

## JOURNEYS

## Mergui archipelago guide

Offering pristine white-sand beaches the islands off the southern coast of Myanmar now secretly serve up a few barefoot luxury options for modern Robinson Crusoes. Our Mergui resorts review and island-hopping boat tripping guide.

by Keith Lyons



Panoramic view of the tastefully luxe Wa Ale Island Resort with its sumptuous beach and breezy blue surrounds. Think gourmet food and comfortable tents/ photo: hotel

UNTIL very recently, the question ‘where is the **Mergui Archipelago**?’ could be used as a tricky tie-breaker in *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. The enigmatic region was famed for its Moken pearl divers who could see underwater and hold their breath longer than thought humanly possible. The last reference to the mysterious island group came in the 1965 James Bond movie *Thunderball* when it was designated as a ransom drop-off point.

Few have heard of the island group. And even fewer can locate the archipelago in the wide Indian Ocean.

Try asking Google and it will bring up a map of the Bay of Bengal as it merges with the Andaman Sea. Barely perceptible between India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the coast of southern Myanmar and Thailand is a scattering of 800 or so mostly uninhabited islets and atolls. Perfectly illustrating a vast spread of islands, Wikipedia even uses the map as its best example of an ‘archipelago’.



Awei Pila offers clear waters and white sand/ photo: Keith Lyons

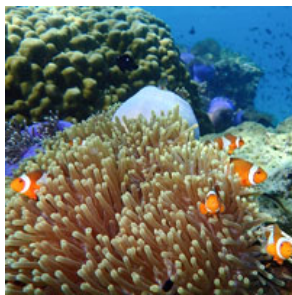
Viewed from above, the remoteness – and pristine wilderness – was aptly depicted in the *Biggles* adventure series a century ago, with the archipelago like ‘a necklace of emeralds dropped carelessly on a turquoise robe’, the ‘sort of place where anything could happen’. Piracy, slavery, plundering, and smuggling were the main things that did happen.

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For half a century following Burma’s independence in 1948 the ‘forbidden islands’ were out-of-bounds. Access was begrudgingly granted by the military in the late 1990s allowing divers in from nearby Thailand on expensive live-aboard charter yachts in search of sharks, manta rays, whale sharks, and dugongs. But intrepid adventurers weren’t allowed to stay on the densely-jungled limestone and granite islands.

When Myanmar (renamed in 1989) moved towards democracy and started to open up to foreign visitors again earlier this decade, a handful of the islands were earmarked for development.

However, the challenges of creating self-sufficient island resorts from scratch – and getting official approvals – resulted in none of the half dozen planned resorts opening on schedule. Development restrictions, lack of infrastructure, and high entry fees mean the archipelago is the newest, coolest destination, with some of the most anticipated luxury resort openings.



Marine life and coral around the Victoria Cliff Resort at Nyaung Oo Phee/ photo: hotel

It isn't inundated with tourist hordes like Phuket or other 'over-touristed' beach destinations. Instead, the 'the maritime Shangri-la' of Asia offers exclusion, seclusion, and white-sand beaches in spades. Think Tom Hanks marooned in *Castaway*, stumbling upon a water-sport wellness retreat fresh out of Harper's Bazaar magazine.

As alluded to in Bond's *Thunderball*, there is something alluring and edgy about the Mergui archipelago and the resorts covered in our review. One of the ironies is that the deserted bays make for perfect Instagram snaps and selfies guaranteed to garner more social media likes, yet there is no mobile phone coverage throughout the offshore islands, and resort satellite internet WiFi is sketchy and slow.

While the untouched surroundings provide eye candy and chicken soup for the soul, in another anomaly there are no coconut palms growing naturally on the islands – but you can have your pina colada. Getting caught in the rain is a seasonal hazard. Despite your year-round need to get away for a vacation, the island paradise isn't open 365 days of the year.

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From May or June through to September, the **southwest monsoon** brings wind, waves, and rain, with rough seas and murky waters, meaning the resorts are closed.

