

The Mergui Archipelago & The Moken

A collection of press articles for those who want to learn more



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NOTES: 1. THIS CHART IS A REPRODUCTION OF THE ORIGINAL CHART PUBLISHED BY THE HYDROGRAPHIC OFFICE, SIMONS STRAIT, LONDON, IN 1970. 2. THE CHART IS A REPRODUCTION OF THE ORIGINAL CHART PUBLISHED BY THE HYDROGRAPHIC OFFICE, SIMONS STRAIT, LONDON, IN 1970. 3. THE CHART IS A REPRODUCTION OF THE ORIGINAL CHART PUBLISHED BY THE HYDROGRAPHIC OFFICE, SIMONS STRAIT, LONDON, IN 1970.

ANDAMAN SEA
BURMA AND THAILAND
MYEIK ARCHIPELAGO
DEPTHS IN METRES
SCALE 1:300 000 at lat 17°00'

Depths are in metres and are related to Chart Datum, which approximately is the level of Mean High Water Springs. The datum is the level of Mean High Water Springs. The datum is the level of Mean High Water Springs. The datum is the level of Mean High Water Springs.

WATERS PAIRS
Mean High Water Springs
Mean Low Water Springs
Mean High Water Neap Tides
Mean Low Water Neap Tides
Mean High Water Ordinary Tides
Mean Low Water Ordinary Tides
Mean High Water Spring Tides
Mean Low Water Spring Tides

CHART 578 ANNOTATIONS
Particulars of the Myeik Archipelago
Particulars of the Myeik Archipelago
Particulars of the Myeik Archipelago
Particulars of the Myeik Archipelago

Tide Levels referred to Datum of Soundings

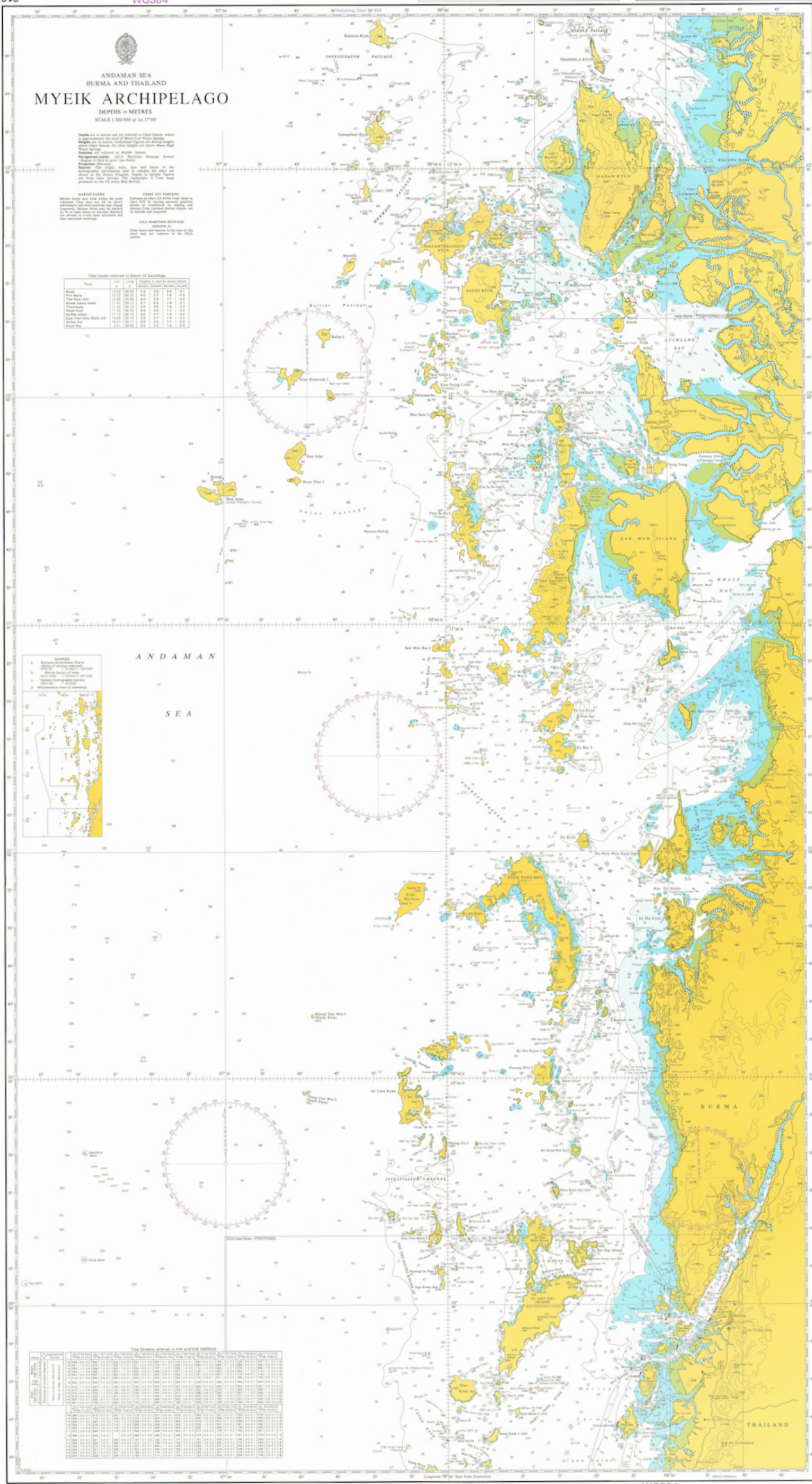
Time	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
0000	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0100	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0200	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0300	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0400	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0500	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0600	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0700	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0800	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0900	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1000	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1100	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1200	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1300	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1400	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1500	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1600	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1700	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1800	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1900	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
2000	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
2100	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
2200	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0 </tr		



ANDAMAN
SEA

Tide Tables referred to Mean High Water Springs

Time	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
0000	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0100	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0200	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0300	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0400	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0500	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0600	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0700	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0800	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
0900	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1000	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1100	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1200	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1300	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1400	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1500	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1600	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1700	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1800	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
1900	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
2000	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
2100	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
2200	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0



Financial Times

April 19, 2013

The lost world: Myanmar's Mergui islands

By Sophy Roberts

The 800 islands of Myanmar's Mergui archipelago are rarely visited and almost completely undeveloped. Now, as the country opens up, they could become the next frontier for Asian tourism

The 2,000-odd Moken people, or sea gypsies, live among the 800 islands of the Mergui archipelago off southern Myanmar. The Moken claim that the islands, a chain that stretches some 400km, were detached from the mainland after a great mythological flood. Looking at them from our yacht, the story does not seem that far-fetched – we appear to have the entire Andaman Sea to ourselves.

The water is the bright, uncompromising blue of a child's felt-tip pen, turning to pale green where the sea thins around the sandbars. Around us are the high points of islands – scores of them, poking up from the water like the conical peaks of sunken volcanoes from a lost world. Each is covered in dense jungle of mahogany, teak and strangler figs that grow with such fecundity that they seem to devour the islands' flanks, advancing upon the ocean itself. Some isles have rocky foreshores; others have white beaches that run for miles. At one small island we drop anchor to snorkel in its creamy shallows where languid tides have moulded underwater ridges to create pockets full of shells.

The skipper of our 60ft ketch, *Colona II*, is Freddy Storheil, a 69-year-old Norwegian. Having sailed this archipelago more than 100 times over 17 years, his experience is precious in a place where knowledge is sparse. The islands are only known to a few keen divers and ethnographers, and to the outside world through occasional reports of illegal logging, dynamite fishing and in 1998, an alleged massacre of 59 civilians by Burmese military on Christie Island. Even Google is challenged by Mergui – searches throw up little of value because the islands have been visited by so few. A Mergui government official tells me that around 1,700 travellers have come during this year's main tourist season, which runs from October until the end of April.

In the three days since leaving the mainland port of Kawthaung, the access point for cruising the islands, the only boats we have encountered are a single tourist vessel, two Moken *kabang* or "mother boats" (the 10m-long boats on which the sea gypsies live), numerous Moken dugout canoes, and long-tail fishing boats. In the central and southern islands we're exploring, the biggest village is Ma Kyone Galet, on Bo Cho island. Of the 600 inhabitants, around 150 are Moken.

Storheil can navigate by sight. Still, he has never previously noticed the beach where we stop to swim – an exquisite, bristling bone-white, which is the best I have seen anywhere in the world. The island, a mile or more in circumference, is unnamed on the charts. "Mergui sometimes feels like you're exploring the New World," says Storheil. Except for one difference: in the age of Magellan, there was no red tape.

The islands were completely off limits to tourists until 1996, when the first parts of the archipelago were opened up to diveboats. Strict regulations remain,

creating headaches for visitors, but at the same time protecting the islands from a tourist industry that has spent the past half-century gobbling up beaches from the Canaries to the Caribbean. One local tour operator tells me around 40 Myanmar boats are registered to operate in the area, though Storheil says there are only about four operating regularly. A few luxury charters come from Phuket in Thailand, a two-day journey for boats travelling at Colona II's six knots. All have to pay the permit fees: around \$4,000 for two years, as well as a \$100-a-head fee per passenger on each trip. Getting these permits used to take weeks when Mergui was defined as a "remote region" in "pre-democracy" Myanmar, but things are getting easier. Permits can now be granted on arrival in Kawthaung, a 90-minute flight from Yangon.

More changes were introduced on March 10: with a couple of weeks' notice, visitors can now enter and exit Myanmar via different ports of entry. This means end-to-end tours of the country are now possible – starting in the northern jungles, finishing on Mergui's beaches. Jay Tindall, co-founder of New York- and Bangkok-based tour operator Remote Lands, says this change will provide a significant boost for Mergui.

The red tape may be loosening its grip, but foreigners who aren't on boats in Mergui still have their movement restricted to within 5km of Kawthaung's immigration office, which limits them to a few bars lining the waterfront, a night at the Honey Bear Hotel, or a 15-minute speedboat ride to the archipelago's first resort, the Andaman Club. I was warned that government minders accompanied every vessel. In the early days, they carried firearms but today our "official" works for the tourist department, not the military. He is articulate, English-speaking, and has a deep knowledge of the area. He also works as the boat's chef and divemaster, and he and a second guide translate so I can understand the Moken's complex and compelling story.

Unable to cut down trees since 1997's logging ban, the Moken say they can no longer build the boats that let them go to sea for up to eight months a year. Fishing restrictions and competition mean they can't rely on trading goods such as sea slugs and pearl oysters, which they used to collect while free-diving to depths of 25m. Instead, most members of this vanishing tribe – exploited over centuries by Chinese traders, Malay pirates, Japanese occupiers and British colonialists – are trying to convert to a more sedentary way of life. It is not an easy transition and in the villages created for the Moken by the government, trash is everywhere. The Moken themselves describe the cultural erosion taking place in a gentle, unaccusing way.

But, still, something of the sea gypsies' old ways exist. We swim with Moken children off the back of our boat and the way they move seems more fish than man. We watch them spear fish, with spectacular efficiency – so accustomed are they to their environment that they have developed a way of improving their sight under water by overruling the eye's reflex to widen the pupils.

