

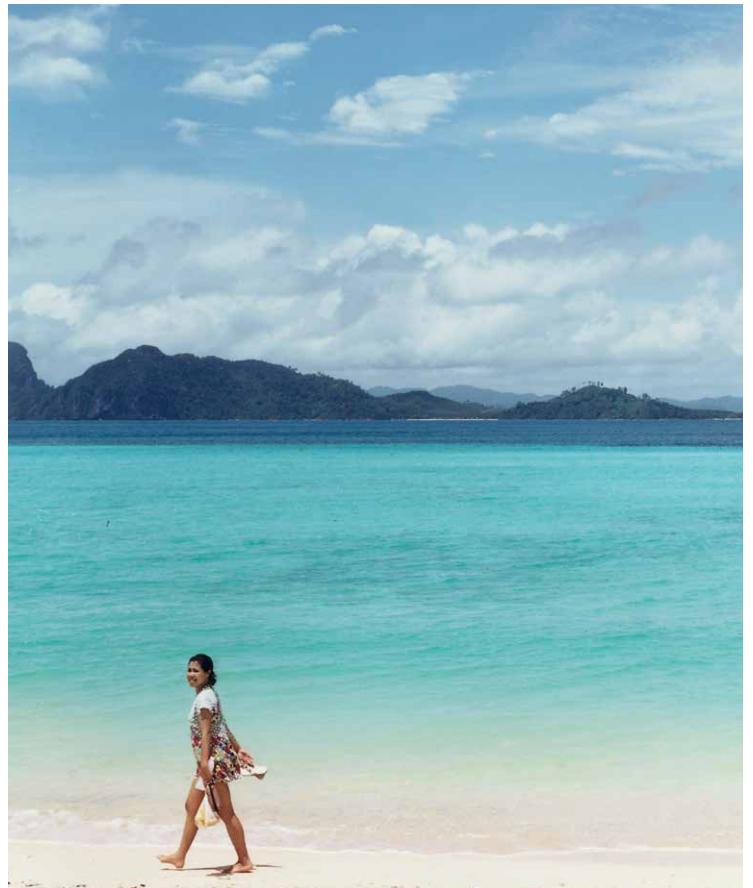
SPECIAL REPORT

Offshore Inspiration

The waters of southern Thailand are peppered with hundreds of islands, so how to pick which one is right for you? Here, we've selected some of our favorite destinations in the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea.

By Simon N. Ostheimer





FOR A GLIMPSE OF ISLAND LIFE:

KOH YAO YAI

It might lie just 10 kilometers offshore, but Koh Yao Yai is worlds away from the busy and brash international destination of Phuket to its west. While millions descend on that island every year, oft-overlooked Koh Yao Yai is home to only 9,000 or so people, and until recent years had very few places to stay. The main reason for this lack of development is because the locals like it this way. Traditionally, the islanders have made their living from harvesting rubber, coconuts, and fish, and you'll still see these industries on the other side of the main road, which cuts down the middle of the island from north to south. While five-star accommodation is now available for visitors, including the **Glow Elixir Koh Yao Yai** (glowbyzinc.com; doubles from US\$145), there's still little else to do on the island but relax by the pool, laze on the beach, and eventually realize exactly why the chilled-out locals are in no rush to see their island home modernized.



COORDINATES
8.0093° N, 98.5892° E
AREA
141.050 KM²
ELEVATION
+11,000 MSL

Bay Watch

Above, from left: Serene Koh Yao Yai is situated in the middle of karst-strewn Phang Nga Bay; a picture-perfect beach on Koh Kradan.

BEST BEACH FOR A SELFIE:

KOH KRADAN

While the islands of neighboring Krabi, such as Phi Phi and Lanta, have been increasingly inundated by tourists over the last decade, those to the immediate south have been slower to attract attention—though that's likely to soon change. The reason why is that, put simply, Koh Kradan is the Thai island of your dreams. Located off the Trang coast, the slender island is mostly national park, with the few resorts lucky enough to call it home—including the most luxurious, the **Sevenseas** (sevenseasresorts.com; doubles from US\$400)—hugging the east coast. Here, a pristine white-sand beach borders azure waters home to tropical fish of all hues. At low tide, you're able to walk a fair ways offshore, though not quite as far as sister islands Koh Mook—home to the famed Emerald Cave, an enclosed beach only accessible via a cave tunnel—and Koh Libong. Still, you're here for one reason, so snap that selfie already.

