

Introduction



Thailand is one of those places that is on everyone's travel list. From the highly cosmopolitan Bangkok to the remote islands of the Andaman Sea, this exotic country has a little bit of everything for most everyone. When people think of Asia, Thailand is often the image that first comes to mind.

Over the years, Thailand has blossomed into a true Mecca for scuba divers from all over the world. Indeed, The Kingdom of Thailand draws more visitors than any other country in Southeast Asia. It has an irresistible combination of breathtaking natural beauty, inspiring temples and ruins of fabulous ancient kingdoms, and is renowned for its hospitality and robust cuisine. Few countries are so well endowed.

Thailand draws more divers than any other Southeast Asia destination, with an estimated 300,000 divers – from the

wide-eyed novice to the seasoned pro – venturing to the country each year. It is estimated the dive industry generates 50,000 jobs as a result. The country has responded by declaring many of its offshore resources as marine national parks and has put rangers in place to run off poachers. It has banned fishing for whale sharks, something none of its neighbors has done, and has placed boat moorings on many sites to prevent anchor damage to the coral reefs.

Having weathered a devastating tsunami in 2004, the industry is on the rebound and is especially strong in places like Pattaya, Ko Tao, Ko Samui and Phuket.

Diving & Snorkeling Thailand will introduce you to the historic shipwrecks of the Eastern Gulf, which sit beside new, habitat-building wrecks created especially for divers to enjoy. The islands of

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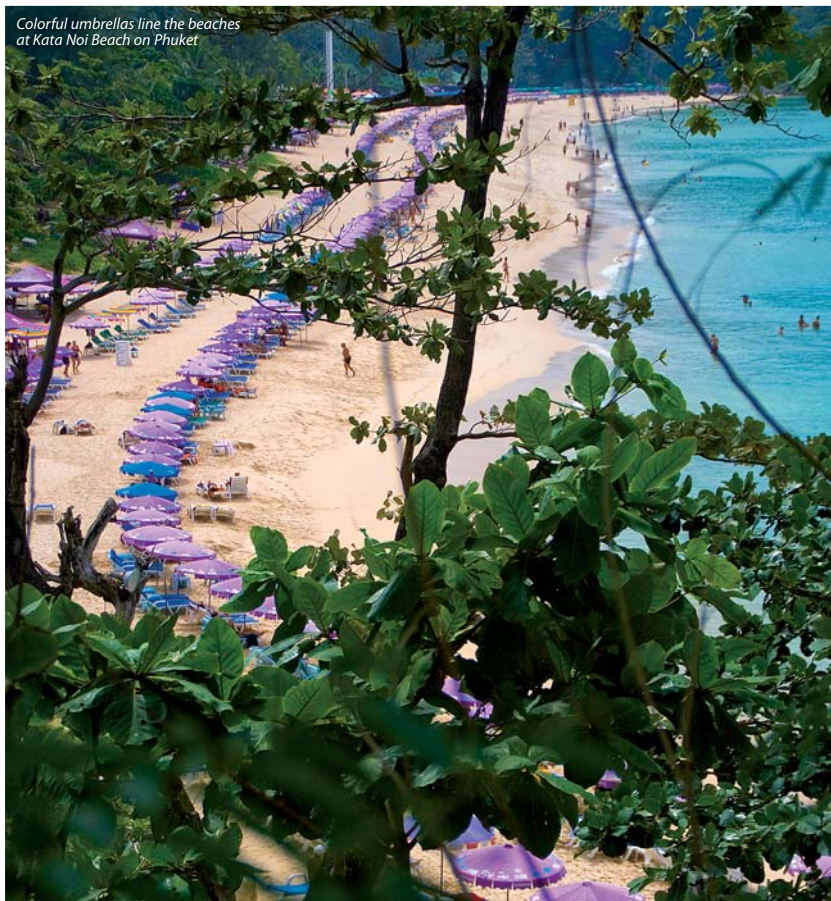
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Ko Tao and Ko Samui are instructional havens where every aspect of diving is taught and practiced on submerged pinnacles, rocky reefs and hard coral fantasylands. On the west coast, Phuket serves as a hub for divers wanting to experience some of the richest marine life in the Andaman Sea. Divers come to see flowing sea anemones, brilliant soft corals, and to chance a view of a leopard shark or a swim beside a behemoth whale shark.