The disappearing Moken, however, are only one side of Mergui's story. The other lies beneath the water. Among the islands we visit, much of the coral is dead – pockmarked with craters from dynamite fishing. One former divemaster and resort manager I speak to says that among scuba enthusiasts, the Mergui

archipelago has a reputation for being “fished out and bombed out”, its treasures spent.

While the marine degradation is, indeed, significant, others will argue that Mergui’s story isn’t over, it is only just beginning. Storheil says some decent dive sites remain; locals talk about Black Rock, where manta rays gather. More than anything, there is space and wilderness without any signs of humanity.

On yet another beach, I run my fingers through sand ground to soft powder by the southwest monsoon that passes through from May to October. At a guess, the sand must run for about 5km, the lack of development put into sharp relief when destinations such as the Maldives have resorts squeezing 64 luxury villas out of beaches just 950m long. Look at Mergui in this way and the archipelago thrums with potential – the flat, seaplane-friendly ocean in the dry season, the larger islands’ freshwater waterfalls and streams.

This potential is not lost on investors, who are crawling all over Myanmar. Tay Za, who is one of Myanmar’s biggest tycoons (and who has been criticised by the US government for links with the former regime), recently bought an island. Gerald Schreiber, a German investor in Myanmar who owns Amara Ocean Resort in Ngapali, is launching a luxury six-cabin sailing boat in Mergui from November. And the big boats are coming in, too, in search of new frontiers. The 149ft Princess Iolanthe is now available for charter in the archipelago at €150,000 per week, and, according to the South China Morning Post, Le Grand Bleu, a 370ft superyacht formerly owned by Roman Abramovich, was seen in the area this month.

Storheil says he was recently moored off Palu Bada when his peace was abruptly interrupted by two Russians riding jet-skis. And he tells me the passengers on the Colona II’s next trip will be Scandinavian hoteliers, seeking not encounters with Moken, but islands suitable for a resort.

The superyachts may be arriving but I am content with Colona II, eating lobster for dinner and sleeping on deck in a part of the world that feels like it has slipped off the map. I listen to Storheil’s stories, to hornbills, swifts and wild animals concealed in jungles where one day, perhaps, a honeymoon suite will stand in place of ancient banyans with roots like melted wax. Perhaps such a future can bring a better life to the people of the archipelago, yet I remain unsure about how much development this spectacular but fragile place can stand.

The New York Times

March 17, 2013

Sailing Among Islands of Mystery

By Miki Meek

I arrived on a chaotic pier in the border town of Ranong, Thailand, feeling as if I was about to throw up as I watched three-story fishing boats chug by. I had persuaded my two younger brothers and eight girlfriends to fly across the world and pool a large chunk of money so we could charter a live-aboard boat. The

plan was to sail for six days through the Mergui Archipelago, a chain of 800 islands off Myanmar's coast that's become the holy grail of sublime, empty beaches.

It sounded simple enough. But I had major, gut-wrenching anxiety because this trip, which cost us almost \$10,000 in cash and wired funds (not including the cost of the flights there) was so off the grid that it couldn't have been organized by a mainstream outfitter that would have sent a representative there an hour in advance, holding a piece of cardboard aloft with our names on it. I was on a pier waiting for a man I didn't know to take me on a boat to another boat that we would live on.

The feeling that you're winging it is only natural for this sort of journey. While the number of foreign travelers to main-land Myanmar has jumped nearly 30 percent over the last year, this mostly uninhabited region spread out over 250 miles in the Andaman Sea has remained on the fringe because of government restrictions and a lack of detailed travel information, even in the most recent guidebooks. Only tour boats with special permits and a government minder are allowed in.

After combing through online discussion boards, I chose one company based in Yangon called Moby Dick because its e-mails were thorough and prompt, and I could always reach it on Skype. Still, a constant loop of "What if no one picks us up? What if there isn't even a boat?" ran in my head until a middle-age Burmese man in a ball cap and blue plaid shorts walked up and shook my hand. He introduced himself as our guide, Thaingar.

We walked to the end of the pier and got into a couple of wooden longboats waiting on the Pakchan River, a natural border between Thailand and Myanmar, that would take us to our live-aboard. As we waited for a mini-traffic jam of goods, families and construction workers commuting between the two countries to clear, a monk stepped into our boat and pulled a cellphone from the folds of his orange robe. He snapped a picture of us, then wrote down his phone number and said to call if we needed anything. I decided to take this as an auspicious omen for what still felt like an unknown trip.

AS WE ENTERED the port of Kawthaung, the southernmost tip of Myanmar and the main jumping-off point to the Mergui Archipelago, the silhouette of our liveaboard, a Burmese-style junk boat, came into view. It was set against a mash-up of wooden houses on stilts, decrepit buildings with names like Honey Bear Hotel and gold stupas peeking out of jagged, green hills. I had been expecting a pretty bare-bones setup, but the boat was actually nice. A hundred feet long, it had a fresh coat of green paint, teak lounge chairs shaded by a white canopy, and cozy, open-air sleeping cabins. Myanmar's flag, decorated with a white star, waved from the mast.

With our ship in sight, we still had an entry process ahead of us. The archipelago officially opened to tourists in 1997, but the government tightly monitors who travels in because of military operations on a handful of off-limit islands. Tour boat companies must submit the names of passengers to the country's capital, Naypyidaw, several weeks before departing, and can travel only to approved areas. Still, Thaingar had to collect our passports and take them -- along with a \$40 travel visa fee and a \$140 entry fee each -- to the

immigration office in Kawthaung. When he returned about an hour later, it was with the news that immigration was holding on to five of my friends' passports until we finished the trip and returned to Kawthaung. On the upside, immigration did not send a minder to join our trip because their office had run out of them that day.

So we proceeded, unaccompanied, heading northwest into the inky blue Andaman Sea. We cracked open and passed around cold, green cans of Myanmar Lager Beer. I squeezed between my brothers, Josh and Jeremy, near the bow where the captain had placed white mums, rice grains and a bowl of ripe fruit, offerings for a safe journey.

We continued for a couple of hours, past rocky outcroppings backlit by the final pink rays of the sun. Once it was dark, the captain, Kyaw Naing, stopped the boat for the night to avoid running into fishing traps, which resembled bamboo fortresses on water. We ate a quick dinner of pork with basil and a brothy soup with chicken on the bone. Plates of crisp, sliced rose apples appeared for dessert. The generator then went off, and we unrolled our blankets for bed, while in the distance, boats hunting squid gave off a white glow. Bright lights lure squid to the surface.

This began a cycle of days and nights that now bleed together in my memory. Early mornings in the Mergui Archipelago reveal a monochromatic sky and sea, melded into a cerulean blue. We marked the time by the land that we passed. The captain navigated around small islands covered with thick jungle and rimmed with white beaches. Around the 40-mile mark, I saw a newly built jetty for a resort set to open in a year or two that is reportedly owned by U Tay Za, a tycoon that the U.S. Treasury labeled as a crony of the country's former military regime. (For now, the only operating hotel is the 22-room Myanmar Andaman Resort on Macleod Island, a two-hour speedboat ride from Kawthaung.)

We arrived on a huge swath of deserted beach on Nyaung Wee Island as dark clouds started rolling in. Clear blue waters from high tide left patterns of lines that extended for more than a mile, and mist hovered around treetops that looked like giant, green yawning monsters. The only sign that someone had been there before was a plastic Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle my friend Jen found, curiously buried in the sand. I put on snorkel gear and circled around, but gave up when I couldn't find much coral or marine life.

It began to pour, and we took cover under leaves, then ran back into the warm ocean. There cannot be a better way to swim or float on your back than this. It stopped only when lightning started, and we had to make our way back to the boat.

THE IDYLL ENDED soon enough. The next day, Thaingar had scheduled an early-afternoon stop at Bo Cho Island, a place I felt uneasy about after reading this description in the itinerary: "Observe the daily life of the almost extinct sea-Gypsies." This was a reference to the Moken, a nomadic ethnic group of about 2,000 that has lived on boats in the archipelago for at least 250 years. Expert divers and beachcombers, they roamed around the Andaman Sea subsisting on fish, sea cucumbers, mollusks and sandworms.

But in the late 1990s, the government settled some Moken on Bo Cho Island. A Buddhist monk arrived soon after, built a gold pagoda that houses a live crocodile and started to evangelize. Burmese fishermen moved in, too, resulting in a small village with a sandy path, littered with plastic bottles, running through the middle of it.

I felt foolish standing around the village in a sun hat during the hottest part of the day with no real reason to be there. A boy in a red shirt adorned with an image of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's pro-democracy leader, ran up to each of us and asked in English: "Hello, what is your name? Where do you come from?"

Most of the adults observed us indifferently from small restaurants, boat-repair shops and thatched-roof homes with satellite dishes. But two women eventually motioned for me to come sit with them on their porch. We could not talk with each other, so I shared some of my old family photos from the 1980s that I had stored on my phone. Those caused some laughs. When Thaingar rounded us up an hour later and took us back to the boat, I felt torn about the visit. The zoo-like aspect of it was unsettling, but I also felt that skipping it would have meant taking a stance that basically said, "We love visiting all your beautiful beaches, but we'd rather not see the human impact of your formerly oppressive government's policies."

I later connected with Jacques Ivanoff, an anthropologist who studies the Moken and who is trying to build a museum dedicated to them in Myanmar. He told me he has had to change his views over the years. "Even if I don't really like it, if foreigners come respectfully and aren't asking the Moken to recreate ceremonial traditions, maybe it means that more people will become aware." Still, he fears that Myanmar's Moken will end up with the same fate that befell a population of Moken the Thai government settled in the Surin Islands. They're now a tourist attraction.

THE REST OF OUR STAY was dominated by the water and beaches that most people travel all this way for. We stopped by a seahorse-shaped island that forms the core of Lampi Island Marine National Park, Myanmar's first and only marine park. It's covered with thick forests of old-growth mangroves and is surrounded by clear, shallow waters. Sandbars give the illusion that you can stand on the surface of the ocean a half-mile out from land.

We snorkeled around the park, and as in a few other spots, I noticed ashy, gray coral and few fish. Thaingar explained it by pointing out a sign posted on the beach that read "No Dynamite Fishing." For years, fishing boats have been dropping explosives into the water as a way to quickly gather large catches. But there's never been a real authority in place to crack down on it, even in the national park. "It's a constant challenge, looking for places where the coral isn't dead," Thaingar told me over dinner. "And then in places where the coral is coming back, we have to ask fishermen to be careful about where they drop anchors." We finally found places where the living coral outnumbered the dead over the next couple of days as we hopped around islands with names like Tar Yar, Shark and Red Monkey. Schools of angelfish swam over black sea urchins and giant clams. Pink sea anemones swayed with the current. The backs of our

legs and arms burned from swimming with our heads down for too long. We never ran into other travelers.

That isolation ended one evening when we started heading back south and pulled into Great Swinton Island, a small trading port where we stopped to sleep and pick up fresh water. I took a kayak out with my brother Jeremy and we couldn't help but paddle closer to a massive red fishing boat that looked as if it had just escaped the end of the world. Twenty-five mostly shirtless men hung out on the back. A man with tattoos spread across half his chest then leaned down and handed me a squid. I thanked him, and with nowhere else to put it, dropped it on my lap. We gave the squid to the cook onboard, who hung it up by a tentacle to dry. From his kitchen, I could see a small rubber plantation on Great Swinton, next to an empty patch where trees had been logged. On the other side of the island, a resort may be built, possibly displacing a seasonal fishing village that runs along the beach.

