

Thailand

Phuket & Andaman Coast (Chapter)

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Coverage includes: Ranong Province, Ranong Town, Ko Chang, Ko Phayam, Laem Son National Park, Phang-Nga Province, Ko Phra Thong & Ko Ra, Khao Sok National Park, Khao Lak & Around, Surin Islands Marine National Park, Similan Islands Marine National Park, Phang-Nga Town & Ao Phang-Nga, Around Phang-Nga, Ko Yao, Phuket Island, Ko Sireh, Laem Phanwa, Rawai, Hat Kata, Hat Karon, Hat Patong, Hat Kamala, Hat Surin, Ao Bang Thao, Sirinat National Park, Khao Phra Taew Royal Wildlife & Forest Reserve, Thalang District, Krabi Province, Krabi Town, Around Ao Nang, Railay, Ko Phi-Phi Don, Ko Phi-Phi Leh, Ko Jum & Ko Si Boya, Ko Lanta, Trang Province, Trang Town, Trang Beaches, Trang Islands, Satun Province, Pak Bara, Ko Bulon Leh, Ko Tarutao Marine National Park, and Satun.

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Why Go?

The Andaman is Thailand's turquoise coast, that place on a 'Travel to Paradise' poster that makes you want to leave your job and live in flip-flops...forever. And for once, the beauty exceeds the hype. White beaches, cathedral-like limestone cliffs, neon corals and hundreds of jungle-covered isles extend down the Andaman Sea from the border of Myanmar to Malaysia. Photographs haven't yet fully captured the array of blues and greens, let alone the soft fingers of humidity on the skin or the feel of the world's softest sands between your toes. For this, you'll need to visit.

The catch is, the destination is no secret and the beaches are becoming more crowded with backpackers, package tourists and everyone in between. Flashy resorts are pushing out the bamboo shacks and authenticity now hides in the backroads. But your poster dream is still here – if you're willing to look.

When to Go

May to October is the rainy season. At this time, the sea swells kick up surf, many resorts close and others slash their prices. The Vegetarian Festival is held in late September or October and involves parades of pierced-faced worshippers, endless firecrackers and great meatless food.

December to January is the high season for tourism. Prices soar, and accommodation and transport need to be booked in advance.

RANONG PROVINCE

The first piece in the Andaman's puzzle of coastal provinces is the least-populated region in Thailand and also its most rainy, with up to eight months of showers per year. As a result, Ranong's forests are lush and green, but it means that it's swampy near the mainland coast where beaches are almost nonexistent.

Ranong Town

ระนอง

POP 24,500

On the eastern bank of the Sompae River's turbid, tea-brown estuary, the frontier town of Ranong is a short boat ride – or a filthy swim – from Myanmar. This border town par excellence (shabby, frenetic, slightly seedy) has a thriving Burmese population (keep an eye out for men wearing traditional *longyi*; Burmese sarong), a clutch of hot springs and some tremendous street food.

Today the town is basking in the transit tourism to Ko Phayam more than the visa runs it was once known for (visas given at

the border are only given for two weeks now). Meanwhile, more and more dive operators specialising in live-aboard trips to the Surin or Similan Islands and Burma Banks are establishing themselves here, adding a pinch of an expat feel.

Sights & Activities

Ranong lacks the sophistication of your standard spa town, but you can sample the waters at sacred, outdoor **Raksawarin Hot Springs** (Th Petchkasem; admission free; ☀8am-5pm), 2km east of town, and where there are pools hot enough to boil eggs (65°C); it's thought to possess miraculous healing powers.

Siam Hot Spa (☎0 7781 3551; www.siamhotsparanong.com; 73/3 Th Petchkasem), opposite the public springs, offers a more sterilised mineral-bath experience. You can dip into a jacuzzi (600B) or standard tubs (300B), and pair it with a salt scrub (550B) or a massage (200B).

Live-aboard diving trips to world-class bubble-blowing destinations, including the Burma Banks and the Surin and Similan Islands, are all the rage in Ranong. Try

BORDER CROSSING: RENEWING VISAS AT VICTORIA POINT

The dusty, tumbledown port at the southernmost tip of mainland Myanmar was named Victoria Point by the British, but is known as Ko Song (Second Island) by the Thais. The Burmese appellation, Kawthoung, is most likely a corruption of the Thai name. Most travellers come here to renew their visas, but the place also makes an interesting day trip.

The easiest way to renew your visa is to opt for one of the 'visa trips' (from 1000B per person including visa fees) offered by travel agencies in Ranong – check out Pon's (p607) – but it's relatively easy to do the legwork yourself.

When the Thailand–Myanmar border is open, boats to Kawthoung leave from the pier at Saphan Plaa (Pla Bridge, about 5km from the centre of Ranong). Take *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* (small pickup truck, also spelt *sǎwngthǎew*) 2 from Ranong (20B) to the pier, where captains of long-tail boats will lead you to the immigration window then to their boat (per person one-way/return 100/200B). When negotiating your price, confirm whether it is per person or per ride, and one-way or return. At the checkpoint, you must inform the authorities that you're a day visitor – in which case you will pay a fee of US\$10 (it must be a crisp bill, you can get one from harbour touts for about 500B). The only big hassles come from 'helpers' on the Myanmar side who offer to do everything from carrying your day pack to collecting forms and then ask for hefty tips.

It's possible to stay overnight in one of Victoria Point's dingy, overpriced hotels but note that this is a rough town and lone women in particular may not feel safe. If you have a valid Myanmar visa in your passport, you'll be permitted to stay for up to 28 days.

If you're just coming to renew your Thai visa, the whole process will take a minimum of two hours. Bear in mind when you are returning to Thailand that Myanmar's time is 30 minutes behind Thailand's. This has caused problems in the past for returning visitors who got through Burmese immigration before its closing time only to find the **Thai immigration office** (☎8.30am-4.30pm) closed. It's a good idea to double-check Thai immigration closing hours when leaving the country – if you don't get stamped in you'll have to return to Myanmar again the next day.

Phuket & the Andaman Coast Highlights

- 1 Cavort with curious pufferfish amid the fiery coloured coral of the **Trang Islands** (p680)
- 2 Scale a limestone cliff then recuperate in the blissful jade waters of **Railay** (p657)
- 3 Float in a sea of lapis lazuli while gazing at the limestone crags of **Ko Phi-Phi** (p662)
- 4 Traipse through the veritable Jurassic Park of **Khao Sok National Park** (p611)
- 5 Snorkel over healthy coral reefs by day and chill at low-key reggae bars at night on **Ko Lipe** (p687)



6 Search for elusive whale sharks and swim with fish at the **Surin** (p616) and **Similan Islands** (p617)

7 Kayak around the beautiful bay of **Ao Phang-Nga** (p618)

8 Fall into the

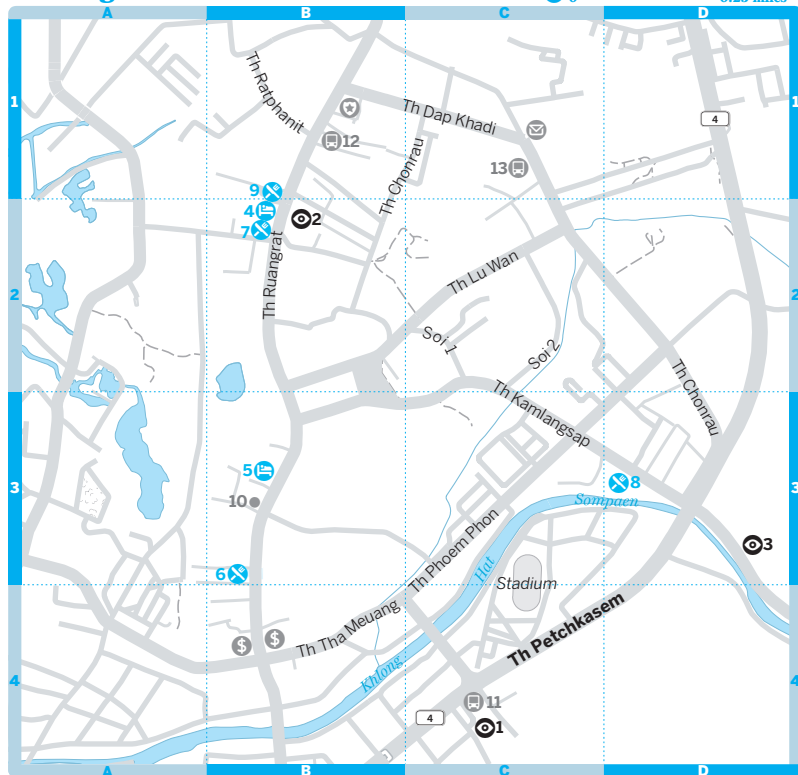
snoozy, beach-bar vibe and lounge on the white sand of **Ko Phayam** (p608)

9 Tempt your tastebuds with a heady mix of gourmet treats and street food at **Phuket** (p622)

10 Find gluttonous hedonism in the hair-raising clubs and packed beaches of **Hat Patong** (p638)



Ranong



Ranong

Sights

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 2 A-One Diving.....B2
 3 Ranong Mineral Hot Springs.....D3
 Siam Hot Spa.....(see 3)

Sleeping

- 4 Dhala House.....B2
 5 Luang Poj.....B3

Eating

- 6 Day Market.....B3

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- 11 Bus Terminal.....C4
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 13 Minivans to Surat Thani.....C1

A-One-Diving (☎ 0 7783 2984; www.a-one-diving.com; 256 Th Ruangrat; 4-night packages from 15,900B) or **Andaman International Dive Center** (☎ 0 7783 4824; www.aicdive.com; Th Petchkasem), located at the bus station.

Sleeping

If you are doing a visa run through an agency, they'll ship you in and out of town without having to spend the night.

Luang Poj

GUEST HOUSE \$
 (☎ 0 7783 3377, 08 7266 6333; luangpoj@gmail.com; 225 Th Ruangrat; r 500B; 🍷🍷) Luang Poj is a gorgeous remodel of Ranong's first hotel: a 1920s-era building. Most rooms are windowless and all share warm-water bathrooms and are decorated in a signature colour (we like the purple room). It's further highlighted with modern flair: think Indian art, birdcages, one-of-a-kind light fixtures and retro photography.

Dhala House

GUEST HOUSE \$
 (☎ 0 7781 2959; http://dahla.siam2web.com; 323/5 Th Ruangrat; r 400-500B; 🍷🍷) The Dhala has cute, concrete bungalows with tiled floors and pebbled tile bathrooms; the bungalows line a garden and are set off the main drag. It has got the friendliest vibe in town and management will happily arrange a late check-out if you're on a visa run.

**Eating & Drinking**

Ranong has a lively, young and very local drinking scene involving lots of karaoke.

On Th Kamlangsap, there is a **night market** not far from Hwy 4 that sells great Thai dishes at low prices. The **day market** on Th Ruangrat offers inexpensive Thai and Burmese meals.

Jammy Bar

THAI, INTERNATIONAL \$\$
 (Th Ruangrat; dishes from 69B; 🍷) The indoor-outdoor garden is vaguely Balinese and is the best-looking dining area in town. Luckily the food is great too: the Thai dishes are fantastic as are the stranger choices including grilled ostrich (229B) or local beef (129B). There's live music on weekend nights.

Sophon's Hideaway

THAI & INTERNATIONAL \$\$
 (☎ 0 7783 2730; Th Ruangrat; mains 80-250B; ☺ 10am-midnight; 🍷) This expat favourite has everything, including internet access, a free pool table, a pizza oven, full bar, water features and rattan furnishings aplenty.

**Information**

Internet can be found along Th Ruangrat for 20B per hour and there's a cluster of ATMs at the Th Tha Meuang and Th Ruangrat intersection.

Main post office (Th Chonrau; ☺ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat)

**Getting There & Away****Air**

Ranong Air (☎ 0 7783 2222; www.ranongair.com) runs four flights per week between Ranong

and Bangkok (one-way 2800B), Phuket (one-way 2300B) and Hat Yai (one-way 2800B). Book flights at Pon's Place.

Bus

The bus terminal is on Th Petchkasem 1km from town, though some Bangkok-bound buses stop at the main market. *Sǒrng-tǎa-ou 2* (blue) passes the terminal. Some bus services are shown in the table:

DESTINATION	PRICE	DURATION
Bangkok	240-680B	10hr
Chumphon	100B	3hr
Hat Yai	410B	5hr
Khao Lak	150B	3½hr
Krabi	200-300B	6hr
Phang-Nga	150B	5hr
Phuket	240B	5-6hr
Surat Thani	100-180B	4-5hr

Minivans head to Surat Thani (250B, 3½ hours, four times daily) and Chumphon (120B, three hours, hourly from 6am to 5pm); see the map for departure locations.

i Getting Around

Motorcycle taxis will take you almost anywhere in town for 20B, to the hotels along Th Petchkasem for 25B and to the pier (for 50B) for boats to Ko Chang, Ko Phayam and Myanmar. Pon's Place can assist with motorcycle and car rentals and offers shuttle vans from its office to the ferry docks for 50B.

Ko Chang

เกาะช้าง

If you're looking for the big Ko Chang, you've come to the wrong place. But if your suitcase is overflowing with novels and you're seeking a silent stretch of sand on which to read them, then welcome! Unlike

PON'S PLACE: RANONG'S TOURISM EXPERT

Pon's Place (☎ 08 1597 4549; www.ponplace-ranong.com; Th Ruangrat; ☺ 7.30am-midnight) is the go-to spot in Ranong for everything from Western breakfasts (from 40B) to Ranong Air bookings. Pon himself is a friendly guy with his phone essentially attached to his head, as he micromanages his Ranong tourism empire. If you need help with anything, stop here first.

most of the Andaman's islands, Ko Chang enjoys its back-to-basics lifestyle – there are no ATMs, internet (2B per minute) is found only at Cashew Resort on Ao Yai and there's no rush for more development.

When you're done with your book, spend your time exploring the island's tiny village 'capital' (and we use that word lightly), or wind your way around on one of the dirt trails. Sea eagles, Andaman kites and hornbills all nest here, and, if you're lucky, you'll catch sight of them floating above the mangroves.

Bungalow operators can arrange boat trips to Ko Phayam (p608) and other nearby islands for around 200B per person (including lunch) in a group of six or more. Dive trips are also possible. **Aladdin Dive Cruise** (☎07782 0472; www.aladdindivecruise.de), on Ko Chang, runs PADI courses and offers a range of live-aboard dive safaris.

Sleeping & Eating

Ao Yai is the main beach where you'll find most lodging options and there are a few more places tucked away on Ao Tadaeng, to the south, which is linked to Ao Yai via a short walking track. More isolated options can be found on the beaches to the north and far south of the island. All guest houses have restaurants that also welcome nonguests.

Crocodile Rock GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎08 0533 4138; tonn1970@yahoo.com; Ao Yai; bungalows 250-450B) Outstanding bamboo bungalows hover on Ao Yai's serene southern headland with superb bay views through gentle foliage. Its classy kitchen turns out homemade yoghurt, breads, cookies, good espresso and a variety of veggie and seafood dishes.

Sawasdee GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎08 6906 0900, 08 1803 0946; www.sawadeeko hchang.com; Ao Yai; bungalows 350-600B) The A-frame wooden bungalows have vented walls to keep things cool and every option has sunken bathrooms painted bright colours, and hammocks on the terraces.

Sunset Bungalows GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎08 4339 5224, 08 0693 8577; Ao Yai; bungalows 250-400B) Sweet wooden bungalows with bamboo decks and attached Thai-style bathrooms sit back in the trees along Ao Yai's best stretch of beach.

Mama's GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎07782 0180, 08 0530 7066; mamasbungalows@yahoo.com; Ao Tadaeng; huts 250-300B) One of three good choices on Ao Tadaeng, Mama's is tucked into a pretty corner on a rocky, hibiscus-laden hillside.

Getting There & Away

From central Ranong Town, take a *sörng-tää-ou* (25B) or a shuttle run by most guest houses (50B) to Saphan Plaa. Three long-tail boats (150B) and two speedboats (350B) leave daily from mid-October to May. All stop on the island's west coast beaches.

A taxi boat service connecting Ko Chang and Ko Phayam runs on weekdays only from Koh Chang Resort on Ao Yai. This boat (per person 150B each way, one hour) leaves Ko Chang at 10am and returns at 4pm.

Ko Phayam

เกาะพะเยา

Technically part of Laem Son National Park (p609), little Ko Phayam is a beach-laden isle that – for now – is managing to go mainstream while still holding onto its soul. Spectacular beaches are dotted with beach bungalows and the wooded interior has some rudimentary concrete motorbike paths. Fauna in the area includes wild pigs, monkeys and snakes, and look for sea eagles, toucans and hornbills. The one 'village' on the island, where you will also find the main pier and a majestic golden Buddha at **Wat Phayam**, caters mostly to tourists but hit it during a festival (such as the Cashew Festival in April) and you'll see that islanders still have a firm attachment to their homeland.

The main drawback of Ko Phayam is that the snorkelling isn't great but the Surin Islands are relatively close and you can hop on live-aboard dive expeditions or speedboat transfers. For dive trips and PADI courses contact **Phayam Divers** (☎08 6995 2598; www.phayamlodge.com; Ao Yai).

Sleeping & Eating

Electricity is often only available from sunset to 10pm or 11pm. Most resorts are open year-round and have attached eateries serving Thai fare that are also open to nonguests. Every strip of sand has its low-key, driftwood beach bar.

oPP Land HOTEL \$
(☎08 1678 4310; www.payampplandbeach.com; Ao Hin-Khow; bungalows 650B) This is a stunning ecolodge, north of the pier on the

little-visited windward side of the island. The stylish concrete bungalows are powered by the wind and sun and have terraces that overlook the sea. The owners have set up an organic garden, make their own all-natural laundry detergent and treat the sewage with a cutting-edge grey-water system.

Chomjan Resort

HOTEL \$

(☎08 5678 4166; www.chomjanresort.com; Ao Khao Kwai; bungalows 500-800B) One of the most comfortable places on this beach; tidy concrete bungalows are up on a beachside slope and have sea views through mature trees. All have terraces with lounging cushions and open-to-sky bathrooms. The restaurant here serves excellent Thai fare.

Starlight Bungalows

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎08 1978 5301; <http://sites.google.com/site/starlightbungalows/>; Ao Khao Kwai; bungalows 500-650B) American-Thai run; choose from high-ceiling spacious wooden huts or small bamboo ones further back in the trees. The social vibe here is as fab as the food – Pom the cook regularly wins local Thai-food cook-offs.

Bamboo Bungalows

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎0 7782 0012; www.bamboo-bungalows.com; bungalows 550-1500B; 🏠🚿) This is a very popular and social beachfront property with a lush garden and a lounge-restaurant with hammocks and cool log swings out the front. Bungalows range from sagging bamboo jobs to fairly luxurious peaked-roof cottages that have tiled floors, ceiling fans and outdoor rain showers.

Mr Gao

HOTEL \$

(☎0 7787 0222; www.mr-gao-phayam.com; Ao Khao Kwai; bungalows from 250B; 🏠) The varnished wood or bamboo bungalows are a hit with activity-oriented couples and families. It has

24-hour electricity and kayak rental, and arranges transport and multiday trips to the Surin Islands (see p616).

Aow Yai Bungalows

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎0 7787 0216, 08 9819 8782; bungalows 300-600B) This is the thatched bamboo bungalow pioneer that started it all here in the late 1980s. Choose between small wooden and bamboo bungalows in the palm grove and a larger beachfront model on the southern end of Ao Yai.

i Getting There & Around

There are daily ferries from Ranong's Saphan Plaa to Ko Phayam's main pier (150B, 1½ to two hours) at 9am and 2pm, and speedboats (350B, 45 minutes) at 10am and 2.30pm. From Ko Phayam back to Ranong the boats run at 9am and 1pm. Long-tail-boat charters to Ko Chang are 1200B, or you can take the taxi boat (150B, one hour) that departs from the main pier at 4pm on weekdays only.

A motorcycle taxi from the pier to the main beaches costs 50B to 80B per person each way depending on the beach. Motorbike and bicycle rentals are available in the village, and from most of the larger resorts.

Laem Son National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติแหลมสน

This **national park** (☎0 7786 1431; www.dnp.go.th; adult/child 200/100B) covers 315 sq km. It includes about 100km of Andaman Sea coastline – the longest protected shore in the country – and more than 20 islands. Much of the coast here is edged with mangroves and laced with tidal channels, which are home to various species of birds, fish, deer and monkeys. Sea turtles nest on Hat Praphat.

KO PHAYAM'S BEACHES

Ko Phayam has many small beaches but these two long stretches of sandy bliss are where most folk end up:

» **Ao Khao Kwai (Buffalo Bay)** is a golden white cove with jungled bluffs and a rock reef offshore – it's the most stunning location on the island. Lovers of peace and quiet head here along with some hippies and the occasional German package tourist. It's a terrific swimming beach, too, except at low tide, when the sea recedes leaving mud flats on the southern end.

» **Ao Yai** is long, wide and chilled out yet social, attracting everyone from gap-year backpackers to glam-packing couples to young families to retirees. The surf kicks up in the fringe and low seasons and you can rent boogie boards and surfboards at guest houses along the beach. At other times the swimming is great here and the island's best snorkelling (don't expect much) is found off **Leam Rung**, Ao Yai's northernmost point.

ANDAMAN DISCOVERIES COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM

Andaman Discoveries (☎08 7917 7165; www.andamandiscoveries.com; Khuraburi), formerly Northern Andaman Tsunami Relief, runs highly recommended community-based tours of one to seven days, including to Ban Talae Nok, a historic fishing village surrounded by tropical forest and mangroves, just down the road from 6km of uninhabited beach. There's an award-winning homestay here featuring cultural and handicraft activities, and fishing and snorkelling trips to uninhabited islands. Pair it with a visit to Laem Son and its warm-hearted residents, who also offer handicraft and sustainable-agriculture demonstrations.

Andaman Discoveries also manages three community-service projects: a learning centre for children of Burmese migrant workers; an orphanage outside of Khao Lak; and a school for disabled children in Phuket. Volunteer placement is available, and whatever you decide to do, it will be an unforgettable experience.

The most accessible beach is the gorgeous 3km white sweep of **Hat Bang Ben**, where the park headquarters are located. Look south and peninsulas jut out into the ocean like so many fingers hiding isolated coves accessible only by long-tail boat. All of the beaches are said to be safe for swimming year-round. From here you can also see several islands, including the nearby Ko Kam Yai, Ko Kam Noi, Mu Ko Yipun, Ko Khang Khao and, to the north, Ko Phayam. Park staff arrange boat trips to any of these islands for 1500B to 1800B depending upon the destination. If there is a prettier sunset picnic spot on the north Andaman coast, we missed it.

Sleeping & Eating

The following accommodation is at Hat Bang Ben. **Camping** (per person 80B) is allowed anywhere among the casuarinas (pay at the park office just inside the park entrance) or you can rent a tent from 150B per night.

Wasana Resort

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎0 7786 1434; bungalows 400-750B; 🏠🚽) The Wasana is a family-run ring of cosy bungalows wrapping around the colourful on-site restaurant. The owners, a Dutch-Thai couple, have plenty of great ideas for exploring Laem Son (ask about the stunning 10km trek around the headland) and can take you out on a day trip to the islands.

National Park Bungalows

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎0 2562 0760; reserve@dnpp.go.th; bungalows with fan 1200B, houses with air-con 1600B; 🏠) Choose from basic fan-cooled bungalows and bigger houses with air-con. The on-site restaurant serves three meals per day.

Getting There & Away

The turn-off for Laem Son National Park is about 58km from Ranong down Hwy 4 (Petchkasem Hwy), between the Km 657 and Km 658 markers. Buses heading south from Ranong can drop you off here (ask for Hat Bang Ben). Once you're off the highway, however, you'll have to flag down a pickup truck going towards the park. If you can't get a ride all the way, it's a 10km walk from Hwy 4 to the park entrance.

Boats out to other various islands can be chartered from the park's visitors centre; the general cost is 1200B to 1500B per day.

PHANG-NGA PROVINCE

Wounds take a long time to heal, but Phang-Nga is finally on the mend. Although tales are still being told about the 2004 tsunami, there's a palpable sense of progress as hot spots such as Khao Lak return to the well-trodden route.

From November to April the water is very clear, the sun shines and soda-white beaches beckon. In the rainy season, however, many places shut down and the area can feel a bit haunted.

Ko Phra Thong & Ko Ra

เกาะพระทอง&เกาะรา

Legend has it that many centuries ago, pirates docked and buried a golden Buddha beneath the sands at Ko Phra Thong, translated as 'Golden Buddha Island'. The legendary statue has never been found but Ko Phra Thong's modern-day treasures are its endless sandy beaches, mangroves, vast birdlife and rare orchids.

Nearby and even quieter is golden beach and mangrove-encircled Ko Ra. This small isle is a mountainous jungle with an impressive array of wildlife (including leopard cats, flying lemurs, scaly anteaters and slow loris) and has a welcoming local population of fisherfolk.

Locals of Tung Dap village on the southern tip of Ko Phra Thong have requested that tourists not visit their area, so please be respectful and avoid this corner.

Sleeping

Golden Buddha Beach Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$\$

(☎08 1892 2208; www.goldenbuddharesort.com; bungalows 3100-14,000B) The area's poshest resort attracts a stream of yoga aficionados keen for a spiritual getaway. Accommodation is in naturalistic-chic privately owned wooden houses rented out short- or long-term. There's also a dive centre.

Ko Ra Eco-Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎08 9867 5288, 08 5280 5507; www.thaiecolodge.com; bungalows 1100-1900B) Nestled in the trees on a small private beach, this older place is under new, activity-oriented management. Everything from meditation retreats to spectacular wildlife hikes and diving and snorkelling tours - including to the relatively nearby Surin Islands - is available.

Getting There & Away

There are no regular boats to Ko Phra Thong or Ko Ra, but you could theoretically charter a long-tail from the Kuraburi pier for around 1500B each way - boatmen are hard to find. It's far better and cheaper to contact your resort in advance to arrange transport.

Khao Sok National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติเขาสก

If your leg muscles have atrophied after one too many days of beach-bumming, consider venturing inland to the wondrous Khao Sok National Park. Many believe this lowland jungle - the wettest spot in Thailand - to be over 160 million years old, making it one of the oldest rainforests on the globe. It features dramatic limestone formations and waterfalls that cascade through juicy thickets drenched with rain. A network of dirt trails snakes through the quiet park, al-

lowing visitors to spy on the exciting array of indigenous creatures.

The best time of year to visit is between December and April - the dry season. During the June to October wet season, trails can be extremely slippery, flash flooding is common and leeches come out in force. On the other hand, animals leave their hidden reservoirs throughout the wet months, so you're more likely to stumble across big fauna.

Sights & Activities

Khao Sok's vast terrain makes it one of the last viable habitats for **large mammals**. During the wetter months you may happen upon bear, boar, gaur, tapirs, gibbons, deer, wild elephants and perhaps even a tiger. There are more than 300 bird species, 38 bat varieties and one of the world's largest flowers, the rare *Rafflesia kerrii*, which is found only in Khao Sok (within Thailand). These **giant flowers** can reach 80cm in diameter.

Chiaw Lan, created in 1982 by an enormous shale-clay dam called Ratchaprappa (Kheuan Ratchaprappa or Chiaw Lan), sits about an hour's drive (65km) east of the visitors centre. The limestone outcrops protruding from the lake reach a height of 960m, over three times higher than the formations in the Phang-Nga area.

Tham Nam Thalu cave contains striking limestone formations and subterranean streams, while **Tham Si Ru** features four converging passageways used as a hideout by communist insurgents between 1975 and 1982. The caves can be reached on foot from the southwestern shore of the lake. You can rent boats from local fishermen to explore the coves, canals, caves and cul-de-sacs along the lakeshore.

Elephant trekking, kayaking and rafting are popular park activities. The hiking is also excellent, and you can arrange park tours from any guest house in or around the park. Various trails you can hike independently from the visitors centre lead to the



KHAO SOK TOURS

Tours in and around Khao Sok can be up to 50% cheaper when booked at guest houses or travel agents near the park itself. Tours booked from further-afield destinations such as Phuket or Khao Lak will include higher-priced transport and tour-agent commissions.

waterfalls of **Sip-Et Chan** (4km), **Than Swan** (9km) and **Than Kloy** (9km), among other destinations. The park office hands out free trail maps.

Sleeping & Eating

The road leading into the park is lined with simple, charming guest houses and all offer a variety of park tours and guide services, while some are located a short distance from the road; minibuses travel along this road. We recommend going on a two-day, one-night trip (2500B per person) to Chiaw Lan where you sleep in floating huts on the lake and go on variety of canoe and hiking excursions.

Most guest houses have their own eateries (also open to nonguests) and there are a few restaurants on the road as well.

Art's Riverview Jungle Lodge

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎08 6470 3234; <http://krabidir.com/artsriverviewlodge>; bungalows 650B) In a monkey-filled jungle bordering a river with a natural limestone cliff-framed swimming hole, this is the prettiest location in Khao Sok. Wood bungalows are simple but big; all have river views.

Morning Mist Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(☎08 9971 8794; www.khaosokmorningmistesort.com; bungalows 650-1000B; 🏠) One of the more comfortable choices. All of the clean, tiled, fan-cooled bungalows have balconies and the most expensive overlook the river.

Jungle Huts

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎0 7739 5160; www.khao-sok-junglehuts.com; huts 300-1200B) Basic but good-value huts sit in a forest of fruit trees near a river or high up on stilts connected by a vertiginous walkway.

Tree Tops River Huts

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎08 7283 2133; www.treetopriverhuts.com; bungalows 540-1900B; 🏠) Right at the park entrance, solid but ageing bungalows are high on stilts in the trees overlooking the river.

Information

The **park headquarters** (☎0 7739 5025; www.khaosok.com; park admission 200B) and visitors centre are 1.8km off Rte 401, close to the Km 109 marker.

There's an ATM outside the Morning Mist Mini-Mart and internet is available near the park entrance for 2B per minute.

Getting There & Around

Minivans to Surat Thani (250B, one hour), Krabi (300B, two hours) and a handful of other destinations leave daily from the park. Otherwise, from Surat catch a bus going towards Takua Pa or from the Andaman coast, take a Surat Thani-bound bus. Buses drop you off along the highway (Rte 401), 1.8km from the visitors centre. If guest house touts don't meet you, you'll have to walk to your chosen nest (from 50m to 2km).

To explore Chiaw Lan lake on your own, charter a long-tail (2000B per day) at the dam's entrance.

Khao Lak & Around

เขาหลัก

Hat Khao Lak is a beach for folks who shun the glitz of Phuket's bigger resort towns, but still crave comfort, shopping and plenty of facilities. With warm waves to frolic in, long stretches of golden sand backed by forested hills, and easy day trips to the Similan and Surin Islands, Khao Sok and Khao Lak/Lam Ru National Parks or even

TSUNAMI EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

On the morning of 26 December 2004, an earthquake off the coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra sent enormous waves crashing against much of Thailand's Andaman coast, claiming around 8000 lives and causing millions of dollars of damage to homes and businesses. In 2005 Thailand officially inaugurated a national-disaster-warning system, which was created in response to the country's lack of preparedness in 2004. The Bangkok-based centre anticipates that a tsunami warning can be issued within 30 minutes of the event being detected by existing international systems.

If there is another tsunami, it's expected that the public will be warned via the nationwide radio network, Channel 5 army TV network, the state-operated TV pool and SMS messages. For non-Thai speakers, the centre has installed warning towers along the high-risk beachfront areas that will broadcast announcements in various languages accompanied by flashing lights. The **call centre** (☎1860) also handles questions and tips from the public regarding potential or unfolding disasters.


Phuket, the area is a central base for exploring the North Andaman – above and below the water.

About 2.5km north of Hat Khao Lak, **Hat Bang Niang** is an even quieter version of sandy bliss with skinnier beaches but fewer people. Khao Lak proper (also called Khao Lak Town locally) – a hodgepodge of restaurants, tourist markets and low-rise hotels along a grey highway – isn't exactly eye-catching, but it is convenient.

Sights

Khao Lak/Lam Ru National Park

NATIONAL PARK

( 0 7642 0243; www.dnp.go.th; adult/child 100/50B; ☀8am-4.30pm) The area immediately south of Hat Khao Lak has been incorporated into the vast 125-sq-km **Khao Lak/Lam Ru National Park**, a collage of sea cliffs, 1000m-high hills, beaches, estuaries, forested valleys and mangroves. Wildlife includes hornbills, drongos, tapirs, gibbons, monkeys and Asiatic black bears. The visitors centre, just off Hwy 4 between the Km 56 and Km 57 markers, has a very nice open-air restaurant on a shady slope overlooking the sea. From the restaurant you can take a fairly easy 3km round-trip nature trail that heads along the cape and ends at often-deserted Hat Lek beach.

Khlong Thap Liang

NATURE RESERVE

Guided hikes along the coast or inland can be arranged through many tour agencies in town, as can long-tail boat trips up the scenic **Khlong Thap Liang** estuary. The latter trip affords opportunities to view mangrove communities of crab-eating macaques.

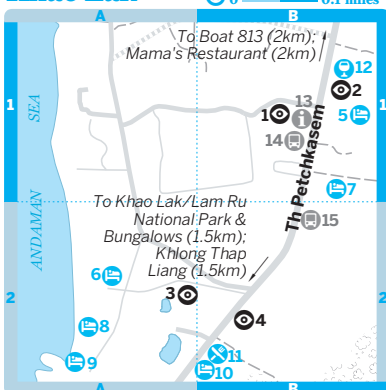
Between Khao Lak and Bang Sak is a network of sandy **beach trails** – some of which lead to deserted beaches – which are fun to explore on foot or by rented motorcycle. Most of the hotels in Khao Lak Town rent motorbikes for 250B per day.

Boat 813

MONUMENT

In an open field nearly 1km from shore, this boat is a testament to the force of the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami. Nearly 10 years later, it remains the region's most prominent reminder of the disaster. There's an information booth nearby with a tsunami timeline in both Thai and English. It's a 50B *sörnng-tāa-ou* ride between here and Khao Lak.

Khao Lak



Khao Lak

Sights

- | | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| 1 Big Blue | B1 |
| 2 Sea Dragon Dive Center | B1 |
| 3 Similan Diving Safaris | A2 |
| 4 Wicked Diving | B2 |

Sleeping

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---------|
| 5 Fasai House | B1 |
| 6 Greenbeach | A2 |
| 7 Khaolak Banana Bungalows | B1 |
| 8 Nangthong Bay Resort | A2 |
| 9 Nangthong Beach Resort | A2 |
| Tiffany's Café | (see 2) |
| 10 Walker's Inn | B2 |

Eating

- | | |
|-----------------------|----|
| 11 Phu Khao Lak | B2 |
|-----------------------|----|

Drinking

- | | |
|------------------------|----|
| 12 Happy Snapper | B1 |
|------------------------|----|

Information

- | | |
|------------------------------------|----|
| 13 Khao Lak Land Discoveries | B1 |
|------------------------------------|----|

Transport

- | | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| 14 Bus Stop (Northbound) | B1 |
| 15 Bus Stop (Southbound) | B2 |

Activities

Diving & Snorkelling

Diving or snorkelling day excursions to the Similan and Surin islands are immensely popular, but if you can, opt for a live-aboard trip. Since the islands are around 60km from the mainland (about three hours by boat), if you do opt for a live-aboard you'll have a more relaxing trip and experience the islands

sans day-trippers. All dive shops offer live-aboard trips from around 10,000/19,000B for two-/three-day packages and day trips for 4900B to 6500B.

On these multiday trips, you'll wake up with the dawn and slink below the ocean's surface up to four times each day in what's commonly considered to be one of the top 10 diving realms in the world. While both the Similan and Surin Islands (p616) have experienced vast coral bleaching recently, **Richelieu Rock** is still the *crème de la crème* of the region's sites and **Ko Bon** and **Ko Ta Chai** are two other good sites due to the traffic of giant manta rays.

Although geared towards divers, all dive shops welcome snorkellers who can hop on selected dive excursions or live-aboards for a discount of around 40%; otherwise, tour agencies all around town offer even cheaper snorkelling trips to the Similan Islands for around 2700B. PADI Open Water certification courses cost anywhere from 10,000B to 18,000B depending upon where you dive. You can go on a 'discover scuba' day trip to the Similans for around 6000B to 6500B.

Recommended dive shops:



Wicked Diving

DIVING

(☎ 7648 5868; www.wickeddiving.com) An exceptionally well-run and environmentally conscious outfit that runs diving and snorkelling overnight trips offering a range of live-aboard options including Whale Sharks & Mantas, Turtle & Reefs and Sharks & Rays conservation trips, run in conjunction with **Ecocean** (www.whaleshark.org). It does all the PADI courses, too.

Similan Diving Safaris

DIVING

(☎ 7648 5470; www.similan-diving-safaris.com) The speciality here is the high-quality four-day live-aboard (18,800B all-inclusive) that regularly attracts return customers. Knowledgeable staff and amazing food sweeten the deal. As far as live-aboards are concerned, this is probably the best bang for your baht. Day trips are also available.

Big Blue

DIVING

(☎ 7648 5544; www.bigbluekhaolak.com) Japanese and Swedish owned; its speedboat, live-aboard and dive instructors are among the best in Khao Lak.

Sea Dragon Diver Centre

DIVING

(☎ 7648 5614; www.iq-dive.com) (☎ 7648 5420; www.seadragondivecenter.com; Th Phetkasem)

One of the older operations in Khao Lak, Sea Dragon has maintained high standards throughout the years.

Sleeping

For the cheapest sleeps in town, head to Sea Dragon Diver Center (p614) and ask about the dorm beds at Tiffany's Café, which go for 180B per night.



Sarojin

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 7642 7900-4; www.sarojin.com; Hat Pakarang; r 12,500-22,250B; ☎@☎☎) A quiet retreat 15km north of Khao Lak with a Japanese-meets-modern-Thai style, the service here is stellar and the setting is elegant and intimate. The very private spa (treatments from 2300B), which takes in views of coconut groves and is nestled at the edge of the mangroves, is one of the best on the Andaman coast. We especially love the pool with its stylish lounging huts that hover above the crystal-blue water, and a cooking class takes place on the banks of the Takuapa River, where you can watch water buffalo stroll by. No kids allowed.



Nangthong Beach Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 7648 5911; www.nangthong2.com; r 2000-2200B, bungalows 2500-3000B; ☎@☎☎☎) The best choice in Khao Lak proper has large, well-appointed rooms, and even larger bungalows, with ceramic-tile floors, dark-wood furnishings, a burgeoning garden, impeccable service and the best stretch of sand in town.

La Flora Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 7642 8000; www.lafloraresort.com; r 5700-7700B, villas 9000-10,500B; ☎@☎☎☎) On gorgeous Hat Bang Niang, this resort excludes barefoot class; it's both elegant and supremely relaxing. Cabana-style villas are large and modern with sexy beachfront infinity pools and there's a kid-friendly pool in the centre of things. Rooms have marble floors, ceramic sinks, striking modern art, mp3 docks and aromatherapy diffusers.

Le Meridian

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 7642 7500; www.lemeridian.com; Hat Bang Sak; r from 5220B, villas from 11,200B; ☎@☎☎) A four-star megaresort, its 243 rooms and 20 villas are the only nests on Hat Bang Sak, 20km north of Khao Lak. It lacks the boutique touch and five-star service of the Sarojin, but it is slightly cheaper and is certainly

majestic, sprawling nearly all the way from the highway to the sea.

Nangthong Bay Resort HOTEL \$\$
(☎ 0 7648 5088; www.nangthong.com; r 200-3000B; 🍷@🍴🚰🚰) Until its sister property (the Nangthong Beach Resort) opened, this was the best midranger on the beach. The rooms are designed with a sparse black-and-white chic decor. The cheapest rooms are set back from the beach, but are fantastic value. Grounds are lush and service is excellent.

Greenbeach HOTEL \$\$
(☎ 0 7648 5845; greenbeach_th@yahoo.com; bungalows 1300-2300B; 🍷🚰) On an excellent stretch of Khao Lak beach and extending back into a garden, this place has a warm family-style soul. The wooden bungalows have glass doors, air-con and fan, shady terraces and views of a towering, ancient banyan tree. Even the cheapest rooms have sea views.

