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WONDERS  
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# DIVING Thailand

Al Hornsby takes you on  
a whistlestop tour of some  
of Thailand's best diving areas

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AL HORNSBY

In the world of exotic diving, Thailand stands out, with an amazingly diverse array of dive locations and marine life. It also has great topside excursions, romantic getaways... and among the planet's most-hedonistic nightlife. Thailand's long, mountainous peninsula, where most diving is located, separates the Gulf of Thailand to the east, from the Andaman Sea to the west. The coastlines are dotted with thousands of jungle-covered, white-sand fringed islands, which rise up steeply out of clear, tropical waters rich with coral reefs. For an article like this, choosing 'the best' of Thailand's dive sites or areas has proven a wonderfully difficult task - there are simply so many to choose from.

We'll start in the country's southwest, in the area around Krabi Province, where Koh Lanta ('Koh' is Thai for island) edges the Andaman Sea. From there, we'll head northwards up the coast to Koh Phi Phi, with its two main islands and scores of deserted islets. Then, moving to the northwest some 46km, we'll reach Phuket, not only one of Thailand's exotic hotspots, but also the epi-centre of Thailand diving, with dayboats and liveaboards reaching sites in virtually every direction. To finish up, we'll head across the peninsula to the offshore island of Koh Tao, known for its remarkable collection of unique dives and its extensive dive training community.

## KOH LANTA YAI

Reached by a flight to the town of Krabi and a boat ride, Koh Lanta Yai is a 25km-long island facing the open sea. The mountainous, jungled island has intricate cave systems, waterfalls, lovely stretches of white sand beach and unusually pristine dive sites - besides the island's several dive operators, there are only a few liveaboards that include Koh Lanta's dives in their itineraries.

An hour of smooth-water motoring takes you to a great site off Koh Ha Noi where the island's cliffs form a steep underwater wall in very clear water, the slope covered in soft corals, sea whips, sponges and anemones. Large schools of blue-striped snapper, Oriental sweetlips, lionfish and angelfish congregate at the slope's end, on a sand bottom at about 20m, where a jumble of large limestone rocks creates swim-throughs. These lead into a cave system filled with cave sweeper, the scene softly lit by shafts of light shimmering down from a 2m round hole at the top. Ascending, there is a tunnel that reaches a beautiful, shallow, sand-bottomed cavern. Some 40km south from Koh Lanta are two famed dive sites, sometimes visited by liveaboards from Phuket to the North, but which are comfortable dayboat trips from Koh Lanta. Hin Daeng ('Red Rock') is a solitary outcrop that barely breaks the surface, named for its thick covering of vibrant, red soft corals. ▶

“ Around the wreck are stingrays in the sand, and giant grouper, sweetlips and several species of snapper congregate about the deck and superstructure ”