Live aboard ships carry groups of divers north of Phuket to the hotspots in the Similan Islands and Surin Islands and

past the Thai border to newly pioneered dive sites in the Mergui Archipelago in rustic Myanmar (formerly Burma).

Virtually every dive destination within Thailand has its own set of dive sites that offer something special and fascinating. To list them all would create a book the size of the Bible. *Diving & Snorkeling Thailand* features some of the finest dives in Thailand and provides divers and snorkelers with a good feel for the country's finest underwater attractions. It is truly a bountiful destination ready to thrill and surprise visiting scuba buffs.





Facts about Thailand



A Thai lady arranges her fruit stand in Ko Tao

ues to develop at a rapid pace. Bangkok is one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities. Ethnic Thais make up over 70% percent of the country's population followed by Chinese, Malays and various tribe people. Even the minorities are most often Thai born, making the country a unified nation.

Tourism dominates the economic scene, and Thailand is a world leader in the industry. Diving tourism ranks high on the list. The country also specializes in health tourism, cultural tourism (like cooking classes) and agricultural tourism. Divers coming to Thailand are in for a treat.

HISTORY

The earliest civilization in Thailand is believed to have been that of the Mons in central Thailand, who brought their Buddhist culture from the Indian subcontinent. In the 12th century, this met a Khmer culture moving from the east, the Sumatran-based Srivijaya culture moving north, and citizens of the Thai state of Nan Chao, in what is now southern China, migrating south. Thai princes created the first Siamese capital in Sukhotha, followed by centers in Chiang Mai and, notably, Ayuthaya.

The 20th century brought great change to Thailand. In 1932, a peaceful coup converted the country into a constitutional monarchy, and in 1939 Siam became Thailand. During WWII, the Thai Government sided with the Japanese. After the war, Thailand was dominated by the military and experienced more than 20 coups and countercoups interspersed with short-lived experiments with democracy. Democratic elections in 1979 were followed by a long period of stability and prosperity as power shifted from the military to the business elite.

OVERVIEW

Thailand is a large country, with most of its northern and central landmass surrounded by Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar (formerly Burma). There are many destinations within this destination, but of most interest to divers are the areas in the Gulf of Thailand and to the west along the Andaman Sea. In recognizing that these areas have great tourist potential, combined with rich resources above and below the water, Thailand has moved to make many sites marine national parks and national parks.

Rich in culture, Thailand has long been involved in international trade, cultural exchanges and independent governance. Now considered one of Asia's main economic forces, it contin-

Rustic Ko Nang Yuan is a low-key escape



In 1997 the Thai baht (Thailand's currency) pretty much collapsed, dragging the economy (and many other Southeast Asian economies) down in a screaming heap. The unfinished skyscrapers around Bangkok are a legacy of this downturn. Politics and coups have been on the scene here for the last 20 years as well and remain part of the scene, although they rarely affect diving tourist areas.

In December 2004, the west-facing Andaman coast was hit by a tsunami, killing more than 5000 people. Worst affected were small family-run businesses and fishermen, whose buildings and boats were lost to the waters. Aside from areas like Ao Lo Dalam on Phi Phi Island and the Khao Lak/Takua Pa areas in Phang-Nga province, the majority of tourist-reliant areas reopened within weeks or even days of the event.

DIVING HISTORY

There seems to be a consistent story relating to the birth of Thailand's tourism and subsequent diving industry. On April 29, 1961, the first of about 100 American servicemen slated to join the Vietnam conflict arrived in Pattaya for a rest and relaxation break. They had a great time playing on the open beaches and snorkeling, and some tried scuba. The rest is history. Quiet little Pattaya became busy, booming Pattaya. It's now Thailand's premier and most successful beach resort, annually attracting tourists in their hundreds of thousands. The original number of dive shops could be counted on one hand (some are still in existence today) and have been joined by dozens of others offering a plethora of specialties.

