL

Located on Chatham Island (reached by a road bridge), the **saw mill** (admission Rs 2; ☎ 8am-2.30pm, closed Sun) was set up by the British in 1836 and was one of the largest wood processors in Asia. Inside is the forest museum, which displays locally grown woods, including the padauk, and has displays on the history of timber milling on the island. It may not be to everyone's taste – especially conservationists – but it gives a different perspective on the islands' colonial history and economy.

AQUARIUM & SWIMMING POOL

The **aquarium** (Mahabir Singh Rd; adult/child Rs 5/3; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-4.45pm, closed Wed & 2nd Sat of month) displays some of the 350 species found in the Andaman Sea – many pickled in formaldehyde – as well as more interesting live specimens in small tanks, including puffer fish, batfish and tiger fish. Opposite the aquarium, the Olympic-sized public **swimming pool** (admission Rs 25; ☎ Mon-Sat) is clean enough, and open to men only 6.30am to 8am and 5pm to 6pm, to women only 4pm to 5pm, and to families 6pm to 7pm. It's closed at other times.

PORT BLAIR

0 2 km
0 1 mile

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SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	EATING 🍴	
Anthropological Museum.....15 C3	Annapurna.....32 C3	
Aquarium & Swimming Pool..16 C2	Durbar Hotel & Juice Bar.....33 B3	
Cellular Jail National		

CORBYN'S COVE

Corbyn's Cove, 4km east of the airport and 7km south of the town, is the nearest beach to Port Blair – a small curve of sand backed by palms. It's popular for swimming, sunset-viewing and lazing around, and is packed with picnicking locals on Sunday and holidays.

Tours

Possible day tours include trips to Wandoor Beach and Chiryu Tapu, or to Mt Harriet. There are few scheduled tours, but the following agencies can arrange private tours (which basically mean hiring a car and driver).

Andaman Teal House (☎ 232642; Haddo Rd) An A&N Tourism agency.

Island Travels (☎ 233034; islandtravels@yahoo.com; Aberdeen Bazaar) The most helpful and clued-up of the agencies, used to dealing with international travellers.

Shompen Travels (☎ 233028; Kamaraj Rd) Provides local tours.

Sleeping

Accommodation is quite scattered in Port Blair, but most places are within a few kilometres of each other around MA Rd and Aberdeen Bazaar. Within each price range there's a huge variety in quality, and accommodation in general is higher priced than its equivalent on the mainland. Checkout is usually 8am, to get ready for early-flight arrivals.

BUDGET

Youth Hostel (☎ 232459; dm/d Rs 50/100) Opposite the stadium, this is a rare Indian YHA, although the only discount is for students (Rs 30). It's still the cheapest place around but it's often filled with groups. Management can be unwilling to accommodate foreigners.

Central Lodge (☎ 243791; Link Rd; s/d with shared bathroom Rs 70/120, with private bathroom Rs 80/150) Set back from the road, this is a basic wooden building. Small rooms are a bit grim but it's a popular cheapie – a throwback to simple lodgings on the backpacker trail of old, minus the banana pancakes.

Jagannath Guest House (☎ 232148; 72 MA Rd; dm/s/d Rs 60/200/300) This is a reasonably good budget choice, not least because the management is accustomed to travellers. Rooms are simple but relatively clean and most have a small balcony.

Holiday Resort (☎ 234231; Prem Nagar; s/d Rs 350/500, with AC Rs 600/800; ☎ ☎) Don't be fooled by the name – this isn't a resort or much of a

place for a holiday, but it's central, cleanish and straddles budget and midrange mainly because there are AC rooms with TVs.

Hotel Raja Monsoon Villa (☎ 241133; s/d Rs 400/550, with AC Rs 550/900) Centrally located, this tatty, clean and friendly family-run hotel is in a side-street of small shops and tea stalls opposite the town's main mosque.

Many cheap lodges line Aberdeen Bazaar.

MIDRANGE

Andaman Teal House (☎ 234060; Haddo Rd; d with out/with AC Rs 400/800; ☎ ☎) Run by A&N Tourism (bookings must be made through the tourist office), this is reasonably central and has a range of ageing rooms spilling through gardens and down the hillside. The AC rooms at the top are better, with TV, carpet and furniture – the others are bare and musty.

Hotel Aparupa (☎ 246582; hotelaparupa@yahoo.com; Link Rd; s/d Rs 750/1050, with AC Rs 900/1200; ☎ ☎) This smart hotel has 26 smallish but immaculate rooms with tile floors, TV and central AC. There's a good little restaurant with a view of sorts and a bar.