Fasai House GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 0 7648 5867; r 500-700B; 🍷@) The best budget choice in Khao Lak, Fasai has immaculate motel-style rooms and smiling staff members who coyly giggle like geishas.

Khao Lak/Lam Ru National Park Bungalows BUNGALOWS \$
(☎ 0 2562 0760; reserve@dnf.go.th; bungalows 800-2000B) There is a handful of four- and six-bed bungalows in the national park. Standards are basic, but the setting will suit those after an eco-experience.

Khaolak Banana Bungalows BUNGALOWS \$
(☎ 0 7648 5889; www.khaolakbanana.com; r 500-1200B; 🍷🚰) These adorable little bungalows have swirls painted on the cement floors and sun-filled indoor-outdoor bathrooms. A cute pool with deckchairs sweetens the deal.

Walker's Inn GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 0 7648 5668; Th Petchkasem; r 400-750B; 🍷🚰) Its big but plain and ageing tiled rooms with air-con and hot showers sit above a pub. It's friendly and popular with backpackers.

🍴 Eating & Drinking

This is no culinary capital, but there are a few local haunts where tourists congregate to relash the day's diving yarns. Early-morning divers will be hard-pressed to find a place to grab a bite before 8.30am.

TOP CHOICE **Mama's Restaurant** RESTAURANT \$\$
(Th Petchkasem; dishes 60-300B) Nobody, and we do mean nobody, does seafood better than Mama, who's set up across from Boat 813. Her fish cakes are insane, so is the barracuda sautéed in yellow curry.

Phu Khao Lak RESTAURANT \$\$
(Th Petchkasem; dishes 80-240B; 🍳breakfast, lunch & dinner) With its cloth tables spilling to the edges of a lawn at the southern end of the Khao Lak strip, this place is hard to miss. And you shouldn't because there's a huge menu of Western and Thai dishes here with ample descriptions, all cooked to perfection.

Pinocchio RESTAURANT \$\$\$
(☎ 0 7644 3079; 67/61 Th Hat Bang Niang, Hat Bang Niang; mains 240-480B) This beautiful candlelit garden restaurant features a huge stone pizza oven, imported wine and cheese, tremendous sourdough bread, even better pizza, homemade pasta, and gelato.

Happy Snapper BAR
(Th Petchkasem) Here's a bar stocked with good liquor, with a map of the world on the ceiling, the tree of life on the wall and a rockin' house band on stage six nights a week in the high season, led by the owner, a Bangkok-born bass legend.

📍 Information

For diving-related emergencies, call the **SSS Ambulance** (☎ 08 1081 9444), which rushes injured persons down to Phuket for treatment. The ambulance can also be used for car or motorcycle accidents. There is also one nurse in Bang Niang who caters to diving related injuries.

There are numerous travel agencies scattered about – the best is **Khao Lak Land Discoveries** (☎ 0 7648 5411; www.khaolaklanddiscovery.com; Th Phetkasem).

📍 Getting There & Away

Any bus running along Hwy 4 between Takua Pa (50B, 45 minutes) and Phuket (100B, two hours) will stop at Hat Khao Lak if you ask the driver.

Khao Lak Discoveries runs hourly minibuses to/from Phuket International Airport (600B, one hour 15 minutes). Alternately you can take a taxi (1200B) or tell a Phuket-bound bus driver to let you off at the 'airport' – you'll get let off at an intersection where motorcycle taxis to the airport (10 minutes) cost 100B.

Surin Islands Marine National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติหมู่เกาะสุรินทร์

The five gorgeous islands that make up this **national park** (www.dnp.go.th; admission 400B; ☉mid-Nov–mid-May) sit about 60km offshore, a measly 5km from the Thai–Burma marine border. Healthy rainforest, pockets of white-sand beach in sheltered bays and rocky headlands that jut into the ocean characterise these granite-outcrop islands. The clearest of water makes for great marine life, with underwater visibility often up to 35m. The islands' sheltered waters also attract *chow lair* (also spelt *chao leh*) – sea gypsies – who live in a village onshore during the monsoon season from May to November. Around here they are known as Moken, from the local word *oken* meaning 'saltwater'.

Ko Surin Nuea (north) and Ko Surin Tai (south) are the two largest islands. Park headquarters and all visitor facilities are at Ao Chong Khad on Ko Surin Nuea, near the jetty. Khuraburi is the jumping-off point for the park. The pier is about 9km north of town, as is the mainland **national park office** (☎0 7649 1378; ☉8am–5pm) with good information, maps and helpful staff.

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👁 Sights & Activities

Several tour operators run day tours from Khao Lak and Khuruburi (2900B including food and park lodging) to the park. The best in safety, service and value is **Greenview** (☎0 7640 1400; Khuraburi pier). Agencies dealing with diving in Hat Khao Lak (p613), Phuket (p622) and Ranong (p607) are the most convenient options for booking live-aboard dive trips. Transfers from the place of purchase are always included.

Diving & Snorkelling

Dive sites in the park include **Ko Surin Tai** and **HQ Channel** between the two main islands. **Richelieu Rock** (a seamouth 14km southeast) is also technically in the park and happens to be one of, if not the, best, dive sites on the Andaman coast. Whale sharks are sometimes spotted here during March and April. There's no dive facility in the park

itself, so dive trips (four-day live-aboards around 20,000B) must be booked from the mainland; see Getting There & Away (p617), and the diving sections for Khao Lak (p616) and Ranong (p603), for more information.

Snorkelling isn't as good as it used to be due to recent bleaching of the hard corals but you'll still see fish and soft corals. Two-hour snorkelling trips (per person 80B, gear per day 150B) leave the park headquarters at 9am and 2pm daily. Expect to be in the company of mostly Thais who swim fully clothed. If you'd like a more serene snorkelling experience, charter your own long-tail from the national park (half day 1000B), or better yet, directly from the Moken themselves in **Ban Moken** (Moken Village). The most beautiful, vibrant soft corals we saw were at **Ao Mae Yai**, an enormous North Island bay around the corner from Chong Khod. The best section of reef is between the white buoys along the northern peninsula. There are more fish off tiny **Ko Pajumba**, but the coral isn't in great shape. **Ao Suth-ep**, off the South Island, has vast schools of iridescent fish and shallow blue holes with milky bottoms.

Wildlife & Hiking

Around park headquarters you can explore the forest fringes, looking out for crab-eating macaques and some of the 57 resident bird species, which include the fabulous Nicobar pigeon, endemic to the Andaman islands. Along the coast you're likely to see the Brahminy kite soaring and reef herons on the rocks. Twelve species of bat live here, most noticeably the tree-dwelling fruit bats (also known as flying foxes).

A rough-and-ready **walking trail** winds 2km along the coast, through forest and back down to the beach at **Ao Mai Ngam**, where there's camping facilities and its own canteen. At low tide it's easy to walk along the coast between the two campsites.

Village Tour

Ban Moken at Ao Bon on the South Island welcomes visitors. Post-tsunami, Moken have settled in this one sheltered bay where a major ancestral worship ceremony (Loi Reua) takes place in April. The national park offers a **Moken Village Tour** (per person 300B). You'll stroll through the village where you should ask locals for permission to hike the 800m **Chok Madah trail** over the jungled hills to an empty beach. Tours depart at 9.15am and must be reserved the day before.

You can also organise a ride over from the park's HQ (per person 100B). If you do visit the village, bring cash to buy handicrafts to help support its economy. There's also a clothing donation box at park headquarters for the Moken, so this is a good, responsible place to lighten your load.

Sleeping & Eating

Park accommodation is decent, but because of the island's short, narrow beaches it can feel seriously crowded when full (around 300 people). Book online at www.dnp.go.th or with the mainland **national park office** (☎07649 1378; ☀8am-5pm) in Khuraburi. The clientele is mostly Thai, giving the place a lively holiday-camp feel. You can camp on both Ao Chong Klod and Ao Mae Ngam. The former has the more spectacular beach, the latter fills up last, is more secluded and with its narrow white-sand shallow bay, it feels a bit wilder. There are no bungalows on Ao Mae Ngam.

Bungalows (2000B) have wood floors and private terraces, as well as private terracotta bathrooms and fans that run all night. **Tents** (2-/4-person 300/450B, bedding per person 60B) are available for rent or you can pitch your own **tent** (per night 80B). There's generator power until 10pm.

A park **restaurant** (dishes from 80B, set menus 170-200B) serves decent Thai food.

Getting There & Away

Your operators use speedboats (return 1600B, one hour one-way) that leave around 9am and honour open tickets. A cheaper 'big boat' that had been docked for over two years when we passed, may start service again during the lifetime of this book.

Similan Islands Marine National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติหมู่เกาะสิมิลัน

Known to divers the world over, beautiful **Similan Islands Marine National Park** (www.dnp.go.th; admission 400B; ☀Nov-May) is 60km offshore. Its smooth granite islands are as impressive above water as below, topped with rainforest, edged with white-sand beaches and fringed with coral reefs. Unfortunately recent coral bleaching has killed many of the hard corals but soft corals are still intact, the fauna is there and it remains a lovely place to dive.

Two of the nine islands, Island 4 (Ko Miang) and Island 8 (Ko Similan), have ranger stations and accommodation; park headquarters and most visitor activity centres are on Island 4. 'Similan' comes from the Malay word *sembilan*, meaning 'nine', and while each island is named, they're more commonly known by their numbers. Recently, the park was expanded to include Ko Bon and Ko Tachai, both have remained unscathed by coral bleaching, making them some of the better diving and snorkelling areas.

Hat Khao Lak is the jumping-off point for the park. The pier is at Thap Lamu, about 10km south of town.

Sights & Activities

Diving & Snorkelling

The Similans offer diving for all levels of experience, at depths from 2m to 30m. There are rock reefs at **Ko Payu** (Island 7) and dive-throughs at **Hin Pousar** (Elephant Head), with marine life ranging from tiny plume worms and soft corals to schooling fish and whale sharks. There are dive sites at each of the six islands north of Ko Miang; the southern part of the park (Islands 1, 2 and 3) is off-limits to divers and is a turtle nesting ground. No facilities for divers exist in the national park itself, so you'll need to take a dive tour. Dive outfits in Hat Khao Lak (p613) and Phuket (p622) book dive trips (three-day live-aboards from around 14,500B).

You can hire snorkelling gear (per day 100B) from the park headquarters. Day-tour operators usually visit three or four different snorkelling sites. Plenty of tour agencies in Hat Khao Lak offer snorkelling-only day/overnight trips from around 3000/5000B.

Wildlife & Hiking

The forest around the park headquarters on Ko Miang (Island 4) has a couple of walking trails and some great wildlife. The fabulous Nicobar pigeon, with its wild mane of grey-green feathers, is common here. Endemic to the islands of the Andaman Sea, it's one of some 39 bird species in the park. Hair-legged land crabs and fruit bats (flying foxes) are relatively easily seen in the forest, as are flying squirrels.

A small **beach track** with information panels leads 400m to a tiny, pretty snorkelling bay. Detouring from it, the **Viewpoint Trail** - 500m or so of steep scrambling - has panoramic vistas from the top. A 500m walk to **Sunset Point** takes you through forest

to a smooth granite platform facing – obviously – west.

On Ko Similan (Island 8) there's a 2.5km forest hike to a **viewpoint**, and a shorter, steep scramble off the main beach to the top of **Sail Rock** (aka Balance Rock).

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation in the park is available for all budgets. Book online at www.dnp.go.th or with the mainland **national park office** (☎076453272) at Hat Khao Lak. Tour agents in Hat Khao Lak also arrange overnight to multiday trips that include transport, food and lodging at the park – these cost little more than it would to go solo.

On Ko Miang there are sea-view **bungalows** (r 2000B; ☎) with balconies; two dark five-room wood-and-bamboo **longhouses** (r 1000B) with fans, and **tents** (2-/4-person 300/450B). There's electricity from 6pm to 6am.

Tents are also available on Ko Similan. You can pitch your own **tent** (per night 80B) on either island.

A **restaurant** (dishes 100-150B) near the park headquarters serves simple Thai food.

Getting There & Away

There's no public transport to the park but theoretically independent travellers can book a speedboat transfer (return 1700B, 1½ hours one way) with a Hat Khao Lak snorkelling operator, though they much prefer that you join the snorkelling tour and generally discourage independent travel to the Similans.

Agencies in Khao Lak (p613) and Phuket (p662) book day/overnight tours (from around 3000/5000B) and dive trips (three-day live-aboards from around 15,000B) – this is about how much you would pay if you tried to get to the islands on your own steam. You can try to link up with a dive trip and pay for the excursion sans diving equipment, but operators will only cooperate if their boats are relatively empty.

Phang-Nga Town & Ao Phang-Nga

พังงาอำเภอพังงา

POP 9700

With turquoise bays peppered with craggy limestone rock towers, brilliant-white beaches and tumbledown fishing villages, Ao Phang-Nga is one of the region's most spectacular landscapes. Little wonder then that it was here, among the towering cliffs and swifts' nests that James Bond's nemesis, Scaramanga (*The Man with the Golden*

Gun), chose to build his lair. Wanted assassins with goals of world domination would not be recommended to hide out here nowadays, since the area is swarming with tourists in motorboats and sea kayaks nearly year-round. Much of the bay, and some of the coastline, has now been incorporated into the Ao Phang-Nga Marine National Park (p619).

Sights & Activities

Phang-Nga is a scruffy town with not much going for it, backed up against sublime limestone cliffs. There isn't a whole lot to see or do unless you happen to be here during the annual **Vegetarian Festival** (see the boxed text, p618) in late September or October.

Boat Tours

About 8.5km south of the town centre is Tha Dan. From here, you can charter boats to see half-submerged **caves**, oddly shaped islands and **Ko Panyi**, a Muslim village on stilts. There are tours to the well-trod **Ko Phing Kan** ('James Bond Island'; see p620) and **Ao Phang-Nga Marine National Park** (500B per person for a two- to three-hour tour); see p619 for more information. Takua Thung, another pier area about 10km further west of Tha Dan, also has private boats for hire at similar prices to tours. The park office, inside Ao Phang-Nga Marine National Park (p619), also offers boat tours.

Although it can be a pain to haggle with boatmen, it's nice to create your own itinerary. Of course, it's easier (and cheaper) to go with an organised tour through an agency in town. **Sayan Tours** (☎07643 0348; www.sayantour.com) has been doing tours of Ao Phang-Nga for many years now, and continues to receive good reviews from travellers. Half-/full-day tours cost from 700/1000B per person and include **Tham Lawt** (a large water cave), Ko Phing Kan and Ko Panyi, among other destinations. For an extra 300B you can add a bit of kayaking. It also offers a **river-rafting trip** (per person 1600B) to the Son Pat Waterfall 25km south of Phang-Nga, and tours to nearby destinations, including **Sa Nang Manora Forest Park**.

Sleeping & Eating

Phang-Nga doesn't have much in the way of quality sleeping and most folks choose to swing by on a day trip. Several food stalls on the main street of Phang-Nga sell delicious *kà-nòm-jeen* (thin wheat noodles) with chicken curry, *nám yah* (spicy ground-fish

curry) or *nám prik* (spicy sauce). There's a morning market open from 5am to 10am daily and a small night market on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, located just south of Soi Lohakit.

Phang-Nga Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 7641 1963; 2/2 Soi Lohakit, Phang-Nga; r 400-1500B; ☎) This converted residential villa features heavy wood staircases, louvred cabinets and peaceful gardens. It's well furnished, there's a little eatery and the staff are gracious.

Phang-Nga Guest House

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎0 7641 1358; Th Petchkasem, Phang-Nga; r 250-380B; ☎) Nothing fancy. Just a clean block of cheap and cherry-tiled rooms in the otherwise drab centre of town.

i Getting There & Away

Phang-Nga's bus terminal is located just off the main street on Soi Bamrung Rat. Bangkok buses to/from Phang-Nga include VIP class (912B, 12 hours, one daily), 1st class (552B, 12 to 13 hours, two daily) and 2nd class (441B, 12 hours, three to four daily).

There are several other bus services available:

DESTINATION	PRICE	FREQUENCY	DURATION
Hat Yai	300B	2 daily	6hr
Krabi	74B	frequent	1½hr
Phuket	85B	frequent	1½hr
Ranong	170B	4 daily	5hr
Surat Thani	150B	frequent	3hr
Trang	240B	frequent	3½hr

Around Phang-Nga

AO PHANG-NGA MARINE NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติอ่าวพังงา

Established in 1981 and covering an area of 400 sq km, **Ao Phang-Nga Marine National Park** (☎0 7641 1136; www.dnp.go.th; admission 200B; ☉8am-4pm) is noted for its classic karst scenery. There are over 40 islands with huge vertical cliffs, some with caves that are accessible at low tide and lead into hidden *hõrngs* (lagoons surrounded by solid rock walls). The bay itself is composed of large and small tidal channels including Khlong Ko Phanyi, Khlong Phang-Nga, Khlong Bang Toi and Khlong Bo Saeng. These channels run through vast mangroves in a north-south direction and today are used by fisherfolk

Ao Phang Nga



and island inhabitants as aquatic highways. These mangroves are the largest remaining primary mangrove forests in Thailand.

In the peak season the bay can become a package-tourist superhighway. But if you explore in the early morning (best done from Ko Yao Noi or Ko Yao Yai) or stay out a bit late, you'll find a slice of beach, sea and a limestone karst to call your own. The best way to experience the park is by kayak.

i Sights & Activities

John Gray's Seacanoë

SEA KAYAKING

(☎0 7622 6077; www.johngray-seacanoë.com) John Gray was the first kayak outfitter in the bay and remains the most ecologically minded. He's constantly clamouring for more protection for his beloved *hõrngs* among local national-park rangers and their supervisors in Bangkok. His **Hong By Starlight day trip** (per person 3950B) dodges the crowds, involves plenty of sunset paddling and will introduce you to Ao Phang-Nga's famed bio-luminescence once night falls. See also p622.

Ko Nok & Ko Klui

ISLANDS

Set halfway between Phuket and Krabi, these two islands are far enough from tour epicentres that you'll usually have them to yourself. **Ko Klui**, the big island north of Ko

WILDLIFE IN AO PHANG-NGA NATIONAL PARK

The marine limestone environment here favours a long list of reptiles, including Bengal monitor lizards, flying lizards, banded sea snakes, dogface water snakes, shore pit vipers and Malayan pit vipers. Keep an eye out for a two-banded monitor (*Varanus salvator*), which looks like a crocodile when seen swimming in the mangrove swamp and can measure up to 2.2m in length.

Amphibians in the Ao Phang-Nga region include marsh frogs, common bush frogs and crab-eating frogs. Avian residents of note are helmeted hornbills (the largest of Thailand's 12 hornbill species, with a body length of up to 127cm), the edible-nest swiftlets (*Aerodramus fuciphagus*), white-bellied sea eagles, ospreys and Pacific reef egrets.

In the mangrove forests and on some of the larger islands reside over 200 species of mammals, including white-handed gibbons, serows, dusky langurs and crab-eating macaques.

Yao Noi, has tidal access to a huge *hôngg*, which some call the **Blue Room**, and a pristine white-sand beach with plenty of hornbills and monkeys.

Ko Phing Kan (James Bond Island) ISLAND
The biggest tourist drawcard in the park is the so-called 'James Bond Island', known to Thais as **Ko Phing Kan** (literally 'Leaning on Itself Island'). Once used as a location setting for *The Man with the Golden Gun*, the island is now full of vendors hawking coral and shells that should have stayed in the sea.

i Getting There & Around

If you have your own vehicle, drive about 6km south on Hwy 4 from the centre of Phang-Nga, turn left onto Rte 4144 (the road to Tha Dan) and travel 2.6km to the park headquarters. Without your own transport you'll need to take a *sôngg-tăa-ou* to Tha Dan (30B).

From the park office, you can hire a boat (1500B, maximum four passengers) for a three-hour tour of the surrounding islands.

Ko Yao

เกาะยาว

With mountainous backbones, unspoilt shorelines, a large variety of birdlife and a population of friendly Muslim fisherfolk, **Ko Yao Yai** and **Ko Yao Noi** are laid-back vantage points for soaking up Ao Phang-Nga's beautiful scenery. The islands are part of the Ao Phang-Nga National Park (p619) but are most easily accessed from Phuket.

Please remember to respect the beliefs of the local Muslim population and wear modest clothing when away from the beaches.

i Sights & Activities

Despite being the relative pipsqueak of the Ko Yao Islands, Ko Yao Noi is the main population centre, with fishing, coconut farming and tourism sustaining its small, year-round population. Bays on the east coast recede to mud flats at low tide but the beaches are still splendid.

Ko Yao Yai is far less developed than Ko Yao Noi; it offers an even more remote and wild getaway. Villagers are still pleasantly surprised to see tourists pedalling their bicycles or buzzing by on rented motorbikes.

Cycling

Bring along or rent (200B per day from most guest houses) a mountain bike if you want to explore each of the islands' numerous dirt trails, or join up with Phuket's **Amazing Bike Tours** (☎08 7263 2031; www.amazingbike toursthailand.com; day trip 2900B). Or, if you like the idea of cycling but think it's too darn hot, rent an ecofriendly electric bicycle (220B per day) from **Eco Island Vehicles** (☎08 6476 1143; Ko Yao Noi), whose staff will pick you up at your Ko Yao Noi hotel; they also rent mountain bikes (200B).

Diving & Snorkelling

Half-day three-island snorkelling tours (1700B, maximum six passengers) through Ao Phang-Nga are easily organised from any guest house or with long-tail captains on the beaches. **Koh Yao Diver** (☎08789 575 517; http://kohyaodiver.com) leads dive trips from both islands.

Rock Climbing

Mountain Shop Adventures (☎08 9971 0380, 08 4841 1540; www.themountainshop.org; Tha Khao) offers full-day rock climbing trips

around Ko Yao Noi from 2500B, as well as fishing, snorkelling and kayak trips. There are over 150 climbs on Ko Yao Noi and owner Mark has routed most of them himself – many trips involve boat travel to get to remote limestone cliff faces. Beginner to advanced trips are available.

Sleeping & Eating

TOP CHOICE **Six Senses Hideaway** HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎0 7641 8500; www.sixsenses.com/hideaway-yao-noi; Ko Yao Noi; r 32,000-400,000B; 🍷@🍷) This swanky five-star property – where 56 hillside pool villas (and their tremendous spa) have been built to resemble an old *chow lair* village – doesn't disappoint. Views of distant limestone formations are jaw-dropping; its Thai kitchen is tantalising; and its commitment to sustainability is unparalleled among global five-star chains.

Elixir HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎08 7808 3838; www.elixirresort.com; Ko Yao Yai; bungalows 8000-25,500B; 🍷@🍷) The first of Yao Yai's two four-star resorts offers tasteful beachfront and hillside peaked-roof villas steeped in classic Thai style. There are dark-wood floors and high ceilings, indoor and outdoor showers, and ceramic-bowl sinks. It's set on a private beach, where you'll also find a common pool, dive centre, massage pagodas and spectacular sunsets over Phuket.

Koyao Island Resort HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎0 1606 1517; www.koyao.com; Ko Yao Noi; villas 7000-13,200B; 🍷@🍷) Its open-concept thatched bungalows offer serene views across a palm-shaded garden and infinity pool to a skinny white beach. We love the elegant, near safari-esque feel of the villas here with their fan-cooled patios and indoor-outdoor bathrooms.

Thiwson Beach Resort GUEST HOUSE \$\$
(☎08 1737 4420; www.thiwsonbeach.com; Ko Yao Yai; bungalows 800-3000B; 🍷🍷) Easily the cleanest, and sweetest, of Ko Yao Yai's bungalow properties. Here are proper wooden bungalows with polished floors, outdoor baths, and wide patios facing the best beach on the island. Beachfront bungalows are the largest, but fan rooms are tremendous value.

Lom Lea GUEST HOUSE \$\$
(☎0 7659 7486; www.lomlae.com; Ko Yao Noi; bungalows 2000-5500B; 🍷) Stylish, naturalist wooden bungalows are fronted by a stun-

ning and secluded beach with views of Phang-Nga's signature karst islands. There's a dive centre, a good restaurant and plenty of activities on offer.

Paradise Hotel HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎08 1892 4878; www.theparadise.biz; Ko Yao Noi; r from 7500B; 🍷) Tucked into a private cove on the far north, and accessible only by long-tail boat or by a winding, rutted earthen road, stay at this ageing place for its exceptionally beautiful and remote location.

Sabai Corner Bungalows GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎0 7659 7497; www.sabaicornerbungalows.com; Ko Yao Noi; bungalows 500-2000B) Tucked into a rocky headland, the wooden and bamboo bungalows here are full of character and blessed with gorgeous views.

Information

In Ta Khai, the largest settlement on Ko Yao Noi, there's a 7-Eleven with an attached ATM, and another ATM around the corner at Government Savings Bank.

On Ko Yai Yai, the only ATM is out of the way near the Klong Hia Pier, so you'd be wise to carry plenty of cash.

Getting There & Away

From Phuket

For Ko Yao Noi, hourly long-tails (150B, 20 minutes) or three daily speedboats (200B, 20 minutes) leave Tha Bano Rong north of Phuket Town between 7.30am and 5.40pm.

To Ko Yao Yai, catch a speedboat or ferry from Tha Rasada near Phuket Town. Ferries depart at 8.30am, 10.30am and 2pm (one hour, 100B). Speedboats (30 minutes, 150B) make the run at 4pm and 5pm. On Fridays the schedule shifts to accommodate prayer times.

From Krabi

There are four 'express' boats (450B, 1½ hours) and two speedboats (600B, 45 minutes) per day from Krabi's Tha Len pier to Ko Yao Noi piers at Tha Manok and Tha Khao.

From Phang-Nga

From Tha Sapan Yao in Phang-Nga there's a 7.30am ferry to Ko Yao Noi continuing to Ko Yao Yai (200B, two hours) that makes an excellent budget cruise of Ao Phang-Nga. It leaves Ko Yao Noi for the return trip at 1pm.

Getting Around

To get from Ko Yao Noi to Ko Yao Yai, catch a shuttle boat from Tha Manok (100B to 150B, 15 minutes) to Tha Klong Hia. On the islands, you

can travel by túk-túk (pronounced dúk dúk'; motorised transport) for about 150B per ride or rent a motorbike from most guest houses for around 250B per day. It's around 70B to 100B for túk-túk transport to the resorts.

PHUKET ISLAND ภูเก็ต

POP 83,800

The reigning granddaddy of Thailand beach vacations, Phuket Province features one giant island – the Andaman's drop zone of quintessential tropical fun.

The island of Phuket has long been misunderstood. First of all, the 'h' is silent. Ahem. And second, Phuket doesn't feel like an island at all. It's so huge (it's the biggest in the country) that you rarely get the sense that you're surrounded by water, which is probably the reason why the 'Ko' (meaning 'island') has been dropped from its name. Dubbed the 'pearl of the Andaman' by marketing execs, this is Thailand's original flavour of tailor-made fun in the sun.

The island's 'sin city' of Patong is the biggest town and busiest beach. It's the ultimate gong show where podgy beachaholics sizzle off their hangovers and go-go girls play ping-pong...without paddles... But ultimately the island's affinity to luxury far outshines its other stereotypes. Jet-setters come through in droves, getting pummelled during swanky spa sessions and swigging sundowners at one of the many fashion-forward nightspots. And you don't have to be an heiress to tap into Phuket's trendy to-do list. There's deep-sea diving, high-end dining, white beaches that beckon you and your book – whatever your heart desires.

Activities

Diving & Snorkelling

Phuket enjoys an enviable central location for diving. The much-talked-about Similan Islands sit to the north, while dozens of dive sites orbit Ko Phi-Phi (p662) and Ko Lanta (p671) to the south. Of course, this means that trips from Phuket to these awesome destinations cost slightly more than from places closer to the sites since you'll be forking over extra dough for petrol. Most operators on Phuket take divers to decent sites orbiting the island, such as Ko Raya Noi and Ko Raya Yai (also called Ko Racha Noi and Ko Racha Yai) to the south; however, these spots rank lower on the wow-o-meter. The

reef off the southern tip of Raya Noi is particularly good for experienced divers. It's a deep site where soft corals cling to boulders, around which pelagic fish species roam. Manta and marble rays are also frequently glimpsed here, and if you're lucky, you may even see a whale shark.

There are heaps of 'dive' shops here – at last count there were over 100, though most of them are the equivalent of a booking agency. The more serious ones often operate their own boat(s) while others send you off with another operator, so ask if you've got any concerns.

Typical one-day dive trips to nearby sites cost around 3500B, including two dives and equipment. Nondivers (and snorkelers) are often permitted to join these dive trips for a significant discount. PADI Open Water certification courses cost around 15,000B for three days of instruction and equipment.

Snorkelling is best along Phuket's west coast, particularly at the rocky headlands between beaches. Mask, snorkel and fins can be rented for around 250B a day. As with scuba diving, you'll find better snorkelling, with greater visibility and variety of marine life, along the shores of small outlying islands such as Ko Raya Yai and Ko Raya Noi.

As elsewhere in the Andaman Sea, the best diving months are December to May, when the weather is good and the sea is smooth and clear.

Recommended diving and snorkelling centres on Phuket include **Sun Fun Divers** in both Patong (p639) and Kata (see Map p636), **Oi's Longtail** (p651) in Hat Nai Yang, and **Dive Asia** in Hat Karon (p635).

Another outfit well worth checking out is **Offspray Leisure** (☎08 1894 1274; www.offsprayleisure.com; 43/87 Chalong Plaza, Chalong; dive trips from 2950B), a dive and snorkelling excursion company specialising in small-load, intimate trips to the reefs around Ko Phi-Phi.

Sea Kayaking

Several companies based on Phuket offer canoe tours of scenic Ao Phang-Nga (see p618). Kayaks can enter semisubmerged caves inaccessible to long-tail boats. A day paddle costs from 3950B per person including meals, equipment and transfer; many outfits also run all-inclusive, three-day (from 13,700B) or six-day (from 27,100B) kayak/camping trips.

Ko Phuket



A reputable and ecologically sensitive company is **John Gray's Seacanoë** (p629). Another popular company that caters to small groups is **Paddle Asia** (☎ 0 7621 6145; www.paddleasia.com; 9/71 Moo 3, Th Rasdanu-sorn, Ban Kuku), which offers several day and multiday trips to Ao Phang-Nga and Khao Sok National Park on classic kayaks rather than sit-on-tops or inflatables.

Surfing

Phuket is an undercover surf destination. Once the monsoons bring their midyear swell, glassy seas fold into barrels. The best waves arrive between June and September, when annual competitions are held in Kata and Kalim. In Kata, the south end of the bay has the best break, which typically tops out at 2m; a couple of surfing outfits operate here, see p635. Hat Nai Han can get bigger (up to 3m) near the yacht club. Be warned, both Kata and Nai Han have vicious undertows that can claim lives.

Hat Kalim, just north of Patong, is sheltered and has a consistent break that also

gets up to 3m. This is a hollow wave, and is considered the best break on the island. The **Phuket Boardriders Club** (www.phuketboardriders.com) sponsors an August contest here. Kamala's northernmost beach has a nice 3m beach break, and Laem Singh, just up the coast in front of the Amanpuri, gets very big and fast, plus it's sheltered from wind by the massive headland.

Hat Nai Yang has a consistent if soft wave that is perfect for veteran boardriders who'd rather not take a pounding. It breaks more than 200m offshore, swells get up to 3m high and there is no undertow.

Kite Boarding

One of the world's fastest growing sports is also one of Phuket's coming fads. The three best spots are Hat Nai Yang, Karon (in the low season) and Rawai (ideal conditions for beginners in the high season). Both of Phuket's two kite-boarding operators (see p648) are affiliated with the International Kiteboarding Organization (think PADI for kite boards).

TOP FIVE PHUKET SPAS

There seems to be a massage shop on every corner on Phuket. Most are low-key family affairs where traditional Thai massage goes for about 250B per hour, and a basic mani-pedi costs around 150B – a real steal. The quality of service at these places varies, and changes rapidly as staff turnover is high. Go with your gut instinct or ask fellow travellers or your hotel staff for recommendations. No matter where you choose, it's hard to go wrong.

If you're looking for a more Westernised spa experience, head to one of Phuket's plentiful spa resorts. These places are often affiliated with a ritzy hotel (but nearly all are open to nonguests). They are *haute couture* affairs with sumptuous Zen designs and huge treatment menus. Prices vary depending on location, but treatments generally start at around 1000B and go up and up from there.

Our top five Phuket spa picks:

- » The **Bua Luang Spa** (p649), at the Anantara Phuket, combines the best of Thai and Ayurvedic healing traditions. Why not follow that turmeric body scrub with a Thai herbal compress massage?
- » The **Six Senses Spa** (☎ 0 7638 1010; www.sixsenses.com; 100 Th Viset, Hat Rawai; r from 4000B; ♿@☎), at the Evason Phuket Resort, is sublimely back-to-nature in setting, yet cutting edge as far as treatments are concerned. Try the *Envisaging Journey* (three hours, 7600B), which includes a body toner, an Energiser massage, followed by foot acupressure.
- » Get wrapped in Asian white clay (2000B) or detoxifying seaweed (2500B) and follow it with a Tri Phase Stone Therapy Massage (2900B) at the **Sala Resort & Spa** (p649).
- » One of Phuket's first spas, **Hideaway Day Spa** (p646) in Ao Bang Thao still enjoys an excellent reputation. More reasonably priced than many hotel counterparts, the Hideaway offers treatments in a tranquil setting by a lagoon.
- » Another reasonable, refreshing choice is the **Raintree Spa** at Sino House (p630) in Phuket Town. When locals crave spa therapy (massages 500B to 1000B) they come here.

Yachting

Phuket is one of Southeast Asia's main yachting destinations, and you'll find all manner of craft anchored along its shores - from 80-year-old wooden sloops to the latest in high-tech motor cruisers.

Marina-style facilities with year-round anchorage are presently available at a few locations:

Phuket Boat Lagoon

MARINA

(☎ 0 7623 9055; fax 0 7623 9056) Located at Ao Sapam, about 10km north of Phuket Town on the eastern shore. It offers an enclosed marina with tidal-channel access, serviced pontoon berths, 60- and 120-tonne travel lifts, a hard-stand area, plus a resort hotel, laundry, coffee shop, fuel, water, repairs and maintenance services.

Royal Phuket Marina

MARINA

(☎ 0 7637 9397; www.royalphuketmarina.com) The US\$25 million Royal Phuket Marina is located just south of Phuket Boat Lagoon. It's more luxurious with shiny new townhouses, upscale restaurants and a convention centre overlooking 190 berths.

Yacht Haven Phuket Marina

MARINA

(☎ 0 7620 6704; www.yacht-haven-phuket.com) This marina is at Laem Phrao on the north-eastern tip of Phuket. The Yacht Haven boasts 130 berths with deep-water access, and a scenic restaurant. It also does yacht maintenance.

Port clearance is rather complicated; the marinas will take care of the paperwork (for a fee, of course) if notified of your arrival in advance. Expect to pay from 17,000B per day for a high-season, bareboat charter.

For more information on yacht charters (both bareboat and crewed), contact the following:

Asia Marine (www.asia-marine.net; Yacht Haven Phuket Marina)

Tawan Cruises (☎ 08 8194 3234; www.tawancruises.com)

If you're interested in a more affordable sailing trip, seek out **Phuket Sail Tours** (☎ 08 7897 0492; www.phuketsailtours.com; Ao Por). Its day trips through Ao Phang-Nga (3000B all-inclusive) come highly recommended.

Horse Riding

Phuket offers horse riding in Rawai (p635).

Courses

Popular Thai cooking classes are held in Kata (p635), Phuket Town (p629), Ko Sireh (p633) and Patong (p639).

Tours

It's not hard to find elephant rides and 4WD tours of the island's interior, though none of those will win their way into the hearts of animal rights activists or environmentalists, so why not take a bike ride? **Amazing Bike Tours** (☎ 0 7628 3436; www.amazingbiketoursthailand.asia; 32/4 Moo 9, Th Chaofa, Chalong; day trips from 1600B), Phuket's best new adventure outfitter, leads small groups on half-day bicycle tours through the Khao Phra Thaew Royal Wildlife & Forest Reserve, and it offers terrific day trips around Ko Yao Noi and the gorgeous beaches and waterfalls of Thai Muang in nearby Phang-Nga province.

Phuket for Children

There's plenty for kids to do on Phuket. And while the seedier face of the sex industry is on full show in Patong (we wouldn't bring our kids there, although many people do), the rest of the island is fairly G-rated.

Elephant treks are always a big hit with kids, with the best options available on the Kata-Hat Nai Han road. **Phuket Aquarium** (p633) and a visit to the tiny **Phuket Gibbon Rehabilitation Centre** (p650) are also terrific animal-themed activities that are sure to please.

The main family-flogged feature of Phuket is **Phuket Fantasea** (p644), which is a pricey extravaganza of animals, costumes, song, special effects, pyrotechnics, and a lousy dinner.

Dino Park (p637) in Karon is a park with a maze of caves, lagoons and dinosaur statues where kids can play minigolf.

The biggest water park in Thailand is **Splash Jungle** (Map p623; ☎ 0 7637 2111; www.splashjunglewaterpark.com; Mai Khao; adult/child 5-12yr/child under 5yr 1500/750B/free), which has a wave pool, a play pool including tipping buckets and water cannons, 12 very cool water slides for all ages, a sauna and bar for mum and dad; the price includes pick-up at your resort.

Volunteering

Soi Dog Foundation (☎ 08 7050 8688; www.soidog.org) is a well-organised unit aimed at sterilising, providing medical care for and

PHUKET'S MOO•AY TAI EXPLOSION ADAM SKOLNICK

Over the past few years, spurred in no small part by the increasing global presence and popularity of Mixed Martial Arts, several *moo•ay tai* (also spelled *muay thai*; Thai boxing) gyms catering to international male and female athletes have sprouted off the beach in Phuket. Based on the original *moo•ay tai* camp concept, fighters live and train on site with seasoned *moo•ay tai* professionals.

The whole thing started with Pricha 'Tuk' Chokkuea and his gym, **Rawai Muay Thai** (☎08 1476 9377; www.rawaimuaythai.com; 43/42 Moo 7, Th Sai Yuan). He and former business partner Danny Avison, a Phuket-based triathlete, decided to train tourists as a fundraising mechanism so Tuk could also train impoverished, up-and-coming Thai fighters, without dipping deeply into their fight purse (the traditional *moo•ay tai* business model, and something Tuk always resented). For years his was the only gym around, but in Rawai alone there are now more than half-a-dozen gyms.

The best new gym is Avison's **Promthep Muay Thai Camp** (☎08 5786 2414; www.promthepmuaythai.com; 91 Moo 6, Soi Yanui). In addition to training fighters, Avison has a tremendous multisport cross-training weight-loss program. Wherever you enter the ring, be warned: this is no wussie watered-down-for-Westerners theme-park ride. Prepare to sweat, cringe, grapple and bleed. If you're the real deal, maybe you'll even win a fight under the Bang-la Stadium lights?

feeding stray dogs. Volunteers are needed for feeding the dogs but it's just as helpful to donate funds towards the projects. Check the website for updates and details.

i Information

Dangers & Annoyances

During the May to October monsoon, large waves and fierce undertows can make it too dangerous to swim. Dozens of annual drownings occur every year on Phuket's beaches, especially on Laem Singh, Kamala and Karon. Red flags are posted to warn bathers of serious rip tides.

Keep an eye out for jet skis when you are in the water. Although in 1997 the Phuket governor declared jet skis illegal, enforcement of the ban is another issue.

Renting a motorcycle can be a high-risk proposition. Thousands of people are injured or killed every year on Phuket's highways. If you must rent one, make sure you at least know the basics and wear a helmet.

There have been recent late-night motorbike muggings and stabbings on the road leading from Patong to Hat Karon, and on the road between Kata and the Rawai-Hat Nai Han area. There have been a few recent random sexual assaults on women, as well. Women should think twice before sunbathing topless (a big no-no in Thailand anyway) and alone, especially on an isolated beach, and it can be dangerous to go for a jog alone at night or early in the morning.