COORDINATES
7.37717° N, 99.30279° E
AREA
2.399 KM²
ELEVATION
+27,000 MSL





MOST REMARKABLE FESTIVAL:

PHUKET VEGETARIAN FESTIVAL

There's nothing that says "festival" like sticking a huge sword through your mouth, flailing your back with an ax, or dancing barefoot in firecrackers. And that's exactly what you get at the Vegetarian Festival on Phuket, which takes place every year around late September, during the ninth lunar month of the Chinese calendar. According to legend, in the late 19th century a visiting Chinese opera troupe fell mysteriously ill. They were advised to pray to the Nine Emperor Gods and stick to a strictly vegetarian diet, which they did, miraculously recovering. To show their gratitude to the spirits, Phuket's large ethnic Chinese community every year puts on a series of parades and ceremonies to display fierce feats of fealty. While this once just entailed poking small skewers through the cheeks, today's adherents try to outdo each other with the use of guns, gas pumps, bicycle spokes (with wheel still attached), and even badminton racquets.

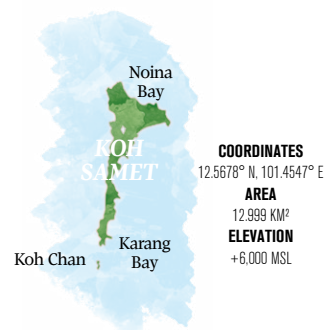
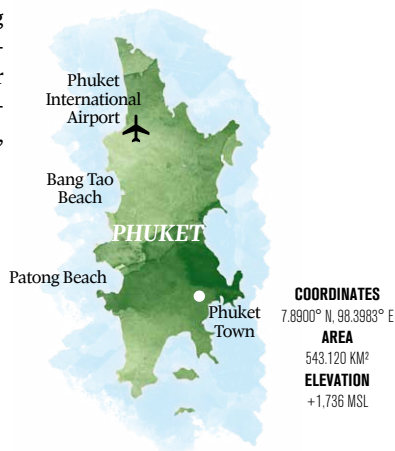
Festive Season

Clockwise from above: Participants at the Phuket Vegetarian Festival; Koh Samet's main pier; Phuket Town's main drag at night.

FOR THE BEST NIGHTLIFE

PHUKET TOWN

When visitors to Phuket eventually tire of sipping sunset cocktails by the beach, all too often they find their alternative drinking options are either expat pubs or suspect girlie bars. That is, unless they head out for a night in Phuket Town. With its distinctive century-old architecture and distance from the west coast, the city has long drawn locals and foreigners alike seeking to avoid the tourist crowds, creating a vibrant nightlife scene that is unique among Thailand's islands. For craft-beer fans, there's the homey **Crafts & Co.**, with a range of Belgian and American brews, or the sleek **Pint Factory**. Cocktail lovers should make a beeline for **Zimplex**, a "mixology laboratory" that creates bespoke concoctions based on your mood and appearance (if you're hungry, grab a bite next door at the excellent **Smokin' Fish**, where the menu changes daily). Still going strong? Then follow the locals down to the Seahorse Circle, a traffic island surrounded by live music bars that open very late.



FOR A QUICK BREAK FROM BANGKOK:

KOH SAMET

Located 220 kilometers southeast of the Thai capital, the tiny island of Koh Samet is usually bypassed by backpackers headed to the much larger island of Koh Chang farther east, close to the Cambodian border. Their loss has been Bangkokians' gain, as wealthy Thais flock to Samet on the weekends for a quick getaway in the sun. Regular ferry services ply the short distance from the mainland, though the more up-market resorts—mainly those run by **Samed Resorts** (samedresorts.com)—have waiting lounges and private boat transfers. While the beaches and landscape can't compare to those found in the southern Thai islands, Samet does at least have the most intriguing literary mention. Famed 19th-century poet Sunthorn Phu set one of his works on the island, in which a musician is captured by a giantess but manages to lull her to sleep with his song, before running off with a mermaid. Statues of both are now obligatory photo stops.



