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## Empty beaches are the norm in the Mergui



Southeast Asia is renowned for its beautiful islands and beaches, but rampant overdevelopment has meant plenty of paradise lost, not to mention sharing your slice of gorgeous white sand with a thousand other folks. Yet there remains one undiscovered spot away from the crowds, the magical Mergui Archipelago.

## A kayaker's tropical paradise



Most don't even know where the Mergui is, with mention of it leading to a Google search to help place it on the map. Restricted to outsiders since World War II, the Mergui Archipelago lies in southern Myanmar, actually quite close to the Thai border. It has only recently been explored by travelers since Myanmar opened its doors to tourism in 2012.

**Emerald bays are perfect for anchoring in**



There are some 800 islands in the Mergui, a majority of them uninhabited, and they feature Asia's most pristine beaches and bays. With only a handful of operating resorts in the entire region at present, the best way to explore the Mergui is via a live-aboard boat, sailing leisurely through the emerald bays.

**You can jump for joy out here**



Part of the government regulations on the Mergui have kept the tourist masses at bay. \$100 entry fees for visitors have kept one-day speed boat tours from pouring in from Phuket, and \$1000 licensing fees for foreign boats have ensured that an overload of cruise ships, yachts and catamarans don't compete for space. Just a few operators run regular departures through the tranquil waters.

## Photogenic boulder-fronted beaches and bays



For island-based operation, Nga Khin Nyo Gyee Island, better known as Boulder Island, is a standout. The island features stunning turquoise bays fronted by photogenic boulders, superb snorkeling, jungle walks, and boasts a variety of flora, fauna, and abundant marine life. The Boulder Bay Eco Resort is the lone small tourist enterprise here, focused on sustainable tourism. The resort uses renewable resources for its comfortable bungalows, hosts a coral regeneration project involving marine biologists from around the world, and runs an array of daily activities via boat, kayak, and on foot for guests to explore the island.

## The MV Sea Gypsy sails slowly through pristine bays



The best way to explore the Mergui is via a live-aboard. The MV Sea Gypsy is a traditional Burmese junk which features open-air gazebos with mosquito netting for sleeping, and is outfitted with toilets, showers, a dining area, and even a bar to make “roughing it” that much more comfortable. The Sea Gypsy is one of the only operators running daily tour programs through the archipelago, and the journeys, run by Island Safari Mergui, are the perfect way to check out a variety of islands and activities.

**Swim, snorkel or just do nothing in this leisurely paradise**



There is plenty of diving, snorkeling, kayaking and marine exploration to be done, but relaxing in the sun in the middle of tropical paradise is also a perfect vacation plan.

## Brilliant sunsets deserve a toast



The sunsets in the Mergui are almost always spectacular, and with plenty of time and no distractions such as mobile phone signals or internet access, good cheer and friendship over plenty of slow conversation is one of the prime reasons to come here.



Hermit crabs feature prominently amongst the marine life



Marine life is abundant, with coral bays filled with surgeon and butterfly fish, while birds like brahminy kites and pied hornbills fly overhead. Hermit crabs are found throughout the islands, both on the beach and along jungle trails.

**Hidden beaches are accessible via jungle trekking**



On Boulder Island, trails have been created to access hidden beaches, and it's easy to live out daily Robinson Crusoe fantasies here.

**Kayaking doesn't get any clearer than this**



Kayaking is also a great way to go, with the Mergui offering some of the best sea kayaking in Asia. Novices can paddle in sheltered bays, and the more experienced can do some island hopping. The live-aboard boats also carry sea kayaks with them, so a support vehicle is never far behind.

### **Boulders look like mountain peaks in the fog**



Needless to say, photography buffs will be enchanted by the photo ops available in the archipelago. The rock formations found in many of the bays make perfect subjects to practice long exposures, and the tremendous sunrises and sunsets provide splendid backdrops. There is even a photography tour offered in the Mergui for shutterbugs aiming to improve their craft in one of the world's most stunning island escapes.

## Moken kids in their dugout canoe



It's not only powdery beaches that make the Mergui so alluring. Several of the islands are home to pockets of Moken sea gypsies who are noted for their genetic abilities to deep sea dive without oxygen. The Moken practice traditional fishing techniques and can either be visited in their stilt village on Jar Lann Island, or be seen paddling their dugout canoes along quiet bays where they come to fish.

## A visitor to the ship



The Moken children aren't shy about approaching visitors, and the live-aboards often carry biscuits and bananas to give out to the curious kids. Just like the Burmese, the Moken use thanaka, a cosmetic paste made from ground tree bark which aids in sun protection.

**If it weren't the tropics, you'd think it was the Northern Lights**



The color spectrum of the Mergui skies is quite phenomenal. If you weren't so far south, you might be misled into thinking you were seeing the Northern Lights, but this phenomenon is caused by squid fishing boat lights. The squid boats go out at night, and their soft lighting illuminates the night sky with an eerie shade of green, somewhat reminiscent of Aurora Borealis.

## An endless palette of sunset colors



Every morning and evening brings a different hue to the Mergui artist's palette. Sunsets are particularly vibrant, ranging from vivid orange to red to pink.



## Blue hour in Boulder Bay



Different shades of blue also feature prominently, with silent bays and boulders silhouetted in the setting sun. The “cool” season is the preferred time of year to visit the Mergui, from October through February, but the season lasts through April and even early May, before the heavy monsoon rains set in and sailing becomes quite dangerous.

**Boulder Island is one of the Mergui's star attractions**



In the winter, blue skies are the norm, and the color of the water, brightness of the sky and powdery white sand of the empty islands – one after another – will have even the most jaded tropical traveler shaking their head in amazement.

## A beach and a sea all to oneself



Nobody knows what the future will hold for the Mergui. Its isolation, government controls, huge open spaces and limited number of tour operators are keeping it untouched for the moment. However, plans are afoot to develop more resorts, and the archipelago can be reached almost as easily from Thailand as from Yangon (the majority of tourists actually cross from Ranong in Thailand over the open border crossing to Kawthaung). Koh Samui and Phuket looked like this 40 years ago, and they have long since been destroyed in terms of being pristine marine escapes. One can only hope that the Mergui avoids the same fate.

## Asia's last tropical paradise



For now, the Mergui remains unspoilt, little trodden, and a great example of what the future of tropical paradise and sustainable eco-tourism might be. You'd be hard-pressed to find this combination of empty islands and enchanting physical beauty anywhere else in this part of the world.