

# TRIPPING

# BY DAY

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> WHILE I JUST LOVE A GOOD LIVEBOARD DIVE TRIP, THE FLEXIBILITY OF DAY DIVING HAS A LOT GOING FOR IT, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU'RE IN AN EXOTIC LOCALE WITH LOTS OF NON-DIVING ACTIVITIES – NOT TO MENTION NON-DIVING COMPANIONS.

**W**ith three dives under your belt, there's nothing like enjoying an all-you-can-use hot shower, a bed to spread out on that doesn't move, and a long walk on the beach at sunset before a restaurant meal with your choice of cuisine. You can dive just one day or many in sequence or wrapped around other non saltwater activities.

Thailand is far enough north to deliver warm tropical water (a steady 27-30C year-round) but not so far as to cause extreme jet lag or the travel grumpies. Now a number of budget airlines (plus a few full-ticket operators) fly direct into Phuket, legendary for its warm water, tropical islands, great diving and, of course, some fairly extreme night life.

As you'd imagine, marine life is better further from heavily populated regions which makes the islands of Phi Phi and surrounds ideal and they're protected marine reserves. I sampled the hospitality of Thailand Divers, based in Phuket just off the night-club strip. In contrast to the T-shirt stands, open air bars and massage rooms, the Thailand Divers shop is bright, clean and stocked with new dive gear. Booking in was simple – present a dive card plus

credit card; pickup from my hotel was arranged for the next morning at 7.30am with any hire gear I needed.

Let me emphasise this – budget airlines make a massive profit from excess baggage charges. Gone are the days of dumping your full dive kit on the baggage conveyor belt with your usual collection of clothes and extras. Each dive booked with Thailand Divers includes all gear hire; just bring your own computer and your mask if you require a special fit. No baggage worries any more. In fact, with judicious packing, you can even get away with the cheaper 'no check in baggage' fares, though I always opt for the 20kg option.

After an early breakfast next morning the mini bus arrived to take us over the peninsula via a few other hotel pickups, past a family of elephants having an early morning bath, to Chalong pier. This saves a lot of time thumping around the peninsula over possibly rough seas. (You can cut down travel time further by staying on the Chalong side for the duration of your diving.)

The 22m dive boat's dive deck is near water level; on the upper level you can prep your camera, record your dive, enjoy a drink and lunch, or just sunbathe and

*Main: There's nothing like a good photographic challenge. These harlequin ghost pipefish will dance in and out of focus all day. Patience and determination will get them to line up just so.*

*Right top to bottom: Hell hath no fury like a female triggerfish during nesting season;*

*You can hire one of the ubiquitous longboats for a few hours or a whole day to zip off to a deserted beach, go snorkelling, or hide from the throngs; A sixspot rockcod *Cephalopholis sexmaculata* is caught snoozing in a comfortable barrel sponge.*





Top to bottom: A female triggerfish *Balistoides viridescens* hovers above her patch of orange eggs; A day octopus *Octopus cyanea* emerges from its home while a honeycomb grouper *Epinephelus merra* watches on; A foraging common blue spotted fantail ray *Taeniura lymma* is shadowed by a cheeky pearly monacle

watch the land views slip past. The roomy vessel can take 45 but 25 is normal, with three to five dive guides.

Phi Phi is an internationally renown dive area primarily catering to dive tourists taking brief dive holidays two or three times per year, so I wasn't expecting the Coral Sea or schooling hammerheads. But I was

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very pleasantly surprised by the variety of marine life on all the sites. The first dive at Koh Bida Nai (Inside Island) brought a zebra shark to entertain us all, swimming above the divers then spiralling down to rest next to a bommie. There's nothing like a shark encounter to get adrenaline buzzing, even if it's a harmless bottom dweller with gummy teeth and a cute smile!

The zebra shark (named for the stripes found on newborn and juveniles which break up into the spots found on adults) is one I never tire of. From their blunt snout to their long, graceful, slender tail, this crab and shell eater is always a welcome sight. If you take your time and avoid aggressive moves, you can sidle right up beside them and watch their gills pumping water and sometimes small butterflyfish cleaning parasites from their raspy hide.

