

STAYING AFLOAT

An aerial photograph taken from the deck of a sailboat, looking down at the passengers and out over the ocean. The water is a deep, vibrant blue. In the distance, a tropical island with a white sandy beach and lush green forest is visible. A long wooden pier extends from the island into the water, ending in a small thatched-roof pavilion. The sailboat's deck is visible in the lower-left corner, with several people sitting and standing. A blue inflatable slide is on the deck. The overall scene is bright and sunny, suggesting a clear day.

A sailing journey through Myanmar's Mergui Archipelago reveals a generation of sea gypsies struggling to sustain their traditional way of life in an era of rapid change

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**A** year ago, a former classical clarinet player from Mozart's hometown of Salzburg and two young German friends based in Shanghai stumbled, or rather sailed, into what they describe as "a maritime Shangri-La." Today, Christoph Schwanitz, a one-time lawyer, lounges on a \$1 million yacht off the deserted shore of an uninhabited island. Bird song from the soaring jungle canopy breaks the primeval silence. The sinking sun burnishes a still-shimmering beach tucked into the tropical green. A dozen eagles circle high overhead, scouting for prey in the water below.

Schwanitz reminisces about planning a pleasure cruise with a friend to India's Andaman Islands. When they ran into bureaucratic red tape and had to abort their plans, they studied the charts, turned the yacht around and headed to the south-western coast of Myanmar, to the Mergui Archipelago.

"There was no infrastructure, no towns, no streets, nothing, a lost island world like a maritime Shangri-La. I had never seen anything like it. Nobody in our group had seen anything like it," he says. "We were absolutely enchanted." So enchanted that Schwanitz and his friend proposed a partnership with the Austrian musician-captain, a veteran of 30 years of sailing in the Mediterranean and Caribbean. A deal was sealed and the *Meta IV*, a 25m ketch built of Thai teak in Phuket, was readied for voyages into what's often called the "Lost World".

This watery realm, isolated from the outside world for decades, encompasses about 800 islands, from jagged outcrops to extensive land masses – one larger than Singapore – rising to hills hundreds of metres high and clothed in dense vegetation. The surrounding Andaman Sea is believed by scientists to harbour some of the world's greatest marine biodiversity. The islands

are home to the Moken, shy, gentle people who worship the spirits of nature and have long plied the surrounding waters, from which they draw their sustenance and around which their unique culture is based.

Along with seven friends, I boarded the *Meta IV* in the port town of Kawthaung at the southern end of Myanmar. We steered a northwesterly course as the crew hoisted the national flags of our group – Thai, American, Australian, British and Indian. The ensuing six-day voyage was to combine sheer pleasure with probes into the natural environment, tourism development and the lives of the Moken.

After two days of glorious sailing on an unruffled sea, we dropped anchor off a marine jewel – Myanmar's only marine national park, Lampi, a place the Moken call "Mother Island". Within its 204km<sup>2</sup> lies a cornucopia of flora and fauna ranging from 228 species of birds to 73



**SET SAIL**  
Not many vessels are approved to enter the Mergui Archipelago



types of seaweed. The evergreen forests host nearly 200 plant species and within this green haven roam mouse deer, gibbons and macaques that amble down to the beaches to catch crabs (they have a menu of 42 species to choose from). There's even one wild elephant, the lone survivor of a small herd that was transported to Lampi from the mainland.

Unfortunately, that's not the whole story of Lampi or the archipelago. Beneath the surface of its crystalline waters and in secluded swathes of forest, man's depredations are increasingly evident – blast fishing, inshore trawling, illegal logging and wildlife poaching among other signs of outsiders moving in and making their mark. As is the case with so many near-pristine spots around the world, the race is on to protect the treasure trove contained here before it's too late.

On Lampi, we met with staffers of Instituto Oikos, an Italian environmental group working on a three-year plan to train recently assigned park

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rangers. Though the group was established in 1996, there were no rangers present until last year. Now, they're here to implement a management plan and help devise ways for the local people to serve as Lampi's protectors – essentially enabling them to derive income from eco-tourism.

“This is a very delicate transitional period and right now we hope to have better and more sustainable development,” Julia Tedesco, the Italian woman running the project, told us after emerging in snorkel and fins from the waters off the coast, where she was surveying the state of the coral. “We have hope, otherwise we could not be here. But it will be difficult.”

Perhaps just as delicate as the environment is the future of the Moken. The world's foremost expert on these nomadic sea gypsies, French anthropologist Jacques Ivanoff, has described

them as “the soul of the archipelago.” It's feared that the rich culture of some of the world's last hunter-gatherer nomads is fast fading, as are their numbers through intermarriage with the Burmese and settlement on the mainland, where they become disconnected from their roots.

