

MYANMAR

An Eco Getaway in the Andaman Sea

TEXT & PHOTOS
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THE MERGUI ARCHIPELAGO IS NESTLED IN THE ANDAMAN SEA OFF THE COASTS OF THAILAND AND MYANMAR. With over 800 islands, most of them uninhabited, the region is covered in lush tropical rainforests, fringed with pristine white sandy beaches, and surrounded by coral reefs teeming with life. It's a true diver's paradise.



► We departed early in the morning from Myanmar's southernmost town, Kawthaung, aboard the MV Sea Gypsy, a spacious and charming wooden vessel. Our destination: Nga Khin Nyo Gye Island, one of the archipelago's westernmost isles, remote and far removed from Myanmar's mainland. The captain informed me that the journey would take five and a half hours, which suited me perfectly. I wasn't in a hurry. Sprawled on a comfortable deck sofa, I sipped a chilled glass of exotic juice while watching seabirds gracefully glide alongside the boat. The view of small, lush tropical islands passing by was mesmerizing and only added to the sense of anticipation.



EMPEROR ANGELFISH

Blue-ringed Emperor Angelfish (*Pomacanthus annularis*) at the dive site Sail Rock.

SCORPIONFISH

Fringed Scorpionfish

(*Scorpaenopsis oxycephala*).



An Instagrammer's Dream

By mid-afternoon, the hum of the engine softened, drawing my attention. Curious, I headed to the wheelhouse just as the captain skillfully turned the vessel toward a secluded bay. The sight was nothing short of breathtaking: a pristine cove framed by towering granite boulders bathed in golden sunlight, set against a backdrop of vibrant rainforest. The turquoise water lapped gently against a powdery white beach, creating a scene so picturesque it felt almost surreal—a paradise tailor-made for an Instagrammer's lens.

A small rubber dinghy approached from the shore, drawing closer with each passing minute. Although the beach appeared deserted, the bay exuded an almost magical serenity. The towering rainforest, creeping all the way down to the shoreline, seemed untouched by human presence, amplifying the sense of isolation and tranquility.

Sunset from the Island's Edge

As we stepped onto the beach from the dinghy, I caught sight of a few discreetly placed buildings partially hidden among the trees. We were welcomed by Kyaw Kyaw Oo, my dive guide for the week ahead. After a refreshing welcome drink, he offered me a tour of Boulder Bay Eco Resort, a sustainable hideaway that would serve as my home base. Kyaw Kyaw suggested a short hike to a viewpoint on the island's western side to catch the sunset. Without hesitation, I agreed.

We strolled along a narrow path through the dense rainforest, enveloped by the chorus of tropical birds and the rustle of unseen creatures. Arriving at the viewpoint just in time, we were greeted by a scene of sheer beauty: the sun, a vivid crimson orb, hovered over the endless horizon. The timing was impeccable, and we lingered, soaking in the breathtaking interplay of colors in the

A STUNNING ISLAND

Sea kayaking at Boulder Bay Island.



MORNING VIEW

Breakfast in peace with a gorgeous view over Boulder Bay.



SUNSET WALL

The large boulders at the Sunset Wall dive site are covered with vibrant marine life. Dive guide Kyaw Kyaw Oo poses behind a large red gorgonian coral.

**THIS MINIMALIST APPROACH
ALLOWS VISITORS TO FULLY
IMMERSE THEMSELVES IN NATURE.
WHETHER WALKING JUNGLE
TRAILS, PADDLING ALONG SERENE
COVES IN A KAYAK, LOUNGING
IN A HAMMOCK BY YOUR HUT,
OR EXPLORING THE VIBRANT
UNDERWATER WORLD.**





evening sky. As the sun dipped below the ocean, we made our way back through the jungle. The dimming light gradually gave way to darkness, and I eventually turned on my headlamp to illuminate the final stretch.

Dining Under the Stars

Back at the resort, the restaurant was elegantly set with an unobstructed view of the bay. Shortly after, I was served a selection of delectable local dishes, each bursting with flavor. Kyaw Kyaw joined me for dinner, and we discussed the exciting week of diving that lay ahead.

GYPSY

The wooden ship MV Sea Gipsy, which sailed us from Kawthaung to Boulder Island.

