

Koh Tao

GO PRO - OR JUST GO DIVING



AL HORNSBY heads for the island of Koh Tao and is pleasantly surprised by the rich diversity of diving experiences, as well as the comprehensive Divemaster and Diving Instructor (IDC) training on offer

Photographs by **AL HORNSBY**

There are a number of reasons why the small island of Koh Tao, off Thailand's eastern coast, is considered one of the most-popular Thai resort destinations. Like many other islands in the country, it has a reputation for fun and partying - it's one of the monthly 'Full Moon Party' islands, after all - but it has different offerings as well. Its crowd, largely European and Asian, is a mix of both young and somewhat older people than seen on most of the other islands, with a lot of repeat travellers who visited when they were university-age, now coming back with their families. And, while there is no shortage of great bars, restaurants and late-night clubs, it has a clean, laid-back atmosphere that coincides with the beauty of its natural, tropical-island environment.

And, while Koh Tao's granite-boulder geology and steep mountainsides create an incredible landscape for hikers and climbers, its biggest recreational draw is its diving and snorkelling. Its name in Thai means 'Turtle Island', as it is a nursery area for green and hawksbill turtles, which are frequently seen, and its beaches and near-shore waters offer surprisingly vibrant dive sites of various descriptions. It is especially unique in that despite its small size - only 21 sq metres, and much of that sparsely-populated mountainsides - it has become one of the top dive training locations in the entire world, with thousands of people each year having PADI Discover Scuba Diving experiences, gaining their Open Water Diver certifications, and moving on up through Advanced Open Water and other continuing education levels. To top it off, it has become one of diving's most-prolific professional-level training centres, and claims to have more Divemasters and instructors trained each year than any other island on the planet.

When you visit Koh Tao for the first time, you might wonder how this evolved. Well, it does have excellent, progressive dive operators who make it natural and easy to expand one's diver training while enjoying diving each day, affordable prices, and a pervasive, tranquil, tropical loveliness. Its real secret, however, is one that isn't the first thing always talked about in Koh Tao, but something that is actually treated very moderately - it's the extraordinary quality and diversity of its diving. I can



tell you, as someone fortunate enough to visit many different dive destinations, my welcome to a new area usually begins with tales of just how incredible the diving is, all the life and marvels we'll see, etc (claims that are virtually always accurate and that I'm certainly very happy to hear). Koh Tao was different... the attitude was far more reserved and conservative... that their diving was very nice, but not so famous as other areas, and so on.

If this was by design (and I really don't think it was), to lull me into modest expectations while knowing that I'd be blown away the moment I hit the water, I'll have to say, it worked. Having dived many parts of the world - especially in the Asia Pacific region - I can honestly say that never have I been so surprised at the incredible richness and diversity of a new dive location as I was in Koh Tao. The environment was dramatic and chock-full of life, rather a marine-species-on-parade experience in very unique settings. To describe just a few dive sites, as examples:

Sail Rock - The one somewhat distant site regularly dived (though less than two hours by boat), Sail Rock lies in open water between Koh Tao and another Thai island, Koh Phangan. It's an iceberg-shaped, life-covered pinnacle, with surrounding additional submerged peaks, that rises steeply from a 45m sand bottom. While it is famed for its winding, well-lit chimney that extends from 18m to within 5m of the surface, for me its special magic was the profuse collection of marine life, with massive schools of different fish as well as large solitary species, in generally very good visibility (the week I was in Koh Tao it ranged between 15m and 40m). In my two dives there, I photographed several types of large grouper, as well as large schools of longfin spadefish; a huge swarm of yellowfin barracuda, followed a bit later by a school of pickhandle barracuda and soon afterward I was enveloped by bluelined barracuda; and also there were vast shoals of yellowtail scad, all milling around the gigantic spire. What we didn't see were whalesharks, which are regularly present (though Koh Tao saved that for just a couple hours later).



Southwest Pinnacle - A great dive site on its own, the third dive of our day to Sail Rock was at a marvellous place known as Southwest Pinnacle (you guessed it, southwest of Koh Tao). A group of seven underwater peaks and ridges that extend from 30m to within 5m of the surface, it's a varied, impressive area, with large patches of anemones covering the rocky faces, most with resident pink anemonefish, and with many small groups of Java rabbitfish milling about. However, lovely and interesting this all was, however, it was the eight-metre whaleshark that really grabbed our attention. Over our 45-minute dive, the huge shark made four or five quick passes... and what an incredible sight it was, especially in this unique setting.