Vibrant soft corals

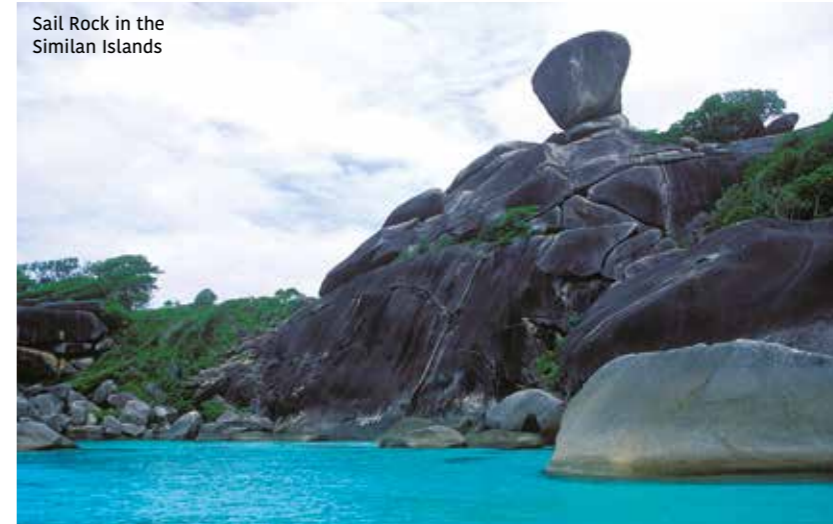


Topside is just as dramatic

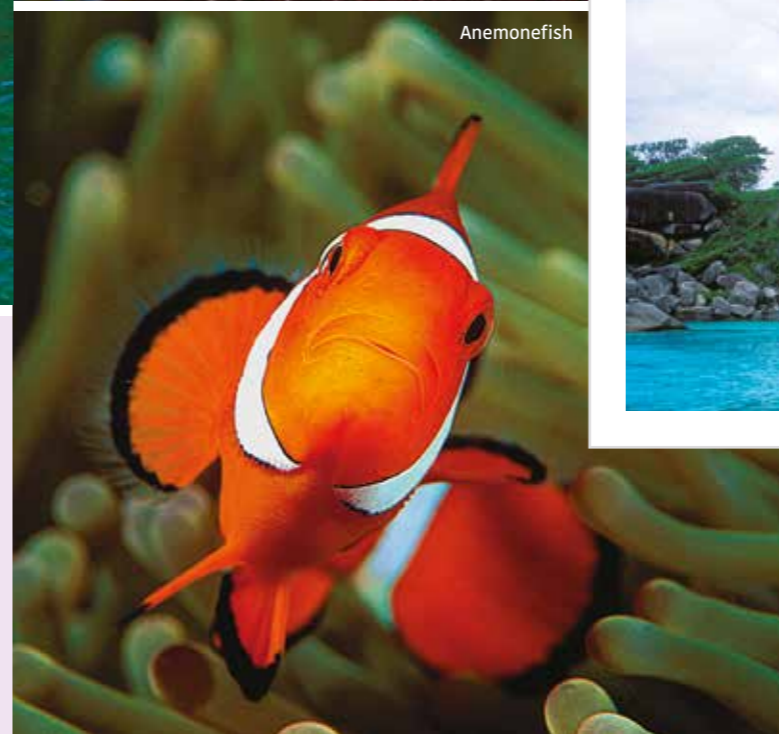


Anemones smother the reef in certain places

Sail Rock in the Similan Islands



Anemonefish



Besides the dominant reds, there are also orange and bright, yellow species, and many sponges, gorgonians and anemones. The beauty aside, Hin Daeng is also famous for its large marine creatures, including silvertip, grey reef and leopard sharks, and mantas are regularly seen – plus, the occasional whaleshark.

Just 500 metres away, Hin Mouang is a series of five pinnacles on a 200-metre-long, submerged ridge, with the shallowest point at 8m. With vertical walls dropping to 70m, it is said to have the deepest drop-off in Thai waters. It has even more life than does Hin Daeng, and 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 stingrays, there are also many pelagic species seen here, including dog-tooth tuna, barracuda and sharks.

#### KOH PHI PHI

Also reached by a flight to Krabi, plus a one-and-a-half hour ferry ride (or two-hour ferry from Phuket to the north), the Phi Phi Islands number in the hundreds, but only one, Phi Phi Don, is inhabited. The main activities around Phi Phi are diving, snorkelling, rock-climbing and beach-combing, with dayboats available to many of the small islets.

Its dive sites range from calm-water, critter photography

sites to some dramatic, big-animal spots. The two, most-regarded sites are at Koh Bida Nok and Koh Bida Nai. Koh Bida Nok is a small island with a granite cliff face, its mountainous underwater terrain formed by huge boulders, ledges and overhangs. The diving is from the surface to 30m, with little current. The rocky faces are covered with large sea fans, sea whips and soft corals, and there are many fish, including ghost pipefish, seahorses and colourful reef tropicals. Leopard sharks are commonly seen, and mantas and whalesharks frequent the area in the February-April season.

A few hundred metres away, Koh Bida Nai, averaging 20m of depth, is a small islet that also features rock faces and granite boulders. 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 often be closely approached and photographed.