Often referred to as sea gypsies, these Austronesian people migrated to the offshore islands of western Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand, probably from China, as many as 4,000 years ago. Until recent times, they spent most of each year roaming the region in their *kabang*, hand-hewn houseboats. They collected molluscs and sea cucumbers, speared fish and dove to ear-busting depths to uncover valuable pearl oysters. Today, very few live the nomadic life, having been moved into island settlements by the government or driven to find work at mainland mines and

farms. Only a few old men still know how to build the floating abodes, fashioned as symbolic representations of humans.

Trawlers, many from Thailand, have depleted their shallow fishing grounds and the Moken cannot compete with better-equipped Burmese divers in the search for sea cucumbers and oysters. As a result, they've been forced to rely on snaring small squid, typically using cheap plastic lures. Thai and Burmese fishermen, on the other hand, use powerful kerosene lamps to attract the large squid species in vast quantities.

“In 20 or 30 years, the Burmese will dominate Moken culture. Only a little of it may remain,” says Khin Maung Htwe, a Burmese married to a Moken, at Ma Kyone Galet village, home to some of the 3,000 Moken and Burmese living in five settlements within the park. Tedesco hopes the



# *It's feared that the rich culture of some of the world's last hunter-gatherer nomads is fast fading*

Moken can be employed in eco-tourism. "They'll have to adapt to the changing situation to survive."

The latest change to impact the "Lost World" is tourism, and the 2013-14 season has seen the biggest-ever influx of visitors, about 2,000 people or 2.5 tourists for every island. That said, given the remote geography, long-standing government restrictions and the expense – the only way to come here is aboard pricey, live-aboard yachts or dive boats – one of Asia's last tourism frontiers is unlikely to be inundated by tourists anytime soon.

Upon leaving Ma Kyone Galet, we cruised past a 5km-long beach on Lampi's western shore that lacked a single footprint and by dinghy approached vast stretches of mangroves with eerie, gnarled roots visible high above the water level. Within this forbidding, lush vastness, pythons slumbered on tree branches.

**FISH FIGHT**  
The Moken struggle to compete with better-equipped divers

## A Moken miscellany

### THE MOKEN BOAST

a rich literary tradition, orally passing stories and poems down the generations. One epic takes 11 hours over three days to recite.

### RESEARCH BY A SWEDISH

group found that the underwater vision of Moken children is twice as good as that of Europeans.

### WHILE MOST MOKEN

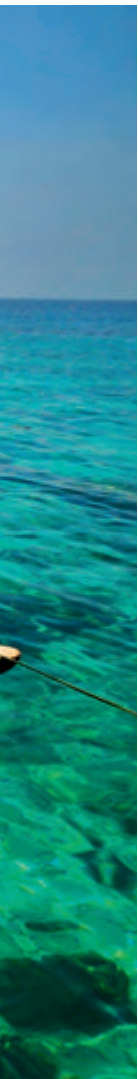
are illiterate, one study discovered that some of its divers were able to clearly identify as many as 80 species of hard coral.

### ALTHOUGH THE MOKEN

now face an uncertain future, their language includes no word for "worry".

### TRADITIONAL OFFERINGS

to their spirits – honey, betel, dolphin meat – can be more difficult to find, so substitutes must be used. "Red Bull" energy drink and plastic toys are favourites.



## Visiting the “Lost World”

### HOW TO GET THERE

Phuket and Kawthaung (transportation from Yangon can be arranged) are currently the only places to board the tourist vessels that are permitted to enter the Mergui Archipelago.

### WHEN TO GO

The season runs from the start of November to the end of April. Tourism is virtually non-existent during the monsoons.

### YACHTS, DIVE BOATS, RESORTS

Burma Boating, [burmaboating.com](http://burmaboating.com)  
Dive and Sail Thailand, [thailanddiveandsail.com](http://thailanddiveandsail.com)  
Boating guide, [burmaliveboards.com](http://burmaliveboards.com)  
Myanmar Andaman Resort, [myanmarandamanresort.com](http://myanmarandamanresort.com)



That evening, in a secluded bay, the only sounds were those of the sea gently lapping at our anchored boat and of night music from the nearby treelines. During our six-day trip, we encountered only four other tourist-carrying vessels and one shark-sleek super yacht, signs that the archipelago is on the map of the world’s super wealthy.