Thai diving pioneers also looked west. The island of Phuket remained unconnected to the mainland for years. Thus, boat trips for tourists to visit and stay were infrequent at best. In the early '70s, the Sarasin Bridge was built, connecting Phuket to Phang Nga Province and

opening the way for those wanting to escape the big city of Bangkok. Winding roads, providing some breathtaking overlooks, were created through the mountains and paved the way for dive shops to start businesses in small hotels at the west coast beaches of Patong, Kata and Karon, now the upscale centers for tourism in southern Phuket.

Phuket's small domestic airport became an international airport in the 1990s as infrastructure expanded. Phuket is now the leading island holiday destination in Southeast Asia, with a number of 5-star rated dive shops and every level of instruction and dive experience offered. The first dive shops (that remain in business today) were started in about 1982 and include Ocean Divers, Fantasea Divers and Santana Diving.

As for recent history, Ko Chang is Thailand's new model for tourism, and diving shops are also getting very busy there.

The situation in the Gulf has been in a state of change since the terrible events of the December 2004 tsunami on the west coast. While that mess was being



Thai elephants are ready for feeding

Live aboard ships sit at scenic Ko Bon



cleaned up, divers looked to the Gulf. Always high on the list of backpackers learning to dive, the Gulf industry really only started taking off in the mid-'90s. Following the tsunami, the caliber of tourist visiting Ko Tao has escalated and island ferries have started delivering people with suitcases and laptops – some even with children. This was a rare occurrence prior to the tsunami and has created a bit of culture shock, with a major catch-up resulting in new resorts, better-equipped dive shops and even 24-hour electricity. Dive shops here have recently evolved from wooden shacks to full-blown dive camps.

The early Pattaya pioneers knew they were on to something and in a short few decades the world had agreed by sending upwards of 300,000 divers annually to the country. The good news is

that new sites are still being found and diving is driving conservation and environmental movements that promote healthy seas and protected reefs and their inhabitants.

GEOGRAPHY

Thailand borders Malaysia, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Laos and Cambodia, and has the Gulf of Thailand on its east coast and the Andaman Sea on its west coast. There are four main zones: the fertile central plains of the Chao Phraya River; the poorer region of the 300m (985ft) high northeast plateau; the fertile valley and mountains of Northern Thailand; and the rainforested southern peninsula. Doi Inthanon, at 2,596m (8,512ft) in Chiang Mai province, is the highest peak.

POPULATION, PEOPLE & CULTURE

Thailand has a population of approximately 65,000,000 people, roughly 95% of which is Buddhist, with about 4% Muslim. Religion and monarchy are the cornerstones of Thai culture and they permeate everyday life. It's the custom to stand for the royal anthem before films are shown, and the national anthem is played across towns, villages and even Bangkok Skytrain stations twice daily.

For the beach-holidaymaker and Bangkok fly-by-nighter, it is often easy to overlook the cultural subtleties of Thailand. The local people are a gregarious and accepting lot, but a little bit of respect goes a long way in finding out more about the country's people and culture.

Be modest in dress and actions. Be respectful in your dealings with Thai people and you will get along fine and have a pleasant experience in the country. If you don't blow your top, they won't blow theirs.

CLIMATE

Climate-wise, the best time for visiting Thailand is between November and February when it is not too wet and not too hot. The south is best visited when the rest of Thailand is miserably hot (March to May), and the north is best from mid-November to early December, or when it starts warming up again in February. Thailand's monsoons arrive around July and continue into November (the 'sticky season'). This is followed by a dry, cool period from November to mid-February, followed by much higher relative temperatures from March to June.

If you're spending time in Bangkok, be prepared to roast in April and do some wading in October – probably the most challenging two months, weather-wise, in the capital.