#### PHUKET

Mention Phuket, which is easily reached by many international air carriers, and exotic thoughts come to mind; gilded Buddhist temples, white-sand beaches, mountainous jungles, Thai food, of course, and a party scene like none

other. As to sporting options, there are many... such as hikes to jungle waterfalls, golfing, surfing, elephant-trekking and mountain biking. But, for divers, there's much more - Thailand's most-exotic feature is undoubtedly the incredible life that exists beneath the surface of the calm, warm waters of the Andaman Sea, and Phuket is the major access point.

With many PADI dive operators and dive charter boats, 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 remarkable density of marine life.

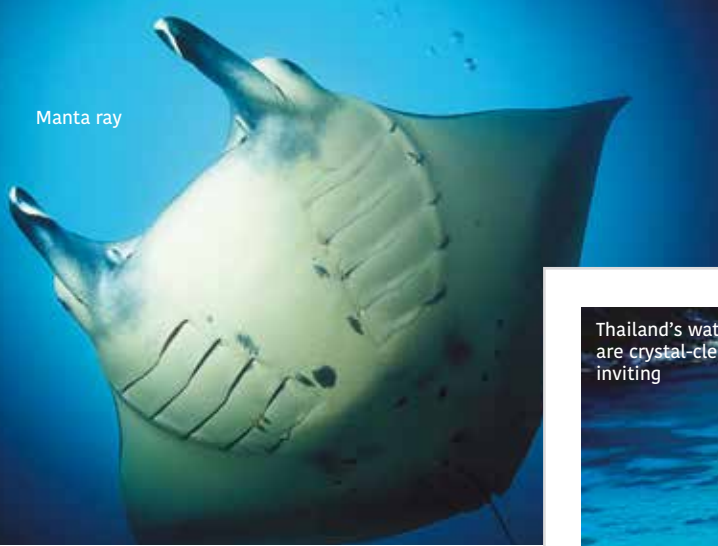
#### PHUKET'S DAY DIVING

The most popular day-dives out of Phuket are conducted around several island groups within approximately one to two hours by boat. One of the most popular sites is Anemone Reef, a submerged pinnacle in a marine sanctuary some 30km east of Phuket. Its rocky ledges from 5m-7m down are covered in anemones with clownfish, and soft corals; in the deeper areas, there are many, large gorgonian fans. Dives are to a maximum of 25m; moderate currents can be experienced. A fun wreck dive, the King's Cruiser, an 85-metre-long sunken car ferry, is just a kilometre away.

Another nearby site is Hin Musang (Shark Point), a line of three main pinnacles, one of which breaks the surface. With an average depth of 20m and a maximum of 24m, 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.

One of the most-dramatic local sites is off Koh Racha Noi. With a maximum depth of 30m, the island's northern

Manta ray



“ The density and scope of the life that surrounds this lonely, ocean pinnacle is remarkable ”

point has huge boulders and pinnacles, with lots of fish and a number of shark-species, especially nurse, leopard sharks and grey reefs. 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 season; currents can be moderately strong at times.

Thailand's waters are crystal-clear and inviting



### LIVEBOARD DIVING

Phuket's most-famed diving is from its large fleet of liveboards, which run trips of typically two to six days. Along with the southern routes that visit Kohl Lanta and Phi Phi sites already described, the northern routes reach Thailand's most-famous diving, in the Similan and Surin Islands.

### KOH SIMILAN

Some 90km northwest of Phuket are the Similans, 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 reaching 30 metres. They offer many popular sites, some 26 being regularly dived.

On the south tip of Koh Similan, Beacon Point 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, blackblotched rays and Jenkins rays.

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

Just south of Koh Similan is Hin Pousar (Elephant Rock), where several rounded rocks extending above the surface form one of the Similans' favourite sites, which cannot be fully explored even over several dives. The boulders rise from the bottom nearly 50m down, their sheer sides covered with purple and white soft corals, and create meandering passageways, with every wall splashed with colour from sponges, corals and seafans. Schools of fusilier, sweetlips and batfish swirl about, and black grouper are plentiful. Currents can be strong at times.

