

Unplugged in Paradise



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Need an e-tox? Then head for one of Asia's fast unspoiled destinations - the Myeik Archipelago in Myanmar.

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My phone and laptop were beginning to control my life, and I was badly in need of an e-tox. I couldn't bear to throw these gadgets away, so I decided to go far, far away; somewhere without Wi-Fi or 3G; somewhere I could escape from the virtual world and reconnect with nature.

Allowing myself one last online indulgence to search for my spot, I signed up with Moby Dick Tours for a cruise through the Myeik (aka Mergui) Archipelago, located in the Andaman Sea off the southern coast of Myanmar.

The indicators were good: over 800 tropical islands, some no bigger than a house and others several kilometres long and wide; most of them uninhabited; no ferries connecting them, and definitely no Wi-Fi.

The trip began in Kawthaung, Myanmar's southernmost town, where I boarded the Sea Gypsy - a homely looking, yellow and green-painted vessel with simple accommodation for 10 people, a communal sitting and eating area, a sundeck and a perpetually smiling crew. My companions for the voyage were a bunch of like-minded travellers from the USA, the UK, Ireland, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany and Thailand.



Our tour guide, Jojo, briefed us on our activities for the next five days. These included exploring the islands and beaches, swimming, sunbathing, snorkelling, kayaking and stand-up paddleboarding (SUP), visiting a Moken (sea nomad) village, meeting local fishermen, eating delicious food and getting to know each other.

Jojo handed each of us a map of the area, and I smiled to see the names of some islands, such as Hastings Island, Lord Loughborough Island and Great Swinton Island, which I presumed were named by ship captains in the era of British rule over Burma. I had read that the region was once a hotbed of pirates, but I hoped we would complete our cruise without seeing a ship with a Jolly Roger flag of skull and bones bearing down on us.

Within a couple of hours heading northwest into the archipelago, we had lost sight of the mainland and were surrounded by islands that were covered in dense forest and ringed by rocky shorelines, sandy beaches and coral reefs. Soon the Sea Gypsy dropped anchor and JoJo whisked us to a deserted beach in a small dinghy. We scrambled up a steep incline to enjoy a panoramic view of the archipelago, but we didn't stay there long. Suddenly everything went dark and the heavens opened; rain came teeming down, thunder cracked and lightning split the sky. By the time we got back to the boat we were all soaked, despite not yet having had a swim in the sea.

Our voyage took place at the turn of the dry to rainy season, and stormy weather became a regular feature of the next few days. While in some ways this was disappointing, the storms brought with them a silver lining in the form of dramatic skies that made for memorable photos. I would find myself composing an image with bright sunlight shining on the Sea Gypsy or on one of our group paddleboarding over limpid waters, with a contrasting backdrop of dark, brooding clouds.

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