Sun Sea Resort (☎ 238330; MG Rd; s/d from Rs 900/1250; ☎ ☎) New in 2006, at these prices (which include breakfast) this is the best value in town. Clean, comfortable and central – with a truly unique exterior, a purple bar and an AC restaurant – it is, however, nowhere near the sea.

Megapode Nest Tourist Complex (☎ 232207; anidco@vsnl.com; off Haddo Rd; s/d from Rs 1000/1400, cottages Rs 2000; ☎ ☎) At Haddo, on the hill above the bay, the Megapode Nest is good value in the upper midrange. Many of the rooms have harbour views and there are large AC doubles and generous yurt-style AC cottages. Prices include breakfast, and it's pleasant to sit in the garden with a cold beer.

TOP END

Major credit cards are accepted at the following hotels and prices include breakfast. They have their charms, but don't expect luxury; they're overpriced for the facilities offered.

Fortune Resort – Bay Island (☎ 234101; bayislandresort@fortuneparkhotels.com; Marine Hill; s/d from Rs 2749/3960; ☎ ☎) Port Blair's top hotel boasts a great location, perched above the ocean with fine sea views from its terraced garden and balcony restaurant. The rooms, while comfortable with polished floors, balconies, neat furnishings, are small and make sure to ask for

a sea-facing room. There's a swimming pool and a good restaurant and bar.

Peerless Resort (☎ 229263; pblbeachinn@sancharnet.in; s/d Rs 2250/3650, cottage d Rs 4500; ♿) The location is the main plus for Peerless Resort – just back from Corbyn's Cove Beach. Otherwise, the rooms are ageing, undersized and in need of serious maintenance and a good clean, although most have a balcony and sea views. The manicured gardens are pleasant, and there's a tennis court, bar and restaurant.

Eating

Port Blair has a range of eating places – from cheap Indian thali places around the bazaar to multi-cuisine hotel restaurants. Good seafood is available at a few places, and those listed are open for breakfast, lunch and dinner unless stated otherwise.

Annapurna (MG Rd; from Rs 20) This spotless veg restaurant, just south of Aberdeen Bazaar, whips up good fresh *paratha* for breakfast and afternoon snacks, as well as main meals; go early or late to avoid local tour groups in peak season.

Durbar Hotel & Juice Bar (near junction Haddo & MA Rd; mains from Rs 20) For cheap clean eats and juices, try this place; the lunchtime side dish of spicy fish fillet (Rs 10) goes well with a thali (Rs 20).

New Lighthouse Restaurant (Marina Park; mains Rs 25-75, seafood Rs 150-350) A decaying structure next to the aquarium, this has a breezy semi-open-air section with a view over the water across sundry piles of rubbish. Fresh seafood – including whole fish, crab and lobster (prices depend on weight and season) – is the main attraction, and you can also get breakfast or a beer here.

Lighthouse Residency (MA Rd, Aberdeen Bazaar; mains Rs 45-110; ☺ lunch & dinner) Modern and trying hard to be chic, this once bright restaurant and cocktail bar had been seriously overtaken by mould when we visited. However there's AC, the beer's cold, and Thai and Chinese dishes make a welcome addition to the Indian favourites.

Waves (Corbyn's Cove; mains Rs 30-95; ☺ lunch & dinner) This breezy open-air beachfront restaurant is a good spot for lunch or an evening meal beneath the palms; indoors it's a bit dismal. Seafood is available (Malai prawns Rs 75, crab and lobster by weight), along with Thai and Indian dishes. You can get a beer at the resort next door.

Mandalay Restaurant (Marine Hill) The open-deck restaurant at Fortune Resort – Bay Island is enjoyable for the views alone, and you can feast in season on the daily buffets (breakfast Rs 200, lunch and dinner Rs 350).

Shopping

Aberdeen Bazaar is lined with stalls selling cheap clothing and household goods. Island crafts such as fine wood carvings, shell jewellery, bamboo and cane furniture, are available from a handful of emporiums and speciality shops. Most of the shells on sale are collected legally – a good emporium can show proof of this – but, as always, be aware of your home countries' restrictions on importing them.

Andaman Handicrafts Emporium (☎ 240141; MG Rd, Middle Point)

Sagarika Government Emporium (MG Rd, Middle Point)

Getting There & Away

See p1110 for details on transport to and from the Andaman Islands.

