

Northern Andaman Coast



Whether you've got designer villa wishes, bamboo hut desires or anything in-between, the northern Andaman coast serves it up hot with a shot of turquoise ocean to wash it down. Phuket, on the southern extremity, is the audacious starlet of the region, flaunting glitzy five-star hotels that grace soda-white beaches, and where sleep is an afterthought to parties, water sports and spa pampering. Ranong, to the far north, is a mix of Burmese and Thais who eke out a living in a dusty frontier town very removed from the tourist industry. Travel the 300km through and between these two provinces and you'll see it all: Muslim stilt villages and vertical limestone karsts; resorts out of the pages of *Architectural Digest* and bays abuzz with jet skis; tangled mangrove swamps and skittish clouds of nesting swallows.

Phuket is the second-most visited location in Thailand (Pattaya is first) and its fame for fine dining, cabarets and private beaches makes it easy to overlook the rest of this coast. But head north and you'll find the underwater paradises of the Surin and Similan islands, considered to be among the top seven wonders of the diving world. In Phang-Nga province several community based tourism projects – fruits of the 2004 tsunami wreckage – allow travellers to give something back to the cultural and environmental hotpotch. In the low season, much of the far north shuts down and Phuket's beaches empty out, leaving fabulous deals on accommodation, lots of rain and some of the best surfing waves on the peninsula.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Searching for elusive whale sharks and swimming with the fish on a live-aboard cruise of the **Similan Islands** (p279) and **Surin Islands Marine National Parks** (p274)
- Experiencing Thai-Muslim culture via community-based projects around **Khuraburi, Khao Lak** or **Ko Yao** (p278)
- Cruising the art galleries and hole-in-the-wall restaurants and bars of colonial **Phuket Town** (p300)
- Kayak around the beautiful bay of **Ao Phang-Nga** (p281)
- Finding gluttonous hedonism in the hair-raising clubs and on the packed beaches of **Hat Patong** (p313) – love it or hate it
- Falling into the snoozy, beach-bar vibe and lounging on the white sand of **Ko Phayam** (p271)



Climate

The Andaman coast is wetter than the southern gulf provinces with the low season months between May and October logging the highest rainfall. During this time, seas are rough and passenger boats to some islands, such as the Surin and Similan archipelagos, are suspended. On the upside, peninsular Thailand is narrow, so if the weather turns sour on the Andaman coast, you can always pack your bags and chase the sun to the eastern seaboard.

National Parks

Some of the northern Andaman coast's most visited areas are national parks. Ao Phang-Nga National Park (p283) swarms with day-trippers drawn by the expanse of turquoise water and pristine islands – it's no wonder Scaramanga (of *The Man with the Golden Gun* fame) chose to build his lair here. Divers and snorkellers are now flocking to Surin Islands Marine National Park (p274) and Similan Islands Marine National Park (p279), considered to be among the seven wonders of the diving world, mostly on two-day to week-long live-aboard cruises.

Even built up Phuket Province has its share of parks: Khao Phra Taew Royal Wildlife & Forest Reserve (p323) is a pristine rainforest in the heart of Phuket's concrete jungle and Sirinat National Park (p322) is one of the wildest stretches on the island.

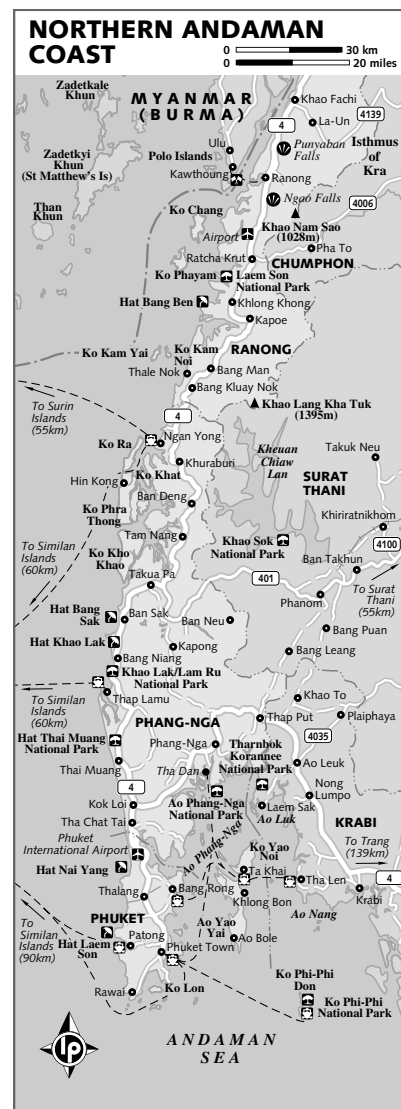
Further off the beaten track in the far north is Laem Son National Park (p270), where you'll find mangrove forests, empty beaches and turtle nesting sites.

RANONG & AROUND

เมืองระนอง

pop 25,000

The least charming of the Andaman coast's provincial capitals, Ranong lies on the east bank of tea-brown Pak Chan estuary, a short boat ride from Myanmar. This is a frontier town through and through, with a frenetic, downtrodden feel and a mix of Burmese and Thais scrambling for your tourist dollar. The town attempts to woo visitors not only with its interesting visa runs to Myanmar (Burma), but with a clutch of natural hot springs and a handful of tumbledown historic buildings. Even if you don't need to renew your visa, it's well



worth taking the opportunity to have a cup of tea in Myanmar – but the bleak town of Ranong doesn't entice a stay longer than a day or two.

There are also a number of dive operators using Ranong as a jumping-off point for live-aboard trips to the Burma Banks and the Surin Islands.

TSUNAMI EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

On the morning of 26 December 2004, an earthquake off the coast of Sumatra sent enormous waves crashing against much of Thailand's Andaman coast, claiming around 8000 lives and causing millions of dollars of damage to homes and businesses. In 2005, Thailand officially inaugurated a national disaster warning system, which was created in response to the country's lack of preparedness in 2004. The Bangkok-based centre anticipates that a tsunami warning can be issued within 30 minutes of the event being detected by existing international systems.

The public will be warned via the nationwide radio network, Channel 5 army TV network, the state-operated TV pool and SMS messages. For non-Thai speakers, the centre has installed warning towers along the high-risk beachfront areas that will broadcast prerecorded announcements in various languages accompanied by flashing lights. The **call centre** (☎ 1860) also handles questions and tips from the public regarding potential or unfolding disasters.

Information

IMMIGRATION OFFICES

The main Thai immigration office is on the road to Saphan Plaa, about halfway between town and the main piers, across from a branch of the Thai Farmer's Bank. If entering Thailand from Myanmar via Kawthoung, you'll have to visit this office to get your passport stamped with a visa on arrival.

There is also a smaller immigration post in the vicinity of Tha Saphan Plaa. If you're just going in and out of Myanmar's Kawthoung for the day, a visit to the small post will suffice.

For details on getting a new Thai visa or making a day trip to Victoria Point (Myanmar), see the boxed text, p268.

INTERNET ACCESS

J Net (☎ 0 7882 2877; Th Ruangrat; per hr 40B; ☎ 9am-9pm)

MONEY

Most of Ranong's banks and ATMs are near the intersection of Th Tha Meuang and Th Ruangrat.

POST

Main post office (Th Chonrau; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat)

TELEPHONE

Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT; Th Tha Meuang; ☎ 24hr) For phone services.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Plenty of agencies along Th Ruangrat offer visa services, bus and boat tickets, accommodation arrangements for the nearby islands of Ko Chang and Ko Phayam, and day trips to Kawthoung (in Myanmar).

Pon's Place (☎ 0 7782 3344; Th Ruangrat; ☎ 7.30am-midnight) Also rents out motorcycles and cars.

Tanatwan Tours (☎ 0 7782 2807; tanatwan@hotmail.com; 16/8 Th Chonrau; ☎ 9am-8pm) Visa trips cost 400B per person (plus visa costs) and depart at 9am daily.

Sights & Activities

HOT SPRINGS

บ่อน้ำร้อน

Ranong may lack the sophisticated pizzazz of your standard spa town, but it is well known for its hot springs. You can sample these famous waters at Wat Tapotaram, where **Ranong Mineral Hot Springs** (Th Kamlangsap; admission 10B; ☎ 8am-5pm) offers pools hot enough to boil eggs in (65°C). Like the three bears of *Goldilocks* fame, the Thai names of the springs translate as Father Spring, Mother Spring and Baby Spring and each has its own distinct smell (all horrid). The water from the three springs is thought to be sacred as well as possessing miraculous healing powers.

Bathing occurs in rustic rooms where you can scoop water from separate hot and cool water tanks and sluice the mixed water over your body, Thai-style. Don't get inside the tanks and spoil the water. Several local hotels pipe water directly from the springs into rooms.

WAT HAT SOM PAEN

วัดหาดสมเฒ่า

About 7km beyond the springs, the village of **Hat Som Paen** is a former tin-mining community. At **Wat Hat Som Paen**, visitors feed fruit to the huge *Blah plo-ang* (black carp) in the temple stream. The faithful believe these carp are actually *tair-wá-dah*, a type

of angel, and it's forbidden to catch and eat them. Legend has it that those who do will contract leprosy.

NAI KHAI RANONG

ในค่ายระนอง

Nai Khai Ranong (Th Ruangrat; admission free; ☎ 9am-4.30pm) is the former home of Koh Su Chiang, a Hokkien who became governor of Ranong during the reign of King Rama V. These days, it is a combination clan house (clubhouse for Chinese who share the same surname) and shrine. It's on the northern edge of town and is worth a peep.

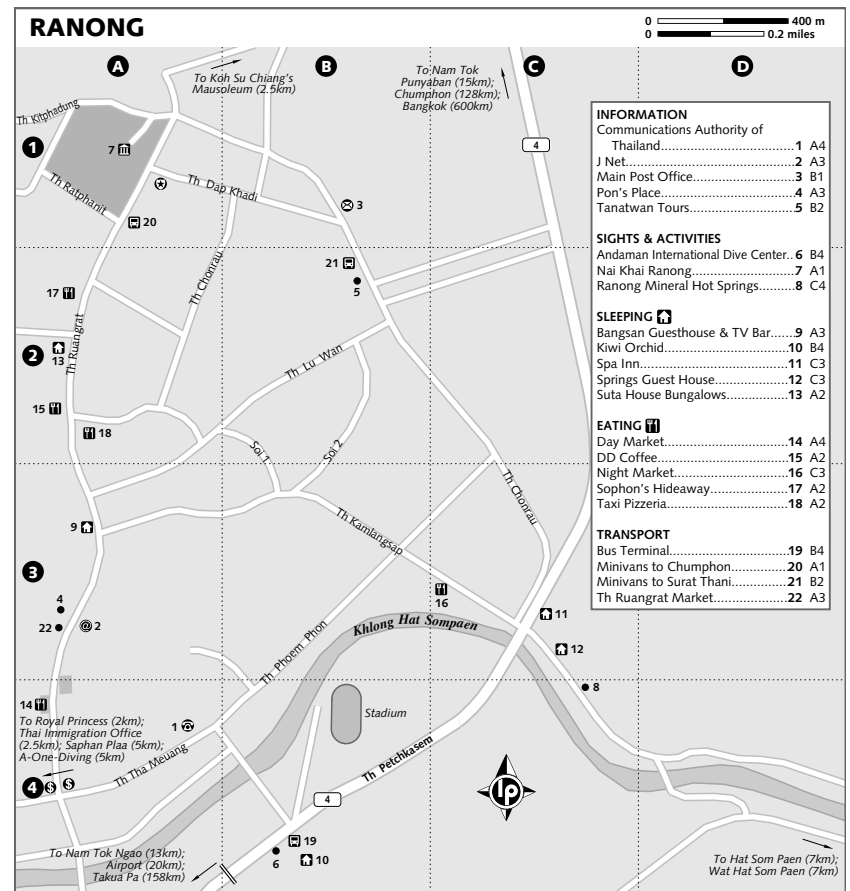
Of the three original buildings, one still stands and is filled with mementos of the

Koh family's glory days. The main gate and part of the original wall also remain.

Several shophouses on Th Ruangrat preserve this old Hokkien style. **Koh Su Chiang's mausoleum** (Susaan Jão Meuang Ranong) is set into the side of a hill a few kilometres north of Nai Khai Ranong, on the road to Hat Chandamri.

WATERFALLS

Of the several well-known waterfalls in Ranong Province, **Nam Tok Ngao** and **Nam Tok Punyaban** are within walking distance of Hwy 4. Ngao is 13km south of Ranong, while Punyaban is 15km north. Just take a sǒrng-tǎa-ou (small pickup truck) in either



direction and ask to be let off at the *nám ðòk* (waterfall).

DIVING

Live-aboard diving trips run from Ranong to world-class bubble-blowing destinations, including the Burma Banks and the Surin and Similan islands. The speciality is four-day, four-night packages for around 15,900B. Try **A-One-Diving** (☎ 0 7783 2984; www.a-one-diving.com; 77 Saphan Plaa) or **Andaman International Dive Center** (☎ 0 7783 4824; Th Petchkasem; www.aidcdiver.com) at the bus station.

Sleeping

Don't expect fireworks from Ranong's hotels; most offer little more than bare bones amenities. Everyone in town can help you arrange a visa run for 400B.

The places on or near Th Petchkasem (Hwy 4) can be reached from town by sǒrng-tǎa-ou 2.

Bangsang Guesthouse & TV Bar (☎ 0 8972 74334; bangsangbar@chaiyo.com; 225 Th Ruangrat; r from 150B) Looking like Greg Brady's psychedelic bedroom circa 1973, you'll need a few drinks at the streetside TV bar before the granite-hard beds upstairs will feel comfy. Shared bathrooms have a free-love style of nonprivacy, but the whole place is as clean as a preppy.

Springs Guest House (☎ 0 7783 4369; Th Kamlangsap; r 200B) This unassuming spot offers a pool table and satellite TV in the quiet bar-restaurant downstairs. The rooms are a little grubby and bathrooms are shared.

Kiwi Orchid (☎ 0 7783 2812; www.kiwiorchid.com; Th Petchkasem; r 250B) Right by the bus station – expect late night rumblings – this ramshackle backpackers has cardboard-like walls and dingy shared bathrooms. It's awfully convenient though, and comes with a mediocre restaurant and overly helpful staff who can help arrange activities and transport.

Spa Inn (☎ 0 7781 1715; fax 0 7782 3384; 25/11 Th Petchkasem; r 300-450B; ☺) The walls at this place could do with a rubdown with the local mineral water. That said, this so-so hotel takes a step up the quality (and price) escalator. Spa Inn has large rooms and pumps its water in from the springs. The rooms at the back look out over the lush green mountainside.

Suta House Bungalows (☎ 0 7783 2707; Th Ruangrat; r 395B; ☺) One of the more comfy choices and right in the town centre, this off-the-road place has a cluster of simple bungalows – and plenty of flowers – around a courtyard/car park. Beds are hard but the showers are hot.

Royal Princess (☎ 0 7783 5240; www.dusit.com; 41/144 Th Tha Meuang; r 990-3000B; ☺) Topping Ranong's accommodation options, this is about the best you can get on the hotel front. There's a gym, pool and mineral water bathrooms, but the trimmings are starting to look a little tatty.

Eating & Drinking

On Th Kamlangsap, not far from Hwy 4 and the Spa Inn, is a night market with several food stalls selling great Thai dishes at low prices; across the street from it is a modest noodle stand. The day market, on Th Ruangrat towards the southern end of town, offers inexpensive Thai and Burmese meals, as well as fresh produce, fish and meats. A cluster of decent eateries can also be found at the northern end of Th Ruangrat.

DD Coffee (☎ 0 7783 0111; Th Ruangrat; snacks 30-100B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Promising 'the best coffee in Ranong', this vibrant café has teens of jabbering teenagers and good black stuff. At night it turns into a popular bar.

Taxi Pizzeria (☎ 0 7782 5730; Th Ruangrat; dishes 70-200B; ☺ lunch & dinner) Completed framed jigsaws provide the decoration at this spartan pizzeria. The food won't have mamma amending her recipe book, but the chef makes a reasonable attempt at rustling up a margarita.

Sophon's Hideaway (☎ 0 7783 2730; Th Ruangrat; mains 80-250B; ☺ 10am-midnight) This expat favourite has everything and then some, including internet access, a free pool table, a pizza oven, full bar, water features and rattan furnishings aplenty. The food isn't great but the sizzling ostrich steak is quite a change from *pât tai*.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Ranong airport is located 20km south of town, just off Hwy 4. **Air Asia** (www.airasia.com) provides

flights Tuesdays, Fridays and Sundays between Ranong and Bangkok (one-way 1200B).

BUS

The bus terminal is on Th Petchkasem towards the southern end of town, though some buses stop in town before proceeding on to the terminal. Sǒrng-tǎa-ou 2 (blue) passes the terminal.

The bus terminal has services to destinations as shown below:

Destination	Bus type	Price	Duration
Bangkok	VIP	665B	10hr
	1st class	428B	
	2nd class ordinary	357B 220B	
Chumphon	2nd class	120B	3hr
Hat Yai	2nd class	410B	5hr
Khuraburi	air-con	100B	1½hr
	ordinary	70B	
Krabi	air-con	190B	6hr
Phang-Nga	ordinary	150B	5hr
Phuket	air-con	240B	5-6hr
	ordinary	180B	
Surat Thani	1st class	180B	4-5hr
	2nd class	100B	

Minivans head to Surat Thani (150B, 3½ hours, four times daily) and Chumphon (120B, three hours, hourly from 6am to 5pm); see the map for departure locations.

Getting Around

Motorcycle taxis will take you almost anywhere in town for 20B, to the hotels along Th Petchkasem for 25B and to the pier for boats to Ko Chang, Ko Phayam and Myanmar for 50B. Pon's Place (p266) can assist with motorcycle and car rentals.

KO CHANG

เกาะช้าง

If you tell folks in Ranong and on Ko Phayam that you are planning on going to Ko Chang, they'll exclaim: 'Why do you want to go there? There's nothing to do!'

And yes, it's blissfully true. This little visited rustic isle is a long way – in every respect – from its much more popular Trat Province namesake. Pass the time exploring the island's tiny village capital (where the boats dock during the dry season) or wend your way around the island on one of the dirt trails. Sea eagles, Andaman kites and hornbills all nest here

RENEWING YOUR VISA AT VICTORIA POINT

The dusty, tumbledown port at the southernmost tip of mainland Myanmar was named Victoria Point by the British, but is known as Ko Song (Second Island) by the Thais. The Burmese appellation, Kawthoung, is most likely a corruption of the Thai name. Most travellers come here to renew their visas, but the place also makes an interesting day trip.

Fishing and trade with Thailand keep things ticking over, but Kawthoung also churns out some of Myanmar's best kick boxers. Nearby islands are inhabited by bands of nomadic *chow lair* (sea gypsies).

The easiest way to renew your visa is to opt for one of the 'visa trips' (from 400B per person plus visa fees) offered by travel agencies in Ranong, but you can do the legwork yourself.

When the Thai-Myanmar border is open, boats to Kawthoung leave from the pier at Saphan Plaa (Pla Bridge) about 5km from the centre of Ranong. Take sǒrng-tǎa-ou (pickup truck) 2 from Ranong (10B) and get off at the **immigration office** (☎ 0 7782 2016; Th Ruangrat; ☺ 8.30am-6pm), 700m north of the pier, to get your passport stamped. Walk or take a motorcycle taxi (10B) to the pier where you'll find crowds of long-tail boats that leave when full (one-way/return 100/150B) to Myanmar immigration. When negotiating your price, confirm whether it is per person or per ride, and one-way or return. At the checkpoint, you must inform the authorities that you're a day visitor – in which case you will pay a fee of US\$10 (it must be a crisp bill) or 600B for a day permit. It's also possible to stay overnight on this permit, although a dingy hotel in rough-edged Victoria Point will cost around 800B per night. If you have a valid Myanmar visa in your passport, you'll be permitted to stay for up to 28 days.

If you're just coming to renew your Thai visa, the whole process will take a minimum of two hours. Bear in mind when you are returning to Thailand that Myanmar's time is 30 minutes behind Thailand's. This has caused problems in the past for returning visitors who got through Burmese immigration before its closing time only to find the **Thai Immigration office** (☺ 8.30am-4.30pm) closed. It's a good idea to double-check Thai immigration closing hours when leaving the country – if you don't get stamped in you'll have to return to Myanmar again the next day.

Some visa-run agents in Ranong (try Kiwi Orchid) offer Myanmar day tours with visa services from 1000B; it's also possible to combine a diving day trip with a visa run through **Andaman International Dive Center** (above) from 5500B.

and if you're lucky, you'll catch sight of them floating above the mangroves. The white, west coast beach of **Ao Yai** might entice you for sunbathing, but note that you'll risk getting devoured by sandflies.

Bungalow operations on the island can arrange **boat trips** to Ko Phayam and other nearby islands for around 200B per person (including lunch) in a group of six or more. Dive trips are also possible. **Aladdin Dive Cruise** (☎ 0 7782 0472; www.aladdindivecruise.de), on Ko Chang, runs PADI courses and offers a range of live-aboard dive safaris. A three-day live-aboard trip to the Surin Islands costs 18,400B; four-day trips to the Similan Islands cost 16,900B.

There are no banks, internet access or cars on Ko Chang so slow down even more with some yoga, t'ai chi and qi gong at **Omtao** (classes 250B; ☎ Oct-May), a German run 'studio' just north of Cashew Resort on Ao Yai.

Sleeping & Eating

Basic bamboo huts reign supreme on Ko Chang and, for the most part, they're only open from November to April. Electricity is limited and a few places have solar and wind power.

Ao Yai is the main beach where you'll find most lodging options and a few more places are tucked away on Ao Daddaeng, to the south, which is linked to Ao Yai via a short walking track. More isolated options can be found on the beaches to the north and far south of the island.

Golden Bee (Ao Yai; bungalows 150B) Uber-basic but spacious, central and clean beachfront huts are tended by some of the nicest folks on the island.

N & X Bungalows (☎ 0 7782 0180; huts 150B) Aspiring Robinson Crusoes should bed down in these no-frills huts. At the southern end of the island at Ao Lek (Small Bay), they're several giant strides off the beaten track.

Hornbill Bungalow (☎ 0 7783 3820; bungalows 150-250B) On an isolated beach in the island's north, this is a good spot for solitude seekers. It's a bit of a hike to get here, but the owner has a boat for ferrying guests around.

Mama's (☎ 0 7782 0180; mamasbungalows@yahoo.com; huts 200B) Tucked in a pretty corner on a rocky, hibiscus-laden hillside above Ao Daddaeng, the huts here are standard-basic but the restaurant serves some of the best Thai food around.

our pick **Ko Chang Resort** (☎ 0 7782 0177; Ao Yai; bungalows 200-300B) Bright colours and rustic

bamboo chic are served on the rocks here above patches of white sand. The priciest bungalows have huge split-level decks and the bathrooms are some of the best around.

Cashew Resort (☎ 0 7782 4741; Ao Yai; bungalows 200-600B) Cashew is Ko Chang's most venerable resort. Choose from cheap A-frame huts or larger, more robust bungalows.

Sawadee (☎ 0 7782 0177; sawadeekochang@yahoo.com; Ao Yai; bungalows 300-400B) The slightly Bali-style, varnished wood bungalows here are the most comfortable you'll find on Ko Chang. Spring mattresses, vibrantly painted bathrooms and the very good alfresco restaurant add a touch of class.

Nature Resort Restaurant (Ao Yai; mains 50-150B) You can't miss this three-storey pagoda-style restaurant on the hillside. The Thai food is very good and don't leave without sampling the cashew or mango wine (50B). Basic bungalows are also available for 200B to 300B.

