

Shine a light nearby and harlequin shrimp wave their claws like semaphore signals.



# MONSTERS & MACRO



**RIGHT ON ENTRY THE MANTA SWEEP PAST IN A FLY-BY. OUR SAVVY DIVE GUIDE QUICKLY HERDED US TOWARDS A HUGE SLOPING GRANITE OUTCROP 28 METRES DOWN. SLOWLY THE MANTA FOLLOWED AND AS IT DIPPED BELOW US IT TURNED AND CAME UP THE SLOPE STRAIGHT AT US, JUST LIKE THAT 'STAR WARS' SCENE WHERE THE GIANT CRAFT SEEMS TO GO ON FOREVER AS IT PASSES OVERHEAD. THE MANTA TURNED AND GLIDED BACK, AGAIN AND AGAIN.**

**T**here are two main routes of liveaboard excursions that head north out of Phuket Island off the west coast of southern Thailand. The first route plies the waters around the Similan and Surin Marine National Parks, whereas the second tour heads further north and includes Myanmar's Mergui Archipelago. We'd joined one of the latter and would initially dive around the Similans, then head north to Richelieu Rock followed by a border crossing to explore the Mergui Archipelago.

The Similans are a very worthy diversion on our way north; the reefs around these islands are frequently listed in the world's 'Top Ten'. On the very first dive I knew this was going to be a great trip. The corals were healthy and the plentiful fish life came in all sizes and colours. Scorpionfish, leopard sharks, trevally, cuttlefish were all regularly seen around the reefs, plus there were large clouds of sweeping glassfish which more often than not were targeted by hunting lionfish.

This delightful underwater scenery continued at Richelieu Rock. Rich, vibrant and clear waters were the order of the day, which naturally meant it was unlikely that we'd encounter whale sharks. They are regular visitors here, but this time the great vis meant we'd be concentrating on the smaller things. There are plenty, right down to a wealth of macro critters.

When you first look at the rocky surfaces from a distance, especially the areas not blanketed in

Colonial anemones clinging to seawhips were found on one of our exploratory 'muck dives'



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**AMONGST ALL THIS GROWTH  
 ARE HARLEQUIN SHRIMP,  
 PORCELAIN CRABS, CARPETS OF  
 ANEMONES, SEAHORSES, FROGFISH  
 AND THE TINIEST OF LIONFISH AND  
 SCORPIONFISH.**”

Having never dived close to very large mantas before, we were spellbound and found them to be everything we'd ever imagined and more, to us one of the most beautiful creatures in the sea. The mantas also proved co-operative, gliding around us for four wonderful dives. Some of our lucky dive group even had a manta follow them to the surface and continue circling them!

Overall the diving in Myanmar is around rocky pinnacles or small islands and whilst they feature cliff-like reefs they aren't actually continuous walls so drift diving isn't really an option, because you could soon find yourself alone and adrift out in blue water. That said, life is everywhere and you don't necessarily need to travel great distances to see amazing life, especially if you're a critter buff.

There's many a macro subjects just waiting to be discovered and the sandy bottoms are literally crawling with life. Pipefish of many varieties, mantis shrimp, flounder, truly amazing sea urchins, tube anemones with commensal shrimps, marbled stingrays and many varieties of gobies.

We were also able to get up close and personal with courting squid. At first they seemed to hesitate in our presence but then instinct regained control and they continued their mating and egg-

corals, it's easy to be fooled into thinking that this is pretty barren territory. On closer investigation it becomes obvious that though this is the case in many other places in the world, mother nature hates empty space. The reefs and rocks here are granite and though conditions aren't suitable for huge corals they're carpeted with smaller ones. Amongst all this growth are harlequin shrimp, porcelain crabs, carpets of anemones, seahorses, frogfish and the tiniest of lionfish and scorpionfish. It's also very common to see three or four moray eels co-habiting in a single lair, and in some cases even different species.

The diving across the border in neighbouring Myanmar generally delivered a lower average visibility, with the lower end of the scale hanging around 15 metres. In these waters we expected plankton feeders like mantas or whale sharks but, ironically it was only when the visibility improved that we were pleasantly surprised. The mantas at Black Rock defied all preconceived odds.

