

Phuket Dive Guide



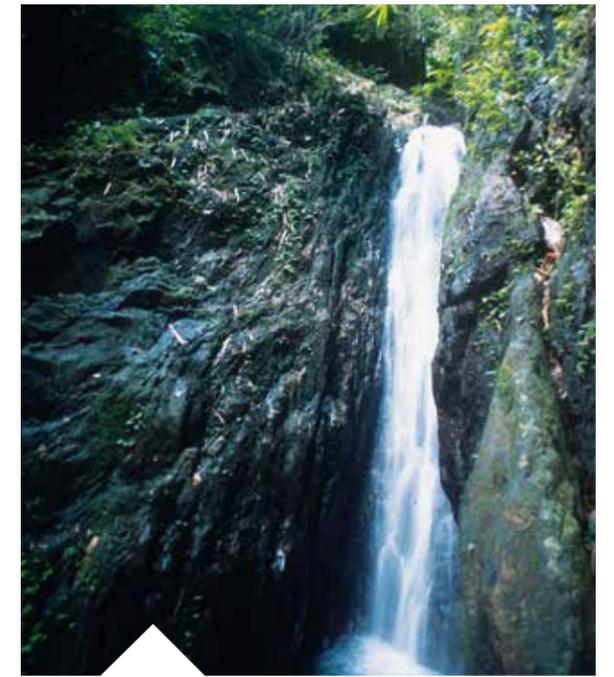
THAILAND is world-renowned for its diving, and **PHUKET** is the gateway to some of the best sites, as well as offering a whole host of other daytime and nocturnal activities

Photographs by **AL HORNSBY**

Mention Phuket, Thailand, and most people envision long, sandy beaches, mountainous jungles and a party scene like no other. As Thailand's best-known holiday island, Phuket is a world headquarters for revellers, with not only friendly locals, but crowds of people from around the globe – from Britain, Scandinavia, Italy, Russia and Australia, especially – there simply to have a good time. Accommodations run from five-star resorts and private bungalows to hostels and everything in between. Restaurants line the streets; besides local Thai and always-popular sushi, there are many others, especially European eateries, usually run by ex-pat visitors who decided they just couldn't leave. And, the club scene... it's electric, as funky as you could want it, and amazingly inexpensive. Of course, there is also Thai massage, which is found everywhere and anywhere, in parlours, on the beach or in the hotels.

As to sporting options, there are many. While simply lying on some long stretch of beach or taking in the sights around town are never bad choices, you can instead hike to jungle waterfalls, golf, surf, kayak, elephant trek, rock-climb and mountain bike. But, divers have a dirty little secret - there's even more, much more. Indeed, Thailand's most-exotic feature may actually be the incredible life that exists beneath the surface of the calm, warm waters of the surrounding Andaman Sea, with Phuket its major access point.

With many dive operators and dive charter boats operating in Phuket, reaching both local sites and more-distant dive areas (on multi-day liveaboard trips) is easy. And, there is an incredible range of world-class diving to choose from, with a wonderful density of marine life and many different topographical features. Anemones, soft corals and gorgonian fans grow on huge, granite boulders and walls, creating unique underwater landscapes. There are large schools of fish, rays, sharks and an assortment of macro-critters, plus a fascinating array of trademark creatures not often seen elsewhere, such as giant guitarfish and leopard sharks. And, if that isn't enough, frequently, in the months of February through April, there are also mantas and whales.



DAY TRIPS

The most-popular day dives out of Phuket are conducted around several island groups within approximately one to two hours by boat. The visibility in the area is good, usually between 15 and 25 metres. These include:

Anemone Reef – A submerged pinnacle 30km east of Phuket, it is a marine sanctuary. Its rocky ledges from 5-7m down are covered in anemones with clownfish, and soft corals; in the deeper areas, there are many large gorgonian fans. Dives are from near the surface to a maximum of 25m; moderate currents can be experienced. A good wreck dive, the **King Cruiser**, an 85-metre-long sunken car ferry, lies on the bottom just a kilometre away.

Koh (island in Thai) Racha Rai – One of two lovely islands about 20km south of Phuket, it has huge granite rocks above and below the surface, with lush coral growth and lots of reef fish, such as blue-ring angelfish and several species of butterflyfish. The water is typically calm and clear, with most dives averaging around 15m in depth, though the site reaches 30m. A number of different rays can be found in the sandy areas.