Little Italy (mains 120-200B) Meals from recipes from the owner's Sicilian grandma are served in the woods about 50m inland from Wat Pah Ko Chang on Ao Yai.

Getting There & Away

From Ranong take a sörng-taa-ou (15B) from Th Ruangrat Market to Saphan Plaa. Alternatively most Ranong guesthouses will shuttle you to the pier for 50B.

Two boats to Ao Yai (per person 150B, 9am and 2pm) leave daily from late October to April – if there's not enough demand only the 2pm boat will run. During the highest season (December to March) there's also a regular daily noon departure. Boats return to Ranong at 8am the next day. During the monsoon months there's a once weekly boat, weather permitting, that stops at the east coast pier – it's a two-hour walk from here to Ao Yai. Chartering a long-tail boat to or from Ko Phayam is 1200B.

Getting Around

There are no cars on the island and only a couple of scooters, so if you're inspired to move, it's on foot or nothing. Some places, such as Hornbill, have boats too and will provide transfers.

LAEM SON NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติแหลมสน
The **Laem Son National Park** (☎ 0 7782 4224; www.dnp.go.th; adult/child 200/100B) covers 315 sq km of the

Kapoe district of Ranong and Khuraburi district in Phang-Nga. This area includes about 100km of Andaman Sea coastline – the longest protected shore in the country – as well as over 20 islands. Much of the coast here is covered with mangrove swamps, home to various species of birds, fish, deer and monkeys (including crab-eating macaques) often seen while driving along the road to the park headquarters. Sea turtles lay eggs on Hat Praphat.

The most accessible beach is **Hat Bang Ben**, where the park headquarters are. This long, sandy beach, backed by shady casuarinas, is said to be safe for swimming year-round. From Hat Bang Ben you can see several islands, including the nearby Ko Kam Yai, Ko Kam Noi, Mu Ko Yipun, Ko Khang Khao and, to the north, Ko Phayam. The park staff can arrange boat trips out to any of these islands for 800B per boat per day. During low tide you can walk to an island just a couple of hundred metres from Hat Bang Ben.

Ko Phayam has plenty of places to stay and is a friendly, demure little island. It has only a few hundred inhabitants, mostly Thais and Burmese, with a smattering of expats and a few dozen *chow lair* (sea gypsies) thrown into the mix. Tourists congregate on the island's pretty beaches, but locals support themselves prawn fishing, cashew-nut farming or working on the rubber plantations. Interesting fauna in the area includes wild pigs, hornbills, monkeys and snakes. There's one 'village' on the island, where you will find the main pier, a couple of simple eateries, some small grocery stalls and a bar. From the pier area, motorcycle taxis scoot you to the bungalow operations around the island, almost all of which are located on one of the island's two picturesque bays and are pretty basic. The motorcycle 'highway', running down the middle of Ko Phayam, augments smaller concrete roadways and dirt driveways.

Ko Khang Khao is known for a beach on its northern end, which is covered with colourful pebbles. Although underwater visibility isn't great around the island, it's a little better than on Ko Chang as it's further from the mouth of the Mae Nam Chan. The beach on **Ko Kam Noi** has relatively clear water for swimming and snorkelling (April is the best month), plus the added bonus of fresh water year-round and plenty of grassy areas for camping. **Ko Kam Yai** is 14km southwest of Hat Bang Ben. It's a large island with some accommodation (camping

and bungalows), a pretty beach and great snorkelling. One island on the other side of Ko Kam Yai is **Ko Kam Tok** (also called Ko Ao Khao Khwai). It's only about 200m from Ko Kam Yai, and, like Ko Kam Noi, has a good beach, coral, fresh water and a camping ground.

About 3km north of Hat Bang Ben, across the canal, is another beach, **Hat Laem Son**, which is almost always deserted. The only way to get here is to hike from Hat Bang Ben. In the opposite direction, about 50km south of Hat Bang Ben, is **Hat Praphat**, very similar to Bang Ben with casuarinas and a long beach. There is a second park office here, which can be reached by road via Hwy 4 (Petchkasem Hwy).

In the canals you ford coming into the park, you may notice the large wooden racks that are used for raising oysters.

Sleeping & Eating

HAT BANG BEN

Small bungalow outfits tend to come and go, especially following the tsunami. Have a good scout around before settling on digs, or head for the better established outfits on Ko Phayam. Camping is allowed anywhere among the casuarinas for 80B per person (pay at the park office just inside the park entrance) or you can rent a tent from 300B per night. Many of these small family operations have basic on-site eateries.

National Park Bungalows (☎ 0 2562 0760; reserve@dnp.go.th; bungalows 100-1000B) The national park has the usual, slightly dowdy array of basic bungalows and bigger, concrete villas. Standards are basic, but fine if you are here to spend your time out in the great outdoors. Similar park accommodation is available on Ko Kam Yai and can also be arranged in advance by contacting the listed number.

KO PHAYAM

Fan-cooled, rustic bungalows are the staple on Ko Phayam and electricity is usually only available from sunset to 10pm or 11pm. Most of the bungalow operations stay open throughout the year – although the shutters will come down if business becomes too slow – and many have attached eateries serving standard backpacker fare.

The following places are either on Ao Yai, a pleasant 3km-long sweep of sandy beach, or Ao Khao Kwai further north. Ao Yai has rolling surf and a low-key party backpacker

vibe, while Ao Khao Kwai has a calm bay and is popular with couples and families. At low tide Ao Khao Kwai turns to mud and is no longer swimmable, and snorkelling isn't great on either beach.

Tang Tong Bungalows (☎ 0 8483 96836; Ao Khao Kwai; bungalows 200B) Basic but large and clean solar-powered bamboo huts are on a gorgeous stretch of beach in a hippy-style setting with an adjacent bar.

our pick Vijit (☎ 0 7783 4082; www.kohpayam-vijit.com; Ao Khao Kwai; bungalows 200-500B; 📍) You can choose from dozens of styles of basic bungalows around a sandy lot planted with shady trees. All are immaculate, huge, have indoor/outdoor bathrooms and little artistic touches. The restaurant here also comes highly recommended and the staff offer fishing and snorkelling trips. Contact in advance for transport from Ranong.

Contact Bungalows (☎ 0 8578 12006; bungalows 250B) Perched on a cliff with access to Ao Khao Kwai at low tide, these well-kept, albeit rustic, bamboo bungalows with tiled bathrooms have excellent, hammock-strewn terraces with sea breezes and luscious views.

Mountain Resort (☎ 0 7782 0098; Ao Khao Kwai; bungalows from 350B) Tucked into a shady palm grove at the far northern end of the bay, this is one of the most picturesque and serene spots on the island. White concrete bungalows sit on a grassy lawn while hornbills swoop overhead.

Mr Gao (☎ 0 7787 0222; www.mr-gao-phayam.com; Ao Khao Kwai; bungalows from 350B) The painted and varnished wood bungalows here are a step up in style and comfort from the classic bamboo crash pad and are very popular with couples. Management would be improved by a smile or two.

Bamboo Bungalows (☎ 0 7782 0012; Ao Yai; bungalows 350-500B) It does exactly what it says in the name, plus you can also opt for more expensive concrete and tile bungalows. It is run by an Israeli-Thai couple, offers oodles of atmosphere and attracts plenty of backpackers; however, the bungalows are quite small. There's a solid eatery, a leafy garden and you can hire bodyboards if you fancy a boogie in the surf.

Coconuts (☎ 0 7782 0011; Ao Yai; bungalows 350-500B) A skip and a jump from Bamboo, this is a decent overflow place, with a range of bungalows – you pay for space here.

Buffalo Bay Vacation Club (☎ 0 7787 0208; www.buffalobayclub.com; Ao Khao Kwai; bungalows 2500-3500B;

📍) Catering primarily to Russian package tourists, this spiffy new place has large concrete bungalows with hot water and more comforts than the rest of Phayam's bungalows combined. Don't miss the very reasonably priced restaurant, which serves ice cream, wine by the glass (only 50B) and other oddities such as tacos and jacket potatoes – along with seafood and Thai specialities.

Drinking

You'll find driftwood-constructed Reggae-style beach bars along both main beaches.

Oscar's (☎ 0 7782 4236; 🕒 10am-11pm) Located in the main village on Ko Phayam, this modern bar looks a little incongruous in its backwater setting. If you're after late (for a remote island) night shenanigans, however, it is *the* place to go to hobnob with the locals.

Getting There & Away

The turn-off for Laem Son National Park is about 58km from Ranong down Hwy 4 (Petchkasem Hwy), between the 657km and 658km markers. Buses heading south from Ranong can drop you off here (ask for Hat Bang Ben). Once you're off the highway, however, you'll have to flag down a pick-up truck going towards the park. If you can't get a ride all the way, it's a 10km walk from Hwy 4 to the park entrance. At the police box at the junction you may be able to hire a motorcycle taxi for 40B; the road is paved, so if you're driving it's a breeze.

From Ranong, take a sǒrng-tǎa-ou from Th Ruangrat Market (15B) or one of the many shuttles that service most guesthouses (50B) to Saphan Plaa.

There are daily boats from Saphan Plaa to Ko Phayam's pier (150B, 1½ to two hours) at 9am and 2pm. A motorcycle taxi from the pier to the main beaches costs 70B per person each way. From Ko Phayam back to Ranong the boats run at 8am and 1pm. During the high season there may be three runs daily. Long-tail boat charters to Ko Chang are 1200B.

Boats out to the other various islands can be chartered from the park's visitors centre; the general cost is 1500B per day.

Getting Around

Transport around Ko Phayam is provided by motorcycle taxis; there are no cars or trucks, and roads are pleasantly motorcycle-sized. A ride to your bungalow will cost 70B. Walking

is possible but distances are long – it's about 45 minutes from the pier to Ao Khao Kwai, the nearest bay.

The shady low-lying island is perfect for biking and walking. Motorcycle rentals are available at **Oscar's** (☎ 0 7782 4236; per day approx 250B), the only bar in Ko Phayam's village, or you can rent **bicycles** (per day 70B) from Koy Shop behind Coconuts (opposite). Some of the bigger guesthouses might be able to arrange rentals, too.

KHURABURI

คุรุบุรี/ตะกั่วป่า

This dusty, Wild West–feeling town is a one-road affair that is the jumping-off point for the Surin Islands (p274) and the home of some excellent community-based tourism opportunities through Andaman Discoveries (see the boxed text, p278) – ask at Cucina Andaburi (right) for directions. Along with Khao Lak (p276), this area was one of the places hardest hit by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, but up here, where tourism is a less important industry, recovery has been much slower.

For internet access and excellent coffee (from 25B), stop into **Friends de Sea Internet** (per hr 40B; 🕒 8am-8.30pm) just north of the southbound bus stop. For tourist information try Cucina Andaburi, or **Tom & Am Tour** (☎ 08 6272 0588) next to the bus stop on the northbound traffic side of the road.

Sleeping & Eating

Tararain River Hut Resort (☎ 0 7649 1789; bungalows 300-500B; 📍) Tumbledown but charming, this resort has tin fan rooms and ever-so-slightly-less-tiny air-con rooms. The best are the fan rooms on the riverside.

Boon Piya Resort (☎ 08 1752 5457; bungalows 650B; 📍) Across the street from Tom & Am Tour, modern concrete bungalows here are spick-and-span and have hot showers.

Kuraburi Greenview Resort (☎ 0 7640 1400; www.kuraburigreenview.co.th; bungalows 1900-2400B; 📍) The rooms here have luxurious (for Khuraburi) amenities and breakfast is on the house, but it's actually about 12km south of Khuraburi, right off Hwy 4. The same company runs the main speedboat to the Surin Islands (see p275), so this is a convenient choice for diving (from 4500B per person) and nondiving (from 2700B per person) trips to the park.

Cucina Andaburi (☎ 0 7649 1590; 🕒 6.30am-midnight; mains 30-100B) Just in front of Tararain River Hut Resort, this is a breezy and charming spot that serves Western breakfasts and excellent Thai food. It's a great stop for tourist info as well.

Getting There & Away

Any Ranong- or Phuket-bound bus will stop in Khuraburi. Take a Phuket-bound bus to Takua Pa, about 50km south of Khuraburi, to

LOCAL VOICE: PUCHONG TIRAWANTA

As a Thai lawyer working from Phuket Town, Puchong Tirawanta has been working with private organisations and NGOs providing tsunami aid since shortly after the wave hit in 2004. His primary job has been to ensure that funds and donations are distributed properly.

What are aid organisations doing now, three years after the tsunami? Tourists won't see much of the recovery that's going on now, since most of it is within the Moken (sea gypsy) communities that were most affected. These people are still actively recovering. Aid is going towards social programs, such as skilled labour programs to help out those who have lost their trade.

As a whole do you think aid programs have been successful? There is a lot of corruption and everyone wants control of the money. The Moken are not Thai citizens so they can't own land. In one case, for example, a temple offered to buy the land for them – but then the temple leaders decided they would have the power to kick the Moken off the land if they didn't abide by their religious rules. Also there have been problems where home- or boat-building supplies have been dropped off in the villages; when we've gone back to check on the progress, the supplies have, on occasion, been sold and the money has gone towards alcohol. If the heads of Moken communities are given the money to distribute, they sometimes end up taking a cut for themselves. It's all very complicated, but there have been so many donations and so much good will that the results overall have been very good.

To find out how you can help, see the boxed text, p278.

As told to Celeste Brash

transfer to destinations such as Surat Thani (ordinary/air-con 75/100B, three hours), Krabi (ordinary 75B, four hours) and Khao Sok National Park (ordinary 30B, one hour, nine daily).

The pier for the Surin Islands is about 9km north of town – the only public transport is motorcycle taxi for around 60B, but if you've booked your boat to the islands with a tour company (see opposite) you'll be picked up for free.

SURIN ISLANDS MARINE NATIONAL PARK (MU KO SURIN NATIONAL PARK)

อุทยานแห่งชาติหมู่เกาะสุรินทร์

The five gorgeous islands that make up the **Surin Islands Marine National Park** (www.dnp.go.th; admission 400B; ☎ mid-Nov–mid-May) sit 60km offshore, just 5km from the Thai–Myanmar marine border. Healthy rainforest, pockets of white-sand beach in sheltered bays and rocky headlands that jut into the ocean characterise these granite-outcrop islands. The clearest of water makes for great marine life, with underwater visibility often up to 20m. The islands' sheltered waters also attract *chow lair*, who live in a village onshore during the May to November monsoon season. This group is known as Moken, from the local word *ór gaang* meaning 'salt water'.

Ko Surin Neua (north) and Ko Surin Tai (south) are the two largest islands. Park headquarters and all visitor facilities are at Ao Chong Khad on Ko Surin Neua, near the jetty. The setting of flaxen sand and spar-

ling blue-green bays is jaw-droppingly spectacular.

Khuraburi is the jumping-off point for the park. The pier is about 9km north of town, as is the mainland **national park office** (☎ 07649 1378; ☎ 8am–5pm), with good information, maps and helpful staff.

Sights & Activities

DIVING & SNORKELLING

Dive sites in the park include **Ko Surin Tai** and **HQ Channel** between the two main islands. In the vicinity is **Richelieu Rock** (a seamount 14km southeast), where whale sharks are sometimes spotted during March and April. Sixty kilometres northwest of the Surins – but often combined with dive trips to the park – are the famed **Burma Banks**, a system of submerged seamounts. The three major banks, **Silvertip**, **Roe** and **Rainbow**, provide five-star diving experiences, with coral gardens laid over flat plateaus, and large oceanic and smaller reef marine species. There's presently no dive facility in the park itself, so dive trips (four-day live-aboards around 20,000B) must be booked from the mainland; see Getting There & Away, opposite, and the Khao Lak section, p277, for more information.

Snorkelling is excellent due to relatively shallow reef depths of 5m to 6m, and most coral survived the tsunamis intact. Two-hour snorkelling trips (per person 80B, gear per day 150B) leave park headquarters at 9am and 2pm daily. If you are staying at headquarters expect to be in the company of mostly Thais who swim fully clothed – so you'll need some swimmable cover-ups (a big T-shirt is ideal) on these trips.

WILDLIFE & HIKING

Around park headquarters you can explore the forest fringes, looking out for crab-eating macaques and some of the 57 resident bird species, which include the fabulous Nicobar pigeon, endemic to the islands of the Andaman Sea. Along the coast you're likely to see the chestnut Brahminy kite soaring, and reef herons on the rocks. Twelve species of bat live here, most noticeably the tree-dwelling fruit bats, also known as flying foxes.

A rough-and-ready **walking trail** – not for the unsteady – winds 2km along the coast and through forest to the beach at **Ao Mai Ngam**, where there's good snorkelling. At

low tide it's easy to walk between the bays near headquarters.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

On Ko Surin Tai, the **Moken village** at Ao Bon welcomes visitors; take a long-tail boat from headquarters (100B). Post-tsunami, Moken have settled in this one sheltered bay where a major ancestral worship ceremony (Loi Reua) takes place in April. If you do visit the village, cover up and bring cash to buy handicrafts to help support their economy. There's also a clothing donation box at park headquarters for the Moken, so this is a good, responsible place to lighten your load.

Sleeping & Eating

Park accommodation is simple and fine, but because of the island's short, narrow beaches it's very close together and can feel seriously crowded when full (around 300 people). Book online at www.dnp.go.th or with the mainland **national park office** (☎ 07649 1378) in Khuraburi. The clientele is mostly Thai, giving the place a lively Asian holiday camp feel.

Bungalows (incl fan, bathroom & balcony 2000B) and good, new **tents** (1/2-person 300/450B, bedding per person 60B) are available or you can pitch your own **tent** (per night 80B). There's generator power until about 10pm.

A park **restaurant** (dishes from 80B) serves authentic, delicious Thai food.

Getting There & Away

A 'big boat', which was docked for repairs when we passed through, theoretically leaves the Khuraburi pier at 9am daily when the park is open, returning at 1pm (return 1200B, 2½ hours one way). Tour operators use speedboats (return 1700B, one hour one way) that leave around 8am or 9am and will transfer independent travellers on their daily runs.

Several tour operators, all located near the pier, run day/overnight tours (around 2800/3700B including food and park lodging) to the park; the best in safety and service is **Greenview Tour** (☎ 0 7640 1400; www.kuraburigrreenview.co.th), which is run by Kuraburi Greenview Resort (p273). Agencies in Khao Lak (p277) and Phuket (p288) are the most convenient booking options for boat travel and dive trips if you don't want to spend the night in Khuraburi – transfers from the place of purchase are always included in prices.

KO PHRA THONG

เกาะพระทอง

Legend has it that many centuries ago, pirates docked here and buried a golden Buddha beneath the sands. Translated as 'Golden Buddha Island', it is now unlikely that Ko Phra Thong will give up its secret, but tourists can still make good use of its pleasant sandy beaches.

The island is as quiet as a church mouse, and fishing (squid, shrimp and jellyfish) remains the island's key industry. The local delicacy is pungent *gà-bi* (fermented shrimp paste) – it stinks, but what a flavour.

our pick **Golden Buddha Beach Resort** (☎ 0 1892 2208; www.goldenbuddharesort.com; bungalows 3200–6500B) is the island's number one resort, attracting a stream of yoga aficionados keen for a spiritual getaway. Accommodation is in naturalistic-wooden houses. All have open-air bathrooms with views of the sea and also the surrounding forest – the setting really fulfils dreams of a private beach getaway.

There are no regular boats to Ko Phra Thong, but if you're set on going to the island independently you can hop on a Surin-bound diving boat at the Khuraburi pier (see p273) and ask the boat driver to drop you off. It's better to contact Golden Buddha Beach Resort in advance to arrange transport. In any case, you'll have to negotiate a price with the boat driver, since there's no set price and it's only 15 to 20 minutes from the Khuraburi Pier.

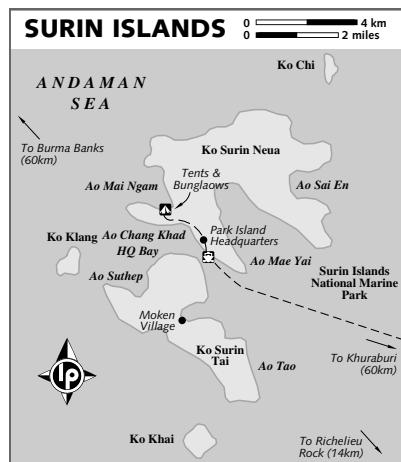
On the north end of the island is **Mr Choi** (☎ 08 4855 9886; bungalows 500B) who has a few small bamboo huts and a bar that pumps out loud reggae music – the place has developed a bit of a traveller cult following. Call ahead for transport.

Locals of Tung Dap village on the southern tip of the island have requested that tourists not visit their area, so please be respectful and avoid this corner.

HAT BANG SAK

หาดบางสัก

A long, sleepy stretch of sand, the beach at Bang Sak had been attracting an ever-growing number of tourists striking north from the more heavily developed resorts of Phuket and nearby Khao Lak. Low-lying and flat, however, the area was badly hit by the 2004 tsunami and scores of businesses and hotels were washed away in an instant. While most



areas had recovered from the tsunami by the end of 2007, Bang Sak was still looking rather sparse. The disheartening reason for this is that most of the local owners on this beach were killed in the tsunami and surviving locals are afraid to move back. The exceptions are the big resorts that are owned by multinationals or Bangkok big wigs – this is the main type of rebuilding that has happened along the waterfront and, thus, it's become a decidedly midrange to upscale area.

Sleeping & Eating

There are just a few hotels along this pretty stretch of beach, making it an ideal romantic hideaway.

Similana Resort (☎ 0 7648 7166; www.similanaresort.com; r 2900-6500B; 📶) Each bungalow here is a small work of art, with handcrafted furnishings, dark-wood floors, quilted bedcovers, bay windows and private decks with panoramic views. Try traveller-recommended tree houses nestled in the forest, which descends down to the sand. Similana is a romantic place that is rather secluded. The beach here is lovely, however, and there's a good on-site restaurant so there's little reason to leave.

Sarojin (☎ 0 7642 7900-4; www.sarojin.com; r 12,500-23,250B; 📶 📺 📶) A quiet retreat with a Japanese-meets-modern-Thai style, service here is stellar and the whole setting (there are only 56 rooms) is elegant and intimate. The very private spa, which takes in views of coconut groves and mangroves, has a very good reputation. We especially love the pool with its stylish lounging huts that hover above the crystal blue water like little islands. The hotel is also a contributor to community tsunami recovery projects. The hotel has two ambient restaurants and a bar as well as the option to take your meal to your room or enjoy it as a picnic on the beach.

Getting There & Away

Buses running between Takua Pa and Phuket will get you here; just ask to be let off at Hat Bang Sak. From Khao Lak catch a frequent sǒrng-tāa-ou (15B) between 8.30am and 5pm.

HAT KHAO LAK

หาดเขาหลัก

As the most practical base for exploring the Similan and Surin islands as well as the main-

land wonders of Khao Sok and Khao Lak/Lam Ru National Parks, it's no wonder that the beautiful, bronze beach of Khao Lak has been experiencing a tourist gold rush in recent years. After the area's near total devastation from the Boxing Day tsunami and subsequent rebuilding, resorts have been flinging open their doors, tourists (especially divers) have been flooding in and new infrastructure has been laid down at a terrific rate.

Nowadays Khao Lak has a bit of a package tour vibe, and there are shops, restaurants, bars and tour offices covering every square inch of space along the highway. Towards the beach it gets much quieter and you can almost forget that you're sharing the town with hundreds of others as you watch the lazy sun disappear into an orange hue on the horizon.

Internet is available at any of a slew of tour agents in the town centre, and banks and ATMs are seemingly everywhere to entice you to buy, buy, buy.