Medical Services

Local hospitals are equipped with modern facilities, emergency rooms and outpatient-care clinics. Both of the following, which are near Phuket Town, have hyperbaric chambers:

Bangkok Phuket Hospital (Map p623; ☎0 7625 4425; www.phukethospital.com; Th Yongyok Uthit) Reputedly the favourite with locals.

Phuket International Hospital (Map p623; ☎0 7624 9400; www.phuketinternationalhospital.com; Th Chalermprakiat) International doctors rate this hospital as the best on the island.

Tourist Information

The weekly English-language *Phuket Gazette* publishes information on activities, events, dining and entertainment around the island, as well as the latest scandals. It can be accessed online at www.phuketgazette.net.

Websites

Jamie's Phuket (www.jamie-monk.com) A fun insider's blog written by a long-time Phuket expat resident with excellent photos and travel tips.

One Stop Phuket (www.1stopphuket.com) A user-friendly travel guide and internet-booking referral service.

Phuket Dot Com (www.phuket.com) Offers a sophisticated compendium of many kinds of information, including accommodation on the island.

i Getting There & Away

Air

Phuket International Airport (☎ 0 7632 7230) is 30km northwest of Phuket Town; it takes around 45 minutes to an hour to reach the southern beaches from here.

Some regional airline carriers:

Air Asia (www.airasia.com) Serves Phuket beautifully. In addition to several daily flights to Bangkok (around 1480B), it also flies direct to Hong Kong (5000B), Chiang Mai (1600B), Singapore (1400B), Bali (2730B) and other destinations.

Bangkok Airways (off Map p628; ☎ 0 7622 5033; www.bangkokair.com; 58/2-3 Th Yaowarat) Has daily flights to Ko Samui (2380B) and Bangkok (1725B) and more.

Nok Air (www.nokair.com) Links Phuket with Bangkok.

THAI (Map p628; ☎ 0 7621 1195; www.thaiairways.com; 78/1 Th Ranong, Phuket Town) Operates around seven daily flights to Bangkok (from around 3000B) with connections to/ from several other cities in Thailand, as well as international destinations.

Several other international airlines fly to Phuket and have offices in Phuket Town including the following:

Dragonair (Map p628; ☎ 0 7621 5734; Th Phang-Nga, Phuket Town)

Korean Airlines (☎ 0 7621 6675; 1/8-9 Th Thungkha, Phuket Town)

Malaysia Airlines (off Map p628; ☎ 0 7621 6675; 1/8-9 Th Thungkha, Phuket Town)

Silk Air (Map p628; ☎ 0 7621 3891; www.silkair.com; 183/103 Th Phang-Nga, Phuket Town)

Ferry & Speedboat

Tha Rasada, north of Phuket Town, is the main pier for boats to Ko Phi Phi (for more information see p668) with connections to Krabi, Ko Lanta, the Trang Islands, Ko Lipe and even as far as Langkawi Island in Malaysia (where there are further ferry connections to Penang).

For quicker service to Krabi and Ao Nang via the Ko Yao islands, boats leave from Tha Bang Bong north of Tha Rasada; see p668 for more details.

Minivan

Travel agencies all around Phuket island sell tickets (which include the ferry fare) for air-conditioned minivans down to Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan. Air-conditioned minivan services to Krabi, Ranong, Trang, Surat Thani and several other locations are also available. Prices are slightly higher than the buses, which all stop in Phuket Town (see p632).

i Getting Around

Local transport around Phuket is terrible. The systems in place make tourists either stay on their chosen beach, rent a car or motorbike (which can be hazardous) or take overpriced private car 'taxis' or túk-túk. There are *sǎrng-tǎa-ou* that run to the beaches from Phuket Town but often you'll have to go via Phuket Town to get from one beach to another (say Hat Surin to Hat Patong) and this can take hours.

See the Getting Around sections of individual locations on Phuket Island for taxi and *sǎrng-tǎa-ou* details.

Phuket Town

เมืองภูเก็ต

POP 94,325

Long before tourist T-shirts or flip-flops, Phuket was an island of rubber trees, tin mines and cash-hungry merchants. Attracting entrepreneurs from as far away as the Arabian Peninsula, China, India and Portugal, Phuket Town was a colourful blend of cultural influences, cobbled together by tentative compromise and cooperation. Today the city is proof of the island's historical soul. Wander down streets clogged with Sino-Portuguese architecture housing arty coffeeshops, galleries, wonderful inexpensive restaurants and hip little guest houses; peek down alleyways to find Chinese Taoist shrines shrouded in incense smoke.

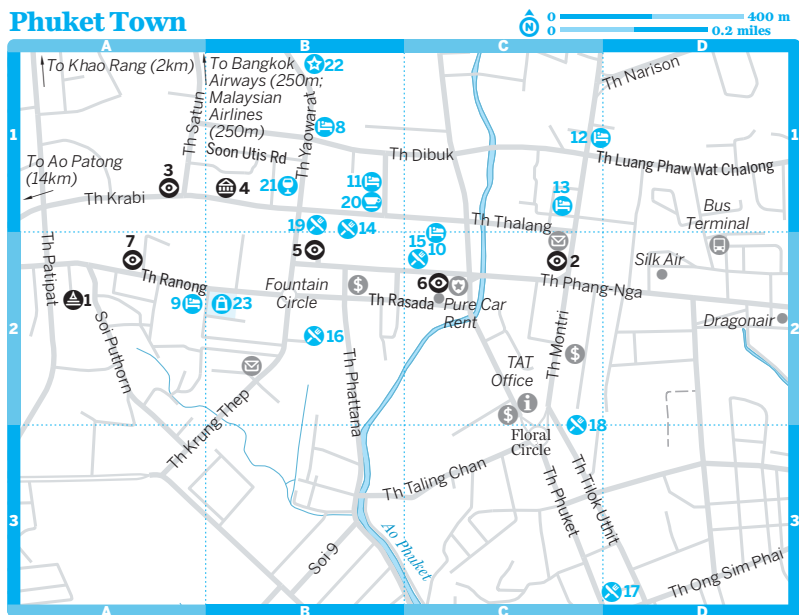
But the town is not just some lost-in-time cultural archive. Bubbling up throughout the emerging Old Town is an infusion of relevant art, music and food that attract a very hip crowd both foreign and Thai. Investors have finally caught on

i

METERED TAXI

To escape Phuket's 'taxi mafia' (an organization of overpriced chartered cars that are often the only means of transport in the beach areas) get the phone number of a metered taxi and use the same driver throughout your stay in Phuket. The easiest way to do this is to take a metered taxi from the airport (one of the only places where you'll find them) when you arrive then take down your driver's phone number. Metered taxis are found about 50m to the right as you exit the arrivals hall.

Phuket Town



Phuket Town

📍 Sights

- 1 Jui Tui Temple A2
- 2 Old Post Office Building C2
- 3 Phra Phitak Chyn Pracha Mansion A1
Phuket Philatelic Museum (see 2)
- 4 Phuket Thaihua Museum B1
- 5 Shrine of the Serene Light B2
- 6 Standard Chartered Bank C2
- 7 THAI Office A2
The Raintree Spa (see 12)

🍷 Activities, Courses & Tours

- Blue Elephant Restaurant & Cookery School (see 3)

🏠 Sleeping

- 8 Casa 104 B1
- 9 Chinotel A2
- 10 D's Corner & Guesthouse C2
- 11 Phuket 346 B1

- 12 Sino House C1
- 13 Sleep Sheep Phuket Hostel C1

🍴 Eating

- 14 China Inn B1
- 15 Cook C2
- 16 Ka Jok See B2
- 17 La Gaetana D3
- 18 Uptown Restaurant C3
- 19 Wilai B1

🍷 Drinking

- 20 Bo(ok)hemian B1
- 21 Saneha B1

🎮 Entertainment

- 22 Timber Hut B1

🛒 Shopping

- 23 Day Market B2

that culture, not just slinky beaches and girly bars, is a commodity. Old shophouses and homes, once left to rot, are being bought up and restored, resulting in flash-forward-gentrification.

If you're on a budget, Phuket Town has the best lodging bargains on the island. From here you can hop on regular *sörn-g-tāa-ou* to any of Phuket's beaches (which will take be-

tween 30 minutes and 1½ hours; see p633) for more details.

Sights

Sino-Portuguese architecture

HERITAGE ARCHITECTURE

Stroll along the streets of Thalang, Dibuk, Yaowarat, Ranong, Phang-Nga, Rasada and Krabi for a glimpse of some of the best architecture on offer. Soi Romanee off Th Thalang is the most ambient area of town. The most magnificent examples of buildings are the **Standard Chartered Bank** (Th Phang-Nga), Thailand's oldest foreign bank; the **THAI office** (Th Ranong); and the **old post office building**, which now houses the **Phuket Philatelic Museum** (Th Montri; admission free; ☎9.30am-5.30pm). The best-restored residential properties are found along Th Dibuk and Th Thalang. The fabulous **Phra Phitak Chyn Pracha Mansion** (9 Th Krabi) has been restored and turned into a branch of the up-scale Blue Elephant restaurant chain and a cookery school.

Shrine of the Serene Light

SHRINE

(ศาลเจ้าแม่สงครม; Saan Jao Sang Tham; ☎8.30am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm) A handful of Chinese temples inject some added colour into the area but the Shrine of the Serene Light, tucked away at the end of a 50m alley near the Bangkok Bank of Commerce on Th Phang-Nga, is a cut above the rest. You'll see Taoist etchings on the walls, the vaulted ceiling stained from incense plumes, and the altar is always alive with fresh flowers and burning candles. The shrine is said to have been built by a local family in the mid-1880s.

Khao Rang

VIEWPOINT

(เขารัง; Phuket Hill; off Map p628) For a bird's-eye view of the city, climb up pretty Khao Rang,

northwest of the town centre. It's at its best during the week, when the summit is relatively peaceful, but keep an eye out for the mobs of snarling dogs.

Phuket Thaihua Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑ์ชาวจีนไหหลำ; 28 Th Krabi; admission 200B; ☎9am-5pm) This flashy new museum, set in an old Sino-Portuguese home, is filled with photos and exhibits on Phuket's history. The last room is covered in photos of local dishes – and if this makes you hungry, info on where to find the food stalls is listed.



Activities & Courses



John Gray's Seacanoë

SEA KAYAKING

(off Map p628; ☎0 7625 4505-7; www.johngray-seacanoë.com; 124 Soi 1, Th Yaowarat) The original, still the most reputable and by far the most ecologically sensitive sea-kayaking company on the island. Like any good brand in Thailand, his 'Seacanoë' name and itineraries have been frequently copied. He's north of Phuket Town.

Blue Elephant Restaurant & Cookery School

COOKING SCHOOL

(☎0 7635 4355; www.blueelephant.com; 96 Th Krabi, Phuket Town; half-day class 2800B) Phuket's newest cookery school is in the stunning restored 1903 Sino-Portuguese style **Phra Phitak Chyn Pracha Mansion** (see p629). There are a variety of options from short group lessons to five-day private training (78,000B). Morning classes take in a market visit.



Festivals & Events

The **Vegetarian Festival** (see p618) is Phuket's most important event. The TAT office in Phuket prints a helpful schedule of events for the festival.

WORTH A TRIP

BIG BUDDHA

Set on a hilltop just northwest of Chalong circle and visible from almost half of the island, the **Big Buddha** (พระใหญ่; Map p623) has the best view on Phuket. Once you're up here, pay your respects at the golden shrine, then step up to Big Buddha's glorious plateau where you can peer into Kata's bay, glimpse the shimmering Karon strand and, on the other side, survey the serene Chalong harbour where the channel islands look like pebbles.

Of course, you'll be forgiven if you disregard the view for a few minutes to watch local craftsmen put the finishing touches on their 60 million baht Buddha, dressed in Burmese alabaster. Over the last 20 years construction on Phuket hasn't stopped, so it means something when locals refer to the Big Buddha project as Phuket's most important development in the last 100 years.

Sleeping

Phuket Town is the cheapest place on the island to get some 'zzz's and is a treasure trove of budget lodging. Head out to the beaches for more midrange and top-end options.

Sino House

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 07623 2494; www.sinohousephuket.com; 1 Th Montri; r 2000-2500B; ㊦㊧) Shanghai style

meets *Mad Men* chic at this impressive Old Town offering. The rooms here are massive with modern furnishings, fantastic hand-made ceramic basins and quarter-moon shower tubs in their bathrooms. There's an on-site **Raintree Spa** (see p624) and long-term rates (18,000B per month) are available.

VEGETARIAN FESTIVAL

Loud popping sounds like machine-gun fire fill the streets, the air is nearly opaque with grey-brown smoke and men and women traipse along blocked-off city roads, their cheeks pierced with skewers and knives or, more surprisingly, lamps and tree branches; some of the flock have blood streaming down their fronts or open lashes across their backs. No this isn't a war zone, this is the **Vegetarian Festival**, one of Phuket's most important festivals, centred in Phuket Town.

The festival, which takes place during the first nine days of the ninth lunar month of the Chinese calendar – usually late September or October – celebrates the beginning of 'Taoist Lent', when devout Chinese abstain from eating meat. But more obvious to the outsider are the daily processions winding their way through town with floats of ornately dressed children and ladyboys (*gà-teu-i*, also spelt *kàthoey*), near armies of flag-bearing colour-coordinated young people and, most noticeably, men and women engaged in outrageous acts of self-mortification. Shopowners along Phuket's central streets set up altars in front of their shopfronts offering nine tiny cups of tea, incense, fruit, firecrackers, candles and flowers to the nine emperor gods invoked by the festival.

Those participating as mediums bring the nine deities to earth by entering into a trance state, piercing their cheeks with an impressive variety of objects, sawing their tongues or flagellating themselves with spiky metal balls. Whatever form the self-flagellation takes, the mediums (primarily men) walk in procession, stopping at shopfront altars, where they pick up the offered fruit. They also drink one of the nine cups of tea, grab some flowers to stick in their waistbands or set strings of firecrackers alight. The shop owners and their families stand by with their palms together in a *wái* gesture, out of respect for these mediums who are temporarily possessed by deities. Surreal and overwhelming hardly describes it.

In Phuket Town, the festival activities are centred around five Chinese temples, with the **Jui Tui temple** on Th Ranong the most important, followed by **Bang Niew** and **Sui Boon Tong** temples. There are also events at temples in the nearby towns of **Kathu** (where the festival originated) and **Ban Tha Reua**. If you stop by the procession's starting point early enough in the morning, you may see a surprisingly professional, latex-glove-clad crew piercing the devotee's cheeks – not for the faint-hearted. Other ceremonies occur throughout the festival at the temples and can include firewalking and knife-ladder climbing. Beyond the headlining gore, fabulous vegetarian food stalls line the side streets offering a perfect opportunity to sample cheap local treats and strike up interesting conversations with the locals.

The **TAT office** (p632) in Phuket prints a helpful schedule of events for the Vegetarian Festival each year. The festival also takes place in Trang, Krabi and other southern Thai towns.

Oddly enough, there is no record of these sorts of acts of devotion associated with Taoist Lent in China. The local Chinese claim the festival was started by a theatre troupe from China that stopped off in Kathu around 150 years ago. The story goes that the troupe was struck seriously ill because the members had failed to propitiate the nine emperor gods of Taoism. The nine-day penance they performed included self-piercing, meditation and a strict vegetarian diet.

For more info, visit www.phuketvegetarian.com.

Phuket 346

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎08 7281 1898; www.phuket346.com; 15 Soi Romanee; r 1300B; 🍷) On charming Soi Romanee, this romantic old shophouse has been exquisitely restored to look like a cosy art gallery. Rooms have white-patterned wallpaper and the occasional bright-coloured wall decorated with modern art. Downstairs are fish ponds and a streetside cafe where jazz is played.

Casa 104

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎0 7622 1268; 104 Th Yaowarat; r from 1000B; 🍷🍷) This is a stunning renovation of a 100-year-old shophouse with burgundy walls, dangling chandeliers, bouquets of bamboo and peacock feathers, and early days' swing on the sound system. And that's just the lobby bar. Guestrooms are more sparse and windowless, but still elegant with white concrete floors, rain showers and original art-nouveau fixtures.

Chinotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 7621 4455; www.chinotelphuket.com; 133-135 Th Ranong; r 1380-1780B; 🍷🍷🍷) It has super-comfortable, clean, new, compact rooms with style – there's a bit of brick, a dash of bamboo and a brightly painted wall or two. Add a TV, fridge, hot-water bathroom and convenient location and you have a gem.

Sleep Sheep Phuket Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(☎0 7621 6464; www.sleepsheepphuket.com; 243-245 Soi Dtat Shop; r 650B; 🍷🍷🍷) In an alleyway off Th Thalang, this relatively modern place has big, brightly painted rooms with hot-water bathrooms and an uncommonly friendly staff; plus it smells like freshly laundered sheets.

D's Corner & Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 3590 4828; 132 Th Thalang; r 380-700B; 🍷🍷) Huge, airy and clean rooms in this spacious guest house are hidden off the road down an unlikely hallway. The welcome is mediocre but the place is great value. Skip your free toast and eat breakfast at the Malaysian roti cafe next door.

**Eating**

There's good food in Phuket Town, and meals here cost a lot less than those at the beach.

**Ka Jok See**

THAI, INTERNATIONAL \$\$\$

(☎0 7621 7903; kajoksee@hotmail.com; 26 Th Takua Pa; dishes 180-480B; ☺dinner Tue-Sun) Dripping Old Phuket charm and creaking

under the weight of the owner's fabulous trinket collection, this atmospheric little eatery offers great food, top-notch music and – if you're lucky – some sensationally camp cabaret.

La Gaetana

INTERNATIONAL \$\$\$

(☎0 7625 0523; 352 Th Phuket; dishes 200-450B; ☺lunch Mon, Tue & Fri, dinner Tue-Sun) An irresistibly intimate five-table restaurant, La Gaetana has black concrete floors, colourful walls and stemware, an open kitchen in the courtyard and a superb Italian menu. Think duck breast carpaccio followed by osso bucco.

**Cook**

ITALIAN THAI \$

(☎0 7625 8375; 101 Th Phang-Nga; dishes 60-120B) The Thai owner-chef used to cook Italian at a megaresort, so when he opened this ludicrously inexpensive Old Town cafe he fused the two cultures. So, order the sensational green curry pizza with chicken, or the pork curry coconut-milk pizza, and fall in love.

China Inn

THAI FUSION \$\$

(Th Thalang; dishes 80-250B) The organics movement meets Phuket cuisine at this turn-of-the-century shophouse. There's red curry with crab, a host of veggie options, homemade yoghurt and fruit smoothies with organic honey. There's also a gallery here with textiles, carvings and clothes from Myanmar and Laos.

Uptown Restaurant

THAI \$

(Th Tilok Uthit; dishes 30-60B; ☺10am-9pm) This classic, breezy Chinese-style cafe may not look fancy, but look around and you'll notice mounted photos of Thai celebrities who have stopped by to slurp the spectacular noodles.

Wilai

THAI \$

(14 Th Thalang; dishes from 65B; ☺breakfast & lunch) Wilai serves Phuket soul food. It does Phuketian *pàt tai* with some kick to it, and a fantastic *mèe sua*, noodles sautéed with egg, greens, prawns, chunks of sea bass, and squid. Wash it down with fresh chrysanthemum juice.

**Drinking & Entertainment**

This is where you can party like a local. Bars buzz until late, patronised almost exclusively by Thais and local expats.

Timber Hut

(☎0 7621 1839; 118/1 Th Yaowarat; admission free; ☉6pm-2am) Thai and expat locals have been filling this old clubhouse every night for nearly 20 years. They gather at long wooden tables on two floors, converge around thick timber columns, swill whiskey, and sway to live bands that swing from hard rock to funk to hip-hop with aplomb.

Saneha

(☎08 1892 1001; Th Yaowarat; ☉6pm-late) A fun upscale bohemian joint lit by seashell chandeliers, with plenty of dark corners where you can sip, snuggle, snack, and dig that soulful acoustic crooner on stage.

Bo(ok)hemian

(☎0 7625 2854; 61 Th Thalang; ☉9am-10pm; ☎) Every town should have a coffee house this cool. The split-level open design feels both warm and leading edge. It has wi-fi, used books for sale, gourmet coffee and tea, and damn good chocolate cake.

Shopping

There are some fabulous bohemian-chic boutiques scattered throughout the Old Town selling jewellery, women's fashions, fabrics and souvenirs. Some whimsical art galleries tucked behind charming Chinese shopfronts are mostly found on Th Yaowarat.

Day Market

(Th Ranong) This market near the town centre traces its history back to the days when pirates, Indians, Chinese, Malays and Europeans traded in Phuket. You might still find some fabrics from Southeast Asia, though it mostly sells food now.

Information

There are numerous internet cafes and ATMs around Th Phuket, Th Ranong, Th Montri and Th Phang-Nga.

Main post office (Th Montri; ☉8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat)

Police (☎191, 0 7622 3555; cnr Th Phang-Nga & Th Phuket)

TAT office (☎0 7621 2213; www.tat.or.th; 73-75 Th Phuket; ☉8.30am-4.30pm) Has maps, information brochures, a list of standard *sông-tâa-ou* fares out to the various beaches, and the recommended charter costs for a vehicle.

Getting There & Around

To/From the Airport

Despite what airport taxi touts would like you to believe, a bright-orange **government airport bus** (www.airportbusphuket.com; tickets 85B) runs between the airport and Phuket Town via the Heroines Monument about every hour between 6am and 7pm. There's also a minibus service at the airport that will take you into Phuket Town for 150B per person. Services to Patong, Kata and Karon beaches cost 180B if there are enough passengers. Chartered cars between the airport and Phuket Town cost 500B; between the airport and beaches is 700B to 1000B. Metered taxis should cost no more than 550B (including airport tax) to anywhere around the island.

Bus

You'll find the **bus terminal** (☎0 7621 1977) just to the east of the town centre, within walking distance of the many hotels. Services from here include the following:

DESTINATION	BUS TYPE	FARE	DURATION
Bangkok	2nd class	487B	15hr
	air-con	626B	13-14hr
	VIP	974B	13hr
Hat Yai	air-con	556B	6-7hr
Ko Samui	air-con	430B	8hr (bus/boat)
Krabi	ordinary	95B	4hr
	air-con	145B	3½hr
Phang-Nga	ordinary	120B	2½hr
Ranong	ordinary	209B	6hr
	air-con	270B	5hr
Surat Thani	ordinary	195B	6hr
	air-con	240B	5hr
Trang	air-con	240B	5hr

Car

There are cheap car-rental agencies on Th Rasada near **Pure Car Rent** (☎0 7621 1002; www.purecarrent.com; 75 Th Rasada), which is a good choice. Suzuki jeeps go for about 1200B per day (including insurance), though in the low season the rates can go down to 750B. And if you rent for a week or more, you should get a discount.

The rates are always better at local places than at the better-known international firms, though you may be able to get deals with the familiar companies if you reserve in advance.

Motorcycle

You can rent motorcycles on Th Rasada near Pure Car Rent, or from various places at the beaches. Costs are anywhere from 200B to 300B per day, and can vary depending on the season. Bigger bikes (over 125cc) can be rented at shops in Patong, Kata, Rawai and Karon.

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou & Túk-túk

Large bus-sized *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* run regularly from Th Ranong near the day market to the various Phuket beaches (25B to 40B per person) – see the respective destinations for details. These run from around 7am to 5pm; outside these times you have to charter a *túk-túk* to the beaches, which will set you back 500B to Patong, 500B to Karon and Kata, 340B to 400B for Rawai and 600B to Kamala. You'll have to bargain. Beware of tales about the tourist office being 5km away, or that the only way to reach the beaches is by taxi, or even that you'll need a taxi to get from the bus terminal to the town centre (it is more or less in the town centre). For a ride around town, *túk-túk* drivers should charge 100B to 200B.

Motorcycle taxis around town cost 30B.

Ko Sireh

เกาะสิเหร่

This tiny island, 4km east of the district capital and connected to the main island by a bridge, is known for its *chow lair* (also spelt *chao leh*) village and a hilltop reclining Buddha at **Wat Sireh**.

The largest settlement of *chow lair* in Thailand is little more than a poverty-stricken cluster of tin shacks on stilts, plus one seafood restaurant. The Urak Lawoi, the most sedentary of the three *chow lair* groups, are found only between the Mergui Archipelago and the Tarutao-Langkawi Archipelago, and speak a creolised mixture of Malay and Mon-Khmer.

A single road loops the island, passing a few residences, prawn farms, lots of rubber plantations and a bit of untouched forest. On the east coast there's a public beach called **Hat Teum Suk**, as well as a terrific cooking school, the **Phuket Thai Cookery School** (☎0 7625 2354; www.phuketthaicookeryschool.com; Ko Sireh; courses per day from 2500B; ☎8.30am-5pm). Here you can get intimate with aromatic Thai spices at this popular cooking school set on a quiet seafront plot on Ko Sireh's east coast. Courses can last up to six hours. The school provides hotel pickups, market tours and a cookbook.

Laem Phanwa

แหลมพันวา

Laem Phanwa is a gorgeous, wooded, elongated cape, jutting into the sea south of Phuket. At the tip of the cape, **Phuket Aquarium** (Map p623; ☎0 7639 1126; www.phuketaquarium.org; adult/child 100/50B; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) displays a varied collection of tropical fish and other marine life. Experience it with a stroll along the walk-through tunnel.

The beaches and coves are rustic and protected by rocky headlands and mangroves. The sinuous coastal road is magic. If you just can't leave, check into the recently renovated **Cape Panwa Hotel** (☎0 7639 1123; www.capepanwa.com; 27 Moo 8, Th Sakdidej; r from 6100B; ♿☎☎☎), a four-star, family-friendly stunner perched on 400m of secluded white sand.

The **seafood restaurants** along the Laem Phanwa waterfront are a great place to hang out and watch the pleasure skiffs and painted fishing boats passing by.

To get to the cape in your own vehicle, take Rte 4021 south and then turn down Rte 4023 just outside Phuket Town.

Rawai

ราไวย์

Now this is a place to live, which is exactly why Phuket's rapidly developing south coast is teeming with retirees, Thai and expat entrepreneurs, and a service sector that, for the most part, moved here from somewhere else.

The region is not just defined by its beaches but by the lush coastal hills that rise steeply and tumble into the Andaman Sea forming **Laem Promthep**, Phuket's southernmost point. These hills are home to pocket neighbourhoods and cul de sacs that are knitted together by just a few roads. So even with the growth you can feel nature, especially when you hit the beach.

👁 Sights & Activities

Hat Nai Han, with its crescent of white sand backed by causerinas, bobbing yachts, seafront temple Wat Nai Han and monsoon-season surf break, is the best beach in the area, but there are smaller, hidden beaches that are just as beautiful. **Hat Rawai** lacks Nai Han's good looks. It's just a rocky long-tail and speedboat harbour, which makes it the perfect place to open up a seafood grill.

There's a string of them here. All are locally owned and equally delicious.

Rawai is a fine place to learn how to kite board (see p648).

Long-tail and speedboat charters are available from Hat Rawai. Destinations include the quiet snorkelling islands of Ko Bon (long-tail/speedboat 800/2000B, Coral Island (1200/3000B) and Ko Kai (4000/8000B). Maximum six passengers.

Phuket Riding Club (☎ 7628 8213; www.phuketridingclub.com; 95 Th Viset, Rawai) offers one-hour (per person 800B) and two-hour (1500B) rides in the jungle around Rawai and along nearby beaches.

Rawai also offers *moo•ay tai* (also spelt *muay Thai*) courses (see p626).

Sleeping

All the lodging in lovely Hat Nai Han is reached via a skinny, rutted paved road that begins from the Phuket Yacht Club parking lot (yes you can drive past the guard) – or charter a long-tail from Rawai for 500B.

Vijitt HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 7636 3600; www.vijittresort.com; 16 Moo 2, Th Viset, Hat Nai Han; villas from 7800B; 🏠) Arguably the area's most elegant property is sprinkled with deluxe villas that boast limestone floors, large bathtubs, outdoor showers, and gorgeous sea views from private terraces. Its stunning, black-bottom infinity pool overlooks Friendship Beach.

Ao Sane Bungalows HOTEL \$
(☎ 7628 8306, 08 1326 1687; 11/2 Moo 1, Th Viset, Hat Nai Han; bungalows 600-850B; 🏠) The rickety cold-water, fan-cooled wooden bungalows are on a secluded beach, with million-dollar views of Ao Sane and Ao Nai Han. There's a beachside restaurant, dive centre and an old-hippie vibe.

Royal Phuket Yacht Club HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 7638 0200; www.royalphuketclub.com; 23/3 Moo 1, Th Viset, Hat Nai Han; r from 6800B; 🏠@🏠) Still a destination for many a transcontinental yachty, there's an air of old-world elegance here, especially in its fabulous lobby-bar spinning with ceiling fans. Rooms feature large terraces – and stunning bay views – and there's every creature comfort you could imagine somewhere on-site. If you can snag one of the low-season discounts, it really is excellent value.

Eating & Drinking

Besides the restaurants listed here, there are a dozen tasty **seafood grills** roasting fresh catch along the roadside at the northern end of Hat Rawai.

TOP CHOICE Rum Jungle RESTAURANT \$\$\$
(☎ 7638 8153; 69/8 Th Sai Yuan; meals 300-500B; 🍷dinner, closed Sun) The best restaurant in the area and one of the best in all of Phuket is family run and spearheaded by a terrific Aussie chef. The New Zealand lamb shank is divine, as are the steamed clams, and the pasta sauces are all made from scratch. Everything – including the Pampero rocks – is served under a thatched roof to an exceptional world-beat soundtrack.

Nikita's BAR
(☎ 7628 8703; Hat Rawai; ☀11am-late) Overlooking the sea on Phuket's south coast, Nikita's is a pleasant, open-aired place to hang out, with coffee drinks, green teas, a nice selection of shakes, and cocktails. If you're hungry you can order from the attached restaurant, Baan Rimlay (wood-fired pizzas from 200B).

Getting There & Away

Rawai is about 18km south of Phuket Town. *Sörng-tāa-ou* (30B) run from Phuket's fountain circle at Th Ranong – some continue on to Hat Nai Han, but not all of them so ask first. The tük-tük trip from Rawai to Nai Han is a hefty 200B.

You can hire taxis (which are actually just chartered cars) from Rawai and Hat Nai Harn to the airport (700B), Patong (500B) and Phuket Town (500B).

Hat Kata

หาดกะตะ

Kata attracts a lively crowd with its shopping and busy beach without the seedy hustle endemic to Patong up the coast. While you might not find a secluded strip of sand, you will find plenty to do and plenty of easy-going folks to clink beers with.

There's surfing here in the shoulder and wet seasons, some terrific day spas and fantastic food. The beach is actually divided in two by a rocky headland, and the road between them is home to Phuket's original millionaire's row. Hat Kata Yai is on the north end, while the more secluded Hat Kata Noi unfurls to the south. Both offer soft golden sand and attract a bohemian crowd.

The main commercial street of Th Thai Na is perpendicular to the shore and has most of the restaurants and shops, along with some cheaper places to stay.

Sights & Activities

The small island of **Ko Pu** is within swimming distance of the shore (if you're a strong swimmer); on the way are some OK coral reefs. Be careful of rip tides; heed the red flags and don't go past the breakers. **Dive Asia** (☎0 7633 0598; www.diveasia.com; 24 Th Karon, Kata) is a recommended dive outfit; there is a second location at 623 Th Karon near Karon Beach.

Both Hat Kata Yai and Hat Kata Noi offer decent **surfing** from April to November. Board rental costs 100B to 150B for one hour or 300B to 600B for the whole day. Try the following:

Phuket Surf (☎08 7889 7308, 08 1684 8902; www.phuketsurf.com) On Hat Kata Yai's southern cove, near the best break; offers surf lessons starting at 1500B for a half-day, as well as board rentals for 100/300B per hour/day. Check its website for more info about local surf breaks.

Phuket Surfing (☎0 7628 4183; www.phuket surfing.com) Just in front of Phuket Surf and sharing a roof with Nautilus Dive, it rents boards by the hour for 100B to 150B.

If you're looking for an alternative to the St Tropez-esque south Kata crush, make a left turn (west) just before the main road rises up and heads towards Karon, continue past the cluster of Thai-food joints and you'll find a gorgeous stretch of Kata beach in the secluded, rocky north end (ie Hat Kata Yai) where long-tails bob in the tide. There are beach chairs and umbrellas for rent along with snorkel gear. And cold beverages are just a lazy wave away.

Courses

Kata Hot Yoga YOGA CLASS
(☎0 7660 5950; www.katahotyoga.com; 217 Th Khoktanod; per class 420B). Crave more heat? Consider taking a class here; they are held three times a day.

Mom Tri's Cooking Class COOKERY SCHOOL
(☎0 7633 0015; www.boathousephuket.com; 2/2 Th Kata (Patak West), Hat Kata; per person per day/weekend 2200/3500B) Offers a fantastic weekend Thai cooking class with its renowned chef, Rattana.

Sleeping

The following are average prices for the high season (May to October). Like Patong, it's getting harder and harder to find anything under 1000B during the high season, but prices drop radically when tourism is down.

The best deals in town can be found on Th Kata (aka the new road).

TOP CHOICE **Mom Tri's Villa Royale** HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎0 7633 3568; www.villarayalephuket.com; ste incl breakfast from 12,500B; ㊦㊧㊨) Tucked away in a secluded Kata Noi location with the grandest of views, Villa Royale is a supremely romantic place with fabulous food. Unwind in beautiful rooms straight out of the pages of *Architectural Digest* and guiltless pleasures include the attached **Spa Royale** and a saltwater pool – if you prefer a tamer version of the real thing – which is just steps away.

Sawasdee Village HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎0 7633 0979; www.phuketsawasdee.com; 38 Th Ked Kwan; bungalows 6500-8500B; ㊦㊧㊨) This is a boutique resort with a lush, opulent but compact footprint built in classic Thai style. Ornate, peaked-roof bungalows have wood floors, beamed ceilings and doors open onto a thick tropical landscape laced with *koi* (carp) canals and gushing with waterfalls. Not to mention those Buddhist art installations. Throw in its quality spa and this place is unique and inviting in every way.

Caffe@Caffe GUEST HOUSE \$\$
(☎0 7628 4005; www.cafeatcaffe.com; 100/60-61 Th Kata; r 1800B; ㊦㊧) Tiled rooms with gold-coloured wallpaper alternated with white painted walls, striped duvets, minibalconies, fridges and TVs make this place as comfy as it is hip. It's in a three-storey building with a modern cafe downstairs.

Mom Tri's Boathouse HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎0 7633 0015; www.boathousephuket.com; 2/2 Th Kata (Patak West); r 9600-25,000B; ㊦㊧㊨) For Thai politicians, pop stars, artists and celebrity authors, the intimate boutique Boathouse is still the only place to stay on Phuket. Rooms are spacious and gorgeous, some sporting large breezy verandahs. Critics complain that the Boathouse is a bit stiff-lipped and old-fashioned for this century, but no-one can deny that the main reason to stay here is for the food. The on-site

restaurant, Boathouse Wine & Grill (p636), is among the best on the island.

Honey Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 7633 0938; www.honeyresort.com; 100/69 Th Kata; r 3400-3900B; 📶📺) This place has spacious new rooms with (tasteful!) wood panelling to spare. All rooms have daybeds, built-in dressers, desks, bathtubs and marble washbasins. There's free wi-fi and flat-screen TVs, too. Promotional rates can be absurdly low, but even the rack rates are a good deal.

Katathani Resort & Spa

HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 7633 0124; www.katathani.com; 14 Th Kata Noi; r from 7800B; 📶📺) Taking over a huge portion of lush, relatively quiet Hat Kata Noi, this glitzy spa resort offers all the usual trimmings in stylish surrounds. It features a spa, a handful of pools and heaps of space. Excellent low-season deals are often available here.

Sugar Palm Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 7628 4404; www.sugarpalmphuket.com; 20/10 Th Kata; r incl breakfast 3700-5200B; 📶📺) It's a 'chic chill-out world' at the Sugar Palm, as this Miami-meets-Thailand-style resort claims. Rooms, decorated in urban whites, blacks and lavender, are exceptional value and sublimely comfy, and all surround a black-bottomed, U-shaped pool. It's a block to the beach in the heart of Kata's lively shopping and restaurant strip.

Fantasy Hill Bungalow

HOTEL \$
(☎ 7633 0106; fantasyhill@hotmail.com; 8/1 Th Patak; r with fan/air-con 450/800B; 📶) Sitting in a lush garden on a hill, the older but well-maintained bungalows here are great value. The place is peaceful but central and the staff supersweet. Angle for a corner room with air-con and a view.

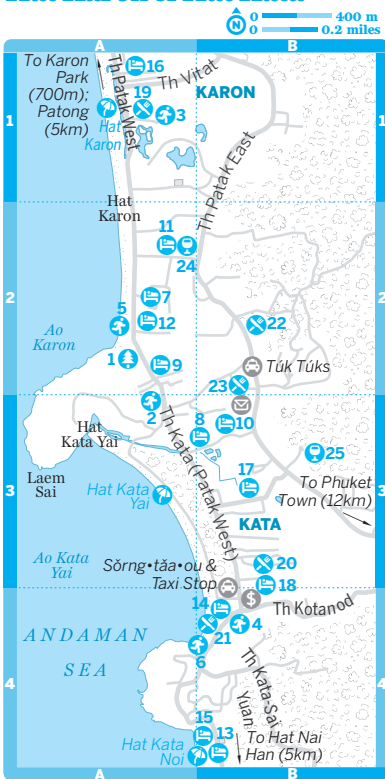
Eating

There's some surprisingly classy food in Kata, though you'll be paying for it. For cheaper eats, head to Th Thai Na and to the cluster of affordable, casual seafood restaurants on Th Kata (Patak West) near the shore.

Boathouse Wine & Grill

MEDITERRANEAN \$\$\$
(☎ 7633 0015; www.boathousephuket.com; 2/2 Th Kata (Patak West); mains 450-950B; 🍷breakfast, lunch & dinner) The perfect place to wow a fussy date, the Boathouse is the pick of the bunch for most local foodies. The atmos-

Hat Karon & Hat Kata



phere can be a little stuffy - this is the closest Phuket gets to old-school dining - but the Mediterranean fusion food is fabulous, the winelist expansive and the sea views sublime.

TOP CHOICE Capannina

ITALIAN \$\$\$
(☎ 7628 4318; capannina@fastmail.fm; 30/9 Moo 2, Th Kata; mains 200-700B) Everything here - from the pastas to the sauces - is made fresh and you can taste it. The ravioli and gnocchi are memorable, the risotto comes highly recommended, and it has great pizzas, calzones and veal Milanese, too. It gets crowded during the high season, so you may want to reserve ahead.

Oasis

FUSION \$\$\$
(☎ 7633 3423; Th Kotanod; meals 350-600B) Two restaurants in one, the top shelf is an Asian-fusion tapas bar blessed with live jazz. The lower level is a candlelit fine-dining pa-

Hat Karon & Hat Kata

Sights

- 1 Dino Park..... A2

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 2 Dive Asia..... A3
 3 Dive Asia..... A1
 4 Kata Hot Yoga..... B4
 5 Kiteboarding Asia..... A2
 Mom Tri's Cooking Class..... (see 14)
 6 Phuket Surf..... B4
 Phuket Surfing..... (see 6)
 Sea Fun Divers..... (see 13)
 Spa Royale..... (see 15)

Sleeping

- 7 Andaman Seaview
 Hotel..... A2
 8 Caffe@Caffe..... B3
 9 Fantasy Hill Bungalow..... A2
 10 Honey Resort..... B3
 11 Kangaroo Guesthouse..... A2

- 12 Karon Beach Resort..... A2
 13 Katathani Resort & Spa..... B4
 14 Mom Tri's Boathouse..... B4
 15 Mom Tri's Villa Royale..... B4
 16 Mövenpick..... A1
 17 Sawasdee Village..... B3
 18 Sugar Palm Resort..... B3

Eating

- 19 Bai Toey..... A1
 Boathouse Wine & Grill..... (see 14)
 20 Capannina..... B3
 21 Oasis..... B4
 22 Pad Thai Shop..... B2
 23 Thai Kitchen..... B2

Drinking

- 24 Nakannoi..... A2
 25 Ratri Jazztaurant..... B3
 Ska Bar..... (see 6)

tio restaurant where you can sample fresh barracuda fillet with a sun-dried herb crust while you watch the oblong paper lanterns swing in the trees.

