

# TRAVEL+ LEISURE

SOUTHEAST ASIA

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**SECRET  
BEACHES  
AROUND  
AUSTRALIA**

**BANGKOK'S  
MODERN THAI  
MENUS**

**KUALA LUMPUR:  
BACK IN VOGUE**

# MERGUI

**OFF THE MAP IN BURMA**

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# MARITIME

Off the south coast of Burma, the barely touched, largely uninhabited Mergui Archipelago beckons the intrepid sailor. **Joe Cummings** checks his phone at the cabin door for an exploration of the new eco-resorts in one of the least touristed places in Southeast Asia.





# FRONTIER



The new Wa Ale Island Resort, in the Mergui, has 11 tented villas on Turtle Beach, a protected hatching site for sea turtles.





## STEPPING FROM THE DOCK AT RANONG, THAILAND, INTO A TARP-ROOFED LONGTAIL BOAT, I HAVE TO REMIND

myself I'm crossing international borders towards partially uncharted waters rather than taking a casual fishing trip.

Here the Kraburi River tidal estuary widens to nearly six kilometers, with the Thailand-Burma marine border running down the middle. Not long after passing that invisible line, we reach Myoma Jetty at Kawthaung, the rough-and-tumble port that was known as Victoria Point under British Burma. A smiling crewmember from the *MV Sea Gypsy* greets me and grabs my bag, and I follow him to a small immigration office for non-Thais entering Burma. Although the sign outside reads "Warmly Welcome and Take Care of Tourists," the immigration officers process my e-visa with an overwhelming sense of indifference.

This inauspicious start doesn't dampen my enthusiasm for my first foray into the Mergui Archipelago, 800-plus isles stretching nearly 400 kilometers between Myeik and Kawthaung. Walking to the boat, David Van Driessche, a jovial Belgian photographer who leads photo tours all over the world, and who has organized this *Sea Gypsy* voyage, reminds me that Burma is a half hour behind Thailand as far as the clocks go. "But where we'll be sailing," he says, "a half century behind."

In fact, many of the islands, atolls and reefs have scarcely been mapped. Long the domain of smugglers, pirates and pearl divers, the region was opened to very limited tourism—liveaboard dive boats from Thailand—in the

late 90s. Just 3,000 visitors stayed overnight in the Mergui in 2018, including those on boats. A mere 200 kilometers south, Phuket hosted 8.4 million visitors last year. The cumbersome Burmese bureaucracy along with the hardships of building infrastructure in such isolated locales have left this one of the few regions in Southeast Asia untouched by mass tourism.

I've been wanting to step foot in this near-mythical place since I first visited the Burmese port of Myeik two decades ago, when the islands just offshore were firmly off limits to foreigners. Liveaboards from Thailand spent too much time navigating up from Phuket; I wanted to sleep ashore betwixt deserted beach and untouched forest, a notion unacceptable to the Burmese government until only recently.

You can now comfortably hole up at Boulder Bay Eco-Resort (which opened in 2015) and the brand-new Wa Ale Island Resort and Awei Pila. Each is its own island, in line with a law that follows the Maldives model; thus far, licenses for 12 resort developments have been issued for 12 islands. Thai-registered commercial boats have been barred since 2011, meaning all cruises depart from Kawthaung (and only from November to April, to avoid monsoon season). As of now, that includes only first-to-market Burma Boating—who last month grew their fleet to eight with the *S55*, a luxe three-level, four-berth catamaran that is the first fully solar-powered yacht in Asia—and Island Safari Mergui, who is running my trip.

ABOVE, FROM LEFT: The new *MV Sea Gypsy* features breezy, open-air berths; book scuba dives with the *Sea Gypsy* to discover the life aquatic in the Mergui; her face painted with traditional *thanaka*, the daughter of one of Wa Ale's employees offers a warm smile. OPPOSITE: A walk through a tropical rainforest on Boulder Island brings you to postcard-perfect Bamboo Bay.

FROM LEFT: WWW.DAVIDVANDRIESSCHE.COM (2); SCOTT A. WOODWARD. OPPOSITE: WWW.DAVIDVANDRIESSCHE.COM









Based on Boulder Island, the marine biologists of Project Manaia are helping to preserve coral reefs, and are trying to index all living species above and under the water. OPPOSITE: A small unnamed island near Bo Wei Island.