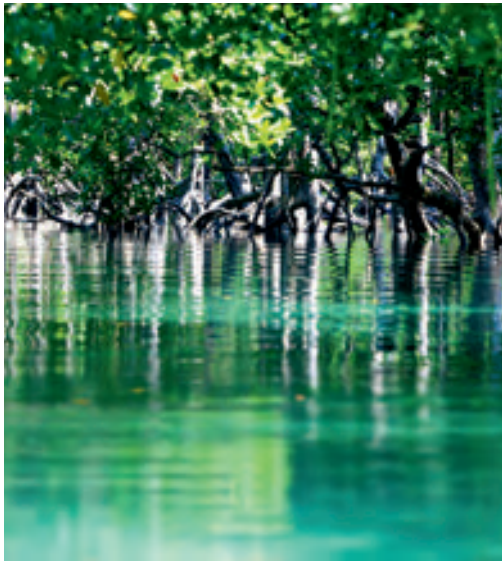
A dozen concessions have been granted for island resorts and others are being negotiated, but so far only one exists, though Myanmar’s richest tycoon, Tay Za, is building another on the unfortunately named *Chin Kite Kyunn* (Mosquito Bite Island). A long concrete jetty and two helicopter pads are in place while construction continues on nine bungalows just steps from the beach but screened by trees. Less than two hours by speedboat from Kawthaung, on a U-shaped bay of McLeod Island, the Myanmar Andaman Resort welcomes divers and those who travel the globe in search of tranquil places – like

71-year-old Manfred Kuchenmuller and his wife Margaret. They opted out of Thailand, fearing swarms of backpackers at all-night beach parties.


“We wanted somewhere more secluded, less touristy, less travelled. We wanted to come to some place where there was just nature,” Margaret says, as her husband interjects with: “Pristine. I think a lot of people search for that. But this is definitely a place which meets those expectations.”

The Moken, too, would like to keep their homeland from being overrun by outsiders, though in their case the goal is to protect traditional livelihoods that are dependent on what nature provides.

“If many people come it will not be easy for Moken people to earn a living. We do not want to do anything else but what we have always done,” one man says while his family and the members of several others rest in the shade of trees on



an island opposite Tay Za’s rising resort. They came from a neighbouring island to fish for squid and comb the beach, which is where they sleep. Children romp and laugh, with nothing but the bounty of nature for playthings.

Aboard the *Meta IV*, I read a book by Walter Grainge White, a missionary who once lived among the Moken and spoke their language. Nearly a hundred years ago, he warned that without protection and benign governance, the Moken would be absorbed by more dominant neighbours and, along with other similar races, be relegated to “the category of the Mohicans”. But he also charted a hopeful vision of a near-Eden, one in which the Moken occupied their rightful place: “In this dream I see the Mergui Archipelago, one of the beauty spots of the East, not denuded of its jungle and laid bare, but planted with flourishing settlements... the beauty of its bays preserved.” 

**FEELING DETACHED**  
The Moken claim that the islands became separated from the mainland after a great mythological flood

เป็นที่รำลึกกันว่าหมู่เกาะมะริด ประเทศพม่า มีความงดงามและอุดมสมบูรณ์ธรรมชาติ เหมือนหลุดเข้าไปในอดีต บนเกาะปกคลุมไปด้วยแมกไม้หนาแน่น ไม่มีถนนหรือสาธารณูปโภค ใต้น้ำอุดมไปด้วยสัตว์โลกใต้ทะเลหลากชนิด และยังเป็นที่อาศัยของชาวมอแกน หรือชาวฮิปซีทะเล ผู้มีความเรียบง่ายและมีวิถีชีวิตผูกพันกับท้องทะเล

เมื่อได้เข้ามาสำรวจเกาะหลักอย่างเกาะลานปี เราก็ได้พบความหลากหลายทางชีวภาพ ในพื้นที่เพียง 200 ตารางกิโลเมตรบนเกาะ มีพืชพันธุ์และสัตว์ต่างๆกว่า 200 ชนิด แต่เพียงปู ก็มีกว่า 42 ชนิดให้เลือก

เมื่อพม่ามีการเปิดประเทศ แม่นอนว่าหมู่เกาะแห่งนี้ต้องมีมาตรการในการอนุรักษ์ทั้งธรรมชาติและชีวิตความเป็นอยู่ชาวมอแกน การเข้ามาของนักท่องเที่ยวส่งผลกระทบต่อวิถีชีวิตของชาวมอแกนอย่างหลีกเลี่ยงไม่ได้ เมื่อธุรกิจเข้ามา ชาวมอแกนเองต้องปรับตัวให้อยู่รอดและอาจทำให้การดำเนินชีวิตแบบชาวเลดั้งเดิมสูญหายไป หลายคนนั้น ไม่รู้วิธีออกเรือจับปลาเสียแล้ว เราได้แต่หวังว่าหมู่เกาะมะริด จะได้รับการปกป้องและพัฒนาไปในรูปแบบที่ยั่งยืน

Check out our destination guide on page 119 and book your flights at bangkokair.com