Thai Kitchen

THAI \$

(Th Thai Na; meals 80B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Good rule of thumb: if a humble, roadside cafe is packed with Thai people, you can be certain that the food will rock. Its green curry (warning: your nose will run) and glass-noodle dishes are superb. It's just down the road from, ahem, 'Pussy Bar'.



Drinking

Kata's nightlife tends to be pretty mellow.

Ska Bar

BAR

(☺till late) At Kata's southernmost cove, tucked into the rocks and seemingly intertwined with the trunk of a grand old banyan tree, is our choice for oceanside sundowners. The Thai bartenders add to Ska's funky Rasta vibe, and the canopy dangles with buoys, paper lanterns and the flags of 10 countries.

Ratri Jazztaurant

BAR

(☎0 7633 3538; Kata Hill; ☺6pm-midnight) Hang out on the hillside terrace, listen to live jazz, watch the sun go down and enjoy delicious Thai food (dishes 145B to 345B). Now *this* is a vacation.

Information

There are plenty of ATMs along Kata's main drag.

Post office (☺9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) On Rte 4028, at the end of Th Thai Na.

Getting There & Around

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou to both Kata and Karon (per person 25B) leave frequently from the day market on Th Ranong in Phuket from 7am to 5pm. The main *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* stop in Kata is in front of Kata Beach Resort.

Taxis from Kata go to Phuket Town (600B), Patong (600B) and Karon (200B).

Motorbike rentals (per day 300B) are widely available.

Hat Karon

หาดกะรน

Karon is like Patong and Kata's love child: It's chilled-out, a touch glamorous and a tad cheesy with some sleazy corners. There are two megaresorts and package tourists aplenty here but there's still more sand space per capita than either Patong or Kata. The further north you go the more chic and beautiful the beach gets, culminating at the northernmost edge, accessible from a rutted road that extends past the vendors and food stalls, where the water is like turquoise glass.

Back within the inland network of streets and plazas you'll find a blend of good local food, more Scandinavian signage than seems

reasonable, low-key girly bars, T-shirt vendors and lovely **Karon Park**, with its artificial lake and mountain backdrop. Fronting the whole mess is a fine stretch of sand.

Jurassic Park meets minigolf at **Dino Park** (☎ 7633 0625; www.dinopark.com; Th Patak West, Karon; adult/child 240/180B; ☀10am-midnight), a bizarre park on the southern edge of Hat Karon. It's a maze of caves, lagoons, leafy gardens, dinosaur statues and, of course, putting greens.

Sleeping

Mövenpick HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 7639 6139; www.moevenpick-hotels.com; 509 Th Kata (Patak West); r from 5900B, villas from 7000B; 🍷🍷🍷) Grab a secluded villa and choose from a private plunge pool or outdoor rainforest shower; alternatively chill in the cubelike rooms with huge floor-to-ceiling glass windows in the ultramodern hotel. Besides a prime location across the street from a pretty beach, the Mövenpick offers a big pool with swim-up bar, a spa, and an alfresco restaurant and bar.

Karon Beach Resort HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 763 3006; www.katagroup.com; 51 Th Kata (Patak West); r from 7500B; 🍷🍷🍷) Perched on the south end of Hat Karon, there are some elegant touches here. From the Buddhist sculpture in the jasmine-scented halls to the crown mouldings, wood furnishings, ceramic tiles and cushy duvets in the rooms, to those luscious sea views from the balcony.

In On The Beach HOTEL \$\$
(☎ 7639 8220; www.karon-inonthebeach.com; 695-697 Moo 1, Th Patak; r from 3500B; 🍷🍷🍷) This is a sweet, tasteful inn on Karon Park. The location is sublime, and the rooms – think of marble floors, wi-fi, air-con and ceiling fans, horseshoe-shaped pool – and come with sea views. With substantial low-season discounts, this is the perfect surf lair.

Andaman Seaview Hotel HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 7639 8111; www.andamanphuket.com; 1 Soi Karon, Th Kata (Patak West); r from 4800B; 🍷🍷🍷) The design here is sort of Cape Cod with sky-blue-and-white exterior and checkerboard marble floors in the lobby. Overall, there's a family vibe. The rooms have a turn-of-the-20th-century-Americana theme with marble tables, antiquated ceiling fans, art-deco-ish bathroom tiles and white-shutter cabinet doors. There's a bubbling kids pool and an adult pool.

Kangaroo Guesthouse GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 07639 6517; 269/6-9 Karon Plaza; r 800B; 🍷🍷) Basic, but very clean, sunny tiled rooms with hot water, air-con, a cute breakfast nook, and balconies overlooking a narrow, slightly seedy soi.

Eating & Drinking

There are a few cheap Thai and seafood places off the roundabout at the north end of Hat Kata (including a number of beach-side seafood houses under one louvred roof 100m north of it) and a similar group on the main road near the southern end of Hat Karon.

TOP CHOICE Pad Thai Shop THAI \$
(Th Patak East; dishes 40B; ☀breakfast, lunch & dinner) On the busy main road behind Karon, just north of the tacky Ping Pong Bar, is this glorified food stand where you can find rich and savoury chicken stew (worthy of rave reviews in its own right), and the best *pât tai* on planet earth: spicy and sweet, packed with prawns, tofu, egg and peanuts, and wrapped in a fresh banana leaf. You will be grateful. It closes at around 7pm.

Bai Toey THAI \$\$
(☎ 08 1691 6202; Soi Old Phuket; meals 200B-250B) This is a charming Thai bistro with shaded outdoor patio and indoor seating. It has the traditional curry, stir-fry and noodle dishes, but you'd do well to sample its Thai-style grilled beef. It's a sliced fillet brushed in oyster sauce, served with sticky rice (200B).

Nakannoi BAR
(☎ 08 7898 5450; Karon Plaza; ☀5pm-1am) It's a boho arthouse hideaway with original canvases on the walls, found-art (including antique motorcycles and bicycles) decor, a concrete island bar and a permanent bandstand, where the owner jams with his mates after 8pm almost every night.

Getting There & Away

For details on transport to Karon, see Getting There & Around, p637.

Hat Patong หาดป่าตอง

Sun-seared Scandinavians in bad knock-off T-shirts, beach-buzzing wave runners, a complete disregard for managed development, and an ability for turning the midlife

GAY PRIDE IN PHUKET

Although there are big gay-pride celebrations in Bangkok and Pattaya, the **Phuket Gay Pride Festival** is considered by many to be the best in Thailand, maybe even South-east Asia. It usually happens between February and April but whenever it blooms, the whole island – but Patong specifically – is packed with (mostly male) revellers from all over the world.

The main events of the four-day weekend party are a huge beach-volleyball tournament and, of course, the Grand Parade, featuring floats, cheering crowds and beautiful costumes in the streets of Patong. In recent years, the festival has also included social-responsibility campaigns against child prostitution, substance abuse and for HIV awareness.

Any other time of year, the network of streets that link the Royal Paradise Hotel with Th Rat Uthit in Patong is where you'll find Phuket's gay pulse; check out the **Boat Bar** (p643).

For updates on future festivals or for more information about the scene in general, go to www.gaypatong.com.

crisis into a full-scale industry (sorry, Viagra, Patong was here first) make Patong rampant with unintentional comedy.

A place of concrete and silicone, and moral and gender bending, Patong is a simply a free for all. Anything, from a Starbucks 'venti latte' to an, ahem, companion for the evening is available for the right price. And while that's true about dozens of other, phonier, destinations, Patong doesn't try to hide what it is. It is what it is. And that's refreshing in a way.

Of course, that doesn't mean you're going to like it. But when you arrive you'll take one look at the wide, white-sand beach and its magnificent crescent bay, and you'll understand how all this started. Today this town is much more of a city than Phuket Town and it's the centre of Phuket's action.

Diving and spa options abound, as well as upscale dining, streetside fish grills, campy cabaret, Thai boxing, dusty antique shops and one of Asia's coolest shopping malls.



Activities & Courses

Sea Fun Divers

DIVING

(☎ 0 7634 0480; www.seafundivers.com; 29 Soi Karon Nui, Patong) This is an outstanding and very professional diving operation. Its standards are extremely high and the service is impeccable. There's an office at the Le Meridien resort in Patong, and a second location at the Katathani Resort.

Pum Thai Cooking School

COOKERY SCHOOL

(☎ 0 7634 6269; www.pumthaifoodchain.com; 204/32 Tha Rat Uthit, Hat Patong) This restaura-

rant chain (three locations in Thailand and two in France) holds several daily one- to six-hour classes (per person 4650B). Longer classes begin with a market tour and end with a meal.

Sleeping

It's getting pretty difficult to find anything in Patong costing less than 1000B from about November to April (the period that corresponds to the prices listed in this book), but outside this time period rates drop by 40% to 60%.

BYD Lofts

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 7634 3024; www.bydlofts.com; 5/28 Th Rat Uthit; apt 4900-11,500B; 📶📺🚿) If style and comfort are more important to you than beachfront (although it's only a minute's walk to the beach), look no further. Urban-style apartments with lots of white (floors, walls, blinds) and sharp lines feel angelic compared with the seedy world of Patong on the streets below. There's a day spa, a rooftop pool and an excellent restaurant on the premises.

TOP CHOICE Burasari

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 7629 2929; www.burasari.com; 18/110 Th Ruamchai; r 2700-9300B; 📶📺🚿) It's a lovely maze of swimming pools and waterfalls, etched columns, cushion-strewn lounges and bars. Rooms are more simple but chic with flat screen TVs, queen-sized beds and bamboo accents. The **Naughty Radish** cafe here serves outrageous customisable salads (from 180B) and the best smoothies (120B) on Phuket.

Patong

0 200 m
0 0.1 miles



Patong

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 1 Pum Thai Cooking
School..... B6

Sleeping

- 2 Baan Pronthateep..... B4
3 Baiphong..... B6
Baithong..... (see 3)
4 Burasari..... A7
5 BYD Lofts..... C3
6 Casa Jip..... B6
7 Impiana Phuket
Cabana..... B4
8 La Flora..... B5
9 Merrison Inn..... C3
10 Newspaper..... C4
11 Patong Backpacker
Hostel..... B5
12 Royal Paradise Hotel..... C5
Sala Dee..... (see 3)
13 The Belle Resort..... B6
14 Yorkshire Inn..... C5

Eating

- 15 Baan Rim Pa..... B1
16 Chicken Rice Briley..... C3
17 Mengrai Seafood..... B5
18 Ninth Floor..... D3
Patong Food Park..... (see 16)

Drinking

- 19 Boat Bar..... C4
JP's Restaurant & Bar..... (see 5)
20 Monte's..... D4
21 Two Black Sheep..... C5

Entertainment

- 22 Bangla Boxing
Stadium..... D5
23 Jung Ceylon
Shopping
Complex..... C5
24 Rock City..... C5
Sound Phuket..... (see 23)



Baiphong, Baithong &

Sala Dee

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎ 0 7629 2074, 0 7629 2738; www.baiphong.com, www.baithong.com, www.saladee.com; 205/12-13 & 205/14-15 Th Rat Uthit 200 Pee; r 1800-3300B; 🍷🍷) These three arty guest houses are all on the same little soi under the same friendly and organised management. Rooms and common areas are filled with Buddha imagery and Zen-spa-type trimmings mingling with modern art and urban touches. The dimly lit, nestlike rooms are all unique so ask to see a few if possible. **The Lounge**, downstairs at Baithong, serves cocktails and very good Italian and Thai food as well as gourmet snacks. Guests can use the pool at the unsightly Montana Grand Phuket next door.

La Flora

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 7634 4241; www.laflorapatong.com; 39 Th Thawiwong; r from 9500B; 🍷🍷🍷) Here's where clean lines and minimalist decor spill onto Patong beach. Rooms are large with wood furnishings (check out that floating desk), flat-screen TV and DVD, bathtub and shower. The minibar is stocked with complimentary soft drinks, and there's a huge lap pool.

Newspaper

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 7634 6276; www.newspaperphuket.com; 125/4-5 Th Paradise; r 2500-5000B; 🍷🍷) One of Patong's classiest three-star inns and easily

the most stylish and sophisticated on this gay-friendly block of bars and cafes. Rooms have upscale tile floors, bedside lanterns, dark-wood furnishings and understated feature walls. It's frequently booked, so reserve ahead.

The Belle Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 7629 2782; www.thebelleresort.com; 104/31-33 Soi Prisaneer; r from 1800B; 🍷🍷🍷) Simple, upscale Zen design, dimly lit rooms with wood floors, lots of glass and soft beds, make this a stylish choice. It's on a quiet street of Italian restaurants near the beach and in the heart of the action.

Baan Pronphateep

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 7634 3037; baanpronphateep.com; 168/1 Th Thawiwong; r 1600-2100B; 🍷) Banyan tree shaded and nestled down a secluded little soi, this is a quiet and simple three-star choice. Rooms are spacious and come with a full-sized fridge and a private patio.

Casa Jip

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 7634 3019; www.casajip.com; 207/10 Th Rat Uthit; r from 700B; 🍷) Italian run and great value, this place has very big, if simple, rooms with comfy beds and a taste of Thai style. You get cable TV and there's even a breakfast room service.

Patong Backpacker Hostel HOTEL \$
 (☎0 7625 6680; www.phuketbackpacker.com; 167 Th Ranong; dm 300-450B, r 1200B; 🏠🚿) This is a great location near the beach and the owner offers info on all the best, cheapest places to eat in town. Dorm prices vary depending on the number of beds in the room (three to 10). The top floor is the brightest but dorm rooms on the lower floors each have their own attached bathroom. Skip the overpriced room.

Some other options:

Bliss HOTEL \$\$\$
 (☎0 7629 2098; www.theblissphuket.com; 40 Th Thawiwong; ste from 15,000B; 🏠🚿🍷) A sleek, new all-suite resort. The suites are 90 sq m with a full-sized living room and master bedroom with wood floors, two flat-screen TVs, a lap pool, a Jacuzzi and a blooming garden on the terrace. Low-season discounts make it worth the splurge.

Impiana Phuket Cabana HOTEL \$\$\$
 (☎0 7634 0138; www.impiana.com; 41 Th Thawiwong; r from 7000B; 🏠🚿🍷) Cabana-style and plumb on the best part of the beach, the rooms here are laden with chic and creature comforts and are close to all the action.

Merrison Inn HOTEL \$\$
 (☎0 7634 0383; www.merrisoninn.com; 5/35 Th Hat Patong; r 1300B; 🏠🚿) Polished concrete floors, terrazzo bathrooms, wall-mounted flat-screen TVs, queen-sized beds and more than a little Asian kitsch make this place a real bargain.

Yorkshire Hotel HOTEL \$\$
 (☎0 7634 0904; www.theyorkshirehotel.com; 169/16 Soi Saen Sabai; r 1800-2300; 🏠🚿🍷) About as Thai as a plate of Yorkshire pud. There's a flicker of B&B charm here and the rooms are sleek.



Eating

Patong has stacks of restaurants and the trick is to steer around the watered-down Thai and poorly executed Western food clogging most main drags. The most glamorous restaurants are in a little huddle above the cliffs on the northern edge of town.

Bargain seafood and noodle stalls pop up across town at night – try the lanes on and around Th Bangla, or venture over to

the **Patong Food Park** (Th Rat Uthit; ☎4pm-midnight) once the sun drops.

Baan Rim Pa THAI \$\$\$
 (☎0 7634 4079; Th Kalim Beach; dishes 215-475B) Stunning Thai food is served with a side order of spectacular views at this institution. Standards are high, with prices to match, but romance is in the air, with candlelight and piano music aplenty. Book ahead and tuck in your shirt.

Lim's THAI \$\$\$
 (☎0 7634 4834; 28 Th Phrabaramee, Soi 7; meals 300-600B; ☎6pm-midnight) Lim's is 500m north (uphill) from the coast road to Kamala. It's a modern, moulded-concrete dining room and lounge serving upscale Thai cuisine. When celebrities land in Phuket, most spend at least one evening here.

Mengrai Seafood SEAFOOD \$\$
 (Soi Tun; meals 120-300B) Located down a sweaty, dark soi off Th Bangla is a wonderful food court serving fresh, local food. The stalls towards the end of the soi serve daily curries that local expats swear by. This restaurant specialises in (very) fresh fish, prawns and mussels.

Chicken Rice Briley THAI \$
 (Patong Food Park, Th Rat Uthit; meals 35-45B; ☎breakfast & lunch) The only diner in the Patong Food Park to offer sustenance when the sun shines. Steamed chicken breast is served on a bed of rice with a bowl of chicken broth with crumbled bits of meat and bone, and roast pork. Dip in the fantastic chilli sauce. There's a reason it's forever packed with locals.

Ninth Floor INTERNATIONAL \$\$\$
 (☎0 7634 4311; 47 Th Rat Uthit; mains 290-1990B; ☎dinner) Come on up to the 9th floor of the Sky Inn Condotel building where you can watch the sea of lights spread through sliding floor-to-ceiling glass doors. This is the highest open-air restaurant on the island, but the perfectly prepared steaks and chops are what made it a Patong institution.



Drinking

Some visitors may find that Patong's bar scene is enough to put them off their *pàt tai*, but if you're in the mood for plenty of beer, winking neon and short skirts, it is certainly worth sampling.

Th Bangla is Patong's beer and bar-girl mecca and features a number of spectacular,

go-go extravaganzas, where you can expect the usual mix of gyrating Thai girls and often red-faced Western men. The music is loud (expect techno), the clothes are all but nonexistent and the decor is typically slapstick with plenty of phallic imagery. That said, the atmosphere is more carnival than carnage and you'll find plenty of Western women pushing their way through the throng to the bar.

Two Black Sheep

PUB

(☎0895 921 735; www.twoblacksheep.net; 172 Th Rat Uthit; ☉11am-2am) Owned by a fun Aussie couple (he's a musician, she's a chef), this old-school pub is a great find. It has good grub and live music nightly. From 8pm to 10pm there's an acoustic set, then Chilli Jam, the house band, gets up and rocks till the last call. And it bans bar girls, which keeps everything at a PG (Parental Guidance) level.

JP's Restaurant & Bar

BAR

(☎07634 3024; www.bydlofts.com; 5/28 Th Hat Patong; ☉10.30am-11.30pm) This hipster indoor-outdoor lounge definitely brings a touch of style and panache to Patong. There's a low-slung bar, the outdoor sofa booths are cush, happy hour (with free tapas) starts at 10pm and there are weekly DJ parties.

La Gritta

BAR

(☎07634 0106; www.amari.com; 2 Th Meun-ngern; ☉10.30am-11.30pm) A spectacular, modern restaurant in the town's southwest that doesn't fit in with the ageing bones of this once-great property, but who cares? With tiered booths, massive yet muted light boxes and a deck that is just centimetres above the boulder-strewn shore, there is no better place for a sunset cocktail.

Monte's

BAR

(Th Phisit Karani; ☉11am-midnight) Now this, my friends, is a tropical pub. There's a thatched roof, a natural-wood bar, dozens of orchids and a flat screen for ballgames. The barflies swarm on Fridays for Monte's famous Belgian-style mussels, and on the weekends he fires up the grill.

Boat Bar

GAY BAR

(☎07634 2206; www.boatbar.com; 125/20 Th Rat Uthit) Phuket's original gay nightspot and still its only disco, is usually jumping with a lively, mostly gay crowd. Make sure to arrive before the midnight cabaret!

★ Entertainment

Cabaret and Thai boxing are something of a speciality here.

Phuket Simon Cabaret

CABARET

(☎07634 2011; www.phuket-simocabaret.com; Th Sirirach; admission 700-800B; ☉performances 7.30pm & 9.30pm nightly) About 300m south of town, this cabaret offers entertaining transvestite shows. The 600-seat theatre is grand, the costumes are gorgeous and the ladyboys (*gà-teu-i*) are convincing. The house is often full - book ahead.

Sound Phuket

CLUB

(☎07636 6163; www.soundphuket.com; Jung Ceylon complex, Unit 2303, 193 Th Rat Uthit; admission varies; ☉10pm-4am) When internationally renowned DJs come to Phuket these days, they are usually giggling amid the rounded, futuristic environs of Patong's hottest (and least sleazy) nightclub. If top-shelf DJs are on the decks, expect to pay up to 300B entry fee.

Rock City

CLUB

(Th Rat Uthit; www.rockcityphuket.com; ☉9pm-late) Let the grunge begin! This dark den of rock lives on the glory of AC/DC, Metallica and Guns N' Roses tribute bands. On Tuesday, Friday and Sunday, rockers channel music by the Red Hot Chili Peppers, the Rolling Stones, U2 and Bon Jovi in one International Rock City Party (1000B) with free cocktails and beer before 11pm, so get there early and keep it rockin'.

Bangla Boxing Stadium

THAI BOXING

(☎07282 2348; Th Phisit Karani; admission 1000-1500B; ☉9-11.30pm Tue, Wed, Fri & Sun) Old name, new stadium, same game: a packed line-up of competitive *moo-ay tai* (Thai boxing) bouts.

Jung Ceylon

CINEMA

(Th Rat Uthit) You can catch new Hollywood releases in pristine, amphitheatre-style cinemas at the shopping mall.

i Information

There are internet cafes, and banks with ATM and currency-exchange facilities across the town.

Post office (Th Thawiwong; ☉9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat)

Tourist police (☎1699; cnr Th Thawiwong & Th Bangla)

i Getting There & Around

Air Asia (☎ 0 7634 1792; www.airasia.com; 39 Th Thawiwong; ☎ 9am-9pm) has an office in town.

Túk-túk circulate around Patong for 50B to 100B per ride. There are numerous places to rent 125cc motorbikes and jeeps. **Big Bike Company** (☎ 0 7634 5100; 106 Th Rat Uthit) rents proper motorcycles (500B to 1000B per day). Keep in mind that the mandatory-helmet law is strictly enforced in Patong, where roadblocks/checkpoints can spring up at a moment's notice. **Budget** (☎ 0 7629 2389; 44 Th Thawiwong; ☎ 9am-4pm) has an office in the Patong Merlin Hotel.

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou to Patong from Phuket Town leave from Th Ranong, near the day market and fountain circle; the fare is 25B. The after-hours charter fare is 500B. *Sǒrng-tǎa-ou* then drop off and pick up passengers at the southern end of Patong beach. From here you can hop on a motorbike taxi (20B to 30B per ride), flag down a túk-túk (prices vary widely) or walk till your feet hurt.

Hat Kamala

หาดกะมลา

A chilled-out hybrid of Hat Karon and Hat Surin, calm but fun Kamala tends to lure a mixture of longer-term lower-key partying guests, a regular crop of Scandinavian families, and young couples. The bay is magnificent, turquoise and serene with shore breakers that lull you to sleep. Palms and pines mingle on the leafy and rocky northern end where the water is a rich emerald green and the snorkelling around the rock reef is pleasant, while new resorts are ploughed into the southern bluffs above the gathering long-tails. The entire beach is backed with lush rolling hills, which one can only hope are left alone...forever. And it's the only beach on Phuket with a walking path lined with this many restaurants, resorts and shops. Ditch the motorbike and step into Kamala bliss.

👁 Sights & Activities

Local beach boffins will tell you that **Laem Singh**, just north of Kamala, is one of the best capes on the island. Walled in by cliffs, it has no road access so you have to park your vehicle on the headland and clamber down a narrow path, or you could charter a long-tail (1000B) from Hat Kamala. It gets crowded.

Phuket Fantasea THEMED THEATRE **\$\$**
(☎ 0 7638 5000; www.phuket-fantasea.com; admission with/without dinner 1900/1500B; ☎ 6-11.30pm Fri-Wed) This is a US\$60 million 'cultural

theme park' located just east of Hat Kamala. Despite the billing, there aren't any rides, but there is a show that takes the colour and pageantry of Thai dance and combines this with state-of-the-art light-and-sound techniques that rival anything found in Las Vegas (think 30 elephants). All of this takes place on a stage dominated by a full-scale replica of a Khmer temple. Kids especially will be captivated by the spectacle but it is over-the-top cheesy, and cameras are forbidden.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

Layalina Hotel

HOTEL **\$\$\$**

(☎ 0 7638 5942; www.layalinahotel.com; r incl breakfast 5500-7700B; 🍷🍷🍷) Nab one of the split-level suites with very private rooftop terraces at this small boutique hotel for romantic sunset views over white sand and blue sea. The decor is simple, Thai and chic, with fluffy white duvets and honey-toned wood furniture. Room rates include a one-hour couple's massage at the on-site spa. The pool is ridiculously small – but that turquoise ocean *is* only steps away.

Cape Sienna Hotel

HOTEL **\$\$\$**

(☎ 0 7633 7300; www.capesienna.com; r 8500-10,130B, bungalows 4350-5600B; 🍷🍷🍷) This flashy, romantic hotel dominates the southern headland and offers magnificent azure bay views from the lobby and a pool. Rooms are modern, with plenty of clean, fresh lines and all the amenities. No kids allowed.

Clear House

HOTEL **\$\$**

(☎ 0 7638 5401; www.clearhousephuket.com; r 1300B; 🍷🍷) Shabby chic with a mod twist, whitewashed rooms have pink feature walls, plush duvets, flat-screen TVs, wi-fi and huge pebbled baths. This place just feels good.

Rockfish

FUSION **\$\$**

(☎ 0 7627 9732; 33/6 Th Kamala Beach; dishes 150-1000B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Perched above the river mouth and the bobbing long-tails, with beach, bay and mountain views, is Kamala's best dining room. It rolls out gems such as braised duck breast with kale, and prosciutto-wrapped scallops.

i Getting There & Away

To catch a regular *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* from Kamala to Patong costs 50B per person, while a *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* charter (starting in the evenings) costs 250B.

Hat Surin

หาดสุรินทร์

Like that hot boy or girl in school who also happens to have style, soul, a fun personality and wealthy parents, Hat Surin is the kind of place that can inspire (travel) lust in anyone who meets her/him. With a wide, blonde beach, water that blends from pale turquoise in the shallows to a deep blue on the horizon and two lush, boulder-strewn headlands, Surin could easily attract tourists on looks alone. Ah, but there are stunning galleries, five-star spa resorts and wonderful beachfront dining options, too. So by the time you're done swimming, sunbathing, snacking at local fish grills and sipping cocktails at barefoot-chic beach clubs, don't be surprised if you've fallen in love.

Sleeping

Hat Surin is home to some of Phuket's classiest resorts but there's little available for people with small budgets. To experience one of Phuket's most exclusive hotels (and celebrity magnets) stay at the over-the-top luxurious **Amanpuri Resort** (☎ 0 7632 4333; www.amanresorts.com; villas US\$925-8050; 🍷🍷🍷).

The Surin Phuket

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 7662 1579; www.thesurinphuket.com; r 17,000-58,000B; 🍷🍷🍷) Almost any place located on a private beach this quiet and stunning would have been a top pick. But The Surin's (previously 'The Chedi') bungalows, with naturalistic wooden exteriors that hide beneath the hillside foliage, and earthy, luxurious interiors, make the site that much better. You'll have to be in decent shape for walking around the resort, since it can be quite a hoof up hills and over wooden walkways to get to many of the bungalows. It received an extensive renovation mid-2011 so should be even better by the time you get there.

Twin Palms

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 0 7631 6500; www.twinpalms-phuket.com; r 6100-38,800B; 🍷🍷🍷) This is the Audrey Hepburn of Phuket's hotels – it's classic yet completely contemporary. There's a pervasive feeling of space with minimalist, artsy swimming pools everywhere that are fringed by delicate white frangipani. Even the simplest rooms are extra spacious and have oversized bathrooms, sublimely comfortable

beds and a supreme sense of calm. It's a few minutes' walk to the beach. Expats from all over Phuket can be found eating the island's most popular **brunch** (open noon to 2pm; buffet 1300B) here on Sunday.

Benyada Lodge

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 7627 1261; www.benyadalodge-phuket.com; r 2800-3500B; 🍷🍷🍷) Chic, modern rooms – with black louvred closets, terracotta-tiled bathrooms and silk, pastel-coloured throw pillows scattered in the lounging corner – are a great bargain for this area. The service is stellar. Take in the sunset and have a dip in the pool at the rooftop bar or it's only a few minutes' walk to the beach.

Capri Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 7627 0597; www.phukethotelcapri.com; r 900-1500B; 🍷🍷) Here's your slice of Italy with pillars everywhere and Mediterranean-style painted archways over the bathrooms in the cute, bright rooms. The best nests have pink-painted wrought-iron balconies overlooking a not-very-European, but quiet street. Add the Italian bistro downstairs and it's a fantastic bargain.

Eating & Drinking

There are plenty of excellent restaurants in and around Surin. For cheap seafood, your first stop should be the numerous, fun and delicious seafood dining rooms.

Taste

FUSION \$\$\$

(☎ 08 7886 6401; tapas 160-225B) The best of a new breed of urban-meets-surf eateries along the beach. Dine indoors or alfresco on meal-sized salads, perfectly cooked fillet mignon or a variety of Thai-Mediterranean starters and mains. Service is outstanding and there's an enticing attached gallery selling Tibetan, Nepali and local jewellery and art.

Catch

FUSION \$\$\$

(☎ 0 7631 6500; mains 250-450B) Slip on your breeziest linen to dine at this draped, cabana-style eatery right on the beach. It's part of Twin Palms, even though it's not attached, and has all the same classy attributes as the hotel in both ambience and cuisine.

Stereo Lab

BAR, CLUB

(☎ 08 9218 0162; www.stereolabphuket.com; Hat Surin; ☺11am-2am) It offers a bar, dance floor, and unbroken sea views. Special events feature known international DJs.

Northern Beaches



i Information

There is an ATM at Surin Plaza, just east of the beach on Rte 4025. Internet access is available at most hotels for 1B per minute.

i Getting There & Away

A regular *sǎrng-tǎa-ou* from Phuket Town's Th Ranong to Hat Surin costs 35B per person, while *túk-túk* or *sǎrng-tǎa-ou* charters cost 450B.

Rent cars from **Andaman Car Rent** (☎0 7662 1600; www.andamancarrent.com; ☎9am-9pm), opposite the entrance to Twin Palms. Vehicles can be rented from 1400B per day.

Ao Bang Thao

อ่าวบางเทา

Almost as large and even more beautiful than Patong Bay, the stunning, 8km white-sand sweep of Ao Bang Thao has several personalities. The southern half is home to a sprinkling of three-star bungalow resorts. Further inland you'll find an old fishing village laced with canals along with a number of upstart villa subdivisions. Don't be alarmed if you see a herd of water buffalo grazing just 100m from a gigantic construction site.

Northern Beaches

Sights

- 1 Phuket Fantasea..... B5

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 2 Hideaway Day Spa..... D1

Sleeping

- 3 Amanpuri Resort..... A1
 4 Andaman Bangtao Bay
 Resort..... B2
 Benyada Lodge.....(see 6)
 5 Cape Sienna Hotel..... A5
 6 Capri Hotel..... B3
 7 Clear House..... A5
 8 Layalina Hotel..... B5

- 9 The Surin Phuket..... A2

- 10 Twin Palms..... B2

Eating

- 11 Babylon Beach Club..... C1
 12 Catch..... A3
 Chaba..... (see 10)
 13 Rockfish..... A5
 14 Siam Supper Club..... D1
 15 Taste..... A3
 16 Tatonka..... D1
 17 Tawai..... D1

Drinking

- 18 Stereo Lab..... A3

Smack in the centre of it all is the somewhat absurd Laguna Phuket complex – a network of five four- and five-star resort properties and an ageing shopping mall knitted together by an artificial lake, patrolled by tourist shuttle boats, and a paved nature trail. But in the north Mother Nature asserts herself once more, and a lonely stretch of powder-white sand and tropical blue extends past all the bustle and change, and delivers the kind of peace you imagined when you booked your trip.

The **Hideaway Day Spa** (☎08 1750 0026; www.phuket-hideaway.com; 382/33 Th Srisoonthorn, Chergtalay) has an excellent reputation. It offers traditional Thai massage, sauna and mud body wraps in a tranquil wooded setting at the edge of a lagoon. Treatments start at 1500B. It also has its own line of spa products.

Sleeping

Laguna Phuket is home to five luxury resorts, an 18-hole golf course and 30 restaurants. Guests at any one of the resorts can use the dining and recreation facilities at all of them. Frequent shuttle buses make the rounds of all the hotels, as do pontoon boats (via the linked lagoons).

Banyan Tree Phuket HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 7632 4374; www.banyantree.com; villas from 25,000B; 🍷🍷🍷) One of Phuket's finest hotels, and the first to introduce bungalows with their own private pool, the Banyan Tree Phuket (in Laguna Phuket) is an oasis of seclude, understated luxury. Accommodation is

in villas – and, as long as you're here, the on-site spa should not be missed.

Angsana Laguna Phuket HOTEL \$\$\$

(www.angsana.com; see website for prices; 🍷🍷🍷🍷) Gated away in Laguna Phuket, the Sheraton Grande Laguna underwent extensive renovation to be rebranded as the Angsana Laguna Phuket opening in December 2011. The gigantic hotel will appeal to a lively, active crowd. It features a gigantic 323m-long pool, water-sports facilities galore and well over 400 rooms.

Andaman Bangtao Bay Resort HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 7627 0246; www.andamanbangtaobayresort.com; bungalows 3900-5900B; 🍷🍷🍷) Every bungalow has a sea view and there's a summer-camp vibe at this pleasant little resort. The design is very Thai, with woodcarvings on the walls and coconuts hanging from the eaves of the roofs, but for this price we expected a little more luxury.

Eating

Many of Phuket's finest eateries are found just outside Laguna's main gate, and there are even more at the seafood-oriented beach cafes south of the Banyan Tree Phuket.

Tatonka INTERNATIONAL \$\$\$

(☎0 7632 4349; Th Srisoonthorn; dishes 250-300B; 🍷dinner Thu-Tue) This is the home of 'globetrotter cuisine', which owner-chef Harold Schwarz developed by taking fresh local products and combining them with Europe, Colorado and Hawaii cooking techniques. The eclectic, tapas-style selection includes creative vegetarian and seafood dishes and

such delights as Peking duck pizza (220B). There's also a tasting menu (750B per person, minimum two people), which lets you try a little of everything. Call ahead during the high season.

Siam Supper Club INTERNATIONAL \$\$\$
(☎0 7627 0936; Hat Bang Thao; dishes 180-450B)
One of the hippest spots on Phuket where the 'infamous' come to sip cocktails, listen to jazz and eat an excellent meal. The menu is predominantly Western with gourmet pizzas, seafood *cioppino* and hearty mains such as veal tenderloin with wild mushrooms on truffle mash. Don't miss the insane cheesecake.

Babylon Beach Club ITALIAN & THAI \$\$\$
(☎08 1970 5302; Hat Bang Thao; dishes 120-850B; ♿) Accessible by dirt road are the seaside, polished, whitewashed environs of the Babylon Beach Club. Under new Italian management, lunch is more casual 'beach fare' such as burgers and salads while dinner gets more lavish with mains such as prawn and asparagus risotto.

Tawai THAI \$\$\$
(☎0 7632 5381; Moo 1, Laguna Resort Entrance; mains 180-300B) Set in a lovely old house decorated with traditional art is this gem of a Thai kitchen, serving classics like roast duck curry and pork *lâhp*. A free shuttle service is available to and from the Laguna hotels.

Chaba THAI \$\$\$
(☎0 7627 1580; Moo 1, Laguna Resort Entrance; meals 400-800B) Upscale Thai served with flair on the lagoon just outside the Laguna gates. Just point, it will steam, grill or fry it.

i Getting There & Away

A *sǒng-tǎa-ou* between Ao Bang Thao and Phuket Town's Th Ranong costs 25B per person. Túk-túk charters are 700B.

Sirinath National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติสิรินาถ

Comprising the beaches of Nai Thon, Nai Yang and Mai Khao, as well as the former Nai Yang National Park and Mai Khao wildlife reserve, **Sirinath National Park** (☎0 7632 8226; www.dnp.go.th; admission 200B; ☀8am-5pm) encompasses 22 sq km of coastal land, plus 68 sq km of sea.

The whole area is a 15-minute or less drive from Phuket International Airport,

which makes it particularly convenient for a first stop.

👁 Sights & Activities

If you're after a lovely arc of fine golden sand, away from the buzz of Phuket busy-ness, **Hat Nai Thon** is it. Swimming is quite good here except at the height of the monsoon, and there is some coral near the headlands at either end of the bay.

Hat Nai Yang's bay is sheltered by a reef that slopes 20m below the surface - which makes for both good snorkelling in the dry season and fantastic surfing in the monsoon season. Along the dirt road at the very southern end is a seemingly endless strip of seafood restaurants, beach bars and, oddly enough, tailor shops. It's all refreshingly rough around the edges.

Oi's Longtail (☎08 1978 5728; 66 Moo 3, Hat Nai Yang; tours 1600B) specialises in two-hour snorkelling tours of the reefs around Ko Waeo. It's located at the Bank restaurant, opposite the long-tail boat harbour.

Hat Nai Yang is a great place to go kite boarding. Two fine operators with offices here:

Kiteboarding Asia KITE BOARDING
(☎08 1591 4594; www.kiteboardingasia.com; lessons from 4000B) Its main office is on Hat Nai Yang, but it has a kiosk on the south end of Hat Karon (see Map p636) that's open in the low season. It also offers lessons off Rawai's Friendship Beach.

Kite Zone KITE BOARDING
(☎0833 952 005; www.kitesurfingphuket.com; beginner lessons from 1100B) With locations in Nai Yang and Rawai, it is the younger, hipper of the two schools, with a tremendous perch on Friendship Beach. Courses range in length from an hour to five days.

About 5km north of Hat Nai Yang is **Hat Mai Khao**, Phuket's longest beach. Sea turtles lay their eggs here between November and February. Take care when swimming, as there's a strong year-round undertow. Except on weekends and holidays you'll have this place almost to yourself.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

HAT NAI THON หาดไนathon
Naithonburi HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎0 7620 5500; www.naithonburi.com; Moo 4, Th Hat Nai Thon; r 3500-4500B) A mellow mega-resort if ever there was one. Yes, it has 222

rooms, but it rarely feels too crowded. Rooms are spacious with terracotta tile floors, Thai silks on the bed and private balconies. The enormous pool is lined with lounges and daybeds. Its **Chao Lay Bistro** (mains from 180B) is as swank as Nai Thon gets.

Naithon Beach Resort HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 7620 5379; www.phuket-naithon.com; 23/31 Moo 4, Th Hat Nai Thon; cottages 3300B; ☺Nov-May; ♿) Aka Woody's Paradise, small polished wood chalets with slate bathrooms are tucked into the south end of Hat Nai Thon, 10 steps from the sand.

HAT NAI YANG & HAT MAI KHAO หาดในยาง/หาดไม้ขาว
Anantara Phuket HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 7633 6100; www.phuket.anantara.com; 888 Moo 3, Tumbon Mai Khao; villas from 35,000B; ♿@☺☺) Phuket's newest all-villa property opens onto a serene lotus-filled lagoon that extends to the beach. Luxurious, classic Thai pool villas are connected to the lobby, bars, restaurants and the beach, by old timber boardwalks that wind beneath swaying palms. It also offers the **Bua Luang Spa** (see p624) and the hotel's **Sea Fire Salt Restaurant** is worth a romantic splurge even if you're not staying here.