Our journey through this remote region was beginning to not feel so distant. That night, three of us ditched our beds and lay on deck, staring straight up at a half moon and stars that looked like pinholes punched out of the sky. Our sound-track was a boat nearby, filled with fishermen giving their all to karaoke versions of Burmese pop songs. Small waves rocked us slightly from side to side. Peace, and sleep, were fleeting.

The New York Times
January 13, 2013

Where To Go In 2013

1. Rio de Janeiro

[...]

41. Getaria, Spain

[...]

42. Mergui Islands, Myanmar

Live-aboard diving in a remote archipelago.

With white sands, coconut trees and 800 mostly uninhabited islands, the Mergui Archipelago on the southern coast of Myanmar has been tantalizing travelers for decades -- sitting right there on the map but seemingly just out of reach. That's changing as the country takes baby steps toward democracy and the region becomes more accessible to tourists with a budget for live-aboard boat trips. Only a handful of companies are running trips to the Mergui islands right now, so expect all the clichés: lazing on deserted islands inhabited by a seminomadic population.

43. The Falkland Islands

[...]

The International Herald Tribune
April 26, 2012

Paradise in a police state; As Myanmar opens up, idyllic archipelago stays largely closed to tourists

By Thomas Fuller

The Mergui Archipelago could become the next frontier for Asian tourism. But even as the country leaves behind military rule, the islands, nearly empty, remain paradise in a police state.

The beaches of this southern Burmese archipelago are postcard perfect, easily fulfilling the clichés of a tropical paradise: Ribbons of white sand glow in the bright sun, all framed by the azure waters of a coral-filled sea.

A vast majority of the 800 islands here are also something else: empty.

In a part of the world otherwise packed with humanity, a visitor can travel an entire afternoon in a wooden boat weaving among uninhabited islands and see only a handful of fishermen in dugout canoes trolling for squid.

As Myanmar opens up to the world, the Mergui Archipelago, as it is known, could become the next frontier for Asian tourism.

But it is not a project for tomorrow. Even as Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, leaves behind decades of military rule, the archipelago remains paradise in a police state.

The few dozen tourists who visit the area each month are closely monitored. Eight copies of their passports are made and distributed to various elements of the authorities, including the military intelligence service and the Special Branch of the police, two bodies that during the rule of the military junta were tasked with tracking down enemies of the state.

The reasons for the security precautions are unclear. A former officer in the Burmese military says the government wants to cover up a massacre that took place on one of the islands.

U Phone Win, a businessman who owns an island in the archipelago and hopes to purchase a small cruise ship to take visitors around the area, says tight security is a pretext by shady interests seeking to protect their illegal fishing, logging and smuggling businesses.

"If Myanmar could develop these islands, they could receive millions of tourists," Mr. Phone Win said. "But some of the authorities are trying to monopolize the area to make money for their own benefit."

"They are trying to control the area," he said. "There's a lot of corruption."

Despite a campaign to promote tourism in other parts of the country, getting to the Mergui Archipelago can stump even the most dedicated and experienced adventure travelers.

With rare exceptions, foreign visitors are required to get prior approval from the country's capital, Naypyidaw, a process that can take several weeks, if permission is granted at all. Upon arrival, visitors are charged vague "access fees" equivalent to upward of \$100.

Most of the time, visitors are allowed to travel only on expensive, government-approved chartered boats. The government first allowed this kind of travel in 1997 but required that a soldier with a firearm be onboard at all times.

That rule has since changed. "All the guests complained," said U Ko Pai, who guides foreign divers in the archipelago. Today, the boats must still have a government-approved guide.

Myanmar's president, U Thein Sein, has pushed through a raft of political and economic changes during his 12 months in office. But those changes have not trickled down to local officials here, says Mr. Ko Pai.

"At the moment, the changes are on the top floors," Mr. Ko Pai said in an interview. "At lower levels, not many things are changing yet."

Mr. Phone Win, the investor, says anyone interested in setting up a tourism business in the archipelago must reckon with a thicket of government restrictions and bans. Basic communications equipment like radios and satellite phones are not allowed without a license, and getting one is "very difficult," he said. The government does not allow access to the area by private planes with pontoons, which could help serve some of the more remote islands.

A handful of islands are off-limits altogether, including some with military bases. U Aung Lynn Htut, a former major in the Burmese military, says the military has something to hide.

He says he was involved in a military operation ordered by the country's former dictator, U Than Shwe: a massacre on Christie Island, at the southern edge of the archipelago, in 1998.

Fifty-nine people were killed, including women and children, said Mr. Aung Lynn Htut, who defected to the United States in 2005.

The top military brass were after insurgents smuggling weapons, but the people executed by soldiers were civilians who had come to the island to collect firewood, Mr. Aung Lynn Htut said by e-mail.

Mr. Aung Lynn Htut's account was partly published last year in *The Irrawaddy*, a magazine that covers news about Myanmar.

Asked for comment on the allegations, U Ko Ko Hlaing, an adviser to Mr. Thein Sein, said by e-mail that he had "no knowledge" of the alleged massacre and there was no connection between it and the security restrictions. The government limits travel of foreigners to places where the situation is "not so secured," Mr. Ko Ko Hlaing said without elaborating.

For the employees at the only working hotel on the archipelago, the 22-room Myanmar Andaman Resort on Khayin Khwa Island, the weather, not security, is their main safety concern.

For six months of the year, the Mergui Archipelago is lashed by a monsoon that pushes in from the southwest, forcing the resort to close.

Large swells of as much as 3 meters, or 10 feet, during the monsoon, which starts in May, make travel through the archipelago difficult.

Yet even outside monsoon season, boat journeys can be rough. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the country's opposition movement, became seasick while campaigning for elections on the few inhabited islands of the archipelago. She needed a week to recuperate from what her doctor described as a combination of motion sickness and exhaustion.

Even by the standards of Myanmar's poor infrastructure, the archipelago is difficult to reach. Two small airports on the mainland strip closest to the islands, in the cities of Kawthaung and Myeik, have flights on aging aircraft from

Yangon, Myanmar's main city and the primary gateway to the country. But flight schedules are unpredictable.

That could change if tourists reach a critical mass, as in neighboring Thailand. A group of Chinese businessmen traveled through the archipelago in February in search of islands suitable for large hotels, Mr. Ko Pai said. But one major consideration for investors is that many of the smaller islands do not have sources of fresh water.

There are some signs, literally, that that is already happening.

Newly erected signboards in Kawthaung, where security is more relaxed, have replaced the old messages exhorting Burmese to be patriotic and wary of foreign influences.

The new signs, written in Burmese and English, say, "Warmly Welcome and Take Care of Tourists."

The Globe and Mail (Canada)

April 16, 2011 Saturday

Wake up with a wild boar, hike with reticulated pythons, paddle with swarming bats, bed down at night with lizards and macaques

By Bruce Kirkby

We arrived in the Mergui Archipelago, in the Indian Ocean just off the southern coast of Myanmar, on a powerboat, following a bumpy two-hour ride from the port city of Kawthong. Tropical darkness had long since enveloped the ocean by the time the captain dropped anchor. Somewhere off the bow, amid inky shadows and starlight reflected on the waves, was the faint outline of a tropical isle. The sound of surf carried on a warm breeze. Stripping naked, we tied our clothes in garbage bags and leaped overboard. Ten minutes later, exhausted, salty and sandy, we were tossed ashore by a crashing wave at the feet of the island's caretaker. After nibbling on an enormous papaya, my wife, Christine, and I collapsed into our small mesh tent, the world around us quickly fading to a point, like the image on a TV as it is turned off.

The eastern sky was already flushing pink when I was awoken by a deep snort, which I assumed to be from Christine. Rolling to elbow her, I found myself face to face with a wild boar, peering in through the mesh. White tusks curving up from grey whiskers, it sniffed, tossed its nose defiantly several times, and then waddled away to continue rooting through the undergrowth.

Seconds later, a troop of long-tailed macaques raced past. Christine and I watched from our sleeping bags, giggling with excitement. Monkeys? Right outside our tent?! Babies clung to their mother's bellies. Bold adolescents approached the tent and peered in, our slightest movement sending them racing away in shrieks. At the end came elder males, aloof and bulky, swaggering on their knuckles. Chasing crabs along the beach, the group danced and screamed, slowly melting away. Offshore, a pair of white-bellied sea eagles hunted the shallows, schools of fish rippling the surface like rain in their dance of escape.

Tracks from a busy night covered the sand outside our tent: civet cat, monitor lizard, sea turtle and mouse deer (small, hoofed creatures with a tapered snout, standing just 30 centimetres tall). In a bamboo grove, we spotted the thick coils of a reticulated python. Feral elephants roam these parts, and the Moken (a nomadic sea-based tribe) claimed to have occasionally seen tiger prints on the beaches.

The abundance was in stark contrast to Borneo's north coast, where we were a month earlier on a long sea-kayaking voyage. There, we saw not a single animal apart from domestic cows grazing in clear-cuts. Rivers stained the sea red, bleeding topsoil from a ravaged interior, and the orangutan, once rumoured to swing from one end of the island to the other without touching the ground, had been relegated to tiny preserves.

Here, in the Mergui Archipelago, we were seeing what Borneo once was. Glittering schools of fish clogged the ocean. We snorkelled above cities of wondrous coral, sponges the size of 50-gallon barrels and forests of elkhorn. Paddling a kayak into a narrow sea cave, just two metres wide yet taller than a house, we were blinded by darkness. Something rushed past, close to our heads - then there was a growing cascade, the beating of a thousand wings, for we had disturbed a bat colony. The cave belched a stream of grey bodies that coalesced into a swirling ball in the cloudless sky. Several sea eagles, sensing an easy meal, slammed into the airborne congregation and flew off slowly, dark twitching bodies clutched to their chests.

We spent our final afternoon hiking a nearby island. The sun was crimson and dropping toward the Indian Ocean as we reached the summit. Soaked in sweat, we sat in the tall grass, eyes on a fruiting fig tree protruding from the canopy below - a known hornbill roost.

These enormous birds with long curved beaks (something like the Froot Loops bird) are rare. They're threatened by tropical deforestation, travelling great distances to forage the canopy for nuts and fruit. Gregoriously social, they often return to a communal roost each evening.

Something large flew past in the shadows of the canopy below, the slow, rhythmic wing beats pulsing like an old steam engine. A trio of hornbills arrived, circling below us, squawking loudly. Returning from surrounding islands, the birds hooted and swooped over the canopy, beaks silhouetted against a violet sky. Landing on the fig tree, they jumped about its branches, shouting loudly. Soon, there were 20, then 30, 40. We watched until the last rays of light faded from the sky, and then stumbled down through dark forest and swam back to our waiting powerboat.