BOAT

Most inter-island ferries depart from Phoenix Bay Jetty. Advance tickets for boats can be purchased from the ticket counters between 9am and 11am the day before travel. On some boats, such as the Neil and Havelock Island ferries, tickets can be purchased on the boat but in high season you risk missing out.

From Chatham Wharf there are hourly passenger ferries to Bamboo Flat (Rs 3, 15 minutes).

BUS

The bus stand in Port Blair has a clear, current timetable hanging from the roof.

Services include four daily buses to Wandoor (Rs 8, 1½ hours). There's a daily bus at 4.30am to Diglipur (Rs 120, 12 hours). A direct bus goes to Mayabunder at 5am and 10.30am (Rs 95, nine hours) and to Rangat at 5.45am and 10.50am (Rs 65, six hours).

If you want to take the scenic 48km road trip to Bamboo Flat and Mount Harriet, there's a bus at 8.15am and 4pm (Rs 15, 1½ hours); returning by ferry will take only 15 minutes.

Getting Around

The central area is easy enough to get around on foot, but if you want to get out to Corbyn's Cove, Haddo or Chatham Island, you'll need

some form of transport. A taxi or autorickshaw from the airport to Aberdeen Bazaar costs around Rs 50. From Aberdeen Bazaar to Phoenix Bay Jetty is about Rs 25 and to Haddo Jetty it's around Rs 35.

A good way to explore the island south of Port Blair is by moped or motorbike. They can be hired through **Govindamma & Co** (☎ 232999; gdmamaha@yahoo.co.in; off Haddo Rd) for Rs 150 per day for a gearless scooter or Rs 200 per day for a 125cc motorbike. Rs 1000 deposit is required and helmets (of sorts) are supplied. Go to their Yamaha workshop on 2nd DP St, opposite the Hindi Medium School on Haddo Rd but call ahead to check availability.

Bicycles are good for getting around the town and the immediate Port Blair area. They can be hired from stalls in Aberdeen Bazaar for Rs 40 per day.

AROUND PORT BLAIR & SOUTH ANDAMAN

Ross Island

An essential half-day trip from Port Blair, this eerie place was once the administrative headquarters for the British. **Ross Island** (admission Rs 20) is where all the action was in those heady colonial days and newspapers of the day fondly called it the 'Paris of the East'. However, the manicured gardens and grand ballrooms were destroyed by an earthquake in 1941. Six months later, after the Japanese entered WWII, the British transferred their headquarters to Port Blair. The island was again damaged by the tsunami in 2004.

Many of the buildings still stand as evocative ruined shells slowly being consumed by trees. Landscaped paths cross the island and all of the buildings are labelled. There's a small museum with historical displays and photos of Ross Island in its heyday.

Ferries to Ross Island (Rs 16, 20 minutes) depart from the jetty behind the Aquarium in Port Blair at 8.30am, 10.30am, 12.30pm and 2pm Thursday to Tuesday; check current times when you buy your ticket, as times can be affected by tides.

Viper Island

The afternoon boat trip to **Viper Island** (admission Rs 5) is worthwhile to see the sobering remains of the ochre-coloured brick jail and the gallows built by the British in 1867. Viper is named after a 19th-century British trading ship that was wrecked nearby.

A harbour cruise to Viper Island leaves from the jetty behind the Aquarium daily at 3pm (Rs 65, 45 minutes each way) stopping at the island for about 20 minutes. On Wednesday (when no boats are going to Ross Island), there are more frequent ferries.

North Bay

This is the most easily accessible snorkelling bay to Port Blair. A combined boat tour to Ross and Viper Islands and North Bay leaves daily from the jetty behind the Aquarium (per person Rs 250; ☎ 9.30am-5pm), allowing 2½ hours to snorkel and explore the bay.

Mt Harriet

Mt Harriet (365m) is across the inlet, north of Port Blair, and there's a road up to the top with good views and good birding. To reach Mt Harriet, take the Bamboo Flat passenger ferry (Rs 3, 15 minutes), which leaves regularly from Chatham Jetty. From Bamboo Flat the road runs 7km along the coast and up to the summit. Taxis will do the trip for around Rs 250 if you don't want to walk.