During the season, from October to May, the colour of the water varies depending on the light and turbidity, from Tanqueray gin emerald green and Bombay Sapphire violet-blue through to crystal clear like a medium-dry martini, the favourite tippie of 'shaken, not stirred' James Bond. Best bets for flat, glassy millponds, unruffled like a debonair, dapper spy, are between February and April.



Boulder Bay Eco Resort/ photo: Keith Lyons

There's another irony about the archipelago resorts: you pay a premium for things not to be there. There are no shopping malls, no 7-11 convenience stores, no banks or ATM machines, no nightclubs or karaoke, no pestering vendors, and hardly any other guests.

If there's a word that sums up the resorts, it would have to be 'unpretentious'. And the vibe at these 'barefoot luxury' establishments is casual yet convivial. There's no need for tuxedos or formal wear. No one is going to notice creases in your beach shirt or bathing suit. No one is going to give you the line from *Thunderball*, 'What *exactly* do you do?' There is no one to impress even if you introduce yourself as 'Bond, James Bond'. But there are distractions as we note in our Mergui island guide and resorts review.

Instead of swashbuckling, daring adventures and innumerable survival challenges, the daily challenges are more to do with water and land-based soft adventure, disconnecting from the digital world, and re-connecting with the elemental rawness of the natural world. Typically island days start early to beat the midday heat and are governed by the tides, with refuelling on delicious food at mealtimes. Morning excursions are complemented by afternoon siestas, and by then, the sun is over the yardarm.

If you want more space than NASA, you can be stranded on a deserted bay like shipwrecked Robinson Crusoe – all of the resorts have secret beaches and coves. Personal, individually-tailored service means your own Man Friday might accompany you on a coastal mangrove kayaking trip or a bird-watching jungle hike.

And like Crusoe, as you ease into island time and the tropical playground, you might find that your worries are replaced by a carefree happiness.

The islands possess a restorative elixir guaranteed to lift the mood, with negative ions found in the warm water, on beaches awaiting your footprints, and in the lush rainforest. One island, Boulder, may have inspired Peter Pan's Neverland, a place where you never grow old. However, some of the resorts only allow children aged 8 years or older, and due to the rugged nature of the terrain, can't easily accommodate those with disabilities or mobility issues.



Stylish Awei Pila interiors/ photo: hotel

As well as a sense of wellbeing and wonder, and the free-spirited feeling of being young again, there's another intangible bonus from paying the pioneer premium of getting there before it is 'discovered': bragging rights. As a discerning, trend-setting traveller, there's much social capital to be gained from being among the inaugural guests to set foot on the powdery soft sands at new resorts. Some locations have already been scouted for island buyouts for A-List celebrity 'bikini and martini' holidays and royalty honeymoons, ensuring privacy away from the paparazzi.

## Getting to the Mergui islands

Another paradox is that while 95 percent of the islands are situated within Myanmar, it is much easier to access the Mergui (sometimes written as Myeik, but not to be confused with the town of Myeik) archipelago through Thailand. While a relaxing beach holiday at the end of a trip around Myanmar makes sense, **flights on the flag-carrier Myanmar National Airlines** from the former capital Yangon to the gateway of Kawthaung are unreliable and expensive – not great if you have a planned rendezvous to catch a boat or deposit a ransom. A less stressful way involves overnighing in Kawthaung at Victoria Cliff or Grand Andaman resort hotels. Kawthaung's airport is being extended and upgraded, in anticipation of taking international flights, initially from Bangkok and Phuket.

Most start their adventure in the hot springs town of **Ranong** in southern Thailand, which has up to five flights a day with **Thai AirAsia** and **Nok Air** from Bangkok's no-frills Don Mueang. Around 300km south, the busy hub of **Phuket** has numerous flight connections across the region, but it is a long four to five-hour journey by road up to Ranong.



Aerial view of Victoria Cliff Resort at Nyaung Oo Phee/ photo: Keith Lyons

There is talk of allowing seaplanes and helicopters to whisk time-strapped city-slickers seeking back-to-nature escapes to their fantasy islands from Kawthaung, Ranong or even Phuket, but at the moment that is just that – talk.

It's a short **long-tail boat** trip (300 Thai baht one way) from Ranong across a wide estuary to Kawthaung. Myanmar is in its own time zone, 30 minutes – and 30 years – behind Thailand.

