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[LIFESTYLE](#) ∨

[ACTIVITIES \(HTTP://WWW.BEACHTRAVEL.ONLINE/CATEGORY/LIFESTYLE/\)](http://www.beachtravel.online/category/lifestyle/) ∨

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Published about a month ago on March 3, 2020

MYANMAR: Secluded Sand

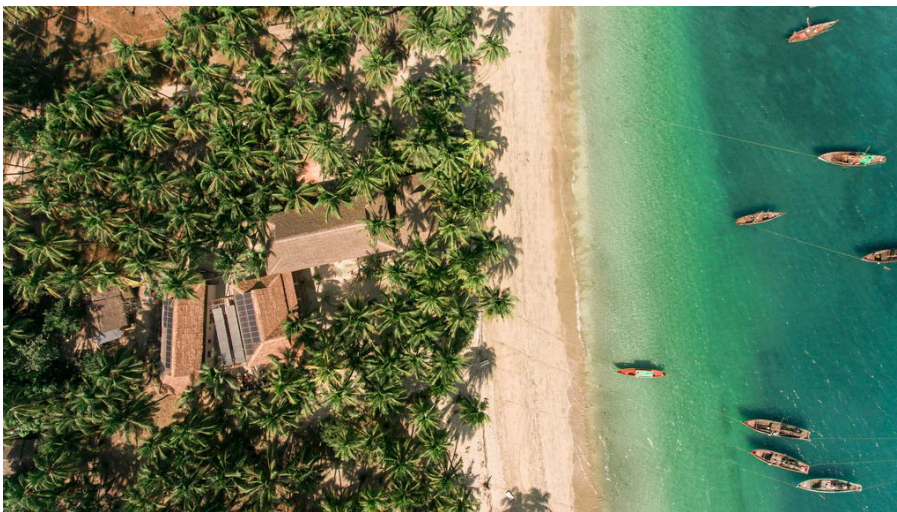
by Dave Stamboulis

When most visitors think of Southeast Asian beaches, Myanmar usually isn't the first country to come to mind. Which is probably just fine for those in the know. With over 2,000 miles of untouched coastline and some 800 uninhabited islands in the magical Mergui Archipelago, you'll find plenty of hidden gems and tropical paradises reminiscent of what Thailand was like thirty or forty years ago. For those who want seclusion, epic sunsets, along with some of the best diving to be found in the region, Myanmar's your choice. Just don't delay on going, as the word is starting to spread about this white sand nirvana.



115 Island, Mergui Archipelago by David van Driessche

Ngapali (pronounced Napally) beach is Myanmar's most popular swath of sand, and features seven kilometers of gorgeous palm-fringed blindingly white sand. Once only accessible by a tortuous mountain road through Rakhine Province, you can now arrive in 45 minutes via a flight from Yangon to the nearby Thandwe Airport. The long curving beach here faces west and is noted for its dramatic sunsets. Ngapali is wonderfully relaxing, and if you get bored you can always make a day trip out to the unique black sand island of Zalat Htone, just a short boat ride away. Even better yet, head out to Ngapali's most secluded piece of paradise, Lalay Lodge (<https://lalaylodge.com/> (<https://lalaylodge.com/>)), a sustainable beachfront resort hidden in laid back Maung Shwe Lay fishing village (45 minutes by boat from Ngapali) where you can hike, bike, standup paddle, and snorkel to your heart's content, all the while enjoying an authentic local village experience.



Lalay Lodge, Ngapali photo courtesy of Lalay Lodge

If you're looking for a weekend beach escape from Yangon, there are a couple of options. Choose between sleepy Chaung Tha, a beach mainly frequented by locals and noted for its abundance of excellent fresh seafood. Chaung Tha is only reachable by road, some 5-6 hours from Yangon, and is home to the comfy Azura Beach Resort (<https://azura-beach-resort-chaungtha.booked.net/> (<https://azura-beach-resort-chaungtha.booked.net/>)). Otherwise, head to Ngwe Saung (Silver Beach), accessed by a 6 hour drive (or even a 16 hour boat journey!). There are 15 kilometers of silvery sand to spread out on here, and the beach faces the Bay of Bengal, once again making for sunset-viewing extraordinaire.



Azura Beach Resort, Chaung Tha by Jaffee Yee

However, if you truly want an escape, and to see what Asian beaches must have been like before mass tourism, head to the Mergui Archipelago. Comprised of some 800 islands off of Myanmar's southern coast, the Mergui features endless turquoise bays, total solitude, amazing opportunities for diving, snorkeling, and kayaking, and even a chance to interact with the unique Moken sea nomads, famed for their deep sea diving without oxygen prowess, and who have lived out of their traditional canoes as the only residents of the Mergui for ages.

Access to the Mergui is via Kawthaung township, serviced by flights from Yangon and departure points for boats, and with tight restrictions imposed by the government to preserve the area, you'll need to make arrangements with a tour operator to visit. Island Safari Mergui (<https://islandsafarimergui.com/> (<https://islandsafarimergui.com/>)) offers tours on its live-aboard traditional Burmese junk, the MV Sea Gypsy, as well as

arranging stays on Boulder Island, aptly named for its large photogenic boulders that guard the entrance to one of the Andaman's nicest bays, and home to the charming Boulder Bay Eco Resort (<https://boulderasia.com/> (<https://boulderasia.com/>)), where simple wood and bamboo bungalows aesthetically blend in with the jungle, just steps from hiking trails created by the resort, which lead to hidden jungle overlooks and dazzling serene beaches and azure bays.



Boulder Bay Eco Resort Sunset, Mergui Archipelago by Dave Stamboulis

In the Mergui you can cruise spots like Shark Island (named for its fin-like pinnacle and not for predators in the water), where you'll be able to set foot on land via a dingy or kayak and feel like Robinson Crusoe, with your footprints being the only sign of visitation in remarkably pristine bays and empty beaches. On massive Swinton Island, home to dense jungle and root-choked mangrove forests, you can go wildlife spotting, and then there's the large bay on Jar Lann Island, where hundreds of Moken paddle their dugout canoes and inhabit a small fishing village open to visitors.

While the ancient temples of Bagan may headline your Myanmar tour, its marvelous marine and coastal life remain the country's best kept secret. Make sure to set aside some days, or perhaps weeks here, as once you arrive, you might not want to leave.

89
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