Wandoor

Wandoor, a tiny speck of a village 29km southwest of Port Blair, is the jumping-off point for **Mahatma Gandhi Marine National Park** (Indian/foreigner Rs 50/500), which covers 280 sq km and comprises 15 islands. The diverse scenery includes mangrove creeks, tropical rainforest and reefs supporting 50 types of coral. The marine park's snorkelling sites at **Jolly Buoy** and **Red Skin** islands, damaged during the tsunami, have reopened and boats leave somewhat erratically from Wandoor Jetty for visits to both (per person Rs 300); check the current situation with the Forestry Department desk at A&N Tourism in Port Blair. You can pick up your permit there, or at the office next to the Wandoor Jetty. However, if Havelock or Neil Islands are on your Andamans itinerary, you may find it easier and cheaper to wait until you reach them for your underwater experience.

Buses run from Port Blair to Wandoor (Rs 8, 1½ hours). About 2km beyond the Wandoor Jetty are a number of quiet, sandy beaches with some excellent snorkelling.

Chiriyapu

Chiriyapu, 30km south of Port Blair, is a tiny village with beaches and mangroves.

There's a beach about 2km south of Chiriya Tapu that has some of the best snorkelling in the area. There are seven buses a day to the village from Port Blair (Rs 8, 1½ hours) and it's possible to arrange boats from here to Cinque Island.

Cinque Island

The uninhabited islands of North and South Cinque, connected by a sandbar, are part of the wildlife sanctuary south of Wandoor. The islands are surrounded by coral reefs, and are among the most beautiful in the Andamans. Visiting boats usually anchor off South Cinque and passengers transfer via dinghy to the beach.

Only day visits are allowed but, unless you're on one of the day trips occasionally organised by travel agencies, you need to get permission in advance from the Chief Wildlife Warden (p1109). The islands are two hours by boat from Chiriya Tapu or 3½ hours from Wandoor, and are covered by the Mahatma Gandhi Marine National Park permit (Indian/foreigner Rs 50/500).

HAVELOCK ISLAND

With one of the Andaman's most dazzling beaches and plenty of cheap bamboo-hut accommodation, Havelock is the island of choice for travellers wanting to kick back and enjoy the slow (but not comatose) pace of island life. It's easily accessible from Port Blair, and offers excellent snorkelling and scuba-diving opportunities. Although Havelock is the most developed of the islands, it's still very low-key and simple – a world away from the beach resorts of mainland India or Southeast Asia.

Inhabited by Bengali settlers since the 1950s, Havelock is about 54km northeast of Port Blair and covers 100 sq km. Only the northern third of the island is settled, and each village is referred to by a number. Boats dock at the jetty at No 1 Village; the main bazaar is 2km south at No 3 Village; and most of the accommodation is strung along the east coast between villages No 2 and No 5.

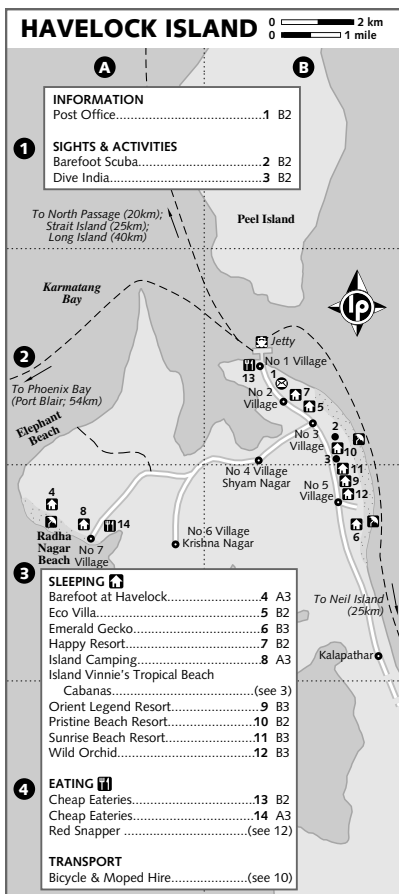
Sights & Activities

Radha Nagar Beach (also called No 7), on the northwestern side of the island about 12km from the jetty, is a gorgeous stretch of squeaky clean white sand – though some seaweed gets thrown up during monsoon – and crystal-

clear water backed by native forest. Don't miss a sunset here. In peak season you can take a short **elephant ride** (adult/child Rs 20/10) through the beach's shady forest. Ten minutes' walk along the beach to the northwest is the gorgeous 'lagoon' stretch of sheltered sand and calm water.

Elephant Beach, where there's good snorkelling, is further north and reached by a 40-minute walk through a muddy elephant logging trail and swamp; it's well-marked (off the cross-island road), but is hard going after rain. The beach itself virtually disappeared after the tsunami and at high tide it's impossible to reach – ask locally.