Sights & Activities

TREKKING & BOAT TRIPS

The area immediately south of Hat Khao Lak has been incorporated into the vast 125-sq-km **Khao Lak/Lam Ru National Park** (☎ 0 7642 0243; www.dnp.go.th; adult/child 200/100B; 🕒 8am-4.30pm), a beautiful collection of sea cliffs, 1000m hills, beaches, estuaries, forested valleys and mangroves. Wildlife seen in the park includes hornbills, drongos, tapirs, gibbons, monkeys and Asiatic black bears. The visitors centre, just off Hwy 4 between the 56km and 57km markers, has little in the way of maps or printed information, but there's a very nice open-air restaurant perched on a shady slope overlooking the sea. From the restaurant you can take a fairly easy 3km round-trip nature trail that heads along the cape and ends at an often deserted sandy Hat Lek beach.

Guided treks along the coast or inland can be arranged through many tour agencies in town, as can long-tail boat trips up the scenic **Khlong Thap Liang** estuary. The latter affords opportunities to view mangrove communities of crab-eating macaques. Between Khao Lak and Bang Sak is a network of sandy **beach trails** – some of which lead to deserted beaches – which are fun to explore on foot or by rented motorcycle. Most of the hotels in town rent out motorbikes for 250B per day.

About 2.5km north of Hat Khao Lak, **Hat Bang Niang** was also flattened by the tsunami,

but is well worth a trip if you are looking for a little more peace and quiet.

DIVING & SNORKELLING

Diving or snorkelling day-excursions to the Similan and Surin islands are immensely popular, but if you can, opt for a live-aboard. Since the islands are around 60km away from the mainland (about three hours by boat), you'll have a more relaxing trip as well as be able to experience the islands without day-tripper crowds if you stay the night or longer. All dive shops offer live-aboard trips for around 6500/10,000/13,500B for one-/two-/three-day packages and day trips for 4900B to 5900B.

Although geared towards divers, all dive shops cater to snorkellers who can hop on selected dive excursions or live-aboards for a discount of around 40%; otherwise, tour agencies all around town offer even cheaper snorkelling trips for around 2700B. PADI Open Water certification courses cost around 16,000B or you can do a first test dive in the Similans on a 'discover scuba' day trip for around 7400B.

Recommended dive shops (all along Th Petchkasem) include the following:

Sea Dragon Dive Center (☎ 0 7642 0420; www.seadragondivercenter.com) Specialises in live-aboards and is one of the few centres to reliably offer trips year-round. It has an impeccable reputation.

Sub Aqua (☎ 0 7648 5165; www.subaqua-divecenter.com) Owns great big boats that herd divers and snorkellers out to the islands on day trips.

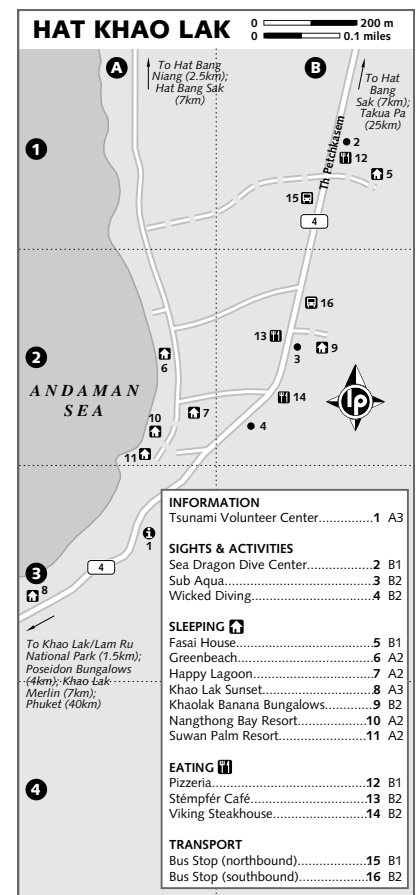
Wicked Diving (☎ 0 7648 5868; www.wickeddiving.com) A new, exceptionally well-run and environmentally conscious outfit that runs diving and snorkelling overnight trips, where you can sleep in national-park bungalows, as well as a range of live-aboards and open water certification options.

Sleeping

Backpacker accommodation predominates in the busy and congested centre of town, while grand resorts dominate the outskirts of town along the coast and now offer some of the swankiest beds this side of Phuket.

BUDGET

Fasai House (☎ 0 7648 5867; www.fasaihouse.com; r 500-700B; 📶 📺) Apartment block-style rooms are plain, but big, modern and super comfy for the price. The staff get our highest marks for service.



our pick **Khao Lak Banana Bungalows** (☎ 0 7648 5889; www.khaolakbanana.com; 4/147 Moo 7 Kukkak; bungalows 500-1200B; 📶 📺) The adorable little bungalows here have swirly painted cement floors, bright yellow exteriors and indoor/outdoor bathrooms with giant ceramic Thai-style pots to take a splash shower – as well as Western showerheads. All rooms have safety boxes and there's a cute pool surrounded by deck chairs.

Happy Lagoon (☎ 0 7642 3408; r 600-1200B; 📶) A short hop from the beach, this somewhat cheesy spot, complete with fake concrete karsts, has a popular open-air restaurant-bar that lends the whole place a lively air. Bungalows that extend back into a garden maze are clean, have hot water and are

COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM IN PHANG-NGA PROVINCE

Post tsunami, Phang-Nga looks pretty much back to normal if you stay in tourist areas. What the majority of visitors don't know is that many fishing communities have had their way of life changed forever, either by the loss of life of key family members, destruction of fishing equipment or relocation inland because of necessity or fear. Recovery nowadays is taking the form of community development and visitors can help out by taking part in one of the region's fabulous community based tourism projects.

The most well-known organisation on this coast is the excellent, Thai-run **Tsunami Volunteer Center** (☎ 07648 5541; www.tsunamivolunteer.net) in Khao Lak. Volunteers are needed to teach English or work on village projects, and you can simultaneously take Thai language and cooking courses. For a shorter experience, two-day, one-night homestay tours are available from 3000B. If you can't stay the night, at least take its very worthwhile '**Post Tsunami Experience' tour** (tour 100B; ☎ 9am Tue), which leaves from Nang Tong Supermarket in central Khao Lak and includes an authentic Thai lunch. Proceeds and anything you buy along the way help support local economies. Also stop by the centre for drop-in Thai cooking (200B) or language (100B) classes at 3pm every Wednesday, and check the schedule for occasional craft and dancing classes.

Northern Andaman Tsunami Relief (NATR; www.northandamantsunami-relief.com) began as a volunteer-run tsunami relief organisation, but as needs changed it began to help communities create their own development projects; today the communities are self-sufficiently running their programs with little assistance from NATR. The NATR success story of most interest to visitors is **Andaman Discoveries** (☎ 08 7917 7165; www.andamandiscoveries.com; Khuraburi), which runs highly recommended community-based tours including homestays, community-service projects and volunteer placement – whatever you decide to do, it will be an unforgettable experience.

Established years before the tsunami even hit the Andaman Coast, the **Koh Yao Noi Eco-Tourism Club** (☎ 07659 7409; www.koh-yao-noi-eco-tourism-club.com) is the happy and successful fruit of island visionaries who were concerned about the effects of tourism on their tiny Muslim fishing isle of Koh Yao Noi. You can choose to take a simple homestay (150B per person per night plus a 100B fee to the Koh Yao Noi Environment Fund) plus three meals (150B per person per day), or add locally run tours around the island and beyond from 300B per person. A similar experience can be had with **Community Based of Kohyaohomestay** (☎ 07659 7428; www.kohyaohomestay.com; r per person incl meals 650B).

excellent value. The more expensive models have classy touches such as carved Thai wooden furniture.

MIDRANGE

Poseidon Bungalows (☎ 07644 3258; www.similan-tour.com; bungalows 900-1400B) On the other side of the headland from Khao Lak/Lam Ru National Park, about 4km south of Hat Khao Lak, this quiet spot has huts that are discreetly dispersed among huge boulders and coastal forest, affording plenty of privacy. The socially and environmentally conscious proprietors dispense information on the area and organise boat excursions and dive trips to the local reef and to the Similan Islands. The restaurant serves Thai and European food.

Greenbeach (☎ 07648 5845; greenbeach_th@yahoo.com; bungalows 1200-2000B; ☎) On an excellent

stretch of beach and extending back into a packed-mud garden, the nicest bungalows here are actually the fan-cooled ones, which are large and have louvred wooden doors. All bungalows have woven bamboo walls and tiny terraces.

Khao Lak/Lam Ru National Park Bungalows (☎ 02562 0760; reserve@dnp.go.th; bungalows 1200-2500B) There is a handful of four- and six-bed bungalows in the national park. Standards are basic, but the setting will suit those after an eco-experience. Perfect for ramblers.

our pick Nangthong Bay Resort (☎ 07648 5088; www.nangthongbayresort.de; r 1200-3000B; ☎) This is the best midranger on the beach and it's no secret, so it fills up fast. Rooms are designed with a sparse black-and-white chic décor and have bathrooms that open up to the bedrooms. The cheapest rooms are set back from the beach but are fantastic value

with views of the sea. Grounds are lush and service is excellent.

Khao Lak Sunset (☎ 07642 0075; Th Petchkasem; r 2690-3490B; ☎) What this last generation resort lacks in style, it makes up for with a prime beachfront location and good service. Prices are good and if you want a comfy sleep without blowing big bucks, you can't go wrong here. It's at the southern end of town.

TOP END

Suwan Palm Resort (☎ 07648 5830; www.suwan-palm.com; Hat Nang Thong; r 2800-9500B; ☎) Rechristened after the tsunami (it used to be the Khaolak Orchid Resortel), this hotel has rooms with floor-to-ceiling glass doors opening onto a patio overlooking the water. Beautiful! The rooms are tastefully decorated with light teak furniture. Beds are firm and the air-con can be a tad noisy. The on-site restaurant and Irish pub add lively ambience come dark.

Khao Lak Merlin (☎ 07642 8300; www.khaolak-hotels.com/khaolakmerlin; Hwy 4; r 6800-35,000B; ☎) This majestic resort 7km south of town features a maze of swimming pools, colonial meets Zen-style rooms and creature comforts aplenty, all amongst 15 acres of lush gardens. The beach here is as quiet as it is lovely and all the privacy makes this a splurge-worthy romantic getaway.

Eating

All midrange to top-end resorts have their own atmospheric but expensive restaurants, but there are heaps of simple, very good restaurants – mostly specialising in seafood – along the main road.

Stempfér Café (breakfast around 60B, sandwiches 90-120B; ☎ 9am-10pm) An excellent German bakery serving the best coffee in town, as well as healthy and not-so-healthy breakfasts, sandwiches, fresh bread, light Thai meals, ice cream (20B a scoop) and cocktails.

Viking Steakhouse (☎ 07642 0815; Th Petchkasem; mains 140-600B; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Offering a fine line in pizzas, pastas and Nordic meat feasts, this is a longstanding favourite. The cosy, open-fronted interior features all sorts of welcome trimmings.

our pick Pizzeria (☎ 07648 5271; mains 200-380B; ☎ noon-11pm) The footpath setting here on the northern part of the main drag is pretty bleak, but by Georgio! – the authentic and rich Italian dishes are phenomenal. We loved the

gnocchi and lasagne, and just the look of the pizzas brought us back in for another go.

Getting There & Away

Any bus running along Hwy 4 between Takua Pa (50B, 45 minutes) and Phuket (80B, two hours) will stop at Hat Khao Lak if you ask the driver. Buses will also stop near the Merlin resort and the Khao Lak/Lam Ru National Park headquarters. By taxi it's only one hour to Phuket Airport (1500B).

SIMILAN ISLANDS MARINE NATIONAL PARK (MU KO SIMILAN NATIONAL PARK)

อุทยานแห่งชาติหมู่เกาะสิมิลัน Known to divers the world over, beautiful **Similan Islands Marine National Park** (www.dnp.go.th; admission 400B; ☎ Nov-May) is 70km offshore. Its smooth granite islands are as impressive above water as below, topped with rainforest, edged with white-sand beaches and fringed with coral reef.

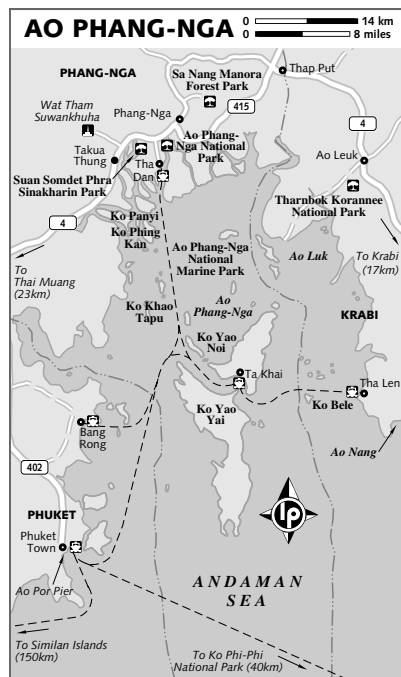
Two of the nine islands here, Island 4 (Ko Miang) and Island 8 (Ko Similan), have ranger stations and accommodation; park headquarters and most visitor activity centres are on Island 4. 'Similan' comes from the Malay word *sembilan*, meaning 'nine', and while each island is named, they're more commonly known by their numbers.

Khao Lak is the jumping-off point for the park. The pier is at Thap Lamu, about 10km south of town, where you'll find a cluster of tour operators. The **mainland park office** (☎ 07659 5045; ☎ 8am-4pm) is about 500m before the pier, but there's no information in English available.

Sights & Activities

DIVING & SNORKELLING

The Similans offer exceptional diving for all levels of experience, at depths from 2m to 30m. There are seamounts (at **Fantasy Rocks**), rock reefs (at **Ko Payu**) and dive-throughs (at **Hin Pousar** or 'Elephant-head'), with marine life ranging from tiny plume worms and soft corals to schooling fish and whale sharks. There are dive sites at each of the six islands north of Ko Miang; the southern part of the park (Islands 1, 2 and 3) is off-limits to divers and is a turtle nesting ground. No facilities for divers exist in the national park itself, so you'll need to take a dive tour. Agencies in Khao Lak and Phuket book dive trips (three-



wood staircases, louvred cabinets and peaceful gardens. It's well furnished (comfy beds year-round but hot water in the high season only), there's a little eatery and the staff are gracious. The most expensive room is the massive family suite.

Old Lukmuang Hotel (☎ 0 7641 2125; fax 0 7641 1512; 1/2 Muu 1, Th Petchkasem; r 450B) This place is awfully dingy, but Bond fanatics will be interested to know that it housed some of the crew from *The Man with the Golden Gun* when they based themselves here during filming.

Phang-Nga Bay Resort Hotel (☎ 0 7641 2067; fax 0 7641 2070; Th Petchkasem; r from 2000B; ♿) The views across the bay are great, but this flaky old-timer has certainly seen better days. The rooms still come with plenty of amenities (TV, fridge), but whether they work is something of a lottery. It's 8.5km south of town, in Tha Dan.

Eating

Several food stalls on the main street of Phang-Nga sell delicious *kà-nòm jeen* (thin wheat noodles) with chicken curry, *nám yah* (spicy ground-fish curry) or *nám prik* (spicy sauce). *Roti gaang* (fried flatbread dipped in mild curry sauce, served with jam or fruit fillings) is available from the morning market, which is open from 5am to 10am daily. There's also a small night market on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, located just south of Soi Lohakit.

If you're coming in from Phuket, keep an eye out for Food Safety St – 1km past the New Lukmuang Hotel, next to the Caltex petrol station. At night, it's filled with excellent – and presumably hygiene-conscious – food stalls.

Cha-Leang (☎ 0 7641 3831; Th Petchkasem; dishes 40-90B; ☺ lunch & dinner) The best – and often busiest – eatery in town cooks up a smorgasbord of well-priced seafood dishes. Try the 'clams with basil leaf and chilli' or 'edible inflorescence of banana plant salad'. There's a pleasant veranda out the back.

Bismilla (☎ 0 1125 6440; Th Petchkasem; mains 60-120B; ☺ lunch & dinner) With dishes such as 'yumm fish's spawn' on the menu, how can you resist an evening at this basic Thai-Muslim outfit? The food is good and the prices are excellent.

Getting There & Away

If you're arriving in the Ao Phang-Nga area from Krabi on Hwy 4, you can go two ways. After Thap Put, you can either continue

straight on Hwy 4 or go left onto Hwy 415. Turning onto 415 will keep you on the shorter, straighter path, while staying on Hwy 4 will take you onto a narrow, very curvy and pretty stretch of highway, which is 5km longer than the direct route. It's your choice.

Phang-Nga's bus terminal is located just off the main street on Soi Bamrung Rat. Bangkok buses to/from Phang-Nga include VIP (685B, 12 hours, one daily), 1st class (441B to 459B, 12 to 13 hours, two daily) and 2nd class (357B, 12 hours, three to four daily). There are several other services available:

Destination	Price	Frequency	Duration
Hat Yai	250B	2 daily	6hr
Ko Pha-Ngan	580B	2 daily	6hr
Ko Samui	480B	2 daily	5hr
Krabi	100B	frequent	1½hr
Phuket	80B	frequent	1½hr
Ranong	160B	4 daily	5hr
Satun	292B	2 daily	6hr
Surat Thani	160B	9 daily	3hr
Trang	150B	frequent	3½hr

Getting Around

Most places in town are accessible on foot. Motorcycle taxis around town cost 20B.

Sayan Tours (p281), located at the bus terminal, can assist with motorcycle rental (200B per day). Sǒrng-tǎa-ou/motorcycle taxis to Tha Dan cost 20/40B.

AROUND PHANG-NGA

Ao Phang-Nga National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติอ่าวพังงา

Established in 1981 and covering an area of 400 sq km, **Ao Phang-Nga National Park** (☎ 0 7641 1136; www.dnp.go.th; admission 200B; ☺ 8am-4pm) is noted for its classic karst scenery created by fault movements on the mainland that pushed massive limestone blocks into geometric patterns. As these blocks extend southwards into Ao Phang-Nga, they form over 40 islands with huge vertical cliffs. The bay itself is composed of large and small tidal channels that originally connected with the mainland fluvial system. The main tidal channels – Khlong Ko Phanyi, Khlong Phang-Nga, Khlong Bang Toi and Khlong Bo Saen – run through vast mangroves in a north-south direction and today are used by fisherfolk and island inhabitants as aquatic highways. These mangroves are the largest remaining primary mangrove forests in Thailand. Over 80% of the area

within the park boundaries is covered by the Andaman Sea.

The biggest tourist drawcard in the park is the so-called James Bond Island, known to Thais as **Ko Phing Kan** (literally 'Leaning on Itself Island'). Once used as a location setting for *The Man with the Golden Gun*, the island is now full of vendors hawking coral and shells that should have stayed in the sea, along with butterflies, scorpions and spiders encased in plastic.

There are a couple of **caves** you can walk through and a couple of small sand **beaches**, often littered with rubbish from tourist boats. About the only positive development has been the addition of a concrete pier so that tourist boats don't have to moor directly on the island's beaches, but this still happens when the water level is high and the pier is crowded with other boats.

PLANTS & ANIMALS

Two types of forest predominate in the park: limestone scrub forest and true evergreen forest. The marine limestone environment favours a long list of reptiles, including Bengal monitor lizards, flying lizards, banded sea snakes, dogface water snakes, shore pit vipers and Malayan pit vipers. Keep an eye out for a two-banded (or water) monitor (*Varanus salvator*), which looks like a crocodile when seen swimming in the mangrove swamp and can measure up to 2.2m in length.

Amphibians in the Ao Phang-Nga region include marsh frogs, common bush frogs and crab-eating frogs. Avian residents of note are helmeted hornbills (the largest of Thailand's 12 hornbill species, with a body length of up to 127cm), the edible-nest swiftlets (*Aerodramus fuciphagus*), white-bellied sea eagles, ospreys and Pacific reef egrets.

In the mangrove forests and on some of the larger islands reside over 200 species of mammals, including white-handed gibbons, serows, dusky langurs and crab-eating macaques.

ROCK ART

Many of the limestone islands in Ao Phang-Nga feature prehistoric rock art painted or carved onto the walls and ceilings of caves, rock shelters, cliffs and rock massifs. In particular you can see rock art on Khao Khian, Ko Phanyi, Ko Raya, Tham Nak and Ko Phra At Thao. Khao Khian (Inscription Mountain) is probably the most visited of the sites. The

The overnight trip is a less rushed way to see the area, but Ko Phanyi has seen so many visitors over the years that the warm welcome guests once experienced in homestays has become a rarity – while it was an interesting experience, we felt unwanted in this active fishing village that must relish its privacy after peak tourist hours. Sayan Tours also offers **kayaking trips** and tours to other nearby destinations, including Sa Nang Manora Forest Park and the various caves near town.

MR Kean Tours (☎ 0 7643 0619) is another option, and has offices at the bus terminal in the centre of town. There are also kayaking tours available from Phuket (see p297).

Sleeping

Phang-Nga Guest House (☎ 0 7641 1358; Th Petchkasem; r 250-380B; ♿) On the whole, this is a gloom-free zone that was getting a fresh coat of pastel paint in the rooms when we passed. Staff are helpful and the clean, basic rooms with TVs are a bargain.

our pick **Phang-Nga Inn** (☎ 0 7641 1963; 2/2 Soi Lohakit; r 400-1600B; ♿) This converted residential villa is an absolute gem with its heavy

images contain scenes of human figures, fish, crabs, shrimp, bats, birds and elephants, as well as boats and fishing equipment – it's obvious this was some sort of communal effort tied to the all-important harvesting of sustenance from the sea. Some drawings also contain rows of lines thought to be some sort of cabalistic writing. The rock paintings don't fall on any one plane of reference; they may be placed right-side up, upside-down or sideways. Most of the paintings are monochrome, while some have been traced several times over in orange-yellow, blue, grey and black.

SLEEPING & EATING

National Park Bungalows (☎ 0 2562 0760; reserve@dnpp.go.th; bungalows 700-900B; 🏠) These are on the mainland, near the park headquarters. The cheaper bungalows sleep four and are fan-cooled; the pricier air-con bungalows sleep two. Camping is permitted in certain areas within park boundaries but you should ask permission at the office first.

There's a small, clean restaurant in front of the office with views looking out over the mangroves.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

From the centre of town, drive about 6km south on Hwy 4, then turn left onto Rte 4144 (the road to Tha Dan) and travel 2.6km to the park headquarters. Without your own transport you'll need to take a sǒrng-tǎa-ou to Tha Dan (20B).

From the park office, you can hire a boat (1000B, maximum four passengers) for a 2½-hour tour of the surrounding islands.

Ko Yao

เกาะยาว

The pretty islands of **Ko Yao Yai** (Big Long Island) and **Ko Yao Noi** (Little Long Island) are part of the Ao Phang-Nga National Park (p283) and are about as photogenic as the park gets. Encompassing 137 sq km of knotted forest, pristine beach and unspoilt shoreline, they offer a great vantage point for kicking back and soaking up the bay's beautiful scenery.

Despite being the relative pipsqueak, Ko Yao Noi is the main population centre of the two, with fishing, coconut farming and tourism sustaining its small, year-round population. **Hat Pa Sai** and **Hat Tha Khao** are excellent beaches, but bring along a mountain bike

(pick one up from your resort in Phuket) if you want to explore the island's numerous dirt trails. **Ta Khai**, the largest settlement on Ko Yao Noi, is a subdistrict government seat and the source of minimal supplies. Boat trips to neighbouring islands are possible.

Ko Yao Yai is less developed than Ko Yao Noi. **Hat Lo Paa Raet** and **Hat Tiikut** are the island's best beaches – the former lined with coconut palms, the latter with casuarina trees. **Koh Yao Diving Centre** (☎ 0 9724 5134; www.kohyao-diving.com) on the west coast leads dives around Phang-Nga and beyond.