FOR JUNGLE TREKS:

KOH CHANG

Thailand's third largest island after Phuket and Samui, Koh Chang first began to take off as a tourist destination around a decade ago, luring backpackers with its unspoiled beaches and unexplored interior. In the intervening years, the beach shacks have steadily been replaced by resorts, to the point where many consider the island too crowded and overdeveloped. But the jungle in the middle of Koh Chang has stayed relatively untouched, mostly due to the fact that 80 percent of the island is a protected national park, and the topography prevents the construction of an airport. A guide is absolutely necessary as most paths are not signposted, but there is a variety of great walks catering to all abilities, which include seeing waterfalls, climbing to the very top of Mount Salakphet (at 744 meters the highest point on the island), and even a coast-to-coast walk that takes upwards of eight hours to complete. The treks organized by **Coco Dee Bo Tours** (cocodeebokohchang.com) are recommended.



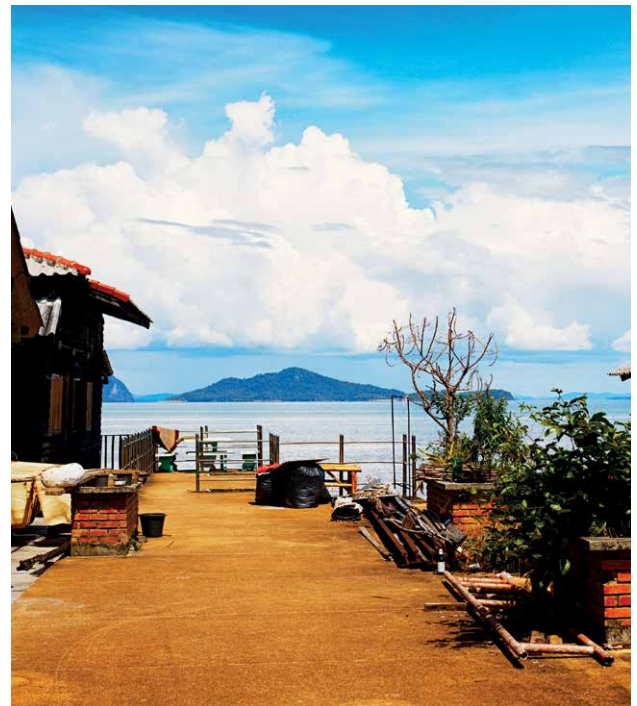
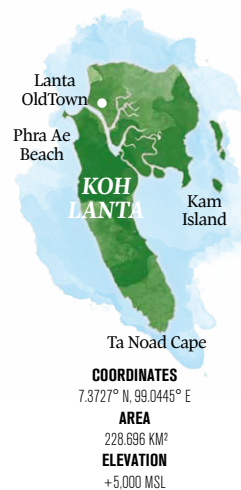
Going Green

A lush swath of Koh Chang's forested interior, left. Below: Amid the traditional wooden houses of Lanta Old Town.

FOR TRADITIONAL CHARM:

LANTA OLD TOWN

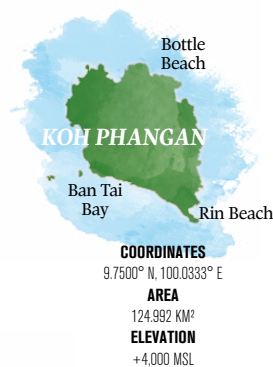
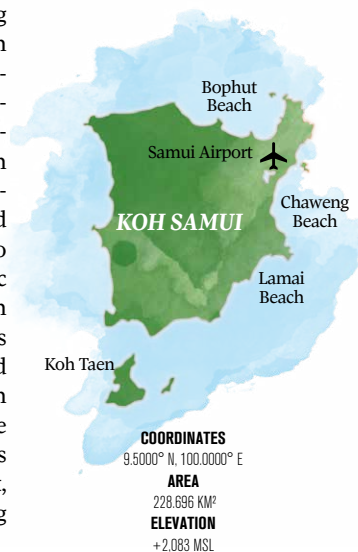
When Phuket became too developed, and mainland Krabi too crowded, European tourists headed farther east, until they came across relaxed and remote Koh Lanta. Accessible only by boat—unlike its nearby contemporaries such as Koh Phi Phi—the island has grown on its own terms, and retains a chilled vibe that's increasingly difficult to find anywhere else. While the 30-kilometer-long island has a slew of impressive beaches down its west coast, the sleepest part can be found on the opposite shore, along with Lanta Old Town. Long ago this was a thriving port, with Arabic and Chinese traders dropping anchor on the way to Phuket, but for more than a century now it's been a sleepy idyll of traditional wooden houses built on stilts over the water. Today, these are home to an eclectic mix of restaurants and lodgings, including bohemian B&B **The Old Times** (theoldtimeslanta.com; doubles from US\$35) and chic eatery **Mango House** (mangohouses.com). If you can, time your visit to coincide with the annual Lanta Lanta festival, held every March.