A highlight of Havelock is **snorkelling** or **fishing**, and the best way to do either is on



THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

Havelock has become a magnet for budget travellers over the last few years. This is a mixed blessing for islanders, who are delighted by the income they bring, but considerably less delighted by the behaviour of a noticeable minority. Here's the gist of conversations we had repeatedly with locals:

'I don't understand why when we agree a price for something – a room or a tour or motorbike hire – later they shout at me and want me to make a smaller price. Why do they break their word?'

'Some of them are so aggressive. They don't know how to have a conversation or how to ask for something, they only know how to shout. Now I don't have anything to do with those ones, you can tell them a mile off.'

'I think they think we're stupid. They eat almost all the meal and then complain that it wasn't what they ordered and want us to give it free or to make them another one.'

'Well my family can't go to the beach and I can't go out fishing sometimes, when my boat's on-shore and men and women are sunbathing naked on the sand beside it. We don't take our clothes off in front of strangers. They never see us like that, so why do they think it's OK and that we don't mind?'

Fair comments.

a boat trip organised by one of the accommodation places. Trips cost from Rs 300 to 1000, depending on the number of people and the distance. Wild Orchid organises full-day trips (per couple from Rs 2000) that take you through a mangrove swamp and to some great snorkelling sites.

Havelock is also the premier spot for **scuba diving** on the Andamans; **Barefoot Scuba** and **Dive India** are the two professional dive outfits here (see p1110 for more information).

Some resorts can organise guided **jungle treks** for keen walkers or birders, though be warned that the forest floor turns to slippery and very gummy mud after rain, and walking is hard work. The inside rainforest is spectacular, giving new meaning to the notion of tall trees, and the **bird-watching** – especially on the forest fringes – is rewarding; look out for the blue-black racket-tailed drongo trailing his fabulous tail feathers and, by way of contrast, the brilliant golden oriole.

About 5km beyond Village No 5 is Kalapathar, where an **elephant training camp** is sometimes open to visitors. Beyond Kalapathar the road peters out into deep forest, and there are some good snorkelling spots accessible by boat along the coast.

Sleeping & Eating

Heading south along the coast from the jetty there's a string of simple huts and a couple of more upmarket places at No 5 Village or west to No 7 Village. The listings that follow are in geographical order beyond the jetty.

Pristine Beach Resort (☎ 282344; alexpristine@hotmail.com; huts Rs 100-150, cottages with private bathroom Rs 250-400) Run by an affable couple, these cute huts, good restaurant and a licence to serve alcohol make this a cut above most places. The bar stays open late for night owls (but quietly enough to allow other guests to sleep). It's on a nice bit of beach.

Island Vinnie's Tropical Beach Cabanas (☎ 282187; www.islandvinnie.com; cabanas without/with bathroom Rs 450/1200) New in 2006, these comfortably furnished pink canvas tents, raised on individual verandas, wouldn't look out of place in a desert setting, and so far they're surviving the monsoon climate. Packages are offered for divers, and for visitors who are staying more than 10 days.

Wild Orchid (☎ 282472; www.wildorchidandaman.com; d cottages without/with AC Rs 2100/2500; ♿) Set back from a secluded beach, this is a mellow, friendly place with tastefully furnished cottages designed in traditional Andamanese style. Modern bathrooms, four-poster beds and verandas, and roomy public spaces with comfortable seating add to the comfort factor. There's also a masseur on-site in season, and a bar. The restaurant here, Red Snapper (mains Rs 100 to 250), is one of few genuinely good places to eat on the island and certainly scores on ambience. Fresh seafood is usually available (often caught by the owner or guests!) and the menu can include terrific homemade pasta, Thai curries and Continental dishes, as well as Indian favourites. Book your table early in peak season.

Emerald Gecko (☎ 282170; www.emerald-gecko.com; small huts Rs 200-300, large huts Rs 1000-1500) This is a step up in quality from other hut resorts. There are four comfortable double-storey huts with open-roofed bathrooms, lovingly constructed from bamboo rafts that have drifted ashore from Myanmar. There are some budget huts too, and a restaurant with a good creative menu designed by the same folk as Wild Orchid, and a bar. It's low-key and peaceful.

Island Camping (furnished tents Rs 150-500) Island Camping has tented accommodation in an enviable location among the palms at the end of the road to Radha Nagar Beach. All tents have solid floors, raised camp beds and mosquito nets. It's open from November to March; book through A&N Tourism in Port Blair.