Smoke poured from the crest of a nearby island, but it was actually swarms of flying foxes - fruit bats with a metre-wide wingspan - setting out from their colony to scavenge at night. We passed thousands in the darkness, skimming low and so close we could almost reach out and touch them. A glowing green trail stretched behind the powerboat, the result of a massive bloom of phosphorescent algae. As we sped along, fish just below the ocean's surface streaked away like green missiles. It felt like a dream.

Of course, patches of such raw wilderness exist around the globe, though most are shrinking. In fairness, their wonders are no more remarkable than those hidden in Vancouver's Stanley Park, Toronto's ravines or St. John's Signal Hill. Whether you find yourself peering at a delicate spring flower or traipsing through a rain forest on the far side of the planet, we remain part of nature's great web.

BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific - Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring
January 13, 2011

Burma's new deep-sea port said raising environmental, rights concerns

A new deep-sea port and special economic zone in Tavoy, southern Burma, will bring much-needed infrastructure to the military-ruled country and be a boon to regional trade, but will also present serious risks to the local population and environment, according to experts. The multi-billion dollar project, which will be financed by the Bangkok-based Italian-Thai Development Public Company, will cover an area of about 260 square kilometres (100 square miles) and affect more than 30,000 people from 19 villages in Yephyu and Longlon townships, near Tavoy, the capital of Tenasserim Division. Local sources say that even though preparatory work on some parts of the project has already begun, residents of the area still haven't been told how the plan to build what is expected to become Southeast Asia's biggest special economic zone will affect them.

Villagers in the area say they are worried about where they will be relocated to and how they will be compensated for the loss of their land, but don't expect to have any choice in the matter. "If they order us to move, we can't resist," a villager from Nabule, in the project area, told The Irrawaddy. Italian-Thai will reportedly spend US \$8.6 billion on the new mega-project, which will combine a deep-sea port, industrial estate and trans-border route with sea, road and rail links with Thailand.

The proposed industrial estate will contain a power plant, a steel mill, an oil refinery, a petrochemical complex, a fertilizer plant, a shipbuilding and maintenance yard and a variety of light-and medium-industry factories, as well as a pipeline linking Tavoy to Pu Nam Ron in Thailand's Kanchanaburi Province. There will also be residential and commercial developments, including a tourist resort and a recreation complex, according to a PowerPoint presentation prepared by Italian-Thai that is widely circulating on the Internet. The 10-year project was signed in Naypyidaw on Nov. 2 of last year, five days before Burma held its first election in 20 years. Now groundwork for the first phase of construction - the road to Thailand, a water reservoir, a water and waste-water treatment plant and the 400 MW coal-fired power plant - have been initiated and are due to be completed within five years.

The idea to create this massive new economic zone first started to gain traction in 2008, when the foreign ministers of Thailand and Burma signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on the sidelines of a meeting of

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) foreign ministers in Singapore. It received a further boost late last year during a visit to Naypyidaw by Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, who signed an agreement on the project with his Burmese counterpart Thein Sein on Oct. 11. However, there are still hurdles facing the project, largely due to the involvement of Burma's Western-sanctioned military regime. The Asia Development Bank (ADB) has declined to support the project, despite the fact that it will connect with the three economic corridors of the ADB's Greater Mekong Sub-Region development plan, which aims to create links between the economies of mainland Southeast Asia and China. Thailand's Kasikorn Bank has also rejected Italian-Thai's bid for financing, and the support of major shipping companies and manufacturers is also doubtful. However, according to a report by the International Herald Tribune, Italian-Thai has received backing for the project from a private bank that it would not name.

Meanwhile, Thailand's Minister of Industry, Chaiwut Bannawat, will lead a delegation of Thai business representatives on a fact-finding mission to Burma from Jan. 18-22 to seek information on the Burmese regime's investment policy and its framework for development of the Tavoy project, according to reports by The Nation, a Bangkok-based English-language daily. While the Thai investors seem confident of the project's eventual success, other observers are less sure about its prospects, at least in terms of bringing any real benefit to the local economy.

Sean Turnell, an expert on the Burmese economy at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, said he was cautiously optimistic about the project. "Longer term, and come a reasonable government in Burma that was genuinely concerned with economic development, Tavoy could become the sort of infrastructure the country needs. But even such longer-term benefits presuppose such a government will emerge," he said.

In a properly governed economy, the increased efficiencies from such a facility would pay dividends that would accrue to the country hosting it, the Australian economist also noted.

The International Herald Tribune reported that the project includes a profit-sharing agreement with the Burmese junta, but executives from Italian-Thai said they could not divulge details. Meanwhile, business sources in Rangoon told The Irrawaddy that one of the regime's closest cronies have already been awarded huge contracts related to the Tavoy project. He is Max Myanmar owner Zaw Zaw, who accompanied Burma's top general on a tour of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in China last year. Zaw Zaw, chairman of Myanmar Football Federation, is on US sanctions lists, and favoured business associate of junta head Snr-Gen Than Shwe and is especially close to former Lt-Gen Thiha Thura Tin Aung Myint Oo, the Secretary 1 of the ruling junta and chairman of the regime's Trade Council.

With some of Burma's top businessmen already on board, the project has also attracted the attention of other local business people hoping to cash in on what looks like a potential goldmine. Residents of villages near the project area, most of whom make a living by farming or fishing, say that there has been a sudden influx of outsiders, including not only Thai employees of Italian-Thai, but also

Burmese from other parts of the country trying to snap up properties ahead of the coming rush.

"There are lots of people coming and going all the time, many of them hunting for houses and land to buy," said one resident of Maungmagan, a village well known for its attractive beach.

He said people are trying to acquire houses and plots of land in his village because it is not located inside the project area. In that area, he said, nobody is interested in buying property because they know that it could soon be taken away from them.

In Tavoy, a city of around 150,000 inhabitants, residents told The Irrawaddy that land and house prices have doubled or tripled in recent months as businessmen, most of them close to the military regime, look for places to open banks, hotels and other businesses. One local business owner said that an acre of land in downtown Tavoy suitable for building a hotel is now worth as much as 1.5 billion kyat (\$1.8 million) - three times what it would have cost before. The Tavoy project is also expected to increase tourism in the region, especially in southern Tenasserim's Mergui archipelago. One proposal that has been put forward is to extend the reach of the project by 300 miles (483 km) to include the archipelago's pristine islands, which are already famous for their white sand beaches, crystal clear water and abundance of marine life.

While foreign investors consider the potential for future spinoffs from the Tavoy project, Burma's domestic media has focused mainly on its possible impact on the country's economy. Most reports have highlighted how Tavoy will become the region's biggest and most modern seaport, providing a shortcut between Europe and mainland Southeast Asia and possibly transforming Burma's economy the way that Shenzhen marked China's first step along the way to becoming an economic superpower.

What Burma's heavily censored domestic media has not mentioned, however, is the cost of this project for those who will be most directly affected by it. This cost, say observers who have been watching this project take shape, will be measured not only in the loss of land by farmers currently working their fields in the area, but also in the long-term environmental degradation it is expected to cause.

Local officials have told The Irrawaddy that many farmers continue to grow seasonal crops in the project area, but others who worked at rubber plantations are already gone, forced to leave to make way for companies that are increasingly moving in to claim land that has sustained local people for generations.

According to locally based researchers, Kaung Myat Co, Ltd, a Burmese logging company, recently seized 2,000 acres of land in the area, while Hein Yadan Company confiscated 500 acres belonging to villagers living in Myatta, near the region where the deep-sea port project will be built.

Saw Eh Na, one of the researchers, said that the villagers were not compensated for the loss of their land, and most now have no means of making a living. He added that the land confiscation was likely related to the sea-port project. "The companies will plant rubber that they can sell to companies in the industrial zone that will be built in the Dawei port area," he said.

Sources also said the trade route that will be built from Tavoy to Thailand also crosses several plantations belonging to Myatta village residents, meaning that many more villagers fear they will soon be forced off their land.

Environmentalists are also worried. They say that the planned project will damage the region's coastline and its relatively untouched wilderness areas. Fuelling their concerns is the fact that no environmental impact assessment has been carried out and that the project does not include any environmental conservation plan.

"The construction of a deep-sea port and industrial zone on the Tenasserim coast will severely affect the biodiversity along the coastal region," said a Burmese marine biologist from the Marine Science Association of Myanmar, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Another scientist who has studied the the region's unique, life-supporting ecosystems echoed these concerns: "Mangrove forest and coral reef are very important places for a wide range for aquatic species. They are necessary environments for the life and reproduction of those species. Without them, aquatic animals can no longer exist. As a result, biodiversity will be ruined." Especially sensitive, he said, are the 601 species of coral reefs that have reportedly been found in the Mergui archipelago, which comprises over 800 islands.

Referring to the lack of strong regulations and good governance to protect the environment, an official from the Forest Resource Environment Development and Conservation Association (FREDA), a leading Burmese environmental NGO based in Rangoon, also warned of long-term costs.

"Fuel wastes from ships and petrochemical waste from the factories will become an environmental problem that is quite difficult to tackle," the official said.

None of this is likely to stop the Tavoy project from going ahead, however. As Matthew Smith, a senior consultant at EarthRights International (ERI), an international environmental and human rights group, has noted, "The well-being of the population and the environment simply haven't been prioritized under military rule, especially when business interests come into play."

This was amply illustrated recently when a court in Kachin state awarded villagers evicted from the Hugawng Valley Tiger Reserve just 80,000 kyat (\$96) per acre for land confiscated by the Yuzana Company, which in 2006 was granted 200,000 acres in the reserve to establish sugarcane and tapioca plantations. This was the same amount that was originally offered to them by Yuzana, which is owned by Htay Myint, who is on the US sanctions blacklist and soon to become a sitting member of Burma's Parliament after winning a seat in Tenasserim Division as a candidate for the regime-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party.

Many observers believe, however, that it is precisely this disregard for environmental and human rights protections that makes the Tavoy project so appealing to Thai investors. They note that the shift to Burma comes as Thailand imposes stricter environmental regulations in the wake of findings that residents of Map Ta Phut in Rayong Province had an increased risk of cancer due to air and groundwater pollution from the country's largest industrial port. However, shifting to Burma carries its own dangers, say activists.

"Investors face serious material and reputational risks, despite the regime's propaganda, and what Asian companies investing in these projects aren't thinking about is the possibility of serious liabilities in courts of law for complicity in abuses in Burma," said ERI's Matthew Smith.

National Geographic Magazine - NGM.com

April 2005

Sea Gypsies of Myanmar

By Jacques Ivanoff

The world is closing in on the Moken way of life.

On the horizon we see them, their flotilla of small hand-built boats, called kabang, like a mirage beneath the setting sun. They are wary of strangers: At our approach they split up and scatter. We close in on one boat, and I call out reassuring words in their language. The boat slows and finally stops, rolling on the swell in heavy silence. I jump aboard, a privileged trespasser and rare witness to another world.

That world belongs to the Moken, a nomadic sea culture of Austronesian people who likely migrated from southern China some 4,000 years ago, and, moving through Malaysia, eventually split off from other migrant groups in the late 17th century. Their home is the Mergui Archipelago, some 800 islands scattered along 250 miles (400 kilometers) of the Andaman Sea, off Myanmar (formerly Burma). For decades piracy and Myanmar's military dictatorship kept outsiders away. With special permits to work in the area, I too am a nomad on these waters, having followed the Moken for years to hear their stories and learn more about their culture.

