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[7 once-in-a-lifetime experiences at the new destination Mergui Archipelago](#)

By [Keith Lyons](#) on Apr 17, 2019 in [Accommodation](#), [Asia](#), [Hotels](#), [Myanmar](#), [Regions](#), [Resorts](#)

The mysterious Mergui Archipelago, off the east coast of southern Myanmar and Thailand, is the newest destination in Asia to open up to luxury travel. With 800 largely uninhabited islands scattered across a broad swathe of the Andaman Sea, the large region was once the rest and recreation playground for Burma's British colonial holidaymakers dating back to the time of the poet Kipling. But for most of the second half of last century it was strictly off-limits to all. It is only in the last few years that foreigners have been able to explore the 'forgotten islands', initially on liveaboard charter dive boats, and now, from high-end island resorts. So far, half a dozen barefoot luxury resorts have opened, with more slated for development.



With Myanmar's 'one island-one resort' rule, as well as environmental protection guidelines and bureaucratic hurdles, it is still not easy to get to the remote limestone and granite islands, but definitely worth it. Despite the costs of getting to the gateway port towns of Ranong and Kawthaung in Thailand and Myanmar, the \$US50 tourist visa fees, and hefty marine royalty fees, the attraction of the Mergui Archipelago is its exclusivity as well as its soft white sand beaches and pristine environment. Think of it as being the new Maldives, but less crowded, less sanitized and built, and more natural and raw.

Ideally suited to couples, friends and family groups, the island resorts cater to those who just want to laze by the pool or beach sipping a cocktail in between spa treatments and meals, but they are geared up for adventurous travellers who want more than just an escape from the rat-race. A more immersive experience is available, with sea swimming, snorkelling, paddle-boarding, kayaking, diving, hiking, bird-watching and visits to villages of sea-faring nomadic sea gypsies.

With the emphasis on water activities, the resorts are only open during the dry season, avoiding the rainy monsoon which can bucket down from June to September and stir up water turbidity. From October to May, visibility is generally good, and winds calmer, enabling boat excursions and snorkelling trips over coral gardens, or SCUBA dive trips further out to encounter sharks, manta-rays, or whale sharks.

All the resorts have dive centres with dive masters, with some having resident marine biologists on hand to educate about the unique environment. Past dynamite fishing and over-fishing have left large holes in coral reefs, reduced fish stocks and larger species, and plastic and marine debris from all over Asia wash up at some bays.

While there are reminders of the wastefulness of the modern world, the islands do come with a digital detox, with no mobile phone coverage, though most resorts now have unreliable satellite WiFi for those who cannot stay away from emails and social media. All the resorts are endeavouring to be clean and green, with the use of green technologies such as solar panels, biodegradable products such as bathroom soaps and reef-friendly sunscreens, and efforts to reduce plastic and waste. An example of the eco-initiatives is resort-branded refillable water bottles given to arriving guests rather than single-use plastic bottles, with filtered spring water on tap.

The islands hold some once-in-a-lifetime experiences for intrepid visitors to the last island frontier.

Kayaking and picnicking at 115 island aboard the Sea Gipsy

Regarded as one of the most beautiful islands among the 800 or more of the archipelago, 115 island group is best visited during an Island Safari aboard the Sea Gipsy. The small cargo boat, converted into a passenger's vessel, sets off two times a week for its slow journey around the islands, calling in at Boulder island on its way back to Kawthaung port. The 115 island group is one of the highlights on the itineraries which also take in Moken fishin' villages and isolated bays ideal for beach-combing, swimming or snorkelling. Guests sleep in wood-panelled open-air gazebos at night, while a sun deck and lounge area offers the ideal spot for chillaxing and socialising. The Sea Gipsy carries kayaks and stand-up paddleboards, and there are even opportunities to catch fish with the friendly staff. The delicious meals around a shared table include beach picnics and starlit dinners.



Unwinding at Wa Ale Island Resort

You may not want to leave the island paradise at Wa Ale island, one of the best examples in the world of barefoot luxury. With a minimal environmental footprint, and sustainable tourism ethos, Wa Ale Resort is a conservation-led project which enables guests to immerse themselves in the tropical island, with creature comforts and more. Tented villas, with earthy tones blending with the surroundings, are spread out behind the main beach, which is also a protected sea turtle sanctuary and nesting site. Near the main pavilion, jungle treehouses look out through trees to the blue Andaman Sea. Boardwalks and some of the other buildings are made from re-purposed old boat planks and mainland warehouses, at this well-designed, expansive resort. The focus is on soft adventure activities and healthy cuisine prepared by a 5-star chef using the resort's own organic kitchen garden produce and local seafood. Add Wa Ale Island Resort to your bucket list.



