

Diving in Thailand



Dive tourism in Thailand is thriving. With a large base of dive retailers and operators, scuba diving is a cash cow for Thailand's tourism. More than 300,000 overseas visitors come to the country to dive each year, and there are also around 80,000 certified card-holding Thai scuba divers. Ko Tao is the designated destination for all dive beginners (30% of all dive certificates in the world are issued here).

Diving in Thailand is economical and available at all times of the year, although underwater visibility changes by season. In the Andaman Sea, the best time to dive is from October to April, and sites in the Gulf of Thailand are best dived from May to September.

Reputable dive shops are affiliated with PADI or other international dive bodies, and most hold courses in multiple languages. All over Thailand, you can expect modern amenities, international standard boats and professional facilities.

Groups and families can avail good live aboard operations which also cater to snorkelers and non-divers. Friends and family of divers can relax, swim,

snorkel and enjoy the food, trip, scenery and experience of cruising in some warm and beautiful seas.

WHEN TO GO

By far the best time to visit is from February to March when the weather is kind and the beaches are at their finest. The peak travel months are August, November, December, February and March, with secondary peak months in January and July. If your main objective is to avoid crowds and to take advantage of discounted rooms and low-season rates, you should consider traveling during the least crowded months (April, May, June, September and October).

Diving is available at all times of the year, although visibility changes according to the season. In the Andaman Sea, the best time to dive is from October to April, and in the Gulf of Thailand from May to September. At recommended dive sites in Thailand, the water is often so clear that the underwater world of whale sharks, manta rays, marlin, flying fish, dolphins and coral reefs is visible from the surface.

WHAT TO BRING

The climate in Thailand is best described as tropical with a range of seasons from very hot to mild (but still warm). The usual resort wear and light cotton clothing is best. Shorts, short dresses and T-shirts are the norm in most spots. If you are staying in a fancy hotel, check if there is any sort of dress code, especially for dining. Otherwise, relax. In December or January it can be cool in the evenings, so pack a thin jacket or pullover. The rest of the year is hot both day and night.

Use both a high DEET content sunscreen and long-sleeve pants, shirts and socks if you are in a malarial area. Most dive destinations aren't a problem in Thailand, but areas in the north of the

country, like Chiang Mai, can have malarial mosquitoes.

Some people travel light or arrive with near-empty suitcases in order to take advantage of Thailand's great tailors and shopping.



The Best Dives

Wreck Dive

The **HTMS Khram** was sunk especially for divers around Pattaya and is a great site for playing and training.

Shark Point



Shark Dive

The best chance to see a shark is at **Ko Bon**, where manta rays come in to clean

and an occasional whale shark may join in the fray. Leopard sharks rest in the sand at 100ft.

Reef Dive

Shark Point, near Phuket, is a real beauty with three pinnacles covered in sea life.

Pinnacle Dive

Western Rocky Island is an amazing formation that has macro life and tons of fish.

Critter Dive

There's lots going on all the time at **Richelieu Rock**, where frogfish, harlequin shrimp and mating cuttlefish are seen on a regular basis.



Richelieu Rock

WHAT TO BRING DIVING

Thailand is a good dive destination because if you do forget something, there are many fully-equipped dive shops that offer equipment rental and sales, parts purchase (eg fin straps) and even regulator repairs. If you're not picky and don't want to carry dive gear, full rental of all kit is also available.

The water is tropical and generally clear with an average temperature of 68° to 74° Fahrenheit (26°C to 29°C) around the country, but it can be colder between November and February. This period also brings some unusual sightings, like guitar sharks. The water temperature is normally warmest from mid-March to late May. Usually all that is needed is a 1.5mm to 3mm wetsuit to remain very comfortable; heartier folks just wear skins or T-shirts. Those acclimated, like divemasters, wear 5mm to 7mm.

Normal scuba gear or snorkeling gear is fine for Thailand.

Don't forget your 'C' card and dive log to show your host dive shop. Nitrox is offered almost everywhere, so bring your mixed gas card if you are going to use it.

Tech diving, rebreather diving, rental and training is also available within Thailand.



Greeting the local canines in Ko Tao

DIVE TRAINING & CERTIFICATION

Thailand offers all levels of training, from snorkeling and basic scuba to full instructor courses. PADI is the main agency represented in Thailand. TDI technical diving courses are also offered and SSI also has good representation here. Check with your dive shop for information on the courses you can take. Thailand is perfect for advanced diving, rescue, basic underwater photography, nitrox, wreck certification, marine life courses and many other specialties.