Ko Bele, a small island east of the twin Ko Yao, features a large tidal lagoon, three white-sand beaches, and easily accessible caves and coral reefs.

There's an ATM in the village on Ko Yao Noi but it tends to break down so make sure you have plenty of cash in-pocket.

Please remember to respect the beliefs of the local Muslim population and wear modest clothing when away from the beaches.

SLEEPING & EATING

Ko Yao Noi

Once known for its budget digs, Ko Yao Noi is seeing a lot of development these days, much of it upscale – there's not much here for midrangers. Another sleeping option is a homestay – see p278 for details.

Sabai Corner Bungalows (☎ 0 1892 7827; www.sabaicornerbungalows.com; bungalows 500-2000B) There's a great social ambience here led by Colin, a long-time British expat and rather special character. Bungalows are sturdy thatch-and-wood with small verandas; the cheapest ones have rudimentary shared bathrooms. The restaurant is quite good and you get the usual fabulous views.

Tha Khao Bungalow (☎ 0 1676 7726; www.kohyao-bungalow.com; bungalows 550-1200B) Thatch-and-wood bungalows are the staple at these Hat Tha Khao digs. It's well set up for tourists, rents out bikes and kayaks, and features a restaurant serving tasty food.

Pasai Bungalows (☎ 0 7659 7064; bungalows 600-700B) Across the street from a little white beach, these tidy, wooden bungalows are great value. Management is super friendly and there's a social café-bar out front.

Island Nature Lodge (☎ 08 9868 8639; www.thailand-birdwatching.com/kohyao_nature_camp.html; bungalows incl breakfast 700-900B) Stay in one of these tidy bamboo-thatched numbers if you're into bird-

ing, mountain biking or just getting a taste of secluded beach and jungle.

our pick Lom Lea (☎ 08 9868 8642; www.lomlae.com; bungalows 2100-5000B) The stylish, naturalist wooden bungalows here are fronted by a stunning and secluded beach with views of Phang-Nga's signature karst islands. There's a dive centre, a good restaurant and plenty of activities on offer. We found the bungalows a bit rustic for the price, but the setting and service do merit extra baht.

Koyao Island Resort (☎ 0 1606 1517; www.koyao.com; villas from 8060-11,200B; 🏠 🚗 🚶) Open-plan, thatched bungalows offer serene views across a palm-shaded garden and infinity pool to a skinny white beach. We love the elegant, near safari-esque feel of the villas here, with their fan-cooled patios and indoor/outdoor bathrooms. There's a busy and posh restaurant-bar and service is stellar.

Six Senses Hideaway (☎ 0 7641 8500; www.sixsenses.com/hideaway-yaanoi; r 32,000-74,250B; 🏠 🚗 🚶) This is an over-the-top luxury resort where all rooms – which are essentially ultra-chic house complexes – have their own pool and butler service. Of course there's the signature Six Senses Spa, which is one of the best in the region. If you can afford to stay here, you may as well take advantage of the resort's helicopter service from Phuket.

Ko Yao Yai

With fewer lodging choices, Ko Yao Yai offers a more remote and wild getaway.

Halavee Resort (☎ 0 7881 1238; halavee_r@yahoo.co.th; bungalows 500-1000B) Inland from the pier on Prunai Rd and perched on a hillside with panoramic views, this popular place doesn't have much charm but is well-run and well-priced.

YaoYai Island Resort (☎ 08 9471 9110; www.yao-yairesort.com; bungalows 1200-2200B; 🏠) Located on the gem of a beach at Loh Pared on the western side of the island and with sunset views, the bungalows here are comfy and there's plenty to do despite the remote setting. There's an on-site restaurant and a great laid-back vibe.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Although both islands fall within the Phang-Nga Province boundaries, the easiest places to find boat transport to Ko Yao Noi and Ko Yao Yai are Phuket (Phuket Province) and Krabi. In Phuket Town, catch a sǒrng-tǎa-ou from the front of the day market to the public

pier at Bang Rong (on Ao Po) for 40B. From here, there are up to six boats daily between 8am and 5pm – the 12.30pm boat is the most reliable from May to November. Alternatively, there are boats at 10am and 4pm from Tha Ao Por near Phuket Town, at 11am and 1pm from Krabi's Tha Len and at 1pm from Tha Dan in Phang-Nga. All boats cost 100B each way and take between one and two hours. Once you arrive on Ko Yao Noi, it's 70B to 100B for transport to the resorts.

To get from Ko Yao Noi to Ko Yao Yai, catch a shuttle boat from Tha Manok (20B, 15 minutes). On the islands, you can travel by tǔk-tǔk (pronounced dǔk dǔk; motorised vehicle) for about 80B per ride.

Suan Somdet Phra Sinakharin Park

สวนสมเด็จพระศรีนครินทร์

This public **park** (admission free; 🌅 dawn-dusk) has two entrances. The most dramatic is through a huge hole in a limestone cliff near the Phang-Nga Bay Resort Hotel (p282), in Tha Dan. The main – less scenic – entrance is at the southern end of Phang-Nga. The park is surrounded by limestone cliffs and bluffs, cut through with caves and tunnels. Wooden walkways link the water-filled caverns so that visitors can admire the ponds and amazing limestone formations. One of the larger caves, **Tham Reusi Sawan**, is marked by a gilded statue of a *reu-sǎe* (Hindu sage) – complete with tiger skins. The other main cavern is known locally as **Tham Luk Seua** (Tiger Cub Cave).

Sa Nang Manora Forest Park

สวนป่าพระนางมนราห์

This beautiful and little-visited **park** (admission free; 🌅 dawn-dusk) features an impressive fairyland setting, with lots of dense rainforest, rattan vines, moss-encrusted roots and rocks and multilevel waterfalls with several pools suitable for swimming. Primitive trails run along (and at times through) the falls, level after level and beyond – you could easily get a full day's hiking in without walking along the same path twice. Bring plenty of drinking water – although the shade and the falls moderate the temperature, the humidity in the park is quite high.

The park's name comes from a local folk belief that the mythical Princess Manora bathes in the pools of the park when no one else is around. Facilities include some picnic tables and a small restaurant.

To get here, head north out of Phang-Nga on Hwy 4. Go 3.2km past the Shell petrol station, then turn left and go down a curvy road for another 4km. Motorcycle taxis from Phang-Nga cost 60B.

Wat Tham Suwankhuha

วัดถ้ำสุวรรณคูหา

A cave wát (temple), **Wat Tham Suwankhuha** (Heaven Grotto Temple; admission 10B; ☞ dawn-dusk) is full of Buddha images. The shrine consists of two main caverns, the larger one containing a 15m reclining Buddha and tiled with *lai-krakham* and *benjarong* (two coloured patterns more common in pottery), and the smaller cavern displaying spirit flags and a *reu-sée* statue. Royal seals of several kings, including Rama V, Rama VII and Rama IX – as well as those of lesser royalty – have been inscribed on one wall of the latter cave. Many monkeys hang around the area, and if you don't lock your car doors they're likely to break in to get at your travel snacks.

The wát is 10km southwest of Phang-Nga. To get here without your own transport, hop on any sǒrng-tǎa-ou running between Phang-Nga and Takua Thung (30B). The wát is down a side road.

PHUKET PROVINCE

Just the name Phuket (poo-*get*) gets folks daydreaming; it's the ultimate tropical resort getaway where the sand is white, the sea is blue and the booze is cheap. And this island really does live up to expectations: the beaches all around the island are simply dazzling and there's one to suit every taste. Bad boy Patong hoovers in throngs of package tourists, partiers and the region's less savoury characters with its water sports à gogo, electric nightlife and girlie bars. A few notches down on the sleazy and cheesy scale, Hat Karon and Hat Kata are twin-resort, busy-body socialites attracting holidaymakers who like to mingle and shop in between tanning sessions. Hat Surin and Ao Bang Thao offer a more refined and exclusive version of paradise, with private beaches and the gated and meticulously mowed Laguna Complex. The rest of the island houses the areas that don't fit the mould: the relatively undeveloped beaches of Nai Hang and Mai Khao, the real-life Thailand of Phuket Town, lush inland vistas and a few remote swathes of

rainforest. Go with the tourist flow or branch off on your own; this island is big enough for everybody. In fact, Phuket is Thailand's largest and most populous island.

The region has been prosperous since the 19th century thanks to tin mining, sea trade and rubber plantations, but today it's tourists who bring in the big bucks. Luxury resorts are becoming more numerous and radically more luxurious – you can now get a room with its own private 9m pool as well as 24-hour butler service – and as higher-end foreigners holiday here or move in, prices on everything from backpacker lodging to transport will continue to soar.

Information

INTERNET RESOURCES

Phuket.com (www.phuket.com) Offers a sophisticated compendium of many kinds of information, including accommodation on the island.

Phuket-Info.com (www.phuket-info.com) You'll find more info on Phuket Province here.

Phuket.Net (www.phuket.net) An internet service that provides forums for tourism and business-oriented exchange, and has limited listings.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Both hospitals listed are equipped with modern facilities, emergency rooms and outpatient-care clinics. For information on dive-related medicine, see p288.

Bangkok Phuket Hospital (Map p287; ☎ 0 7625 4425; Th Yongyok Uthit) Reputedly the favourite with locals.

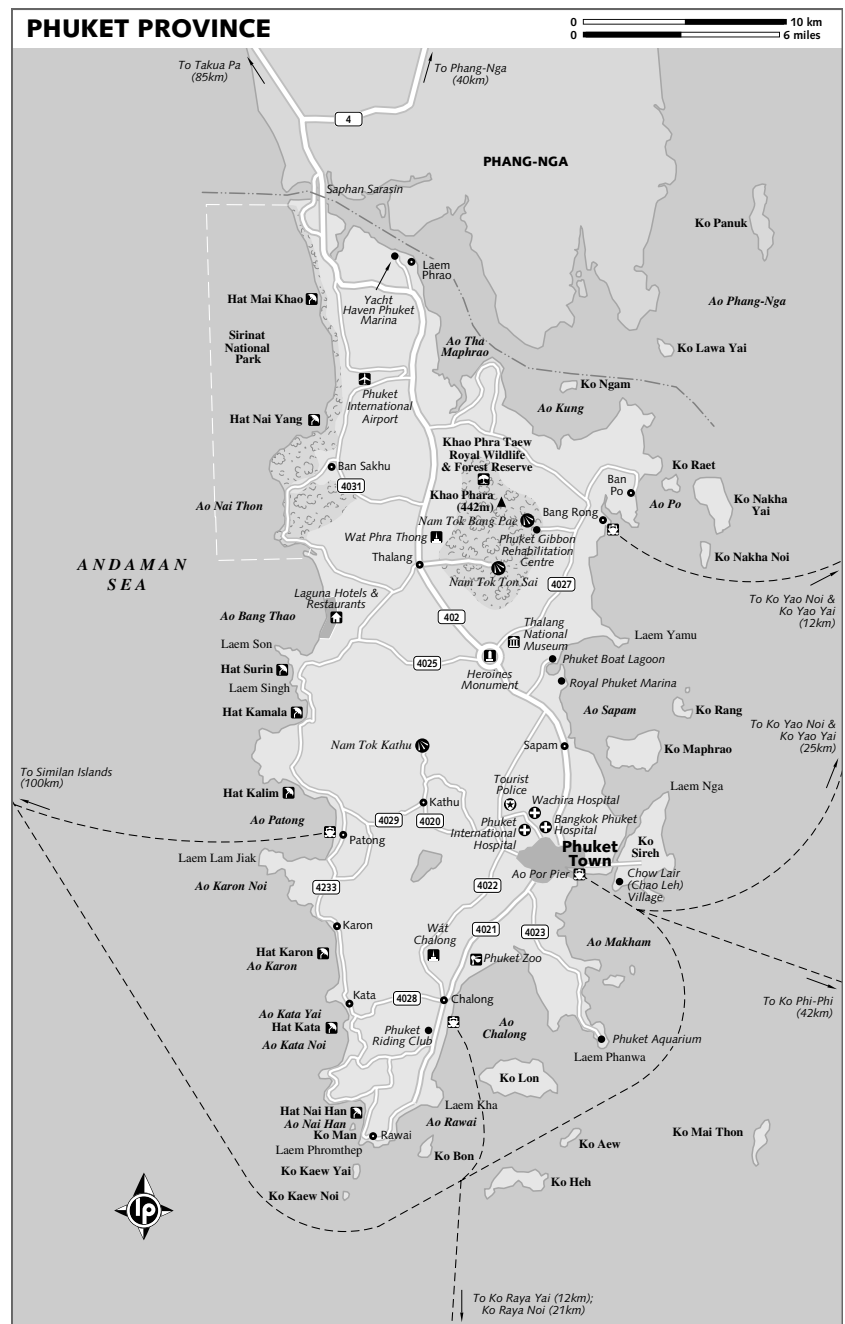
Phuket International Hospital (Map p287; ☎ 0 7624 9400, emergency 0 7621 0935; Airport Bypass Rd) International doctors rate this hospital as the best on the island.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The weekly English-language *Phuket Gazette* (20B) publishes lots of information on activities, events, dining and entertainment in Phuket Town, and around the island. It can be accessed online at www.phuketgazette.net. The same publisher issues *Gazette Guide* (140B), a sizeable tome listing businesses and services on the island.

Dangers & Annoyances

Drownings are quite common on Phuket's beaches, especially on the western coast (Surin, Laem Singh and Kamala). Red flags are posted on beaches to warn bathers of



TOP 10 PHUKET RESORTS

Taking a Splurge

Chedi (p320) Location, location, location.

Indigo Pearl (p323) Hardware meets high-style Tropicana.

Layalina Hotel (p319) Boutique gem on a quiet beach.

Trisara (p323) The ultimate in Asian pampering.

Twin Palms (p320) A classic beauty in *haute couture*.

Without Breaking the Bank

Baipho & Baithong (p315) Serene spa-like design in the heart of the action.

Benyada Lodge (p320) Modern, chic comfort.

Casa Brazil (p312) Latin colours liven up a fun guesthouse.

Sino House (p303) Chinese-style luxury.

Sugar Palm Resort (p309) Young, fun and cosmopolitan.

riptides and other dangerous conditions. If a red flag is flying at a beach, don't go into the water. Especially during the May to October monsoon, the waves on the western coast of Phuket sometimes make it too dangerous to swim. Hat Rawai, on the southern edge of the island, is usually a safe bet at any time of year.

Keep an eye out for jet skis when you're in the water. Although the Phuket governor declared jet skis illegal in 1997, enforcement of the ban is cyclic.

Renting a motorcycle can be a high-risk proposition. Thousands of people are injured or killed every year on Phuket highways. Some have been travellers who weren't familiar with riding motorcycles and navigating the island's roads, highways and traffic patterns. If you must rent a motorcycle, make sure you at least know the basics and wear a helmet.

Recently there have been late-night motorbike muggings on the road leading from Patong to Hat Karon.

Activities

DIVING & SNORKELLING

Although there are scores of dive sites around Thailand, Phuket is at the heart of the Thai scuba diving industry and is one of the world's top 10 dive destinations. The island is ringed by good-to-excellent dive sites, including

several small islands to the south (Ko Hae, Ko Raya Yai, Ko Raya Noi, Hin Daeng and Hin Muang) and to the east (Ko Yao Noi and Ko Yao Yai). Live-aboard excursions to the fantastic Surin and Similan islands, or to the Burma Banks/Mergui Archipelago off the southern coast of Myanmar, are also possible from Phuket.

Phuket has heaps of 'dive' shops – at last count there were over 100, though most of them are the equivalent of a booking agency. The more serious ones often operate their own boat(s) while others send you off with another operator, so ask if you're concerned. And it doesn't hurt if an operator is a five-star PADI dive centre, though this isn't always the best criterion for dive shops. Many of these operations are centred on Hat Patong, though the smaller beach towns certainly have their share. Some of the bigger (but not necessarily better) places have multiple branch offices all over Phuket.

Typical one-day dive trips to nearby sites cost around 3000B, including two dives and equipment. Nondivers (and snorkellers) are permitted to join such dive trips for a significant discount. PADI Open Water certification courses cost around 11,000B for four days of instruction and all equipment. Most places also rent out all the basic equipment.

It's very wise to obtain your own private diving insurance before travelling. PADI or DAN are best – regular insurance doesn't often cover diving accidents or decompression costs, but you could check with your insurance representative. Your dive shop will also have some insurance, but some shops have better insurance than others; ask.

There are three hyperbaric chambers on Phuket. **Wachira Hospital** (Map p287; ☎ 0 7621 1114; Th Taowarat) and **Phuket International Hospital** (Map p287; ☎ 0 7624 9400, emergency 0 7621 0935) are both just outside Phuket Town; a private **hyperbaric chamber** (Map p314; ☎ 0 7634 2518; 231-233 Th Rat Uthit) is in Patong. The chamber at Phuket International Hospital is considered the best of the three. Dive shop affiliation with the private hyperbaric chamber in Patong mostly means that clients who need to use that chamber will be charged US\$200 rather than US\$800 per hour of treatment (five-hour minimum), though if a dive shop has the right kind of insurance it will cover much of this cost. Again, ask for specifics if you're concerned.

(Continued on page 297)

(Continued from page 288)

Snorkelling is best along Phuket's western coast, particularly at the rocky headlands between beaches. Mask, snorkel and fins can be rented for around 250B a day. As with scuba diving, you'll find better snorkelling, with greater visibility and variety of marine life along the shores of small outlying islands such as Ko Raya Yai and Ko Raya Noi.

As elsewhere in the Andaman Sea, the best diving months are December to May, when the weather is good and the sea is at its clearest (and boat trips are much safer).

There are numerous dive shops with supplies, including the following:

All 4 Diving (Map p314; ☎ 0 7634 4611; 5/4 Th Sawatdirak, Hat Patong) Phuket's largest dive store.

Andaman Sea Sport (Map p301; ☎ 0 7621 1752; 69 Th Phuket, Phuket Town) Stocks diving and snorkelling supplies.

Dive Supply (Map p314; ☎ 0 7634 2513; www.dive supply.com; 189 Th Rat Uthit, Hat Patong) Has a great variety of diving equipment, and offers a good service in several languages.

HORSE RIDING

Phuket Riding Club (Map p287; ☎ 0 7628 8213; pemika2006@hotmail.com), near Ao Chalong, offers one-hour (per person 650B) and two-hour (1250B) rides in the jungle and along nearby beaches.

KAYAKING

Several companies based in Phuket offer canoe tours of scenic Ao Phang-Nga. The kayaks

are able to enter semisubmerged caves (which Thai fishermen have called *hōrng* or 'room' for centuries) inaccessible to long-tail boats. A day paddle costs from 3000B per person including meals, equipment and transfer; many outfits also run all-inclusive, three-day (from 13,000B) or six-day (from 42,000B) kayak/camping trips. The following operators are based in Phuket Town:

John Gray's Seacanoë (off Map p301; ☎ 0 7625 4505-7; www.johngray-seacanoë.com; 124 Soi 1, Th Yaowarat) One of the oldest and most reputable companies on the island. Like any good brand in Thailand, his 'Seacanoë' name has been frequently copied. He's north of Phuket Town.

Paddle Asia (☎ 0 7624 0952; www.paddleasia.com; 19/3 Th Rasdanusorn) Caters to beginners and those who don't enjoy being surrounded by noisy tour groups.

Sea Canoe Thailand (Map p301; ☎ 0 7621 2172; www.seacanoë.net; 367/4 Th Yaowarat) Has a great reputation despite the unoriginal name. It's north of Phuket Town.

SURFING

Phuket's west coast beaches get a good pounding during the May to October monsoon. Kata and Nai Han are said to be the best for surfing, especially after a storm has blown through from the southwest. Hat Surin and Ao Bang Thao are also great spots to learn to surf, with the wave season sometimes extending through to October. There are a few surf shops with boards for rent in Kata and Patong, including the following:

Aloha Surf Sports Co (☎ 0 7634 4504; 124/14 Th Thawiwong, Hat Patong) Rents out surfboards and other surfing accessories.

WHICH DIVE SHOP?

Choosing the right dive shop can be an intimidating business. After all, there are so many flashy storefronts advertising the wonders of the diving world – over 100 in Phuket alone. How on earth can you be sure you're making the right choice?

When choosing a dive company on Phuket (or anywhere in Thailand, for that matter) there are a few key questions you should ask. For example, how long has the dive shop existed? How many divers will be on the boat? What is the dive instructor-to-client ratio? What kind of insurance do they have and what does it cover? Is it a licensed Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) operator? If it's a live-aboard trip, is there oxygen on board? Talk to the staff (if they're not out diving): how experienced are they and how much of this experience is local? Do they make you feel comfortable and confident? If you're taking a class, what kind of certification do the instructors have? And do they speak your language well enough that you understand each other? One last thing: look at the equipment – is it in good shape and well-maintained?

Perhaps the best way to choose an excellent dive operation, however, is to get a glowing recommendation from other divers who've already done the underwater deed. Word-of-mouth is often the best indicator of the quality of a company – and in the competitive diving world, a good reputation can really make or break a business.

TOP 5 PHUKET SPAS

There seems to be a massage shop on every corner in Phuket. Most are low-key family affairs where traditional Thai massage goes for about 250B per hour, and a basic pedi-mani costs around 100B – a real steal. The quality of service at these places varies, and changes rapidly as staff turnover is high. Go with your gut instinct or ask fellow travellers or your hotel staff for recommendations. No matter where you choose, it's hard to go wrong.

If you're looking for a more Westernised spa experience, head to one of Phuket's plentiful spa resorts. These places are often affiliated with a ritzy hotel (but nearly all are open to nonguests). They are *haute couture* affairs with sumptuous Zen designs and huge treatment menus. Prices vary depending on location, but treatments generally start at around 1000B and go up and up from there.

Our top five Phuket spa picks are:

- At the JW Marriott resort (p323), the **Mandara Spa** is perfect for couples. There are 10 couples' treatment suites that include indoor and outdoor space. The 'Healing Hot Stones' massage (US\$175) is one of the signature treatments.
- The **Six Senses Spa** at the Evason Phuket Resort (p306) is sublimely back-to-nature in setting, yet cutting edge as far as treatments are concerned. Try the 'Sensory Spa Journey' (90 minutes, 8000B), which includes a four-hand massage (two therapists), luxurious footbath and goody bag of product samples used in your treatment.
- Try the signature three-hour 'Royal Banyan Treatment' (US\$195) at the **Banyan Tree Spa** at Banyan Tree Phuket (p321). It includes a mint footbath, a cucumber and lemongrass rub, Thai herbal massage and a soak in a flower-filled tub.
- One of Phuket's first spas, **Hideaway Day Spa** (p321) still enjoys an excellent reputation. More reasonably priced than many hotel counterparts, the Hideaway offers treatments in a tranquil setting by a lagoon.
- As posh as it gets: the **Trisara Spa** at Trisara (p323) is very private, faces the ocean and opens onto breezy pavilions surrounded by ponds. Try one of the holistic oil massages (from 2000B). The oils used are made without chemicals or preservatives.

Blujelly (☎ 08 5880 7954; www.blujelly.com; Ao Bang Thao) Offers kids' lessons and is a good source of info about surfing around Ao Bang Thao.

Phuket Surf (Map p309; ☎ 08 1002 2496; www.phuketsurf.com) On Hat Kata Yai's southern cove; offers surf lessons starting at 1500B, as well as board rentals. Check its website for more info about the local surfing community.

YACHTING

Phuket is one of Southeast Asia's main yacht destinations, and you'll find all manner of craft anchored along its shores – from 80-year-old wooden sloops that look like they can barely stay afloat to the latest in hi-tech motor cruisers. Marina-style facilities with year-round anchorage are presently available at a few locations.