Birdwatching at Dawn

The next morning, I awoke refreshed to the symphony of bird calls echoing through the jungle outside my cozy hut, which was perched just meters from the beach. Grabbing my binoculars, I ventured along a jungle path leading to a small wooden bridge spanning a dry streambed. Here, a natural clearing provided the perfect spot to observe the vibrant birdlife as the first light of day illuminated the canopy.

A Marine Biologist's Haven

After a hearty breakfast featuring an assortment of fresh local fruits, Kyaw Kyaw and I prepared for the day's first dive. Just steps from the restaurant, we boarded a small boat that took us to a research barge anchored in the bay. Sponsored by Boulder Bay Eco Resort, this converted steel vessel served as a base for marine biologists conducting vital research. The barge provided an ideal spot to assemble our dive gear and don wetsuits before heading to one of the 12 nearby dive sites, all within a short boat ride.



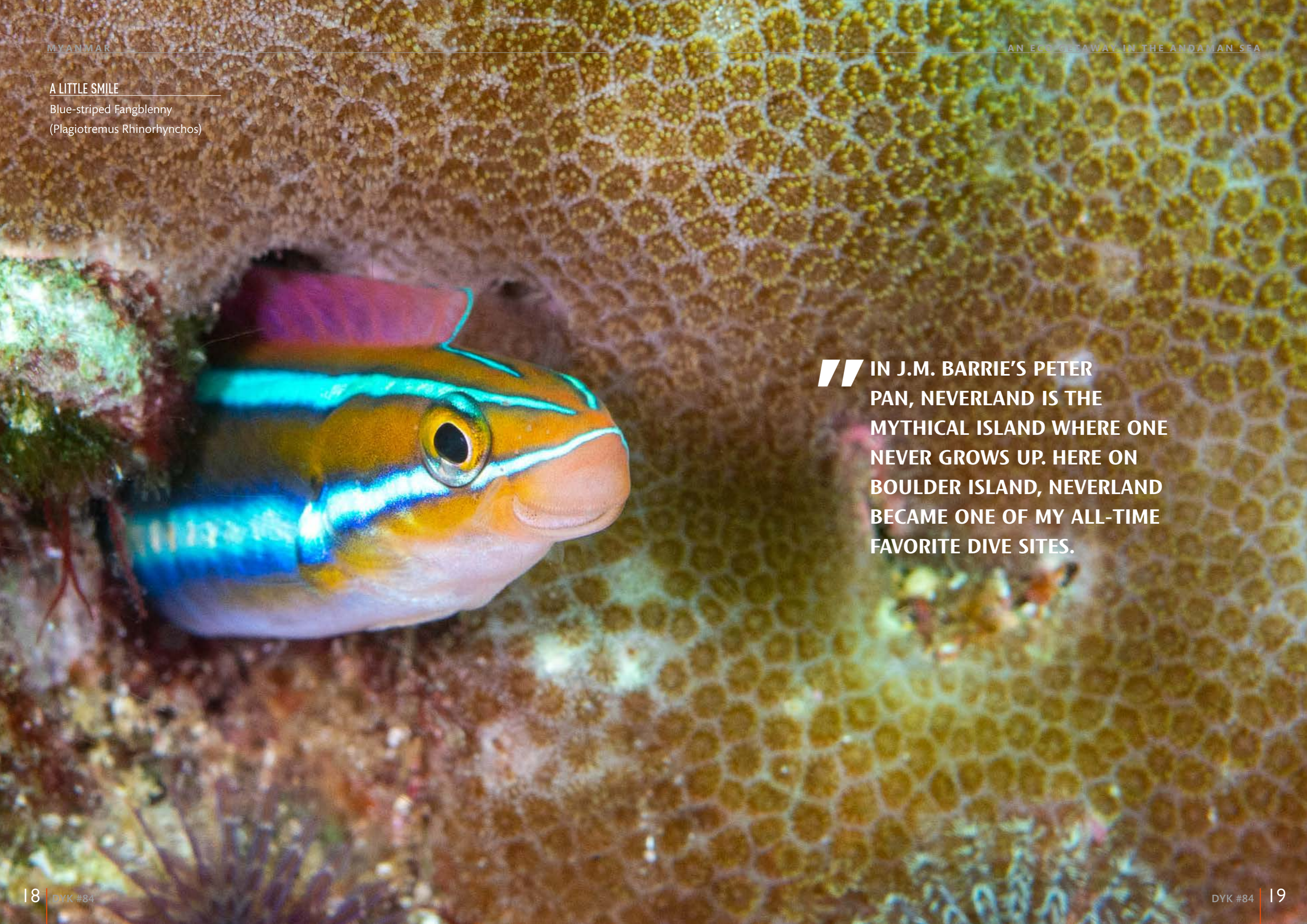
VIDEO

Frode Kjems Uhre
diving in Myanmar

Video:
Frode Kjems Uhre

A LITTLE SMILE

Blue-striped Fangblenny
(Plagiotremus Rhinorhynchos)



IN J.M. BARRIE'S PETER PAN, NEVERLAND IS THE MYTHICAL ISLAND WHERE ONE NEVER GROWS UP. HERE ON BOULDER ISLAND, NEVERLAND BECAME ONE OF MY ALL-TIME FAVORITE DIVE SITES.

Immersed in Marine Abundance

Our first dive was at Secret Cove, where the strong current hinted at an abundance of marine life. As I backrolled into the water, I was immediately enveloped by an underwater spectacle. Schools of fish swirled around me, their movements almost hypnotic. Securing myself against a rock to steady my position in the current, I watched a moray eel cautiously peek from a crevice. Moments later, the current propelled a pair of emperor fish so close to my mask that I could see every intricate detail of their vibrant scales. Following Kyaw Kyaw's signal, I released my hold on the rock, allowing the current to carry me on a thrilling drift dive past ever-changing underwater landscapes and dense fish shoals.

Surface Interval Serenity

Returning to the barge after the dive, we left our gear behind and headed to the resort for a sumptuous lunch. Deciding to take a break before the next dive, I borrowed a fish identification book from the resort's library and reclined in a hammock outside my hut. As I swung gently in the tropical breeze, I attempted to name some of the colorful species I had just encountered – a blissful way to spend a surface interval.

Exploring Neverland