Even if you are known as an international man (or woman) of mystery, you will need more than your MI6 ID card to get into Myanmar. Most visitors (apart from Thai nationals) require an **e-visa**, easily obtained in advance (at [evisa.moip.gov.mm](http://evisa.moip.gov.mm)) for US\$50. Having a photocopy of your passport and a couple of mugshots puts smiles on the faces of the relaxed **immigration** staff.

You can't just rock up to Kawthaung and hire a boat to check out some of the islands, as the restricted-access resorts are scattered far and wide over an area several times larger than the Maldives, up to three hours away by speedboat, with set transfer schedules during the week, and red tape to complete before they can roll out the red carpet. On then with our Mergui fun guide.

## Mergui resorts guide bare eco to luxe

So how do the resorts shape up? The resorts, which range in concessions to comfort and green credentials, vary in size, style, and offerings – with prices around US\$300 to US\$850 a night. Some have air-con, others ceiling fans and sea breezes. Not all have hot water showers, in-room fridge mini-bars, or internal telephone systems – you might find that you may not need them. In an endeavour to reduce plastic waste, all resorts give out refillable water bottles – expect biodegradable bathroom products, reef-friendly sunscreen, and paper drinking straws.



Heading any list of archipelago resorts is the superb **Wa Ale Island Resort**, (e-mail: [info@waalesort.com](mailto:info@waalesort.com) or [waalesort.com](http://waalesort.com)) rated in the top 10 hotels in Asia by *The Telegraph*. Located within Lampi Marine National Park, Myanmar's first marine protected area, the resort's main beach is a protected sea turtle nesting site. Set back from the dunes are natural-hue luxury safari tent villas and jungle treehouses. Championed by the American resort manager's 'can do' attitude, guests are encouraged to try wholesome activities – including kayaking, swimming, snorkelling, diving, and hiking. Sumptuous, innovative gourmet cuisine is prepared by a passionate British five-star safari chef using local seafood and produce from the resort's own organic kitchen garden.



Luxury tent at Wa Ale - class act/  
photo: hotel

An eye for detail, the use of recycled and repurposed materials, including rustic boat timbers and old monastery wood, and tree-sleeping pythons and crab-catching macaques, add to the quirkiness of the resort. With 20 percent of profits set aside to protect habitats and improve life for the nearby Moken and Burmese fishing villages, the feel-good factor is high. Transfer by Wa Ale's Bond-style racy 300-horsepower speedboat will set on auto-repeat in your mind the 'dum di-di dum dum' rhythm of the Bond theme tune with its guitar riff, brass fanfare, and gun barrel sequence.

Even if you are not a bucket list kind of person, you might want to include **Boulder Bay Eco Resort** (e-mail: [info@boulderbayecoresort.com](mailto:info@boulderbayecoresort.com) or [boulderasia.com](http://boulderasia.com)) on your wish list of places to visit before you die – or to prolong your life. With its iconic balancing boulder in the middle of a sheltered tidal reef bay, the resort features rustic wooden cabins tucked away in tropical rainforest, with views out to the sandy beach and headlands. Self-sufficient with its own solar power plant and spring water, the 'back-to-nature' resort is the base for soft adventure on and off the 135-hectare (half square mile) diverse jungle-covered island.



Boulder Bay superior room, rustic/  
photo: hotel

Boulder's underwater world has branching, plate and sponge corals, and a variety of marine life close to the shore, as well as two marine biologists mapping the coral garden reefs and educating guests about the island environment. With half a dozen bays and various lookout points connected by trails, a dive centre, and a graceful bamboo yoga *shala*, you can see why guests are reluctant to leave the island which has Burma-Scottish links which may have been provided inspiration for JM Barrie in conjuring up Neverland.