Koh Racha Noi – One of the most-dramatic day dive sites, with a maximum depth of 30m, the northern tip of the second of the Racha islands has huge boulders and pinnacles, with lots of fish and a healthy shark population, especially nurse sharks, leopard sharks and grey reef sharks. The southern tip is deeper, averaging 25m and exceeding 40m, with lots of soft corals on the boulders, and there is an old wooden shipwreck. The site features occasional sightings of mantas and whalesharks in the February-April season; currents can be moderately strong at times.

Hin Musang (Shark Point) – A line of three main pinnacles, one of which breaks the surface, the site is 1km southeast of Anemone Reef. With an average depth of 20m and a maximum of 24m, it is one of the most-popular Phuket day dives. It has lots of marine life, including sponges, gorgonians and big fish, such as trevally, barracuda and schooling snapper. A brilliant, soft coral-covered arch is a special spot, and a sandy bottom with a number of resident leopard sharks gives the site its name.

THE PHI PHI ISLANDS

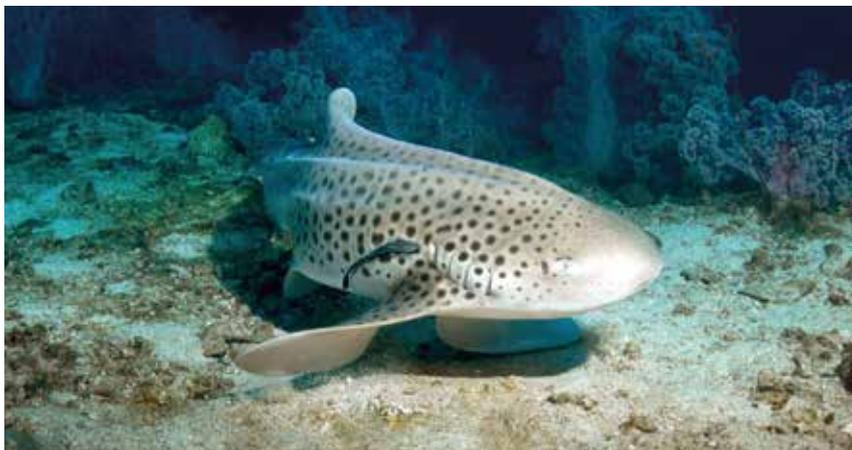
Located 48km southeast of Phuket, two-and-a-half hours by boat, the Phi Phi Islands are dived both as daytrips and by liveaboard. The islands are lovely, with two main islands and many jungle-covered islets jutting up from the water. The two most-popular sites are:

Koh Bida Nok – A small island with a granite cliff face, its mountainous underwater terrain is formed by huge boulders, ledges and overhangs. The diving is from the surface to 30m, with little current. The scenery is dramatic, with the rocky faces covered with fans, sea whips and soft corals. There are many fish, including ghost pipefish, seahorses and colourful reef tropicals. Leopard sharks are commonly seen in the sand, and mantas and whalesharks frequent the area in season.

Koh Bida Nai – A few hundred metres away, Bida Nai is a small islet that also features rock faces and granite boulders, averaging 20m of depth. It has an exquisite swim-through filled with glassy sweeper, and around the coral bottom are many scorpionfish and lionfish. Large pelagics are frequently seen, and unusual bamboo sharks can be found. The site is also known for cuttlefish and squid, which can be closely approached and photographed.



“The site is for experienced divers, with the shallowest point at 8m and vertical walls dropping to 70m - it is said to have the deepest drop-off in Thai waters”



THE SOUTH

Hin Daeng (Red Rock) – A solitary outcrop that barely breaks the surface of the sea, it is named for its thick covering of vibrant, red soft corals. Actually a series of walls and canyons that drop to 60m, it also has soft coral varieties in oranges and bright yellows, and many different species of sessile creatures, including sponges, gorgonians and anemones, fed by the currents that sweep across the intricate reef system. The beauty aside, Hin Daeng is famous for its large marine life - silvertip and grey reef sharks cruise by in the blue water, and mantas and whalesharks are regularly seen.