*breem* *Scolopsis monogramma*; A pair of *Daphne's chromodoris* *Chromodoris daphne* laying an egg ribbon in a sheltered niche; A zebra shark *Stegostoma fasciatum* cruises overhead, suckerfish attached. This harmless and approachable shark species is common on Thai reefs, partly due to the fact that they taste awful so are left alone by the locals.

Coral growth was healthy and prolific, with coral groupers using acropora coral plates for snoozing and large striped yellow snapper schools languidly flowing over the reef slope. No gloves are allowed, which helps prevent damage to fragile coral by learner divers who tend to grab onto anything. Long spined urchins kept us all honest –

their brittle black spines can pierce anything and leave you with a stinging reminder to watch how you dive!

On Koh Bida Nok (Outside Island) we found pinnacles dropping to a sand slope with the commonly found blue-spotted fantail ray snuffling through the sand and coral rubble, searching for crabs and small shells. Under their snout is an array of sensors, picking up the electrical impulses of their prey's muscle fibres. Being buried in the sand is no protection from this diligent and pretty little stingray.

No tropical dive is complete without colourful soft corals and seafans. The fans and soft corals are there, just not the huge trees found on deep oceanic cliffs. There were enough to add colour and texture to the reef, great for tourist diving. The marine variety is certainly there, just on a more manageable scale.

After two dives it was time for a buffet lunch in a sheltered bay, with one of the staff hurriedly cooking away to keep the trays topped up. Included are all the soft drinks you can handle as well, plus tea and coffee. Lunch done for, dive logs updated and a little suntan maintenance, it was time for the next dive.

Koh Doc Mai (Flower Island) is where I decided to ditch my wide angle lens and bolt on a macro. Small critters were my target. My dive guide Ryan Fryer quickly found some resident critters, plus some that may stay for a few days or weeks then disappear. That's the beauty of day diving – guides are very familiar with all locals inhabiting the reef, so if you have any special requests they can take you right to them. For productivity it beats the 'unknown dive spot' lottery.

Right top to bottom: An orangebanded stingfish *Choridactylus multibarbus* was a great find on one sandy site. An uncommon critter with a great face and very mobile modified pectoral fins used to walk over the seabed; A pair of red lionfish *Pterois volitans* will hunt co-operatively for small reef fish, using their large pectoral fins to herd their prey to within reach of their large mouth; A short dragonfish *Eurypegasus draconis* is obviously very curious while feeding on mysids on the sandy seabed. This relative of seahorses and seadragons is patterned with a mesh camouflage. The tail is rarely used, instead the large fan-like pectoral fins are used to shuffle along in small skips; You don't get this on a liveaboard. Nothing beats a funny cold drink with a miniature umbrella, a good book and some flat calm water in which to cool off.



Finding a ghost pipefish is hard enough, finding two isn't much harder as often they're in mating pairs – but three? What is this? The hardest part of photographing these bizarre critters is they can disappear on you if you lose the slightest amount of concentration. A twist or turn and their paper-thin ventral side makes them disappear like the open slats of a venetian blind. If they move across a soft coral or seafan while you're fiddling with your camera, their perfect camouflage will whisk them off into the twilight zone.

The trick to photographing these spiky cousins of the seahorse is to have them parallel to your camera's sensor or perpendicular to your lens. That way their slender body fits within your lens' depth of field so they're sharp from nose to tail. With a lot of concentration and perseverance you can get one lined up. Two is a whole different story. Three? Yougottabekiddingme! It's like trying to photograph three pencils tossed into the air. The solution? Grit your teeth and hang in there. A half tank of air, a nice patch of urchin spines in my elbow and one very bored dive guide later (how can you get so cold in 29 degree water, Ryan?) I managed to fluke the lottery. As a friend of mine was wont to say, "It's better to be lucky than good."