Phuket Boat Lagoon (Map p287; ☎ 0 7623 9055; fax 0 7623 9056) is located at Ao Sapam, about 10km north of Phuket Town on the eastern shore. It offers an enclosed marina with tidal

channel access, serviced pontoon berths, 60- and 120-tonne travel lifts, a hard-stand area, plus a resort hotel, laundry, coffee shop, fuel, water, repairs and maintenance services.

The US\$25 million **Royal Phuket Marina** (Map p287; ☎ 0 7623 9762; www.royalphuketmarina.com) is located just south of Phuket Boat Lagoon's luxury villas. Townhouses and a hotel join 190 berths and a spa here.

Yacht Haven Phuket Marina (Map p287; ☎ 0 7620 6705; www.yacht-haven-phuket.com) is at Laem Phrao on the northeastern tip. The Yacht Haven boasts 130 berths and a scenic restaurant, and also does yacht maintenance.

If you need sails, **Rolly Tasker Sailmakers** (☎ 0 7628 0347; www.rollytasker.com; 26/2 Th Chaofa, Ao Chalong) can outfit you with these; riggings, spars and hardware are also available.

Port clearance is rather complicated; the marinas will take care of the paperwork (for a fee, of course) if notified of your arrival in advance. For information on yacht charters

(both bareboat and crewed), yacht sales and yacht deliveries, contact the following:

Faraway Sail & Dive Expeditions (☎ 0 7628 0701; www.far-away.net; 112/8 Muu 4, Th Taina, Hat Karon)

Sunsail Yacht Charters (☎ 0 7623 9057; www.sun sailthailand.com; Phuket Boat Lagoon)

Thai Marine Leisure (☎ 0 7623 9111; www.thai marine.com; Phuket Boat Lagoon)

Yachtpro International (☎ 0 7623 2960; www.sailing-thailand.com; Yacht Haven Phuket Marina)

Expect to pay from 19,000B per day for a high-season, bareboat charter.

The TAT office (p300) in Phuket Town also has an extensive list of yacht charters and brokers. For insurance purposes, it's a good idea to see if the boat you want to charter is registered in Thailand.

Tours

Siam Safari (☎ 0 7628 0116; www.saiamsafari.com; 45 Th Chao Far, Chalong) and **Adventure Safaris** (☎ 0 7634 1988) combine 4WD tours of the island's interior with short elephant rides and short hikes for around 2500B per day. Half-day trips are also available, although the difference in price is not that great.

Courses

Pum Thai Cooking School (Map p314; ☎ 0 7634 6269, 0 1521 8904; www.pumthaifoodchain.com; 204/32 Tha Rat Uthit, Hat Patong) Runs excellent Thai restaurants in Phuket, Ko Phi-Phi and France. At the Phuket branch you can learn easy *haute cuisine* the Thai way for 450B for a one-dish class, 900B for a two-dish class, and up to 4650B for an over-six-hour, five-dish class.

The Boathouse (see p310) Offers a thrilling two-day Thai cooking class (per person one day/weekend 2000/3000B) each weekend with its chef, Tamanoon.

Phuket for Children

There's plenty for kids to do in Phuket and while the seedier face of the sex industry is on full show in Patong (we wouldn't bring our kids there, although many people do), the rest of the island is fairly G-rated.

In terms of activities, the usual array of water sports is offered at the bigger resorts up and down the coast. Many of the activities already mentioned will also appeal to children of all ages. Young animal lovers will enjoy **Phuket Zoo** (Map p287; ☎ 0 7638 1227; www.phuket zoo.com; 23/2 Muu 3 Soi, Th Phalai Chaofa; admission 200B; ☎ 8.30am-6pm), which has the usual monkey, elephant and crocodile shows, as well as a but-

terfly farm. The **Phuket Aquarium** (p306) and the **Phuket Gibbon Rehabilitation Centre** (p324) could also be interesting for older children.

The main family-flogged feature of Phuket, however, is **Phuket Fantasea** (p318), which is a pricey extravaganza of wild animals, costumes, song, dance, special effects, pyrotechnics, a lousy dinner and magic (marvel at the disappearing elephants) – but it's all very, very cheesy.

Volunteering

Soi Dog Foundation (☎ 08 7050 8688; www.soidog.org) is a well organised unit aimed at sterilizing, providing medical care for and feeding stray dogs. Volunteers are needed for feeding the dogs but it's just as helpful to donate funds towards the projects. Check the website for updates and details.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Thirty kilometres northwest of Phuket Town, **Phuket International Airport** (Map p287; ☎ 0 7632 7230) has a post office, bookshop, restaurants and cafés, **left-luggage facility** (per piece per day 40B; ☎ 6am-10pm) and very expensive **internet connection** (per 15min 100B) in the domestic departure area. There are plenty of foreign exchange booths in both sections and, in the arrivals area, you'll find ATMs and a tourist office. Note that it takes around 45 minutes to an hour to reach the southern beaches from here.

THAI (Map p301; ☎ 0 7621 1195; www.thairways.com; 78/1 Th Ranong, Phuket Town) operates about a dozen daily flights to Bangkok (from 1515B one way); it also has regular flights to/from 11 other cities in Thailand and international destinations including Penang, Langkawi, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei and Tokyo.

Bangkok Airways (Map p301; ☎ 0 7622 5033; www.bangkokair.com; 58/2-3 Th Yaowarat) has daily flights to Ko Samui (1975B one way), Bangkok (2725B one way) and Utapau for Pattaya (3100B one way).

Nok Air (☎ 1318; www.nokair.co.th; Phuket International Airport) links Phuket with Bangkok, as do **One-Two-Go** (☎ 1141, ext 1126; www.fly12go.com; Phuket International Airport) and web-based **Air Asia** (www.airasia.com), from 726B one way. Air Asia also flies to Kuala Lumpur (from 1089B one way) and Singapore (989B one way).

VEGETARIAN FESTIVAL

The Vegetarian Festival, Phuket's most important festival, takes place during the first nine days of the ninth lunar month of the Chinese calendar – usually late September or October.

Basically, the festival celebrates the beginning of the month of 'Taoist Lent', when devout Chinese abstain from eating all meat and meat products. In Phuket, the festival activities are centred on five Chinese temples, with the Jui Tui temple on Th Ranong the most important, followed by Bang Niaw and Sui Boon Tong temples. Events are also celebrated at temples in the nearby towns of Kathu (where the festival originated) and Ban Tha Reua.

The TAT office in Phuket prints a helpful schedule of events for the Vegetarian Festival each year. The festival also takes place in Trang, Krabi and other southern Thai towns.

Besides abstinence from eating meat, the Vegetarian Festival involves various processions culminating with incredible acts of self-mortification – walking on hot coals, piercing the skin with sharp objects and so on. Shop owners along Phuket's central streets set up altars in front of their shopfronts offering nine tiny cups of tea, incense, fruit, candles and flowers to the nine emperor gods invoked by the festival. Those participating as mediums bring the nine deities to earth for the festival by entering into a trance state and piercing their cheeks with all manner of objects – sharpened tree branches, spears, slide trombones etc. Some even hack their tongues continuously with saw or axe blades – this is the hardest to watch.

During the street processions these mediums stop at the shopfront altars, where they pick up the offered fruit and either add it to the objects piercing their cheeks or pass it on to bystanders as a blessing. They also drink one of the nine cups of tea and grab some flowers to stick in their waistbands. The shop owners and their families stand by with their palms together in a *wai* gesture, out of respect for the mediums who are temporarily possessed by the deities.

The entire atmosphere is one of religious frenzy, with deafening firecrackers, ritual dancing and bloody shirt fronts. Oddly enough, there is no record of this kind of activity associated with Taoist Lent in China. The local Chinese claim that the festival was started by a theatre troupe from China that stopped off in nearby Kathu around 150 years ago. The story goes that the troupe was struck seriously ill because the members had failed to propitiate the nine emperor gods of Taoism. The nine-day penance they performed included self-piercing, meditation and a strict vegetarian diet.

For more info, visit www.phuketvegetarian.com.

of some of the best on offer. The most magnificent examples in town are the **Standard Chartered Bank** (Th Phang-Nga), Thailand's oldest foreign bank; the **THAI office** (Th Ranong); and the **old post office building**, which now houses the **Phuket Philatelic Museum** (Th Montri; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm), a first-stop for stamp buffs. The best-restored residential properties are found along Th Dibuk and Th Thalang.

Phuket's main **day market** (Th Ranong) is worth a wander and is the spot to invest in the requisite Thai and Malay sarongs, as well as baggy Shan fisherman's pants.

A handful of Chinese temples injects added colour into the area. Most are standard issue, but the **Shrine of the Serene Light** (Saan Jao Sang Tham; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm), tucked away at the end of a 50m alley near the Bangkok Bank of Commerce on Th Phang-Nga, is a cut above the rest. Here, you will find plumes of incense smoke, dazzling décor and a peaceful ambi-

ence. The shrine, which has been restored, is said to be nearly 200 years old and a sense of history is tangible.

For a bird's-eye view of the city, climb pretty **Khao Rang** (Phuket Hill), northwest of the town centre. It's best during the week, when the summit is relatively peaceful, but keep an eye out for mobs of snarling dogs. If, as many people say, Phuket is a corruption of the Malay word *bukit* (hill), then this is probably its namesake.

For information on activities available throughout Phuket Province, see p288.

Festivals & Events

The **Vegetarian Festival** (see above) is Phuket's most important event and usually takes place during late September or October. The TAT office in Phuket prints a helpful schedule of events for the Vegetarian Festival. If you plan to attend the street processions, consider

bringing earplugs to make the noise of the firecrackers more tolerable.

Sleeping

Phuket Town is the cheapest place on the island to get some 'Z's and is a treasure trove of budget lodging. Head out to the beaches for more midrange and top end options.

BUDGET

On On Hotel (☎ 0 7621 1154; 19 Th Phang-Nga; r 180-400B; 📶) This bare-bones classic scooped a bit-part in *The Beach* (2000) – not necessarily a good thing – and despite its musty rooms and peeling paint, retains a whiff of Old Phuket. Expect sagging beds, squeaking fans, squat toilets and padlocked doors: budget authenticity in a nutshell. It is clean though and there's an old-school dingy café downstairs where you can sweat it out with other guests and a handful of old Chinese guys.

Phuket International Youth Hostel (☎ 0 7628 1325; www.phukethostel.com; 73/11 Th Chao Fa, Ao Chalong; dm 200B, r 360-440B; 📶) As a bona fide Hostelling International outfit, this contemporary spot offers comfortable sleeps in typically sterile surrounds. 'Reliable' is the buzzword here and while you won't be dazzled by its authentic charm, you will sleep safe in the knowledge that you're not being stalked by creeping cockroaches. It is 7km south of Phuket Town.

Phuket Backpackers (☎ 0 7625 6680; www.phuketbackpackers.com; 167 Th Ranong; dm 250B, r 600-700B; 📶) It's only worth staying in this overpriced yet central backpackers if you stay in the super-flashy, urban-chic dorms. Rooms are big but shabby, while common areas are pleasant, social and have touches such as modern art on the walls.

our pick Talang Guest House (☎ 0 7621 4225; talanggh@phuket.ksc.co.th; 37 Th Thalang; r 250-450B; 📶) Taking a beeline back to the old school, this decrepit shophouse is something of an architectural classic. Creature comforts are at a premium, but it bags extra points for character and charm. If you really want to soak up the atmosphere, check in to the 3rd-floor room overlooking the street. It's a fan room with a large veranda and is ideal for nostalgia junkies.

Thavorn Hotel (☎ 0 7621 1333; fax 0 7621 5559; 74 Th Rasada; r 280-550B; 📶) Established in 1964 – hey, they think it's worth mentioning – this city centre giant looks like a monument to ar-

chitectural Stalinism. On the inside, however, things take a turn for the better. The lobby houses the self-styled 'Phuket Museum' – a collection of intriguing local bric-a-brac – while the upper floors contain tatty rooms catering to a variety of budgets.

Crystal Inn (☎ 0 7625 6789; www.phuketcrystalinn.com; 2/1-10 Soi Surin, Th Phuket; r from 900B; 📶) Some thought obviously went into this place: there are Rothko-style murals and the décor is contemporary, soothing and way above standard for this price range. It might not age well, but for now this is an excellent choice.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Baan Suwatawae (☎ 0 7621 2879; www.baansuwatawae.co.th; 1/10 Th Dibuk; r from 1300B; 📶) With Zen art, hardwood floors, good-sized tile bathrooms and comfy lounge areas, these studio-style rooms are a steal. Higher priced rooms have terraces overlooking the blue-tiled pool and lily pond and the whole place smells like lemongrass. It's geared towards long-term stays but will rent by the night.

Phuket Merlin Hotel (☎ 0 7621 2866; www.phuketmerlinhotel.com; 158/1 Th Yaowarat; r 1500-5000B; 📶) This Merlin has seen better days. There is, however, a swimming pool and fitness centre, as well as a nightclub and sauna.

Royal Phuket City Hotel (☎ 0 7623 3333; www.royalphuketcity.com; 154 Th Phang-Nga; r 1900-5500B; 📶) Phuket's swankiest business-style outfit offers all the usual thrills and spills: pool, sauna, spa, zebra-print disco. Expect plentiful mod cons, smiling, attentive staff, CNN or the BBC on your telly and a great night's sleep.

our pick Sino House (☎ 0 7622 1398; www.sinohousephuket.com; 1 Th Montri; r 2000-2500; 📶) Shanghai style meets old-world Phuket at this chic new hotel. Every one of the room types is massive, albeit dark, and has a fantastic bathroom with a handmade ceramic basin and quarter-moon-shaped shower tub. Some rooms have big squishy couches and Thai-style kitchens. There's an on-site spa and long-term rates. In short, this is the most stylish and comfortable place to stay in Phuket Town. Staff are lovely and speak excellent English.

Metropole Phuket (☎ 0 7621 5050; www.metropolephuket.com; 1 Soi Surin, Th Montri; r 3000-24,000B; 📶) The Metropole fancies itself as a big-hitter. The seahorse fountain is a little kitsch, the rooms are frumpy (think shimmering polyester bedspreads) and the staff are a little inattentive, but this is a good bet for those

looking for city-centre comforts. There are great views from the upper floors.

Eating

There's good food in Phuket Town, and meals here cost a lot less than those at the beach – as much as 50% less. Southeast of the centre, on Th Ong Sim Phai, is the town's municipal market where you can buy fresh fruit and vegetables. Around three sides of this market you'll find a night market that features Thai and Chinese food.

Natural Restaurant (☎ 0 7622 4287; 62/5 Soi Phuthon; dishes 50-200B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Travel around the world in 80 plates at this dazzlingly green Phuket eatery. The décor – all pot plants and bamboo – is *Swiss Family Robinson* meets *The Beach*, and the picture menu promises everything from Wiener schnitzel to Singaporean noodles and green curry. Whatever you're craving, you won't go wrong going Natural.

Khana Sutra (☎ 0 7625 6192; 18-20 Th Takua Pa; dishes 80-250B; ☎ lunch & dinner; ☎) The curries here, which are claimed to have aphrodisiac properties, are authentically Indian and are served among the decorative charms of an authentic Delhi diner. If the owner's around, be prepared for opinionated discussions about British football.

China Inn (Th Thalang; dishes 80-250B; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat) Offers top-notch Chinese in old-world surrounds (check out the beautiful, old wooden doorway).

Siam Indigo (☎ 0 7625 6697; Th Phang-Nga; dishes 130-290B; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) One of Phuket Town's swankiest choices, this fusion cuisine restaurant serves everything from Asian tapas to New Zealand rack of lamb (490B). The setting in a historic building is minimalist and modern while remaining relaxed and subtly romantic.

Ka Jok See (☎ 0 7621 7903; kajoksee@hotmail.com; 26 Th Takua Pa; dishes 180-480B; ☎ dinner Tue-Sun) Dining here is reason enough to come to town. Dripping old Phuket charm and creaking under the weight of the owner's fabulous trinket collection, this atmospheric little eatery offers great food, top-notch music and – if you're lucky – some sensationally camp cabaret. Enjoy your dinner, sip some wine and then dance the night away. Book ahead.

Salvatore's (☎ 0 9871 1184; 15 Th Rasada; dishes 200-680B; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun; ☎) This authentic Italian restaurant (read checked tablecloths, giant pepper grinders, opera and a portly

owner) cooks up all of mama's favourites, from a mean pizza to a sizzling fillet steak.

Drinking

Phuket Town is more a place to chat over a beer than to boogie the night away. That said, the major hotels have discos and/or karaoke clubs. If you really want to get down, try Zanzibar located in the Royal Phuket City Hotel (p303).

O'Malleys (☎ 0 7622 0170; 2/20-21 Th Montri; ☎ 4pm-1am) Travelling thousands of miles to sink Guinness in an Irish pub always feels a little daft, but Phuket's homesick flock to this cosy Celtic watering hole for pool and assorted shenanigans. It has a generally welcoming atmosphere and the interior is almost authentic, if a little clean.

Timber Hut (☎ 0 7621 1839; 118/1 Th Yaowarat; ☎ 6pm-2am) This red-brick spot has Wild West décor and live music from 10pm. The tunes can be deafeningly loud but it's popular with Thai 20-somethings and there's usually plenty of entertainment on offer.

ourpick! Glasnost (☎ 08 4058 0288; 14 Soi Rommani) With the unusual moniker of 'Law & Notary Public Bar', this place doubles as a law office but don't let that intimidate you. It's about as laid-back and intimate a setting as you could find, and spontaneous jazz jam sessions are the norm.

Nong Jote (☎ 07 621 1139; 16 Th Yaowarat; ☎ 5pm-midnight) Go and hop into this classic Chinese-shophouse-style bar for a beer (from 40B), a light meal (from 60B) and laid-back socialising with locals, expats and travellers – be prepared to discuss British football.

Entertainment

Paradise Cinemas (☎ 0 7622 0174; Th Tilok Uthit; tickets 80B) For addicts of celluloid, Paradise screens English-language blockbusters.

Boxing Stadium (tickets 500-1000B) Thai boxing can be witnessed Tuesday and Friday nights at 8pm. Ticket prices vary depending on where you sit and include one-way transport. The stadium is at the southern edge of town near the pier; tük-tük cost 70B. Get your tickets at the On On Hotel (p303).

Shopping

There's some reasonable shopping in the provincial capital.

Day Market (Th Ranong) This market near the town centre traces its history back to the

days when pirates, Indians, Chinese, Malays and Europeans traded in Phuket. You might still find some fabrics from Southeast Asia, though for the most part it sells food now.

Municipal Market (Th Ong Sim Phai) Southeast of the centre, the focus of this market is on fresh produce and other things to eat.

Robinson Ocean Plaza (36 Th Tilok Uthit; ☎ 9am-10pm) You'll find this air-conditioned shopping mall near the municipal market.

Getting There & Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

There is a minibus service at the airport that will take you into Phuket Town for 120B per person; Patong, Kata and Karon beaches cost 180B. If there aren't enough passengers to make the minibus run profitable, you may have to shell out for a taxi. Taxis between the airport and Phuket Town cost 500B; between the airport and beaches is 700B to 800B.

BUS

You'll find the **bus terminal** (☎ 0 7621 1977) just to the east of the centre, within walking distance of the many hotels. Services from here are in the table below:

Destination	Bus type	Fare	Duration
Bangkok	ordinary	501B	15hr
	air-con	626B	13-14hr
	VIP	970B	13hr
Chumphon	air-con	320B	6½hr
	ordinary	250B	8hr
Hat Yai	air-con	370B	6-7hr
	ordinary	494B	8hr (bus/boat)
Ko Samui	air-con	494B	8hr (bus/boat)
	ordinary	95B	4hr
Krabi	air-con	146B	3½hr
	ordinary	225B	8hr
Nakhon Si Thammarat	air-con	300B	7hr
	ordinary	86B	2½hr
Phang-Nga	ordinary	153B	6hr
	air-con	233B	5hr
Ranong	ordinary	124B	6hr
	air-con	195B	5hr
Surat Thani	ordinary	120B	3hr
	air-con	135B	6hr
Takua Pa	ordinary	135B	6hr
	air-con	241B	5hr
Trang	ordinary	135B	6hr
	air-con	241B	5hr

CAR

There are cheap car rental agencies on Th Rasada near Pure Car Rent. Suzuki jeeps go for about 1400B per day (including insurance), though in the low season the rates can

go down to 750B. And if you rent for a week or more, you should get a discount.

The rates are always better at local places than at the better-known international ones, though you may be able to get deals with the familiar companies if you reserve in advance.

Pure Car Rent (☎ 0 7621 1002; www.purecarrent.com; 75 Th Rasada) A good choice in the centre of town.

Via Rent-A-Car (☎ 0 7638 5718; www.via-phuket.com; 189/6 Th Rat Uthit, Patong) Offers similar rates to Pure, and can deliver to anywhere on the island.

MOTORCYCLE

You can rent motorcycles on Th Rasada near Pure Car Rent, or from various places at the beaches. Costs are anywhere from 200B to 300B per day, and can vary depending on the season. Bigger bikes (over 125cc) can be rented at a couple of shops in Patong and Karon.

SÖRNG-TĀA-OU & TÜK-TÜK

Large bus-sized sörng-tāa-ou run regularly from Th Ranong near the market to the various Phuket beaches for 40B to 70B per person – see the respective destination for details. These run from around 7am to 5pm; outside these times you have to charter a tük-tük to the beaches, which will set you back 250B to Patong, 280B to Karon and Kata, and 340B for Nai Han and Kamala. You'll probably have to bargain. Beware of tales about the tourist office being 5km away, or that the only way to reach the beaches is by taxi, or even that you'll need a taxi to get from the bus terminal to the town centre (it is more or less in the town centre). For a ride around town, tük-tük drivers should charge 30B.

Motorcycle taxis around town cost 20B.

KO SIREH

เกาะสิเหร่

This tiny island, 4km east of the district capital and connected to the main island by a bridge over a canal, is known for its *chow lair* village and a hilltop reclining Buddha.

This village, the largest settlement of Urak Lawoi *chow lair* in Thailand, is little more than a poverty-stricken cluster of tin shacks on stilts, plus one seafood restaurant called Gypsy World. The Urak Lawoi, the most sedentary of the three *chow lair* groups, are found only between the Mergui Archipelago and the Tarutao-Langkawi Archipelago, and speak a creolised mixture of Malay and Mon-Khmer.

A loop road goes around the island, passing a few residences, shrimp farms, lots of rubber plantations and a bit of untouched forest. On the eastern side of the island is a public beach called **Hat Teum Suk** with a few chairs and thatched-roof shelters; it's nothing special, rather a local hang-out.

LAEM PHANWA

แหลมพันวา

Laem Phanwa is an elongated cape, jutting into the sea south of Phuket. At the tip of the cape, **Phuket Aquarium** (Map p287; ☎ 0 7639 1126; adult/child 100/50B; 🕒 8.30am-4pm) displays a varied collection of tropical fish and other marine life. There are 32 tanks and you can experience underwater life with a stroll along the walk-through tunnel.

The seafood restaurants along the Laem Phanwa waterfront are a great place to hang out and watch the pleasure skiffs and painted fishing boats passing by.

To get to the cape, take Rte 4021 south and then turn down Rte 4023 just outside Phuket Town.

HAT RAWAI & HAT LAEM KA

หาดราไวย์และแหลมका

On the up side, Rawai is relatively quiet and if you'd rather spend your time away from the jet skis, trinket sellers and boom boxes of the bigger resorts, it may just be your ticket to a little peace and quiet. But the beach is a little unimpressive, extremely narrow in places and not good for swimming, so committed beach lizards should head northeast to nearby Hat Laem Ka instead, which is an easy 1km walk away.