- Sandy or rubble bottoms often reveal interesting and varied creatures; some anemones are completely different to their reef-bound cousins.
- Sieve-patterned and yellow-edged moray eels ignore their differences and share the same hole.

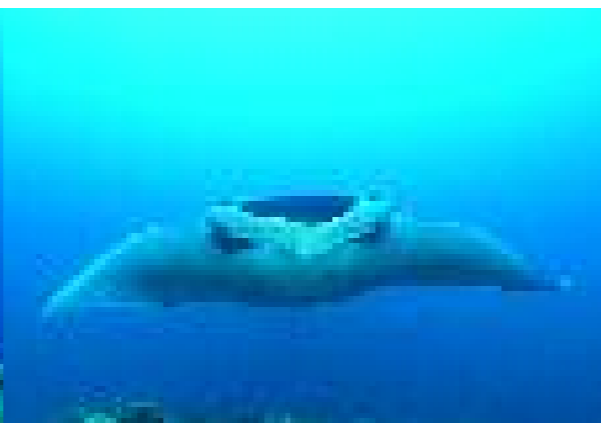
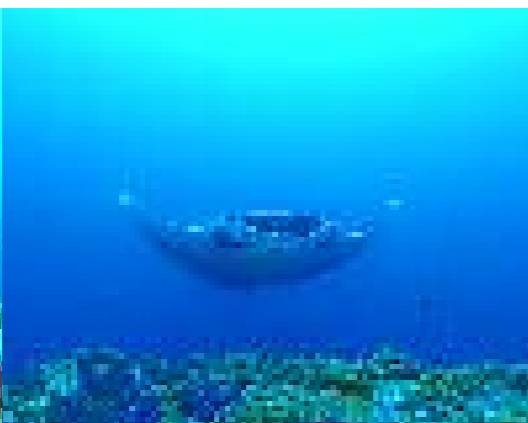
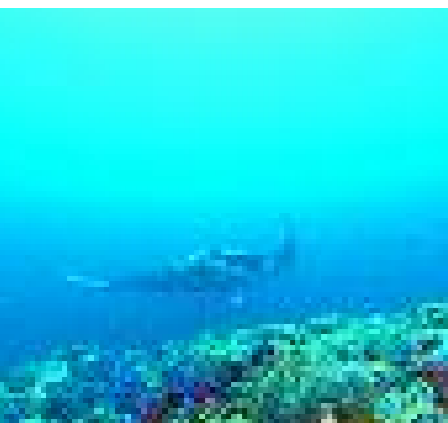


**UNDERWATER WEATHER**

Until now underwater 'weather' was something I'd heard of but not actually seen. During a dive at Koh Bon, a small uninhabited island due north of the Similans, the extremely warm very clear water was abuzz with reef action. It was only when you took your eyes off the reef and looked out in the direction of the incoming current that you noticed what resembled a large storm cloud rolling in. Once it arrived you could feel the lower section slightly sucking you into it. The water was a cold blurred concoction of silt, nutrients and thermocline. It carried you along in its grasp. Then it passed and all returned to normal – the transition had lasted no more than three minutes. This was one of those cold water upwellings that give the reefs here the sustenance of life.



- Strong currents can be encountered and along with nutrient rich upwellings, they provide a healthy environment for corals to grow. Where corals do seem to get a good footing they're crowded with many varieties.
  - Look hard, small creatures of amazing design like this ghost pipefish can be found on many dives.
  - This turtle was so intent with feeding on a sponge that it didn't notice me until a slight surge pushed it my way.
  - David the marine bio photographs me photographing him as we both attempt to stay in front of a cold nutrient-rich upwelling.
- Below
- A manta impersonating a giant spacecraft doing a slow fly-over.



laying, often within centimetres of us. During this amorous routine they changed colours dramatically and the males flared and challenged each other for fertilisation rights with each female.

During passport formalities between Myanmar and Thailand you can take a small land excursion into the Myanmar town of Kawthaung on Victoria Point, the southernmost entry point to the country. You can either take a short hike up to a Buddhist Temple at the top of the town (with lots of village children in tow) or you can kick back and take a seat at one of the many bars and watch the world go over a cold beer. There's also plenty of places in which to spend money with numerous bargains so don't forget to wear your battering hat!