*I am enveloped by soft  
breezes, hearty sea  
aromas and the  
murmuring surf*











**So, on a sunny** November morning, I walk across a railed plank from the jetty to the *Sea Gipsy*'s main deck. The converted Burmese junk, with its ochre-painted wood-and-steel hull and curved decks, evokes a bygone era in seafaring history. Open-air sleeping areas fitted with privacy curtains accommodate up to 10 voyagers. I'm given one on the upper deck facing the stern, with a semi-panoramic view.

Hawsers are hauled in and we're heading northwest. As Kawthaung recedes in the distance, so do our mobile phone signals, until finally there's no transmission. We'll remain blissfully free of all Internet and phone contact till we reach Boulder Island in two days.

Within an hour of leaving port, islands pop into view—I'm trading mobile-phone bars for sandbars—one after another and sometimes in clusters. Some display craggy granite and limestone cliffs, topped with layers of thick rainforest, while others are relatively flat and barren. Every now and then a brilliant beach appears, some so beautiful and inviting I want to shout at the captain to stop the boat so that I can swim out and feel the sand under my feet.

In the afternoon, the *Sea Gipsy* moors in a calm, deserted bay at Taung Labo Island. Kayaks and a rubber inflatable whisk us to a crescent shore of sand and rock. A carpet of sea urchins near the waterline makes swimming tricky but walking along the beach and in the cool shade is lovely. We return to the *Sea Gipsy* for cocktails en route to a more sheltered bay at impossibly scenic Island 115. Out come the smaller craft again, and this time we find a sandy point with beaches on either side, built for swimming, snorkeling and kayaking.

Back aboard that evening, everyone gathers on the upper deck for sunset viewing. Every now and then a huge fish leaps out of the sea

and flops back down. A simple meal of Thai and Burmese dishes is served at a communal table amid the chatter of journo war stories—my fellow passengers include two writers and three pro photographers—and drinks from a bottle of bourbon someone brought along.

Intoxicated more by the full moon and carpet of stars gleaming in the sky above than by the whiskey, I walk to my berth and lie down without bothering to draw the curtains. Enveloped by soft breezes, hearty sea aromas, and the murmuring surf, I drift into what turns out to be one of the best sleeps I can remember in months, if not years.

**Day two starts** with coffee and eggs on the deck while the boat sails to Shark Island, named after its shape not the presence of razor-toothed fish, for more swimming, kayaking and snorkeling. The day ends with an even more spectacular sunset and another night of blissed-out open-air sleeping.

The next day our itinerary includes an island inhabited by Moken, tribal nomads who beat us all to the Mergui by centuries. Nowadays numbering only around 3,000, they are mostly settled in villages throughout the archipelago and further south on Thai and Malaysian islands. Also known as "sea gypsies," the Moken are expert fishermen and can free-dive deeper and longer than probably any other group native to the Indian Ocean and Andaman Sea. The small village has a network of parallel narrow wooden piers where residents moor their paddleboats and motorized skiffs. There is also a relatively new Buddhist monastery cheaply built of concrete.

Later, we arrive at Boulder Island, home to three-year-old Boulder Bay Eco-Resort. Welcoming us in the open-air dining pavilion

ABOVE, FROM LEFT: Kayaking before breakfast is the ultimate serenity; a baby python on Boulder Island; the dive instructors at Wa Ale, on the resort's pier, which was made entirely from recycled wood. OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: Time trickles by at Wa Ale; one of Wa Ale's beachfront tented villas.





of the resort is owner Bjorn Burchard, a Norwegian who moved to Burma in 1993 and operates a Rangoon-based furniture business along with the *MV Sea Gypsy* and Moby Dick Tours. Burchard built his resort as a model for low-impact development in the region. A solar farm powers the lights and Wi-Fi for the 10 spacious wooden bungalows, while water is pumped from a local spring and filtered. Trails radiate out through tangled island forest to five pristine coral-fringed coves, and to a bamboo forest, a freshwater river, and Eagle Rock viewpoint. Simple and nutritious meals, along with boat transfers, are included in the tariff.

“We’re a remote island on the western edge of the archipelago, so everything has to come from the mainland,” says Bjorn. “We brought in recycled wood for the bungalows because we didn’t want to cut down the trees.”