TOP CHOICE **Indigo Pearl** HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 7632 7006; www.indigo-pearl.com; r 6800-26,250B; ♿@☺☺) One of the most unique and hip of Phuket's high-end resorts takes its design cues from the island's tin-mining history – although it sounds weird, this industrial theme melded with tropical luxe creates a spectacularly soothing place to stay. Hardware, such as vices, scales and other mining tools, is used in the decor to the tiniest detail – even the toilet-paper rolls are big bolts – and the common lounge areas are infused with indigo light. The gardens are modern and lush and surround a pool that looks like an oasis with a big waterfall.

Sala Resort & Spa HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 7633 8888; www.salaphuket.com; 333 Moo 3, Tambon Maikhao; r from 11,550B, villas from 15,750B; ♿@☺☺) This uberstylish, boutique property is a blend of Sino-Portuguese and art-deco influences with mod flair. Even 2nd-storey rooms have outdoor bathrooms. The black-granite infinity pool at the beachfront is gorgeous, and the bar area includes cushy, circular sofa lounges. It's the kind of

place that makes everyone feel like a celebrity. It also offers spa services.

Nai Yang Beach Resort HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 7632 8300; www.naiyangbeachresort.com; 65/23-24 Th Hat Nai Yang; r from 3600B; ♿@☺☺☺☺) This workhorse of a midranger is as clean as it is busy and dominates causarinalined Hat Nai Yang. The lowest-end rooms are fan cooled, while higher-end ones sport modern Thai style and are quite chic.

JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 7633 8000; www.marriott.com; r from 6800B; ♿@☺☺☺☺) So big there's a free shuttle to get around it, the Marriott wends its way around swimming pools and lily ponds along a steep light-gold beach – at night it's lit by flaming torches. Rooms are elegant with big bathrooms, hardwoods and sea views.

Sirinart National Park CAMPING, BUNGALOWS \$-\$\$
(☎ 0 7632 7152; reserve@dnf.go.th; campsites 30B, bungalows 1000-2000B) There are campsites (bring your own tent) and large, concrete bungalows at the park headquarters on a gorgeous, shady, white-sand bluff. Check in at the visitors centre or book online.

Rimlay Bungalows GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 08 9646 0239; andaman-car@hotmail.com; 90 Moo 5 Nai Yang; bungalow 500B, r 800-1800B) Spread over two properties, the bamboo bungalows are miniscule and basic while fan-cooled or air-conditioned rooms are tiled, have attached hot-water bathrooms and are great value.

i Getting There & Away

If you're coming from the airport, a taxi costs about 200B. There is no regular *sǒng-tǎa-ou*, but a tǔk-tǔk charter from Phuket Town costs about 800B.

Khao Phra Taew Royal Wildlife & Forest Reserve

อุทยานสัตว์ป่าเขาพระแทว

Phuket's not all sand and sea. In the north of the island, this park protects 23 sq km of virgin island rainforest (evergreen monsoon forest). There are some pleasant hikes over the hills and a couple of photogenic waterfalls: **Nam Tok Ton Sai** and **Nam Tok Bang Pae**. The falls are at their most impressive during the rainy season between June and

November. The highest point in the park is **Khao Phra** (442m). Because of its royal status, the reserve is better protected than the average national park in Thailand.

A German botanist discovered a rare and unique species of palm in Khao Phra Taew in the mid-1900s. Called the white-backed palm or *langkow* palm, the fan-shaped plant stands 3m to 5m tall and is found only here and in Khao Sok National Park (p611).

Nowadays resident mammals are limited to humans, pigs, monkeys, slow loris, langurs, civets, flying foxes, squirrels, mousedeer and other smaller animals. Watch out for cobras and wild pigs.

Park rangers may act as guides for hikes in the park on request; payment for services is negotiable.

Phuket Gibbon Rehabilitation Centre

ANIMAL SHELTER

(Map p623; ☎0 7626 0492; www.gibbonproject.org; donations encouraged; ☉9am-4pm) A tiny sanctuary in the park near Nam Tok Bang Pae, it is open to the public. Financed by donations (1500B will care for a gibbon for a year), the centre adopts gibbons that have been kept in captivity in the hopes they can be reintroduced to the wild. The centre also has volunteer opportunities that include providing educational information to visitors, cleaning cages and feeding the animals as well as tracking the released animals.

Cable Jungle Adventure Phuket ZIP LINES (☎08 1977 4904; 232/17 Moo 8, Th Bansuan-neramit; per person 1950B; ☉9am-6pm). If you're the thrill-seeking sort, harness up at this maze of eight zip lines, linking cliffs to ancient trees, tucked away in hills. The zips range from 6m to 23m above the ground and the longest run is 100m. Closed-toe shoes are a must.

To get to Khao Phra Taew from Phuket Town by vehicle, take Th Thepkasatri north about 20km to Thalang District and turn right at the intersection for Nam Tok Ton Sai, which is 3km down the road. Some travel agencies run day tours to the park.

Thalang District

อำเภอถลาง

A few hundred metres northeast of the famous **Heroines Monument** in Thalang District on Rte 4027, and about 11km northwest of Phuket Town, is **Thalang National Museum** (Map p623; ☎0 7631 1426; admission

30B; ☉8.30am-4pm). The museum contains five exhibition halls chronicling southern themes such as the history of Thalang-Phuket and the colonisation of the Andaman Coast, and describing the various ethnicities found in southern Thailand. The legend of the 'two heroines' (memorialised on the nearby monument), who supposedly drove off an 18th-century Burmese invasion force by convincing the island's women to dress as men, is also recounted in detail. The focal point of one hall is the impressive 2.3m-tall statue of Vishnu, which dates to the 9th century and was found in Takua Pa early in the 20th century.

Also in Thalang District, about 5km north of the crossroads near Thalang town, is **Wat Phra Thong** (Map p623; admission by donation; ☉dawn-dusk), Phuket's 'Temple of the Gold Buddha'. The image is half buried so that only the head and shoulders are visible. According to local legend, those who have tried to excavate the image have become very ill or encountered serious accidents. The temple is particularly revered by Thai-Chinese, many of whom believe the image hails from China. During the Chinese New Year pilgrims descend from Phang-Nga, Takua Pa and Krabi.

KRABI PROVINCE

When travellers talk about the amazing Andaman, they are probably talking about Krabi, with its trademark karst formations curving along the coast like a giant limestone fortress. Rock-climbers will find their nirvana in Railay, while castaway wannabes should head to Ko Lanta, Ko Phi-Phi or any of the other 150 islands swimming off the bleach-blond shores.

Krabi Town

กระบี่

POP 27,500

Krabi Town is majestically situated among impossibly angular limestone karsts jutting from the mangroves but midcity you're more likely to be awestruck by the sheer volume of guest houses and travel agencies packed into this compact, quirky little town. Western restaurants are ubiquitous, as are gift shops that all sell the same ole trinkets. Yet if you hang out a while, you'll also see that there's a very real provincial scene going on in between the cracks.

Th Utarakit is the main road into and out of Krabi and most places of interest are on the soi that branch off it.

👁 Sights & Activities

Wat Tham Seua

TEMPLE

(วัดถ้ำเสือ) Wat Tham Seua (Tiger Cave Temple) is a sprawling hill and cave temple complex 8km northwest of Krabi that's an easy day trip from Krabi Town. The best part of the grounds can be found by following a loop trail through a little forest valley behind the ridge where the *bôht* (central sanctuary) is located. You'll find several limestone caves hiding Buddha images, statues

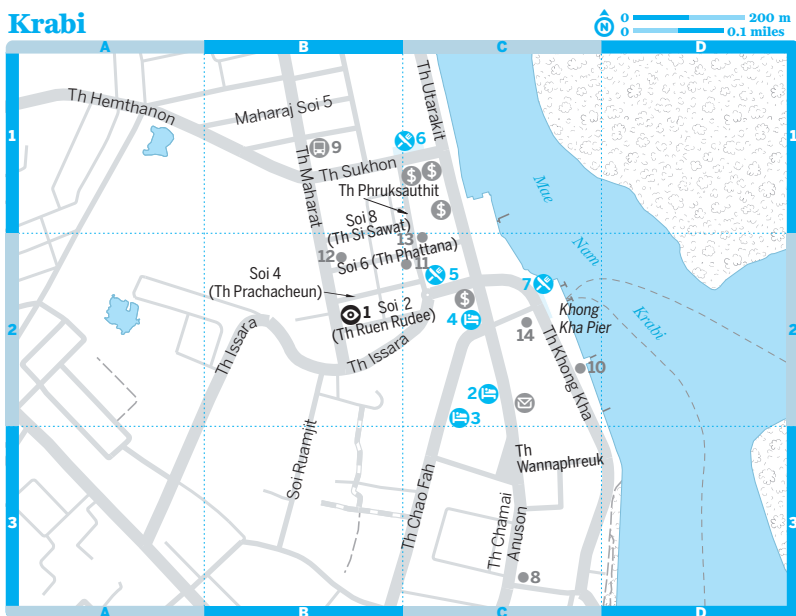
and altars. Troops of monkeys cackle from the trees. Back near the park entrance you'll come to a gruellingly steep 1237-stair case leading to a 600m karst peak. The fit and fearless are rewarded with a Buddha statue, a gilded stupa and spectacular views. Motorcycle taxis or *túk-túk* to the wát from Krabi cost 100B each way; a *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* from Th Utarakit is 50B. Please, please dress appropriately when visiting the wát by covering shoulders to knees.

Sea Kayak Krabi

KAYAKING

(☎ 0 7563 0270; www.seakayak-krabi.com; 40 Th Ruen Rudee) It offers a wide variety of sea-kayaking tours, including to Ao Thalane

Krabi



Krabi

👁 Sights

- 1 Sea Kayak Krabi..... B2

🏠 Sleeping

- 2 Chan Cha Ley..... C2
3 K Guesthouse..... C2
4 Pak-up Hostel..... C2

🍴 Eating

- 5 Cucina Italiana Viva..... C2
6 Day Market..... C1
7 Night Market..... C2

ℹ Information

- 8 Immigration Office..... C3

🚗 Transport

- 9 Minivans to Ao Luk..... B1
10 PP Family Co..... C2
11 Sǒrng-tǎa-ou to Ao Luk..... C2
12 Sǒrng-tǎa-ou to Ao Nang & Hat
Nopparat Thara..... B2
13 Sǒrng-tǎa-ou to Ao Nang & Hat
Nopparat Thara..... C2
14 Yellow House..... C2

(half/full day 900/1500B), which has looming sea cliffs; Ko Hong (full day 1800B), famed for its emerald lagoon; and Ban Bho Tho (full day 1700B), which has sea caves with 2000- to 3000-year-old cave paintings. All rates include guides, lunch, fruit and drinking water.

Tours

Various companies offer day trips to Khlong Thom, about 45km southeast of Krabi on Hwy 4, taking in some nearby hot springs and freshwater pools. Expect to pay around 1000B to 1200B, including transport, lunch and beverages; bring a swimsuit and good walking shoes. Various other 'jungle tour' itineraries are available.

Sleeping

Krabi has an exceptional guest-house scene that continues to improve, but go to nearby Ao Nang if you crave luxury. In the low season, guest-house room prices can plummet to as low as 150B.

Pak-up Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(☎ 05611 955; www.pakuphostel.com; 87 Th Utarakit; dm 180-200B, d 600B; 🚻🚿) This snazzy hostel features several uberhip 10-bed dorms with big wooden bunks built into the wall, each equipped with a personal locker. Massive, modern shared bathrooms have cold-water stalls as well as a few hot-water rain showers. There are two on-site bars (one with nightly live music) and a young, hip, clublike vibe.

Chan Cha Lay

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 07562 0952; www.chanchalay.com; 55 Th Utarakit; r 400-700B, r without bathroom 250B; 🚻) The rooms here with en suite, and decorated in gorgeous Mediterranean blues with polished-concrete semioutdoor bathrooms, are Krabi's most stylish and comfortable. The shared-bathroom, fan-only rooms are plain, but spotless with firm beds.

K Guesthouse

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 07562 3166; kguesthouse@yahoo.com; 15-25 Th Chao Fan; r 150-600B; 🚻🚿) This is a Wild West-looking place with varnished wooden rooms that line a second-storey verandah that overlooks the street. Cow heads on the walls and easy socialising in the downstairs cafe add to the frontier appeal.

Eating & Drinking

Night market

THAI \$

(Th Khong Kha; meals 20-50B) The most popular and pleasant place for an evening meal is near the Khong Kha pier. Menus are in English but the food is authentic: try papaya salad, fried noodles, *dôm yam gûng* (prawn and lemon-grass soup) and sweet milky Thai desserts.

Day Market

THAI \$

(Th Sukhon; meals 20-60B) This market is even more Thai than the night market. Among the tropical-fruit stands are simmering curry pots, and banquet trays of steaming noodles with fried squid, sautéed beef, devilled eggs, fried fish and boiled corn. Eat dining. Though called the day market, it's open most nights too.

Cucina Italiana Viva

ITALIAN \$\$

(☎ 07563 0517; 29 Th Phruksauthit; pizzas 200-260B) This is the place to sample tasty, thin-crust pizza, with a variety of cheeses and toppings to choose from. It has calzones, Italian wine, ice cream and coffee, and it delivers.

Information

Ferries to Ko Phi-Phi and Ko Lanta leave from a passenger jetty at Khlong Chilat, about 4km southwest of town. Krabi's bus terminal is north of the centre at Talat Kao, near the junction of Th Utarakit. The airport is 17km to the northeast.

Many of Krabi's guest houses and restaurants offer internet access for 40B to 60B per hour. There are numerous banks and ATMs.

Immigration office (☎ 07561 1350; Th Chamai Anuson; ☎ 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri) Handles visa extensions.

Krabi Hospital (☎ 07561 1210; Th Utarakit) About 1km north of town.

Post office (Th Utarakit) Just south of the turn-off to Khong Kha pier.

Getting There & Away

Air

Most domestic carriers offer flights between Bangkok and Krabi International Airport (one-way around 4400B, 1¼ hours). **Bangkok Air** (www.bangkokair.com) has a daily service to Ko Samui for around 3800B.

Boat

Boats to Ko Phi-Phi and Ko Lanta leave from the passenger pier at Khlong Chilat, about 4km southwest of Krabi. Travel agencies will arrange free transfers when you buy a boat ticket with them.

The largest boat operator is **PP Family Co** (☎0 7561 2463; www.phiphifamily.com; Th Khong Kha), which has a ticket office right beside the pier in town. In high season there are boats to Ko Phi-Phi (300B, 1½ hours) at 9am, 10.30am, 1.30pm and 3pm while in low season the schedule is reduced to two boats per day.

From November to May, there is only one daily boat to Ko Lanta (350B, two hours) leaving Krabi's Khlon Chilat pier at 11.30am. These can also stop at Ko Jum (one hour), where long-tails shuttle you to shore (though you'll pay the full 350B). During the wet season, you can only get to Ko Lanta by frequent air-conditioned vans (300B, 2½ hours), which also run throughout the high season.

If you want to get to Railay, long-tail boats leave from Krabi's Khong Kha pier to Hat Rai Leu East (150B, 45 minutes) from 7.45am to 6pm. The boatmen will wait until they can fill a boat with 10 people before they leave; if you're antsy to go before then, you can charter the whole boat for 1500B.

To get to Phuket or the Ko Yao Islands, the quickest route is with direct boats from the pier at Ao Nang (see p653). *Sörnng-tǎa-ou* run between the two piers for 50B or a taxi costs 300B to 400B.

Bus

The **Krabi bus terminal** (☎0 7561 1804; cnr Th Utarakit & Hwy 4) is in nearby Talat Kao, about 4km north of Krabi. Air-conditioned government buses leave for Bangkok (720B, 12 hours) at 7am, 4pm and 5.30pm. There's a very plush 24-seat VIP bus to Bangkok (1100B) departing at 5.30pm daily. From Bangkok's southern bus terminal, buses leave at 7.30am and between 7pm and 8pm. Regular, air-conditioned government buses from Talat Kao also service Hat Yai (170B, three hours), Phuket (145B, 3½ hours), Surat Thani (140B, 2½ hours) and Trang (90B, two hours).

Minivan

Minivans are booked through travel agencies in town. Prices can vary widely; shop around to get an idea. Some sample fares are Ao Leuk (80B, one hour), Hat Yai (350B, three hours), Ko Lanta (350B, 1½ hours) and Phuket (350B, three hours). Minivans leave when full.

Sörnng-tǎa-ou

Sörnng-tǎa-ou run from the bus station to central Krabi and on to Hat Nopparat Thara (40B), Ao Nang (60B) and the Shell Cemetery at Ao Nam Mao (80B). There are services from 6am to 6.30pm. In the high season there are more-frequent services until 10pm for a 10B surcharge. For Ao Luk (80B, one hour) there are frequent *sörnng-tǎa-ou* from the corner of Th Phattana

and Th Phruksauthit; the last service leaves at around 3pm.

Getting Around

Central Krabi is easy to explore on foot, but the bus terminal and airport are both a long way from the town centre. A taxi from the airport to town will cost 400B. In the reverse direction, taxis cost 350B, while motorcycle taxis cost 300B. Agencies in town can arrange seats on the airport bus for 120B. *Sörnng-tǎa-ou* between the bus terminal and central Krabi cost 40B.

Car & Motorcycle

Hiring a vehicle is an excellent way to explore the countryside around Krabi. Most of the travel agencies and guest houses in town can rent you a Yamaha motorbike for around 200B per day.

Yellow House (☎0 7562 2809; Th Chao Fah) has a gleaming fleet of Yamahas and provides helmets. A few of the travel agencies along Th Utarakit rent out small 4WDs for 1200B to 1800B per day.

Ao Nang

POP 12,400

อำเภอ

Granted, you're not breaking ground, but there's still plenty to like about Ao Nang, a beach town that's unabashedly devoted to tourism. It all starts with the beaches, framed by limestone headlands tied together by narrow strips of golden sand. In the dry season, the sea glows a lovely turquoise hue; in the wet season rip tides stir up the mocha shallows. If you're hankering for a swim in crystalline climes at any time of year, you can easily book a trip to the local islands that dot the horizon.

Ao Nang is compact, easy to navigate, and with the onrush of attractive, midrange development, accommodation standards are especially high, with substantial discounts possible. It's not nearly as cheap (or as authentic) as Krabi town, but it's cleaner and sunnier; it's also much better value than what you'll find in Phuket. There's plenty to do (mangrove tours? snorkelling trips?); it's only a 40-minute trip from Krabi airport, and a smooth 20-minute long-tail boat ride from stunning Railay. It's no wonder this beach is increasingly popular with travellers of every ilk.

Sights

Shell Cemetery

NATURE RESERVE

(สุสานหอย; admission 50B; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) About 9km east of Ao Nang at the western end of Ao Nam Mao is the **Shell Cemetery**,

KHAO PHANOM BENCHA NATIONAL PARK

This 50-sq-km **park** (อุทยานแห่งชาติเขาพนมเบญจา; ☎0 7566 0716; adult/child under 14yr 200/100B) protects a dramatic area of virgin rainforest along the spine of 1350m-high Khao Phanom Bencha, 20km north of Krabi. The park is full of well-signed trails to scenic waterfalls, including the 11-tiered **Huay To Falls**, 500m from the park headquarters. Nearby and almost as dramatic are Huay Sadeh Falls and Khlong Haeng Falls. On the way into the park you can visit **Tham Pheung**, a dramatic cave with shimmering mineral stalactites and stalagmites. The numerous trails that wend through the area are excellent for hiking.

Many bird-spotters come here to see white-crowned and helmeted hornbills, argus pheasants and the extremely rare Gurney's pitta. Local guides aren't absolutely necessary here, considering the well-marked trails. But visitors who hire guides tend to spot more wildlife, and have a deeper experience in general.

There is no public transport to the park, but it's easy to get here from Krabi by hired motorcycle; follow the signposted turn-off from Hwy 4. Park your motorcycle by the park headquarters. Alternatively, you can hire a túk-túk for around 600B round-trip.

also known as Gastropod Fossil or Su-San Hoi. Here you can see giant slabs formed from millions of tiny 75-million-year-old fossil shells. There's a small **visitors centre** (admission 50B; ☎8.30am-4.30pm), with geological displays and various stalls selling snacks. *Sǒrng-tǎa-ou* from Ao Nang cost 30B.

Activities

Loads of activities are possible at Ao Nang, and children under 12 typically get a 50% discount.

Kayaking

Several companies offer kayaking tours to mangroves and islands around Ao Nang. Popular destinations include the scenic sea lagoon at Ko Hong (1500B to 1800B) to view collection points for sea-swallow nests (spurred by demand for bird's-nest soup). There are also trips to the lofty sea cliffs and wildlife-filled mangroves at Ao Thalane (half/full day 500/800B) and to the sea caves and 2000- to 3000-year-old paintings at Ban Bho Tho (half/full day 700/900B). Rates will vary slightly, but always include lunch, fruit, drinking water, sea kayaks and guides.

Diving & Snorkelling

Ao Nang has numerous dive schools offering trips to local islands, including Ko Si, Ko Ha, Yava Bon and Yava Son. It costs about 3200B for two dives. Ko Mae Urai is one of the more unique local dives, with two submarine tunnels lined with soft and hard corals. Other trips run further afield to King Cruiser (three dives 4700B) and Ko Phi-Phi (two dives 3900B). A PADI Open Water course will set

you back 14,900B to 16,000B. Reliable dive schools include **Ao Nang Divers** (☎0 7563 7244; www.aonang-divers.com) and **Poseidon Dive Center** (☎0 7563 7263; www.poseidon-diving.com). Most dive companies can also arrange snorkelling trips in the area.

Cycling

Take a Tour de Krabi by hooking up with **Krabi Eco Cycle** (☎0 7563 7250; www.krabi-ecocycle.com; 41/2 Muu 5; half-/full-day tour 800/1700B). The recommended full-day 15.5km pedal takes you through rubber plantations, small villages, hot springs and, finally, a cooler dip at the aptly named Emerald Pool. Lunch is included on all tours except the half-day bike-only tour.

Courses

Krabi Thai Cookery School COOKERY SCHOOL (☎0 7569 5133; www.thaicookeryschool.net; 269 Moo 2, Ao Nang, Rte 4204) About 10km from Ao Nang between Wat Sai Thai and Ao Nam Mao, this school offers one-day Thai-cooking courses from 1000B; transfers are included in the price.

Tours

Any travel agency worth its salt can book you on one of the popular four- or five-island tours for around 2200B. The **Ao Nang Long-tail Boat Service** (☎0 7569 5313; www.aonangboatco-op.com) offers private charters for up to six people to Hong Island (2500B) and Bamboo Island (3800B), and the standard five-island tour, of course. You can also book half-day trips to Poda and Chicken

Islands (1700B, four hours) for up to four people.

Several tour agencies offer tours to **Khlong Thom**, including visits to freshwater pools, hot springs and the **Wat Khlong Thom Museum**; the price per adult/child is 1200/900B. So-called 'mystery tours' visit local snake farms, rural villages, crystal pools and rubber, pineapple, banana and papaya plantations, and cost around 900/450B per adult/child. Tour agencies also offer trips to attractions around Ao Phang-Nga and to a number of dubious animal shows.

You can also arrange day tours to Ko Phi-Phi on the **Ao Nang Princess** (adult/child 1400/1000B). The boat leaves at 9am from the Hat Noppharat Thara National Park headquarters and visits Bamboo Island, Phi-Phi Don and Phi-Phi Leh. Free transfers from Ao Nang to Hat Noppharat Thara are included in the price.

Sleeping

Prices at all these places drop by 50% during the low season. There is a handful of under-1000B spots lining the main road about 3km from the beach.

Golden Beach Resort HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 7563 7870-74; www.goldenbeach-resort.com; r 3900-6100B, bungalows 5100-8100B; 🍷🍷) This sprawling, unpretentious resort dominates the southernmost 400m of Ao Nang's beachfront – the best part of the beach. It's made up of large hotel blocks and stylish white-cement, wood-trimmed bungalows arranged in garden foliage around a big pool. It's only verging on hip but it definitely feels good to be here. Check the website for specials.

Somkiet Buri Resort HOTEL \$\$
(☎ 0 7563 7320; www.somkietburi.com; r 17100-6200B; 🍷🍷🍷) This place just might inspire you to slip into a yoga pose. The lush jungle grounds are filled with ferns and orchids, while lagoons, streams and meandering wooden walkways guide you to the 26 large and creatively designed rooms. A great swimming pool is set amid it all – balconies either face this pool or a peaceful pond. The service is first-rate.

Red Ginger Chic Resort HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 7563 7777; www.redgingerkrabi.com; 88 Moo 3; r 6300-10,900B; 🍷🍷🍷) Fashionable and colourful with detailed tiles, large paper lanterns, and a frosted-glass bar in the lob-

by. Large rooms feature elegant wallpaper; modern furnishings and large balconies overlooking an expansive pool. Expect discounts of up to 50% in the low season.

Ao Nang Cliff Resort HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 7562 6888; www.aonangcliffbeach.com; r 4500-7500B; 🍷🍷🍷) Think sunken bedrooms, daybeds, duvets, and rain showers. The best-situated rooms have cliff and sea views, and the pool outside the lobby is stunning. If you come in the low season you can grab a room for 2500B.

Verandah HOTEL \$\$
(☎ 0 7563 7454; www.theverandahaonang.com; r incl breakfast 1700-2300B; 🍷🍷) Solid value right in the middle of things, the rooms here are simple, spacious and immaculate, with tiled floors, minifridge, hot water, satellite TV and safety boxes. The price includes breakfast and guests are welcome to use the pool at nearby Peace Laguna Resort.

Apasari HOTEL \$\$
(☎ 0 7563 7188; www.apasari.com; r 1800-5800B; 🍷🍷🍷) One of a handful of stylish new midrangers on Ao Nang's newest boulevard. Rooms have high-end tiled floors, built-in desks and wardrobes, and flat-screen TVs. All rooms have balconies overlooking the lap pool. It's exceptional value in the low season.

Dream Garden HOTEL \$
(☎ 0 7563 7338; r 950-1200B; 🍷🍷) Walk through the entrance of a dingy travel agency, past a stylish polished cement spa effusing scents of lemon-grass to a two-storey block of plain but clean and large tiled rooms with hot water, wood furnishings and small terraces.

Phra Nang Inn HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 7563 7130; www.phrananghotels.com; r incl breakfast 4000-9000B; 🍷🍷🍷) It's an artistic explosion of rustic coconut wood, bright orange and purple paint, and plenty of elaborate Thai tiles. There are two pools, and a second, similarly designed branch is across the road from the original.

J Hotel HOTEL \$
(☎ 0 7563 7878; j_hotelo@hotmail.com; r from 800B; 🍷🍷) J Hotel is an old standby that caters well to backpackers. Large, bright rooms have new tiled floors, built-in desks, wardrobes and satellite TV, but some smell a bit musty. Sniff well before you commit.

Bernie's Place

HOTEL \$

(☎0 7563 7093; r 300-700B; 🍷) The staff look and act like they're sleepwalking but rooms are big and bright with ceiling fans and some have sea views from a common verandah. The dark downstairs bar offers protein-packed, backpacker-priced buffets (all you can eat for 250B).

**Eating**

Ao Nang is full of mediocre restaurants serving overpriced Italian, Scandinavian, Indian, Thai and fast food. For superbudget meals, a few stalls pop up at night on the road to Krabi (near McDonald's). You'll find *roti* (pancakes), *gàì tórt* (fried chicken), hamburgers and the like. Another 100m up the road (and across the street) you'll find decent priced, tasty Thai fare in a row of bamboo-hut-style restaurants.

**Soi Sunset**

SEAFOOD \$\$

(☎0 7569 5260; Soi Sunset; dishes 60-400B; 🍴lunch & dinner) At the western end of the beach is this narrow pedestrian-only alley housing several romantic seafood restaurants with gorgeous views of an island-dotted ocean. They all have model ice boats at the entrance showing off the day's catch and smiling staff to beckon you in to take a seat. One of the best (and most popular) is Krua Ao Nang at the end of the strip.

Jeanette's Restaurant

SWEDISH, THAI \$\$

(☎08 9474 6178; www.jeanettekrabi.com; dishes 120-450B; 🍴breakfast, lunch & dinner) The most popular place in town thanks to its signature bench seating, ink-blot art on the walls and traditional Thai menu augmented with Swedish hits (that apple pie does sound good).

**Drinking & Entertainment**

Have a drink – there's no shortage of bars in Ao Nang.

Aonang Krabi Muay Thai**Stadium**

THAI BOXING

(☎0 7562 1042; admission 800B, ringside 1200B) If you get tired of the beach bars and video movies on the strip, this place has boisterous *moo-ay tai* (Thai boxing) bouts two days a week (check current schedules at any travel agent in town) from 8.45pm. A free *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* runs along the strip at Ao Nang, collecting punters before the bouts.

Last Café

CAFE, BAR

(☎11am-7pm) At the far southern end of Hat Ao Nang is this barefoot beach cafe, with cold beer and cool breezes. Come here for a welcome blast of Ao Nang natural.

Amy's Bar

BAR

(☎11am-2am) Give Amy's points for its floral retro hippy design, which comes with flat screens streaming live football games, billiards and the ladies who love them. It's one of several pubs on this soi, which runs perpendicular to the cliff.

i Information

All the information offices, including **Ao Nang Visitor Center** (☎0 7562 8221), on the strip, are private tour agencies, and most offer international calls and internet access for around 1B per minute.

Several banks have ATMs and foreign-exchange windows (open from 10am to 8pm) on the main drag.

i Getting There & Around**Bus, Car & Minivan**

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou run to/from Krabi (50B, 20 minutes) starting at the Krabi bus terminal (add 10B to the fare) via Th Maharat, the Khong Kha pier in Krabi and on to Hat Noppharat Thara, Ao Nang and finally the Shell Cemetery. From Ao Nang to Hat Noppharat Thara or the Shell Cemetery it's 20B.

Airport buses to and from Ao Nang cost 80B to 100B and leave throughout the day. Private taxis from the airport cost about 800B. Minibuses go to destinations all over the south including Phuket (350B to 400B, three to four hours), Pak Bara (300B, 3½ hours) and Ko Lanta (400B, two hours).

Dozens of places along the strip rent out small motorcycles for 150B to 200B. Budget Car Hire charges around 1600B.

Boat

Boats to Railay's Hat Rai Leh West are run by **Ao Nang Long-tail Boat Service** (☎0 7569 5313; www.aonangboatco-op.com) and rates are 80B per person from 7.30am to 6pm or 150B per person from 6pm to 6am. It's a 15-minute journey – boats leave when there are a minimum six people or you can charter the whole boat by paying for the equivalent of six people.

Ferries and speedboats leave from the nearby pier at Hat Noppharat Thara (see p668) to Ko Phi Phi, Ko Lanta, Phuket and the Ko Yao Islands.

Around Ao Nang

HAT NOPPHARAT THARA

หาดนพรัตน์ธารา

North of Ao Nang, the golden beach goes a bit more *au naturel* as it curves around a headland for 4km, until the sea eventually spills into a natural lagoon at the Hat Noppharat Thara National Park headquarters. Here scores of long-tails mingle with fishing boats and speedboats against a stunning limestone backdrop. The small **visitors centre** has displays on coral reefs and mangrove ecology, labelled in Thai and English.

Several resorts falsely advertise a 'central Ao Nang' location – so if you don't like reading fine print, you might end up sleeping out here (and you might prefer it anyway).

Sleeping

Sala Talay Resort & Spa

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 7581 0888; www.salatalay.com; r 10,000-29,000B; 🍷@🍷) This beautiful new hotel is all moulded concrete, wood and stone. Rooms have polished concrete floors, walls and washbasins, DVD players and flat-screen TVs. Online rates are significantly lower than our listed rack rates outside the peak season.

Sabai Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 7563 7791; www.sabairesort.com; bungalows 1300-2200B; 🍷@🍷) This is the most professionally run of the area's bungalow properties. The tiled-roof bungalows are fan cooled with pebbled concrete patios overlooking a palm-shaded swimming pool, and a flower garden.

Government bungalows

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 7563 7200; bungalows 800B-1000B) These wooden, fan-cooled bungalows across the street from the beach are rustic yet well maintained and a terrific budget choice. Prices don't go up in the high season, but you'd better book ahead. Check in at national park headquarters near the harbour.

Around the national park headquarters there are several **restaurants** serving snacks such as fried chicken and papaya salad.

Getting There & Away

Sörng-tãa-ou between Krabi and Ao Nang stop in Hat Noppharat Thara; the fare is 40B from Krabi or 10B from Ao Nang. From November to May the *Ao Nang Princess* runs between Hat Nop-

pharat Thara National Park headquarters and Ko Phi-Phi (400B, two hours). The boat leaves from the national park jetty at 9am, returning from Ko Phi-Phi at 3.30pm. It also stops at Railay's Hat Rai Leh West. This boat can also be used for day trips to Ko Phi-Phi. During the high season there's also a direct boat to Phuket, leaving from the same pier (450B) via Ko Lanta at 10.30am and 3.30pm (450B).

A faster alternative to Phuket is to take the *Green Planet* speedboat (950B, 1¼ hours) to Bang Rong Pier, north of Phuket Town via Ko Yao Noi and Koh Yao Yai (both 450B, 45minutes). The boat leaves Hat Noppharat Thara at 11am and 4pm and transport to your Phuket accommodation is included in the fare.

Railay

ไร่

Krabi's fairy-tale limestone crags come to a dramatic climax at Railay (also spelled Rai Leh), the ultimate jungle gym for rock-climbing fanatics. This quiet slice of paradise fills in the sandy gaps between each craggy flourish, and although it's just around the bend from chaotic tourist hustle in Ao Nang, the atmosphere here is nothing short of laid-back, Rasta-Thai haven.

Sights

At the eastern end of Hat Phra Nang is **Tham Phra Nang** (Princess Cave), an important shrine for local fishermen. Legend has it that a royal barge carrying an Indian princess foundered in a storm here during the 3rd century BC. The spirit of the drowned princess came to inhabit the cave, granting favours to all who came to pay respect. Local fishermen – Muslim and Buddhist – place carved wooden phalluses in the cave as offerings in the hope that the spirit will provide plenty of fish.

About halfway along the path from Hat Rai Leh East to Hat Phra Nang, a crude path leads up the jungle-cloaked cliff wall to a hidden lagoon known as **Sa Phra Nang** (Holy Princess Pool). There's a dramatic viewpoint over the peninsula from the nearby cliff top, but be warned that this is a strenuous hike with some serious vertigo-inducing parts.

Above Hat Railay East is another large cave called **Tham Phra Nang Nai** (Inner Princess Cave; adult/child 40/20B; ☀5am-8pm), also known as Diamond Cave. A wooden boardwalk leads through a series of caverns full of beautiful limestone formations but, with shifting rain patterns, the water is gone and with it the illuminated effects that won the

diamond moniker. But even in monochrome conditions, it's still worth a stroll.



Activities

Rock Climbing

With nearly 500 bolted routes, ranging from beginner to challenging advanced climbs, all with unparalleled cliff-top vistas, it's no surprise that Railay is among the top climbing spots in the world. You could spend months climbing and exploring – and many people do. The newest buzz is deep-water soloing where climbers free-climb ledges over deep water – if you fall you will most likely just get wet, so even daring beginners can give this a try.

Most climbers start off at **Muay Thai Wall** and **One, Two, Three Wall**, at the southern end of Hat Rai Leh East, which have at least 40 routes graded from 4b to 8b on the French system. The mighty **Thaiwand Wall** sits at the southern end of Hat Rai Leh West and offers a sheer limestone cliff with some of the most challenging climbing routes.

Other top climbs: **Hidden World** (some classic routes for intermediate climbers), **Wee's Present Wall** (an overlooked 7c+ gem), **Diamond Cave** (another beginner-to-intermediate favourite) and **Ao Nang Tower** (a three-pitch climbing wall reached only by long-tail).

The going rate for climbing courses is 800B to 1000B for a half day and 1500B to 2000B for a full day. Three-day courses (6000B) will involve lead climbing, where you clip into bolts on the rock face as you ascend. Experienced climbers can rent gear sets from any of the climbing schools for 800/1300B for a half/full day – the standard set consists of a 60m rope, two climbing harnesses and climbing shoes. If you're planning to climb independently, you're best off bringing your own gear from home; be sure to bring plenty of slings and quickdraws, chalk (sweaty palms are inevitable in the tropics) and a small selection of nuts and cams as back-up for thinly protected routes. If you forget anything, some climbing schools sell a small range of imported climbing gear but they might not have exactly what you need or the right size. A woven rattan mat (available locally for 100B to 150B) will help keep the sand out of your gear.

Several locally published books detail climbs in the area, but *Rock Climbing in Thailand* (US\$40), by Elke Schmitz and

Wee Changruea, is one of the more complete guides. Recommended climbing shops:

Highland Rock Climbing CLIMBING OUTFIT
(☎08 0693 0374; chaow_9@yahoo.com; Hat Rai Leh East) If you're bunking on the mountain, the owner of this outfit is the man to climb with.

Hot Rock CLIMBING OUTFIT
(☎0 7562 1771; www.railayadventure.com; Hat Rai Leh West) Has a very good reputation and is owned by one of the granddaddies of Railay climbing.

King Climbers CLIMBING OUTFIT
(☎0 7563 7125; www.railay.com; Hat Rai Leh East) One of the biggest, oldest, most reputable and commercial schools.

Wee's Climbing School CLIMBING OUTFIT
(☎08 1149 9745; www.tonsai basecamp; Hat Ton Sai) Arguably the most professional outfit in the area.

Water Sports & Other Activities

Several **div**e operations in Railay run trips out to Ko Poda and other dive sites. Two local dives at outlying islands costs about 2000B while a three- or four-day PADI Open Water dive course is 12,000B.

Full-day, multi-island **snorkelling** trips to Ko Poda, Chicken Island and beyond can be arranged through any of the resorts for about 1800B (maximum six people) or you can charter a long-tail (half/full day 1700/2200B) from Hat Railay West beach. If you just want to snorkel off Railay, most resorts can rent you a mask set and fins for 100B to 150B each.

Flame Tree Restaurant (Hat Rai Leh West) rents out **sea kayaks** for 200B per hour or 800B per day. Overnight trips to deserted islands can be arranged with local boat owners, but you'll need to bring your own camping gear and food.

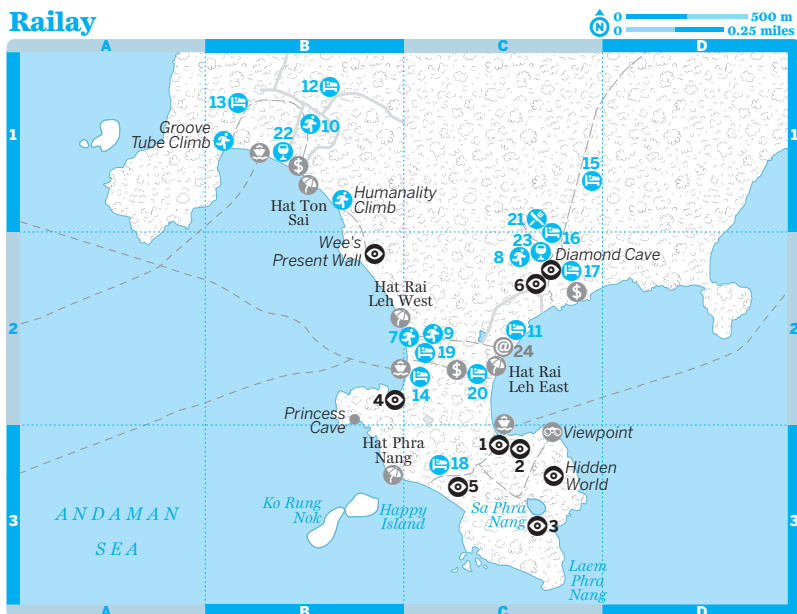
Railay Thai Cookery School (Rai Leh Headlands; ☎08 4096 4994; courses 1200B), right below Railay Phutawan Resort Restaurant, offers five-hour courses in a lovely semioutdoor setting at 8.30am and 2.30pm daily.

Sleeping & Eating

HAT RAI LEH WEST

Railay West is beautiful and developers know it – you'll only find midrange and top-end resorts around here. Rates drop by 30% in the low season. You can't go wrong with any of the resorts' restaurants.