IDCs (Instructor Development Courses) run almost weekly and can always be attended in some part of the country.

Most costs for diving are pretty much the same across Thailand. It is best to shop for what you want. Remember, the cheapest package may or may not be the best and safest training. Ask questions and shop for the best situation for your needs.

LIVE ABOARDS

There are currently many live aboards operating around Thailand which cater to all income groups and range from extremely basic to among the finest in the world. Trips range from as short as two days, which is basically an overnight at sea, to two-week expeditions. Ocean Rover, which operates out of Phuket, has been listed in the world's top 10 live boards.

Live aboard boats provide a superb way to see a lot and to dive frequently. As many as five dives a day can be offered (four day dives and a night dive) and divers can travel through the hot western spots and up into Myanmar (formerly Burma) for some unique diving experiences.

Live aboard diving generally provides a shared room, all meals, soft drinks, air, nitrox and experienced crew. It can

really enhance the diving experience to have a knowledgeable guide and crew, which make a real difference between an ordinary and excellent dive trip. A good live board will also have a well-stocked library and video selection of marine-related titles. Truly knowledgeable divemasters and cruise directors can give informed briefings and excellent post-dive discussions about the habits and habitat of marine critters. Ask around and make sure you're getting the most bang for your buck so your holiday dreams are fulfilled. Live aboards can't make whale sharks appear, however. Enjoy the experience of being out to sea in Thailand's rich environment and look upon big fish visits as a bonus if you do get lucky.

One disturbing thing about most Thai live aboards, however, is that they don't use tenders to move divers back and forth to the sites, resulting in big ships chasing divers down all over the site. This is both an unsafe situation and also causes a lot of irritating and unnecessary noise underwater. Try to find a ship that uses a small boat or zodiac-style dinghy to drop off and pick up divers.

It is by far the best way to go. If an operation inquires as to why you didn't choose them, let them know that lack of tender diving was a major factor.

SNORKELING

Thailand has many good venues for snorkelers, as the numerous small islands have beautiful fringing reefs. Snorkeling is a very popular pastime due to the usually clear water, easy access by boat or shore, and normally mild currents within inshore bays. Many people come to Thailand for the snorkeling alone. Be aware of the boat traffic on Thai beaches and snorkel away from the boat lanes. Most dive shops and even some beach huts have snorkel gear for rent if you don't want to bring your own. If you have never done it, this country is all about instruction. You can take lessons.

Most snorkelers can get to see a good portion of the reefs visited by live aboards. Although be aware that not all venues are good for snorkeling due to surge and currents or the depth of the submerged site.