If you're considering that 'different' dive vacation, seriously consider Thailand and the Andaman Sea. It really does have plenty of corals, fish and critters. You can also see the big stuff like mantas and whale sharks. It really does deserve a prime spot on anyone's international dive destination wishlist.

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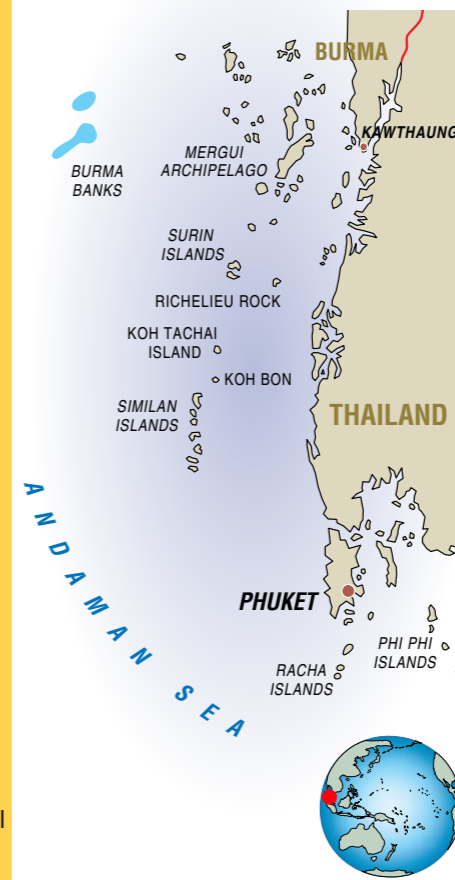
- Squid can be seen gathering to mate.
- Porcelain crabs are almost as common as anemonefish out here - but if you take the time for a closer look, you'll see them casting out baskets to feed!
- Most of the reefs are comprised of granite - though they initially appear to be barren, closer investigation reveals a totally different and rich environment packed with critters. The pairs we observed continued to deposit their eggs despite our up-close hovering and strobes.
- The M/Y Anggun at the Three Islets; topside outcrops like these were typical of many dive locations we visited.



## OUR LIVEBOARD

I was fortunate to win a prize in a recent photography competition which had us off to Phuket, Thailand to join a luxury liveboard excursion. The M/Y Anggun was our floating hotel whilst we dived around Mu Koh Similan Marine National Park then on to the Mergui Archipelago of neighbouring Myanmar. Trips sail from 8 and 10 day cruises. Every cabin has panoramic windows, an ensuite and very firm beds. The dive deck is thoughtfully kitted out with camera table, storage bins for cameras and dive gear, freshwater rinse tanks and showers. A competent Thai crew care for dive gear and are always there on hand to help.

Like most liveboards operating out of Thailand, if you aren't diving or relaxing, you're eating. The Thai food is excellent with a mind-boggling variety ranging from scrumptious seafoods, meats and poultry. The chef also caters for vegetarians. If you enjoy spicy food you're also in for a treat as all savoury dishes, even breakfast, come with optional chilli accompaniments.



## QUICK THAI TRAVEL TIPS

- 'Wai' is what the Thai people do instead of shaking hands. You press your palms together as if praying and raise them close to and before your face.
- Maintain 'Jai yen' at all times. 'Jai yen' means 'cool heart'. For the Thais, getting angry means a loss of face for everyone present. Contain your temper at all times.
- Talking loudly is considered to be rude behaviour.
- Thais believe that the top of the head is the most sacred part of the body. Do not touch anyone's head except for very small children.

## GETTING TO THAILAND

Multiple airlines travel to Thailand from all over the world; flights are available direct into Phuket, as well as via Hong Kong and Singapore.

### Optimum Diving Season

**November - January:** Can be overcast with occasional rain and light winds. Cool water. Best season for mating cuttlefish, octopus, leopard sharks and nudibranchs.

**February - mid April:** Calm dry, hot. Warmer water.

Best period for mantas and whale sharks due to plankton blooms however this can at times limit visibility, schooling trevally, snappers, barracuda, and cuttlefish mating (still)

**April - May - End of season:** Often calm, but swell can pick up, some light winds and rain. Warm water.

Mantas, mating squid and cuttlefish (yes, still!)



*The Buddhist temple at Kawthaung on the Burmese border is amazing in itself - but a visit here also delivers excellent views over the harbour.*