A little later, Kyaw Kyaw Oo and I set out for the dive site called Neverland. We descended to a depth of just over 20 meters, where the underwater topography proved to be both dramatic and captivating. The seascape featured rocky formations and vibrant soft corals, including gorgonian sea fans, tube corals, and sea whips. The current here was strong, drawing in large schools of fish. Among them, I marveled at pairs of emperor angelfish and butterflyfish, seemingly frozen in place, effortlessly holding their ground against the flow.

RØD MARMOR ▷
Marmoreret
Stenkrabbe (*Carpilius
Convexus*)



A CURIOUS FELLOW

One of the many hermit crabs in the area, getting up close!



When we surfaced, Kyaw Kyaw Oo asked if I was up for a third dive. Despite already being saturated with fantastic experiences from the two earlier dives, my answer was an enthusiastic yes. In J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Neverland is the mythical island where one never grows up. Here on Boulder Island, Neverland became one of my all-time favorite dive sites.

Beautiful Nudibranchs

After a leisurely surface interval of about an hour, spent chatting aboard the floating barge, we headed to the dive site Sail Rock. Descending to 19 meters, we found a sandy seabed interspersed with rocky outcrops and soft corals. The area was alive with marine life, both large and small. Once again, I encountered vibrant schools of butterflyfish and emperor angelfish. But this site offered even more surprises in the form of fascinating smaller creatures.

I spotted a fringed scorpionfish hidden among the rocks and stumbled upon numerous colorful nudibranchs. With my wide-angle lens still on the camera, I couldn't capture the intricate details of these tiny treasures, though a macro lens would have been perfect for the task. Even without it, the dive was a treasure trove of marine biodiversity.

Dense Bamboo Forest

After returning to Boulder Bay Island following our final dive of the day, I noticed there was still over an hour until sunset. I decided to take a solo walk and explore the island's marked trails. Among the options, I chose a path that led through a part of the jungle with dense bamboo groves.

The trail opened up to a small bay aptly named Bamboo Bay. Sitting alone at the water's edge, I soaked in the peaceful view and the profound silence, a perfect contrast to the bustling life beneath the waves. After a while, I retraced my steps back to the resort, feeling completely at ease.

SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP ▷

Porcelain Crab
(*Neopetrolisthes Sp.*)
resting in its host
anemone, sharing a
near-symbiotic bond.



