

Words and photos by Juan Gallardo
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I recently spent eight days on a liveaboard in the Mergui (Myeik) Archipelago and it was the best diving adventure I've ever had. The fact that we didn't come across other boats at any of the dive sites made it extra special, especially for the underwater photographers amongst us.

The diving sites are incredibly beautiful with colourful, soft corals, swim-through caves, macro life, and a big chance of meeting a whale shark or giant manta rays.

The boat I chose had an amazing crew and the diving instructors were super friendly and professionals with great respect for the environment. They conducted clear briefings before every dive, which made me feel safe and comfortable under water.

The boat has three decks and eight cabins, all of them with air conditioning and a sea view window that can be opened. The upper deck is the chill-out area and the area where briefings take place before each dive. Instructors are so familiar with the diving sites that one of them has created maps of the different islands, which are used to explain the diving plan prior to every dive.

The upper deck is also the dining area where you can help yourself to coffee, tea, toast, water, electrolyte drinks, fresh fruits and, my favourite, pineapple jam biscuits. If you have ever dived in Thailand, you will be familiar with the biscuits I'm talking about.

Special mention goes to the chef on board and her assistant who prepared the most delicious Thai food. The wide variety of food included meat, fish and vegetable dishes far tastier than in most restaurants. In the mornings we had a European style breakfast including corn flakes, muesli, fruit, brown bread, pancakes, omelettes, fried eggs, sausages, tea and coffee.

We did a total of 22 dives, starting in the early morning before breakfast, with the fourth and final dive just before sunset. We also had the opportunity to go on a night dive, which is always exciting.

SCUBA DIVING

Myanmar's Myeik Archipelago

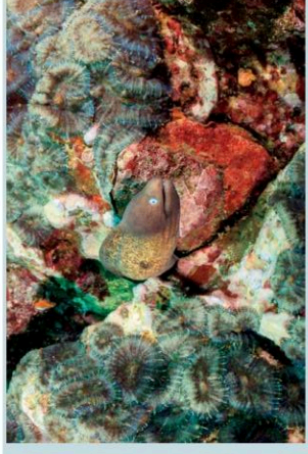
There was plenty to do between the dives, such as paddling out on kayaks to explore deserted islands. The untouched white sand beaches and the clear water felt like paradise.

Apart from diving, kayaking and eating, my other favourite activity was to head up to the top deck to relax on the sunbeds. This is the perfect place for reading and maps, especially after breakfast following the first dive of the morning.

The highlight of the trip was our visit to Black Rock. We arrived on the third day and nothing could have prepared us for what we were about to witness. We jumped into the water just before 7 am and were immediately greeted by manta rays. We saw several mantas on the second, third and fourth dives. We were so excited that we voted to stay a second day at Black Rock. And guess what? It was as good as the first day; we saw mantas on every single dive. The same thing happened the next day, so in the end we spent three days at Black Rock doing 12 dives.

On one of the dives I was surrounded by six huge mantas with wingspans of about four or five metres. They swam so close to me! Truly unforgettable!

Juan Gallardo is a born adventurer from the Spanish city of Seville and has lived in the UK, the US and Europe. Juan first visited Myanmar in 2012 and has been living in Yangon since 2014. He is passionate about photography and Burmese cuisine, which he captures in his book: "Delicious Myanmar - Discover Myanmar through its people and food".



ACTIVITIES

Kayaking and paddle boarding offer great opportunities to slowly move across the shallows to skirt the enchanted mangrove forests and up the small rivers. Get a glimpse into the lives of the many small critters that live in these shallow protected waters.

Yachting is one of the most sustainable forms of ecotourism and leaves the areas they visit exactly as nature intended, provided their guests follow strict rules to respect nature and not to litter. If the yachts and their guests leave no traces of pollution, and no signs of disruption to the reefs, beaches, and jungles and their inhabitants, then this is the best way to experience the archipelago. While the jungle is home to so many creatures, likely many not been identified, the diversity on the islands is more than matched by life in the sea, showcasing an incredible variety of marine life.

While official hiking trails are still very limited, if you are adventurous enough to take on the dense forests, you will find jungles on the islands to be one of the most rewarding experiences in the archipelago. A diverse range of wildlife can be found including the cute spectacled leaf monkey, gibbons, Sunda pangolin, pythons, monitor lizards, oriental small-clawed otter, lesser mouse-deer, monitor lizards, civets, chevrotains, gibbons, and many more. Watch out for the scampering crab-eating macaques foraging for crabs on the islands' rocky shores. Among the most unique birds in the Myeik Archipelago are the plain-pouched hornbill, Wallace's hawk-eagle, white-bellied sea eagles, crested partridge, red-throated sunbird, brown-winged kingfisher, Pacific reef herons, emerald doves, and more.

While diving, on a good day, you may see several shark species such as the nurse, grey reef, and bull sharks, as well as eagle and manta rays, the dugong, giant stingrays, octopus, seahorses, frogfish, scorpionfish, ribbon eels, ornate ghost pipefish, schools of barracudas, rainbow runners, tuna, trevallies, and Spanish mackerels, and the list goes on and on.

The archipelago is scuba diving, as well as snorkelling. There is no better way to enjoy this adventure than to embark on a live-aboard boat and set off on a multi-day excursion that covers a wide area.

The area has a fascinating topography and prolific fish and invertebrate life. In the more shallow waters, you will come across many species of corals as well as parrotfish, domino fish, butterfly fish, snapper, grouper and colourful sea anemones.

The diving spots across the region are diverse and far apart, most of which have not been explored. In the far western corner of the archipelago where the continental shelf drops off into the deep sea, is a range of underwater mountains known as the Burma Banks which consist of the islands of Rainbow, Silvertip, and Roe Bank, plus the Coral and Heckford Banks. This area offers some serious adrenaline-pump-