One of the first to open, **Victoria Cliff Resort at Nyaung Oo Phee** (e-mail: [info@nyaungoopheeresort.com](mailto:info@nyaungoopheeresort.com) or [www.nyaungoopheeresort.com](http://www.nyaungoopheeresort.com)) is all about snorkelling and diving. With half a dozen different snorkelling locations just off the main beach or a short boat trip away, family-friendly NOP – or Now O Pee as it is known in Thai – is a popular day trip from Ranong or Kawthaung, attracting predominantly Thai tourists, though some staff and guides speak English. The waters abound with sweetlips, groupers, snappers, emperors, triggerfish, and parrotfish, as well as staghorn, tiger claw, harp coral. These days the only poachers around are those at the breakfast egg station.

The building of new villas replacing tents will enable more to stay overnight to enjoy the post-day trip calm and the evening's cultural show which culminates in a spectacular fire show. Though dubbed 'the party island' in one Thai TV programme and particularly Instagramable, most overnighers are in their beds soon after the night show finishes, pleasantly exhausted from the day's snorkelling. There is no *Octopussy* Bond girl to be found, but at several sites, the distinctive striped 'Nemo' clownfish can be seen hiding in its poisonous anemone host, and in the afternoon purple-sheaf anemones retract their long tentacles in a stunning display.



Beach bites at Victoria Cliff Resort at Nyaung Oo Phee/ photo: Keith Lyons

There is no hideaway wall bed, but the idiosyncratic yurts would make the perfect Bond hideaway at one of the flashiest island resorts, the five-star **Awei Pila** (e-mail: [info@aweipila.com](mailto:info@aweipila.com))

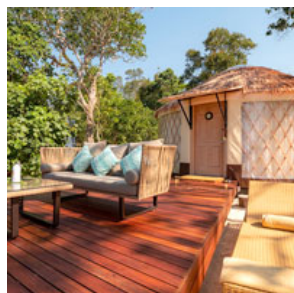
or [www.aweipila.com](http://www.aweipila.com)). New arrivals fresh off the 150-minute speedboat transfer are invited to kick off their shoes, leave behind their worldly worries, and feel the soft sand under their pasty feet. If you've been recently shaken, Awei Pila is a good place to get gently stirred. Centrepiece is the main reception and dining area, where guests can laze under an umbrella gazing out at the billion-dollar views of the infinity pool, clear azure Andaman Sea and cerulean blue skies, or saunter across dazzling white coral sands to the gently-sloping safe swimming beach where the warm sea water is laden with the good-mood elevator magnesium.

Circular tented villas discretely-placed among towering leafy trees along the 600m-long beachfront have hidden air-con units and rainforest bathrooms, while raised decks with comfy sofas give front row seats to appreciate the mesmerising panorama.

The resident marine biologist, dive master and guide – who is pushing for the resort to be 100 percent plastic-free – leads trips, including to the nearby settlement of Moken semi-nomadic gatherers and collectors, and Burmese fishers. This hideaway rates high on our Mergui resorts review spanning the southern Myanmar archipelago.

In **Kawthaung** itself, the best option before venturing out to the islands or for a stopover to connect with flights is the relatively new four-star **Victoria Cliff Hotel and Resort**

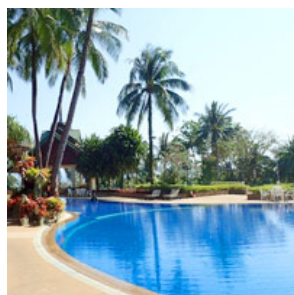
**Kawthaung** (e-mail: [info@victoriaciff.com](mailto:info@victoriaciff.com) or [www.victoriaciff.com](http://www.victoriaciff.com)), offering elevated panoramic views out over the Andaman Sea from its ocean-side rooms as well as from the cliff-edge infinity pool and open-air restaurant, which are particularly appealing towards sunset. In the landscaped tropical gardens there's a larger pool, spa and fitness centre, as well as a lake with hungry swans and koi carp. The 90-room hotel can arrange trips to Maliwan 'jasmine flower' falls where the resort is 'licensed to spa', maintaining natural hot springs near a village originally settled by Chinese and Thai in the 18th century. Not exactly the steaming scenes as in *Casino Royale*, but hot water, of a healing kind, nevertheless.