There's quite a lot to see and do in the surrounding area, including a **chow lair village**, boats to the nearby islands and good **snorkelling** off Laem Phromthep at the southern tip of Phuket Island. In fact, most of Rawai's visitors these days are divers who want to be near Phromthep and/or boat facilities for offshore diving trips.

Laem Phromthep is also a popular viewing point at sunset, when busloads of Thai tourists come to pose for photos and enjoy the view. On a hill next to the viewpoint is a **shrine to Phra Phrom** (Brahma).

Sleeping

Laemka Beach Inn (☎ 0 7638 1305; fax 0 7628 8547; Hat Laem Ka; bungalows 600-1500B; 🏠) Laemka features 30 thatched bungalows spread among coconut

groves above Laem Ka beach, which is much nicer than Rawai. Only the more expensive bungalows have air-con, but all have screen doors and windows (a rare bonus in these parts). The shoreline along the rounded cape is an interesting mix of clean sand and large boulders, with good swimming. Many speed-boats depart from here for nearby islands, and it's a favourite local picnic spot.

Evason Phuket Resort (☎ 0 7638 1010; www.sixsenses.com; 100 Th Viset, Hat Rawai; r 7500-38,200B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) This spa hotel extraordinaire offers copious amounts of luxury. Hip and heavily designed, it is the type of place that appeals to rock stars and moneyed media types. Expect beautiful people tapping away at their wireless gadgetry beside the infinity pool and immaculately turned-out staff. Room prices – opulent villas top the billing – stretch from reasonable to extraordinary.

Eating & Drinking

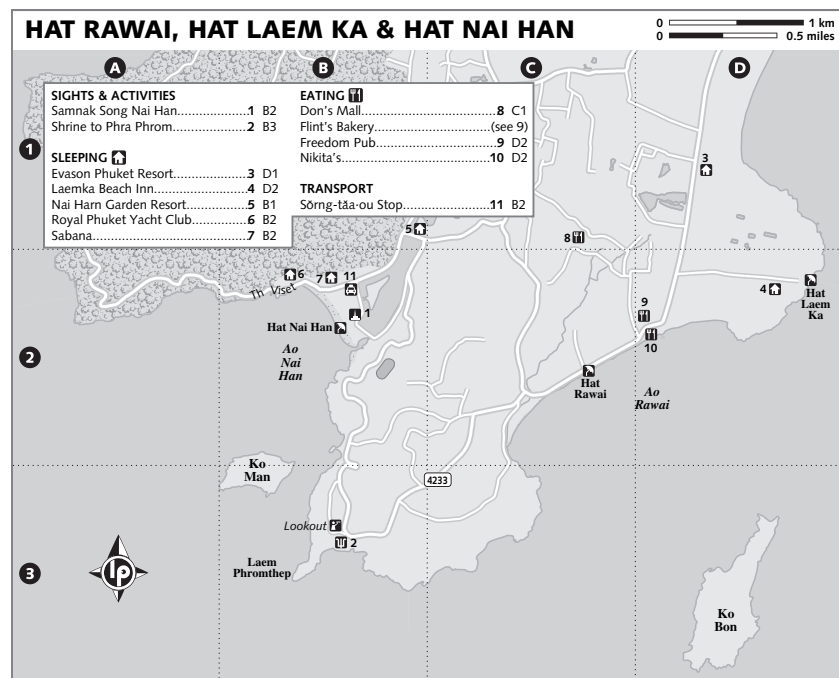
Besides the restaurants attached to the resorts in Rawai, there are oodles of seafood and noodle vendors along the roadside near Hat Rawai.

Flint's Bakery (☎ 0 7628 9210; Hat Rawai; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Cakes, coffees and pizzas are on offer at this little bakery. It's right next door to Freedom Pub.

Freedom Pub (☎ 0 7628 7402; Hat Rawai; dishes 80-200B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) More watering hole than restaurant, this Rawai boozier features outdoor seating, a pool table, live music on the weekends, a free barbecue on Friday nights and – beware – an on-site tattoo parlour.

Nikita's (☎ 0 7628 8703; Hat Rawai; dishes 80-225B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Diners and boozers attend Nikita's in equal numbers. The result is a lively atmosphere with plenty of fun and frolics when the town is busy. The menu is the usual melange of East meets West and the décor is bright and quirky.

Don's Mall (☎ 0 7638 3100; 48-5 Soi Sai Yuan; dishes 100-650B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This Texan-run food-and-entertainment complex showcases American meat feasts barbecued over a mesquite-wood fire. It also has an extensive wine list, fresh baked goods and much more. It's about 2km from downtown Rawai or to get here from Phuket Town (and many people make the trip just for the food), turn right onto Th Soi Sai Yuan, just south of the Chalong roundabout, and proceed for 3km; you can't miss it.



Getting There & Away

Rawai is about 18km from Phuket Town and getting there costs 20B by sörng-tâa-ou from Phuket's fountain circle at Th Ranong. Tuktuk charters cost at least 150B from Phuket Town. The tuktuk trip from Rawai to Nai Han is a hefty 20B.

Long-tail boats are available for charter right along Hat Rawai – a charter to Ko Phi-Phi costs 3500B (maximum six passengers).

HAT NAI HAN

หาดในหาน

The tourist earthquake has yet to hit Hat Nai Han, 10km south of Kata. The colossal **Royal Phuket Yacht Club** dominates one hillside, but **Samnakk Song Nai Han** (Map p307), a monastic centre, claims the lion's share of the beachfront land and has thus far managed to stave off the developers. Whatever the reasons, this beautiful little bay remains one of the quietest in Phuket and – from your balcony at the Yacht Club – you can just about catch a glimpse of the Phuket of three decades ago.

Hat Nai Han is a dangerous place to swim during the monsoon season (May to October),

when the sea becomes particularly rough – look out for the red flag, which means dangerous swimming conditions. Beach chairs and umbrellas can be rented for 60B from stalls along the beachfront.

Sleeping & Eating

Except for the Yacht Club, there's not much accommodation with views of the beach. Restaurants at the Yacht Club cater for expensive appetites, while a handful of no-frills beachside food stalls will fill you up for a pittance.

Nai Harn Garden Resort (Map p307; ☎ 0 7628 8319; www.naiharnresort.com; 15/12 Muu 1, Th Viset; r 2100-8300B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) Back from the beach, on the far side of the reservoir, this resort offers a range of bungalows and villas in a spacious garden setting. The atmosphere is a little suburban cul-de-sac, but standards are high, there are plenty of masseurs at hand – massage is something of a hotel speciality – and prices are reasonable.

Sabana (Map p307; ☎ 0 7628 9327; www.sabana-resort.com; 14/53 Muu 1, Th Viset; r 3500-8500B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) Right on The Royal Phuket's doorstep, this is

an excellent and much less expensive backdrop. The décor is all primary colours and Thai motifs and, while the cheaper rooms are a little ordinary, the pricier 'Thai Sala' options are beautifully designed. There's also an on-site spa.

The Royal Phuket Yacht Club (Map p307; ☎ 0 7638 0200; www.phuket.com/yacht-club; 23/3 Muu 1, Th Viset; r from 8000B; 🚗 🚚 🚚) There's not a yacht in sight, but the property is grand indeed. Rooms feature fabulously large terraces – and stunning bay views – and there's every creature comfort you could imagine somewhere on site. If you can cadge one of the low season discounts, it really is excellent value.

Getting There & Away

Nai Han is 18km from Phuket Town and a sǒrng-tāa-ou (leaving from the intersection of Phuket Town's Th Krung Thap and the fountain circle) costs 25B per person. Tùk-tùk charters are 150B to 200B one way. From Nai Han to Rawai, expect to pay about 20B in a tùk-tùk.

HAT KATA

Kata is just a fun beach. It lacks the seediness of Patong and the gloom of Karon and attracts travellers of all ages with its shopping, surfing, lively beach and fine dining. While you might not find a secluded strip of sand, you will find plenty to do and plenty of easy-going folks to meet.

The beach here is actually divided into two distinct parts, separated by a rocky headland: Hat Kata Yai to the north and Hat Kata Noi to the south. Both offer plenty of soft, golden sand and attract a somewhat bohemian crowd compared with the rest of the island.

The main commercial street of Th Thai Na is perpendicular to the shore and has most of the restaurants and shops, along with some cheaper places to stay. Expats have moved into the area in large numbers, with Scandinavians appearing to hold most of the best cards; you won't get five paces without passing a 'Viking' this or a 'Horned Helmet' that.

Information

There are plenty of ATMs along Kata's main drag.

Kata Bookshop (☎ 0 7633 0109; 82 Th Kata; 🕒 10am-9pm) Great selection of new and used books and helpful service.

Post office (🕒 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) On Rte 4028, at the end of Th Thai Na.

Sights & Activities

The small island of **Ko Pu** is within swimming distance of the shore (if you're a strong swimmer); on the way are some OK coral reefs. Be careful of riptides; heed the red flags and don't go past the breakers (ask about swimming conditions). Both Hat Kata Yai and Hat Kata Noi offer decent **surfing** waves from April to November. Board rental costs 150B for one hour or 600B for the whole day.

Sleeping

These are average prices for the high season (May to October) – haggle for discounts when things are quiet. Like Patong, it's getting harder and harder to find anything under 1000B during the high season and the beach is becoming distinctly upscale – but prices can drop radically when tourism is down.

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

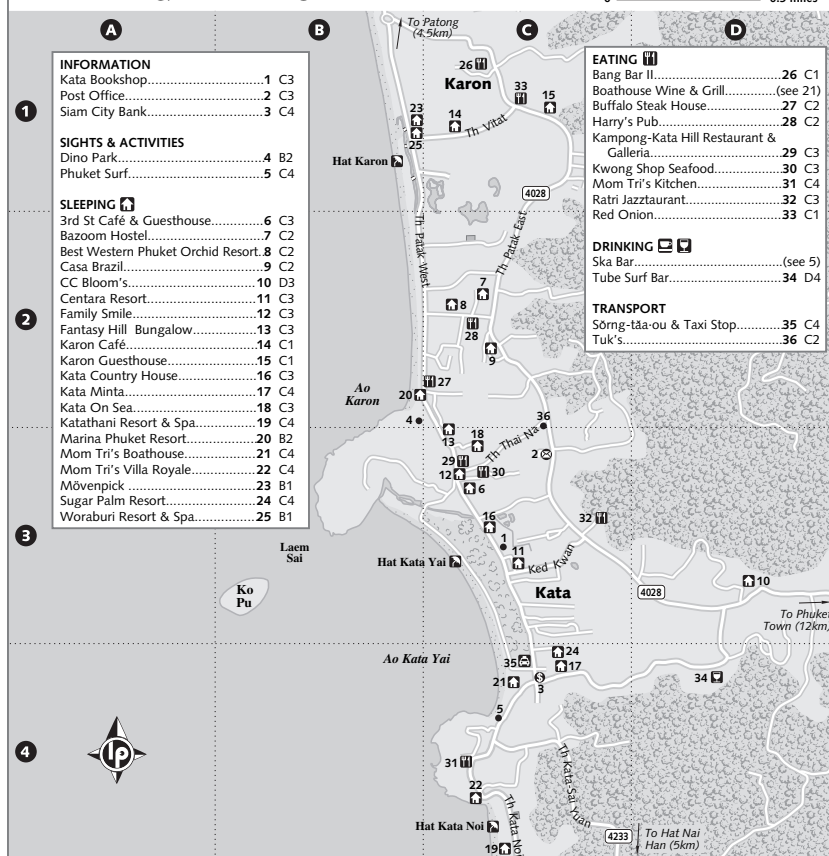
In general, the less expensive places tend to be off the beach between Kata Yai (to the north) and Kata Noi (to the south) or well off the beach on the road to the island interior.

Kata On Sea (☎ 0 7633 0594; bungalows 400-1000B; 🚗 🚚) It's a steep 100m climb to this clutch of 29 modest bungalows dotting a quiet green hilltop, but for this price, it's well worth the effort. The bungalows are large and maximize the views with giant windows, and the minifridges are a score for keeping beer and water cold on hot days. Rooms with air-con start at 800B and there's a low-key family atmosphere.

Family Smile (☎ 0 7633 0594; www.familyinnphuket.com; 147-151 Th Thai Na; r 1000-1400B; 🚗 🚚) The good-sized standard rooms here have some quirky antiques that give the otherwise plain style more personality. It's a multistorey place on a busy street corner, but rooms are quiet.

Kata Country House (☎ 0 7633 3210; www.katacountryhouse.com; 7/23 Th Kata; r 1800-3000B; 🚗 🚚) We can't tell if the retro '60s/'70s kitsch is done on purpose here or if it's just a lovely accident. Whatever the case, it's authentic. Expect wagon-wheel railings on the terraces, a tiki-style lounge that plays everything from swing to country and western, and sculptures everywhere ranging from elephants to Native American chiefs. The staff seem to get as big a hoot out of the place as the guests.

HAT KATA & HAT KARON



It's nothing luxurious but we give it five stars for character.

our pick Sugar Palm Resort (☎ 0 7628 4404; www.sugarpalmphuket.com; 20/10 Th Kata; r incl breakfast 1800-6100B; 🚗 🚚) It's a 'chic chill-out world' at the Sugar Palm, as this Miami-meets-Thailand-style resort claims. Rooms, decorated in urban whites, blacks and lavender, are exceptional value and sublimely comfy, and all surround a black-bottomed, U-shaped pool. You feel a bit on stage going for a swim here, but the beach isn't far and you're in the heart of Kata's lively shopping and restaurant strip. Those who hang out in their room will find that the bath tubs are perfectly positioned for watching the plasma-screen TVs. High-end touches, such as the welcome fruit

juice, tip-top service, free tea and coffee, and bathrobes, are just the cherry on top of this already delicious cake.

3rd St Café & Guesthouse (☎ 0 7628 4510; www.3rdstreetcafe.com; 100 3/4 Th Patak West; r 2000-2500B; 🚗 🚚) The six rooms are each styled differently at this eclectic guesthouse with a knack for decorating. Walls are done up in muted earthy tones with lots of bright modern art. Furniture and fixings are classy, and make use of natural materials such as rich, red Thai silk. The guesthouse is just minutes from the beach. An American breakfast is included.

Kata Minta (☎ 0 7633 3283; www.kataminta.com; 6/56-58 Moo 2, Th Patak; r 2600-2800B; 🚗 🚚) Distinctly Thai-style rooms here have plenty of trimmings such as teak furniture and silk bed

runners, but the musty smell stops them from being as nice as they could be. Service is lukewarm but the location, in the heart of the shopping and restaurant area, is OK.

TOP END

CCBloom's (☎ 0 7633 3322; www.ccbloomshotel.com; 84/21 Th Patak; r 3400-3900B; 🍷 🍴 🍷) This American-run gay-friendly boutique hotel (strangely named after Bette Midler's character in the movie *Beaches*) has a fab location overlooking Kata. Stylish rooms are done up in creamy yellow with crimson silk panels draped from the ceiling. They are festooned with orchids and face out onto a small pool decorated with a waterfall. If you tire of the isolation (it's quite a hike from the beach), a free shuttle makes multiple runs to the waves.

Centara Resort (☎ 0 7637 0300; www.phuket.com/centralkata; 54 Th Ked Kwan; r from 5850B; 🍷 🍴 🍷) If you've got kids in tow, some money to burn and an aversion to the sleazy and cheesy, head straight here. Rooms are modern, simply stylish and filled with every comfort, but it's the pool, with a water slide, little bridges to swim under and a swim-up bar for mum and dad that we liked the best. There's a free shuttle to the beach.

Katathani Resort & Spa (☎ 0 7633 0124; www.katathani.com; 14 Th Kata Noi; r from 7000B; 🍷 🍴 🍷) Down on quieter Hat Kata Noi, this glitzy spa resort offers all the usual trimmings in stylish surrounds. It features a spa, a handful of pools, a beauty salon and heaps of space. Excellent low season deals are on offer if you haggle.

Mom Tri's Boathouse (☎ 0 7633 0015; www.boathousephuket.com; 2/2 Th Patak West; r 8000-25,000B; 🍷 🍴 🍷) For Thai politicians, pop stars, artists and celebrity authors, the intimate boutique Boathouse is still the only place to stay on Phuket. Rooms were remodelled after the tsunami and are spacious, gorgeous affairs, some sporting large breezy verandas. Critics complain that the Boathouse is a bit stiff-lipped old-fashioned for this century, but no-one can deny that the main reason to stay here is for the food. The three on-site restaurants are the best on the island.

our pick Mom Tri's Villa Royale (☎ 0 7633 3568; www.villaroyalphuket.com; ste incl breakfast from 11,500B; 🍷 🍴 🍷) Tucked away in a secluded Kata Noi location with the grandest of views, Villa Royale opened in 2006 to nearly instant acclaim. The romantic place with fabulous food offers beautiful rooms straight out of the pages

of *Architectural Digest*. Guiltless pleasures include an attached spa and a saltwater pool, if you prefer a tamer version of the real thing – which is just steps away.

Eating

There's some surprisingly classy food in Kata, though you'll be paying dearly for it. For cheaper eats, head to Th Thai Na, which has more than its fair share of Italian and – of course – Scandinavian restaurants. A cluster of affordable, casual seafood restaurants can be found on Th Patak West near the shore, though they don't all offer sea views.

Kwong Shop Seafood (☎ 0 1273 3707; Th Thai Na; mains 40-130B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This no-frills seafood joint displays fresh fish outside and pictures of its happy customers on the walls. It is cheap and very, very cheerful – a winning combination.

Kampong-Kata Hill Restaurant & Galleria (☎ 0 7633 0103; Th Patak West; dishes 80-260B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Chock-a-block with Thai antiques and serving some fabulous local dishes, this excellent little eatery is up a long stairway. Finding good, well-priced Thai food in these parts can be a bit of a headache – this is a great place to start.

Ratri Jazztaurant (☎ 0 7633 3538; Th Chalong-Karon; dishes 145-345B; 🍷 11am-1am) Hang out on the hip hillside terrace, listen to live jazz, watch the sun go down and enjoy delicious Thai food. Now *this* is a vacation.

Mom Tri's Kitchen (☎ 0 7633 0015; Th Kata Noi; dishes 180-880B; 🍷 6.30am-midnight) The more casual link in the Boathouse chain, this delightful restaurant offers Mediterranean/Thai *haute cuisine* and fine wines. All are served in gorgeous grounds overlooking the beach and the atmosphere is intimate.

our pick Boathouse Wine & Grill (☎ 0 7633 0015; www.boathousephuket.com; Th Patak West; mains 450-950B; 🍷 7am-midnight) The perfect place to wow a fussy date, the Boathouse is the pick of the bunch for most local foodies. The atmosphere can be a little stuffy – this is the closest Phuket gets to old-school dining – but the Mediterranean fusion food is fabulous, the wine list expansive and the sea views sublime.

Drinking

Kata's nightlife tends to be pretty mellow.

At Kata's southernmost cove, Ska Bar, tucked into the rocks and seemingly inter-

DETOUR: ISLANDS AROUND PHUKET

There are several islands off the coast of Phuket that make for quieter, more romantic getaways. **Ko Heh** (also known as Coral Island and sometimes spelled Ko Hae) is a few kilometres south of Ao Chalong. It's a good spot for diving and snorkelling, although jet skis and other pleasure craft can be an annoyance. The island gets lots of day trippers from Phuket, but at night it's pretty quiet. Most of the 64 concrete bungalows of **Coral Island Resort** (☎ 0 7628 1060; www.coralislandresort.com; bungalows 2800-3600B; 🍷 🍴 🍷) are arranged around the swimming pool, but the more expensive bungalows are seaside. There's also a karaoke lounge, and cable TV in the lobby just in case you can't live without your daily dose of the tube.

Southeast of Laem Phanwa is **Ko Mai Thon**, which is similar to, but smaller than, Ko Heh. Stay at **Maiton Resort** (☎ 0 7621 4954; www.maitonisland.com/room.html; bungalows 7500-12,750B; 🍷 🍴 🍷), which offers semiluxurious hillside or beachside bungalows, two pools (indoor and outdoor), a sauna, fitness centre, tennis court and five restaurants.

Ko Raya Yai and **Ko Raya Noi**, about 1½ hours by boat south of Phuket, are also known as Ko Racha Yai/Noi. They are highly favoured by divers and snorkellers for their hard coral reefs, which are found in both shallow and deep waters, making it a good area for both novices and pros. Accommodation is available on both islands.

Most people use travel agencies in Phuket Town to get to these islands. If you want to go it alone, boats leave Ao Chalong and Hat Rawai for Ko Heh; the trip takes 30 minutes and costs 100B. You can also charter a long-tail boat or speedboat from Rawai or Ao Chalong for 1500B.

Songserm Travel (☎ 0 7622 2570; 51-55 Th Satoon) runs passenger boats to Ko Raya Yai from Phuket Town port every morning. The trip takes 30 minutes and costs 400B each way. **Pal Travel Service** (☎ 0 7634 4920) runs a similar service. Both companies suspend service from May to October.

twined with the trunk of a sturdy tree, is our choice for oceanside sundowners. The Thai bartenders add to Ska's funky Rasta vibe. It stays open late.

Tube Surf Bar (☎ 0 7285 4718; dishes from 30B) This surf bar gets going on Tuesday and Friday nights (in particular), when surf videos are screened; if you're looking to find out more about local surfing culture, this is where to head. It's a bit difficult to find – if you get lost ask for directions (during the day) from Phuket Surf (which runs the Tube), next to the Ska Bar.

Getting There & Around

Sörng-täa-ou and buses to both Kata and Karon (per person 50B) leave frequently from the Th Ranong market in Phuket from 7am to 5pm. The main sörng-täa-ou stop is in front of Kata Beach Resort.

Taxis from Kata go to Phuket Town (300B), Patong (250B) and Karon (150B).

Motorcycle rentals are available at **Tuk's** (☎ 0 7628 4049) for 300B.

HAT KARON

หาดกะรน

A long sweep of gently curving beach, Hat Karon has a dash of package holiday ambience

mixed in with tranquil beach paradise and a smidgen of Patong sleaze. There's an element of hush about the place that can either make it seem wonderfully peaceful or depressingly backwater – it depends on your attitude. The northern section of town, around Th Vitat, is a little dowdy, but features a handful of decent budget hotels, while the southern beach section blends seamlessly into much livelier Hat Kata. **Siam City Bank** (Th Patak East; 🍷 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) has money exchange (until 6pm) and ATM facilities.

Things can get very quiet here during the low season and the resort suffers from the off-peak gloom that tends to afflict seaside towns when visitors are thin on the ground.

Dino Park (☎ 0 7633 0625; Th Patak West; adult/child 260/200B; 🍷 10am-midnight) is a bizarre, Flintstones-esque outdoorsy area with mini-golf, leafy gardens (with waterfall) and an eatery serving 'Bronto' burgers. It is at the southern edge of Hat Karon.

Sleeping

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

Hat Karon is lined with inns and deluxe bungalows, along with some cheaper places. Ask for discounts in the low season, and if you stay more than a few days. Less expensive

places will naturally be found well off the beach, often on small hillocks to the east of the main road.

Bazoom Hostel (☎ 0 7639 6914; www.bazoomhostel.com; 64/76-77 Th Patak East; dm/r 250/590B; 🏠 📶) One of Phuket's bona fide backpacker haunts, Bazoom offers the usual standard features: psychedelic décor, an internet café, plenty of banter and staff who are savvy with the intricacies of doing Phuket on the cheap. The dorm is basic (with 14 beds), or you can opt for one of the no-frills but comfy rooms. Air-con is available in the pricier doubles. Some sörng-täa-ou drivers may pretend they've never heard of this place, as Bazoom doesn't pay them commissions – be adamant. Also, we've heard rumours that Bazoom may change its name. From Phuket Town, you can catch the Kata/Karon bus (40B). Alternatively, call for a pick-up (150B).