Graceful mantas are a highlight of Thai diving



A snorkeler heads out from shore



Thailand's huge diversity makes it a photo paradise

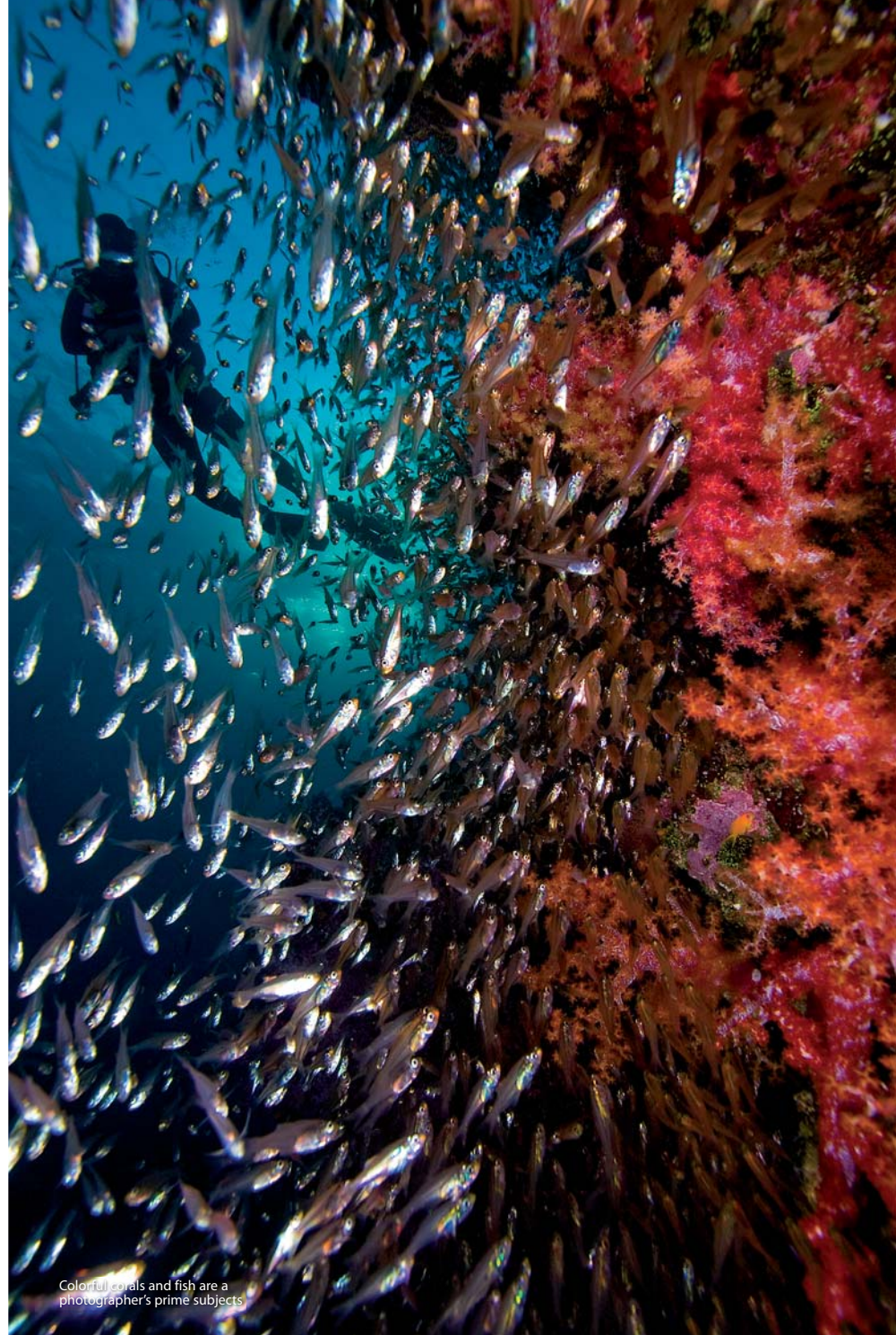
UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

Underwater photography is a favored activity for many divers traveling to Thailand. The brilliant soft corals, bright purple sea anemones and multitude of colorful invertebrates, combined with the chance to see and photograph something as huge as a whale shark, make this one of the premier underwater photography destinations in the world. Thailand is a great place for colorful wide angle lens work, medium focal length for fish and macro photography.

Most larger dive centers offer the PADI Underwater Photographer specialty course, which will teach you the basics of underwater photography, like composition and camera handling, with spe-

cial emphasis on practical techniques. Also included are sections on photography dive planning, organization, procedures, techniques, potential problems and how to care for and maintain camera equipment. This is frequently taught now using a digital camera, and usually comes with the use of a shop camera or you can bring your own.

For those with film, print film processing is still widely available. For those with slide film, proper E-6 processing is becoming harder to find as digital takes over. Bangkok is about the only option for professional results for film. Ask if your dive center offers processing before you go if you want on-the-spot results. A few live aboards may still do this, but it is phasing out rapidly.



Colorful corals and fish are a photographer's prime subjects

Many dive centers have personal video services and there are a few companies that also teach video technique and editing. Most will find it simpler to buy a DVD of the day's dives at a reasonable fee.

Doing boat dives with a good Thailand underwater guide who is familiar with working with a photographer is highly recommended. The longtime guides all talk and know one another and may relay information on the latest find of a frogfish, harlequin shrimp or ghost pipefish pair. It can make your photo experience much better in the long run.

In Thailand, you will find that underwater photographers are only marginally catered to. Most boats have fresh water buckets that can hold perhaps three housed point-and-shoot cameras and strobes (or one SLR system). Few boats have actual dedicated spaces for cameras, and many divers are novices or new to boat etiquette and don't necessarily look where they fling gear. Some may even approach you, dripping wet, when your housing is open and ask to see your photos from the last dive. It is prudent to be very defensive when doing some of the group dives. Also, most divers bring smaller point-and-shoot cameras. Those with SLRs should run through a bit of procedure on handling their camera going in and coming out so lens covers get replaced and chances for damage are kept at a minimum. Tanks dedicated to camera rinse can be rather crowded with both boat and shore divers sharing the same bin, and masks and fins allowed to be washed in the same water.