Railay



Railay

📍 Sights

- 1 Muay Thai Wall..... C3
- 2 One, Two, Three Wall..... C3
- 3 Sa Phra Nang..... C3
- 4 Thaiwand Wall..... B2
- 5 Tham Phra Nang..... C3
- 6 Tham Phra Nang Nai..... C2

👤 Activities, Courses & Tours

- 7 Flame Tree Restaurant..... C2
- 8 Highland Rock Climbing..... C2
- 9 Hot Rock..... C2
- King Climbers..... (see 24)
- Railay Thai Cookery School..... (see 21)
- 10 Wee's Climbing School..... B1

🛏 Sleeping

- 11 Anyavee..... C2
- 12 Countryside Resort..... B1
- Mountain View Resort..... (see 13)
- 13 Paasook..... B1

- 14 Railay Bay Resort & Spa..... C2
- 15 Railay Cabana..... C1
- 16 Railay Phutawan Resort..... C2
- 17 Rapala Rockwood Resort..... C2
- 18 Rayavadee..... C3
- 19 Sand Sea Resort..... C2
- 20 Sunrise Tropical Resort..... C2

🍴 Eating

- 21 Railay Phutawan Resort
Restaurant..... C1

🍷 Drinking

- 22 Chillout Bar..... B1
- Highland Rock Climbing..... (see 8)
- 23 Ya-ya Bar..... C2

📍 Information

- ATM..... (see 7)
- Clinic..... (see 14)
- 24 Phra Nang Tours & Travel..... C2

Railay Bay Resort & Spa

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 7562 2570-2; www.railaybayresort.com; bungalows 3700-17800B; 🍴🍷) The amoeba-shaped blue pool here faces onto the best bit of the beach so you can switch between salt and fresh water. Elegant bungalows with big

windows, white walls and rustic-chic timber terraces run right across the peninsula to Hat Railay East via gorgeously planted grounds. Bungalows on the east side are older, with dark-tinted windows, and are the least expensive.

Sand Sea Resort

(☎0 7562 2608; www.krabisandsea.com; bungalows 1950-5950B; 🍷@🍷) The lowest-priced resort on this beach offers everything from ageing fan-only bungalows to newly remodelled cottages with every amenity. There's a peaceful karst-view, foliage-enclosed pool – if you're able to tear yourself away from that sublime beach out the front, that is.

HOTEL \$\$

HAT RAI LEH EAST**Sunrise Tropical Resort**

(☎0 7562 2599; www.sunrisetropical.com; bungalows incl breakfast 2500-5750B; 🍷@🍷) Bungalows here rival the better ones on Hat Railay West but are priced for Hat Rai Leh East – so we think this is one of the best deals in Railay. Expect hardwood floors, Thai-style furniture, lush bathrooms with bright aqua tiles and private balconies or patios.

HOTEL \$\$

Anyavee

(☎0 7581 9437; www.anyavee.com; bungalows 2800-7000B; 🍷@🍷) A quirky resort but one with more style than most on this beach. Bungalows here have lots of windows, mak-

HOTEL \$\$

ing them bright but not private. The interiors are country chic, with cream-and-beige plaid duvets and plenty of hardwoods.

Rapala Rockwood Resort

(☎08 4191 5326; bungalows 500-750B) Ramshackle bamboo bungalows have verandahs, bathrooms, mosquito nets and fans. The delightful location atop a hill means breezes and views of the sea (and your neighbours). The cushion-lined restaurant here serves Thai and Indian food.

HOTEL \$

RAILAY HIGHLANDS**TOP CHOICE Railay Phutawan Resort**

(☎08 4060 0550, 0 7581 9478; www.phuritvalleyresort.com; bungalows 1140-1940B, r 1640B; 🍷@🍷) The best options here are the super-spacious polished cement bungalows highlighted with creamy yellow walls, big rain-shower bathrooms and all the trimmings of a high-end resort. Tiled rooms in an apartment-style block are a step down in luxury but very comfortable and fan-cooled bungalows with bamboo ceilings are musty but good value.

HOTEL \$\$

WHERE TO STAY IN RAILAY

There are four beaches around Railay or you can choose to stay up on the headland. It's only about a five-minute walk between Hat Rai Leh East, Hat Rai Leh West, Hat Phra Nang and the headlands. Hat Ton Sai is more isolated and to get to the other beaches you'll need to take a long-tail (50B) or hike – it takes about 20 minutes to scramble over the rocks from Hat Railay West.

▶ **Hat Rai Leh East** is the most developed beach. The shallow, muddy bay lined with mangroves is not appetising for swimming, but the beach is lined with hotels and guest houses, and those headlands and limestone cliffs are miraculous.

▶ **Hat Rai Leh West** is a near-flawless white wonder and the best place to swim, join an afternoon pick-up football game or just watch the sun go down. Tastefully designed midrange resorts are sprinkled throughout, and long-tail boats pick up and drop off here to/from nearby Ao Nang.

▶ **Hat Phra Nang** is quite possibly one of the world's most beautiful beaches, with a crescent of pale, golden sand, framed by karst cliffs carved with caves. Those distant limestone islets peeking out of the cerulean sea are Chicken (Ko Hua Khwan) and Poda islands. Rayavadee, the peninsula's most exclusive resort, is the only one on this beach but anyone can drop a beach towel.

▶ **Hat Ton Sai** is the grittier climbers' retreat. The beach here isn't spectacular, but with so many good climbs all around, most people don't mind. Bars and bungalows are nestled in the jungle behind the beach and it's a lively, fun scene.

▶ **The Railay Headlands** catch sea breezes and, since it's the most recent place to be developed, feels like a frontier with plantations, jungle and some very friendly locals. To get here you'll have to walk about 500m from either Hat Rai Leh West or East. From Hat Rai Leh West follow 'Walking Street,' veer left onto a dirt path then follow the signs to Ya-Ya Bar. From Hat Rai Leh East turn right on the cement road accessible via the beachside Diamond Cave Restaurant.

Railay Cabana

GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎0 7562 1733, 08 4057 7167; bungalows 350-600B) Superbly located high in the hills in a bowl of karst cliffs, this is your hippie tropical mountain hideaway. Simple, clean thatched-bamboo bungalows are surrounded by mango, mangosteen, banana and guava groves. The only sounds are birds chirping and children laughing.

**Railay Phutawan****Resort Restaurant**

THAI, WESTERN
(meals 80-180B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Amid dense jungle and karst cliffs, it's best to dine here during the day to appreciate the view. Try to get one of the intimate shaded booths at the jungle's edge.

HAT PHRA NANG

หาดถ้ำพระนาง

**Rayavadee**

HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎0 7562 0740-3; www.rayavadee.com; pavilions 22,300-39,900B, villas 72,000-128,000B; ☹☹☹) This exclusive resort has sprawling banyan-tree- and flower-filled grounds navigated by golf buggies. The two-storey, mushroom-domed pavilions are filled with antique furniture and every mod con - as well as the occasional private jacuzzi, swimming pool or butler service. Two restaurants grace Hat Phra Nang (one is half inside an illuminated cave) and nonguests can stop in for pricey but divine Thai or Mediterranean meals.

HAT TON SAI

หาดต้นไทร

Countryside Resort

HOTEL \$
(☎08 5473 9648; countryside-resort.com; cabins 850B; ☹@☹) This is a UK-owned property with attractive solar-powered cabins. There are high ceilings, lace curtains and ceiling fans. Top-row nests have insane karst views, and you'll love Ewok-faced Ollie, the property mascot.

Paasook

HOTEL \$

(☎08 9645 3013; bungalows 300-800B) Definitely the most stylish budget establishment on Ton Sai: wooden bungalows have elongated floor-to-ceiling windows and concrete floors. The gardens are lush, management is friendly and there's a rustic-chic outdoor restaurant, perfect for steamy evenings.

Mountain View Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 7562 2610-3; bungalows 1300-1900B; ☹) This place is bright, cheery and immaculate with mint-green walls, tiled floors and crisp sheets in lodge-like environs. Some rooms are slightly musty, so sniff around.

**Drinking**

There's a bunch of places on the beaches where you can unwind and get nicely inebriated.

Chillout Bar

BAR \$

(Hat Ton Sai) Right on the beach and with several levels of decks, this is where the bigger name Thai and international bands play when they're in town. At other times, it's the ideal place to lounge with a beer.

Highland Rock Climbing

CAFE \$

(☎08 0693 0374; Railay Headlands) Part climbing school, part cafe, this place is cobbled from driftwood and dangling with orchids. The owner, Chaow, sources his beans from sustainable farms in Chiang Rai, and serves the best coffee on the peninsula.

Ya-ya Bar

BAR \$

(Railay Headlands) The Ya-ya Bar has an awesome setting under a massive climbing wall. Bob Marley looms like a patron saint. Mojitos (160B) are poured liberally. There's also a Thai boxing ring with courses on demand offered at 500B per hour.

i Information

There are two ATMs along Hat Rai Leh East. On Hat Ton Sai there is one ATM near the Ton Sai Bay Resort. Several of the bigger resorts can change cash and travellers cheques.

For minor climbing injuries there's a small **clinic** at Railay Bay Resort.

Wi-fi availability will depend on where you stay. If you lack the hardware, try **Phra Nang Tours & Travel** (internet per min 1B) on the east beach.

i Getting There & Around

Long-tail boats to Railay run from Khong Kha pier in Krabi and from the seafronts of Ao Nang and Ao Nam Mao. Boats between Krabi and Hat Rai Leh East leave every 1½ hours from 7.45am to 6pm when they have six to 10 passengers (150B, 45 minutes). Chartering the whole boat costs 1500B.

Boats to Hat Rai Leh West or Hat Ton Sai from Ao Nang cost 80B (15 minutes) from 7.30am to 6pm or 150B at other times; boats don't leave until six to eight people show up. Private charters cost 800B. During exceptionally high seas the boats from Ao Nang and Krabi stop running, but you may still be able to get from Hat Rai Leh East to Ao Nam Mao (100B, 15 minutes), where you can pick up a *sǒng-tǎa-ou* to Krabi or Ao Nang.

From October to May the *Ao Nang Princess* runs from Hat Noppharat Thara National Park headquarters to Ko Phi-Phi with a stop at Hat Rai Leh West. Long-tails run out to meet the boat

at around 9.15am from in front of the Sand Sea Resort in Hat Rai Leh West. The fare to Ko Phi-Phi from Railay is 350B.

Ko Phi-Phi Don

เกาะพีพีดอน

Oh, how beauty can be a burden. Like Marilyn Monroe, Phi-Phi Don's stunning looks have become its own demise. Everyone wants a piece of her. Though not exactly Hollywood, this is Thailand's Shangri-la: a hedonistic paradise where tourists cavort in azure sea and snap pictures of long-tails puttering between craggy cliffs. With its flashy, curvy, blonde beaches and bodacious jungles it's no wonder that Phi-Phi has become the darling of the Andaman coast. And, like any good starlet, this island can party hard all night and still look like a million bucks the next morning. Unfortunately, nothing can withstand this glamorous pace and unless limits are set, Phi-Phi is in for an ecological crash.

Ko Phi-Phi Don is practically two islands joined together by a narrow isthmus flanked by the stunning **Ao Ton Sai** and **Ao Lo Dalam** on either side. Boats dock at the large concrete pier at Ao Ton Sai and a narrow path, crammed full of tour operators, bungalows, restaurants, bars and souvenir shops, stretches east along the beach towards **Hat Hin Khom**. The maze of small streets in the middle of this sandbar is equally packed and is known as **Tonsai Village** (or the Tourist Village). The swimmer-friendly **Hat Yao** (Long Beach) faces south and has some of Phi-Phi Don's best coral. The beautifully languid and long eastern bays of **Hat Laem Thong** and **Ao Lo Bakao** are reserved for several top-end resorts, while the smaller bays of **Hat Phak Nam** and **Hat Rantee** play host to a few simple, low-key bungalow affairs.

Sights & Activities

The strenuous and sweaty climb to Phi-Phi's **viewpoint** is a rewarding short hike. The path up the mountain begins near Spider Monkey and wends its way up a steep crag – most people will need to stop for a short break (don't forget to bring some water), but once you reach the top you'll be treated to postcard-worthy views of the twin bays, soaring karst formations and quiet Ko Phi-Phi Leh off in the distance.

Diving

Crystal-clear Andaman water and abundant marine life make the perfect recipe for top-notch scuba. Popular sights include the **King Cruiser Wreck**, sitting a mere 12m below the surface; **Anemone Reef**, teeming with hard corals and clownfish; **Hin Bida**, a submerged pinnacle attracting turtles and large pelagic fish; and **Ko Bida Nok**, with its signature karst massif luring leopard sharks. Hin Daeng and Hin Muang (p671), about 70km south, are expensive ventures from Ko Phi-Phi – it's cheaper to link up with a dive crew in Ko Lanta.

An Open Water certification course costs around 12,900B, while the standard two-day trips cost from 3200B. Trips out to Hin Daeng/Hin Muang will set you back 5500B. A couple of diving companies:

Adventure Club

DIVING

(Map p664; ☎08 1970 0314; www.phi-phi-adventures.com) Our favourite diving operation on the island runs an excellent assortment of educational, ecofocused diving, hiking and snorkelling tours. You won't mind getting up at 6am for the much-loved shark-watching snorkel trips on which you're guaranteed to cavort with at least one reef shark.

Blue View Divers

DIVING

(Map p663; ☎0 7581 9395; www.blueviewdivers.com) Focuses on community involvement and beach clean-ups (its latest effort cleared up 700 tonnes of rubbish) and is the only shop to offer dives from a long-tail.

Snorkelling

A popular snorkelling destination is **Ko Mai Phai** (Bamboo Island), 5km north of Phi-Phi Don. There's a shallow area here where you may see small sharks. Snorkelling trips cost between 600B and 2400B, depending on whether you travel by long-tail or motorboat. There is also good snorkelling along the eastern coast of **Ko Nok**, near Ao Ton Sai, and along the eastern coast of **Ko Nai**. If you're going on your own, most bungalows and resorts rent out a snorkel, mask and fins for 150B to 200B per day.

Rock Climbing

Yes, there are good limestone cliffs to climb on Ko Phi-Phi, and the views are spectacular. The main climbing areas are **Ton Sai Tower**, at the western edge of Ao Ton Sai, and **Hin Taak**, a short long-tail boat ride around the bay. There are some good climbing shops on the island and most places charge around

Ko Phi-Phi Don



Ko Phi-Phi Don

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 1 Blue View Divers B3
- 2 Hin Taak B4
- 3 Ton Sai Tower B3

Sleeping

- 4 Beach Resort C4
- 5 Holiday Inn Phi Phi Island B1
- 6 Mama Beach Residence B3
- 7 Phi Phi Island Village B2
- 8 Phi-Phi Hill Resort C4

- 9 PP Viewpoint Resort B3
- 10 Rantee Hut C3
- 11 Relax Beach Resort C2
- 12 Toh Ko Beach Resort C3
- 13 Uphill Cottage C3
- 14 Viking Natures Resort C4
- 15 Zeavola A1

Drinking

- 16 Sunflower Bar B3

1000B for a half-day of climbing or 1500B to 2000B for a full day, including instruction and gear. **Spider Monkey** (Map p664; ☎07581 9384; www.spidermonkeyclimbing.com) is run by Soley, one of the most impressive climbers on Phi-Phi. One of the bigger outfits around is **Cat's Climbing Shop** (Map p664; ☎08 1787 5101; www.catclimbingshop.com) in the tourist

village. Cat's gets good reports for safety and service.

Courses

Thai-food fans can take cooking courses at the recommended **Pum Restaurant & Cooking School** (Map p664; ☎08 1521 8904;

Tonsai Village



Tonsai Village

📍 Sights

- 1 Uphill Cottage.....D1

👤 Activities, Courses & Tours

- 2 Adventure ClubB2
 3 Cat's Climbing Shop.....B2
 4 Pum Restaurant & Cooking School.....B2
 5 Spider MonkeyB1

🛏 Sleeping

- 6 Chunut HouseC2
 7 Oasis Guesthouse.....C3
 8 Rock Backpacker.....C1
 9 The White.....B1

🍴 Eating

- 10 Garlic RestaurantB1
 11 Le Grand BleuA2
 12 Local Food Market.....B1
 13 PapayaB2
 14 Unni'sB2

🍷 Drinking

- 15 BreakersB2

🌟 Entertainment

- 16 Reggae BarB2
 17 Slinky BarB1

www.pumthaifoodchain.com; classes 450-4650B) in the tourist village. You'll learn to make some of the excellent dishes that are served in its restaurant and go home with a great cookbook.

👉 Tours

Ever since Leo smoked a spliff in Alex Garland's *The Beach*, Ko Phi-Phi Leh (see p668) has become somewhat of a pilgrimage site. Aside from long-tail boat tours to this island and to Ko Mai Phai (Bamboo Island),

tour agencies can arrange sunset tours to Monkey Bay and the beach at Wang Long (600B). Adventure Club (see p671) is a good choice.

🛏 Sleeping

Finding accommodation on this ever-popular island has never been easy and you can expect serious room shortages at peak holiday times. Masses of touts meet incoming boats and, while often annoying, can make your life easier.

Be sure you lock the door while you sleep and close all the windows when you go out. Break-ins can be a problem.

TONSAI VILLAGE

บ้านคั่นไทร

The flat, hourglass-shaped land between Ao Ton Sai and Ao Lo Dalam is crowded with loads of lodging options.



Mama Beach Residence

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p663; ☎08 8443 1363, 0 7560 1365; www.mama-beach.com; r 2500-3800B; 🏠📺🚿) Popular with French travellers, this is an uncommonly chic block-style hotel right on the best part of Ao Ton Sai beach. Modern-equipped rooms have large white tiled floors, sea-view terraces with relaxing wood deck furniture, and bathrooms with stone sinks and showers bordered with loose seashells. Seaside yoga classes (1¼ hours, 400B) are offered several nights a week at 6pm.

PP Viewpoint Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p663; ☎0 7560 1200, 0 7561 8111; www.phiphiviewpoint.com; bungalows 1700-3500B; 🏠📺) At the far northeastern end of Ao Lo Dalam, wooden bungalows sit high on stilts and enjoy awesome views. There is a small swimming pool that practically drops into the ocean below and a glass-walled tower with 360-degree views where you can pamper yourself with a Thai massage. The Ao Dalam party can be heard up here so bring earplugs.

Chunut House

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(Map p664; ☎0 7560 1227; www.phiphichunuthouse.com; bungalows 2500-3500B; 🏠📺) On a quiet path away from the bazaar of the tourist village, this place is refreshingly tranquil. Spacious wooden and bamboo bungalows are dripping with naturalistic mobiles, planters and crafty touches, and have clean tiled bathrooms.

The White

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(Map p664; ☎0 7560 1300; www.whitephifi.com; r 1500-1800B; 🏠📺🚿) Geared towards the 'flashpacker' crowd, The White has two comfy and surprisingly quiet locations in Tonsai Village – the better being The White 2 that has a few rooftop suites with patios. Squeaky clean rooms, decked out with TVs and safes, are very white (of course) with hip touches such as black-and-white tiled hot-water bathrooms.

Uphill Cottage

GUEST HOUSE \$

(Map p663; ☎0 7560 1124, 08 6553 2316; www.phiphiphillcottage.com; r700-1500B; 🏠📺) Rooms are basic but big and clean, and you can only faintly hear the noise from the tourist-centre party. Aptly named, this place is (surprise!) up on a hill near the viewpoint path. Rooms have terraces with views over town and a hint of the sea.

Oasis Guesthouse

GUEST HOUSE \$

(Map p664; ☎0 7560 1207; r 900B; 🏠) It's worth the walk up the side road east of the village centre to find this cute guest house with wooden shutters and surrounded by trees. The innkeeper can be surly, but freshly painted rooms have sparkling bathrooms. It's first come, first serve only.

Rock Backpacker

HOTEL \$

(Map p664; ☎08 1607 3897; dm 300B, r 400-600B) A proper hostel on the village hill, with clean dorms lined with bunk beds, tiny private rooms, an inviting restaurant-bar and a rugged, graffiti-scrawled exterior.



SLEEPING (OR TRYING TO) ON KO PHI-PHI

Noise pollution on Phi-Phi is bad and centred around central Ao Ton Sai and Ao Dalam – although don't expect an early night on Hat Hin Khom either. At the time of writing bars had a 2am curfew in Ao Dalam and 1.30am in Ton Sai – that are more or less observed – but that doesn't stop inebriated revelers from making plenty of other noises (door slamming seems to be a late-night island pastime).

The most peaceful accommodation can be found on the following:

- » Phi-Phi's east coast
- » The back road that connects the southeast end of Ao Ton Sai with Ao Lo Dalam (and passes Chunut House)
- » The hill near the road up to the viewpoint
- » The far western section of Ao Ton Sai
- » Hat Yao

Of course, the best option may be to simply grab a bucket and join the scrum.

HAT HIN KHOM

หาดหินกลม

This area has a few small white-sand beaches in rocky coves that are relatively quiet. It's about a 15-minute jungle walk from both Hat Yao and the Ao Ton Sai bustle.

Viking Natures Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p663; ☎08 3649 9492; www.vikingnaturesresort.com; bungalows 1000-6500B; 🏠) OK it's funky (in all senses of the word), but the wood, thatch and bamboo bungalows here are dreamily creative and stylish with lots of driftwood, shell mobiles and hammock-decked lounging spaces with outrageous views of Ko Phi-Phi Leh. All bungalows have mosquito nets and balconies, but the cheaper rooms don't have their own bathrooms.

HAT YAO

หาดยาว

You can either walk here in about 30 minutes from Ton Sai via Hat Him Khom or take a long-tail (100B to 150B) from Ton Sai pier. This long stretch of pure-white beach is perfect for swimming and well worth the walk but don't expect to have it to yourself – it's popular with families and sporty types playing volleyball.

Phi-Phi Hill Resort

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(Map p663; ☎0 7561 8203; www.phiphill.com; bungalows 700-2000B; 🏠🍷) High up in a very quiet plantation of mostly fruit trees, this simple resort spans the island's southern bluff so you can watch the sun rise on one side and set on the other. The best deals are the big, clean wooden fan-cooled cold-water bungalows on the sunset side. It closes from May to October.

Beach Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p663; ☎0 7561 8268; phiphithebeach.com; bungalows 3450-5350B; 🏠🍷) An expanding class act with a tiny pool and chic bar, this place swarms with package tourists looking for (and finding) comfort. The elegant teak, Thai-style bungalows grace a manicured jungle hillside with stunning views of Ko Phi-Phi Leh.

HAT RANTEE & AO TOH KO

Still fairly low-key, this series of small, remote grey-gold beaches has good snorkelling. You can either get here by long-tail from Ao Ton Sai pier (300B – although most resorts provide free pick-up if you reserve and the return trip is 150B) or by making the strenuous 45-minute hike over the viewpoint.

Toh Ko Beach Resort

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(Map p663; ☎08 1537 0528; www.tohkobeachresort.com; bungalows 1000-2800B; 🏠🍷) All alone on white, mellow Ao Toh Ko, there's a summer-camp camaraderie here. Simple, wooden or bamboo fan-cooled bungalows are perched on a hill and have stone baths and mosquito nets.

Rantee Hut

GUEST HOUSE \$

(Map p663; ☎08 9741 4846; bungalows 700-1000B) The basic Rantee Hut stands out for its groovy sea-view restaurant strewn with lounging cushions and seeping mellow reggae tunes.

HAT PHAK NAM & AO LO BAKAO

Hat Phak Nam is a gorgeous white-sand beach is nestled on the same bay as a small fishing hamlet. To get here, either charter a long-tail from Ao Ton Sai for around 500B (150B by shared taxi boat upon your return), or make the very sweaty one-hour hike over the viewpoint.

The fine stretch of palm-backed sand of **Ao Lo Bakao**, ringed by dramatic hills, is one of Phi-Phi's most lovely, with offshore views over aqua bliss to Bamboo and Mosquito Islands. Phi-Phi Island Village arranges transfers for guests but on your own a charter from Ao Ton Sai will cost 800B.

**Relax Beach Resort**

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p663; ☎08 1083 0194, 08 9475 6536; www.phiphirelaxresort.com; bungalows 1400-4400B; 🏠🍷🍷) There are 47 unpretentious but pretty Thai-style bungalows with wood floors, two-tiered terraces with lounging cushions and mosaic bathrooms in the newest nests. All are rimmed by lush jungle – there's a good restaurant and breezy bar, and it's worked by incredibly charming staff who greet and treat you like family.

Phi-Phi Island Village

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p663; ☎0 7636 3700; www.ppisland.com; bungalows 7200-21,500B; 🏠🍷🍷) This place really is a village unto itself: its whopping 100 bungalows take up much of the beachfront with palms swaying between them. Facilities vary from the family-friendly and casual to romantic dining experiences and pampering spa treatments. It adds up to good living with a whiff of old-school luxury if you have the means.

HAT LAEM THONG

หาดแหลมทอง

The beach here is long, white and sandy with a small *chow lair* (sea gypsy) rubbish-strewn settlement at the north end. Despite the upmarket offerings here the beach is really busy and all the hotels are packed together. A long-tail charter from Ao Ton Sai costs 800B. Operators can also arrange transfers.

Holiday Inn Phi-Phi Island

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p663; ☎0 7562 7300; www.phiphi.holidayinn.com; bungalows 8297-10,400B; 🍷🍷🍷) This is your standard Thailand-issue Holiday Inn – comfortable, white-concrete-with-dark-rim-chic and filled with active types milling around the pool. The restaurant has a gorgeous alfresco deck with sea views.

Zeavola

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p663; ☎0 7562 7000; www.zeavola.com; bungalows 9900-26,900B; 🍷🍷🍷) Hibiscus-lined pathways lead to shady teak bungalows with sleek, distinctly Asian indoor-outdoor floorplans. Each comes with glass walls on three sides (with remote-controlled bamboo shutters for privacy), beautiful 1940s fixtures and antique furniture, a patio and impeccable service.

**Eating**

Most of the resorts, hotels and bungalows around the island have their own restaurants. Ao Ton Sai is home to some reasonably priced restaurants but don't expect haute cuisine.

Local Food Market

THAI \$

(Map p664; Ao Ton Sai; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) The cheapest and most authentic eats are at the market. A handful of local stalls huddle on the narrowest sliver of the isthmus and serve up scrumptious *pàt tai*, fried rice, *sôm-dam* (spicy green papaya salad) and smoked catfish.

Le Grand Bleu

FUSION \$\$\$

(Map p664; ☎08 1979 9739; mains 195-695B; ☺lunch & dinner) This place serves Thai-Euro fusion set in a charming wooden house just off the main pier. It serves French and Aussie wines, and you can get your duck wok-fried with basil or oven-roasted and caramelised with mango.

Unni's

WESTERN \$\$

(Map p664; mains around 120B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Come here for lunch to dine on homemade bagels topped with everything

from smoked salmon to meatballs. There are also massive salads, Mexican food, tapas, cocktails and more.

Garlic Restaurant

THAI \$

(Map p664; ☎08 3502 1426; dishes 45-95B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) A bright shacklike place that's always packed with happy travellers chowing terrific, not-too-spicy Thai food.

Papaya

THAI \$

(Map p664; ☎08 7280 1719; Ton Sai Village; dishes 80-300B) The food here is cheap, tasty and spicy. You'll get some real-deal Thai food served in heaping portions. It has basil and chilli, all the curries and *dôm yam*, too.

**Drinking & Entertainment**

A rowdy nightlife saturates Phi-Phi. Buckets of cheap whiskey and Red Bull, and sticky-sweet cocktails make this the domain for spring-break wannabes and really bad hangovers. The truth is if you're nesting within earshot of the wild happenings you may as well enjoy the chaos.

**Sunflower Bar**

BAR

(Map p663; Ao Lo Dalam) Poetically ramshackle, this driftwood gem is still the chilliest bar in Phi-Phi. Destroyed in the tsunami, the owner rebuilt it with reclaimed wood. The long-tail booths are named for the four loved ones he lost in the flood.

Reggae Bar

BAR

(Map p664; Tourist Village) You haven't experienced Phi-Phi's nightlife until you've watched tourists beat the crap out of each other in this rowdy bar's Thai-boxing ring. Both contestants get a free bucket to ease the pain.

Slinky Bar

CLUB

(Map p664; Ao Lo Dalam) This was the beach dance floor of the moment when we visited. Expect the standard fire show, buckets of candy juice and throngs of folk mingling, flirting and flailing to throbbing bass on the sand.

Breakers

BAR

(Map p664; Ton Sai Village; ☺11am-2am; 🍷) A sports bar as good for TV football as it is for people-watching and great food. The burgers (200B to 240B) and steaks are awesome and the buffalo-wings starter-plate sampler can feed a handful of pint-swillers.

i Information

ATMs and internet shops (per minute 2B) are spread thickly throughout the tourist village but aren't available on the more remote eastern beaches. Wi-fi is available at **D's Bookshop** (Map p664; ☺7am-10pm) in the heart of the tourist village. It also sells new and used fiction, and pours a decent espresso (50B).

i Getting There & Away

Ko Phi-Phi can be reached from Krabi, Phuket, Ao Nang, Railay and Ko Lanta. Most boats moor at Ao Ton Sai, though a few from Phuket use the isolated northern pier at Laem Thong. The Phuket and Krabi boats operate year-round, while the Ko Lanta and Ao Nang boats only run in the October to April high season.

Boats depart from Krabi for Ko Phi-Phi (300B, 1½ hours) at 9am and 3.30pm, while from Ao Nang (350B, 1½ hours) there's one boat at 3.30pm each day. From Phuket, boats leave at 9am, 2.30pm and 3pm and return from Ko Phi-Phi at 9am, 1.30pm and 3pm (400B, 1¼ to two hours). Boats to Ko Lanta leave Phi-Phi at 11.30am and 2pm and return from Ko Lanta at 8am and 1pm (300B, 1½ hours). For Railay (350B, 1¼ hours), take the Ao Nang-bound ferry.

i Getting Around

There are no roads on Phi-Phi Don so transport on the island is mostly by foot, although long-tails can be chartered at Ao Ton Sai for short hops around Ko Phi-Phi Don and Ko Phi-Phi Leh.

Long-tails leave from the Ao Ton Sai pier to Hat Yao (100B to 150B), Laem Thong (800B), Hat Rantee (500B) and Viking Cave (on Ko Phi-Phi Leh; 500B). Chartering speedboats for six hours costs around 6500B, while chartering a long-tail boat costs 1200B for three hours or 2500B for the whole day.

Ko Phi-Phi Leh

เกาะพีพีเล

Rugged Phi-Phi Leh is the smaller of the two Phi-Phi islands and is protected on all sides by soaring cliffs. Coral reefs crawling with marine life lie beneath the crystal-clear waters and are hugely popular with day-tripping snorkellers. Two gorgeous lagoons await in the island's interior – **Pilah** on the east coast and **Ao Maya** on the west coast. In 1999 Ao Maya was controversially (the film crew reportedly trashed it) used as the setting for the filming of *The Beach*, based on the popular novel by Alex Garland.

At the northeastern tip of the island, **Viking Cave** (Tham Phaya Naak) is a big collection point for swifts' nests. Nimble col-

lectors scamper up bamboo scaffolding to gather the nests. Before ascending, they pray and make offerings of tobacco, incense and liquor to the cavern spirits. This cave gets its misleading moniker from 400-year-old graffiti left by Chinese fishermen.

There are no hotels on Phi-Phi Leh and most people come here on one of the ludicrously popular day trips out of Phi-Phi Don. Tours last about half a day and include snorkelling stops at various points around the island, with detours to Viking Cave and Ao Maya. Long-tail trips cost 800B; by motorboat you'll pay around 2400B. Expect to pay a 400B national-park day-use fee upon landing.

It is possible to camp on Phi-Phi Leh through **Maya Bay Camping** (☎08 6944 1623; www.mayabaycamping.com; per person 2100B). It offers action-packed overnight trips that include kayaking, snorkelling, lunch, dinner, and sleeping bags under the stars.

Ko Jum & Ko Si Boya

เกาะจัม (ปู) เกาะศรีบอยา

Like Lanta's two baby brothers, Ko Jum (the northern hilly part is called Ko Pu) and Ko Si Boya eagerly wait for tourists to come and play on their streamers of white sand. The islands share a relaxed ambience where travellers can wander around friendly Muslim fishing villages or fill up their vacation days with afternoons of blissful nothingness.

Sleeping & Eating

Limited transport forces most resorts to close between June and October. Most accommodation options have on-site restaurants.



Koh Jum Beach Villas

VILLAS \$\$\$

(☎08 6184 0505; www.kohjumbeachvillas.com; Hat Yao; villas 6000-16,000B; 🍷🍴) Spacious wooden homes with plenty of lush decks with cushioned seating are spread along a luscious nub of Hat Yao. Houses are privately owned and rented out by the night and the community is devoted to keeping the place as environmentally and socially responsible as possible.

Oon Lee Bungalows

GUEST HOUSE \$-\$\$

(☎08 7200 8053; www.koh-jum-resort.com; bungalows 500-3800B) This Crusoe-chic, Thai-French family-run resort is nestled on a deserted white beach on the Ko Pu part of Ko Jum. Wooden stilted bungalows are in

a shady garden and plenty of activities, including some of the island's best hiking, are on offer. The fusion restaurant here is reason enough for a visit.

Woodland Lodge

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎08 1893 5330; www.woodland-koh-jum.com; Hat Yao; bungalows 800-1000B) This place has tasteful, clean huts with shiny, polished wood floors and verandahs. The exceptionally friendly British-Thai owners can organise boat trips and fishing and have an excellent, sociable restaurant.

Siboya Resort

HOTEL \$

(☎0 7561 8026, 08 1979 3344; www.siboyabungalows.com; bungalows 200-1200B; @☎) OK, Ko Siboya's beach isn't spectacular. But the mangrove setting is wild and full of life, and the wood bungalows are large and tasteful. No wonder ever-smiling, secretive, European and Canadian 50-somethings flock here like it's the menopausal version of Alex Garland's *The Beach*.

Getting There & Away

From December to April, boats between Krabi and Ko Lanta can drop you at Ko Jum (400B, one hour). In November and May, only the early-morning boat will make the stop. Ko Si Boya can also be accessed by a 3pm boat (100B) from Ban Laem Kruat, a village about 30km southeast of Krabi, at the end of Rte 4036. Boats to Ko Si Boya leave from Laem Hin (50B), north of Ban Laem Kruat throughout the day.

Ko Lanta

เกาะลันตา

POP 20,000

Long and thin, and covered in bleach-blonde tresses, Ko Lanta is Krabi's sexy beach babe. The largest of the 50-plus islands in the local archipelago, this relaxing paradise effortlessly caters to all budget types with its west-coast parade of peach sand – each beach better than the next. The northern beaches are busy but fun and things get more and more mellow as you head southbound.

Ko Lanta is relatively flat compared to the karst formations of its neighbours, so the island can be easily explored by motorbike (bicycles involve long distances and high temperatures). A quick trip around reveals a colourful crucible of cultures – fried-chicken stalls sit below slender minarets, creaking *chow lair* villages dangle off the island's side, and small Thai wát hide within green-brown tangles of curling mangroves.

Ko Lanta is technically called Ko Lanta Yai, the largest of 52 islands in an archipelago protected by the Ko Lanta Marine National Park. Almost all boats pull into Ban Sala Dan, a dusty two-street town at the northern tip of the island.

Sights

Ban Ko Lanta (Old Town)

TOWN

Halfway down the eastern coast, **Ban Ko Lanta** (Lanta Old Town) was the original port and commercial centre for the island, and provided a safe harbour for Arabic and Chinese trading vessels sailing between Phuket, Penang and Singapore.

Some of the gracious and well-kept wooden stilt houses and shopfronts here are more than 100 years old. Pier restaurants offer up fresh catch and have views over the sea. There's a small afternoon market on Sunday, and if you're looking for sturdy, attractive handmade leather goods, stop by **Lanta Leather** (☎08 5046 6410; ☺8am-8pm); for quality hammocks don't miss **Hammock House** (☎0 4847 2012; www.jumbohammock.com; ☺10am-5pm) where you can also pick up its fabulous *Lanta Biker's Map* full of off-the-beaten-path recommendations.

If you crave information on culture, head south and stop by the **Chao Leh Museum** (Ban Sanghka-U), where you'll find a complex of traditionally lashed bamboo homes, engaging oil canvases and exhibits detailing the *chow lair*'s myths, music and ceremonies. To find the museum look for the houseboat jutting from the hillside across the road from the sea.

Ko Lanta Marine National Park

NATIONAL PARK

(อุทยานแห่งชาติเกาะลันตา; adult/child 400/200B) Established in 1990, this marine national park protects 15 islands in the Ko Lanta group, including the southern tip of Ko Lanta Yai. The park is increasingly threatened by the runaway development on the western coast of Ko Lanta Yai. The other islands in the group have fared slightly better – **Ko Rok Nai** is still very beautiful, with a crescent-shaped bay backed by cliffs, fine coral reefs and a sparkling white-sand beach. Camping is permitted on Ko Rok Nok and nearby **Ko Haa**, with permission from the national-park headquarters. On the eastern side of Ko Lanta Yai, **Ko Talabeng** has some dramatic limestone caves that you can visit on sea-kayaking tours. The national-park fee applies if you visit any of these islands.

Ko Lanta



Ko Lanta

Sights

- 1 Chao Leh Museum..... C6
- 2 Ko Lanta Marine National
Park Headquarters..... C7
- Liquid Lense (see 9)
- 3 Tham Khao Mai Kao B5
- 4 Tham Seua..... B6

Activities, Courses & Tours

- Blue Lanta Divers..... (see 34)
- 5 Dive & Relax..... A4
- Lanta Divers..... (see 34)
- 6 Scubafish..... B6
- Scubafish..... (see 9)
- 7 Time for Lime..... A3

Sleeping

- 8 Andalanta Resort..... C7
- 9 Baan Laanta Resort & Spa..... B6
- 10 Bee Bee Bungalows..... A5
- 11 Costa Lanta A2
- 12 Hutye Boat..... A4
- 13 Kantiang Bay View Resort..... B6
- 14 La Laanta C7
- 15 Lanta Darawadee..... B5
- 16 Mango House C5
- 17 Maya Beach Resort..... A2

- 18 Phra Nang Lanta..... B6
- 19 Relax Bay..... A4
- 20 Sanctuary..... A4
- 21 Somewhere Else..... A4
- 22 Sri Lanta B6
- 23 Sriraya..... C5

Eating

- 24 Beautiful Restaurant..... C5
- 25 Lanta Seafood..... A2
- 26 Red Snapper A4
- 27 Saturday Market..... B5
- 28 Sunday Day Market..... A2
- 29 Sunday Evening/Monday
Morning Market..... C5
- 30 Tuesday/Wednesday Market..... B5

Drinking

- 31 Hat Phra Ae Bars..... B4

Shopping

- 32 Hammock House..... C5
- 33 Lanta Leather..... C5

Transport

- 34 Passenger Jetty..... B2

The **national-park headquarters** is at Laem Tanod, on the southern tip of Ko Lanta Yai, reached by a steep and corrugated 7km dirt track from Hat Nui; túk-túk can take you there. There are some basic hiking trails and a **scenic lighthouse**, and you can hire long-tails here for island tours during the low season.

Tham Khao Maikao

(ถ้ำหินงอกหินย้อย) Monsoon rains – pounding away at limestone cracks and crevices for millions of years – have created this complex of forest caverns and tunnels. There are chambers as large as cathedrals, dripping with stalactites and stalagmites, and tiny passages that you have to squeeze through on hands and knees. There's even a subterranean pool you can take a chilly swim in. Sensible shoes are essential and getting totally covered in mud is almost guaranteed.

Tham Khao Maikao is reached via a guided trek through the jungle. A local family runs treks to the caves (with torches) for around 200B. The best way to get here is by

rented motorcycle, or most resorts can arrange transport.

Close by, but reached by a separate track from the dirt road leading to the marine national park headquarters, **Tham Seua** (Tiger Cave) also has interesting tunnels to explore; elephant treks run up here from Hat Nui.