I spend the next two days hiking, pausing to swim, snorkel and watch sea eagles soar overhead. I learn about Project Manaia, a small marine research organization that establishes coral nurseries and is cataloguing wildlife and environmental conditions to understand how to best protect the southern Mergui. Led by Austrian diver Manuel Marinelli, the team includes a marine conservationist from the U.K., a marine biologist from Germany, a marine ecologist from Australia, and an oceanographer from Spain, all residents on the island at different times of year.

After six days away from civilization, our group reboards the *Sea Gypsy* for a straight sail back to Kawthaung, no beachy layovers, alas. Everyone else transfers by longtail boat back to Thailand. But lucky me: I’m only halfway through my Mergui expedition.

**On my return to** Myoma Jetty the next day, a young Burmese woman clad in white calls out my name. She leads me to a sleek luxury powerboat. Three couples from France, Spain

and Germany are on board, along with the British-American couple who oversee Wa Ale Island Beach Resort: general manager Alyssa Wyatt and her husband, chef Ray Wyatt. After greetings over champagne, we’re at sea, chatting over canapes in the air-conditioned cabin. The powerful craft takes two hours to cover the 65 nautical miles to Wa Ale Island, northwest of Lampi Island, one of the archipelago’s largest landmasses; both are part of Lampi Island National Marine Park.

Opened last October, Wa Ale Island Resort occupies the rugged south shore. It’s the baby of Singapore-based American Christopher Kingsley, who obtained a license from the Myanmar Forestry Department for the entire 3,600-hectare island as a site for his ambitious eco-resort and conservation projects.

The speedboat glides into a cliff-sheltered natural harbor. The resort design was a collaboration between Christopher and architect C.S. Nel. They used as many local materials as possible, Alyssa says, “without disturbing the environment. We built mainly using reclaimed timber from old boats, abandoned houses and monasteries.” As at Boulder Bay, the native trees were left untouched, and all guest amenities, from shampoo to sunscreen, are biodegradable.

Broad-plank flooring with a warm vintage patina, rough stone walls, natural log pillars, and a striking three-tiered thatched roof with vaulted ceilings form the central pavilion. It is on a prime spot atop a sloping, white-powder beach leading down to a cove that cradles calm turquoise waters. It’s a fantasy fulfilled, one in which Swiss Family Robinson wins the California SuperLotto Plus.

Not far away from this restaurant and bar area stand two treetop villas high on wooden pillars amid forest canopy. Built with bamboo and reclaimed wood, the villas’ wide balconies offer the best panoramas available. But life in Wa Ale’s 11 tented villas on adjacent Turtle Beach is no hardship, either. “Every tented villa has an unobstructed view of the beach,” Alyssa says. “At the same time, we preserved forest between the sites to enhance privacy and provide a feeling of having the sea to yourself.”

I settle into villa No. 7 and admire the 140-square-meter state-of-the-art luxury tent, mounted on wood decks with front and back verandas. Double-vaulted ceilings center on the sleeping area, with its king-size canopy bed and custom mosquito net, and a lounge area with sofas that can convert into two single beds. An indoor/outdoor bathroom features a shower in a sizable enclosed garden. Two huge ceiling fans, along with tent walls that unzip to

Chef Ray Wyatt conjures up family-style lunches at Wa Ale.



expose floor-to-ceiling screened panels, provide all the breeze needed. No Internet and no air-con: my definition of natural luxury.

Ray's culinary mastery, acquired during years of chef work in Denmark, Tanzania and Kenya (he and Alyssa most recently ran acclaimed conservationist safari camp Ol Donyo Lodge in Kenya's Chyulu Hills), are on display as the evening repast unfolds. Served in the softly lit, open-air dining area, the meal starts with light potato-and-buckwheat gnocchi with prosciutto and brown butter before going splendidly local with a luscious Burmese pork belly curry, Burmese tea-leaf salad, purple rice, and pickled baby cucumbers. Confronted with an eye-catching chocolate-and-chili tart and candied ginger cream, I find dessert impossible to decline.