As most divers use wrist lanyards, a crowded rinse bin and boat rinse tub means that people can hastily pull their gear out and snag yours as well. This can cause latches to unlock and uncovered domes and ports to get scratched. While it seems like a good idea to keep your camera wet all the time, the lack of

enough boat basins and the overcrowding at the shop can be a problem.

One of the absolutely best thought-out and executed camera areas was found on the Ocean Rover live aboard. The all-around arrangements for photographers (both video and still) of all levels is one of the finest in the world. From dedicated work stations and charging areas to the handling of equipment before and after the dive, most operations could learn a bit from this ship's philosophy.

There are some nice beach dives, but fine sand can get into cameras during these dives. Night diving in Ko Tao is popular as is Karan Noi in Phuket. After beach dives, carefully check and clean your o-rings to ensure fine sand particles have not become lodged in the o-ring slots and on the rings themselves. A little preventive maintenance in the evenings can be worth many dollars and reduce the risk of a camera having to be replaced due to a housing flooded because of an errant speck of beach sand.



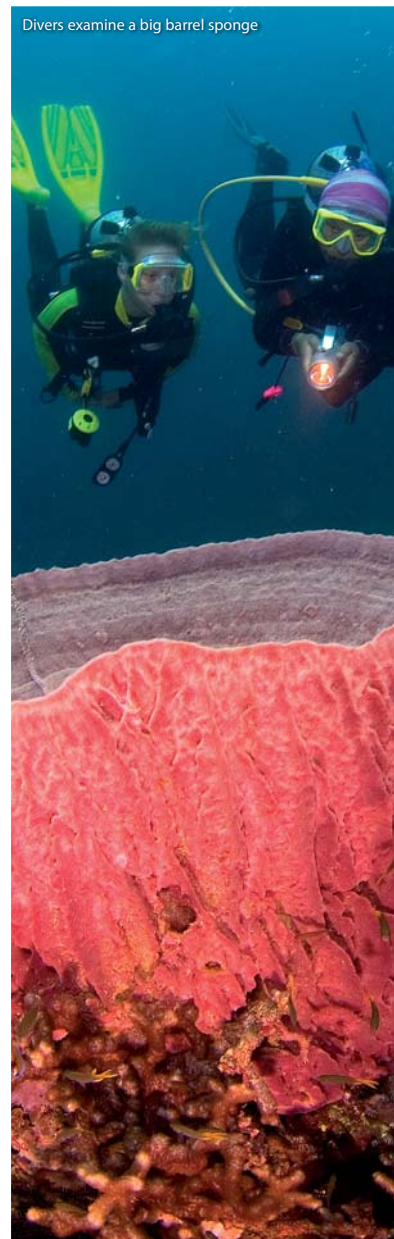
Dive shop videographers are normally on hand to record your experience

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Conservation

Divers examine a big barrel sponge



Thailand is a conservationist's dream, with over 100 national parks and dozens of marine parks. Similan Islands National Park, 70km from Phang-Nga town, is one of Thailand's most famous diving areas. This archipelago of nine islands, established after a year-long exploration by the Forestry Department, includes the islands of **Ko Bon**, Ko Bayu, Ko Similan, Ko Paya, Ko Miang (two adjoining islands), Ko Payan, Ko Payang and Ko Huyong. The park was expanded recently to include the remote islands of Ko Bon and **Ko Tachai**. Similan is a Malay or Yawi word that means nine.

Protected Species

Some species found in Thailand that are globally threatened and in danger of extinction include:

Corals & Marine Life

All types of soft and hard coral and sea fans – dead and alive – are locally and internationally protected by law. Coral reefs rival rain forests in their biological diversity. The magnificent array of reef fish and bottom-dwelling animals, such as crustaceans, that visitors enjoy observing all depend on the health of the coral reef. Marine mammals, such as whales, porpoises and dolphins, are fully protected both internationally and locally.

Sea Turtles

Sea turtles are completely protected, as are their nests and eggs, by both local and international law in Thailand. Turtles are threatened worldwide by overexploitation. It is prohibited to catch, kill, eat, possess, offer for sale, sell, buy, trade or give as a gift turtle meat or any other part of a turtle.