Karon Guesthouse (☎ 0 7639 6860; r 400-500B; 🏠 📶) Furniture is of the scratched, mismatched variety and bathrooms are tiny, but this family-run hotel is very cheap, the staff are friendly and beds are firm. It offers free left-luggage service and safe deposit, plus satellite TV in the lobby. Guests have pool privileges at the nearby Golden Sands Hotel.

Fantasy Hill Bungalow (☎ 0 7633 0106; fantasysill@hotmail.com; bungalows 500-1500B; 🏠 📶) Sitting in a lush garden on a hill, the bungalows here are good value and of the type that's pretty much disappeared from this beach. Fantasy Hill isn't a fancy spot, but it's better than average for the price.

Karon Café (☎ 0 7639 6217; www.karon-phuket-hotels.com; 526/17 Soi Islandia Park Resort; r 800-900B, family ste 1100B; 🏠 📶) Way less 'sexy' than most places back on this bar-filled lane. Rooms here are clean and above a friendly little café.

our pick Casa Brazil (☎ 0 7639 6317; www.phukethomestay.com; Soi 1, 9 Th Luang Pho Chuan; r 1100-1500B; 🏠 📶) Simple rooms have Brazilian colour and flair, which makes this friendly, clean spot stand out from the rest. There's a whimsically styled and very social café on the ground floor and the 21 rooms are spacious and tastefully decorated. There are also very small verandas in each room overlooking the neighbourhood, which is mostly residential. It is a short and pleasant walk to the beach, with both Hat Karon and Hat Kata being almost equidistant.

Best Western Phuket Orchid Resort (☎ 0 7639 6599; www.bestwestern.com; 562 Th Patak; r from 2500B;

🏠 📶) This Best Western, with sleek architecture effortlessly blending into the hill upon which it sits, gives you more than your money's worth. The amenities, along with the spacious, posh rooms, feel as if they belong at a much pricier place. The hotel is family oriented, with babysitting services. The pool is the most popular hang-out for sunbathers.

TOP END

Many of the remaining places to stay in Karon are newer resort-type hotels with all the posh amenities.

Woraburi Resort & Spa (☎ 0 7639 6638; www.woraburiphuket.com; 198-200 Th Patak West; r incl breakfast 4100-8500B; 🏠 📶) Rooms here, just across the street from the beach, have some very nice Thai touches, such as sandstone 'carved' art in the bathrooms. The morning buffet breakfast is immense, tasty and served in a giant open-air pavilion. When we passed there was a snooker table and a giant TV in the lobby, which detracted from an otherwise stylish setting.

Marina Phuket Resort (☎ 0 7633 0625; www.marina-phuket.com; 47 Th Patak West; r from 5000B; 🏠 📶) If you're after privacy, you could do a whole lot worse than a night here. Three types of villas are on offer: the most expensive 'sea' villas open up over the sea and you can fall asleep to the soporific sound of water lapping against the stilts. The gardens are an immense botanical explosion, and the setting is textbook romantic. It's also great for families.

our pick Mövenpick (☎ 0 7639 6139; www.moevenpick-hotels.com; 509 Th Patak West; r from 8000B; 🏠 📶) Grab a secluded villa and choose from a private plunge pool or outdoor rainforest shower; alternatively chill in the cube-like rooms with huge floor-to-ceiling glass windows (in some cases covering two entire walls) in the swank ultramodern white hotel. Besides a prime location across the street from a pretty stretch of the beach, the Mövenpick offers artistic décor, top-end linen, a big pool with swim-up bar, a spa, and an alfresco restaurant and bar with a giant selection of wood-fired pizzas.

Eating & Drinking

As usual, almost every place to stay has a restaurant. There are a few cheap Thai and seafood places off the roundabout (includ-

ing beachside seafood stalls 100m north of it), but overall you'll find a better selection further south at Hat Kata Yai and Hat Kata Noi.

Red Onion (☎ 0 7639 6827; dishes 80-160B; 🏠 4-11pm) This slap-up eatery in half of a garage with a tin roof is a bona fide farang (foreigners of European descent) magnet. There is Thai food on the menu, along with Western titbits such as schnitzel and spaghetti. Cocktails and wine selections complement the meals, so try to forget the bad music. Dine at cheery red-clothed tables on chairs padded with silk pillows. It's about 300m east of the roundabout – look for the coloured lights.

Buffalo Steak House (☎ 0 7633 3013; Th Patak West; dishes 80-450B; 🏠 lunch & dinner) At the southern end of the town, this old-timer swears it serves the best steak in Phuket. It's not wildly off the mark and if you fancy large slabs of red meat, this is your place. The open front keeps the air fresh, and wood décor brings a taste of the Wild West to the table.

Harry's Pub (☎ 0 7635 7656; Th Patak East; dishes 100-300B; 🏠 lunch & dinner) Harry's is at its best in the high season, when it is one of the area's most popular watering holes. Whenever the doors are open though, you can count on big portions of anything that comes with fries. The beer's good, if a little expensive.

Bang Bar II (🌙 noon-midnight) Built from flotsam and jetsam collected on the beach, this chilled-out bar is perfect for sundowners. It features your standard brand of Rastafarian décor and a collection of surfboards. A sun-bleached tarpaulin provides shelter during monsoon downpours.

Getting There & Away

For details on transport to Karon, see p311.

HAT PATONG

หาดป่าตอง

You'll either love Patong or you'll hate it. This beachside monument to hedonism is a place where many visitors get more sleep on the beach during the day than during the party-hard nights. From around 11am, sunburnt tourists wearing the latest Thai knockoff T-shirts, and often accompanied by small children wielding soft drinks, swarm the streets in search of bargains – as well as the curve of beach in search of a patch of sand to fry their skin some more. As the sun goes down, the families go in, the bar girls come out, the

booze starts to flow and the hips start gyrating. The rest is a blur, but judging by the aching of your head the next day you're pretty sure you had a great time. And is that a girl or a boy tucked in next to you?

But even if you're not the stay-out-all-night sort, Patong can entice the curious with its diving options, upscale dining, shopping, cabaret shows and Thai boxing. The beach is gorgeous but loud, and with all the jet skis, a dip in the water isn't all that peaceful. The swankiest resorts will offer more tranquility, but if that's what you're looking for, why are you in Patong? Plenty of parents bring their kids to this beach, but if you do, be prepared to answer questions such as: 'Mummy, what's a hooker/ladyboy/junkie?'

Information

There are banks with ATM and exchange facilities across town.

Bank of Ayudya (Th Rat Uthit; 🏠 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, exchange booth 11am-9pm) Features an exchange booth.

Bookazine (☎ 0 7634 5834; 18 Th Bangla; 🏠 10am-11pm) For English-language books and magazines.

Boots Pharmacy (☎ 0 7634 3713; Th Thawiwong; 🏠 9am-6pm) A branch of the British pharmacy chain.

Immigration office (☎ 0 7634 0477; Th Kalim Beach; 🏠 10am-noon & 1-3pm Mon-Fri) For visa extensions.

Post office (Th Thawiwong; 🏠 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat)

TA Internet (☎ 0 7634 9014; Th Bangla; per min 2B; 🏠 9am-3am)

Tourist Police (☎ 0 7634 0244; Th Thawiwong)

Activities

Patong is a centre for diving on the island; see p297 for a list of established dive shops. For excursions to the Similan and Surin islands, see p279 and p274, respectively.

Motor yachts, sailboats and catamarans can sometimes be chartered with or without crew; see p298.

Sleeping

It's getting pretty difficult to find anything in Patong under 1000B from approximately November to May (the period that corresponds to the prices listed in this book), but outside this time rates drop by 40% to 60%. This is a town known for prostitution so even most 'nice' places have a 'joiner fee' (anything from 500B upwards, depending on the hotel's rates) and condoms are a minibar standard.

HAT PATONG

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BUDGET

On the beach there is nothing in the budget range, but on and off Th Rat Uthit, especially in the Paradise Complex and along Soi Saen Sabai, there are several nondescript guesthouses with rooms that hover around 1000B in the high season but plummet to as low as 350B in the low season.

Crown Backpackers (☎ 0 7634 2297; crown_hostel@yahoo.com; 169/3 Soi Sansabai; female only dm 250B, r from 400B) Expect bare-bones basics and late night rumblings in this hostel in the heart of the bar zone.

our pick Capricorn Village (☎ 0 7634 0390; 2/29 Th Rat Uthit; bungalows from 660B; ☎ ☎) This is perhaps the best deal in Patong in the high season. Bright little bungalows with terraces wind back into a quiet garden and the service is lovely. Guests can use the pool at K's Hotel next door.

BB Cottage (☎ 0 7634 2948; 171/21 Soi Saen Sabai; bungalows 850-1450B; ☎ ☎) Smacked right up against the massive Jungle Ceylon shopping mall, the scruffy bungalows here are uncommonly big and all except the smallest have kitchens. The garden is spacious and the whole place is quiet and central.

MIDRANGE

You won't get beachfront for midrange prices but you will get cleanliness and comfort.

Touch Villa (☎ 0 7634 4011; touchvilla@hotmail.com; 151/4 Th Rat Uthit; r 1000B; ☎ ☎) Suspect name, reliable standards. This slightly crumbly spot has a twee garden setting and a holiday camp ambience. It's cheap and cheerful with just a 'touch' of Patong's seediness.

Casa Jip (☎ 0 7634 3019; www.casajip.com; 207/10 Th Rat Uthit; r 1000B; ☎ ☎) Italian run and great value, this place has very big, relatively luxurious rooms with comfy beds and a taste of Thai style. You get cable TV and there's even a breakfast room service. It's popular with couples.

Tatum Mansion (☎ 0 7634 4332; tatumansion@hotmail.com; 66/7-8 Soi Kepsap; r from 1400B; ☎ ☎) On a street packed with budget offerings and massage parlours à gogo, this British-owned outfit comes up trumps. You get cable TV, hardwood furniture, a great bed and the low-down on town from the super-friendly management.

K's Hotel (☎ 0 7634 0832; www.k-hotel.com; 180 Th Rat Uthit; r from 1500; ☎ ☎) While this place caters primarily to Germans, you'll feel plenty willkommen if you're not – and will feel espe-

cially comfortable after swilling quality beer at the on-site *biergarten*. Rooms are above standard with plasma TVs, big windows and stone-tile bathrooms. The surrounding gardens are lush and the pool feels like it's in a jungle. It's popular with families.

First Resort Albergo (☎ 0 7634 0980; firsthotel@hotmail.com; 19/12 Th Rat Uthit; r from 1800B; ☎ ☎) And so to Italy. This pleasant, Italian-run spot is as solid as mama's bust and offers stylish rooms around a pool. There's TV, a terrace restaurant (expect pizza and bolognese made with Thai basil) and plenty of warm Mediterranean hospitality.

Yorkshire Inn (☎ 0 7634 0904; www.yorkshireinn.com; 169/16 Soi Saen Sabai; r 1800-2100, apartments 4400B; ☎ ☎) About as Thai as a plate of Yorkshire pud, this is one of a string of unabashedly British outfits, courting visitors who insist on putting the home in their comforts. This one offers a flicker of homey B&B charm and can at least put together a mean fry-up – the Yorkshire pudding is a little less successful. The rooms and apartments are spotless and come with cable TV.

our pick Baiphō & Baithong (☎ 0 7629 2074; www.baiphō.com; 205/12-13 & 205/14-15 Th Rat Uthit; r incl breakfast 1800-3300B; ☎ ☎) This much style isn't usually found in this price range – particularly in Patong where chic is scarce. Buddha imagery and Zen-spa-type trimmings mingle with modern urban touches in the dimly lit, nest-like rooms of these twin hotels. 'The Lounge' downstairs serves upper-crust cocktails and very good Italian and Thai food, as well as gourmet snacks. Guests can use the pool at the unsightly Montana Grand Phuket next door.

Blue Ocean Resort (☎ 0 7634 5191; www.blueoceanresort-phuket.com; 210/23 Soi Kepsap; r 1900-2100B; ☎ ☎) The phuket-cut rooms here are in a classy Thai-style house that's surrounded by plants, flowers and a pretty pool. It's great value and is regularly booked, so reserve ahead.

Andatel (☎ 0 7629 0489; www.andatelhotel.com; 419 Th Rat Uthit; r 2000-2800B; ☎ ☎) Andatel offers fading Thai-meets-Andalusian styling and plentiful creature comforts in dark rooms with balconies. There's a decent restaurant out front.

TOP END

Holiday Inn (☎ 0 7634 0608; www.phuket.holidayinn.com; Th Rat Uthit; r from 4560B; ☎ ☎) This resort is a little glitzier than your run-of-the-mill Holiday Inn, and offers all the usual

GAY PRIDE IN PHUKET

Although there are big gay pride celebrations in Bangkok and Pattaya, the Phuket Gay Pride Festival is considered by many to be the best in Thailand, maybe even Southeast Asia.

The first Phuket Gay Festival started as a small community project in November 1999, in response to plans for similar events in the capital and in Pattaya. When the festival proved to be very successful, the planners realised that Phuket would be competing with the other cities' festivals so the festival was moved from November to February – a drier month in Phuket anyway. However, in 2007 it was held in August. Whenever it is on, the whole island – but the town of Patong specifically – is packed with (mostly male) revellers from all over the world.

Although Bangkok and Pattaya both have prominent gay scenes, Phuket's is possibly the most lovely, both because of the scenery and the light-hearted, open and friendly atmosphere. In recent years, the festival has also included social responsibility campaigns, such as HIV awareness, staying clean and sober, and the fight against child prostitution.

The main events of the four-day weekend party are a huge beach volleyball tournament and, of course, the Grand Parade, featuring floats, cheering crowds and beautiful costumes in the streets of Patong.

Prefestival parties start happening weeks before the event, and include things such as Gay Diving and Gay Sea Canoeing. Great package tours can be booked through many companies, including **Gay Guide Thailand** (www.gayguideinthailand.com) for men, and **Lesbian Adventures in Thailand** (www.lathailand.com) for women.

For updates on future festivals, or to sign up for the spectacular volleyball tournament, go to www.phuketpride.org.

amenities, plus one or two more. There's also a glossy spa featuring a smorgasbord of restorative treatments.

BYD Lofts (☎ 0 7634 3024; www.bydlofts.com; 5/28 Th Hat Patong; apt 5250-10, 250B; ☎ ☎ ☎) If style and comfort are more important to you than beachfront (although it's only a minute's walk to the beach), look no further. Urban-style apartments with lots of white (floors, walls, blinds) and sharp lines feel angelic compared with the seedy world of Patong on the streets below. There's a day spa, a rooftop pool and an excellent *haute cuisine* restaurant on the premises.

our pick Baan Yin Dee (☎ 0 7629 4104; www.baanyindee.com; 7/5 Th Muean Ngen; r from 5800B; ☎ ☎ ☎) On a hill overlooking town, this is Patong's premier boutique getaway. It's small but perfectly put together: spacious rooms with balconies, design magazine styling and a trickle of beautiful young things hanging out around the pool. If you're partying all night, this is the place to repair your soul and there's a fabulous restaurant for a fine culinary treat.

Le Meridien Phuket (☎ 0 7634 0480; www.lemeridien.com; r from 8925B; ☎ ☎ ☎) Just outside town, this swanky resort has everything the international globetrotter could ask for, from tennis courts and swimming pools (both very much in the plural), to fabulous restaurants

and palatial rooms. There's even volleyball, minigolf and a climbing wall. It remains one of Phuket's great escapes.

Impiana Phuket Cabana (☎ 0 7634 0138; www.impiana.com; Th Thawiwong; r from 9200B; ☎ ☎ ☎) Cabana style and plumb on the best part of the beach, the rooms here are laden with chic and creature comforts and are close to all the action. We were surprised that we couldn't find English-speaking staff at such a high-end spot though.

Eating

Patong has stacks of restaurants, some of them quite good. Bargain seafood and noodle stalls pop up across town at night – try the lanes on and around Th Bangla.

Patong's most glamorous restaurants are in a little huddle above the cliffs on the northern edge of town. Back in town, expect the usual spread of expat diners, filled with topless (the men, that is) tourists.

Jung Ceylon Shopping Complex (Th Rat Uthit; dishes 60-150B; ☎ 11am-11pm) For excellent, cheap eats in sterile surrounds, head for the basement food court in this shopping complex, where you'll find stalls serving specialities from every corner of Thailand.

Ali Baba (☎ 0 7634 5024; 38 Th Ruamchai; dishes 100-300B; ☎ 11am-midnight) A favourite with Patong's

resident Indians, Ali Baba serves delicious subcontinental specialities to diners swathed in hookah smoke.

Harry's Steakhouse & Pub (☎ 0 1787 3167; 110/2 Soi Big One; dishes 100-495B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) No surprises at Harry's: it's the usual, air-conditioned tourist boozier. If you fancy a slab of steak in fresh, clean surrounds, however, you could do a lot worse than a table here.

Savoey (☎ 0 7634 1171; 136 Th Thawiwong; dishes 120-350B; ☎ lunch & dinner) This perennially popular seafood haunt subscribes to the 'slay 'em and weigh 'em' fish restaurant philosophy. Cast an eye over the mountain of seafood piled up on ice outside, or the fish gulping away in tanks inside, point out your prey and then take a seat to enjoy your catch. Great food, good prices.

Baluchi (☎ 0 7629 2526; Horizon Beach Resort, Soi Kepsap; dishes 175-700B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Patong's showcase Indian restaurant features top-notch tandoori, air-conditioned comforts and a 'show' kitchen – go watch your food being made.

our pick Baan Rim Pa (☎ 0 7634 4079; Th Kalim Beach; dishes 215-475B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Stunning Thai food is served with a side order of spectacular views at this institution. Standards are high, with prices to match, but romance is in the air, with candlelight and piano music aplenty. The cooking is top-notch – book ahead and tuck in your shirt.

Da Maurizio Bar Ristorante (☎ 0 7634 4079; Th Kalim Beach; dishes 450-950B; ☎ lunch & dinner) This upmarket Italian joint is cut from similar cloth and serves pasta dishes so good you'll be composing arias on your napkin. Expect the requisite level of Roman romance and unctuous, mouth-watering cooking.

Drinking

Some visitors may find that Patong's bar scene is enough to put them off their *pât tai*, but if you're in the mood for plenty of beer, winking neon and short skirts, it is certainly worth sampling.

Th Bangla is Patong's beer and bar-girl Mecca and features a number of spectacular, go-go extravaganzas, where you can expect the usual mix of gyrating Thai girls and often red-faced Western men. The music is loud (expect techno), the clothes are all but non-existent and the décor is typically slapstick with plenty of phallic imagery. That said, the atmosphere is more carnival than carnage and

you'll find plenty of Western women pushing their way through the throng to the bar.

Tiger Entertainment (☎ 0 7634 5112; Th Bangla; ☎ noon-2am) The strangest building in Phuket features concrete cave styling and a menagerie of unsettling – and extremely well-endowed – anthropomorphic tigers. More a congregation of go-go bars – topped with a nightclub – than a single entity, this is the first, and often last, stop on any odyssey through Patong's bar scene.

Banana Disco (☎ 0 1271 2469; 96 Th Thawiwong; admission 200B) If you're after a more sophisticated nightclub experience, this is your ticket. A corny Aztec theme prevails, but at least you can dance without skidding around in puddles of beer.

Molly Malone's (☎ 0 7629 2771; Th Thawiwong; ☎ noon-2am) Wildly popular with tourists, this pub rocks with Irish gigs every night at 9.45pm. There's a good atmosphere, lots of pub food and some great tables out the front from which to admire the ocean and legions of passers-by. Guinness is available for a mere 349B per pint.

Scruffy Murphy's (☎ 0 7629 2590; 5 Th Bangla; ☎ 11am-2am) Yep, it's another Irish bar. This is, however, one of Patong's more respectable bars – largely due to the price of the drinks – with cosy Celtic styling, live music, good beer and better *craft* (distinctly Irish brand of fun). If you're keen to escape the Thai bar girls, this is one of the better bets.

Entertainment

Once you've done the go-go, there's plenty more to see. Cabaret and Thai boxing, in particular, are something of a speciality here.

Phuket Simon Cabaret (☎ 0 7634 2011; www.phuket-simoncabaret.com; admission 550B) About 300m south of town on Th Sirirach, this cabaret offers entertaining transvestite shows. The 600-seat theatre is grand, the costumes are gorgeous and the ladyboys are convincing. The house is often full. Performances are given at 7.30pm and 9.30pm nightly – book ahead.

Rock City & Saxophone (Th Kalim Beach) These two new venues, next door to each other, have nightly live music. Rock City, well, rocks, with local and Western hard-rock bands. Saxophone focuses on jazz, funk and soul, and books acts from Bangkok on a regular basis.

Sphinx Theatre (☎ 0 7634 1500; 120 Th Rat Uthit; admission 350B) There's more cabaret on offer at

the Sphinx, where shows kick off at 9pm and 10.30pm daily.

Bangla Boxing Stadium (☎ 0 7282 2348; Th Bangla; admission 1000B) This stadium stages bouts at 8pm every Sunday.

Train Thai Boxing (☎ 0 7629 2890; Soi Kepsap; ☎ 8am-9pm) You can learn a few moves of your own at Train Thai Boxing, where a 90-minute lesson costs 300B – but pack some Band-Aids.

Getting There & Around

Túk-túk circulate around Patong for 25B per ride. There are numerous places to rent 125cc motorcycles and jeeps. **Patong Big Bike** (☎ 0 7634 0380; Th Rat Uthit) rents proper motorcycles (500B to 1000B per day), not scooter/motorbikes, as well as off-road motorbikes (350B per day). Keep in mind that the helmet law is strictly enforced in Patong. **Via Rent-A-Car** (☎ 0 7638 5718; www.via-phuket.com), based in Kamala, has an unattended office in town (you call from the telephone there) and delivers rental cars to Patong. **Budget** (☎ 0 7629 2389; 44 Th Thaveewong; ☎ 9am-4pm) has an office in the Patong Merlin Hotel.

Sǒrng-tāa-ou to Patong from Phuket Town leave from Th Ranong, near the day market and fountain circle; the fare is 50B. The after-hours charter fare is 250B. Buses from Patong to Phuket Town leave from the southern end of Th Thawiwong and cost 50B.

HAT KAMALA

หาดกมลา

Since its tsunami battering, Kamala has lost ground – in terms of tourist arrivals – to nearby Patong and Hat Surin. The upside of this is that the resorts are newer and the beaches are quieter than almost anywhere else on Phuket. This pretty beach is golden-white, the ambience is very mellow and everyone smiles and says hello to each other. This might not last for much longer though, as new resorts are popping up and several stray jet skis seem to have escaped from Patong to buzz around this otherwise quiet bay.

Sights & Activities

Local beach boffins will tell you that **Laem Singh**, just north of Kamala, is one of the best capes on the island. Walled in by cliffs, there is no road access so you have to park on the headland and clamber down a narrow path. You could camp here and eat at the rustic

roadside seafood places at the northern end of Singh or in **Ban Kamala**, a village further south. If you're renting a motorbike, this is a nice little trip down Rte 4025 and then over dirt roads from Surin to Kamala.

Phuket Fantasea (☎ 0 7638 5000; www.phuket-fantasea.com; admission with/without dinner 1900/1500B; ☎ 6-11.30pm Fri-Wed) is a US\$60 million 'cultural theme park' located just east of Hat Kamala. Despite the billing, there aren't any rides, but there is a show that takes the colour and pageantry of traditional Thai dance and costumes and combines this with state-of-the-art light-and-sound techniques that rival anything found in Las Vegas (think 30 elephants). All of this takes place on a stage dominated by a full-scale replica of a Khmer temple reminiscent of Angkor Wat. Kids especially will be captivated by the spectacle but it is over-the-top cheesy. There is a good collection of souvenir shops in the park offering Thai handicrafts. The food on offer at Thai buffet dinner has a bad reputation among travellers, so consider taking in the show without the meal. Tickets can be booked through most hotels and tour agencies.