Barefoot at Havelock (☎ 282151, in Port Blair 237656; www.barefootindia.com; cottages Rs 3600-5300; ♿) For the location alone – ensconced in bird-filled forest grounds just back from Radha Nagar Beach – this is the Andamans most luxurious resort, conscious of its use of natural resources. Accommodation is in 18 beautifully designed timber and bamboo-thatched cottages with four-poster beds, stylish bathrooms and verandas, and attention to privacy. Staff and food service still have some way to go to match the quality of accommodation.

Numerous small places have set up under the palm trees, with accommodation in sturdy bamboo huts with lights and fans for around Rs 150 to 300, and all have their own simple, open-sided restaurants. Popular hot spots at the time of research:

Happy Resort (☎ 282061; Village No 2)

Eco Villa (☎ 282072; Village No 2)

Sunrise Beach Resort (Village No 3)

Orient Legend Resort (☎ 282389; Village No 3)

There are cheap eateries serving thalis and fish dishes near the jetty, and on the road leading to No 7 beach.

Getting There & Away

Ferry times are changeable, but there are always direct sailings to and from Havelock from Phoenix Jetty in Port Blair at least once daily, and often twice or more (tourist ferry Rs 150; 2½ hours). Check times in the local newsheet or at the jetty, and you're best to book at least a day in advance at the Port Blair passenger terminal. The ticket office is open between 9am and 11am.

Several ferries a week link Havelock with Neil Island, and also with Rangat in Mid-

dle Andaman, where buses continue north to Diglipur.

Getting Around

A local bus connects the jetty and villages on a roughly hourly circuit, but having your own transport is useful on Havelock. You can rent mopeds or motorbikes (per day Rs 150) and bicycles (per day Rs 40 to 50) from the shop outside Pristine Beach Resort, from the stall with the sign in Village No 3, or ask at your hotel.

An autorickshaw from the jetty to No 3 Village is Rs 30, to No 5 is Rs 50 and to No 7 it's Rs 200.

NEIL ISLAND

If you *really* want to slow down, and are looking for peace, isolation and near-deserted beaches without being a castaway, Neil Island, 40km northeast of Port Blair, is a good place to get off the ferry. Much quieter than nearby Havelock Island, Neil is populated by Bengali settlers involved in fishing and agriculture. This is the place to lie on the beach, jungle-walk, snorkel, cycle through paddy fields and farms, and then lie on the beach some more.

Sights & Activities

Neil Island's beaches are numbered 1 to 5, and the road distance between them is 8km. **No 1 Beach** is the prettiest and most accessible, a 40-minute walk 3km west of the jetty and village. Most of the accommodation places are close to No 1 Beach and the island's best **snorkelling** is around the coral reef at the far (western) end of this beach. At low tide it's difficult getting over the coral into the water; conversely, at high tide the beach is underwater so plan your activities around tide times. **No 2 Beach**, on the north side of the island, has a natural bridge rock formation in the water; a cycle ride and short walk will take you to it. A track up the small hill behind Gyan Garden Restaurant leads to a **viewpoint** across the island and out to sea. **No 5 Beach**, reached via the village road to the eastern side of the island, is an enclosed stretch with a bit of swell. It's a pleasant bike ride out here (about 5km from the village); just cycle to the end of the road, and walk 50m or so straight ahead to the beach.

You should be able to hire snorkelling gear around town (per day Rs 100), but don't bank on it. Hire of a fishing boat to go to offshore snorkelling or fishing spots will cost per day

between Rs 800 and 900; several people can fit on board, depending on the size of the boat. Bicycles are available for hire at several shops in the village (per day Rs 40).

Contact the charming **Saha** (☎ 282620, 9474212840), Neil Island's unofficial Mr Fixit, for help with accommodation, tours and transport.

Sleeping & Eating

In the village, a few hundred metres from the jetty, there's a market, a few shops, a couple of basic restaurants and the A&N Tourism guesthouse. West of the jetty along No 1 Beach are three small 'resorts' with basic huts and marginally more comfortable cottages; all have great potential and great locations but are in various stages of decay. All provide food.

Cocon Huts (☎ 282528; huts Rs 50, cottages Rs 350-400) The first place you come to, about 500m from the village market, has a good waterfront location but its bar has become a serious local drinking hole, and it can sometimes get pretty uncomfortable for guests.