Health & Safety

Overall, Thailand is a healthy place to visit with some of the finest hospitals in the world. There are numerous decompression chambers for diving accidents located around the country, many also used to treat other illnesses.

In the north of the country, some cases of malaria have been reported. It is a serious and potentially fatal disease spread by mosquito bites, with symptoms ranging from fever, chills and sweating, headache, diarrhea and abdominal pains, to a vague feeling of ill-health. Seek medical help immediately if malaria is suspected. Without treatment, malaria can rapidly become more serious and can be fatal. Thailand's more susceptible areas for malaria include northern Kanchanaburi

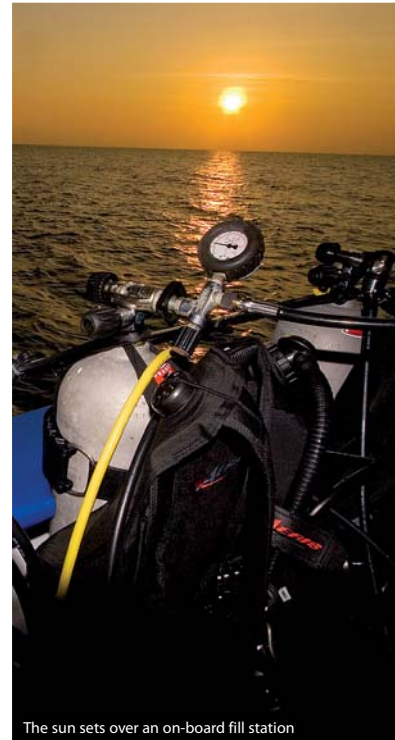
Province (especially Thung Yai Naresuan National Park) and parts of Trat Province along the Cambodian border (including Ko Chang).

Japanese B encephalitis, a mosquito-transmitted viral infection of the brain, is thought to be a very low risk for travelers and generally only a risk in rural, rice-growing areas. However, it can be fatal and may cause permanent brain damage in those who recover. There is an effective vaccine, and you should take measures to avoid mosquito bites.

Many animals can be infected with rabies (including dogs, cats, bats and monkeys). The saliva of the animal is infectious and any bite, scratch or even lick from a warm-blooded, furry animal should be cleaned immediately and thoroughly. Scrub with soap and running water, and then apply alcohol or iodine solution. Medical help should be sought promptly to receive a course of injections to prevent the onset of symptoms and death.

The *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which transmits the dengue virus, is most active during the day and is found mainly in urban areas in and around human dwellings. Signs and symptoms of dengue fever include a sudden onset of high fever, headache, joint and muscle pains, nausea and vomiting. A rash of small red spots sometimes appears three to four days after the onset of fever. Severe complications do sometimes occur. You should seek medical attention as soon as possible if you think you may be infected. A blood test can indicate the possibility of dengue fever. Aspirin should be avoided, as it increases the risk of hemorrhaging. There is no specific treatment, and there is no vaccine against dengue fever.

A listing of hospitals in Thailand can be found at www.khaosanroad.com/hospitals.htm



The sun sets over an on-board fill station

Rating System for Dives & Divers



Divers disembark a local longtail boat

The dive sites in this book are rated according to divers at a particular time diving at a particular place. These are not absolute ratings. For instance, someone unfamiliar with prevailing conditions might be considered a novice diver at one dive area, but an intermediate diver at another, more familiar location.

Novice:

A novice diver generally fits the following profile:

- basic scuba certification from an internationally recognized certifying agency
- dives infrequently (less than one trip a year)
- logged fewer than 25 total dives
- little or no experience diving in similar waters and conditions
- dives no deeper than 60ft (18m).

*An instructor or divemaster should accompany a novice diver on all dives.

Intermediate:

An intermediate diver generally fits the following profile:

- may have participated in some form of continuing diver education
- logged between 25 and 100 dives
- no deeper than 130ft (40m)
- has been diving within the last six months in similar waters and conditions.

Advanced:

An advanced diver generally fits the following profile:

- advanced certification
- has been diving for more than two years; logged over 100 dives
- has been diving within the last six months in similar waters and conditions.

Pre-dive Safety Guidelines

Regardless of skill level, you should be in good physical condition and know your limitations. If you are uncertain as to which category you fit, ask the advice of a local dive instructor. He or she is best qualified to assess your abilities based on the prevailing dive conditions at any given site. Ultimately, you must decide if you are capable of making a particular dive, depending on your level of training, recent experience and physical condition, as well as water conditions at the site. Remember that water conditions can change at any time, even during a dive.