It is an elder named Gatcha who allows me on his family's boat and listens to my plea to join them. I have a long history here: My father, Pierre Ivanoff, worked with the Moken starting in 1957, and I reestablished that relationship in 1982, several years after his death. I tell Gatcha that I've lived among his people, that I befriended their greatest shaman and recorded hours of his myths and tales that I wish to share. When Gatcha finally offers me a plate of betel nuts, I know he has accepted me.

"The Moken are born, live, and die on their boats, and the umbilical cords of their children plunge into the sea," goes an epic of the Moken. For eight to nine months a year they live aboard their low-slung kabang—punishment, according to the myth, laid upon the society by an ancestral island queen, Sibian, when her husband, Gaman the Malay, committed adultery with her sister. The queen declared that the kabang would represent the human body, with the front of the boat a mouth constantly seeking nourishment and the back an anus for defecation.

As divers and beachcombers the Moken take what they need each day—fish, mollusks, and sandworms to eat; shells, sea snails, and oysters for barter with the mostly Malay and Chinese traders they encounter. They accumulate little and live on land only during the monsoons.

The wave troughs look immense from the kabang, but Puket—one of Gatcha's seven children—sits in the stern calmly smoking his pipe amid the exhaust of the motor. Puket and another son, Jale—a mighty spear fisherman—and a daughter named Iphim, a childless widow, travel with their father most of the time. This family, like all Moken, poses little threat to others sharing these waters. Apolitical and nonviolent, Moken keep to themselves except when trading, usually on the move in flotillas of seven or more kabang belonging to an extended family. Still, our lone vessel is stopped by a Burmese military boat disguised as a trawler. Fortunately, we are sent on our way without incident, and Puket even manages to beg a few fish and some liquor by flattering the officials.

But it is not always so. The Moken have been exploited and harassed throughout history by the British, Japanese, Thai, and Burmese alike. They've been stopped to pay taxes, driven away by illegal fishermen, forced to work in mines and on farms, prohibited from vital trading areas, jailed for lacking permits, even turned into opium addicts by merchants to keep them dependent. Recently the Myanmar government, following Thailand's lead, has tried to settle the Moken permanently in a national park as a tourist attraction.

The Moken have resisted, but threats to forcibly settle them still hang in the air. And other troubles abound. Their own demography could destroy them: Many young men die each year in diving accidents—often from the bends when they dive too deep and resurface too quickly while working for Burmese fishermen. As the military presence increases throughout the islands, the Moken are unable to move freely in search of spouses. And without room to roam, they cannot find the traders who provide rice—the staple Moken food—and fuel for their motors. Ten years ago, some 2,500 Moken still led the traditional seafaring and spiritual life in this archipelago. That number is slowly diminishing and is now at perhaps 1,000.

As the son of a shaman and a father figure to his people, Gatcha's mission is to keep the old ways alive, bringing the Moken together for rituals that have suffered as flotillas have divided into subgroups and scattered north and south to reduce competition for natural resources. On this journey he will round up followers, including sacred singers and dancers to take with him to Nyawi Island, where things have gone awry. Soldiers are harassing the Moken and Burmese there, and the Burmese government has mandated a Moken festival for tourists—which Gatcha says is upsetting the spirits. With offerings, trances, song, and dance on Nyawi, he hopes his people can begin to appease the ancestors, to whom they look for guidance and protection.

The days of gathering end with a night of restorative ritual, after which I am heartened to see Gatcha and his family push out to sea in the damp, gray morning, continuing their journey through the archipelago. As the dry season nears its end, it is time to put down shallow roots on land, setting up a temporary camp in which to wait out the swift winds and rains of the monsoons. It will be a place to honor the spirits and to build new boats for young men coming of age.

The island chosen for a monsoon camp offers a breathtaking setting: A wall of virgin forest—rife with boar and bats to be hunted—a band of beach, and a

deep, powerful sea. Women comb the beaches and sing, and children play in the surf. Girls coax sandworms from hiding with rattan sticks; boys fashion harpoons and learn from the older men how to hunt for fish, crab, turtle, ray, and eel.

The Moken are the soul of this archipelago, the expression of a world that has begun to fade. My hope is that as the rains continue to come and go, so too will the Moken, from sea to land and back again.

BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific

January 8, 2005

Burma opposition radio disputes junta's tsunami casualties

Excerpt from report by Burmese opposition radio on 7 January

It has been learned that Rangoon-based IFRC, International Federation of the Red Cross, met with diplomats yesterday and explained about the latest figures of the tsunami death toll in Burma issued by them. The IFRC revised the previous figure of 86 dead and said the number could be between 60 and 80 dead. It noted that the figures issued by the SPDC State Peace and Development Council was accurate. DVB Democratic Voice of Burma asked IFRC resident representative Joanna MacLean about the revision of figures.

Dear listeners, DVB would like to present the condition of islands in Mergui archipelago in southern Burma regarding conflicting reports about the number of tsunami deaths. According to aid agencies' reports Burma's rocky shoreline with hundreds of islands and the angle of the coast prevented the damage. However, the questions remain whether the islands are inhabited or not and why the SPDC and the aid agencies did not assess the tsunami toll and include them in the report. DVB contacted correspondent Maung Maung Hein from Ranong about the situation.

DVB correspondent Since they mentioned that the rocky shoreline and the islands prevented a disaster, then definitely the islands must have been hit. Could you tell us more about the islands?

Maung Munag Hein The TPDC Township Peace and Development Council has issued an order in 1995 preventing people from inhabiting some islands. Later, some began to live there. Furthermore, since the battalions based in Kawthaung and Mergui Townships provided security, the people began to get involved in logging and fishing. They then started to inhabit the islands and make dried fish and salt fish on the beach as a livelihood. The people living on the islands and the fishing boats are all missing now. That is on Hlaingpi Island. Makyunkalat Island is a little offside so it was not affected. There are Kyunkantlant, Hainggyikyun and Hman islands here together with some small islands. Many people on the islands, involved in illegal logging and fishing, were struck by the tsunami. As the days go by the corpses disappear underwater and turn up in the fishing nets together with the fishes. This is what a fisherman had to say. passage omitted End of recording

That was a report by Maung Maung Hein. The reason the SPDC did not release any casualty figures is to prevent the leaking of news about junta soldiers' approval of illegal inhabitation of the islands and the local authorities approval of illegal Thai logging businesses on the islands.

The Baltimore Sun

July 8, 2001

Excursion to BURMA; Escaping the modern world on a boat trip through the Mergui Archipelago, where few foreigners have ventured.

By Frank Langfitt

As Paul, our dive guide, drifted over a head of coral, his body stiffened. Wheeling around wide-eyed, he put an open hand on top of his head like a fin - the universal signal for "shark." Inside a coral crevice on the sandy bottom lay a pair of gray nurse sharks, the longer of which appeared to be more than 6 feet. I was relieved. Nurse sharks are bottom feeders and don't attack. These were big ones, so I dived down for a better look. The hail of bubbles and flailing limbs proved too much for the timid fish. They wriggled about, kicking up clouds of sand while searching for a place to hide.

Paul surfaced and yelled across the water to the sailboat that we'd found sharks. "This is supposed to be an incentive for us to get in?" asked Bea, who was sitting on deck and preferred her sharks behind glass.

By the time Paul returned below the surface, the sharks had disappeared beneath a coral ledge, but they would live on in our dinner conversations aboard the Gaea, the 51-foot trimaran we called home for nearly a week. It was our fourth day amid the empty islands of the Mergui Archipelago on the southern coast of Myanmar -- or Burma, as it is still widely known. In addition to the sharks, we'd seen some fishing boats, visited a village of sea gypsies and crossed paths with a Burmese naval vessel.

That was it. No other tourists -- and sometimes, when we scanned the horizon at dawn, no one at all.

In a world of six billion people, where you can phone home from the Great Wall or watch Jennifer Lopez videos on the Vietnamese coast, the search for authentic travel experiences has become increasingly difficult. Each year, people must go farther and farther to find places untouched by American pop culture and unfiltered by the tourism industry.

The myth of unspoiled lands has fueled the Western imagination for generations, spawning novels ranging from James Hilton's "Lost Horizon" to Alex Garland's "The Beach," which was set on an island in Thailand and made into a movie starring Leonardo DiCaprio. The reality is that most of the best spots in Asia were "discovered" long ago.

Thailand's resort island of Phuket complements its beaches and limestone karst formations with go-karts, bungee-jumping and "Dino Park," a dinosaur-theme miniature golf park with an erupting volcano. These days, tour buses pull up to

the ruins of Cambodia's Angkor Wat, which were deserted a few years ago because of civil war and fear of land mines.

The Mergui is one of the last great places in the hemisphere to be spared from the cultural Cuisinart of globalization. The islands have remained largely unchanged because of self-imposed isolation by Burma's repressive military regime.

Cut off from the world for more than half a century, the Mergui comprises some 800 wooded, tropical islands covering about 10,000 square miles in the Andaman Sea, which lies just north of the Indian Ocean. The islands are filled with wildlife, including hornbills, sea eagles, heron, python, macaques, wild pigs and elephants. Other than the village of sea gypsies and fishermen, there are no other people.

Just opened to tourism

My wife, Julie, and I first heard about the Mergui a couple of years ago over dinner in Beijing. We were out with fellow journalists who raved about a sailboat trip they'd taken in Burma.

The voyage sounded wonderful: sea kayaking amid mangroves and caves as well as snorkeling and scuba diving on isolated reefs. What made the Mergui so attractive, though, was that few people had ever been there. The islands only opened to tourism in early 1997, when two brothers from Britain, Graham and Adam Frost, negotiated an agreement with the Burmese government to take passengers there.

Last April, with Julie expecting a baby in several months, we booked two bunks on the Gaea as a last hurrah of pre-parental travel and flew to Thailand, where the Frosts' company, South East Asia Liveboards, is located.

We were nervous about spending so much time on a boat. The Gaea sleeps eight and we didn't know who else would be aboard. Our concerns dissolved the morning we arrived at the office and found out that no one else had booked the trip. We would have the boat to ourselves for six days.

The night before, we had had dinner in Phuket with a fellow correspondent, Miro Cernetig of the Globe and Mail in Toronto, and his wife, Bea, who happened to be in town. When we learned the next morning that the other cabins were empty, I called Miro and Bea and made my pitch: six days on the water in Burma kayaking, scuba diving and snorkeling. Because of the short notice, the company would offer them 40 percent off.

Bea, half asleep, handed the phone to Miro, who was stepping out of the shower.

"Call me in 10 minutes," he said.

When I called back, Miro said, "We're packed."

After a flurry of calls to change flights and hotel reservations, we set off in a van up the coast, leaving the heavy development of Phuket behind.

Five hours later, we arrived in Ranong, a Thai port town at the mouth of the Pakchan River, across the water from Burma. After a brief stop at Thai immigration, we loaded our bags into a wooden long-tail boat for the 30-minute trip across the river. Although still in Thailand, we felt as if we'd already entered another country. Row after row of stilt houses made of plywood and corrugated aluminum lined the riverbanks. The harbor was jammed with long-tail boats, so

named because of the huge, egg-beater engines drivers wield like giant weed whackers.