Hin Mouang (Purple Rock) – Just 500 metres to the southeast, Hin Mouang is a series of five pinnacles on a 200-metre-long, submerged ridge. The site is for experienced divers, with the shallowest point at 8m and vertical walls dropping to 70m - it is said to have the deepest drop-off in Thai waters. It has even more life than Red Rock, and it is described by some as ‘simply amazing’, and one of the best dives in Thailand. There are many soft corals, carpets of anemones and delicate hard corals, all jam-packed onto every available surface. Besides the numerous colourful tropicals and large rays, there are also many pelagic species seen here, including mackerel and barracuda.

EXPLORE THAILAND

Explore Thailand's underwater playground with waters abundant with sharks, and other large pelagics and macro critters. Relax on board S/Y The Junk - a unique dive vessel that welcomes 18 divers in beautiful cabins with en suite facilities. Explore the breathtaking Similan and Surin Islands with a range of itineraries available. To book your diving holiday, speak to one of our expert travel team on 01752 480808 or visit our website for more information!





THE NORTH

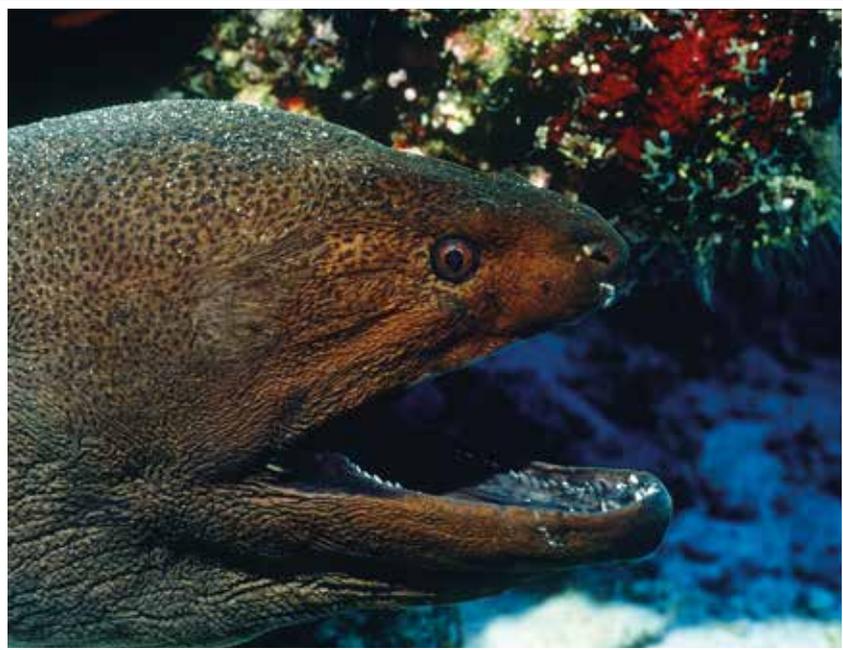
THE SIMILAN ISLANDS

Some 90km northwest of Phuket are the Similan Islands, nine larger islands and many smaller rock outcroppings that form the Mu Koh Similan Marine National Park. These beautiful, jungle-covered isles are breathtaking – both above and below the waterline. The water typically is very clear, with visibility often exceeding 30 metres. They offer many popular sites, some 26 being popularly dived, including the following:

Beacon Point – On the south tip of Koh Similan, this site has large scattered boulders and profuse hard corals, and reaches 40m in depth. There are whitetip sharks and many schooling fish, plus many pelagic species. In sandy areas there are numerous stingrays, including blue-spotted ribbon-tailed rays, black-blotched rays and Jenkins rays.

Boulder City – Located some 200 metres south of Koh Payan, the dive site is a submerged jumble of huge, smooth-sided boulders and swim-throughs. The rock is decorated with many fans, soft corals and encrusting sponges. Averaging 20m and reaching 30m in depth, it is an exciting dive, with eagle rays and mantas. There is a resident school of bumphead parrotfish, and dogtooth tuna and Napoleon wrasse are frequently seen.