PRE-TRIP PREPARATION

Shops in Thailand offer equipment for sale and rental, and also equipment repair. If you are using your own gear, get your regulator tuned up before leaving home if you haven't used it for over six months. Also consider doing some local check-out dives, even if just in a pool.

It's worth exercising prior to the trip in order to face the challenges of boat diving and the ins and outs and walks associated with shore diving. Swimming, hiking with a backpack and jogging will help increase fitness and stamina.

Make sure your passport is not about to expire or hasn't already expired. You can't get into Thailand without one and you can't get back home even if you do manage to get into Thailand.

MEDICAL & RECOMPRESSION FACILITIES

Hyperbaric recompression chambers are located strategically throughout Thailand, and more chambers are being introduced to treat other illnesses, making chambers widely available. A dedicated diving telemedicine consultation network provides high quality diving medicine and other specialized medical service on a 24-hour basis. Diving medicine centers operate in Bangkok, Ko Tao and Phuket, with each facility staffed by physicians and nurses trained and experienced in diving medicine and ready to provide hyperbaric treatments for unfortunate divers at short notice.

By international standards, the cost of medical treatment in Thailand is surprisingly low. Nevertheless, health and accident insurance is strongly recommended. Every major town in Thailand has a public hospital, but these can be poorly equipped and overcrowded. Private hospitals are recommended for easier communication and better service; ask for *long-piya-barn ekachon* (private hospital).

Your DAN affiliate should also be consulted in the event of a diving accident, or diving illness symptoms, as well as your dive shop manager so they can react to the emergency and set things in motion for treatment.

Emergency numbers are only useful if you can speak Thai. If you need help contact the Tourist Police on 1155. Please note that air evacuation is still very sketchy. Those on live aboard trips to remote sites should recognize this and dive conservatively.

DAN

Divers Alert Network (DAN) is an international membership association of individuals and organizations sharing a common interest in diving and safety. It operates a 24-hour diving emergency hotline in the US at ☎ 919-684-8111 or ☎ 919-684-4DAN (which accepts collect calls in a dive emergency). DAN does not directly provide medical care; however, it does provide advice on early treatment, evacuation, and hyperbaric treatment of diving-related injuries.

All divers should have DAN or some similar insurance. Some dive companies and live aboards actually require it, so take care of your diving insurance before you head to Thailand.



A Thai ambulance waits at a dock

*A diver examines a flowing sea anemone
with its 'Nemo' clown anemonefish*



Marine Life



Wentle traps eat tube coral and leave eggs in the coral skeleton

Thailand is blessed with a diverse population of fish and invertebrates that comprise both Indo Pacific dwellers and Indian Ocean species, plus quite a few endemic species. It is a great place for variety, but care must be taken with a few of these ocean creatures that use defense mechanisms harmful to divers.

Thailand is a superb place to get to know the ocean and its creatures. Most fish, crabs and other marine creatures have specific habitats. Getting to know where a certain subject likes to live, when it likes to feed, when and where it mates and all of the other routines of life under the sea will enable the diver to find the subject with greater ease. This enhances observation and also photography.

Colorful fish are perhaps the most sought after in the Thailand waters. Beautiful angelfish, parrotfish, basslets and triggerfish catch the eye of divers and snorkelers. But there are more mundane fish that are also worth watching for their unique coloration or ability to camouflage, like a seahorse or frogfish.

The invertebrate world around Thailand can't be dismissed. The amazing sponge formations on virtually every dive site give the reef form and color. Thailand's corals are healthy and very competitive, sometimes growing into or on top of one another. And crustaceans such as shrimp, crabs and lobsters all have unique homes and many have symbiotic relationships with other marine creatures.

HAZARDOUS MARINE LIFE

The diversity of marine life extends also to dangerous marine animals. Most of these are quite small and not ferocious, but highly venomous. There are cone shells, stonefish, scorpionfish, stingrays, hydroids, fire corals, urchins and many other creatures that can adversely affect a diver.

Divers should read or ask about which creatures will be commonly seen and should know first aid procedures in

the rare event a person is wounded by a marine animal. Be especially careful on night dives. Carrying proper antiseptic ointments greatly helps.



