

ISLAND HOPPING FROM HAT YAI TO TRANG

Mike Smith risked his extremities to get the story, but admits he had a great time island hopping in the Andaman Sea on the coast of Thailand



Resort - Li Pe Island





T

he The boat's stern lowered as the bow rose to face the sky. Two Yamaha V-6 200 engines screamed into life propelling us across the water, hitting 45 knots in just a few seconds. The sea looked calm, but this powerful speedboat slammed against the surf at regular intervals as we island hopped from Pak Bara Pier to Koh Li Pe in Satun Province, Thailand.

Gateway to the Islands

Hat Yai in southern Thailand, near the border with Malaysia, is best known for spas, shopping, street food and weekend breaks. Less well known is there is access at Pak Bara Pier to spectacular, mainly undeveloped, islands in the Andaman Sea, just a two hour drive from the city. I was with a group of travel agents and media folk, hosted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand. After a fantastic roadside dim sum breakfast at Choke Dee Restaurant and a pleasant drive we were travelling by speedboat, the quickest and most flexible way to get to the islands. We got an adrenalin buzz from travelling at high speed over the water, hanging on tight and enjoying the ride across a beautiful blue sea on a bright sunny day. Finally decelerating we approached Koh Rawi in Tarutao National Marine Park, Satun Province;

the first of many picturesque small islands with soft, white sandy beaches that we would pass by or briefly visit. A picnic lunch of fresh fish, fruit and spicy Thai curry was followed by photos on swings and what appeared to be strategically grown trees with branches perfect for sitting on.

Getting Stoned

A nearby small island has its fair share of tourists, but doesn't have any sandy beaches! Koh Hin Ngam is covered in small smooth grey/black stones which have been polished and rounded by the sea. Folklore has it that if you make a pile of 12 stones your wish will be granted, but if you remove a stone for a souvenir not only will you risk a fine but you will be cursed with bad luck by the God of Tarutao. We stepped into surprisingly warm water as we



Arch at Koh Khai



Rock Piles
Koh Hin Ngam

disembarked and waded ashore to Sita Beach Resort and Spa on Koh Li Pe. We checked into our well-appointed rooms and I was surprised to discover that mine even had an alfresco bath tub! Li Pe is the only island in the National Park with accommodation and it gets mixed reviews because of the rapid pace of development. However, first impressions were good. Pattaya Beach was clean and quiet, but rather narrow, with powdery sand and clear water with a number of laid back bars and restaurants. There was a mixture of budget and upmarket hotels and numerous spas but no ATM's! Night Owls Koh Li Pe is a small island and most visitors swim, snorkel, dive or simply relax reading and getting tanned on the beach. I wandered and waited for sunset before joining the group at Walking Street for a seafood dinner which included excellent steamed crabs. Being night owls and thirsty we adjourned to a beach bar, perched on a wooden frame for six, and drank bottles of Singha Beer as we chatted and enjoyed the music of Eric Clapton, The Eagles and various soft rock artists performed by a local duo. It was amusing to watch people on rugs on the sand continuously take evasive action by retreating as the tide came in very rapidly. By closing time it was necessary to paddle back to the hotel and it was nigh impossible to avoid tripping over anchor ropes. Lover's Gate I would have liked more time on Koh Li Pe, but we left next morning calling briefly at Koh Khai (Egg Island) where we waded up to our waists to the photogenic "Lover's Gate" arched rock and ogled the expensive looking yacht anchored nearby. After a thrilling high speed return on a mirror flat sea, with wake trailing behind us, to Pak Bara Pier we transferred to Trang, but



Sita Beach
Resort and Spa



Going ashore
at Li Pe Island



Long tailed boat to Paradise

only after we had been scared witless at Le Khaokob Cave. A river passes through the cave system which is accessed via boat with a couple of stopping off points. There are some stalactites and stalagmites but nothing exceptional. However, getting out of the cave is something entirely different!

Almost a Nose Job!

Lie on your back and stay still the boatman shouted from the front. What he actually meant was: STAY STILL NOW! NOW! NOW! Hands by your sides! Don't move an inch! DON'T MOVE AT ALL! Keep your hands off the cave roof! TRUST ME! The five of us laid on our backs as our boatman steered the wooden boat using his hands on the roof of the cave. Razor sharp stalactites seemed to be aiming straight at us as if in a scene from Star Wars, then miraculously whizzed past our faces missing by fractions of a centimetre. The urge to push against the cave roof was extremely tempting, but we simply had to trust our guide as the current rushed us along. After an agonising 10 minutes our screams of "oh no!" died down and we could relax when we reached the cave exit. We struggled out of the boat swearing never to do that again, but probably would! Some comedienne commented that being a Caucasian with a big nose in such



Snorkeling fun

situations is a disadvantage! Laughing in relief I agreed!

