

# Diving the BURMA banks

FOLLOWING FOOD OFFERINGS TO THE GODS AND FIRE CRACKERS TO WARD OFF EVIL SPIRITS, WE WERE ON OUR WAY TO THE MERGUI ARCHIPELAGO


**T**he ceremony takes place every time the ship leaves port and the Thai crew including the captain wouldn't leave without this ritual, except for one time, according to the tour leader... "We just couldn't get hold of fire crackers". The result, high seas, bad visibility, flooded cameras, engine problems, etc. The Gods would have been pleased this time and the deafening noise was enough to scare Godzilla back to the depths!

After a pleasant overnight cruise from Phuket we arrived at the Surin Marine National Park located about 80 kilometres due west of Ranong Province on the west coast of Thailand.

The five granite islands here sit in 135 square kilometres of water and the local dive sites are as diverse as they are interesting. Koh Tachai features a series of multi-level reefs, each different in formation and resident marine life. Further south lies the rocky outcrop of the Koh Bon Island with regular manta ray sightings especially between February and April when upwelling currents concentrate planktonic food near the surface. The dive site here is in a large bay, dropping to about 25 metres and it's on the outer edge where these magnificent creatures can be admired as they glide past. Patience is the secret I was told, so I positioned myself behind a large boulder which also protected me from the moderate current. Ten minutes later the first manta glided over me and it sure was worth the wait.

Next day we cruised on to the Thailand/Myanmar border to clear

Far left: The western side of Black Rock is carpeted with colour; this diver is completely dwarfed by a giant gorgonia fan.

Left: A feeding triggerfish. 



customs at Ranong and cross over to Kawthaung on the southern tip of Burma.

Burmese authorities opened their borders to foreign visitors in 1997. The Burma Banks cover 1500 square kilometres and are about 200 kilometres west of Ranong. The majority of dive sites at the Banks are fairly level broad plateaus with minimum depths of 21-24 metres, making for rather short bottom times unless you're diving on nitrox. Waters surrounding the Banks ranges to 300 metre depths and currents can be quite tricky and strong here, especially along the dropoffs. Down-currents can occur but rarely last more than a few minutes. Stay close to your buddy or group and bring a decent safety sausage with you – becoming separated from your dive boat this far from land could be disastrous.

Silvertip Bank is one of the shallowest dives at 18 metres and covers around a square kilometre with the western edge dropping to 45 metres. I started my dive descending to about 36 metres and found some of the nicest soft coral plus large barrel sponges. Keep an eye on the open water – predators like rainbow runners, dogtooth tuna and jacks can make regular patrols on the dropoffs. A very friendly potato cod followed me as I worked my way up the slope to complete my dive on the shallower plateau where the other divers were interacting with more potato cods. For a moment I felt I was back at the Cod Hole in Australia! Surely those gentle giants have been handfed before or would otherwise not be so friendly...

Western Rocky 80 kilometres offshore is one of the southernmost sites. The most stunning element is a tunnel which runs through the large rocky island devoid of vegetation. The entrance starts at the southern part at about 20 metres depth

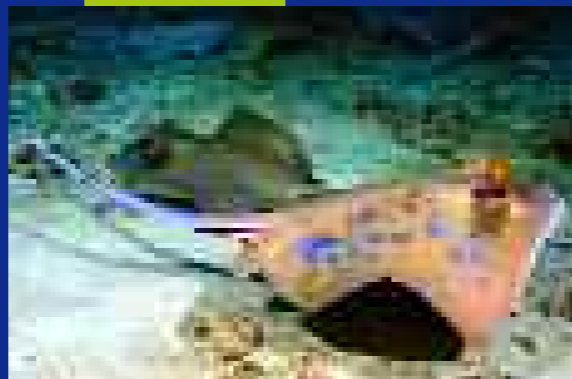
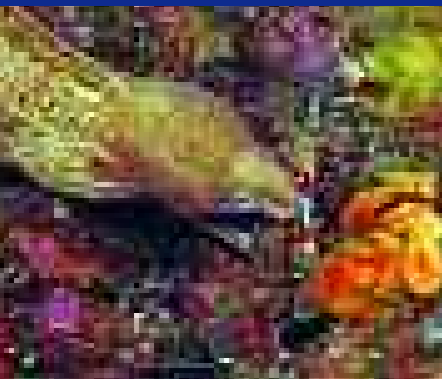
leading 36 metres to the two narrow exits on the northern side.