BEST SEASIDE SHOPPING:

FISHERMAN'S VILLAGE,
SAMUI

On most Thai islands, tourist retail has traditionally consisted of little more than simple stalls selling T-shirts and trinkets. In recent years, however, Fisherman's Village in Samui has been setting an example for what shopping by the sea should be like. Located in Bophut on the north shore of the up-market resort island, it has a Friday-night walking street that draws thousands, and is home to a mix of modern buildings and quaint Chinese shop-houses inhabited by upscale seafood restaurants, chilled lounges, and curio stores like **Blue Vanilla** and the eclectic **Woody A Shop & Bar**. At the western end of the street you'll find beach bars where people perch on beanbags and watch the sun set, and The Wharf, an ambitious open-air mall that's home to the likes of **Barracuda**, which serves Mediterranean seafood with a twist, and **A Little Me**, a cute store selling cool eco-recycled products.



BEST PLACE TO DETOX:

KOH PHANGAN

If there's one thing that's been regularly associated with Thailand's islands over the years, it's the infamous Full Moon parties, those bacchanalian nights of bucket-fueled debauchery. And if there's one place that has partied harder than anywhere else, it's Phangan. Every month, the beaches of Haad Rin fill with revelers determined to see the sun rise. This is all well known, but what's not is that Phangan is also, ironically or perhaps suitably, home to one of the country's most popular wellness and healing centers, **The Sanctuary** (thesanctuarythailand.com; five-night detox packages from US\$640). Along with a variety of detox programs, which include fasting, cleansing, and raw food diets, it also runs yoga retreats, meditation courses, and spa therapy. Of course, given the location, you're never too far from the music; bring earplugs if you don't want to be disturbed by the weekly all-night party on the nearby beach. Or alternatively, join in—you can always detox again tomorrow.

Slow But Sure

Below, from left: Relaxing at Woody A Shop & Bar in Samui's Fisherman's Village; the quieter side of Koh Phangan.





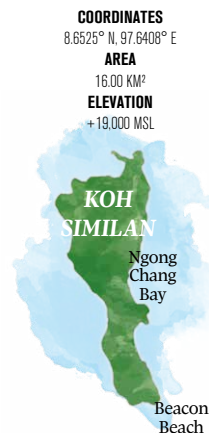
Full Immersion

A group of divers preparing to explore the reefs of Koh Tao, left. Below: Taking to the waters in the Similans.

BEST ISLANDS TO EXPLORE BY BOAT:

SIMILANS

Located in the Andaman Sea, the Similans comprises a group of nine rocky islands (the name comes from the Malay word for “nine”—*sembilan*). None of them are permanently inhabited, thanks to their status as a protected national park, which has thankfully kept them free of the development that has tarnished the likes of Koh Lipe in the far south. From October through May, a small fleet of live-aboards and speedboats make the short journey from Phuket to explore the area’s famous dive sites, which are home to more than 500 species of coral, and include exotic names like Elephant Head. While scuba divers flock here on four-day tours and overnight stays, such as those organized by Phuket-based **Sunrise Divers** (sunrise-divers.com), day trips are also doable for those who just want to snorkel and take in the pristine environment. If you’re interested in staying overnight, the park authorities have basic camping and bungalow accommodation on the only two islands you’re actually allowed to step ashore on: Koh Similan (number eight), and Koh Miang (number four), also home to small restaurants.



FOR DIVE LESSONS:

KOH TAO

In some ways it’s remarkable that this little isle in the Gulf of Thailand, miles from anywhere, has become Thailand’s hub for dive courses. But with low costs, amazing marine life, and mostly unpolluted coral reefs, it’s become a mecca for those taking their PADI certification. There are more than 30 dive sites around the island, and double that number of schools. Add in the fact that whale sharks visit the surrounding waters, and that the island is an important breeding ground for hawksbill and green turtles. With such a wealth of marine life, the pioneer backpackers are being replaced by couples and families, with several reasonable resorts springing up in recent years to cater to them. To reach Koh Tao you have to fly into either Samui or mainland Chumphon (the latter is closer, though has far fewer flight connections) and then catch a ferry.