Sattakut Shipwreck – Not far offshore on the west side of Koh Tao, we dived a very interesting shipwreck, the Sattakut. A 48-metre-long US Navy LCI (landing craft, infantry) that saw considerable action during World War Two throughout the Pacific theatre, after the war it became a part of the Thai Navy. Sunk as a dive site in 2011, it rests with its stern at 30m, the bow at 26m, and the bridge at 18m. With two guns, the most dramatic is its 76mm bow cannon. Around the wreck we saw stingrays in the sand, and giant grouper, sweetlips and several species of snapper congregating about the deck and superstructure. Penetrations were possible for those of us with the appropriate certifications.

Chumphon Pinnacle – Well, every destination has its favourite dive, and for me, as nice as my dives around Koh Tao had been, the finale - which actually now lives in my favorite (ever) dive sites' list - was a long, submerged pinnacle off the northwest tip of the island. Rising up from a 40m sand/rubble bottom to within 14m of the surface, Chumphon is drama personified. We dropped onto a huge panorama of mountainous ridges and spires extending outward in seemingly every direction, dizzyingly

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complex in the 35-metre vis, crystal-blue water. The surfaces of the rocks were decorated with large gorgonians, black coral bushes and sponges. Most spectacular, however, were the seemingly hectares of slopes that were completely covered with huge, emerald, gold and violet-colored anemones, with massive schools of flashingly-bright yellowband fusiliers swirling above them all; as my many photographic images bear witness, the scene was near-indecribable. As we moved about, we found large brown-marbled grouper, coral cod and groups of giant sweetlips. At one spot on the sandy bottom, a large school of squid moved about, hunting over the sand. And, as if not to allow the dive to end on a quiet note, during our safety stop, a group of four young African pompano begin making rapid, flash-by passes at us, with one of them periodically extending his

GOING PRO IN PARADISE

In Koh Tao's history, Sairee Cottage Resort, located along the water on the island's most-popular area (Sairee Beach), is considered one of the pioneers. And, for the island's dive community, many longtime local pros have been associated with it at some time in their careers, whether receiving training, working or even living there - in the old days for about the cost of a burger a night! These days, it still is a fixture in the Koh Tao dive scene, having been developed into a lovely, modern resort, but having lost none of its casual, on-the-sand charm.

With a training pool, dive centre and classrooms, Wi-Fi and the other amenities expected by modern travellers, and several restaurants around the property (with many more accessible within short strolls), the resort has a variety of different accommodations, including beach and garden bungalows, poolside and garden rooms and even a comfortable dormitory (included in the price of the Go Pro training programmes).

The dive operation has qualified as a PADI five-star Instructor Development (IDC) Centre on Koh Tao, and is known not only for its excellent fun-dive offerings, but also for its dive educational programmes, featuring everything from snorkelling and PADI Discover Scuba Diving to Open Water Diver, Advanced Open Water Diver, Rescue Diver and specialties; in fact, a sizeable percentage of open water-certified diving guests start out fun-diving, only to realise that by the end of a week-long stay they can also earn their PADI Advanced Open Water credentials, and more, along the way.

Even more specialised is the professional diver development programme, with PADI Dive Master and Instructor Development Courses a hallmark. With wide-reaching programmes and schedules, divers interested in going pro find not only the required training, but also internship and mentoring programmes that help build real-world experience in diving operations, guiding dives and working with customers. The Go Pro PADI Instructor programme is led by PADI Platinum Course Director/Emergency First Response Instructor Trainer Marcel van den Berg, who, with his IDC Staff, conducts hands-on, close-attention programmes that receive high marks from their candidates. After qualifying as PADI Open Water Scuba Instructors by succeeding in a PADI Instructor Examination (IE) (which are conducted frequently on Koh Tao), the innovative Master Scuba Diver Trainer (MSDTC) Programme not only teaches candidates the five instructor specialties required, but also provides the new OWSIs the opportunity to teach and certify the 25 divers needed to be certified as MSDTs. This can be accomplished in about two weeks, but the full internship programme can be enjoyed for up to six weeks, allowing candidates considerable training and teaching experience before they enter the dive industry. Divers interested in becoming PADI Instructors should go to www.saireecottagediving.com and click on the IDC tab for full information.

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'streamer' threadfins in display, then instantly retracting them. For many minutes, I followed them through my viewfinder, repeatedly firing, trying to capture the millisecond of the display, without being able to tell if I ever caught it or not - until later on the boat, looking closely at my images - one, unusual photograph emerged, of the four, chromium-hued pompano, the big one at the centre in full display, an image like I had never before captured.

Yes, my brief visit to Koh Tao was something indeed, surprising, and so very special. ■

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