The cave hosts dozens of lobsters and sometimes sleeping nurse sharks are found here. It's a good idea to check the cave exit first from the other side to ensure it isn't blocked by large amounts of sand which the current can bring in.

Travelling north, we arrived at North Twin Island with an average diving depth of 20 metres. There are numerous scattered large boulders here and batfish are commonly seen flying in formation between them, whilst a whole range of reef fish shelter on the elk and staghorn coral on the tops. Unfortunately an outbreak of crown of thorns sea stars has consumed many of these corals, but there are still plenty of healthy colonies.

Another great spot is Shark Cave with a great swimthrough between two rock formations. The walls were alive with creeping and crawling macro life and I burnt up a whole roll of film on one dive! Due to the good conditions we had two dives here, including a night dive. I took my time framing a tiny glass shrimp busily moving on a cowrie shell and after a few minutes I discovered my arms were covered with small reef shrimps! They quickly hopped off once I moved... I did notice a tickling sensation on my hands at the time, but was concentrating hard on the action through my viewfinder...

One of my favourite dives of the trip was Black Rock; this stark pinnacle jutting out of the ocean is just large enough to circumnavigate in a leisurely dive. The western side drops sharply to 40 metres and is carpeted with vibrant soft coral hosting marine life such as anemones with porcelain crabs, cuttlefish, dark spotted moray eels, octopus and clouds of baitfish so thick you feel lost swimming



Main: The spotted porcelain crab has rather large nippers to discourage enemies but they are actually very thin. From far left: Pinching the moray eel on the nose, this reef crab wasn't prepared to give up without putting up a fight; Bannerfish are often seen swimming in pairs; Blue spotted stingrays can often be seen resting on the sandy reef bottom; A diver's silhouette is a great backdrop to this large gorgonia harp fan; A healthy staghorn coral.



A blue striped emperor angelfish with its extraordinary colouration glides elegantly in front of my camera

inside them. It was around 5pm and feeding time for some of the creatures out there. As I watched a reef crab feeding on a piece of jellyfish, I noticed a moray eel emerging from its hiding place. With enormous speed it snapped the crab up right in front of my eyes and camera before twisting back to the burrow with its prey. What a great action shot and story to tell back on board!

Only a few liveaboards visit the Burma Banks and Mergui Archipelago. But just imagine – you may be one of the very first to dive a new adventure because more sites wait to be discovered...

From the top: *MV Mermaid I* offers liveboard diving in style; we visited the Buddhist Temple in style in this naturally airconditioned taxi... very environmentally friendly; the fantastic dive site Shark Cave.



## info

I travelled on *Mermaid I*, the newest addition to Seaworld Dive Team's liveboard fleet. The 28 metre long ship offers six airconditioned double cabins, each with its own private bathroom, TV, DVD-player and stereo. Gourmets will be delighted with an a la carte menu featuring Thai and European cuisine.

### GETTING THERE

Phuket, Thailand has an International Airport with several flights from Bangkok, Singapore and other cities. Liveboard trips departing from Ranong can be arranged with bus or air transportation from Phuket. Itineraries starting in Phuket include popular destinations such as the Similan and Surin Islands and Riche-lieu Rock, which offer consistent whale shark encounters.

### ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Visitors to Thailand are granted a visa of 30 days on entry. No special visa is required for tourists cruising Burmese waters, however land based visas must be obtained in advance. Also a port fee of US\$ 140.00 (they must be in crisp new notes!) is collected at the Burmese border.

### CLIMATE

Most dive tours operate during the dry season in October to May when seas tend to be calm and winds light. Water temperatures average 29 degrees Celsius all year-round and visibility ranges from 30-50 metres.

Contact [www.seaworld-phuket.com](http://www.seaworld-phuket.com)