MORAY

Fringed Moray
(*Gymnothorax Fimbriatus*)

THE NIGHT DIVES AROUND BOULDER ISLAND REVEALED A HIDDEN SIDE OF THE REEF, WHERE NOCTURNAL HUNTERS LIKE MORAY EELS AND SQUID EMERGED FROM THEIR DAYTIME HIDEOUTS.

Night Dives and Close Encounters

Over the next four days, Kyaw Kyaw and I explored the underwater world with three dives daily, including several night dives. The night dives around Boulder Island revealed a hidden side of the reef, where nocturnal hunters like moray eels and squid emerged from their daytime hideouts. Illuminated by our dive lights, crabs and shrimp scurried across the coral, creating an intricate tableau of life.

Meeting the Moken People

One morning, as Kyaw Kyaw Oo and I returned from our dive, we noticed a Moken boat anchored in the bay. Curious, we approached and were warmly invited aboard. The boat was home to 8-10 Moken people, including men, women, and children. The Moken, an Austronesian ethnic group, have lived a semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle as sea gypsies for generations. They have their own language, Moken, and many do not speak Burmese or Thai.

Fortunately, the captain of the boat spoke Burmese, allowing me to communicate through Kyaw Kyaw Oo as a translator. The captain explained that they had anchored in the bay to fish for cuttlefish after nightfall. The Moken greeted us with friendly smiles, revealing teeth stained and worn from years of chewing betel nuts. After chatting briefly, I thanked them for their hospitality and wished them luck with their fishing before we continued on our way.

Freeing Trapped Fish

During one of our dives, Kyaw Kyaw Oo discovered a large fish trap on the seabed, its surface buoy missing. Presumably abandoned by a fishing vessel, the trap was now filled with fish, unable to escape. Moved by the sight, Kyaw Kyaw Oo decided to release them. After 5-6 minutes of prying, he managed to open the hatch, freeing a school of over 50 large fish.

CAPTAIN

The captain of the Moken boat.



A NEW FRIEND

Frode visiting the Moken boat.



FREEDOM

Dive guide Kyaw Kyaw Oo has just opened the hatch of the fish trap, allowing the school of fish to swim to freedom — a wonderful sight.



PARROTING

Parrotfish (*Chlorurus Sordidus*)

/// A LITTLE LATER,
KYAW KYAW OO AND
I SET OUT FOR THE
DIVE SITE CALLED
NEVERLAND. WE
DESCENDED TO A
DEPTH OF JUST OVER
20 METERS.

Watching them dart away into the open sea was a truly uplifting experience. To ensure the trap could no longer function, he left the hatch open before we swam on.

Eco Resort in Every Sense of the Word

I've stayed at numerous resorts that brand themselves as "eco," but Boulder Bay Eco Resort genuinely lives up to the name. This tranquil retreat stands in stark contrast to the sprawling concrete hotels and overcrowded tourist beaches so common elsewhere.

The resort's small huts are crafted from local materials and blend seamlessly into their surroundings, remaining virtually invisible from the water—even those just a few meters from the beach. Solar panels provide all electricity, ensuring the resort is free from noisy diesel generators. There's no chlorine pool, no air conditioning, no souvenir shops hawking knock-offs with "special price for you." Nor are there loud nightclubs, jet skis, or fuel-guzzling speedboats pulling tourists on waterskis or parasails.


There are no motorcycles or roads on this little island—only narrow trails winding through the jungle. The beaches remain pristine and untouched, free of bars or rows of sun loungers. Boulder Bay Eco Resort is the island's sole accommodation, ensuring an intimate and exclusive experience for guests.

This minimalist approach allows visitors to fully immerse themselves in nature. Whether walking jungle trails, paddling along serene coves in a kayak, lounging in a hammock by your hut, or exploring the vibrant underwater world with snorkel or scuba gear, the resort offers an unparalleled connection to the natural world. ■

A LITTLE CAMEL ▷

Camel Shrimp
(*Rhynchocinetes
Durbanensis*).





WHEN WE SURFACED, KYAW KYAW OO ASKED IF I WAS UP FOR A THIRD DIVE. DESPITE ALREADY BEING SATURATED WITH FANTASTIC EXPERIENCES FROM THE TWO EARLIER DIVES, MY ANSWER WAS AN ENTHUSIASTIC YES.