Snorkelling at Victoria Cliff Resort on Nyaung Oo Phee

One of the best snorkelling islands is Nyaung Oo Phee, 90 minutes by speedboat from Kawthuang, where Victoria Cliff Resort has a resort for day trippers and overnights. The restaurant and villas along the beachfront and in the tropical jungle provide the ideal base for replenishing before exploring NOP's nearby snorkelling sites, with some just a walk off the beach, while others require a short boat trip. A highlight is the super soft powdery sands at Madam Beach, where guides take guests into the warm waters to spot clownfish, while late afternoon visitors might even witness anemones pull in their tentacles and pull over a protective purple sheaf. As well as variety of fishlife, the clear waters support a mix of soft and hard corals, including spectacular seafan, staghorn and harp corals. While most to Nyaung Oo Phee are day-trippers from Ranong or Kawthuang, those that stay overnight get to see a Myanmar dance performance followed by an amazing fire show.



Being stranded at Boulder Bay Eco-Resort

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If you seek a paradise island for adventure, and want to get back to nature, Boulder Island is the perfect place, one of the most remote in the archipelago. The main bay with a tidal reef and coral gardens has a distinctive balancing rounded rock defying gravity. Wooden cabins are spread throughout the jungle, some with sea views, at Boulder Bay Eco-Resort, and a bamboo yoga shala on the nearby beach is a wonder of eco-architecture. With several different bays, a network of jungle trails, a dive and marine research centre, and excellent snorkelling from the beach, there's plenty to occupy your time at the low-key, rustic resort. Or you can ponder the possibility that the island provided inspiration to the creator of Peter Pan's Neverland. Boulder Bay Eco-Resort, one of the less expensive resorts, is perhaps the most eco-friendly of the developments, with green design, solar panels, spring water, biodegradable bathroom products and on-site environmental educators.



Beachviews and fishing village at Awei Pila

One of two archipelago resorts with a swimming pool, the full-facility Awei Pila Resort is centred around its gleaming infinity pool which looks out across a white-sand beach to an inviting swimming bay. Those same serene views can be appreciated in private from raised platforms with sofas in front of beachfront circular 'yurt' tents scattered along the beach and in the flanking forest. In contrast to the flash resort, over the hill (or by boat) there's a small shanty settlement of Moken sea gypsies and a larger village of Burmese fishers and traders, providing an insight into the lives of the few who make a living in the waters off the coast of Myanmar and Thailand.



Sunset at Victoria Cliff Hotel and Resort Kawthaung

Oriented towards the distant Mergui Archipelago, the Victoria Cliff Hotel and Resort in Kawthaung is the best place on the mainland of southern Myanmar for stopovers and sunsets. As flights between Yangon to Kawthaung don't always connect with boat departures or arrivals to and from the island resorts, the top choice in Kawthaung is the Victoria Cliff with its ocean view villas and rooms, or garden view accommodation. A restaurant and terrace bar provide the ideal spot to enjoy dramatic sunsets, while two swimming pools get you into the aqua-life mood or allow a slow acclimatization back to the real world after an island adventure.



Chance your luck at the Grand Andaman

A casino hotel which is now more family-friendly with more of a focus on food than gambling, the Grand Andaman hotel makes it easy whether you are coming or going, or just looking. Its gaming tables and slot machines may operate 24/7, but so do some of its dining facilities and its impressive-stocked duty-free store. The hilltop resort, a short boat ride from Kawthaung, also has direct boat transfers across to Ranong in Thailand. Foreigners can visit without a visa, just by paying US\$10 cash for a Kawthaung area border pass.



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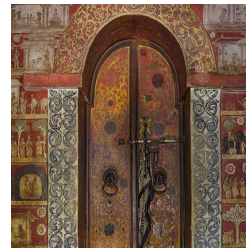
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[April 18, 2019 at 5:33 am](#)

\$50 for a tourist visa ain't too bad, you should try India! I think that it was £75 last time I visited. Not that the dosh oiled the wheels if still took 2 hours to get through immigration.



Keith Lyons says:

[May 8, 2019 at 12:17 pm](#)

Yes, \$50 isn't too bad for a Myanmar visa, and it is really easy to obtain, in a day or two, from the official government website Myanmar eVisa <https://evisa.moip.gov.mm/>, or if you just going to Kawthaung, and not out to the island resorts, you can get a border pass for \$10, a popular option for many foreigners living in Thailand doing the 'visa run'.

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