"This is like the Mekong," Miro said, "only better."

Both of us had traveled by boat through Vietnam's Mekong Delta, a latticework of bridges, canals and tributaries filled with boat traffic that has emerged as a tourist attraction in the past decade. Ranong had some of the same qualities, but here we were the only foreigners.

After crossing the brackish, choppy water, we pulled up to a white shack on concrete stilts. Tires dangled from ropes along the side and the red, white and blue Burmese flag flapped from the roof. It was the first stop in what turned out to be a surprisingly casual immigration process.

Our guide, Paul, from Birmingham, England, hopped out. After a customs official did a cursory head count of our boat, we pulled into Kawthoung, a thriving Burmese port. The second phase of immigration was even more relaxed. We sat down at a bar, ordered several mugs of Myanmar Beer and handed our photos and passports to Tom, an amiable guide ostensibly assigned by the Burmese Tourist Ministry to keep an eye on us.

Tom went off to collect our visas; we went strolling around town. It was a Sunday afternoon, and swerving motorbikes filled the city's dirt streets.

Kawthoung is a mix of fading colonial architecture and new buildings with names such as the "Honey Bear Hotel," built on a distant dream of tourist dollars.

It is also home to one of the more squalid open-air markets I've seen in Asia. We weaved past stalls where dead fish lay rotting in plastic pales blanketed with flies and women sat cross-legged on wooden pallets hacking away at chicken necks. The meat, which stank, had been out for hours. The air was so hot that our arms, faces and backs dripped with sweat.

With the paperwork finished, we boarded the Gaea and prepared to weigh anchor. Paul lighted a long string of firecrackers adorned with the Chinese characters for "Double Happiness," a ritual designed to bring good luck and impress passengers. The explosion sent bits of red paper flying at us across the deck. The staccato blasts echoed off the hillsides nearby.

Lonely beaches, clear water

The Gaea was simple and cozy. Three of the four cabins lay inside the boat's wooden pontoons and were really no more than narrow passageways with shelf-like beds. Because of the heat, we usually slept on deck, lying on blue cushions and covered with beach towels. It was lovely when we were motoring along and the boat gently rocked back and forth beneath the stars. It was dreadful when the Burmese deck hand snored.

The boat was equipped with a bathroom and a hand-held shower. There was a cramped kitchen with two burners, wicker cabinets and several coolers filled with ice, sodas and a seemingly endless supply of food. The boat's electrical system had its idiosyncrasies: The captain had to turn on the engine to operate the toaster.

The first day, we were under way until 2 a.m. When we awoke the next morning, we were surrounded by several jungle islands, each with its own

crescent-shaped beach. As the pink light of dawn hung on the horizon, Miro and I leapt into the clear, green water and swam for the nearest beach. Like most of the islands we saw, this one began with a lip of sand and then rose quickly in a tangle of vines and trees up steep limestone rocks. Julie said the foliage reminded her of the shoreline along Loch Raven. She had a point, but I couldn't imagine telling friends back home: "You've got to go to Burma, it's just like Baltimore County."

The archipelago's clean water and many untouched forests stand in stark contrast with the squalor of Kawthoung, but there are increasing signs of human encroachment. Along the beach lay plastic water bottles tossed from the growing number of boats that come to exploit the area through illegal logging and dynamite fishing.

After a breakfast of scrambled eggs, croissant, pineapple, toast and sausage, we boarded sea kayaks and paddled along the island's edge. The area teemed with life, including kingfishers and fluorescent green crabs, which darted along the rocks. A sea eagle plunged beneath the surface and emerged with a fish between its talons. The rocky coastline swallowed up the water and spit it out in waves and rivulets.

We came upon a cave filled with hundreds of swallows. After we paddled in backward, the swallows roared out over our heads, blackening the sky. As a swell rolled into the cave, we paddled out furiously to avoid being pulled in deeper and smashed against the rocks.

That afternoon, we made our way toward the Mergui's only settlement, a village of about 400 sea gypsies and 200 Burmese fishermen who live in stilt houses along a beach. The sea gypsies, known as the Moken, are Southeast Asian nomads who speak their own language and travel from island to island in flotillas. They collect seashells, hunt sea turtles and seem to do little else. First encountered by the British in 1826, they had fiercely resisted integration. The Burmese corralled them into a government-built village six years ago.

Many of the gypsies, whose faces are dark from the sun and whose teeth are yellowed from a lifetime without fluoride, seemed friendly. Young mothers held their children up for us to see as we strolled past their homes. Others, though, exuded the sort of toughness one might expect from a life spent largely on the sea. Some young women walked around with cheroots -- cigars -- sticking out of their mouths.

It was hard to know if the sea gypsies liked their new, sedentary life, because we couldn't speak their language. We visited a 62-year-old monk, who lived on a hill above the town and spoke Burmese, the country's dominant tongue with an alphabet comprised of various circular and horseshoe-shaped letters. We gave him several cans of Coke and Sprite -- valuable commodities when the nearest cold soda is at least 10 hours away by boat. Then we sat down on rattan mats and asked questions as Tom translated.

The monk said the sea gypsies found the island hard to farm and complained about the lack of food. But they also thought the village safer than the open sea. Two weeks earlier, a sea gypsy had been gunned down when robbers attacked his boat and stole his engine.

(Adam Frost, co-owner of South East Asia Liveboards, says the Mergui is perfectly safe for tourists and that none of the company's boats has ever been threatened, followed or stopped.)

Trading with fishermen

The next two days were filled with snorkeling, kayaking and wildlife. We paddled up a clear river with a sandy bottom to gaze at pythons wrapped like ribbons around tree branches. We meandered through a maze of mangroves that hung down like slalom gates.

As we anchored one evening, hundreds of flying foxes flew past the moon. At sunset, Julie and I drifted quietly toward a beach in a kayak as a troop of macaques wandered along the sand hunting for crabs.

One morning, a small fishing boat approached. The skipper cut the engine and guided his craft toward ours, moving the rusty rudder back and forth with his bare foot. A crew member held out a silver fish like a tiny billboard.

The fishermen had been on the water for 10 days and had little to show for it but grimy clothes. In an act of charity, we traded a couple of packets of cheroots and cigarettes for the silver fish and two dead crabs.

That evening, our cook, a Thai named Mee, steamed fresh crabs. Julie, who grew up in Baltimore, demonstrated how to pick them Maryland-style.

Food was good and plentiful aboard the Gaea. Breakfasts usually included eggs, bacon, papaya and mango. Dinners were often built around Thai seafood and a mound of rice. Mee cooked it all shirtless, his back painted with a tattoo of a dragon and what looked like a pagoda. A man of few words, Mee sat on deck in the evenings, scraping knives on a sharpening stone.

With two days left on our trip, a voice crackled over the radio one morning: "Have an urgent message for one of your passengers -- Frank. His editor wants him to call immediately."

This is the last message a foreign correspondent wants to hear on vacation anywhere, let alone the Andaman Sea. The information was sparse: American and Chinese planes had collided. Jumbo jets? We didn't know.

"I hope it wasn't a U.S. military plane," Miro said.

We motored two hours across the water to a dive boat where I used a satellite phone to call my editor in Baltimore. The People's Liberation Army was holding a U.S. spy plane and its crew of 24 on Hainan, China's tropical island province.

"It would be good if you could get back to Beijing as soon as you can," my editor said.

The trip was over. Unable to make port by the time immigration closed, we took a final snorkel and dive before setting off through the night and arriving in Kawthoung at dawn. Along the way, we thought about all the islands and empty beaches we had seen that week and knew that some day the Mergui would change. In some ways, it already had.

On our last day we saw dozens of dead puffer fish floating on the surface where fishermen had recently used dynamite. In the hills, we heard the whine of chainsaws wielded by illegal loggers.

We could only hope that when development comes, it doesn't destroy the very things that draw people here. We knew we were lucky to have seen it now.

World and I
August 1, 2000

Into a Lost World - The mergui archipelago, closed to tourists until 1997, is one of the last untouched areas on earth left to explore

By Nordbye, Masha

As we enter the new millennium, few regions of our planet remain as unexplored Edens. But off the coast of Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, lies one such place--an extensive archipelago of over eight hundred uninhabited islands and islets scattered throughout the Andaman Sea. For over half a century the country has been isolated from the rest of the world by its political regime; and it was only in the last few years that the Mergui Archipelago, an area encompassing ten thousand square miles, was opened to outsiders. Here visitors have the unique opportunity to explore one of the last great pristine environments left on earth.

During the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, merchants, pirates, and adventurers undertook arduous trips through the Strait of Malacca to navigate between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. As trade grew between India, Siam (now Thailand), and China, ships figured a way to cut transport time in half by taking a more northerly route to the Isthmus of Kra (the narrow slice of land that connected Siam and Malaysia) and then transporting their cargo overland by elephant. By this time, the great kingdom of Siam had become a major trading junction and its southern city of Mergui a prosperous port and meetingpoint for the multitude of Asian caravans.

But even during Mergui's heyday the islands in the archipelago remained uninhabited, never being deemed fit for settlement or farming. Adding further to the islands' isolation, the British, who became the dominant sea power in the area, transferred their commercial centers farther south along the Malay peninsula by the nineteenth century. Because of these shifts and the advent of steamships and other faster methods of transportation, the once flourishing Mergui eventually collapsed into complete obscurity.

In 1997, after three years of lengthy negotiations, South East Asia Liveboards (SEAL), based in Thailand, finally received permission from the Myanmar government to escort tourists into the Mergui Archipelago. Even today the area is considered so remote (it cannot be found on most world maps) that the only existing charts are those drawn by the British shortly after World War II (the British ruled Burma from 1862 to 1948). By venturing into this lost realm, one has the remarkable opportunity to visit a world of ages past (where piracy still exists) and to experience one of the few places whose ecosystem remains virtually unspoiled since the beginning of time.

The adventure begins

It was my good fortune to be sent here for the filming of a TV pilot called Action Asia for the Discovery Channel. Our group consisted of two Australian camera crew and two on-camera hosts. The two hosts-- Fred, a Calvin Klein model from Canada, and Paveena, an almond-eyed beauty whose parents came from

Thailand--are from Hong Kong. My job would be to direct the show, both on land and underwater.

We began our voyage in Phuket, a popular resort town on the southern coast of Thailand filled with hundreds of tanning tourists, bargain shops, and restaurants. Having seen many billboards written in the indecipherable Thai alphabet, I couldn't help but smile when I caught sight of a travel office sign posted in English: Welcome to the Krabi Happy Tour!

At an office near our hotel, we met up with our guide for the trip, Graham Frost, a gregarious Australian who runs the SEAL program. After picking up our diving gear, we started our adventure by driving four hours to the Thai border town of Ranong, passing by miles of gorgeous ocean scenery and rubber plantations where a thick, milky liquid slowly oozed into small metal buckets tied to the tapped trunks. By early afternoon we reached the port, which lies on the southeastern coast of the fjord that separates Myanmar from Thailand.