Day trips also let you take a break from diving. Coral cuts and nicks, sunburn and general travel weariness can grind you down. I'm not sure about you, but scuba

diving can give you bone-deep tiredness, in a good way. Not like running a marathon or playing squash, just a satisfying urge to sleep. It may be the increased nitrogen in our blood but I regard diving as a full-body sport. Moving through a viscous foreign environment with all that gear producing extra drag gives a wicked workout. So after one, two or three days of diving, you can take a break, sleep in, hit the beach and generally recoup for the next onslaught.

My second day started at Racha Noi (Marina Bay) where we were escorted to the site by a small pod of dolphins, the ultimate ocean divers and acrobats. For us divers, encounters with these playful mammals is all part of the reward of heading out to sea. My notes from this dive mention only one thing: Queen triggerfish with a nest of eggs. Yes, this one critter was enough entertainment for the whole dive.

For a start, the queen trigger isn't a diminutive beastie. Growing to over half a metre and five kilos, the queen is half triangular head with a heavily scaled body. Normally reticent or indifferent to divers, it can be found whooshing mouthfuls of water into rubble or sand to uncover small fish, shells, octopus and crabs which it devours with a powerful beak shaped like a heavy set of bolt cutters. It can also bypass a sea urchin's long spines – its huge head with protruding beak penetrates the outer





A small broad-tailed sea krait *Laticauda laticaudata* hunts over the reef, using its finely tuned sense of taste/smell to track down tiny shrimps and fish hiding in crevices of the reef.



These gold-saddled rabbitfish *Siganus guttatus* ignored me as they foraged among the sandy rubble.

defences and nimbly snips off the spines, leaving the crunchy urchin at its mercy.

What makes this fish species interesting is that every year, apparently around the time when I was on this particular dive, it constructs a large shallow depression in a suitable patch of rubble and deposits an orange, pizza-sized disc of eggs. From all accounts, queen triggerfish eggs must rate with ice cream and donuts because local reef fish find them irresistible. Constant tending and maintenance of the nest and eggs occurs to prevent persistent locals nipping in for a quick snack. Obviously, this annoys the harried mother, especially if it occurs continuously over a number of weeks. Then we noisy divers turn up and find a very grumpy female with a beak as big and as dangerous as a set of metal shears. Suffice to say, Ryan kept a safe distance but I risked removal of various body parts to get some shots of her tending her nest.



Racha Yai, Bay 3 or Lucy's Bay, had my favourite dive territory, a steep sand slope. Here we found the cryptic short dragonfish *Eurypegasus draconis*. A cousin to the ghost pipefish and seahorse families, this tiny critter sports a disguise to foil the most observant predators. Initially they look bizarre and strange, but up close they have a very cute face with a tiny mouth that can zip out to suck up tiny shrimp-like mysids living on the sand. If you lie still they'll skip right up, their goggle eyes rotating independent of each other as they check you out.

On the same dive Ryan was on the ball, pointing out a scorpionfish that walked across the sand on leg-like modified fin spines. Like the dragonfish, it seemed totally indifferent to my camera and bubble-blowing body. Its oversized head showed a grumpy grimace, occasionally raising its dorsal spines as if to say, "don't mess with me, I'm having a bad day". Initially we thought it was an Indian Ocean walkman but with such a blunt head it obviously wasn't that species. It took a lot of tracking down but eventually, with the help of the Aussie fish guru Rudi Kuitert; it was identified as an orangebanded stingfish *Choridactylus multibarbus*. A nice find!

For ease of access, warm water and varied critters, there's nothing like a day trip or three in Thailand. If you want a super cheap fare, you might have to fly via Kuala Lumpur or Singapore, but there are also real bargains to be had when specials come up, flying direct into Phuket. Or you can opt for a flight into Bangkok to check out the north of the country and tie in a cheap flight down to Phuket for some day diving and beach snoozing.

For diehards there are day trips to the famous Similan Islands, though I'd recommend one of the 3-7 day liveaboards – less travel and more dive time, so more nitrogen for your buck. You can also have a day or two of local day trips as a warm up to a more advanced Similan adventure, a good idea if you haven't been in the water since your last vacation. Costs are very competitive and daily beach living is dirt cheap. All up, you can't go wrong day tripping in the tropics.