Coral Facts by Dee Scarr

The facts of life for coral:

- 1 Be aware that we use the word 'coral' for three things: the individual coral animal, called the polyp; the polyps and the skeleton they've secreted, also called a coral head; and the skeleton without its living polyps, also called coral rock. The first two of these are alive, while the last is not alive, which leaves a great deal of room for confusion.
- 2 A coral polyp (the living coral animal) is only three to four cell layers thick.
- 3 To create a model of coral tissue against its own skeleton, take a wet tissue and drape it across a bare razorblade.
- 4 Every individual coral animal in a coral head is a clone of every other coral animal in that coral head.
- 5 A coral head is started by a single coral larva which grows and begins to secrete a calcium-based skeleton, then clones itself, and repeats the process. Slowly.
- 6 A hemispherical coral head of 3ft diameter is two- to three-hundred years old.
- 7 The branching corals, elkhorn and staghorn grow more quickly than the 'head' corals, such as brain coral and star coral. They thrive in shallower waters, though, so are more likely to be broken by wave action.
- 8 Look at a star coral head, or a starlet coral head. Every single little mound or indentation – every single little circle in the whole coral head – is an individual coral animal.
- 9 Look at a brain coral head, or a sheet coral. The polyps aren't as easy to distinguish as they are in the star corals, but a careful look will reveal the mouths of the polyps, day or night.
- 10 The tissue of every coral polyp in a coral head is connected to all the polyps around it. The entire surface of a coral head is covered with living coral tissue.



Sharks

Sharks are encountered on few dives in Thailand. Attacks are rare and usually only occur in some misguided feeding attempt, or on fishermen spearing fish. In the event that a shark does become aggressive, it is sometimes wise to rise to a shallower depth to get out of its territory. If a shark comes too close, stop and face the animal and watch it closely and quietly. Be prepared to push it away with a camera, knife, spear or tank. Treatment for bites is to stop any bleeding, reassure the patient and treat for shock, and seek immediate medical treatment.

Lionfish

These fish are seen commonly around areas with lots of baitfish, where they hunt. They also prowl under ledges and in the open at night. They inject their venom with spines on their back and the wound can also be quite painful with a lot of swelling. To treat, wash the wound, immerse in water as hot as the victim can stand for 60 to 90 minutes and seek medical aid.

Fire Coral

It looks pretty with its caramel color, but it is like putting your hand on a cigarette. It actually has tiny 'hairs' that burn like crazy and can swell up afterward. This mechanism is to defend against munching parrotfish, but divers sometimes get tagged as well. If stung by their powerful nematocysts, the skin will burn and itch. Rinse with seawater or water and apply vinegar or methylated alcohol on the sting. In a severe case anti-histamines can help, and seek immediate medical treatment.

Jellyfish

The stings of a jelly are released by nematocysts contained in the trailing tentacles. The rule of thumb is the longer the tentacles, the more painful the sting. Keep an eye out for jellyfish while snorkeling. On the outer reefs, man-o-war and sea wasps are found. Most stings can be treated with vinegar. Some people do react adversely to jellyfish stings, similar to those who are allergic to bee stings. Be prepared to administer CPR and seek medical aid.



Tiny but still potent scorpionfish

Barracuda

Barracuda bites are also quite rare. The fish tend to be attracted to shiny objects and have been known to attack in murky water. Like sharks, this is normally a case of mistaken identity and invariably an accident.

On Thailand's reefs, small schools and individual blackbar barracuda will frequently be encountered. There are also a lot of the larger great barracuda. These fish should not be teased. Their bites can be damaging, so stop any bleeding, reassure the patient, treat for shock and seek immediate medical treatment.

Stonefish/Scorpionfish

These fish will be seen commonly in sandy and rubble areas in Thailand's waters and on night dives. They inject their venom with spines on their back.

The wound can also be quite painful with a lot of swelling. To treat, wash the wound, immerse in water as hot as the victim can stand for 60 to 90 minutes and seek medical aid.

Sea Urchins

These spiny critters can be a real problem. The stings from the spines can range from irritating to highly intense. Spines can also break off inside the skin. Avoid contact with urchins and remain vigilant in the areas they frequent, especially at night. Treat by administering CPR until the pain subsides. Seek medical advice and use antibiotics where advised. For superficial pricks, use lemon or lime, as the acid will speed the dissolution of the spine remnants left under the skin. Deeper, larger spines may have to be surgically removed.

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