Activities

Diving & Snorkelling

Some of Thailand's top spots are within arm's reach of Ko Lanta. The best diving can be found at the undersea pinnacles called **Hin Muang** and **Hin Daeng**, about 45 minutes away by speedboat. These world-class dive sites have lone coral outcrops in the middle of the sea, and act as important feeding stations for large pelagic fish such as sharks, tuna and occasionally whale sharks and manta rays. Hin Daeng is considered by many to be Thailand's second-best dive site after Richelieu Rock, near the Burmese border (p662). The sites around **Ko Haa** have consistently good visibility, with depths of 18m to 34m, plenty of marine life and a

cave known as 'the Cathedral'. There are also trips to the King Cruiser Wreck, Anemone Reef and Ko Phi-Phi.

Trips out to Hin Daeng/Hin Muang cost around 5000B to 6000B, while trips to Ko Haa tend to be around 3500B to 4500B. PADI Open Water courses will set you back around 14,000B to 17,000B.

Numerous tour agencies in the main tourist areas can organise snorkelling trips out to Ko Rok Nok, Ko Phi-Phi and other nearby islands.

Scubafish

DIVING

(☎ 0 7566 5095; www.scuba-fish.com) One of the best dive operations on the island is located at Baan Laanta Resort (p674) on Ao Kantiang; there's also a small second office at the Narima resort. Unlike some of the large and impersonal operators based in Ban Sala Dan, Scubafish runs personal and personable programs tailored to one's needs, including the Liquid Lense underwater photography program. The three-day dive packages (9975B) are quite popular.

Other reliable dive companies include the following:

Blue Planet Divers

DIVING

(☎ 0 7566 2724; www.blueplanetdivers.net; Ban Sala Dan) The only school that specialises in free diving instruction.

Lanta Diver

DIVING

(☎ 0 7568 4208; www.lantadiver.com; Ban Sala Dan)

Dive & Relax

DIVING

(☎ 08 4842 2191; www.diveandrelax.com; Hat Phra Ae) In the Lanta Castaway Beach Resort.

Courses

Time for Lime

COOKING

(☎ 0 7568 4590; www.timeforlime.net) On Hat Khlong Dao, this place has a huge, professional kitchen with plenty of room to run amok. It offers cooking courses with a slightly more exciting selection of dishes than most cookery schools in Thailand; five-hour courses cost 1800B with substantial discounts if you take more than one class. Profits from the school help finance Lanta Animal Welfare (see p673).

Sleeping

Ko Lanta is home to many long stretches of beach packed with accommodation. Some resorts close down for the May-to-October low season, others drop their rates by 50%

or more. Resorts usually have their own restaurants and tour-booking facilities that can arrange island snorkelling, massages, tours and motorcycle rental.

HAT KHLONG DAO

หาดคลองดาว

This is an outstanding 2km stretch of white sand with no rocks – perfect for swimming. Unfortunately garbage does accumulate when the tides shift. Locals say it comes from Phi-Phi. And they say it disdainfully.

Costa Lanta

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 7566 8168; www.costalanta.com; r from 6200B; ☼@☼☼) Here are incredibly Zen abodes nestled in a coconut-palm garden laced with tidal canals at the north end of Hat Khlong Dao. Everything from the floors to the walls and the washbasins is polished concrete and the barn doors of each cabana open on two sides to maximise air flow. The restaurant is stunning, as is the black spill-over pool on the edge of the sand. Discounts are available if booked through its website. The low-season rates are a steal.

Maya Beach Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 7568 4267; mayalanta.com; r 4300B; ☼@☼☼) Ignore the Best Western affiliation if you can, because this place has attractive, large, Ikea-chic rooms on two floors. There are louvred railings on the terrace, Buddhist shrines on the sand and a pool that blends with the nearby sea.

HAT PHRA AE

หาดพระเเ

The beach at Hat Phra Ae (Long Beach) is only mediocre, but the ambience is lively. A large travellers' village has set up camp and there are loads of *fa-ràng*-oriented restaurants, beach bars, internet cafes and tour offices.

Relax Bay

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 7568 4194; www.relaxbay.com; bungalows 1200-2500B; ☼☼) This gorgeous French-run place is spread out over a tree-covered headland near a small beach. Its wooden bungalows sit on stilts with large decks, or for a more unique experience sleep in a sea-view luxury tent perched over the rocks on a wooden platform.

Sanctuary

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 08 1891 3055; sanctuary_93@yahoo.com; bungalows 600-1200B) The original Phra Ae resort is still a delightful place to stay. There are artistically designed wood-and-thatch bungalows with lots of grass and a hippie-

JUNIE KOVACS & LANTA ANIMAL WELFARE

Founder: Lanta Animal Welfare, which rescues animals, organises sterilisation and vaccination campaigns, and offers local sensibility and education.

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY STRAYS?

Many guest houses get puppies or kittens for the tourist season because the guests like them. Once the season is over the animals get abandoned on backroads.

HOW TO HELP.

Volunteers are needed short or long term to walk dogs, help with fundraising campaigns, helping out volunteer vets, catching strays and so on. If you fall in love with an animal we can help with the paperwork to bring it home with you! Soi Dog (see p625) on Phuket is another great place where you can help and every little bit counts. Donations are also greatly appreciated since we get no help from the government.

As told to Celeste Brash.

ish atmosphere that's low-key and friendly. The restaurant offers Indian and vegetarian eats and the Thai usuals. It also holds yoga classes.

Hutyee Boat

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎08 3633 9723; bungalows 350-400B) A hidden hippie paradise of big, solid bungalows with tiled bathrooms and minifridges in a forest of palms and bamboo. It's behind Nautalus Bungalows.

Somewhere Else

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎08 1536 0858; bungalows 400-1000B; ☎) Big octagonal bamboo huts grace a shady lawn right on a very social and lounge-worthy stretch of beach.

HAT KHLONG KHONG

หาดคลองโขง

This is thatched-roof, Rasta-bar bliss with plenty of beach -volleyball games, moon parties and the occasional well-advertised mushroom shake (imbibe at own risk). Still, it's all pretty low-key and all ages are present. The beach goes on forever in either direction.



Bee Bee Bungalows

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎08 1537 9932; www.beebeebungalows; bungalows 400-800B; ☎@☎) One of the best budget spots on the island, Bee Bee's superfriendly staff care for a dozen creative bamboo cabins - every one is unique and a few are up on stilts in the trees. The on-site restaurant has a library of tattered paperbacks to keep you busy while you wait for your delicious Thai staples.

Lanta Darawadee

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 7566 7094; www.lantadarawadee.com; bungalows incl breakfast 1000-1600B; ☎☎☎) If you're

digging the Hat Khlong Khong scene but can't live without air-con, here's a great-value option right on the beach. It's bland but the new, clean rooms have good beds, terraces, minifridges and TVs. The water is solar heated and rates include breakfast.

HAT KHLONG NIN

หาดคลองนิน

After Hat Khlong Tob, the main road heading south forks: head left for the inland road which runs to the east coast, go right and the country road hugs the coastline for 14km to the tip of Ko Lanta. The first beach here is lovely, white Hat Khlong Nin. There are lots of small, inexpensive guest houses at the north end of the beach that are usually attached to restaurants - it's easy to get dropped off here then shop around for a budget place to stay.



Sri Lanta

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 7566 2688; www.srilanta.com; cottages from 3000B; ☎@☎) At the southern end of the beach, this decadent resort consists of minimalist, naturalistic wooden villas in wild gardens stretching from the beach to a landscaped jungle hillside. There's a very stylish beachside area with a restaurant, infinity pool and private drapery-swathed massage pavilions. The resort strives for low environmental impact by using biodegradable products and minimising energy use and waste.

AO KANTIANG

อำเภอกันตัง

A superb sweep of sand backed by mountains is also its own self-contained little village complete with minimarts, internet cafes, motorbike rental and restaurants. Much of the beach here is undeveloped although

there are lots of sailboats and motorboats anchored in the bay. It's far from everything; if you land here don't expect to move much.



Phra Nang Lanta

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 7566 5025; lanta@vacation.village.co.th; studios 6000B; 🍷🍷🍷) The gorgeous Mexican-style adobe concrete studios are huge and straight off the pages of an architectural mag. Interiors are decorated with clean lines, hardwoods and whites accented with bright colours. Outside, flowers and foliage climb over bamboo lattice sunshades and the pool and lush restaurant-bar look over the beautiful beach.

Baan Laanta Resort & Spa

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 7566 5091; www.baanlaanta.com; bungalows from 3500B; 🍷🍷🍷) Landscaped grounds wind around stylish wooden bungalows and a pool that drops off to a stretch of white sandy beach. The room's centrepiece is a futon-style bed on a raised wooden platform under a gauzy veil of mosquito netting.

Kantiang Bay View Resort

HOTEL \$-\$\$

(☎ 7566 5049; kantiang.bay.net; bungalows 500-2000B; 🍷🍷) Choose between the cheap, rickety, not-exactly-spotless wooden-and-bamboo bungalows or the more expensive, candy-coloured tiled rooms with minifridge. The bamboo-clad restaurant serves decent, *fa-rang*-friendly Thai dishes.

AO KHLONG JAAK & LAEM TANOD

อ่าวคลองจากแหลมตโนด

The splendid beach at Ao Khlong Jaak is named after the inland waterfall.



La Laanta

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 7566 5066; www.lalaanta.com; bungalows 2800-6200B; 🍷🍷🍷🍷) This is barefoot elegance at its finest. Owned and operated by a young, hip, English-speaking Thai-Vietnamese couple, this is the grooviest spot on the entire island. Thatched bungalows have polished-concrete floors, platform beds, floral-design motifs and decks overlooking a pitch of sand, which blends into a rocky fishermen's beach. Set down a rutted dirt road, it's also the closest resort to the marine national park.

Andalanta Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 7566 5018; www.andalanta.com; bungalows 2600-6900B; 🍷🍷🍷) You'll find beach-style, modern air-conditioned bungalows (some with a loft) and simple fan-cooled ones; all face the sea. The garden is a delight, there's

an ambient restaurant and the waterfall is just a 30- to 40-minute walk away.

Mu Ko Lanta Marine National Park Headquarters

CAMPING GROUND \$

(☎ in Bangkok 0 2561 4292; camping with own tent per person 30B, with tent hire 300-400B) The secluded jungle grounds of the national-park headquarters are a wonderfully serene and wild place to camp. There are toilets and running water, but you should bring your own food. You can also get permission for camping on Ko Rok or Ko Haa here. National-park entry fees apply (see p669). The road to the marine national-park headquarters fords the *klong* (canal), which can get quite deep in the wet season.

BAN KO LANTA

บ้านเกาะลันตา

There are a handful of inns open for business on Lanta's oft-ignored, wonderfully dated and incredibly rich Old Town.

Mango House

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎ 7569 7181; www.mangohouses.com; suites 2000-2500B; ☺ Oct-April) These 100-year-old Chinese teak pole houses and former opium den are stilted over the harbour. The original time-worn wood floors are still intact, ceilings soar and the house-sized rooms are decked out with satellite TVs, DVD players and ceiling fans. The restaurant is just as sea-shanty-chic and serves Thai and Western dishes with panache.

Sriraya

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 7569 7045; r with shared bathrooms 500B) Sleep in a simple but beautifully restored, thick-beamed Chinese shophouse. Walls are black and the sheets are white. Angle for the street-front balcony room that overlooks the old town's ambient centre.



Eating

Ban Sala Dan has plenty of restaurants and minimarts. Don't miss the seafood restaurants along the northern edge of the village. With tables on verandahs over water, they offer fresh seafood sold by weight (which includes cooking costs).

Beautiful Restaurant

SEAFOOD \$\$

(☎ 7569 7062; Ban Ko Lanta; mains 100-200B) This is the best of the Old Town's seafood houses. Tables are scattered on four piers that extend into the sea. The fish is fresh and exquisitely prepared.

Lanta Seafood

SEAFOOD \$\$

(☎0 7566 8411; Ban Sala Dan) The best option of the seafood-by-weight options. Order the *Blah tørt kà mìn* – it's white snapper rubbed with fresh, hand-ground turmeric and garlic, then deep fried.

Red Snapper

FUSION \$\$

(☎0 7885 6965; tapas/mains from 70/235B; ☺dinner) A Dutch-run tapas restaurant on the roadside in Ao Phra Ae, the garden setting is romantic and the duck breast with shitake mushrooms comes highly recommended.

**Drinking & Entertainment**

If you're looking for roaring discotheques, pick another island. If you want a more low-key bar scene with music wafting well into the night, then head to Ao Phra Ae, where you'll find a cluster of fun spots such as **Opi-um**, **Earth Bar** and **Reggae House**.

**Information**

Ban Sala Dan village has a number of internet cafes (1B per minute), travel agencies, dive shops and motorcycle rental joints. There are five 7-Elevens spread along the island's west coast – each one has an ATM.

Ko Lanta Hospital (☎0 7569 7085) It's 1km south of Ban Ko Lanta (Old Town).

Police station (☎0 7569 7017) North of Ban Ko Lanta.

**Getting There & Away**

Most people come to Ko Lanta by boat or air-conditioned minivan. If you're coming under your own steam, you'll need to use the frequent **vehicle ferries** (motorcycle 20B, car/4WD 75/150B; ☺7am-8pm) between Ban Hua Hin and Ban Khlong Mak (Ko Lanta Noi) and on to Ko Lanta Yai.

Boat

There are two piers at Ban Sala Dan. The passenger jetty is about 300m from the main strip of shops; vehicle ferries leave from a second jetty that's several kilometres further east.

There is one passenger ferry connecting Krabi's Khlong Chilat pier with Ko Lanta departing from Ko Lanta at 8am (400B, two hours) and returning from Krabi at 11am. It also stops at Ko Jum (for the full 400B fare).

Boats between Ko Lanta and Ko Phi-Phi technically run year-round, although service can peter out in the low season if there are too few passengers. Ferries usually leave Ko Lanta at 8am and 1pm (300B, 1½ hours); in the opposite direction boats leave Ko Phi-Phi at 11.30am and 2pm. From here you can transfer to ferries to Phuket.

WORTH A TRIP**KO LANTA'S MARKETS**

- » Sunday day market at Ban Sala Dan
- » Sunday evening/Monday morning market in Old Town
- » Tuesday/Wednesday market in Ban Je Li
- » Saturday market near Ban Khlong Nin

From around 21 October to May, you can join a four-island snorkelling tour to the Trang Islands and hop off with your bags at any destination you choose (350B) – bring your swimsuit. Boats stop on Ko Ngai (two hours), Ko Muk (three hours) and Ko Kradan (four hours).

There are also several speedboats that go from Ko Lanta to the Trang islands, the fastest being the **Satun-Pak Bara Speedboat Club** (☎0 7475 0389, 08 2433 0114; www.tarutaoli peisland.com) that stops in Ko Ngai (650B, 30 minutes), Ko Muk (900B, one hour) and Ko Bulon Leh (1600B, two hours) then continues on to Ko Lipe (1900B, three hours).

Tigerline (☎08 1092 8800; www.tigerline travel.com), a high-speed ferry, runs between Ban Sala Dan on Ko Lanta and Ko Lipe (1400B, four hours), stopping at Ko Ngai (500B, 30 minutes), Ko Kradan (750B, 1½ hours) and Ko Muk (750B, two hours). The service leaves at 1pm. The next day the same boat makes the return trip from Ko Lipe departing at 9am and arriving in Ban Sala Dan after noon.

Minivan

Minivans run year-round and are your best option from the mainland. Daily minivans to Krabi airport (280B, 1½ hours) and Krabi Town (250B, 1½ hours) leave hourly between 7am and 3.30pm. From Krabi, minivans depart hourly from 8am till 4pm.

Minivans to Phuket (350B, four hours) leave Ko Lanta every two hours or so, but are more frequent in the high season. There are also several daily air-conditioned minivans to Trang (250B, 2½ hours) and less frequent services to Khao Lak (650B, six hours), Ko Samui (650B including boat ticket) and other popular destinations.

Getting Around

Most resorts send vehicles to meet the ferries – a free ride to your resort. In the opposite direction expect to pay 80B to 250B. Alternatively, you can take a motorcycle taxi from opposite the 7-Eleven in Ban Sala Dan; fares vary from 50B to 250B depending on distance.

Motorcycles (250B per day) can be rented all over the island. Unfortunately, very few places provide helmets and none provide insurance, so take extra care on the bumpy roads.

Several places rent out small 4WDs for around 1600B per day, including insurance.

TRANG PROVINCE

With its own set of jagged jungly karst formations and lonely islets in the crystalline sea, Trang feels like 'Krabi Lite'. Travellers are getting wise to the province's charms, and the region is experiencing a tourist boom like neighbouring Krabi did several years back. Trang's shining stars are the constellation of fabled offshore isles known simply as the Trang Islands.

Trang Town

POP 64,700

ตรัง

Most visitors to Trang are in transit to nearby islands, but if you're an aficionado of culture, Thai food or markets, plan to stay a day or more. It's an easy-to-manage town where you can get lost in wet markets by day and hawker markets and late-night Chinese coffee shops by night; at nearly any time of the year, there's likely to be some minor festival that oozes local colour.

Most of the tourist facilities lie along the main drag, Th Praram VI, between the clock tower and the train station.

Sights

Trang is more of a business centre than a tourist town. **Wat Tantaiyaphirom** (Th Tha Klang) has a huge white *chedi* (stupa) enshrining a footprint of the Buddha that's mildly interesting. The Chinese **Meunram Temple**, between Soi 1 and Soi 3, sometimes sponsors performances of southern Thai shadow theatre. It's also worth strolling around the large **wet and dry markets** on Th Ratchadamnoen and Th Sathani.

Activities & Tours

Tour agencies around the train station and along Th Praram VI offer various tours around Trang Province. **Boat trips** to Hat Chao Mai National Park and the Trang Islands start at 750B plus national-park fees. There are also **sea-kayaking** tours to the gorgeous Tham Chao Mai mangrove forests (650B). **Snorkelling** trips on private

long-tails to Ko Rok (3500B, maximum four people) and trips to local **caves and waterfalls** (1800B, maximum three people) by private car can also be arranged by most agencies.

For a cultural fix you can spend a day **hiking** in the Khao Banthat Mountains to visit villages of the Sa Kai mountain people (2500B, maximum two people).

Sleeping & Eating

Trang is famous for its *mõo yâhng* (crispy barbecued pork) and *râhn go-Bûi* (coffee shops) that serve real filtered coffee. You can find *mõo yâhng* in the mornings at some coffee shops or by weight at the wet market on Th Ratchadamnoen. To really get into the local scene get to a dim-sum depot early in the morning and stay out late at the coffee shops along Th Ratsada.

Sri Trang Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎0 7521 8122; www.sritrang.com; 22-26 Th Praram VI; r 450-690B; 🏠🚰) There is a range of fan-cooled and air-conditioned rooms in this renovated 60-year-old building with high ceilings, a winding wood staircase, groovy paint jobs, and wi-fi throughout. There's also a hang-out-able cafe-bar downstairs.

Rua Rasada Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 7521 4230; www.ruarasadahotel.com; 188 Th Pattalung; r incl breakfast from 2700B; 🏠🚰🚰) Trang's slickest choice is a 10-minute (25B) tûk-tûk ride from the train station. The chic rooms have large tiles, comfortable beds and a dusky blue, dark mauve-and-grey colour scheme. It's a five-minute walk to Robinson's Shopping Mall and Cinema City.

Koh Teng Hotel

HOTEL \$

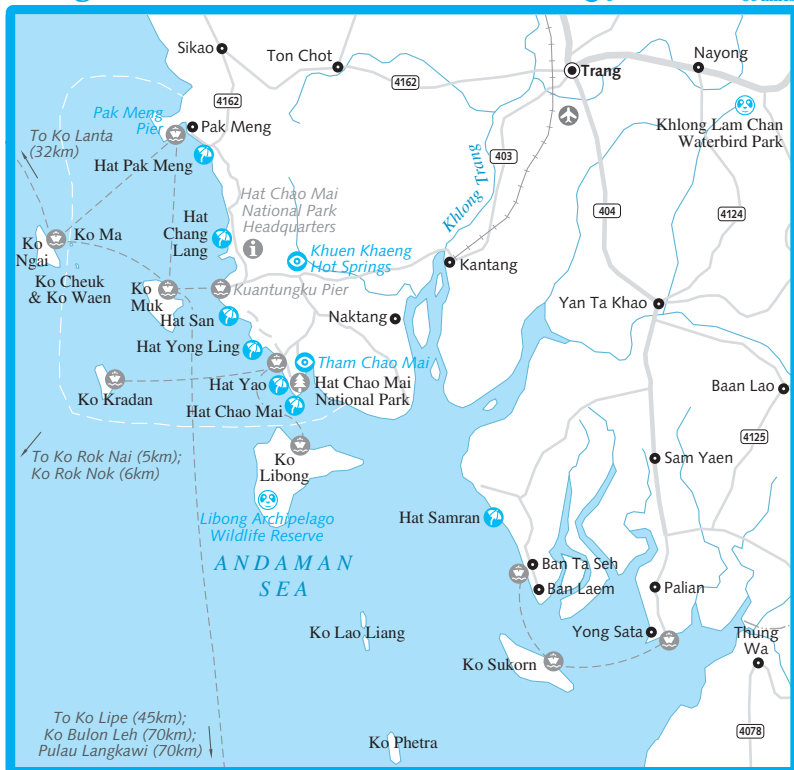
(☎0 7521 8148; 77-79 Th Praram VI; r 180-380B; 🏠) The Koh Teng is the undisputed king of backpacker digs in Trang. If you're feeling optimistic, the huge, windowlit rooms here have an adventuresome kind of shabby charm to them; if not, the grunge factor might get you down.

Night market

MARKET \$

(btwn Th Praram VI & Th Ratchadamnoen; meals around 30B; 🍴dinner) The best night market on the Andaman coast will have you salivating over bubbling curries, fried chicken and fish, *pât tai* and an array of Thai desserts. Go with an empty stomach and a sense of adventure. On Friday and Saturday nights

Trang Province



there's a second night market right in front of the train station.

Asia Ocha

THAI \$

(Th Kantang; meals from 30B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) In business since the mid-1940s, this place serves filtered coffee to an all-Thai clientele who sit at vintage marble tables in this antiquated building. Don't miss the food either – the roast duck is delectable.

i Information

You'll find several internet cafes and various banks with ATMs and foreign-exchange booths on Th Praram VI.

My Friend (☎ 7522 5984; 25/17-20 Th Sathani; per hr 30B) Has the best 24-hour internet cafe in town.

Post office (cnr Th Praram VI & Th Kantang) Also sells CAT cards for international phone calls.

i Getting There & Away

Air

Nok Air (www.nokair.com) and **Orient Thai Airways** (www.orient-thai.com) operate daily flights from Bangkok (Don Muang airport) to Trang (around 1500B one-way).

The airport is 4km south of Trang; minivans meet flights and charge 60B to get to town. In the reverse direction a taxi or tók-túk will cost 80B to 100B.

Bus

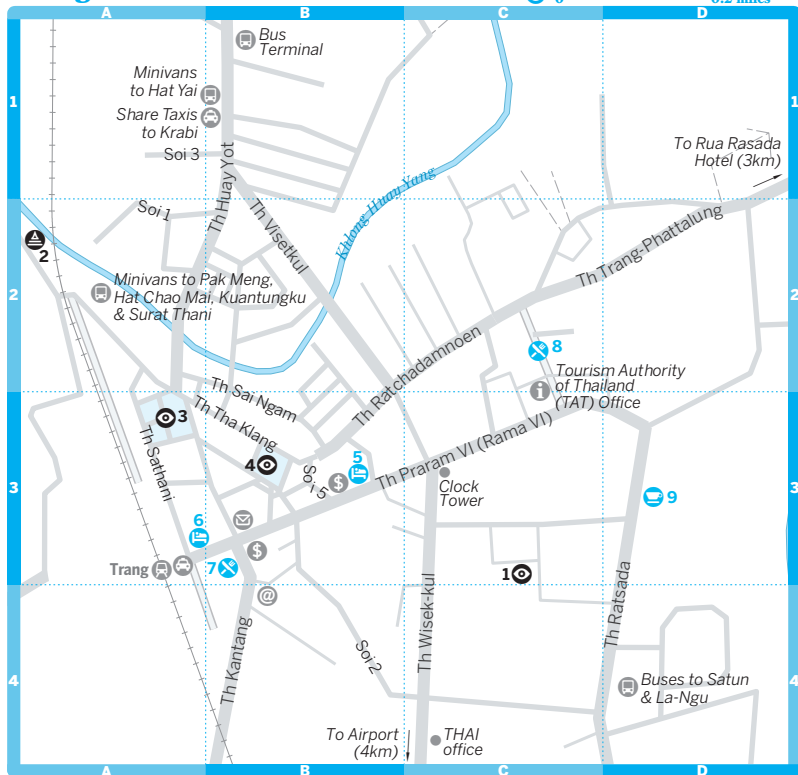
Buses leave from the Trang **bus terminal** (Th Huay Yot). Air-conditioned buses from Trang to Bangkok cost 600B to 680B (12 hours, morning and afternoon). More comfortable are the VIP 24-seater buses that leave at 5pm and 5.30pm (1050B). From Bangkok, VIP/air-conditioned buses leave between 6.30pm and 7pm.

Other services:

Hat Yai (110B, three hours, frequent departures)

Krabi (115B, two hours, frequent departures)

Trang



Phang-Nga (180B, 3½ hours, hourly)

Phuket (240B, five hours, hourly)

Satun (120B, three hours, frequent departures)

Minivan & Share Taxi

Hourly vans heading to Surat Thani (180B, 2½ hours), with connections to Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan, leave from a **depot** (Th Tha Klang) just before Th Tha Klang crosses the railway tracks. Several daily air-conditioned minivans between Trang and Ko Lanta (250B, 2½ hours) leave from the travel agents across from the train station. There are shared taxis to Krabi (180B, two hours) and air-conditioned minivans to Hat Yai (160B, two hours) from offices just west of the Trang bus terminal.

Local transport is mainly by air-conditioned minivan rather than *sǎng-tǎa-ou*. Minivans leave regularly from the depot on Th Tha Klang for Pak Meng (70B, 45 minutes), Hat Chao Mai (80B, one hour) and Kuantungku pier (100B, one hour) for onward boat travel.

Train

Only two trains go all the way from Bangkok to Trang: the express 83 and the rapid 167, which both leave from Bangkok's Hua Lamphong station in the afternoon and arrive in Trang the next morning.

From Trang, trains leave in the early and late afternoon. Fares are around 1480B/831B for a 1st-/2nd-class air-conditioned sleeper and 285B for 3rd class.

i Getting Around

Túk-túk and their drivers mill around near the train station and should charge about 30B for local trips, or 250B per hour. Motorbike taxis charge the same price.

Motorcycles can be rented at travel agencies for about 200B per day. Most agencies can also help you arrange car rental for around 1400B per day.

Trang

📍 Sights

- 1 Meunram TempleC3
- 2 Wat Tantayaphirom.....A2
- 3 Wet & Dry MarketA3
- 4 Wet & Dry MarketB3

🛏 Sleeping

- 5 Ko Teng Hotel.....B3
- 6 Sri Trang Hotel.....A3

🍴 Eating

- 7 Asia Ocha.....B3
- 8 Night Market.....C2

☕ Drinking

- 9 Coffee Shops.....D3

Trang Beaches

Think of limestone karsts rising from steamy palm-studded valleys and swirling seas. Trang's beaches are mostly just jumping-off points to the islands but if you have the time, stop and enjoy the scenery.

HAT PAK MENG & HAT CHANG

LANG

หาดปากเมง/หาดฉาง

Thirty-nine kilometres west of Trang in Sikao District, Hat Pak Meng is the main jumping-off point for Ko Ngai. There's a wild-looking stretch of coastline here, and though the beach is scruffy, the backdrop – jutting limestone karsts on all sides that rival the best of Railay and Phi-Phi – is spectacular. The main pier is at the northern end of the beach and there are several seafood restaurants with deck chairs under casuarinas where Rte 4162 meets the coast.

Tour agencies at the jetty organise one-day boat tours to Ko Muk, Ko Cheuk, Ko Ma and Ko Kradan for 900B to 1000B per person (minimum three people), including lunch and beverages. There are also snorkelling day tours to Ko Ngai (750B) and Ko Rok (1200B to 1400B, plus national-park fees). Mask and snorkel sets and fins can be rented by the pier for 50B each.

Hat Chang Lang is the next beach south from Hat Pak Meng and it continues the casuarina-backed beach motif. At the southern end of Hat Chang Lang, where the beachfront road turns inland, is the headquarters of **Hat Chao Mai National Park** (☎ 07521 3260; adult/child under 14yr 200/100B; ☀6am-6pm).

The 231-sq-km park covers the shoreline from Hat Pak Meng to Laem Chao Mai and encompasses the islands of Ko Muk, Ko Kradan and Ko Cheuk plus a host of small islets. In various parts of the park you may see endangered dugong and rare black-necked storks, as well as more common species such as sea otters, macaques, langurs, wild pigs, pangolins, little herons, Pacific reef egrets, white-bellied sea eagles and monitor lizards.

Tours and long-tail charters from Ko Muk and Ko Kradan can get you to the park.

🛏 Sleeping

Anantara Sikao

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 07520 5888; www.sikao.anantara.com; r 5400-15,400B; 📶🚰🚰) Set on the northern edge of Hat Chang Leng, Anantara's glamorous yet hip vibe has refreshed these old bones (it was once an Amari Resort). Deluxe oceanfront rooms have wood floors, floating desks, flat-screen TVs and amazing views of Pak Meng's signature karsts. There are impressive timber columns and Balinese wood furnishings in the lobby, and the view from its Acqua restaurant is jaw dropping. Take the free shuttle to its guests-only beach club on seductive Ko Kradan.

National Park

Headquarters

CAMPING, CABINS \$

(☎ 07521 3260; www.dnp.go.th/index_eng.asp; camping with own tent free, with tent hire 300B, cabins 800-1000B) Simple cabins sleep up to six people and have fans. You can also camp under the casuarinas. There's a restaurant and a small shop here, too.

📍 Getting There & Away

There are several daily boats from Pak Meng to Ko Ngai (400B) at 10am, returning from Ko Ngai at 9am. A long-tail charter is 1200B.

Regular air-conditioned minivans from Th Kha Klang in Trang run to Hat Pak Meng (80B, 45 minutes) and Chao Mai (100B, one hour). Or you can charter a taxi from Trang for around 800B.

The Chao Mai National Park headquarters is about 1km off this road, down a clearly sign-posted track.

HAT YAO


หาดยาว

A rickety, scruffy fishing hamlet just south of Hat Yong Ling, Hat Yao is sandwiched between the sea and imposing limestone cliffs, and sits at the mouth of a thick mangrove estuary. A rocky headland at the southern end of Hat Yao is pockmarked with caves and there's good snorkelling around the island immediately offshore. The best beach

in the area is the tiny **Hat Apo**, hidden away among the cliffs. **Tham Chao Mai** is a vast cave full of crystal cascades and impressive stalactites and stalagmites that can be explored by a chartered boat.

Just south of the headland is the Yao pier, the main departure point for Ko Libong and the midpoint in the Tigerline chain that connects Ko Lipe to Ko Lanta.

Sleeping & Eating

 **Haad Yao Nature Resort** (☎08 1894 6936; www.trangsea.com; r 500-1200B, bungalows 800B; ♻️🌿), set in the harbour, is run by the Lifelong Learning Foundation, an ecological and educational NGO led by enthusiastic naturalists. This place offers a variety of environment-focused tours in the Hat Yao area. It has large cottages with wide terraces, TV and DVD, simpler motel-style rooms and a few overwater bungalows.

Along the beach, north of the limestone headland, is a collection of wooden seafood restaurants selling cheap Thai meals. There is also a handful of tasty restaurants on the harbour.

Getting There & Around

From here, you can take a regular long-tail boat to Ko Libong (50B, 20 minutes) or charter a long-tail to Ko Libong (800B, 20 minutes) or Ko Muk (1500B, one hour). *Sǎrng-tǎa-ou* to Trang (70B, one hour) leave when full from the pier and meet arriving boats. **Tigerline** (☎08 1092 8800; www.tigerlinetravel.com) is the area's high-speed ferry service, which docks in Hat Yao for lunch on its way between Lanta (750B, 2½ hours) and Lipe (750B, 2½ hours).

Trang Islands

The mythical Trang Islands are the last iteration of the Andaman's iconic limestone peaks before they tumble into the sea like sleeping giants. Shrouded in mystery and steeped in local legend, these stunning island Edens are home to roving *chow lair* and technicolour reefs.

KONGAI เกาะทอง (โท)

The long, blonde, wind-swept beach along the developed east coast of Ko Ngai (often called Ko Hai) extends into blue water with a sandy bottom (perfect for children) that ends at a reef drop-off with excellent snorkelling. Coral and clear waters actually encircle the entire densely forested island – it's a stunning place. With no indigenous

population living here, several spiffy resorts have the whole island to themselves. There are two dive centres (dives from 1500B), mask and snorkel sets and fins can be rented from resorts for 60B each, sea kayaks rent for around 150B per hour, or you can take half-day snorkelling tours of nearby islands (850B per person). Internet at the big resorts is slow and costs 100B to 150B per hour.

Even though it's technically a part of Krabi Province, the island's mainland link is with Pak Meng.

Sleeping

Most places are decidedly midrange and come with restaurants and 24-hour electricity. The boat pier is at Koh Ngai Resort, but if you book ahead resorts on the other beaches will arrange transfers.

Coco Cottages

HOTEL \$\$

(☎08 1693 6457, 08 9724 9225; www.coco-cottage.com; bungalows 1650-4700B; ♻️🌿) As the name suggests, cottages are coconut extravaganzas with thatched roofs, coconut-wood walls and lit with coconut-shell lanterns. Grab a sea-view fan bungalow if you can.

Ko Hai Seafood

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎08 1367 8497; r 1200B; ♻️🌿) These solid bamboo bungalows are easily the most charming budget choice on the beach. The owners are happy, fun and laid-back plus they have one of the best kitchens on the island.

Ko Hai Camping

CAMPING GROUND \$

(☎08 1970 9804; seamoith2004@yahoo.com; tent 600B) Big, clean fan-cooled tentalos on the beach have shared bathrooms and are run by friendly Tu, who also manages the adjacent Sea Moth Dive Center.

Getting There & Away

Ko Ngai Villa runs the daily boats from Hat Pak Meng to Ko Ngai at 10am (400B, 1½ hours), returning from Ko Ngai between 9am (400B, 1½ hours). You can also privately charter a long-tail to and from Pak Meng for 1200B, as well as Ko Muk (1200B) and Ko Kradan (1500B).

In the high season, the **Tigerline** (☎08 1092 8800; www.tigerlinetravel.com) high-speed ferry runs between Ban Sala Dan (750B, 30 minutes) on Ko Lanta and Ko Lipe (1400B, four hours) stopping at the pier on nearby Ko Muk.

Satun Pakbara Speedboat Club (☎0 7475 0389, 08 2433 0114; www.tarutaolipeisland.com) is the more direct and comfortable choice

from Ko Lanta (650B, 30 minutes). Or you can charter a long-tail to Lanta for 2000B.

KO MUK

เกาะมุก

Motoring into Ko Muk is unforgettable whether you land on the sugary white-sand bar of **Hat Sivalai** or spectacular **Hat Farang** (aka Hat Sai Yao, aka Charlie's Beach) where jade water kisses a perfect beach. Unfortunately, the lodging options aren't tremendous; there's a steady stream of Speedo-clad package tourists tramping the beach, and even more in the speedboats that buzz in from Ko Lanta. Still, the west-coast sunsets are glorious, it's easy to hop from here to any and every island in the province, and you may feel Ko Muk's topography stir something deep and wild in your primordial soul.

Hat Farang is where most of the action is – a blend of travellers and package tourists revelling in calm more than party. Hat Sivalai and Hat Lodung are both a short walk from the main pier. If you're facing the sea at the pier, humble, local-flavoured Hat Lodung is to your left after a stilt *chao lair* village and some mangroves; stunning Hat Sivalai wraps around the peninsula to the right.

👁️ Sights & Activities

Good snorkelling opportunities lie offshore and the archipelago's star attraction, **Tham Morakot** (Emerald Cave), hides at the northern end of the island. This cave is a limestone tunnel that leads 80m to a mint-green sea lagoon (pirates once hid treasure here). Inside, you swim part of the way in pitch-blackness, to a small, concealed white-sand beach surrounded by lofty limestone, with a chimney that lets in a piercing shaft

of light around midday. The cave features on most tour itineraries so it gets ridiculously crowded in high season. Rent a kayak (per hour/day 150/500B) or charter a long-tail (300B) to visit on your own early in the morning or late in the afternoon, but watch the tides – you can't go in at high tide.

Between Ko Muk and Ko Ngai are the small karst islets of **Ko Cheuk** and **Ko Waen**, which have good snorkelling and small sandy beaches.

Princess Divers (☎08 6270 9174) is located at Charlie Beach resort and the independent **Chill Out Divers** is right behind Charlie Beach Resort. Both are recommended and offer one/two dives for 1800/2600B and PADI courses from 10,900B. Chill Out Divers also offers **yoga classes** (250B to 400B) on the beach.

Koh Muk Nature Resort rents out **mountain bikes** (per day 150B) with maps for self-guided island tours.

🛏 Sleeping

Sivalai

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎08 9723 3355; www.komooksivalai.com; Hat Sivalai; bungalows incl breakfast 5000-8000B; 🚻) Straddling an arrow-shaped peninsula of white sand and surrounded by views of karst islands and the mainland, this location is mind-bogglingly sublime. Elegant thatched-roof cottages are almost encircled with glass doors so you can let in as much of the view as you want.

Pawapi Resort

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎08 9669 1980; www.pawapi.com; Hat Sivalai; bungalows incl breakfast 2600B) The upscale bamboo bungalows here hover on stilts

REMARKABLE RUBBER TREES

If you ever wondered where the bounce in your rubber comes from, wonder no further: unlike money, it grows on trees. All over the Trang region, particularly on the islands floating off its coast, you are likely to come across tracts of rubber-tree plantations.

Rubber trees produce the milky liquid known as latex in vessels that grow within the bark of the tree. The trees are 'tapped' by making a thin incision into the bark at an angle parallel with the latex vessels (note that latex isn't the tree's sap). A small cup collects the latex as it drips down the tree. New scores are made every day – you can see these notched trees and collection cups throughout the region.

Latex from multiple trees is collected, poured into flat pans and mixed with formic acid, which serves as a coagulant. After a few hours, the very wet sheets of rubber are wrung out by squishing them through a press. They're then hung out to dry. You'll see these large, yellowish pancakes drying on bamboo poles wherever rubber trees are grown. The gooey ovals are then shipped to processing plants where they are turned into rubber as we know it.

about 1.5m off the ground so that breezes ventilate the room from all sides and the insanely gorgeous view sits 180 degrees in front of you.

Charlie Beach Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(☎07520 3281/3; www.kohmook.com; Hat Faràng; bungalows 1200-3100B; 🍷🍷) There's a bunch of different bungalow options, ranging from basic beach shacks to three-star, air-conditioned cottages at this sprawling resort, which dominates the beach and is linked by sandy paths. Skip the restaurant, though.

Sawasdee Resort

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎08 1508 0432; www.kohmook-sawadeeresort.com; Hat Faràng; bungalows 800B) Unremarkable wooden bungalows with terraces are right on the quiet shady north end of Hat Faràng. You're paying for the location – which is sublime.

Ko Mook Garden Resort

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎08 1748 384, 08 1798 7805; Hat Lodung; bungalows 300B, r 500B) The wooden rooms here are large while the bamboo bungalows are small and basic. Staying here means you're with a local family who take guests snorkeling, lend out bikes and give out detailed maps of all the island's secret spots.

i Getting There & Away

Boats to Ko Muk leave from the pier at Kuantungku. There are four daily departures at 8am, 10am, noon and 3pm (100B to 300B, 30 min-

utes) that make the return trip to the mainland an hour later; the early morning ferry is the cheapest. Minibuses to/from Trang (200B, one hour) meet the boats. A chartered long-tail from Kuantungku to Ko Muk (600B, 30 minutes) and from Ko Muk to either Pak Meng or Hat Yao is around 1200B (45 minutes to one hour).