Tango Beach Resort (☎ 282583; huts Rs 50, cottages Rs 500) Further west, this is a similar set up minus the drinkers, with a couple of concrete cottages as well as huts. It's closer to the better part of No 1 Beach.

Pearl Park Resort (☎ 282510; huts Rs 100, cottages & rooms Rs 400-1000) Pearl Park is set quietly beyond the end of the road, in a beautiful garden of palms and flowering plants a short stroll from the western end of No 1 Beach. As well as thatch huts, there are two dilapidated but once-charming Nicobarese-style cottages on stilts, and a couple of concrete hotel-style rooms.

Hawa Bill Nest (☎ 282630; dm Rs 150, d Rs 800; ♿) It's not often that a charmless government-run hotel comes out ahead in the comfort and cleanliness stakes, but at the time of research it was true on Neil Island. Five minutes' walk from the village beach, it's convenient if not as atmospheric as the other options; book through A&N Tourism in Port Blair.

Providing somewhat erratic service out of season, but popular when/if they're up and running, **Gyan Garden Restaurant** and **Green Heaven Restaurant** are two informal and relaxed outdoor eateries and hang-outs between the village and No 1 Beach.

There are plans afoot for accommodation and food at No 5 Beach; check with the folk at Wild Orchid on Havelock Island to see what's become of those.

Getting There & Away

A ferry makes a round trip each morning from Phoenix Bay Jetty in Port Blair (Rs 36, two hours). Twice a week the Rangat ferry calls at Neil after Havelock, which is useful if you want to visit both islands.

An autorickshaw will take you to No 1 Beach from the jetty for Rs 50.

MIDDLE & NORTH ANDAMAN

The Andaman Trunk Rd runs north from Port Blair to Bharatang Island and Middle Andaman – both linked by small roll-on roll-off ferries – then onto North Andaman linked by road bridges. It's *very* slow going, but consider at least the northern part of the road – say between the jetties at Rangat and Diglipur – as an alternative to taking the ferry in both directions. Relentlessly thick jungle opening to mangrove-fringed waterways with only occasional cultivated clearings make this a spectacularly lush and green journey, especially with the knowledge that tribal people still live traditional lives in the deep forest. The road runs beside Jarawa reserves on the west coasts of South and Middle Andaman, but as most traditional Jarawa people are busy getting on with their lives in the forest you're unlikely to encounter them unless they're beside the road (see the boxed text, p1122). Motorcycles are forbidden beyond the checkpoint, 40km outside of Port Blair.

You can get to Rangat, in Middle Andaman, several times a week from Port Blair or Havelock Island by ferry (Rs 80/25, nine hours) or daily by bus (Rs 70, eight hours). **Hawksbill Nest** (☎ 279022; four-bed dm Rs 600, d without/with AC Rs 450/850; ♿) is about 15 minutes north of Rangat, and any northbound bus will drop you there; bookings must be made at A&N Tourism in Port Blair. Hawksbill turtles do nest on the beaches of nearby Cuthbert Bay between November and February.

Mayabunder & Around

In Mayabunder there's an unexpected gem in the shape of **Sea'n'Sand** (☎ 273454; thanzin_the_great@yahoo.co.in; r Rs 200-500), a simple lodge, restaurant and bar overlooking the water 1km south of the town centre. Run by Titus and Elizabeth, along with their young family, it's low-key and will appeal to travellers looking for an experience away from the crowds. Titus organises a range of **boat-based day tours** (per tour from Rs 500-2500) that, depending on the season

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE WORST KIND

It's mid-afternoon during a torrential monsoon downpour, and our convoy of public buses, local tour vehicles, goods trucks and police escort crawls slowly along the narrow Andaman Trunk Rd, through the Jarawa tribal reserve.

There is the occasional glimpse of Jarawa people standing beside the road with a police guard – there to protect them from us, I realise, as my bus goes past. People thrust mobile phone cameras out of the windows, fling sweets and bananas, laugh and make monkey noises, and make crude gestures. How the groups of naked and shivering tribal adolescents feel about being on display like this isn't immediately apparent as we go past in a blur, further showering them with water. No-one is reprimanded or arrested or fined. Later I am told that this happens during every transport convoy, every day.

The considerable legal restrictions about contact with tribal people – no gifts, no photography, no 'feeding' – and the considerable police presence in the reserve clearly isn't effective. Many in the islands' government and civil society are lobbying to close the road to the general public and to leave the Jarawa in peace. After this trip I hope they succeed.