Awei Pila bungalow and timber sunning deck/ photo: hotel

If there was a hotel that should be turning up the volume on the Bond theme, it is the palatial sprawling 5-star **Grand Andaman Hotel** (e-mail: [booking@grandandamanisland.com](mailto:booking@grandandamanisland.com) or [www.grandandaman.co.th](http://www.grandandaman.co.th)), a 21-year-old hotel originally known as the Andaman Club. The 205-room hilltop complex on its own island within sight of Kawthaung and Thailand has been tarted up recently and now offers more activities than just slot machines and gaming tables, with a huge tree-flanked swimming pool the only shady aspect of the family-friendly accommodation. The Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course is gone (rooted up by wild pigs), the petting zoo is no longer, and there's faint hope of finding Pussy Galore or Plenty O'Toole among the Thai groups which flock to the hotel, particularly on weekends and holidays.

With bird's eye views into the diamond-speckled Andaman Sea, there's also excellent bird watching of the ornithological kind, with hornbills squawking in the trees of the 730 hectare (1,800 acre) resort, and overhead, brahminty kites gliding on the thermals above. With its tagline 'persons of any nationality may enter with ease and without any visa', this is the only island accommodation not requiring a Myanmar visa.



Grand Andaman pool/ photo: Keith Lyons

Just get a **border pass** for US\$10 and valid for seven days for use in the area of **Kawthaung** and the nearby island where the Grand Andaman hotel is situated.

Foreigners can go directly to the hotel from a dedicated immigration jetty for the Ranong boat operators, but only during the daytime to complete immigration formalities.

There is an immigration facility at the hotel itself. But to go to the other islands, and further out of Kawthaung (20 miles or so) requires a visa, either an e-visa or standard tourist visa.

There are frequent boat transfers to Ranong and Kawthaung, and in keeping with the ethos of 'being entirely devoted to the pleasure and enjoyment' of guests, the duty-free shop is open 24 hours along with the casino and dining areas.

## Island safaris and boat trips

Perhaps the most relaxed – and most authentic – way to explore the archipelago (without breaking the bank) is with **Island Safaris** (e-mail: [info@islandsafarimergui.com](mailto:info@islandsafarimergui.com) or [islandsafarimergui.com](http://islandsafarimergui.com)), on the converted wooden junk, the Sea Gypsy. With open-air gazebo accommodation below, and a large lounge and sun deck on top, the former cargo boat transports passengers to another world, with frequent stops at sandy bays for swimming, snorkelling, and beachcombing. Itineraries utilizing twice-weekly departures during the October to May season include visiting fishing villages and settlements of the seafaring Moken sea gypsies, and overnighing off Boulder Island.

The size of the vessel and its nostalgic character means the Island Safari is popular with family groups, friends and even solo travellers, as it provides the best value option for exploring the formerly prohibitively-expensive archipelago. Five-day safaris start at US\$1,100 per person.

The other pioneers of Mergui Archipelago exploration, old hands **Burma Boating** (e-mail: [info@burmaboating.com](mailto:info@burmaboating.com) or [www.burmaboating.com](http://www.burmaboating.com)), have a large fleet of various sized boats, including a shiny new solar-power yacht, offering a range of cabin cruises (from US\$2,600 per person) as well as private yacht charter (from US\$1,600 per day for a three-cabin, three-crew vessel to over US\$7,000 per day).

With an eight-day island loop (from US\$3,780 per person) as well as a 10-day excursion, the Burma Coastal Voyage, (starting at US\$4,450 per person) from Kawthaung through the archipelago stopping at old port towns on the way to Yangon, Burma luxury small ship operator **Pandaw** (e-mail: [information@pandaw.com](mailto:information@pandaw.com) or [www.pandaw.com](http://www.pandaw.com)) takes guests back in time to the Bond-era aboard a classic 1960's motor yacht, the Andaman Explorer.

The first resort in the archipelago (and now the last resort) **Myanmar Andaman Resort** ([www.macleodislandmyanmar.com](http://www.macleodislandmyanmar.com)) was under renovation mid-2019 and occasionally entertains day-trippers aboard 1,500-passenger Star Cruises **SuperStar Libra** or the 3,500-capacity **Genting Dream** ([www.gentingcruiselines.com](http://www.gentingcruiselines.com)) from Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. Based out of Ranong, Thailand, is **The Smiling Seahorse** ([www.thesmilingseahorse.com/](http://www.thesmilingseahorse.com/)) that does diving cruises to the Mergui Archipelago on liveaboard vessels. Look at a six-day/five-night dive trip at roughly Bt43,000 for full board, soft drinks and 17 dives.

