

Travel

Why Myanmar's Mergui Archipelago is the ultimate long-weekend tropical island getaway

The lack of direct flights makes arriving in paradise that much more special, especially when it is as unspoilt as the Myeik Kyunzu, where the barter economy beats bills and barefoot luxury is exactly that

Topic | Asia Travel



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The life of Robinson Crusoe, or any other castaway for that matter, can't have been exactly idyllic. The sands may have been golden, the waters azure, the island "delightfully unspoilt" – but what did he do come happy hour?

All of which brings us to the [Mergui Archipelago](#) [1] (aka Myeik Kyunzu, aka Maldives sans the masses), on the west coast of Myanmar, which teeters between being 800 mainly uninhabited islands pure and simple, plus some thriving coral reefs, and getting branded – the horror, the horror – "the next big thing".

One or two resorts have opened up on the islands, balancing their eco credentials with assertions of luxury, and liveaboards still putter about, but otherwise Mergui is one of the few places in Asia that has not succumbed to the homogenisation engendered by mass tourism. The diving is unparalleled, and the sense of isolation untrammelled.

So – assuming this is not blindingly obvious – if there is any time to go, it would be sooner rather than later.

Apart from slurping up the peace, quiet and exclusivity, diving and snorkelling are the obvious recreations, while the Moken (sea gypsies) are tolerant of visitors. Forging a trail through some of the larger islands' jungles has its Indiana Jones moments.

Where to sleep



Accommodation options in the Mergui range from liveaboard yachts to luxury land-based locales. Photo: Boulder Bay

Divers have been living aboard yachts of varying size and comfort in the Mergui for decades; pukka resorts are a recent innovation, and at present few in number. Needless to say, the surroundings are Instagram-perfect, a treat for the soul as well as the eyes.

Boulder Bay Eco Resort on Nga Khin Nyo Gyee Island runs to a score of bungalows (local sustainable timber, thatched roofs) and has been at pains to minimise its footprint – powered by solar energy, fans rather than air-cons, reusable aluminium containers: get thee gone, single use plastics. Nightly rates, including three meals and soft drinks, start at US\$152 per head. Boulder can also call on a Burmese-style junk, Sea Gypsy, for exploring the archipelago.

Awei Pila, on the northernmost beach of Pila Island, counts 24 tented villas as well as a spa and – given the beach's proximity – a seemingly superfluous swimming pool. Full board rates for two guests are US\$750 nightly.

Where to shop



Money won't get you far in a Moken village, where the barter economy still reigns. Photo: Julian Ray

The Moken don't have much money, or any immediate need of it in what is still very much a barter economy: they mostly sleep on their boats or in temporary shelters on shore, catch fish from the sea and grow vegetables where they can. So the very few commercial establishments in the archipelago tend to stock basic necessities and not a great deal else.

A few souls have cottoned on to the fact that some visitors want to take seashells home and for totally inexplicable reasons are willing to pay good money for something that can otherwise be picked up off the beach or the sea floor for free. And that's about the sum total of the Mergui's retail therapy.

What to eat

As with shopping, so it is with eating out. Visitors will find themselves eating breakfast, lunch, dinner and maybe a bit more besides at their resort or aboard their floating dive hotel. One of Mergui's gustatory delights is either catching your supper yourself, or hailing a passing fishing boat and negotiating – at times, rather a brisk process – for some of their catch. A starlit driftwood beach barbecue caps the day beautifully.

Burmese seafood curry – heavy on the turmeric and chillies, and crucially dependent on fresh mussels – is one of the more popular local dishes, and justifiably so.

Getting around



A beach in the Mergui Archipelago, where you're almost guaranteed solitude. Photo: Boulder Bay

You can't get to the middle of nowhere without a fairly lengthy hop, skip and a jump, and so it is with Mergui.

The first step is Bangkok, served by half-a-dozen or more airlines from Hong Kong. From Don Mueang Airport, Nok and AirAsia fly to Ranong on the west coast (90 minutes, return US\$140 and up) which is the jumping-off point for a 30-minute long-tail ride to Kawthaung in Myanmar. The final leg, aboard a 20-seat catamaran to Boulder Bay, takes two hours, or just under three hours to Awei Pila by speedboat. The routing could never be described as direct, but it does make arrival all the more welcoming.

Liveboards can pick up guests from the pier in Ranong.

Plus

Mergui gets a brief verbal cameo in the James Bond flick *Thunderball* (1965), as the drop-off location for the £100 million ransom ("in flawless diamonds") that typecast baddy Blofeld demands from Nato.

Maurice Collins' stranger-than-fiction *Siamese White* traces the adventures of Samuel White, a 17th-century buccaneering Briton for whom theft, murder, treason, rebellion and assorted skulduggery were all part of the rich tapestry of everyday life in Mergui.

An ambitious plan, floated in the early noughties by a Burmese entrepreneur, to turn one of the larger Mergui islands into a naturist resort thankfully failed to find any backers.

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