### KOH SURIN

Some 100km to the north of the Similans are the remote Surin Islands, forming the Mu Surin Marine National Park. The Surins feature perhaps the single, most-dramatic dive site in Thailand – remote Richelieu Rock, at the park's southeast corner, which is a rough spire that just breaks the surface.

Rising from a gravel bottom at 30m, the crag is small enough to be easily circumnavigated in less than 30 minutes, with a gradual spiral upwards to the tip providing a perfect, not-a moment-wasted, dive plan. The density and scope of the life that surrounds this lonely, ocean pinnacle is remarkable. There are three-metre-long giant guitarfish; huge schools of trevally, cobia, snapper, blackfin barracuda and batfish; lionfish of several species; numerous species of clownfish; cuttlefish; nurse and leopard sharks; yellow-margin and reticulated morays; mantis shrimp and more. And, if this remarkable place needed anything else, in the February and April season whalesharks may frequently be seen. ▶

The Sattakut



Whaleshark



Gigantic gorgonian sea fan



### KOH TAO

On the opposite side of the Thai peninsula, Koh Tao sits in the Gulf of Thailand, some 74km offshore. Reached by a one-hour, ferry-ride from the international airport at Koh Samui, Koh Tao's granite-boulder geology and steep mountainsides create an incredible landscape for hikers and climbers, but its biggest recreational draw is its diving and snorkelling.

Like many other Thai islands, it has a reputation for fun and partying – it's one of the monthly 'Full Moon Party' islands – but, overall, it has a clean, laid-back atmosphere. It has also become one of the top training sites in the diving world, especially known as one of diving's most-prolific professional-level training locations.

Perhaps not as well-known are its unique dive sites, such as Sail Rock, 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, its special magic is the profuse collection of marine life. There are several species of large grouper, huge schools of resident longfin spadefish, yellowfin pickhandle and bluelined barracuda, and vast shoals of yellowtail scad, all milling around the gigantic spire. Whalesharks are also regularly seen.

Not far offshore on the west side of Koh Tao is the 48-metre-long US Navy LCI (landing craft, infantry) Sattakut, which saw considerable action during World War Two

throughout the Pacific theatre, and after the war became a part of the Thai Navy. Sunk as a dive site in 2011, it rests with its bow at 26m, and the bridge at 18m. With two guns, the most dramatic is its 76mm bow cannon. Around the wreck are stingrays in the sand, and giant grouper, sweetlips and several species of snapper congregate about the deck and superstructure. Penetrations are possible for those with the appropriate certifications.

Perhaps the island's most-remarkable dive is a long, submerged pinnacle off the northwest tip of the island, Chumphong Pinnacle. Rising up from a 40m sand/rubble bottom to within 14m of the surface, the site is a huge panorama of mountainous ridges and spires extending outward in every direction. The surfaces of the rocks are decorated with large gorgonians, black coral bushes and sponges, and seemingly hectares of slopes are completely covered with huge, emerald, gold and violet-colored anemones, with massive schools of bright yellowband fusilier swirling above them. There are also many large brown-marbled grouper, coral cod and groups of giant sweetlips.

### CONCLUSION

All in all, Thailand, with its remarkable dive sites and marine life, and its wide array of holiday options both above and below the waterline, should undoubtedly be considered a must visit on every diver's wish list. ■

### FACE TO FACE

Face to Face – Up Close with Mother Nature is a collection of Al Hornsby's most-exciting underwater and topside wildlife encounters, as captured through his



camera and words. With forwards by two longtime friends and dive buddies, Jean-Michel Cousteau and Amos Nachoum, the colour and B&W images feature sharks, whales, crocodiles, grizzly bears, leopards, cobras and many more of nature's most lovely and exciting creatures. The accompanying text, Al's first-person impressions of the encounters that led to the images, share his feelings and emotions during those oft-times intense, face-to-face moments. Available at [www.alhornsbyproductions.com](http://www.alhornsbyproductions.com)