There we hired out long-tail boats, the slender wooden vessels that have been used to crisscross these waters for centuries. But now, instead of using paddles, the local drivers use engine-driven open-air propellers to navigate their way back and forth along the Panchan River. The waterway flows around a kaleidoscope of sights: Red-robed monks, holding yellow umbrellas over their bare-shaven heads as they ride in dugout canoes; merchant cargo ships unloading boxes laden with fresh fruit; and rickety wooden beach houses, propped up by stilts, surrounded by green hills dotted with glimmering golden statues of Bodhisattvas and Buddhas. Our slight, dark-skinned driver looked to be of Indian descent (his smile revealed two remaining teeth, between which he fitted a hand-rolled cigarette).

After a half-hour ride, we reached Kawthong, the gateway to the archipelago. Upon the muddy banks stood the local customs house, an old wooden hut painted white and blue, over which flew a tattered national flag. A few uniformed men stood around it, old rifles slung over their shoulders. The Myanmar government is notorious for its disregard of human rights and its closed-door policy toward tourists, but here we felt no unease. We had already received permission to enter, so we handed over our papers, pictures, and passports and proceeded on our way.

Rounding a small bend in the river, we reached our diving boat, the Gaea, a fifty-one-foot trimaran that would be our home, day and night, over the next seven days. It was there that we met up with our crew: a rugged, sun-bleached-blond captain from Australia, a brightly tattooed Thai cook named Mee, and two swarthy helpers from Myanmar who spoke good English. As dusk enveloped the landscape, we all gathered on deck to watch our first orange-red sunset of the trip.

That night everyone slept soundly as the Gaea sailed to its first destination in the Andaman Sea. We were lying atop a gigantic water bed with a million stars twinkling over a jet-black sea. Suddenly I was jolted awake by alarmed voices on deck. The captain explained that a whale had just surfaced right in front of the bow and that, with a quick turn of the wheel, he had steered clear of a head-on collision. For the first time, it hit me that we were not in the modern

world anymore. Entirely alone, far from the nearest village, we had no one to signal for help.

Home to the Moken

I returned to bed only to be reawakened a few hours later by the clanking sounds of our anchor being cast and the strong smell of coffee brewing. Mingalaba (Burmese for "Good morning") was exchanged between the crew members. I climbed topside and took in the great expanse of sunlit wilderness before me. An emerald-green sea danced in and out of scores of small islands covered by lush mangrove forests and white coral beaches. We later kayaked out to one of these uninhabited shores, and I imagined myself to be the first human ever to leave footprints in the sand.

The first animal footprints we came upon were, remarkably, those of a tiger. The thick jungle, impossible to penetrate without a machete, offers the perfect habitat to some of the last wild cats, rhinoceroses, and elephants to be found in Southeast Asia. Elephants and Sumatran rhinos have been sighted swimming between the islands (elephants can swim up to twenty miles at a time). With a vision to preserve the wide variety of wildlife of these island habitats, the government has already designated the largest of the islands, Lampi (the size of Singapore), as the archipelago's first national park.

The area is also home to an indigenous people called the Moken, better known as sea gypsies. It is believed that these seafaring nomads wandered into the area centuries earlier to escape the brutal piracy in Malaysian waters (they speak an old Malay dialect). Today entire generations of one family live completely self-contained on primitive wooden boats. Surprisingly, they do not fish with nets, hooks, or lines, preferring instead to collect mollusks, fish, and sea urchins left behind on beaches during low tide. They also dry seaweed and sea cucumbers, which they trade for rice, diesel fuel, or opium, the latter being mixed with dry banana leaves and smoked in water pipes. It is only during the heavy monsoon season (June through September) that the sea gypsies venture to live on land, where they supplement their seafood diet with a few subsistence crops.

Today only about three thousand sea gypsies still wander the archipelago. Recently the government set up permanent facilities on one of the islands (the only one inhabited) to provide medical care and schooling for those families who wish to take advantage of the modern world. Most Moken, however, remain quite traditional and refuse to adopt new ways. The sea gypsy religion is animist--on land they put up spirit poles, ceremonial flags, and effigies, complete with hats and cigarettes, that represent their ancestors. As with any primitive culture, the question arises as to how best to assimilate them into the modern world without destroying their centuries-old traditions. With so few Moken left, I can't help but wonder whether we may be the last generation to witness their culture intact.

Before continuing on our way, we boarded a sea gypsy junk and made our own trade: three bags of rice for three of the largest lobsters I've ever laid eyes on (and each side thought it had gotten the better deal!). This would be part of our evening's feast, and our Thai chef skillfully began the preparations. But

meanwhile it was time to head north for Great Swinton Island, the site of our first dive.

Underwater fantasy

We geared up in tight-fitting wet suits, heavy tanks, and full face masks (which had communication devices to allow us to speak underwater) and merrily jumped, flippers flapping, into the 80-degree water. Andy Cornish, a Hong Kong expert in the biodiversity of reef fish, was to be our guide in this extraordinary environment. As he acknowledged: "Because this area has been closed off for so long, no study has ever been done on the types of fish inhabiting the reefs and coral beds. So it's a great opportunity to find out what is actually here."

We slowly descended to about forty feet below the surface. At first, Fred had a problem equalizing his ears, as his diving buddy, Paveena, hovered nearby. I heard Fred say, "I've made only about six dives in my entire life. Paveena has made about a hundred--so I will be sticking to her like glue!" As flailing Fred slowly maneuvered his gear into cohesive balance, we all glided around the impressive reefs rife with red and orange corals and hardy sponges. (Because the area really gets pounded during the monsoon season, nothing too fragile can survive.) The ecosystem here is driven by plankton, taken in and out by the tides; and when stimulated, the bioluminescent types give off a wonderful glowing light.

Eclectic groups of pelagic fish (those who live in the open ocean) darted in and out of the rocky outcroppings: giant grouper, powder-blue surgeon fish, lion fish (whose spines are very poisonous), black-spotted sting rays, and bearded scorpion fish completely camouflaged against the rocks.

"Uni, uni, uni," shrieked Paveena, who had almost brushed up against a spiny sea urchin. "Let's try some. They taste better raw!"

As I daintily danced through this fantastic undersea world, I felt like Alice in Wonderland swimming through the Looking Glass. I gazed with awe upon living gardens of sea anemones, displaying rare miniature shrimp who spend their entire life in the anemones' interiors; the shrimp clean the anemone and, in turn, get protection. Ledges were filled with lurking lobsters and three different varieties of moray eels, whose mouths opened wide as we stared eye to eye.

"When they open their mouths wide like that," Andy informed us, "the eels are pumping water over their gills." He pointed out other species with names right out of the latest rap lyrics: colored nudibranchs, checkerboard wrasse, and juvenile harlequin sweetlips alongside damsels, dog-faced puffers, and sea whips--all hip hopping in banners around us.

The currents and surges moved around an impressionistic palette of hard and soft corals: Large table corals were speckled by purple plume worms, yellow brain, and brownish stag and elk corals, as well as huge, Gauguin-esque gorgonian cluster corals that spread out like fossilized birch trees. Amid all this, I sighted my favorite--a group of squidlike cuttlefish--swimming one behind the other in a swing dance line formation.

Soon it was time to surface: After forty-five minutes, we had run out of air.

Back on deck, when she realized we still hadn't seen what we came for, Paveena exclaimed, "I can't even imagine adding sharks to what I just saw. Don't think I can handle that!"

That night we partook of a sumptuous lobster feast that would inadvertently fatten us up for the next day's dive to see sharks, a dive that weighed heavily on our minds.

In the morning we dropped anchor by Big Rock, a notorious predator location. "A very high concentration of sharks are in these waters," Graham informed us. "Up to seven varieties have been reported here during a single dive. These can include gray reef, bull, hammerhead, silver-tipped, whale, leopard, and nurse." "My pulse rate has definitely accelerated," chipped in Fred.

Andy, knowledgeable about sharks, explained to us that they had evolved little in the last 150 million years, and that they were a real force in driving natural selection. Sharks had known no other predator till man. In much of the water around Asia, the shark population has already been killed off to supply the illegal shark fin (soup and medicine) industry. "You'll rarely sight sharks around Hong Kong anymore," he remarked, "so this is a fantastic opportunity to observe sharks in their natural environment."

Graham mapped out our next underwater scenario. "There's no real reason to be seriously scared. Sharks are just very inquisitive. Since we'll be invading their patch, the sharks want to come and check us out. We'll not appear like food to them--just big, strange, bubble-blowing blobs."

Paveena still wanted to know how sharks act when threatened.

"If you see their pectoral fins down along their sides and their back arched erratically," he answered, "you should clear out of their way. Always stay together and give off good vibrations!"

Now more than ever, Fred wanted to keep close to Paveena.

Several years ago Graham discovered this diving site, which he named "In Thru the Out Door." As he explained, "On the way there, the current will push us around till we come into a gully in the middle of the rock. As you swim underneath it, you will enter the cave, which is filled with many small caverns. The dive is called 'In Thru the OutDoor' because we go in the backdoor as the sharks swim out!"

Not only were we to encounter sharks, but we would also have to enter a deep, dark cave, a first for most of us. We all received large torches (diving flashlights), since visibility would be low. On the way toward the gully, Fred sighted a sea snake. Andy warned that they were highly poisonous and recommended we stay away. Then we entered the abyss of the cave, and nothing could have prepared me for what happened next. Imagine swimming into an eerie, dark void that enveloped each diver like a moist, pulsating womb. Our meager lights cast only shadows upon silhouettes of unrecognized creatures, and then, out of nowhere, hundreds upon hundreds of small formations swam through the beams.

"Look at all those fish," exclaimed Fred.

"Those are all baby (juvenile) barracuda," interjected Andy.

Andy explained that one female barracuda can lay up to a million eggs in her lifetime. Barracuda are nocturnal, so during the day they school in large numbers (especially inside caves) for added protection.

At the moment, I couldn't concentrate on another word the professor said. All I could think about was how not to feel scared or claustrophobic. When a diver is frightened, he can hyperventilate, which in turn screws up breathing; and here, encased in a big, solid chunk of rock seventy feet under the sea, there was no chance to quickly surface. "Don't worry, be happy," I heard a voice echo through my ears.

But these barracuda felt like mythological figures guarding the cave's entrance, and who knew what lurked farther inside. And then "Ulysses" in his purple flippers jetted on by me. It was the fearless Graham, who proceeded, head first, into a murky cavern. I recalled the story of the Sirens. "Come, come." Graham's hypnotic voice lured me in. So down I went, and the entire wall moved beneath me. It was two massive nurse sharks that had spotted our alien group.

All of a sudden, the current began sucking me out the other side of the cave. In the midst of this chaotic churning, I caught Paveena's voice, "Oh my God! Shark, shark, shark!" It was time for our close encounter of the third kind. Four gray reef sharks darted near the exit hole from which I had just popped out. "Must take a fair amount of food to keep those chaps going," observed Andy. Somehow we made it back to the boat with all our limbs intact and our spirits soaring. After making it through such an incredible adventure, we confidently concluded that, indeed, the only thing to fear in life was fear itself. For millennia mankind had been frightened of the vastness of the seas that cover 70 percent of our world. It has only been during the last fifty years and the invention of the Aqua-Lung that we have begun to unlock the mysteries of the ocean depths.