And that's your Mergui Archipelago guide with an A to Z of top beach resorts in southern Myanmar and Mergui hotel reviews.

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## FAST FACTS / Hotel Contact List

Cash is king, with newly-minted, crisp US dollars preferred by resorts (or advanced payment by bank transfer), though Thai baht is widely used in Kawthaung. The **exchange rate is US\$1 = 1,512 Burmese kyat** (pronounced 'chyat' and written as K or MMK). The platinum credit card your bank said could be used everywhere around the world is only useful for cutting up cocaine, though some high-end resorts may accept it (with a surcharge).

This is a list of all the resorts currently open. Service charges, government taxes, and the marine royalty fee are included in the **all-inclusive resort package price**, which covers airport pickup and boat transfers, room, meals and drinks, and most resort-based land and water activities. Massage and spa treatments, motorized boat activities, dive excursions are extra, as is some premium top-shelf alcohol.

The price is pretty consistent throughout the season October to May, with **December and January**, and the busy Myanmar, Thai and Western holiday periods seeing **high-season** price increases – and getting booked out. You can't easily book the full-board packages using hotel booking sites, the best rates and offers are available direct from the resort websites, with promotions sometimes available from regional representative travel agents – or name-drop and mention this fine travel site.



Island Safaris is a value option for archipelago explorers/ photo: Keith Lyons



Burma Boating has a large fleet including a solar-powered boat/ photo: burma boating

The **telephone** numbers below are for the **mainland offices**, not the actual resorts, which have no phone coverage.

## **Mergui Archipelago hotel guide/ Tour operators**

**Awei Pila.** Tel: [95] 1368-7703, (e-mail: [info@aweipila.com](mailto:info@aweipila.com) or [www.aweipila.com](http://www.aweipila.com))

**Boulder Bay Eco Resort.** Tel [95] 138-0382, (e-mail: [info@boulderbayecoresort.com](mailto:info@boulderbayecoresort.com) or [boulderasia.com](http://boulderasia.com))

**Burma Boating.** Tel: [66] 2-1070-445, (e-mail: [info@burmaboating.com](mailto:info@burmaboating.com) or [www.burmaboating.com](http://www.burmaboating.com))

**Genting Dream.** ([www.gentingcruiselines.com](http://www.gentingcruiselines.com))

**Grand Andaman Hotel.** Tel: [66] 778-10-659, (e-mail: [booking@grandandamanisland.com](mailto:booking@grandandamanisland.com) or [www.grandandaman.co.th](http://www.grandandaman.co.th))

**Island Safari.** Tel: [95] 1-380-382, (e-mail: [info@islandsafarimergui.com](mailto:info@islandsafarimergui.com) or [islandsafarimergui.com](http://islandsafarimergui.com))

**Myanmar Andaman Resort.** ([www.macleodislandmyanmar.com](http://www.macleodislandmyanmar.com))

**Pandaw.** Tel: [84] 985-417-758, (e-mail: [information@pandaw.com](mailto:information@pandaw.com) or [www.pandaw.com](http://www.pandaw.com))

**Victoria Cliff Hotel Resort Kawthaung.** Tel: [95] 9-444-888-664, (e-mail: [info@victoriaciff.com](mailto:info@victoriaciff.com) or [www.victoriaciff.com](http://www.victoriaciff.com))

**Victoria Cliff Resort Nyaung Oo Phee.** Tel [95] 59-51656, (e-mail: [info@nyaungoopheeresort.com](mailto:info@nyaungoopheeresort.com) or [www.nyaungoopheeresort.com](http://www.nyaungoopheeresort.com))

**Wa Ale Island Resort.** Tel [95] 095-018-269, (e-mail: [info@waaleresort.com](mailto:info@waaleresort.com) or [waaleresort.com](http://waaleresort.com))

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