

THE SMILING SEAHORSE

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Nestled between the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea and flanked by some of Asia's most famous destinations, Burma is one of the world's best-kept secrets. The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, or Burma as it remains better known, was opened up to tourism in 1997. Since then, the Burmese government has worked hard to develop its tourism industry and more and more visitors are arriving to experience the country's turquoise waters and palm-fringed white sand beaches.

With development forging ahead in neighbouring Thailand, Laos and pretty much everywhere else on the continent, the natural marine wonders that drew people to some of those better-known destinations are losing their exclusive appeal. In contrast, Burma's Mergui Archipelago offers over 800 islands sprinkled throughout 12,000 square kilometres of crystalline waters just begging to be discovered. Since Burmese waters were opened up a few boats have begun to appear, yet the islands remain almost entirely uninhabited save for the odd Burmese sea gypsy fishing from his boat amongst the mangrove glades. The vastness of the area means it is possible to spend weeks here without coming across another human being, with just the kingfishers, wild pigs, monkeys and a whole host of marine life for company.

Burma's diving is almost entirely accessed by live-aboard boats, which offer the most effective means of exploring the outer reaches of the Mergui Archipelago. Most of the dive boats arrive from major resorts such as Phuket in neighbouring Thailand. But for something a little bit different and for the best access to the area, try Ranong, the Thai border town across the strait from Burma on its South East coast. Ranong itself is home to various natural

attractions. It is blessed with hot springs and unspoiled mangrove forests and makes a great base for a few days of relaxing and exploring before joining your live-aboard. But it won't take too long before you are hankering to discover the diverse marine ecosystem of the Mergui Archipelago. New magical dive sites off deserted islands are being discovered and added to a few lucky itineraries every year.

Divers are spoilt for choice in Burma's virgin waters. Visibility is incredible here and the coral gardens that cover the seabed like a blanket are absolutely teeming with marine life. Mantas, dolphins and whales patrol the crystalline waters and the area was once famous for its many sharks. On this stage though, little creatures enjoy equal billing with the big boys. Lobsters, crabs, cuttlefish and shrimps scurry around the sea floor providing plenty of action and keen underwater photographers are spoilt for choice, with pipefish, frogfish, nudibranch and seahorse all jostling for position against the coral heads and myriad colours of the untouched seabed.

There is something magical about Burmese diving that is hard to put your finger on, but it pervades every minute you spend here exploring. Nearby Thailand offers breath-taking dive experiences on an enormous scale, with many well known dive sites, and yet if you stack them head to head the Mergui Archipelago wins hands down. Perhaps it is due to the remoteness of its sites and their naïve beauty, completely untouched by commercial tourism. Or maybe it is just down to the sheer scale of the surroundings and the diversity of marine life on offer. Whatever it is, it sets Burma apart.

It would be impossible to list every dive site and in this unique archipelago, new adventures



are discovered as frequently as new marine species. But here we take a look at five of the best to give you an idea of what's in store on your Burmese diving adventure.

Western Rocky is one of the archipelago's southernmost dive sites and perhaps one of its most exciting in terms of the breadth of diving on offer. Western Rocky itself is a small island, sporting a diveable passage right through its heart that just manages to be lit by daylight all the way through. A guest appearance by a three-metre nurse shark is not uncommon and there are good chances of seeing other shark species including the famous whale shark, bowmouth guitar fish, harlequin shrimp, frogfish and sea horse, while the anemone-lined cavity is full of oversized lobsters and crabs. The four islets off shore are worth a dive on their own, their walls blanketed with clams and colourful sponges, and busy with big reef squid and chevron barracuda. Canny divers who plan their itinerary well can enjoy a spectacular night dive on the south wall where the red and orange coral are lit to perfection by the moonlight.

The islet of Black Rock is a small rock in the middle of the ocean. It provides a steep wall drop to over 100 metres, characterised by rugged boulder formations and fine soft coral. A shallow section of tube corals is home to a bevy of miniature sea creatures, where sea urchins bask and busy crabs and shrimps clatter about their business. Many consider Black Rock to be the finest dive spot in Burma. Its crystal clear waters offer 35-metre visibility, providing breath-taking views past the rock walls to the on-going procession of barracuda, tuna, mackerel, rays, reef sharks, whale sharks and eagle rays.

Die-hard shark spotters will not be disappointed in Burma. Underwater cave systems provide plenty of opportunity to see nurse sharks basking amongst the crustaceans and clown fish in the privacy of their sheltered homes. Shark Cave is home to a group of nurse

sharks up to four metres long. Its entrance is loyally guarded by grey reef sharks and sweetlips, but take the time to look beyond the cave's obvious attractions if you dare and you will also see a floor covered in yellow sponges, a ceiling of marigold cup corals and a whole host of marine delights, from Durban dancing shrimps, clams and sea stars to moray eels, cowries and sea slugs.