The kitchen cooks healthily and creatively using produce from the organic garden, as well as produce brought in from Thailand where necessary, and sustainable seafood caught daily in nearby waters. "Since my crew are all Burmese, it isn't hard to keep the focus local," Ray says. "But I try to broaden that spectrum to all Southeast Asia, and Korea, China, Japan and India, and then combine all that with Mediterranean influences. We try to mix it up so that we're never bored in the kitchen, and the guests never see the same thing twice."

**I am awakened** at 6 a.m. by the soft ringing of a bell at my door. Outside on the deck, a villa attendant offers a French press full of fresh hot coffee and reminds me I've arranged to go on a nature hike with the resort's full-time naturalist, Alexander Evans.

Alexander, a young American raised in Singapore, takes me and an older German couple scaling steep hills through primal rainforest along a well-structured trail established by the resort. He identifies birds by their call, even without seeing them. High in the trees, the occasional longtail macaque swings by, coming back to the cool forest after a morning of crab-knocking on the beach. We spot sea eagles and emerald doves, but the most remarkable sighting for me is a giant black squirrel, with a tail reaching almost a meter long.

The following day Alexander and I navigate the entire coast of Wa Ale Island in a dinghy. On the north shore we pass Honeymoon Beach, a curving kilometer-long strip of sand where owner Christopher plans to establish a branch resort one day. Coming around the east end of Wa Ale, the boat enters a calm and scenic strait between Wa Ale and Lampi islands where dozens of local fishing boats are moored.

Aung Soe, the resort's friendly sous chef, brings me back there later to buy fresh grouper, snapper and barracuda from the boats. We also visit two villages on the strait, Salet Galet and May Kyone Galet, which supply itinerant fishermen with food, water, fishing gear and minor boat repairs, and offer a place where they can gather to drink beer. It's an interesting look at Mergui island culture amid an archipelago that's largely uninhabited.

Lampi Foundation, one of several charitable projects established by the resort, contributes to village cultural preservation with regular donations of supplies, equipment and medicine. They are also charged with conserving local fauna. One-kilometer Turtle Beach, which is ideal for swimming due to its lack of exposed rock and its wide swathe of deep sand, is also a perfect hatching site for its namesake sea turtles. Lampi Foundation has been able to protect more than 40 nests, saving some 4,000 green and leatherback turtle hatchlings.

But the best conservationists accomplish as much by their inaction as by their action. On our nature hike, Alexander had showed us the then soon-to-open River Café & Bar, a rustic collection of reclaimed wooden planks assembled into a kitchen and deck overlooking a freshwater river and flanked by large shade trees. He pointed out several Burmese pythons sleeping in the trees, coiled on branches so that the leaves hid them from birds of prey.

Just as these powerful creatures blend in with their surroundings for survival's sake, the sustainability of Mergui's island resorts depends on how well they integrate with their natural and cultural environment. +

## THE MERGUI ARCHIPELAGO

It's easiest to fly into Ranong, Thailand, and transfer by sea to Burma, but check your visa requirements before you travel: [evisa.moip.gov.mm](http://evisa.moip.gov.mm).



**Boulder Bay Eco-Resort** The trailblazer first resort in the Mergui has 10 villas. [boulderasia.com](http://boulderasia.com); from US\$240 per person per night all-inclusive, two-night minimum.

**Wa Ale Island Resort** Opened last October; 11 tented villas and two treetop villas. [waaleresort.com](http://waaleresort.com); doubles from US\$500 per night, inclusive of meals, house wine and beer, and transfers from Kawthaung or Ranong on Tuesday and Saturday.

**Awei Pila** Opened last December, with 24 air-conditioned, yurt-shaped tented villas and a pool. [aweipila.com](http://aweipila.com); from US\$750, inclusive of meals,

non-alcoholic drinks and transfers from Kawthaung or Ranong.

**Island Safari Mergui Sailboat**

Cruisers and liveaboards; can add on stays at Boulder Bay Eco-Resort and photo tours with David Van Driessche ([www.davidvandriessche.com](http://www.davidvandriessche.com)). [islandsafarimergui.com](http://islandsafarimergui.com); from US\$1,110 for five-day sail, inclusive of meals and non-alcoholic drinks.

**Burma Boating** Luxury yachts, such as a new solar catamaran, for multi-day explorations; can add on stays at Awei Pila. [burmaboating.com](http://burmaboating.com); from US\$1,600 for four-day sail, inclusive of meals and non-alcoholic drinks.