Rambutan fruit for sale in the market



A girl with sun protection in Burma

LANGUAGES

Thai is the official language of the kingdom. English is widely spoken and understood in almost every tourist venue. Thai is a complicated language with its own unique alphabet, but it's fun to try at least a few words. The main complication with Thai is that it is tonal: the same word could be pronounced with a rising, falling, high, low or level tone and could theoretically have five meanings! But give it a go anyway. *Sawadee* (saw-wah-day) means 'hello' and *kob-kuhn* (cob-coon) means 'thank you'. There, you're off to a flying start!

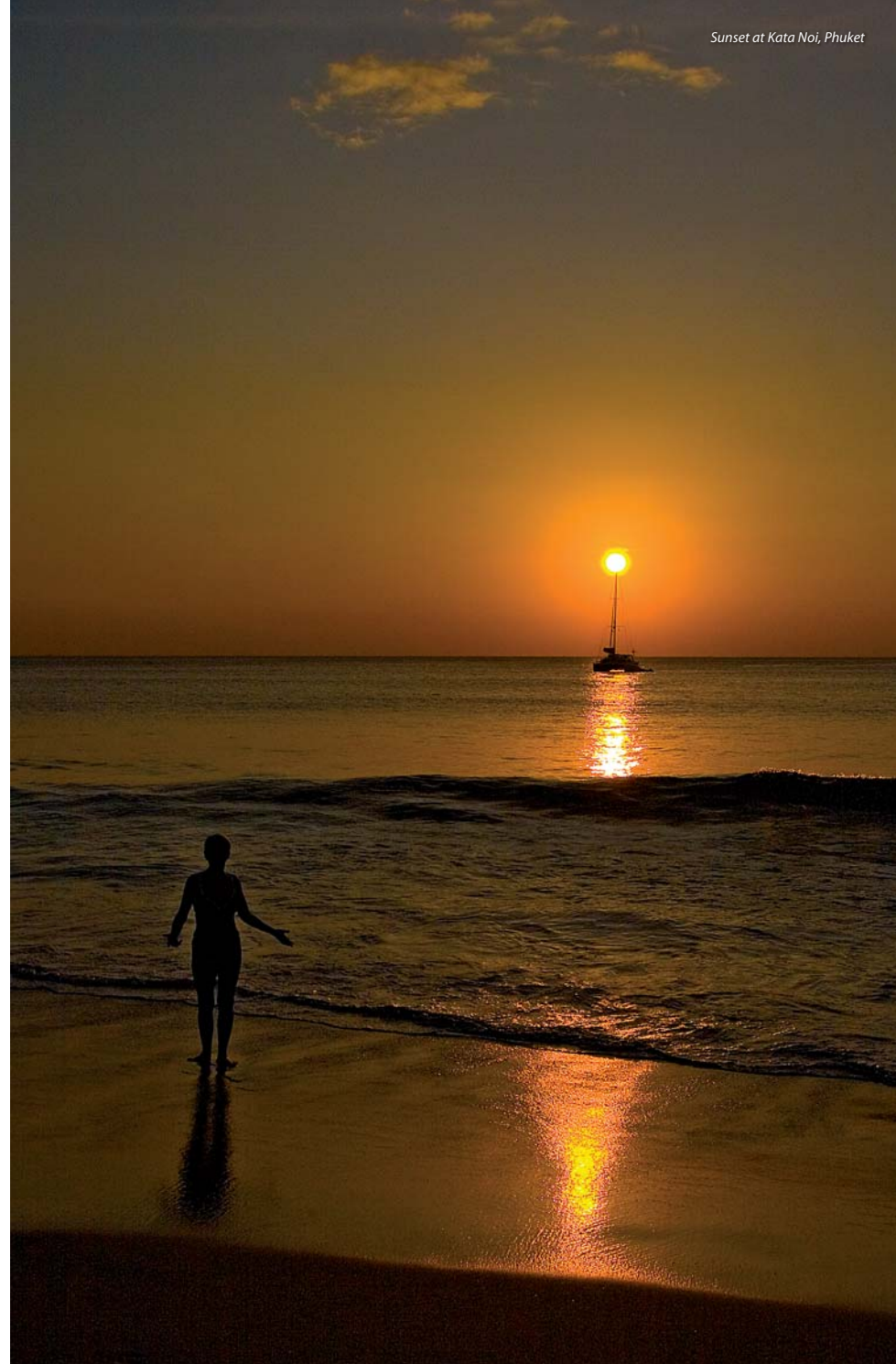
GATEWAY CITY

Dubbed the 'Pearl of the South' by the tourist industry, Phuket is Thailand's largest, most populous and most vis-