Few live-aboards make it to the northern extreme of the Mergui region, but those that do are in for a delight. Tower Rock features breath-taking topography with walls studded with corals and fans providing shelter for spiny lobsters, banded shrimps, oysters and clams, while manta rays and schools of modulas glide silently past the impressive backdrop.

Several miles off shore, North Twin offers a dive experience that is quite unique within the archipelago, typified by large granite boulders covered in gorgonian sea fans and soft corals. This is the place to spot schools of goat fish, bat fish and snapper in the shallow waters and a popular manta cleaning station at around 22 metres, giving way to yellow tail barracudas, big eye trevally, tuna and eagle rays appearing from the deep blue depths.

The dive sites in the Mergui Archipelago are spread far and wide and access via land is complicated and restricted. The only way to really get the benefit of exploring the Burmese waters is by live-aboard safari. Most live-aboards depart from the busy tourist centres of Phuket and Khao Lak and travel north through the attractive Similan Islands. While some make it as far as Burma, it leaves little time for really exploring the deserted tropical islands and virgin waters that are waiting for you over the border. To throw you unreservedly into the unique Burmese diving experience, the border town of Ranong is undoubtedly the place to start.

We met up with Franck and Camille, French owners of The Smiling Seahorse dive company in Ranong to find out more about diving in the area. Franck and Camille operate the MV Thai Sea, a comfortable live-aboard for small groups of up to twelve, dedicated to exploring the top rating dive sites around the Andaman Sea. From their base right on the Thai/Burmese border, they are well positioned to explore some of Thailand's best-known sites such as

Richelieu Rock and Suring Island. But the real jewel in the crown of their dive offering is their unparalleled access to the pristine dive paradise of the Mergui Archipelago.

The pair met through their mutual love of diving, so it seemed natural that they would make their passion their future. "Each holiday was an opportunity to discover a new piece of water", explained Camille, "and we quickly discovered that live-aboards were the best way to reach unspoiled dive sites. But Burma took it to a whole new level and this is where we really discovered the wonder of diving with no other boat in sight". Camille and Franck settled on Ranong as their base and established themselves as one of the only dive companies offering trips up to the deserted island seas off the Burmese coast.

At 20 x 6m, the MV Thai Sea is the perfect size for a live-aboard – large enough to accommodate up to 12 divers, yet small enough to create a cozy, home-away-from-home feel. The boat was completely refurbished at the end of 2011 and as Camille showed me around I could see that the couple had really taken care to create a high standard live-aboard experience. Plenty of comfort to rest and relax at the end of an exciting day of diving, and friendly staff to see to their every need. Barbecues and tasty meals are prepared by a talented on-board chef and served in the large dining area against the stunning backdrop of some of the most exquisite marine geography on the planet. Having lived in the UAE for the last six years before coming to Thailand, the couple understands Muslim needs and will happily prepare halal food onboard if requested in advance.

The large dive deck and dive platform is well equipped with high quality diving kits, onboard compressor and Nitrox station, and provides plenty of storage space if you have brought your own.

Franck is an MSDT PADI Instructor and is keen to share with his clients his passion for the marine world while keeping a keen eye on safety. The team delivers personalised PADI training to suit its clients' needs, from Open Water accreditation through to Divemaster, with a whole raft of specialist dive experiences in between. The boat is equipped with nitrox as well as standard tanks to help experienced

divers get the best out of the varied dive sites.

A live-aboard adventure with the Smiling Seahorse team delivers up to four dives per day but the time you spend drifting from one breathtaking spot to the next is nearly as special as the time you will spend underwater. So when your dive time is over and your sea legs are ready for a rest, there is plenty of time to explore. The islands are full of exciting treasures, from jungle bird-spotting and playing with the monkeys in the mangrove glades, to simply dropping anchor and relaxing on the powder white sands of a deserted palm-fringed beach.

The main dive season in Burma is from October to May, with optimum conditions in the Mergui Archipelago from December to April. For the best manta ray and whale shark sightings, aim for the second half of the season.

Bangkok offers regular domestic flights into Ranong or you can fly to Phuket, where you will be met and transferred to the live-aboard by one of the Smiling Seahorse team.

And who can blame them for smiling? As Franck summed it up for us, "I could never get bored of diving", he explains, "but diving here, this is something else. Every trip we make, I see something new, something unexpected. This is paradise".

See it for yourself and I am sure you will agree.

If you want to go diving in Burma or explore the best diving sites in Thailand, the smiling seahorse has just what you need; friendly staff, a comfortable boat, exceptional service and breathtaking diving.

The Smiling Seahorse's itineraries are exclusive, they don't like to dive on busy dive sites and know you don't either. On Burma trips, you will find it hard to spot another dive boat around.

Besides the amazing diving, you can expect exceptional services on board the 20 meter long MV Thai Sea, the cook is amazing, the number of guests limited to 12 and there are other extras for entertainment (BBQ, kayak, movies...)

Get more info: www.thesmilingseahorse.com