Long-tail charters to Ko Kradan (600B, 30 minutes) and Ko Ngai (1000B, one hour) are easily arranged on the pier or at Rubber Tree Bungalow or Ko Yao Restaurant on Hat Faràng.

From November to May, Ko Muk is one of the stops on the speedboats connecting Ko Lanta and Ko Lipe; see p691 for details.

KO KRADAN

เกาะกระดาน

Kradan is dotted with slender, silky white-sand beaches, bathtub-warm shallows and limestone karst views. There are pristine hard and soft corals just off the south coast and a small but lush tangle of remnant jungle inland. Development is happening fast and while there are now many places to stay on Kradan, all except a select few are over-priced and lack soul.

For internet and boat tickets go to Kradan Beach Resort, the biggest spread of mediocre bungalows on the main beach.

i Sleeping

Seven Seas Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎08 2490 2442; www.sevenseasresorts.com; r 6600-7600B, bungalows 11,750-15,600B; 🍷🍷🍷) This small luxury resort has ultraslick rooms with enormous beds that could sleep four (if you're into that). Beach bums will adore this stretch of sand where cotton hammocks link the curling mangroves. The breezy restaurant, hugging the jet-black infinity pool, serves a mix of Western dishes and excellent southern-style curries. Overall, it's a tad pricey, but the amazing staff more than make up for it.

Paradise Lost

GUEST HOUSE \$-\$\$

(☎08 9587 2409; www.kokradan.wordpress.com; dm 250B, bungalows 900-1600B, with shared bathrooms 700B) One of the first places built on Kradan and still one of the best, this groovy, inland US-owned bungalow property has easy access to the island's more remote beaches. Small bamboo nests have solid wood floors and shared bathrooms. Larger bungalows are all wood and have private facilities, and dorms are on an open verandah. The guest house's kitchen (dishes 120B to 1800B) is the best on the island.

NICE DAY FOR A WET WEDDING

Every Valentine's Day, Ko Kradan is the setting for a rather unusual wedding ceremony. Around 35 brides and grooms don scuba gear and descend to an underwater altar amid the coral reefs, exchanging their vows in front of the Trang District Officer. How the couples manage to say, 'I do': underwater has never been fully explained, but the ceremony has made it into the *Guinness Book of Records* for the world's largest underwater wedding. Before and after the scuba ceremony, the couples are paraded along the coast in a flotilla of motorboats. If you think this might be right for your special day, visit the website www.trangonline.com/underwaterwedding.

i Getting There & Away

Daily **BOATS** to Kuantungku leave at 9am and noon; tickets include the connecting minibus to Trang (450B). A chartered long-tail from Kuantungku will cost around 800B one-way (45 minutes to one hour); you can also charter boats from Kradan to other islands within the archipelago.

Tigerline (๒08 1092 8800; www.tigerline-travel.com) connects Kradan with Ko Lanta (750B, 1½ hours) and Hat Yao (750B, one hour). **Patpailin Ferry** goes to Ko Muk and Ko Ngai (both 500B) then continues on to Ko Lanta.

KO LIBONG

เกาะลิบง

Thais believe that if you wear the tears of the dugong as perfume, you'll attract your soul mate. Perhaps this is why Trang's largest island, while less visited than its neighbours, receives a subset of offbeat tourists, as Ko Libong is known for its fertile beds of sea grass (the rare dugong's habitat) more than its beaches. The island is home to a small Muslim fishing community and has a few resorts on the isolated western coast.

On the eastern coast of Ko Libong at **Laem Ju Hoi** is a large area of mangroves protected by the Thai Botanical Department as the **Libong Archipelago Wildlife Reserve** (๒0 7525 1932). The grass-filled sea channels here are one of the dugong's last habitats in Thailand, and around 40 of them graze on the sea grass that flourishes in the bay. The nature resorts in Hat Yao (p679) and on Ko Libong (the reserve is not far from the Libong Beach Resort) offer dugong-spotting tours by sea kayak, led by trained naturalists, for around 1000B. Sea kayaks can also be rented at most resorts for 200B per hour.

🛏 Sleeping

Libong Beach Resort

HOTEL \$

(๒0 7522 5205; www.libongbeachresort.com; bungalows 500-800B; ๙๐) This is the only place on the island that's open year-round – rates drop considerably in the low season. There are several options from bland slap-up shacks behind a murky stream to beachfront – and very comfortable – varnished wood-and-thatch chalets. The resort offers a slew of trips, motorbike rental (300B) and internet access (per hour 100B). There's also a dive centre (two dives 3500B) open during the high season.

i Getting There & Away

Long-tail boats to Ban Ma Phrao on the east coast of Ko Libong leave regularly from Hat Yao (20 minutes) during daylight hours for 50B per

person; the long-tail jetty at Hat Yao is just west of the newer Yao pier. On Ko Libong, motorcycle taxis run across to the resorts on the west coast for 100B. A chartered long-tail directly to the resorts will cost 800B each way.

KO LAO LIANG

เกาะเหลาเหลียง

Ko Lao Liang is actually two islands right next to each other: Ko Laoliang Nong, the smaller of the two where the only resort is found, and the larger Ko Laoliang Pi, where there's a small fishermen's settlement. The islands are stunning, vertical karst formations with small white-sand beaches, clear water and plenty of coral close to shore.

The only place to stay is **Laoliang Island Resort** (๒08 4304 4077; www.laoliangresort.com; per person 1500B), which is rock-climbing-orientated. Lodging here is in comfy tents equipped with mattresses and fans and there are plenty of activities on offer, including snorkelling, climbing and sea kayaking. At night there's a small bar and the restaurant fires up its seafood barbecue regularly – it's like summer camp for grown-ups (although kids are happy here too). Rates include all meals, snorkel gear and sea kayaks.

Tigerline (๒08 1092 8800; www.tigerlinetravel.com) stops just off Ko Lao Liang between Ko Lanta (1400B, 2½ hours) and Ko Lipe (750B, 2½ hours).

KO SUKORN

เกาะสุکور

Sukorn is a cultural paradise of tawny beaches, light-green sea, black-rock headlands and stilted shack neighbourhoods that are home to about 2800 Muslim fisherfolk – their rice fields, watermelon plots and rubber plantations unfurl on narrow concrete roads. Cycle past fields occupied only by water buffalo, through pastel villages where folk are genuinely happy to see you, and sleep soundly through deep, black nights. Sukorn's simple stillness is breathtaking, its authenticity a tonic to the road-worn soul.

With few hills, stunning panoramas, lots of shade and plenty of opportunities to meet locals, renting a bike (150B) is the best way to see the island. Covering up is an absolute must when you leave the beach – be respectful of the locals.

🛏 Sleeping



Sukorn Beach Bungalows HOTEL \$\$

(๒0 7520 7707, 08 1647 5550; www.sukorn-island-trang.com; bungalows 1000-2500B; ๙๐) Easily the most professionally run place on this island, the concrete-and-wood bungalows

MU KO PHETRA MARINE NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติหมู่เกาะภตรา

Often outshone by the Ko Tarutao Marine National Park next door, **Mu Ko Phetra Marine National Park** (☎0 7478 1582; adult/child 400/200B) is a stunning chain of small islands that includes Ko Khao Yai, Ko Lao Liang (p683), Ko Bulon Leh (see p685) and 19 other jungle-clad towers of limestone. The largest island here is **Ko Khao Yai**, which has several pristine beaches suitable for swimming, snorkelling and camping, and a rock formation resembling a Gothic castle.

The park headquarters, east of Pak Bara, has a small visitors centre and an over-the-water restaurant, plus a nature trail through the forest. **Accommodation** (r 600N, 3-9-person bungalows 800-1500B) is available, and with permission, camping is possible on many of the uninhabited islands in the park. Park fees only apply if you visit the islands offshore.

all have comfy verandahs and a long swimming beach out the front from which you can watch the sun set over outlying islands. The friendly Dutch and Thai owners are chock-full of information, arrange excellent island-hopping tours, and offer guided tours of Sukorn (per person 350B). Oh, and the food (mains 180 to 300B) is the best in the Trang Islands.

Sukorn Cabana

HOTEL \$\$

(☎08 9724 2326; www.sukorncabana.com; bungalows 800-1300B; 📍📞) Sloping landscaped grounds dotted with papaya, frangipani and bougainvillea hold large and clean bungalows with thatched roofs, varnished-wood interiors and plush verandahs. The gorgeous beach has stunning views over Ko Phetra.

i Getting There & Away

The easiest way to get to Sukorn is by private transfer from Trang available through the resorts for 1750B per person. The cheapest way is to take a *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* from Trang to Yan Ta Khao (45 minutes, 60B) then transfer to Ban Ta Seh (45 minutes, 40B) where long-tails (50B) leave from the pier when full.

Otherwise book a private taxi or *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* from Trang to Ban Ta Seh (800B), where you can charter a long-tail to Ban Saimai (200B), the main village on Ko Sukorn. The resorts are a 20-minute walk or 50B motorcycle taxi ride from Ban Saimai. You can also charter long-tails directly to the beach resorts (750B).

From Ko Sukorn you can charter long-tails to Ko Lao Liang (1750B) – where you can meet the high-speed **Tigerline** (☎08 1092 8800; www.tigerlinetravel.com) ferry that connects Lanta with Lipe and serves all islands in between – including Ko Kradan, Ko Ngai or Ko Muk (1400B).

SATUN PROVINCE

Until recently, Satun was mostly overlooked, but that's all changed thanks to the dynamic white sands of Ko Lipe – a one-time backpacker secret turned mainstream beach getaway. Beyond Ko Lipe the province still hardly rates a blink of the eye as visitors rush north to Ko Lanta or south to Pulau Langkawi, Malaysia. This means, of course, that they miss the untrammelled beaches and sea caves on Ko Tarutao, the rugged trails and ribbon waterfalls of Ko Adang and the rustic beauty of Ko Bulon Leh.

Pak Bara

ปากบารา

The small fishing community of Pak Bara is the main jumping-off point for the islands in the Ko Phetra and Ko Tarutao Marine National Park. The peaceful town has some decent sleeping options and great seafood, but unless you arrive after the boats have gone there's no pressing reason to stick around.

The main road from La-Ngu terminates at the pier where there are several travel agencies, internet cafes, cheap restaurants and shops selling beach gear. There's a huge new **visitors centre** (☎0 7478 3485) for Ko Tarutao Marine National Park just back from the pier (under construction when we passed), where you can book accommodation and obtain permission for camping. Travel agencies here can arrange tours to the islands in the national park.

Travellers planning to visit the quieter islands of the Ko Tarutao National Park should stop by the **park headquarters** (☎0 7478 3485) just behind the pier, where you can book accommodation and obtain permission for camping. Travel agencies at the

pier will gladly sell you a ticket to wherever you want to go, and many of these businesses also offer kayaking and snorkelling day trips (from 1500B).

If you get stuck in town, there are a couple of places to stay, including **Best House Resort** (☎ 0 7578 3058; bungalows 600B; 📍), which is the closest to the pier. If you're waiting for a speedboat to one of the islands, there are a few Muslim restaurants huddling around the pier – the best one is next to Andrew Tour. There's one ATM next to Adang Seatours on the main drag.

i Getting There & Away

There are hourly buses between 7am and 4pm from Hat Yai to the pier at Pak Bara (90B, 2½ hours). Coming from Satun, you can take an ordinary bus towards Trang and get off at La-Ngu (60B, 30 minutes), continuing by *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* to Pak Bara (20B, 15 minutes).

Air-conditioned minivans leave hourly for Hat Yai (150B, two hours) from travel agencies near Pak Bara pier. There are also minivans to Trang (200B, 1½ hours), which connect to numerous destinations such as Krabi (450B, four hours) and Phuket (650B, six hours).

From 21 October to the end of May there are several speedboats to Ao Pante Malacca on Ko Tarutao and on to Ko Lipe. Boats depart from Pak Bara at 10am, 11am and 12.30pm (return 1200B, 1½ hours); in the reverse direction boats leave from Ko Lipe at 9.30am, 10am, 12.30pm and 1.30pm. From 16 November these boats also stop at Ko Adang for the same price. For Ko Bulon Leh, boats depart at 12.30pm, arriving in Ko Bulon Leh one hour later (return 800B), before buzzing on to Ko Lipe. If you miss the Bulon boat, you can easily charter a long-tail from local fishermen (1500B to 2000B, 1½ hours). During the wet season, services to Ko Lipe are dependent on the weather and demand, but are usually cut back to three times per week.

Ko Bulon Leh

เกาะบุโหลน

Floating in the sea between the Trang Islands and Ko Tarutao Marine Park, Ko Bulon Leh (also called Bulon) is surrounded by crystal-clear waters that mingle with its powder-soft beaches. The island is in that perfect state of limbo where it's developed enough to offer comfortable facilities, yet not so popular that you have to fight for your own patch of sand.

The exceptional **beach** extends along the east coast from Bulone resort, and around the northeast cape. Bulon's wild coastal beauty is accessible amid coral-gravel-laden

blue **Ao Panka Yai** on the southern coast. There's good snorkelling around the western headland, and if you follow the trails through remnant jungle and rubber plantations you'll wind your way to **Ao Muang** (Mango Bay), where you'll find a *chow lair* squid-fishing camp. **Ao Panka Noi**, accessible from the path leading down from Viewpoint Resort, is another fishing village with long-tails docking on a fine gravel beach. Here you'll find beautiful karst views and a clutch of simple restaurants.

Bulone Resort also offers internet (per minute 3B), and battery-charging services for laptops (50B) and digital cameras (10B).

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

Most places here shut down in the rainy season (May to October). There are a few local restaurants and a small shop in the Muslim village next to Bulon Viewpoint.

Marina Resort

HOTEL \$

(☎ 08 1598 2420, 08 5078 1552; bungalows 500-1000B) Log-built and shaggy with stilted decks, louvred floors and high ceilings, thatched huts never looked or felt so good. There's a kitchen serving tasty food attached to an inviting patio restaurant with cushioned floor seating.

Bulone Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 08 6960 0468; www.bulone-resort.com; bungalows 1250-1650B) Perched on the northeast cape with access to two exquisite stretches of white sand, these cute wooden bungalows have the best beachside location on Bulon. Queen-sized beds come with iron frames and ocean breezes.

Chaolae Homestay

GUEST HOUSE \$

(bungalows 300B) Fantastic-value classy bungalows have varnished wood interiors, thatched roofs and polished cement bathrooms (with squat toilets). It's blissfully quiet, run by a lovely *chow lair* family and is steps away from decent snorkelling at Ao Panka Yai.

i Getting There & Away

The boat to Ko Bulon Leh (400B) leaves from Pak Bara at 12.30pm daily if there are enough takers. Ship-to-shore transfers to the beach by long-tail cost 50B – save yourself from sweat and ask to get dropped off on the beach closest to your resort. In the reverse direction, the boat moors in the bay in front of Pansand Resort at around 9am. You can charter a long-tail from Pak Bara for 1500B to 2000B.

From November to May there are two daily speedboats (600B, one hour) from Ko Bulon Leh to Ko Lipe in Ko Tarutao Marine National Park. Boats, which originate in Ko Lanta and make stops in the Trang Islands, depart from in front of the Pansand resort at 1pm and 3pm.

Ko Tarutao Marine National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติหมู่เกาะตะรุเตา

Like with any good secret, it's only a matter of time before someone lets the cat out of the bag. In this case, that someone was a producer from *Survivor*, America's eminent reality show, who chose this stunning marine park for the fifth instalment of the hit series. Fortunately, stringent Thai law has protected **Ko Tarutao Marine National Park** (๒0 7478 1285; adult/child 400/200B; ☉Nov-mid-May) from preying developers – the marine national park is still one of the most exquisite and unspoiled regions in Thailand.

The massive archipelago features myriad coral reefs, and 51 islands covered with well-preserved virgin rainforest teeming with dusky langurs, crab-eating macaques, mouse deer, wild pigs, sea otters, fishing cats, water monitors, tree pythons, hornbills and kingfishers.

The park officially closes in the low season (May to October), when virtually all boats stop running.

KO TARUTAO

เกาะตะรุเตา

Most of Ko Tarutao's whopping 152 sq km is covered in dense, old-growth jungle that rises sharply up to the park's 713m peak. Mangrove swamps and impressive limestone cliffs circle much of the island, and the western coast is lined with quiet white-sand beaches.

Tarutao has a sordid history that partly explains its great state of preservation today. Between 1938 and 1948, more than 3000 Thai criminals and political prisoners were incarcerated here, including interesting inmates such as So Setabutra, who compiled the first Thai-English dictionary while imprisoned on the island. During WWII food supplies were severely depleted and hundreds of prisoners died from malaria. The prisoners and guards mutinied, taking to piracy in the nearby Strait of Malacca until they were suppressed by British troops in 1944.

There's internet (80B per hour) and wi-fi (50B per hour) at the Ao Pante Malacca Information Centre.

👁 Sights & Activities

The overgrown ruins of the camp for political prisoners can be seen at **Ao Taloh Udang**, in the southeast of the island, reached via a long overgrown track. The prison camp for civilian prisoners was over on the eastern coast at **Ao Taloh Waw**, where the big boats from Satun's Tammalang pier now dock.

Next to the park headquarters at Ao Pante Malacca, a steep trail leads through the jungle to **Toe-Boo Cliff**, a dramatic rocky outcrop with fabulous views towards Ko Adang and the surrounding islands.

Ao Pante Malacca has a lovely alabaster beach shaded by pandanus and casuarinas. If you follow the large stream flowing inland through here, you'll reach **Tham Jara-Khe** (Crocodile Cave), once home to deadly salt-water crocodiles. The cave is navigable for about 1km at low tide and can be visited on long-tail tours from the jetty at Ao Pante Malacca.

Immediately south of Ao Pante Malacca is **Ao Jak**, which has another fine sandy beach; and **Ao Molae**, which also has fine white sand and a ranger station with bungalows and a camp site. A 30-minute boat ride or 8km walk south of Ao Pante is **Ao Son**, an isolated sandy bay where turtles nest between September and April. You can camp here but there are no facilities. Ao Son has decent snorkelling, as does **Ao Makhm**, further south. From the small ranger station at Ao Son you can walk inland to **Lu Du Falls** (about 1½ hours) and **Lo Po Falls** (about 2½ hours).

🏠 Sleeping & Eating

There's accommodation both at Ao Pante Malacca and Ao Molae open mid-November to mid-May. The biggest spread of options is at Ao Pante Malacca, conveniently near all the facilities, where there are **bungalows** (800-1000B), simple **longhouse rooms** (550B) with shared bathrooms sleeping up to four people, and **camp sites** (with/without tent rental 375/150B). Ao Molae is more quiet and isolated – and arguably prettier. Rather swanky one- and two-room **duplexes** (₹600-1000B) are right on the beach. Accommodation can be booked at the **park office** (๒0 7478 3485) in Pak Bara.

Camping (sites with/without tent rental 255/30B) is permitted under casuarinas at Ao Molae and Ao Taloh Waw, where there are toilet and shower blocks, and on the wild beaches of Ao Son, Ao Makham and Ao Taloh Udang, where you will need to be self-sufficient. Note that local monkeys have a habit of going into tents and destroying or eating everything they find inside – so shut everything tight.

There are **canteens** (dishes 40-120B; ☺7am-2pm & 5-9pm) at Ao Pante Malacca and Ao Molae. The food is satisfying and tasty but you can only find beer at Ao Molae.

i Getting There & Around

Boats connecting Pak Bara and Ko Lipe stop at Ko Tarutao along the way; see p685 for detailed information.

With a navigable river and long paved roads, the island lends itself well to self-propulsion: hire a kayak (per hour/day 100B/300B) or mountain bike (50/200B) – or if it's just too damned hot, charter a vehicle (per day 600B). Long-tails can be hired for trips to Ao Taloh Udang (2000B), Ao

Taloh Wow (1500B), and Tham Jara-Khe or Ao Son for around 800B each.

If you're staying at Ao Molae, take a park car (per person 60B) from the jetty at Ao Pante Malacca.

KO LIPE

เกาะหลีเป๊ะ

Ko Lipe is this decade's poster child for untamed development in the Thai Islands. Blessed with two wide white-sand beaches separated by jungled hills, and within spitting distance of protected coral reefs, a few years ago the island was only spoken about in secretive whispers. But then the whispers became small talk, which quickly turned into a roar – you know, the kind generally associated with bulldozers. The biggest losers in all this have been the 700-strong community of *chow lair* villagers who sold land to a Thai developer.

Yet, given this upheaval, there's still plenty to love about Lipe. The gorgeous white-sand crescent of **Hat Pattaya** on the southern coast has some terrific beach bars, seafood and a party vibe during the high season.

KO LIPE'S METAMORPHOSIS ADAM SKOLNICK

Ko Lipe began to change in earnest around 2005 when the sandy cross-island trail was smothered in concrete. However, the seeds of change were planted more than a decade earlier when a Phi-Phi developer named Ko Kyiet approached local *chow lair* (sea gypsy) families about their ancestral land. Although deals were struck, they were never completed. Enter Ko Pi Tong, a Satun native who, according to Kun Pooh of Pooh's Bar and Pooh's Bungalows – a long-time local and one of Lipe's tourism leaders – made his money on the ecologically dubious and lucrative enterprise of collecting swifts' nests.

'Pi Tong is like Robin Hood', said Pooh. 'He paid what Kyiet owed the locals plus interest.' Indeed, Tong went back to the *chow lair* families, most of who didn't have proper documentation for their land, and offered them lump sums of cash. They accepted, which means that technically this was all legal and that they participated in their own plight, but it isn't quite that simple.

When Kyiet negotiated the initial deals, he allowed the *chow lair* to keep a slice of their ancestral land. But Tong bought almost everything. Kun Pan, an elder, who lives in the new cordoned-off *chow lair* village on the hillside above Sunset Beach, explained the situation.

'Before, we had the whole island, we all lived on the beach', said Pan, a silver-haired fisherman with deep lines worn into his leathery brow. 'My brother and I, we not want to sell. The police come and take us to Satun. They said we had no land rights.'

Pooh disputes Pan's claim. He suggests the seaman is confused because 'Tong let [local people] live on the land he bought from them for years'. Tong evicted them relatively recently.

According to Pooh, Tong is now selling the land for many times the purchase price. Clearly, Tong has brought commerce, jobs, infrastructure and wealth into what once was a southern Thai backwater. Plus, some *chow lair* families held out, kept their land and launched successful businesses, such as Daya Resort, on their own – a fact that seems to contradict Pan's story. Still, it's hard not to notice that the vast majority of *chow lair* appear left out of the recent prosperity.

Ko Tarutao National Park

Sights

- 1 Ao Molae Ranger Station..... F2
- 2 Ao Taloh Udang Ranger Station..... F4
- 3 Ao Taloh Waw Ranger Station..... F3
- 4 Chado Cliff..... C4
- 5 Laem Son Ranger Station..... C4
- 6 Park Headquarters..... F2
- 7 Tham Jara-Khe..... F2
- 8 Toe-Boo Cliff..... F2

Sleeping

- 9 Ao Lik Camp Site..... B3
- Ao Molae Bungalows & Camp Sites (see 1)

- Ao Pante Malaka Bungalows & Camp Sites..... (see 6)
- Ao Taloh Waw Camp Sites..... (see 3)

Eating

- Canteen (see 6)
- Canteen (see 5)
- Canteen (see 1)

Information

- 10 Ko Phetra Marine National Park Headquarters..... G1
- 11 Ko Tarutao Marine National Park Headquarters..... G1

Windswept **Sunrise Beach**, another sublime long stretch of sand, juts to the north where you'll have spectacular Ko Adang views. A drawback of both of the busy beaches is the preponderance of long-tails that crowd out swimmers. **Sunset Beach**, with its golden sand, gentle jungled hills and serene bay that spills into the Adang Strait, has an altogether different feel and retains Lipe's wild soul. In between there's an ever-expanding concrete maze of cafes, travel agencies, shops and salons, but with more resorts opting to stay open year-round.

There are no banks or ATMs on the island, though several of the bigger resorts can change travellers cheques, cash or give advances on credit cards – all for a hefty fee. Internet is available along the cross-island path for 3B per minute and a few places behind Sunrise Beach charge 2B per minute.

Activities

There's good coral all along the southern coast and around **Ko Kra**, the little island opposite Sunrise Beach. Most resorts rent out mask and snorkel sets and fins for 50B each, and can arrange four-point long-tail snorkel trips to Ko Adang and other coral-fringed islands for around 1500B. The best way to see the archipelago is to hire a local *chow lair* captain. **Islander Sea Sports** (☎08 7294 9770; per hr/day 100/600B) rents brand-new kayaks on Hat Pattaya.

Divers with a Lipe bias will tell you that there are dozens of sites in the area. What they won't tell you is that the visibility can be pretty hit-and-miss – sometimes the

water is crystal-clear, at other times hard currents drag in clouds of sand. Nevertheless, Ko Lipe is a chilled-out place to do some scuba – there aren't zillions of divers (like on Phuket or Ko Tao) and the reefs are comparatively unharmed. The region's top dive spots include **Eight Mile Rock**, a submerged pinnacle that lures large pelagic fish; the **Yong Hua Shipwreck**, now covered in marine growth; and **Ko Bu Tang**, with its aptly named Stingray City site. There are also pleasant diving spots dotting the channel between Ko Adang and Ko Rawi.

Most diving schools run trips from early November to mid-May and charge around 2700B for a two-dive excursion. A PADI Open Water course will set you back around 12,800B.

The following dive operators are recommended, and use proper boats rather than long-tails:

Forra Diving

DIVING

(☎08 4407 5691; www.forradiving.com) Friendly French-run school with an office on both Sunrise and Pattaya Beaches.

Ocean Pro

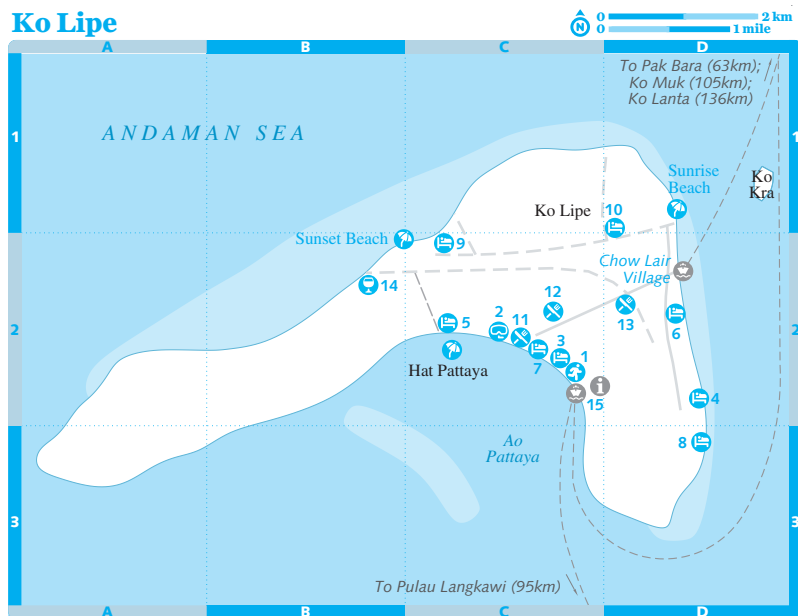
DIVING

(☎08 9733 8068; www.oceanprodivers.net) Professional and knowledgeable staff run a seamless operation.

Sleeping

Most, but not all, resorts on Ko Lipe close from May to October, when the boats don't run as frequently.

Ko Lipe



Ko Lipe

Activities, Courses & Tours

- Forra Diving (see 7)
- Forra Diving (see 6)
- 1** Islander Sea Sports C2
- 2** Ocean Pro C2

Sleeping

- 3** Blue Tribes C2
- 4** Castaway Resort D2
- 5** Daya Resort C2
- 6** Forra Dive D2
- 7** Forra Dive2 C2
- 8** Idyllic Resort D3
- 9** Porn Resort C2
- 10** South Sea D1

Eating

- 11** Nong Bank Restaurant C2
- 12** Pee Pee Bakery C2
- 13** Pooh's Bar D2

Drinking

- 14** Mia Luna B2

Information

- 15** Bundhaya Resort C2
- Immigration Office (see 15)

Transport

- Speedboat Departure Office (see 15)

TOP CHOICE Castaway Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎08 3138 7472; www.castaway-resorts.com; Sunrise Beach; bungalows 3500-5000B; @☎) The roomy wood bungalows with hammock-laden terraces, cushions everywhere, overhead fans and fabulous, modern-meets-naturalistic bathrooms are the most chic on Lipe. It's also one of the most environmental-friendly - with solar hot water and lights.

TOP CHOICE Daya Resort

HOTEL \$

(☎0 7472 8030; Hat Pattaya; bungalows 500-1000B) One of the few places that's still locally run, the striped bungalows here are your standard slap-up wooden affairs but the beach is fantastic, the flowery back garden charming, and the restaurant has the absolute best and cheapest seafood grill on the island...and that's saying something.

Idyllic Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎08 1802 5453; www.idyllicresort.com; Sunrise Beach; bungalows 6300-15,000B; 🍷🍴🍷) High design has arrived on Lipe. With slanted roofs, concrete-and-glass walls, flat-screen TVs, a shingled exterior and floating decks out the front, the digs are more like futuristic pods than beach bungalows.

Blue Tribes

HOTEL \$\$

(☎08 6285 2153; www.bluetribeslpe.com; Hat Pattaya; bungalows 1200-1700B; 🍷🍴) One of Pattaya's more attractive small resorts, its best nests are the two-storey thatched wooden bungalows with downstairs living rooms and top-floor bedrooms that have sliding doors opening to sea views.

Forra Dive

HOTEL \$\$

(☎08 0545 5012; www.forradiving.com; Sunrise Beach; bungalows 800-1000B) Announced by 17 flags that whip in the eastward breeze, this place captures the look of Lipe's pirate spirit with a range of bamboo bungalows and lofts. The best are large with indoor-outdoor bathrooms and hammock-strung terraces. Divers get 25% off lodging and there's a second location, Forra Dive 2, with similar bungalows on Hat Pattaya.

South Sea

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎08 0544 0063, 08 1678 9903; Sunset Beach; bungalows 350B) Inland from Sunset beach, this sunny flower-and-shell-mobile-filled compound has tiny bamboo huts with small sleeping mats and attached semioutdoor Thai-style bathrooms.

Porn Resort

HOTEL \$

(☎08 9464 5765; Sunset Beach; bungalows 500-750B) This collection of weathered bungalows with hard beds is the only resort on imperfect yet golden and swimmable Sunset Beach. It's rustic but the best deal on Lipe for a terrace on private beachfront.

**Eating & Drinking**

Hat Pattaya's resorts put on nightly fresh seafood barbeques and Daya's (see earlier) is arguably the best. Cheap eats are best found at the roti stands and small Thai cafes along Walking Street.

For drinking, driftwood-clad Rasta bars are found on all beaches. At least some things never change.

Nong Bank Restaurant

RESTAURANT \$\$

(Hat Pattaya; dishes 80-120B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) This place serves point-and-grill sea-

food and a superb yellow curry with crab (120B), with a half-dozen tables scattered beneath a tree on the white sand.

Pooh's Bar

RESTAURANT, BAR \$

(☎0 7472 8019; www.poohlpe.com) This massive complex was built by a Lipe pioneer and includes bungalows, a dive shop and several restaurants. It's a very popular local expat hang-out, especially in the low season. Each night it projects films onto its big screen.

Pee Pee Bakery

BAKERY \$

(Hat Pattaya; dishes from 80B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) The best breakfasts on Lipe include homemade breads and pastries and great people-watching as you dine. A full American set costs 240B.

Mia Luna

BAR

(Hat Pattaya) This is a pirate bar of hanging painted bouys, driftwood seating and hammocks. It's isolated on its own nugget of white sand near Bila Beach and a short walk over the hill from Hat Pattaya.

i Getting There & Away

From 21 October through the end of May, several speedboats run from Pak Bara (see p684) to Ko Lipe via Ko Tarutao or Ko Bulon Leh at 9.30am, 11am, 12.30pm and 2pm (550B to 650B, 1½ hours); in the reverse direction boats leave at 9.30am, 10am, 12.30pm and 1.30pm. Low-season transport depends on the weather but there are usually three direct boats per week. A boat charter to Ko Lipe from Pak Bara is a hefty 4000B each way.

Tigerline (☎08 1092 8800; www.tigerline-travel.com) offers the cheapest high-speed ferry service to Ko Lanta (1500B, 5½ hours), stopping at Ko Muk (1400B, 3½ hours), Ko Kradan (1400B, four hours) and Ko Ngai (1400B, 4½ hours). It departs from Ko Lipe's Pattaya Beach at 9.30am.

BORDER CROSSING: KO LIPE TO PULAU LANGKAWI

Both of Ko Lipe's speedboat companies also offer daily trips to Pulau Langkawi (1200B, one hour) in Malaysia; departure is at 7.30am, 10.30am and 4pm. Be at the immigration office at the Bundhaya Resort early to get stamped out. In reverse, boats leave from Pulau Langkawi for Ko Lipe at 7.30am, 9.30am and 2.30pm Malay time.

Satun-Pak Bara Speedboat Club (☎0 7475 0389, 08 2433 0114; www.tarutaolipe.island.com) has a daily, more comfortable speedboat that departs from Ko Lipe for Ko Lanta (1900B, three hours) at 9am also stopping at Ko Bulon Leh (600B, one hour), Ko Muk (1400B, two hours) and Ko Ngai (1600B, 2½ hours). The same boat makes the return trip from Ko Lanta at 1pm.

No matter which boat you end up deciding to use, you will have to take a long-tail shuttle (per person 50B) to and from the floating pier at the edge of the bay.

Ko Adang & Ko Rawi

เกาะอาดังเกาะราวี

The island immediately north of Ko Lipe, **Ko Adang** has brooding, densely forested hills, white-sand beaches and healthy coral reefs. Lots of snorkelling tours make a stop here. Inland are a few short jungle trails and tumbling waterfalls, including the ramble up to **Pirate's Falls**, which is rumoured to have been a freshwater source for pirates. There are great views from **Chado Cliff**, above the main beach, where green turtles lay their eggs between September and December.

Ko Rawi, a long rocky, jungled ellipse 11km west of Ko Adang, has first-rate beaches and large coral reefs offshore. Camping at Ao Lik is allowed, with permission from the national-park authorities. Excellent snorkelling spots include the northern side of **Ko Yang** and tiny **Ko Hin Ngam**, which has underwater fields of giant clams, vibrant anemones and striped pebble beaches. A legend has it that the stones are cursed and anyone who takes one away will experience bad luck until the stone is returned to its source. Even a short stop on the island will cost you the park's entrance fee (adult/child 200/100B).

Park accommodation on Ko Adang is located near the ranger station at Laem Son. There are new and attractive **bungalows** (3-9 people 600-1800B), scruffier **longhouses** (3-bed r 300B) with attached bathrooms and facilities for **camping** (sites per person 30B, with tent hire 250B). A small canteen provides good Thai meals.

Long-tails from Ko Lipe will take you to Ko Adang and Ko Rawi for 50B per person, although you might have to do a little bargaining.

Satun

POP 33,400

สตูล

Lying in a steamy jungle valley surrounded by limestone cliffs, and framed by a murky river, isolated Satun is a relaxing coastal town where tourism is limited to visa-run traffic, which flows in both directions.

Sights

The **Ku Den Museum** (Satun National Museum; Soi 5, Th Satun Thane; admission 20B; ☎8.30am-4.30pm Wed-Sun), housed in a lovely old Sino-Portuguese mansion, is an excellent museum that was constructed to house King Rama V during a royal visit. When the king failed to show up, the governor snagged the roost. The building has been lovingly restored and the exhibits feature dioramas with soundtracks covering every aspect of southern Muslim life.

Sleeping & Eating

Sinkiat Thani Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎0 7472 1055; www.sinkiahotel.thport.com; 50 Th Burivanich; r 680B; ☎@) This ageing tower is central, a bit run-down, but certainly clean enough. It has amazing city and jungle views through smudged windows on top floors. Plus it's right next to On's Restaurant.

On's

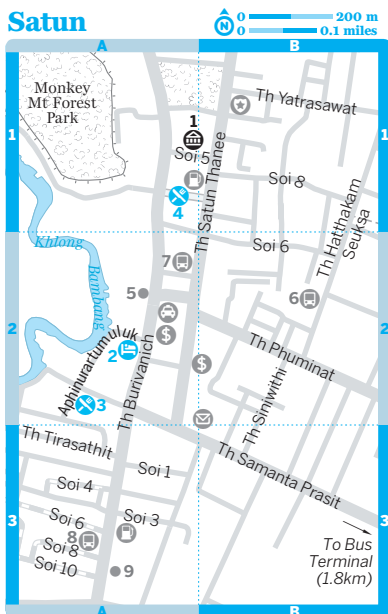
THAI, WESTERN \$

(☎0 7473 0469, 08 1097 9783; 48 Th Burivanich; dishes 80-150B; ☎8am-late; @☎) With its bamboo, sarong-draped tables, leafy front porch and tasty Thai and Western dishes, this is

BORDER CROSSING: SATUN TO KUALA PERLIS OR PULAU LANGKAWI

Boats to Malaysia leave from Tammalang pier, 7km south of Satun. Large long-tail boats run at 9.30am and 4:30pm daily to Kuala Perlis in Malaysia (300B one-way, one hour). From Malaysia the fare is M\$30.

For Pulau Langkawi in Malaysia, boats leave from Tammalang pier at 9.30am, 1.30pm and 4pm daily (300B, 1½ hours). In the reverse direction, boats leave from Pulau Langkawi at 8.30am, 12.30pm and 3pm and cost M\$27. Keep in mind that Malaysia is one hour ahead of Thai time.



the place to hang in Satun (which explains the yachtie barflies).

Chinese and Muslim bites can be scouted on Th Burivanich and Th Samanta Prasit. Try the 'red pork' with rice at the Chinese food stalls or the southern-style roti offered at most Muslim restaurants (around 50B each). Satun's popular **night market** (off Th Satun Thaneer) comes to life around 5pm and serves great Thai curries.

i Getting There & Away

Boat

There's a high-season service to Ko Lipe that departs at 11.30am daily (650B, 1½ hours; December to May). Enquire about tickets at the pier, 7km south of town, or at On's (p692).

Bus

Buses leave from the **bus terminal** (Th Samanta Prasit), 2km east of the town centre. Air-

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Satun

i Sights

- 1 Ku Den Museum.....A1

h Sleeping

- 2 Sinkiat Thani Hotel.....A2

x Eating

- 3 Chinese Food Stalls & Muslim Restaurants.....A2
4 Night Market.....A1
On's.....(see 2)

i Information

- 5 Immigration Office.....A2

i Transport

- 6 Buses to Bangkok.....B2
7 Buses to Trang and Hat Yai.....A2
8 Minivans to Hat Yai.....A3
9 Sörng•tã•ou to Tammalang Pier.....A3

conditioned services to Bangkok (800B to 1200B, 14 hours) leave at 7am, 7.30am, 3pm and 4pm. Air-conditioned buses to Trang (110B, 1½ hours) leave hourly. There are also a few daily buses to Krabi (220B, four hours) and Phuket (360B, seven hours). Buses to Hat Yai (70B, two hours) and local buses without air-con to Trang (90B, two hours) will stop and pick up passengers on Th Satun Thaneer.

Minivan & Share Taxi

There are regular minivans to the train station in Hat Yai (80B, one hour) from a depot south of Wat Chanathipchaloem on Th Sulakanukoon. Occasional minivans run to Trang, but buses are much more frequent. If you're arriving by boat at Tammalang pier, there are direct air-con minivans to Hat Yai and Hat Yai airport (90B).

i Getting Around

Small orange *sörng•tã•ou* to Tammalang pier (for boats to Malaysia) cost 40B and leave from the 7-Eleven on Th Sulakanukoon 40 minutes before ferry departure. A motorcycle taxi from the same area costs 60B.