Virginia Jealous

and how he feels about you, may include **Forty One Caves** where *hawabills* (swiftlets) make their highly prized edible nests; easy snorkelling off **Avis Island**; or a coast-and-forest-wilderness experience on **Interview Island**.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Mayabunder, 71km north of Rangat, is linked by daily buses from Port Blair (Rs 95, 10 hours) and by once- or twice-weekly ferries.

Diglipur & Around

Diglipur, three hours by road north of Mayabunder, is the main town of North Andaman and as far north as you can get in the island chain. The town itself and nearby Kalipur are the only places on North Andaman where foreigners can stay. Ferries arrive at the Aerial Bay Jetty from where it's 11km southwest to Diglipur village and the bus stand, basic restaurants, market and a couple of lodges. Ferry tickets can be booked at the Administration Block in town. Kalipur is on the coast 8km southeast of the jetty.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The twin islands of **Smith** and **Ross**, connected by a narrow sand bar, are accessible by boat and here you can walk through forest, or swim and snorkel in the shallow waters. Since this is designated as a marine sanctuary, you must get a permit (Indian/foreigner Rs 50/500) from the **Forest Office** (☎ 6am-2pm, closed Sun) opposite the Aerial Bay Jetty. You can charter a boat to take you for the day from the village near the jetty for around Rs 500.

At 732m, **Saddle Peak** is the highest point in the Andamans. You can trek through subtropical forest to the top and back from Kalipur in about six hours. Again a permit is required from the Forest Office (Indian/foreigner Rs 25/250) and a local guide will make sure you don't get lost – ask at Pristine Beach Resort. **Snorkelling** behind the small island off the beach near Pristine Resort, and just around the coast at Radha Nagar Beach, is good; limited snorkelling gear is available for hire (per day Rs 100).

Leatherback and green turtles nest along the Diglipur coastline between December and March.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are two places to stay opposite each other at Kalipur, 8km southeast of the Aerial Bay Jetty. Buses run along this route (Rs 8); an autorickshaw costs about Rs 100.

Pristine Beach Resort (☎ 201837; huts Rs 200-500) Huddled among the palms between paddy fields and the beach, Pristine is a pretty spot with several simple bamboo huts on stilts, a restaurant and friendly owners. It gets very busy in peak season.

Turtle Resort (☎ 272553; r without/with AC Rs 400/800; 🍷) Set on a small hill with rural views from the balconies, this A&N Tourism hotel provides some level of comfort, despite being a little run-down and musty and having a forlorn feel. It's best to book ahead through A&N Tourism in Port Blair, though you'll be able to get a room on-site if one's available.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Diglipur, about 80km north of Mayabunder, is served by daily buses to/from Port Blair (Rs 120, 12 hours), as well as buses to Mayabunder (Rs 30, 2½ hours) and Rangat (Rs 50, 4½ hours). There are also daily ferries from Port Blair to Diglipur, returning overnight from Diglipur (seat/berth Rs 81/150, 10 hours).

LITTLE ANDAMAN

Little Andaman is still an outpost and one of the more remote inhabited islands in the group at 120km south of Port Blair.

The island is home to members of the Onge tribe, who were relocated to a tribal reserve in 1977 when the government began developing the island for agriculture and logging of forest timber. Settlement and opening up of the island has had a serious impact on the Onge through loss of environment and hunting grounds – only 100 or so remain. The tribal reserve is out of bounds to visitors.

The populated east coast of Little Andaman was badly affected by the tsunami and most of the population temporarily evacuated to Port

Blair. Tourism and other development plans have been severely hampered; relief work was still underway at the time of research, and we didn't get the opportunity to visit. The big attractions here were pristine beaches such as **Netaji Nagar Beach**, 11km north of Hut Bay, and **Butler Bay**, a further 3km north, good for surfing and swimming but not for snorkelling; unfortunately this was the area worst hit by the tsunami. Inland, **White Surf** and **Whisper Wave waterfalls** offer a forest experience.

Andaman & Nicobar Islands Forest Plantation Development Corporation (ANIFPDCL; ☎ in Port Blair 232866; pblvanvikas@sanchamet.com) had been actively developing a 1500-hectare **red oil palm plantation** about 11km from Hut Bay, but this was also damaged during the tsunami and its future is uncertain. ANIFPDCL also managed the two guesthouses on the island, but these were not functioning at the time of writing.

Ferries land at the Hut Bay Jetty on the east coast and from there most of the accessible beaches and attractions are to the north. Boats sail from Port Blair about three times a week.