Hin Pousar (Elephant Rock) – Just south of Koh Similan, several rounded rocks extending above the surface of the water provide a remarkable site – one of the Similan’s most-famous – that cannot be fully explored even in several dives. The boulders rise from the bottom nearly 50m down, their sheer sides covered with purple and white soft corals. The jumble of rock creates meandering passageways, with every wall splashed with colour from sponges, corals and seafans. Schools of fusiliers, sweetlips and batfish swirl about, and black grouper move through the rock tunnels. Currents can be strong at times.

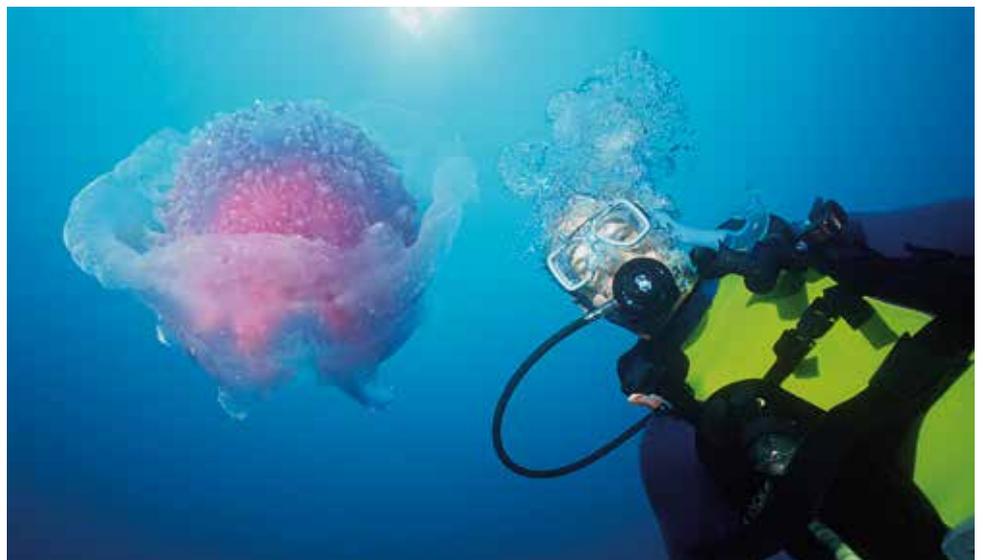


“Richelieu Rock, at the park’s southeast corner, is a rough spire that just breaks the surface some nine miles off the southern tip of Surin Tai”



LIVEBOARD DIVING

Even more dramatic diving is reached by Phuket's many liveboard boats, which run trips typically from two to six days in length. There is a southern route that dives the Phi Phi Islands and the Ko Lanta Marine Park, and a northern run that reaches Thailand's best-known diving in the Similan and Surin Islands.



THE SURIN ISLANDS

Some 100km to the north of the Similans are the remote Surin Islands, forming the Mu Surin Marine National Park. A collection of beautiful, forest-covered islands, the Surins feature perhaps the single-most-dramatic dive site in Thailand - **Richelieu Rock**, at the park's southeast corner, is a rough spire that just breaks the surface some nine miles off the southern tip of Surin Tai.

Rising from a gravel bottom at 30m, the crag is small enough to be easily circumnavigated in less than 30 minutes. It is difficult to describe the incredible density and scope of the life that surrounds this lonely ocean pinnacle. My log of my first two dives on Richelieu documented the following: two to three-metre-long giant guitarfish (one of which gave me a rare photograph); huge schools of trevally, cobia, snapper, blackfin barracuda and batfish; eight lionfish of two species; five species of clownfish; a pair of cuttlefish guarding a single egg; a three-metre nurse shark; a leopard shark; a six inch-long mantis shrimp; several yellow-margined morays and an unusual reticulated moray; a ten-inch-long murex shell laying eggs; and three species of scorpionfish - not to even mention the usual rich assortment of angelfish, butterflyfish, triggerfish, chromis, damsels and fusiliers swarming around gorgonians, sponges, crinoids and brilliantly-coloured soft corals. And if this remarkable place needed anything more, as I was to later discover, between February and April, whalesharks are frequently seen.

For anyone wishing to combine truly great diving with a fantastic, the-sky's-the-limit holiday, Phuket is inarguably unique. It simply has to make any fun-lover's 'don't miss it' list. ■