

# phuket

**small is beautiful**

*Get off the island of Phuket and explore her smaller, interesting sisters*

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: LANA WILLOCKS

# islands

**R**eal, live dragons. Sea gypsies. Exotic birds swooping around thick jungle canopy. Tropical fish weaving through a vibrant coral outcrop. Sand so white it

gleams in the sunshine; so fine it squeaks underfoot. These are just a few of the discoveries to be made on the smaller islands near Phuket along Thailand's Andaman coast.

**Khai island**



## CORAL ISLAND

With two palm-fringed beaches backed by hills of lush jungle, Coral is the postcard image of a tropical isle. Just a 15-minute boat trip away from Phuket, Coral is where visitors come to relax on the sands or try parasailing and banana-boat riding. The central portion of the island's one-kilometre Long Beach gets busy with day trippers in the middle of the day, but those who linger on will find the beach nearly empty in the golden hours of the late afternoon.

The surrounding sea is calm and crystal clear and the coral just offshore, especially from the smaller Banana Beach, is rich with colourful

marine life. With only two beaches and no roads, navigating Coral Island is simple. Reaching Banana Beach from Long Beach is an easy kayak paddle or a 10-minute walk down a cool jungle path. At the far western end of Long Beach sits Komodo Restaurant, a basic local eatery clinging to the rocks. The restaurant's strange name becomes apparent when owner Khun Jiab tosses some raw chicken over a low gate near the restaurant. Suddenly three large monitor lizards scramble down from the hill. It's snack time for Coral's resident dragons.

Australian Steve Anderson of the Coral Island Club, who has operated diving, snorkelling and fishing excursions to Coral and nearby islands for a decade, advises that the best way to avoid the crowds is to charter your own boat. If you have a

## trips by coral island club



### CORAL ISLAND BY SPEED BOAT

Long Beach and Banana Beach THB1,900 (adult; S\$75) and THB950 (S\$38; child 4-11 years). Family or group discounts available. Included: return transfers, lunch, beach lounge, kayak, fish food, mask, snorkel, fins and guide.



### DEEP-SEA AND GAME FISHING

Catch a sail fish and snorkel too. Cruise and explore the islands by Thai fishing boat. Guests can even take the day's catch back to their hotel and have the restaurant prepare it for dinner — that's something to brag about!

*Coral Island is where visitors come to RELAX or try PARASAILING and BANANA-BOAT RIDING*



## *khai nok island*

**A tiny gem of an island, Khai Nok is all about lazing on the sand or snorkelling. “Bird Egg” Island, also called simply “Khai” or Egg Island, is hardly more than a boulder with a tuft of jungle flora ringed by a wide, white-sand beach. About 30 minutes by boat from any of Phuket’s east-coast marinas, Khai Nok’s stunning tropical beauty and shallow jewel-toned waters have made it a favourite family day-tripping destination. It’s a bustling place in the middle part of the day, but, like the other islands, if you arrange your own boat, it’s possible to time your visit to avoid the speedboat-tour crowds.**

large enough group, this could also be a more cost-effective way to go. Coral Island Club’s bladefish sea scooter and Sasuba (like Snuba) tanks offer non-divers a way to explore the depths further than with standard snorkelling equipment, while its tent camp provides the chance to stay over for a night of tropical stargazing. Another choice for an overnight stay is Coral Island Resort, a collection of simple air-conditioned bungalows arranged around a swimming pool. The cooler evening hours are also when the island’s spectacular hornbills come out to play.

## **RACHA ISLAND**

Just beyond Coral, some 40 minutes away from Phuket by boat, is Racha Yai Island, a well-known diving destination that’s home to a

## **EXPLORE Racha’s MARINE LIFE off the rocky COVES fringing the island**

handful of resorts plus a small local population of Muslim fisherfolk. Most visitors arrive first to Racha’s Bungalow Bay, where The Racha luxury resort occupies much of the beachfront area. There’s also a sprinkling of huts selling snacks and renting out sunbeds.

Racha’s exceptionally clear turquoise waters and vivid marine life found off the rocky coves that fringe the island offer some excellent exploration sights. Again, to avoid the crowds, it’s best to charter your own boat and arrive before or after the peak hours. Like Coral, Racha has no roads, only paths that criss-cross the island



for scenic nature walks through its verdant rural interior, complete with the odd water buffalo bathing in the mud. The paths also lead to other bays, where more accommodation, snorkelling sites and sandy beaches can be found.

## SIRAY ISLAND

Siray is certainly the easiest island to reach as it's connected to Phuket by a causeway just a few kilometres east of downtown Phuket City. Hiring a car or a taxi is essential for getting around here, and the quiet coastal road that rings the island makes for a pleasant drive. The first sight after crossing the bridge is a large "Monkey on Road" sign and a platform where many locals stop to feed fruit to the macaques that

dwell in the mangroves. Pleumsuk ("Happiness") Beach is the perfect spot to enjoy seaside dining with a local flavour while the kids play in the sand. Another scenic stop is at Wat Siray, a small hilltop Buddhist temple with views across to Phuket. Inside is a golden reclining Buddha and a few playful cats.

From here, it's a few minutes' drive to Laem Tukkae, "Gecko Cape", home to Phuket's largest sea gypsy village. With their distinct language and sea-roaming culture, the Moken people reveal a side of the Andaman region far removed from Phuket's glitzy malls and marinas. They are generally shy but do welcome visitors, and a few entrepreneurial gypsy ladies have set up stands at the roadside selling pearl jewellery in a rainbow of colours. Across the bay from the village, the Westin Siray Bay Resort & Spa may be seen spread over a lush headland. The 257-room Westin has its own small beach and offers many family-oriented activities within its peaceful grounds. ■

## take me there

CORAL ISLAND CLUB



1/16 Moo 9 Chaofa Rd, Chalong, Muang, tel: +66 (813) 703 181, coralislandclub.com

CORAL ISLAND RESORT



48/11 Moo 9, Chaofa Ro, Chalong, Coral Island, tel: +66 (76) 218 060, coralislandresort.com

THE RACHA



42/12-13 Moo 5, Rawai, Muang, tel: +66 (76) 355 455, theracha.com

THE WESTIN SIRAY BAY RESORT & SPA



21/4 Moo 1, T. Rasada, A. Muang, tel: +66 (76) 335 600, starwoodhotels.com/westin



JETSTAR HAS GREAT LOW FARES TO PHUKET. VISIT JETSTAR.COM TO BOOK