RED ON GREEN CONTRAST

Striped Triplefin Blenny
(*Helcogramma striata*)

FACTS

MYANMAR

GEOGRAPHY The Mergui Archipelago is located in the Andaman Sea off Myanmar's west coast. It consists of over 800 islands, all covered in tropical rainforest. Most are uninhabited and pristine. The Andaman Sea, a marginal sea that forms part of the Bay of Bengal, borders the Indian Ocean. It lies between the Malay Peninsula to the east and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to the west. Myanmar shares borders with Bangladesh and India to the west, China to the northeast, Laos to the east, and Thailand to the southeast. The country has a population of 54 million, with Nay Pyi Taw as its capital and Yangon, with 4.5 million residents, as its largest city.

ETHNIC POPULATION The Moken people, an Austronesian ethnic group, have traditionally lived a semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle as sea gypsies. However, this way of life is increasingly under threat. Approximately 3,000 Moken remain in the Mergui Archipelago. They have their own language, Moken, and many do not speak Thai or Burmese.

ECO-TOURISM Myanmar cautiously opened to tourism in 1997 after more than 50 years of isolation. Consequently, the country sees relatively few tourists

compared to other destinations in Southeast Asia. The Mergui Archipelago, in particular, remains largely untouched, with only a handful of resorts to protect the area. Visitors require a special permit to explore the archipelago.

TRAVEL From Scandinavia, the easiest route is to fly to Bangkok Suvarnabhumi Airport (IATA code: BKK), also known as Bangkok International Airport, and take a domestic flight to Ranong (UNN) in southern Thailand. The flight takes about 1.5 hours. Note that domestic flights to Ranong depart from Don Mueang International Airport (DMK) rather than Suvarnabhumi. A free shuttle bus connects the two airports. From Ranong Airport, a 30-minute minibus ride takes you directly to Ranong Longtail Pier (Saphan Pla Jetty), where you clear Thai immigration. From there, a 20-minute long-tail boat ride brings you to Kawthaung in Myanmar. You can also take a 9-hour bus from Bangkok to Ranong. From Kawthaung, it's a scenic 5.5-hour boat ride to Boulder Island.

VISA A visa is required but easily obtained as an e-visa with an invitation letter from Boulder Bay Eco Resort.

boulderasia.com
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CURRENCY The primary currency is the Myanmar Kyat (MMK). Approximately 1 USD equals 4,500 Kyat. Credit cards are not accepted on Boulder Island, but USD, Myanmar Kyat, and Thai Baht are.

CLIMATE Myanmar has a tropical climate with two seasons. The southwest monsoon, also called the wet monsoon, runs from May to October, bringing rain, winds, and rough seas. During this period, Boulder Island Eco Resort is closed. The northeast monsoon, also called the dry monsoon, occurs from November to April, offering calm seas, making it the ideal diving season.

DIVING Diving takes place from November to April, with 2-3 dives daily. The first dive usually departs shortly after breakfast. A small boat ferries divers to a floating dive platform that also serves as a research station. During high tide, pickups occur directly from the beach in front of your hut; during low tide, you walk to the small jetty. The dive platform is where you check equipment and don wetsuits before heading to one of the 12 dive sites around the island, most within a 10-minute boat ride. Dive sites feature sandy bottoms, large granite boulders, coral reefs, small caves, and swim-

throughs. Strong tidal currents in the area foster abundant soft and hard coral growth and vibrant fish life. Most divers explore the Mergui Archipelago on liveaboards, which rarely visit the dive sites near Boulder Island. This exclusivity means you often have the underwater world entirely to yourself. Between dives, relax on the island or in your hammock. In April, water temperatures reach around 30°C, though visibility may decrease as the rainy season approaches.

HEALTH The nearest decompression chamber is in Phuket, Thailand. Dive conservatively and stay hydrated between dives.

LANGUAGE The official language of Myanmar is Burmese, spoken as a first language by two-thirds of the population. Over 110 other languages are spoken. The Moken people in the Mergui Archipelago speak their own language, also called Moken.

ELECTRICITY 220V. No adapter is required on Boulder Island.

COMMUNICATION WiFi is available on Boulder Island but is neither as fast nor as reliable as in Scandinavia.