Strategic Planning

Mr Chaiwat Charroensuk, Director of Tourism Authority of Thailand, Trang Office, met us for drinks in Trang and we discussed his plans to market the region particularly to Singaporeans, Malaysians & Chinese based on four key selling points: The islands and the activities above and below the water; pollution free air; green forests and unchanged towns. The next morning we drove through some of the green forests we had been talking about, including rubber and palm oil plantations, before boarding

another high powered speedboat at Pak Meng Beach for more island hopping, snorkelling and caving.

The Goddess of Mercy

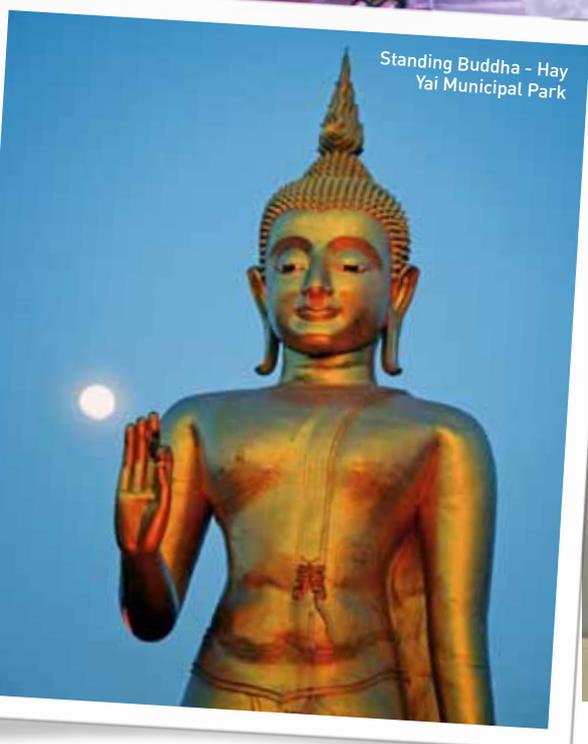
Koh Kradan is an ideal spot for a picnic lunch; the sand is soft, the views across the sea are outstanding and there are a few facilities including a couple of bars and restrooms. The overgrown kids in our group re-lived their childhoods and got buried in the sand. There weren't any temples as we powered by Koh Ngai but we used our imaginations and convinced ourselves that a rock at the end of the islands bore a striking resemblance to Guan Yin the Goddess of Mercy.



Chill out at Ice Dome - Hat Yai



Golden Mermaid



Standing Buddha - Hay Yai Municipal Park



Crossed Swords - Magic Eye 3D Museum

In Line Caving

We joined a large collection of tourist boats at Mook Island. Donning life jackets we jumped into the sea and held onto the back of the person in front of us then bicycle kicked in a snaking line towards the entrance of Morakot Cave. Treading water for 80 meters through the cave, in the dark, we emerged at a beautiful, small emerald cove surrounded by high cliffs where we rested before making the return trip. Re-boarding our speedboat we hurtled back to the pier to change and shower before napping on the bus to Hat Yai which is worth a visit in its own right particularly if you like street food and massages. It is not a “must visit” city but there are quite a few attractions that I enjoyed on our guided tour.

Chilling Out in Hat Yai

I was frozen and it wasn't because my air con was too cold. It is minus 10 degrees in the Ice Dome which has ice sculptures

created by the some of the folks who do the Harbin Ice Festival in China. My camera fogged up on leaving, which was rather frustrating as the lantern festival was just outside but it cleared nicely during dinner and I was able to get some good pictures. The Municipal Park is a highlight of Hat Yai and the view over the city at sunset from the Standing Buddha and cable car area attracts a good crowd. Centara Hotel is in the city centre and thus it was easy to shop for snacks at the night market, grab a beer at West Side Pub, where we listened to good old country music, and have a hot dish of delicious meatball noodles at a street stall before bed.

Songkhla and Art with a Twist

All too soon it was our last day in Thailand. After an early breakfast we squeezed in a visit to neighbouring Songkhla and took a tram round the old town, paused for photos at the golden mermaid then went to the Hat Yai airport via the newly opened Magic

Eye 3D Museum which is great fun for exhibitionists. The art work jumps off the wall! I liked Hat Yai but I preferred the island hopping and would happily do that again! [A](#)

Where to Stay

Hat Yai

Hansa JB Hotel
www.hansajbhotel.com

Centara Hotel Hat Yai
www.centarahotelsresorts.com

Li Pe

Sita Beach Resort & Spa
www.sitabeachresort.com

Trang

Rua Rasada Hotel
www.ruarasadahotel.com

Trip Arranged by Tourism Authority of Thailand, Singapore
www.tourismthailand.rg.sg