

MESMERIZING MERGUI

by Keith Lyons LIFE Phuket News

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Myanmar's Mergui Archipelago is a step back in time to a peaceful island existence.

There is an insider's secret whispered by long-term Phuket residents about the Andaman Sea's best pristine islands, dive spots and deserted beaches. Situated across an international border, they just got easier (and cheaper) to explore.

Have you ever imagined what it must have been like in Phuket say 30 years ago, before the arrival of flash resort hotels, high-rise condos, air-conditioned shopping malls, golf courses, clubs and bars? Some dive operators know. Lured by the azure waters and the coral reefs teeming with aquatic life, they ventured north from Phuket to the Mergui Archipelago, where new dive spots became legend among the diving fraternity.

Some 20 years ago, access was finally allowed from Thai and international waters into the string of islands that make up the archipelago. Why the problem with access? Most of the 800 or so islands strung out along 400km are situated in the military-sensitive border-seas of Myanmar, where unregulated exploitative fishing and forestry, along with a smuggling economy, meant the warm blue waters masked a harsher reality.

Over the last two decades – negotiating a lot of red tape – chartered liveaboard dive boats have taken intrepid adventurers from Phuket into the archipelago, a couple of day's sailing north. The expense of such one-week excursions has meant that, last year, only a couple of thousand foreigners managed to make it to these islands that lie off the coast of Myanmar.

In 2018, the coveted region will open up to tourism with the unveiling of new resorts and eco-friendly accommodation. However, certain measures such as new restrictions on foreign boats, and the prohibitively high fees aimed at curbing the access of Thai-based vessels, are aimed at encouraging the fledgling local tourism industry and it is likely that we will see more excursions from the Burmese port of Kawthaung. A bustling trading town with the atmosphere of a bygone era, Kawthaung lies a short longtail boat trip away from the Thai border town of Ranong. With the scattering of islands located a hour or more off the Myanmar coast, the town is set to be the marine hub and island gateway. There are even plans to build a 3.5km bridge across to the closest island, where a casino already pulls in Thai gamblers. Half a dozen resorts are slated to open in 2018, some bankrolled by big players in the burgeoning Myanmar tourism industry. It is unlikely the growing number of middle-class domestic tourists will prefer the archipelago over the exotic liveliness of Thailand's beaches. And it remains to be seen whether foreigners decide the hassle and expense of getting to the archipelago is outweighed by the benefits of a more exclusive resort experience.

Aiming to cater to curious, soft-adventure travellers who want to get close to nature and away from the tourists, the **Boulder Bay Eco-Resort (boulderasia.com)** is one of the few enterprises taking a smaller-scale approach to development.

With 10 rustic bungalows tucked away behind native screw-pine palms, the eco-resort is not visible from the sea, and its environmental footprint is small. There is no infinity swimming pool, no manicured gardens, and no phone reception. The soft-sand beach and shallow reef are the swimming pool, the island's jungle and coral wonders are its gardens, and with very weak WiFi, the handful of guests instead end up having conversations around the communal dining table.

The Mergui Archipelago is the ultimate “get-away-from-it-all” destination, says Bjorn Burchard of Moby Dick Tours (islandsafarimergui.com). He believes the islands, best visited between October and May, are suited to slow, unhurried, travel and soft adventure activities such as diving, snorkelling, kayaking, hiking and beach-combing. “This really is quite a special place – much of its charm and appeal lies in its untouched nature,” says Bjorn. Bjorn, a Norwegian and veteran of the tourism and hospitality industry of Thailand, used to run liveaboard boats out of Phuket, but now he says the lack of development on the Mergui islands means a visit really is like turning back the clock 30 years. “To give you an idea of the archipelago's state, there are some islands that haven't been properly surveyed and mapped, some small islands don't even have names, and visitors can be the first to set foot on some beaches.

Perhaps there are species underwater and in the rainforest waiting to be found and identified by science?” With anthropologists and marine biologists still learning more about the islands, and its dwindling indigenous population of sea-faring Moken, also known as Sea Gypsies, the remoteness and isolation of the region make it a fascinating place to visit, according to Belgium photo location scout David Van Driessche (davidvandriessche.com), who runs a company called Expeditions in photography (expeditionsinphotography.com).

The combination of place and people make the archipelago truly unique, he says, “Where else on this Earth can you find such a place?” Keith Lyons (keithlyons.net) is a travel writer and professional tour guide, based in Thailand, who writes about Myanmar. His book, a collection of travel stories named ‘Opening up Hidden Burma’ (Duwon Press) will be published in January 2018. He has also contributed to ‘The Best of Myanmar: Golden Land of Hidden Gems’ (KnowledgeMediaGroup.com) which was launched on December 27 in Yangon and is available in bookshops in Thailand.