Don't bother bringing your camera to catch the splendour and spectacle on film – they are not allowed and if you do bring it, you'll have to deposit it for safekeeping before you enter.

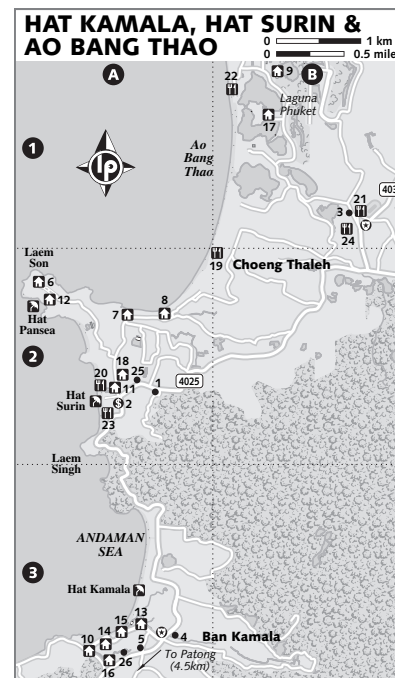
Back in Kamala, you can organise diving through expat-run **Scuba Quest** (☎ 0 7627 9016; www.scuba-quest-phuket.de).

Sleeping & Eating

There's a string of mostly overpriced (from 1000B), dilapidated sleeping options along the north end of the beach clustered among some rickety beach bars and restaurants. All rates drop considerably in the low season. Pickings are slim for good food – if you have a car consider driving to Hat Surin (opposite) where there are lots of great choices.

Benjamin Resort (☎ 0 7638 5145; www.phuketdir.com/benjaminresort; r incl breakfast 1000-1500B; ☎) With circa 1970 construction, but right on the beach, friendly Benjamin is looking a little crumbly, but was getting a fresh coat of paint when we passed through. Rooms all come with TVs and minifridges and the ones with views are the priciest. Rates drop 50% in the low season.

Orchid House (☎ 0 7638 5445; treepoppanat_kwan@yahoo.com; r 1000-1500B; ☎) This orchid is clean-cut and cutesy with patterned tiles and shim-



mering curtains. Blooming pot plants abound and there's a sweet downstairs bar-café. All in all, it's cleaner and better value than Benjamin and is only about 20m further away from the beach.

Kamala Dreams (☎ 0 7629 1131; www.kamala-beach.net; r 2520-3040B; ☎) Two strides from the beach, expect sparkling surfaces and spotless (though slightly dowdy) rooms with tiled floors and blinding white paint. Grounds, though small, are lovely with more white walls, Buddha sculptures and an inviting oval-shaped pool.

Kamala Beach Hotel (☎ 0 7627 9580; www.kamalabeach.com; r 3100-3950B, bungalows 4350-5600B; ☎) There's not much flair to the design here, but the hotel is right on the beach and boasts two big pools. The spacious bungalows are nearly identical to the rooms and not worth the extra baht. A good choice for families.

our pick Loyalina Hotel (☎ 0 7638 5942; www.loyalinalahotel.com; r incl breakfast 5500-7700B; ☎) We loved this tiny beachfront boutique hotel, especially the split-level suites with very private rooftop terraces for romantic sunset views

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over white sand and blue sea. Décor is simple, Thai and chic, with fluffy white duvets and honey-toned wood furniture. This is a place that is ideal for honeymooners, simply dripping in intimacy and sophistication. Room rates include a one-hour couple's massage at the on-site spa. The only downside is that the pool is ridiculously small – but that turquoise ocean is only steps away.

Getting There & Away

To catch a regular sǒrng-tāa-ou from Kamala to Patong costs 50B per person, while a sǒrng-tāa-ou charter (starting in the evenings) costs 250B. You can rent vehicles in Hat Kamala at **Via Rent-A-Car** (☎ 0 7638 5718; www.via-phuket.com).

HAT SURIN

หาดสุรินทร์

Surin is upscale but completely unpretentious. A distinctly Thai spirit lingers here along with the lazy, pampered vacationers – which is probably why expats love this area so much.

Development is fast and furious, but is mostly in the form of buy-in luxury condos and apartments. And we understand why: this golden beach with all the smiling faces makes us want to move here, too. Trees line the shore and dozens of cheap food shacks (offering some of the best value seafood on Phuket) shelter beneath them, while the grander resorts hide away on the hillslops.

The downside of all this, of course, is that the beach can get crowded. Hat Surin is extremely pretty, but stretches have already become a car crash of snack stalls and souvenir sellers. For celebrities, at least, the only way to do Surin today is from behind the guarded gates of the exclusive Amanpuri Resort (right).

Expect big, dangerous seas during the monsoon – swimmers beware, surfers rejoice.

Information

There is an ATM at Surin Plaza, just east of the beach on Rte 4025, and another outside the eternally closed Tourist Service Centre right at the turn-off towards Surin Beach. Internet access is available at **Andaman Car Rental** (☎ 0 7632 4422; per min 1B; ☎ 9am-9pm) and at most of the hotels.

Sleeping

Budget digs are at a real premium, but the midrange and luxury options are among the best on all of Phuket.

Capri Beach Resort (☎ 0 7627 0597; caprihotelsurin@yahoo.com; r 1500-2750B; 🍷) This little yellow temple to Italian kitsch was getting a major makeover when we passed through. Even before the remodel, this welcoming spot offered great home cooking, snug rooms and more Italiana than you could stomach – so imagine what the new and improved version will be like. Expect opera, giant pepper grinders and high standards. It's a short hop from the beach.

Surin Bay Inn (☎ 0 7627 1601; www.surinbayinn.com; r 2000B; 🍷) Right next door, this is another welcoming midranger. There's an eatery serving fabulous breakfasts below, clean, spacious, albeit plain, rooms above and a very useful book exchange.

our pick Benyada Lodge (☎ 0 7627 1261; www.benyadalodge-phuket.com; r 2500-5000B; 🍷) Chic, modern rooms – with black louvred closets, terracotta tiled bathrooms that open up to the room, and silk, pastel-coloured

throw pillows scattered in the lounging corner – are a great bargain for this area. Service is stellar and we loved the high-end details, such as ice water service every time you sit anywhere in the lobby. Take in the sunset and a dip in the pool at the rooftop bar. The hotel is right next to the Surin Bay Inn and only a few minutes' walk to the beach.

our pick Twin Palms (☎ 0 7631 6500; www.twinpalms-phuket.com; r 7800-50,000B; 🍷) This is the Audrey Hepburn of Phuket's hotels – it's classic yet completely contemporary and oozes effortless class. There's a pervasive feeling of space with minimalist, artsy swimming pools everywhere that are fringed by delicate white frangipani. Even the simplest rooms are extra spacious and have oversized bathrooms, sublimely comfortable beds and a supreme sense of calm. It's a few minutes' walk to the beach. Expats from all over Phuket can be found eating the island's most popular brunch here on Sundays.

our pick Chedi (☎ 0 7632 4017; www.ghmhotels.com; r 17,000-41,000B; 🍷) Almost any place that was located on a private beach this quiet and stunning would have to make it onto our top pick list. But Chedi's bungalows, with their naturalistic wooden exteriors that hide beneath the foliage of the hillside, and their earthy, luxurious interiors, make the site that much better. The restaurant has a dreamy, Crusoe feel and looks out over the water and an unexpectedly modern, six-sided pool. You'll have to be in decent shape for walking around the resort, since it can be quite a hoof up hills and over wooden walkways to get to many of the bungalows.

Amanpuri Resort (☎ 0 7632 4333; www.amanresorts.com; villas US\$750-7900; 🍷) Phuket's number one celebrity magnet, the Amanpuri offers lashings of glamour and palatial luxury – in fact, it was designed by the architect behind the former Shah of Iran's winter palace. With a staggering 3½ members of staff to every guest, this is exclusive service with bells on. Accommodation is in private villas and you can even book your own chef to cook for you.

Eating

There are plenty of excellent restaurants in and around Surin. For cheap seafood, your first stop should be the numerous, fun and delicious seafront snack stalls.

our pick Taste (☎ 0 7886 6401; mains 160-225B; 🍷 lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) The best of a new breed of urban-meets-surf eateries along the beach. Our Mandarin chicken salad was the best salad we had in Phuket and we found the house speciality (blue crab ravioli) small but impressively good. The Swedish-Nepali owners are great with service and smiles. This is also a great spot for a sundowner.

Silk (☎ 0 7627 1705; Rte 4025; mains 200-450B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This expansive stylish place is one of several upmarket restaurants in Surin Plaza, just east of the beach on Rte 4025. Silk is something of an expat magnet and draws locals from across the island. The décor is a hip cocktail of burgundy paint, wood and exotic flowers, while the menu focuses on beautifully executed Thai specialities.

our pick The Catch (☎ 0 7631 6500; mains 250-450B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Slip on your breeziest dress or a pair of linen trousers to dine at this drapery, cabana-style eatery right on the beach. It's part of Twin Palms, even though it's not attached, and has all the same classy attributes as the hotel in both ambience and cuisine.

Getting There & Away

A regular sörng-tää-ou from Phuket Town's Th Ranong to Hat Surin costs 50B per person, and tük-tük or sörng-tää-ou charters cost 250B to 350B.

Rent cars from **Andaman Car Rental** (☎ 0 7632 4422; ☎ 9am-9pm), opposite the entrance to Twin Palms. A jeep costs from 1200B per day.

AO BANG THAO

อ่าวบางเทา

The 8km sweep of beautiful Ao Bang Thao is the stomping ground for many of Phuket's glitziest resorts. Buying up land, gating it off and practically establishing their own mini-state, these five-star super-hotels now operate out of a development named Laguna Phuket, which feels more like a ritzy California gated community than Thailand (but it's a great place to be an unabashed tourist and hobnob with big bucks). The pretty southern stretch of beach outside Laguna is the preserve of local fishers and some midrange tourist facilities, and is a lazy, favourite haunt for local expats. The beach down this end seems to go on forever and the colourful long-tail

fishing boats in the far south lend it an old Thailand flavour.

The Hideaway Day Spa (Map p319) has an excellent reputation. It offers traditional Thai massage, sauna and mud body wraps in a tranquil wooded setting at the edge of a lagoon. Treatments start at 1500B. The Hideaway also has its own line of spa products.

Sleeping

Laguna Phuket is home to six luxury resorts, an 18-hole golf course and 30 restaurants (the gargantuan Sheraton Grande alone has eight restaurants). Guests at any one of the resorts can use the dining and recreation facilities at all of them. Frequent shuttle buses make the rounds of all the hotels, as do pontoon boats (via the linked lagoons).

Bangtao Lagoon Bungalows (Map p319; ☎ 0 7632 4260; info@phuket-bangtaolagoon.com; r 1350-5400B; 🍷) The lowest-end rooms here are minuscule and fan cooled, while the top-end ones are beachfront but overpriced for how plain they are – but the beach location is so great it hardly matters. The staff are fabulously friendly.

Andaman Bangtao Bay Resort (Map p319; ☎ 0 7627 0246; www.andamanbangtaobayresort.com; bungalows incl breakfast 4970-7900B; 🍷) Every bungalow has a sea view and there's a summer camp vibe at this pleasant little resort. The design is very Thai, with woodcarvings on the walls and coconuts hanging from the eaves of the roofs, but for this price we expected a little more luxury.

Sheraton Grande Laguna Phuket (Map p319; ☎ 0 7632 4101; www.starwoodhotels.com; r from 9000B; 🍷) Gated away in Laguna Phuket, the Sheraton will appeal to a lively, active crowd. It features a gigantic 323m pool, water sports facilities galore, a kids' club and a whopping 423 rooms.

our pick Banyan Tree Phuket (Map p319; ☎ 0 7632 4374; www.banyantree.com; villas from US\$550; 🍷) One of Asia's finest hotels, and the first on Phuket to introduce bungalows with their own private pool, the Banyan Tree Phuket (in Laguna Phuket) is an oasis of sedate, understated luxury. Accommodation is in villas – some take standards another indulgent step further with two private pools – and the on-site spa is one of the best on the continent. If you're after a rip-roaring time in Thailand,

this is not the spot for you. If you really want to get away from it all, however, pick up the phone and book yourself a room now – it is very popular.

Eating

Despite what some local hoteliers would have you believe, there is good food to be had outside the confines of Bang Thao's luxury hotels. You will find much of it just outside Laguna's main gate.

Lotus Restaurant (Map p319; dishes 50-100B; ☺ lunch & dinner) An open-walled eatery 500m west of the entrance to Banyan Tree Phuket, this is the first in a row of beachside Thai and seafood restaurants that stretches to the south. It's clean, breezy and friendly, and has an amazing assortment of live crab, lobster, shrimp, fish and other visual and culinary delights in very well-tended tanks. Check out the crazy mantis shrimp!

English Pub (Map p319; ☎ 0 9872 1398; Th Srisoonthorn; dishes 100-300B; ☺ lunch & dinner) Aka 'The Whispering Cock', this timber and thatch watering hole is the most authentic English pub on the island – even the toilets smell. It has a sunny beer garden, a snug interior, a good range of beers and some decent pub grub. Shoot some darts or kick back with premiership footy.

Babylon Beach Club (Map p319; ☎ 08 1970 5302; Hat Bang Thao; dishes 120-250B; ☺ 10am-11pm) Grab a table right on the beach and enjoy anything from Thai to Italian seafood or cheeseburgers for the kids.

Tatonka (Map p319; ☎ 0 7632 4349; Th Srisoonthorn; dishes 250-300B; ☺ dinner Thu-Tue) This is the home of 'globetrotter cuisine', which owner-chef Harold Schwarz developed by taking fresh local products and combining them with cooking and presentation techniques learned in Europe, Colorado and Hawaii. The eclectic, tapas-style selection includes creative vegetarian and seafood dishes and such delights as Peking duck pizza (220B). There's also a tasting menu (750B per person, minimum two people), which lets you try a little of everything. Call ahead in the high season. Tatonka arranges free transport for guests of the resort complex.

Getting There & Away

A sörng-täa-ou between Bang Thao and Phuket Town's Th Ranong costs 50B per person. Tük-tük charters are 250B.

SIRINAT NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติสิรินาทร

Comprising the beaches of Nai Thon, Nai Yang and Mai Khao, as well as the former Nai Yang National Park and Mai Khao wildlife reserve, **Sirinat National Park** (☎ 0 7632 8226; www.dnp.go.th; admission 200B; ☺ 8am-5pm) encompasses 22 sq km of coastal land, plus 68 sq km of sea. It runs from the western Phang-Nga provincial border south to the headland that separates Nai Yang from Nai Thon.

Improved roads to **Hat Nai Thon** have brought only a small amount of development to this otherwise pristine coast backed by casuarina and pandanus trees. On the beach, umbrellas and sling chairs are available from vendors. Swimming is quite good here except at the height of the monsoon, and there is some coral near the headlands at either end of the bay. The remains of a wrecked 50m-long tin dredger lie off the coast near tiny **Ko Waew** at a depth of 16m. Naithon Beach Resort (opposite) can arrange dive trips in the area.

Hat Nai Yang is good for snorkelling and is popular with Thai tourists. About a kilometre off Nai Yang is a large reef at a depth of 10m to 20m. Snorkelling equipment can be hired at many of the hotels. Judging from the lie of the reef, there could be a surfable reef break here during the southwest monsoon.

About 5km north of Nai Yang is **Hat Mai Khao**, Phuket's longest beach. Sea turtles lay their eggs on the beach between November and February each year. A visitors centre with toilets, showers and picnic tables is at Mai Khao, from where there are some short trails through the casuarinas to a steep beach. Take care when swimming at Mai Khao, as there's a strong year-round undertow. Except on weekends and holidays you'll have this place almost to yourself; even during peak periods, peace and solitude are usually only a few steps away, as there's so much space here.

The area between Nai Yang and Mai Khao is largely given over to **shrimp farming**. Fortunately shrimp farmers here don't dig artificial lagoons into the beach or mangroves (as at Ko Chang or Khao Sam Roi Yot), but rather they raise the spawn in self-contained concrete tanks, a practice significantly less harmful to the environment.

The whole area is only minutes from Phuket International Airport, which makes it particularly convenient for a first stop after a long trip.

Sleeping & Eating

HAT NAI THON

Naithon Beach Resort (☎ 0 7620 5379; fax 0 7620 5381; 22/2 Th Surin; cottages 1000-1500B; ☺ Nov-May; ☺) This resort has large, tastefully designed wooden cottages. A small restaurant serves sandwiches and Thai food. The resort closes in the rainy season. It is on the opposite side of the access road from the beach.

our pick Trisara (☎ 0 7361 0100; www.trisara.com; villas from US\$780; ☺ ☑ ☒) If you can afford to stay here, do so. A tranquil oasis far removed from Patong's chaos, ultraexclusive Trisara's villas take in some of Phuket's most stunning views and are nestled in an idyllic location between jungle and sea. Minimalist yet soothing décor, private pools and steam rooms (for the spa review, see the boxed text, p298), and simply oodles of class make this one of the island's top choices. Honeymoon, anyone? Service is outstanding.

HAT NAI YANG & HAT MAI KHAO

Along the dirt road at the very southern end of Hat Nai Yang is a seemingly endless strip of seafood restaurants and, oddly enough, tailor shops. There is also a small minimart near the entrance to the Indigo Pearl resort. Camping is allowed on both Nai Yang and Mai Khao beaches without any permit.

Sirinat National Park (☎ 0 2562 0760; reserve@dnp.go.th; tents 50-100B, bungalows 800B) The park offers camp sites and large bungalows. Check in at the building opposite the visitors centre or book online. The restaurant serving basic Thai fare is open from 8am to 9pm.

Phuket Camp Ground (☎ 08 1676 4318; www.phuketcampground.com; tents per person 150B, r 600B; ☑) Privately operated, this campground recently had to move off the beach but still rents out tents, now in a lovely area near a mangrove forest, each with rice mats, pillows, blankets and a torch. A small outdoor restaurant-bar provides sustenance and there are also two simple rooms. The owners will pick you up from the airport for 300B per trip.

Nai Yang Beach Resort (☎ 0 7632 8300; www.naiyangbeachresort.com; 65/23-24 Th Hat Nai Yang; bungalows 1000-8000B; ☺) This resort is clean, quiet and near the beach, and does a great barbecue at night. The lowest-end rooms are fan-cooled, while higher-end ones are modern Thai style and quite chic.

Golddigger Resort (☎ 08 1892 1178; www.airport-phuket.com; r 1200-3500B; ☺ ☑ ☒) One of the

better midrange options along this stretch of beach, Golddigger Resort is Swiss-run and has developed a loyal following. Something of a boutique arrangement, there are only 16 rooms in this one-storey hotel, all with a view of the pool area and thick tropical foliage that covers the grounds.

our pick Indigo Pearl (☎ 0 7632 7006; www.indigo-pearl.com; r 5600-26,250B; ☺ ☑ ☒) The most unique and hip of Phuket's high-end resorts takes its design cues from the island's tin mining history – although it sounds weird, this industrial theme melded with tropical luxe creates a spectacularly beautiful and soothing place to stay. Hardware, such as vices, scales and other mining tools, is used in the décor to the tiniest detail – even the toilet paper rolls are big bolts – and the common lounge areas are infused with indigo light. The gardens are modern and lush and surround a pool that looks like an oasis with a big waterfall. We especially love the décor of the Black Ginger restaurant, which is in a classical wooden Thai building painted entirely black, with black furniture and all, and perched over a bright lily pond. The more laid-back of the resort's two bars is called...wait for it...the Rebar.

JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa (☎ 0 7633 8000; www.marriott.com; 231 Moo 3; r from 8100B; ☺ ☑ ☒) This big and uber-swanky Marriott has an enviable position on the beach. Among the most appreciated assets are mammoth rooms boasting superior sea views, raised *sáh-ah* (often spelt *sala*; covered resting place) areas, triangular back cushions, massage mats and polished wood floors. A cooking school and pub with live music round out the deal. Don't miss the spa (see the boxed text, p298).

Getting There & Away

Sörng-täa-ou from Phuket cost 50B per person and run between 7am and 5pm only. If you're coming from the airport, a taxi costs about 250B. There is no regular sörng-täa-ou stop for Mai Khao, but a tük-tük charter from Phuket Town costs about 300B.

KHAO PHRA TAEW ROYAL WILDLIFE & FOREST RESERVE

อุทยานสัตว์ป่าเขาพระแทว

It's not all sand and sea. In the north of the island, this park protects 23 sq km of virgin island rainforest (evergreen monsoon forest). There are some pleasant hikes over the hills and a couple of photogenic waterfalls: **Ton Sai**

and **Bang Pae**. The falls are best seen in the rainy season between June and November; in the dry months they slow to a trickle. The highest point in the park is the 442m **Khao Phara**. Because of its royal status, the reserve is better protected than the average national park in Thailand.

A German botanist discovered a rare and unique species of palm in Khao Phra Taew about 50 years ago. Called the white-backed palm or *langkow* palm, the fan-shaped plant stands 3m to 5m tall and is found only here and in Khao Sok National Park (p244).

Tigers, Malayan sun bears, rhinos and elephants once roamed the forest here, but nowadays resident mammals are limited to humans, pigs, monkeys, slow loris, langur, civets, flying foxes, squirrels, mousedeer and other smaller animals. Watch out for cobras and wild pigs.

The **Phuket Gibbon Rehabilitation Centre** (Map p287; ☎ 0 7626 0492; www.gibbonproject.org; donations encouraged; ☎ 9am-4pm), in the park near Nam Tok Bang Pae, is open to the public. Financed by donations (1500B will care for a gibbon for one year), the centre adopts gibbons that have been kept in captivity and reintroduces them to the wild.

Park rangers may act as guides for hikes in the park on request; payment for services is by donation.

To get to Khao Phra Taew from Phuket Town, take Th Thepkasatri north about 20km to Thalang District, and turn right at the intersection for Nam Tok Ton Sai, which is 3km down the road.

THALANG DISTRICT

อำเภอถลาง

A few hundred metres northeast of the famous **Heroines Monument** in Thalang District on Rte

4027, and about 11km northwest of Phuket Town, is **Thalang National Museum** (Map p287; ☎ 0 7631 1426; admission 30B; ☎ 8.30am-4pm). The museum contains five exhibition halls chronicling southern themes such as the history of Thalang-Phuket and the colonisation of the Andaman Coast, and describing the various ethnicities found in southern Thailand. The legend of the 'two heroines' (memorialised on the nearby monument), who supposedly drove off an 18th-century Burmese invasion force by convincing the island's women to dress as men, is also recounted in detail utilising backlit display panels and touch-screen electronic presentations. The focal point of one hall is the impressive 2.3m-tall statue of Vishnu, which dates to the 9th century and was found in Takua Pa early in the 20th century.

Also in Thalang District, just north of the crossroads near Thalang town, is **Wat Phra Thong** (Map p287; admission by donation; ☎ dawn-dusk), Phuket's 'Temple of the Gold Buddha'. The image is half buried so that only the head and shoulders are visible above ground. According to local legend, those who have tried to excavate the image have become very ill or encountered serious accidents soon after their failed attempts. The temple is particularly revered by Thai Chinese, many of whom believe the image hails from China. During Chinese New Year the temple is an important focus for pilgrims from Phang-Nga, Takua Pa and Krabi. In addition to Phra Thong there are several other Buddha images, including seven representing the different days of the week, plus a Phra Prakat (an unusual pose in which the Buddha is touching his own head with his right hand) and a Phra Palelai (sitting in 'European pose').

Some parts of the movie *Good Morning Vietnam* were filmed on location in Thalang.

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