ited island. A whirl of color and cosmopolitanism, Thailand's only island province revolves around and thrives on tourism, but still retains a spark of the real Thailand.

There are a hundred and one ways to pass the day in Phuket, which certainly knows how to cater to tourists' every whim. Most flock to the beaches on the southwestern side, which are loaded with amenities and entertainment options.

There are plenty of flights to Phuket from Bangkok (about 80 minutes), operated by a number of domestic and international carriers. Flights are also available to other Thai tourist destinations, such as Ko Samui. As it's an international airport, direct flights to Phuket are also available from destinations outside Thailand including Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.



Author



TIM ROCK

Tim Rock attended the journalism program at the University of Nebraska–Omaha and has been a professional broadcast and print photojournalist for over 30 years. The majority of those years has been spent in the Western and Indo Pacific region reporting on environmental and conservation issues.

His television series, *Aquaquest Micronesia*, was an Ace Award finalist. He has also produced six documentaries on the history and undersea fauna of the region. Tim won the prestigious Excellence in the Use of Photography award from the Society of Publishers in Asia, amongst many other awards for photography and writing. He publishes a magazine and works as a correspondent for numerous Pacific Rim magazines. Tim is the author of many Diving & Snorkeling series guides, including *Bonaire*, *Cayman Islands*, *Thailand*, *Chuuk Lagoon-Pohnpei-Kosrae*, *Bali & Lombok*, *Guam & Yap*, *Palau*, *South Africa-Mozambique* and *Papua New Guinea*, and is a major contributor to *Philippines*.

FROM THE AUTHOR

The very first time I went scuba diving was in early 1972 in the warm, clear waters off Pattaya Beach. It was a mind-

blowing revelation seeing this new, strange and shockingly colorful world. It planted a seed that later led to a career. I was extremely happy to revisit this land and once again embrace its people and its rich underwater world.

A warm thank you to my wife, Larie, for putting up with my absences and, as always, helping out when asked. Special thanks to Hans and Sandy Ulrich for doing so much for me in all aspects of the book research. Thanks to Rene Balot for immense logistical assistance, Porn Songsta, Hans Tibboel, Prakit Phetcamto, Hin Peksuksri, Chalong Phumkliang, Somjet Sriprasit, Sutham Nonsi, Thira Thongmisuk, Wirot Sae-Lee, Charoen Khaikaew, Somnuek Lansin, Yaowapha Piyaprai, Pornpip Popa, Ruengamnat Chooduang, Kay Arsrairas, Peter De Pauw, Jane Wiwek, Matt Bolton, Supha 'Oi' Thamnam, Walter van Paassen, Toine Kokke, Mark Strickland, John Williams, Jamie Macleod, Stuart Oehl, Andrew Hewett, Alex Tyrrell, Elaine Taylor, Erwin Razenberg, Jamie Cox, Priaw Sukanya, Narongsak Tiasakul, Narong Chaimo, Boris De Fauconval and the people of Thailand for their hospitality and dedication to the preservation of the marine world that surrounds their beautiful island.

John Williams and Mark Strickland, the authors of the first Lonely Planet *Thailand* D&S guide book, were very generous in their help and information with this new volume.

PHOTO NOTES

Tim uses Nikon digital cameras, Aquatica underwater housings and Ikelite strobes. Tim's photographic work is represented by Lonely Planet Images (www.lonelyplanetimages.com), Double Blue Images (www.doubleblue.com) and other agents worldwide.

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