Los Angeles Times

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Destination: Myanmar

Sailing into Adventure on the Andaman Sea

By Yvonne Michie Horn

The thought occurred that this might not be smart--sitting alone in a Zodiac on a narrow river deep in the jungle of an uninhabited island off the coast of Myanmar. The surrounding islands were said to shelter elephants, rhinoceros and tigers, pythons, cobras and kraits, one of the most deadly of snakes. And me, the sitting duck; I would be a tasty morsel, my screams muffled by walls of green jungle. Imagination ran rampant.

We were a group of eight, 10 counting Adam Frost, the dive master of the trimaran Wanderlust--which even now awaited our return in nearby blue-green waters--and Carl Brian-Brown, Wanderlust's skipper. We had pattered off in the trimaran's Zodiac to explore a river that cut deep into this island, one of an uncounted fling of, some say, 4,000 that make up the Mergui Archipelago. Now, with the river having become too narrow and shallow for the Zodiac to

navigate, our group had jumped in to splash along on foot, with the goal of perhaps tracking the stream to its source. It was an exercise in slimy boulder-clambering and mangrove-root-swinging that I didn't relish. But given the possible alternative, I yelled, "Wait for me!"

Burma was rechristened Myanmar in 1989 by the military dictatorship that, with a coup d'etat, had sealed off the country to outside eyes in 1962. Once the richest nation in Southeast Asia, today it is one of the poorest and most cruelly restrictive in the world. Although visitors traveling with government-sponsored groups have been allowed entrance into this once golden land since 1973, the sudden appearance of glossy "Visit Myanmar" brochures in 1996 was downright stunning.

Absent from the "Visit Myanmar" invitation was the Mergui Archipelago, 10,000 square miles of mostly small islands, some little more than rocks jutting out of the Andaman Sea. The archipelago gets its name from the town of Mergui on the northern end of the string of islands.

During the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, Mergui was the arrival and departure point for caravans crossing a narrow strip of land then belonging to Siam (now Thailand). It was a harrowing route--rain-swollen gorges, treacherous rapids, mangrove swamps swarming with mosquitoes and leeches, and some of the most impenetrable tiger-filled forests in the world. Nevertheless it was the shortest route between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

In 1760, Mergui town came under Burmese rule. The archipelago became a no man's land, wild and largely uninhabited. After World War II it was declared militarily sensitive by the Burmese government and became forbidden territory. Enter South East Asia Live-aboard, owned and operated by the Frost family, who for 10 years had been conducting diving and snorkeling expeditions in Thai, Indonesian and Indian seas. Increasingly disenchanted with the proliferation of dive boats off the shores of vacation-trendy Phuket, the Frosts negotiated with Myanmar authorities and finally received permission to enter the little-visited archipelago, the first foreign commercial enterprise so approved. (At least two other outfitters have since been granted licenses, including Phuket-based Fantasea Divers and Dive Asia Pacific Co.) In January 1997, Liveaboards' yacht Gaea, one of four now owned by the company, sailed forth on an exploration cruise and reported back that the diving was beyond expectation.

Our group of eight, traveling in October 1997, marked expedition number 21 into the territory. We were a diverse assembly, representing the compass points of North America: Calgary to New Orleans, San Francisco to the Florida Keys. Amazingly, there was but one diver among us; the rest were content to snorkel. Our common reason for signing on, we discovered, was the desire to be among the first Westerners to touch this stretch of the world.

Our adventure began at the edge of the Pakchan, the wide river that separates Thailand from Myanmar. We'd arrived via minivan from Phuket, Thailand, at the port of Ranong, an undistinguished, sprawling Thai town from which we'd be ferried across the river. Making our way through a cacophony of humanity jostling to carry our bags, we crawled, jumped and teetered across a sea of longtail boats to the one that would ferry us to Wanderlust's anchorage at Kawthaung, Myanmar.

The glorified eggbeater of a motor revved to an earsplitting decibel, we entered the river, passing the docked, rusting hulks of fishing boats turned golden in the descending sun.

It was dark when we reached the Wanderlust, stepping directly on board since our feet could not touch the soil of Myanmar until Adam had delivered our passports to be scrutinized by the powers that be in Kawthaung. Armed with whiskey and cigarettes to smooth the way, Adam and Mojo, a Burmese "guide" appointed to sail with us to make certain we'd not stray, zoomed off in the Zodiac in the direction of the town lights. A giant golden, illuminated, reclining Buddha smiled benevolently down on us from a cliffside perch.

Once they returned, we motored in darkness out of the harbor, but not before Wanderlust's three young Thai crew members had set off a flurry of firecrackers on deck to ward off "nats," evil spirits, and ensure us safe voyage. From a Buddhist monastery on a nearby hill, repetitive, wailing chants followed us over the water. Without a doubt, we had entered somewhere else. Conditions aboard the Wanderlust were clean and neat--with large, sunny decks and a well-equipped galley--if a bit crowded below. We slept in berths tucked here and there within the walls of the trimaran. I was lucky to get the saloon berth just off the galley where we ate. The only downside: I was the last to bed and the first up because the area had to be cleared for the meals prepared by a young Thai chef, who turned out extraordinary Thai food along with some Western favorites.

At dawn I crawled out of my berth to find an Andaman Sea bathed in salmon light. The idyllic white-sand-fringed island in whose cove we'd anchored was perfectly mirrored in still water. Night birds silently winged their way back to jungle nests. A flying fish jumped like an expertly skipped stone, leaving a series of widening pools in its wake. Sharing the cove was a shallow-drafted wooden Burmese fishing boat that silently pulled anchor to drift out of sight around the bend of the island, with those on board ignoring my good-morning wave. In our five days sailing the archipelago, no other water traffic was seen, save for a handful of these solitary, picturesque boats.

These were not the so-called sea gypsies (Maw-Khen) to whom the archipelago has for centuries been home. For the Maw-Khen have never fished as a livelihood, instead harpooning only what was needed for daily use.

Until recent years, the Maw-Khen were born, lived and died on their little kabongs (boats); some still do. They dove for pearls; gathered swift's nests (the best for the Chinese delicacy, bird's-nest soup); collected and dried sea slugs, considered aphrodisiacs, to trade with the Chinese who sailed through.

Today most live in villages, rickety versions of Venice made up of a dozen or so thatched huts perched on piles driven into the mud. Off Lambi Island, one of the archipelago's largest (about the size of Singapore), we anchored in sight of Pu Nala, a sea gypsy village, and Mojo and Adam set off in the Zodiac to ask the headman if we might visit.

We waded ashore through floating filth that included a dead dog lying like a Rorschach blob on the ocean floor. A smoky pall hovered over the village, wafting from charcoal fires above which screens had been placed for sea-slug drying. Shy smiles greeted us as we stopped to admire children and show

photos of our own families. From naked babies to small and slender men and women, Pu Nala's residents were extraordinarily handsome--the women dressed traditionally in sarongs and the men in longyi, ankle-length skirts knotted at the waist, embellished with a Western-style shirt here, a baseball cap there.

Each day included an opportunity for shore exploration. One afternoon we jumped into the Zodiac to ride rampaging sea surges in and out of caves wallpapered with colorful lichen and hung with bats. After dinner on another day, we sat around an enormous bonfire of driftwood on shore, built by the boat's crew to alert the jungle of our presence rather than to add warmth to the already humid night. Tales were shared under an incredibly starry sky; ghost crabs scattered across the sand in the beams of flashlights.

We never saw the elephants, rhinoceros and tigers reputed to be there. A possible reason why came from a book by George Orwell that I pulled from the boat's library to read while under sail. Titled "Burmese Days," it is based on time Orwell spent in this country in the early part of the century. He describes the Burmese jungle as a "multitudinous rank of trees tangled with bushes and creepers" so dense that a tiger could lurk mere feet away with no one the wiser. Beyond the archipelago's innocently pristine white sand beaches lay jungle equally dense.

The crystalline blue-green waters around us were more revealing. We identified moon wrasse, parrotfish, goatfish, rabbitfish, leatherjacket, Moorish idol, triton, triggerfish, Oriental sweetlips and several pairs of emperor angelfish. In one channel a congregation of butterflyfish rode the surge with large schools of tangs, sergeant majors and taitfish. Paddling about with our faces in the waters around Kyun Pila, one of the archipelago's Great Swinton islands, we floated over stunningly colorful coral--bright blue, purple, green.

The sole diver among us, accompanied by Adam, came back from the depths reporting similar sightings. With one exception: the exhilarating rush of swimming in the company of sharks.

On our last night aboard, Wanderlust's engine thrummed into action around midnight in order to motor us back to Kawthaung by the next morning. I awoke to find the reclining Buddha smiling down on us in sunlight and the river already noisy with longtails. But this time we could set foot on land. With Mojo doing his best to keep us together, we wandered a town decades had forgotten--a marketplace abundant with fruits and vegetables, inhabitants in Burmese dress shyly curious about the strangers wandering in their midst.

Then it was time to load ourselves and our luggage in a longtail for an earsplitting journey across the river to Thailand. Fast-forward a half century to Bangkok and home.

UNESCO Courier

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Where the spirits roam; 20,000 Worlds Under the Sea; traditional Southeast Asian communities

By Esteban T. Magannon

Three distinctive Southeast Asian ethnic groups have traditional lifestyles centered on life with the sea: the Bajau, the Moken and the Orang Lau. These boat-dwelling peoples have a combined population of 35,000, two-thirds of whom have become sedentarized as the younger generation opt to live onshore. For centuries the waves have shaped the lives of the Orang Laut, Moken and Bajau. How much longer can the traditions of these small Southeast Asian communities withstand the pressures of 'modern' development?

For outsiders, they are the "sea nomads". Admittedly peaceful, simple folks, they are however mistrusted as fugitive pagan savages. Their houseboats look dirty, crowded with children, women cooking and a tangled mess. Of household belongings likely to include a cackling rooster among the Bajau and a dog among the Moken. Moored along beaches, lagoons, estuaries and even the backwaters of beach-front hotels, their floating communities are scattered throughout Southeast Asia.

They form three distinct cultural groups stemming from archipelagic environments: the Orang Laut from estuaries of the Lingga-Riau-Straits of Malacca mudflats, the Moken from the Mergui Archipelago and the Bajau from the Sulu Archipelago of the Philippines, in the adjoining islands of East Borneo, and those of eastern Indonesia, in particular the coasts of Celebes and Flores. Their numbers remain somewhat of a mystery, partly due to imprecise census-taking. While they are counted as citizens in the countries where they are found, they are considered as ethnic minorities subject to discrimination reserved for "outsiders".

Anthropologists put their total population at about 35,000. Yet they estimate that probably not even one third of this number still live by tradition—meaning with the sea, not simply on the sea, nor by it—because of sedentarization. This distinction is important but often ignored as many anthropologists and others continue to oppose land and sea people, as if the two ways of life contradicted one another. The boat dwellers, in fact, oscillate between sea and land.

The Moken compare themselves to their "mythical sister" the turtle. They live between two elements, water and land. Moored in a lagoon or the leeward edges of an island, their houseboats are removed from the threats of coastal predators but not far enough to be swept away by ebbing currents.

With variations, their houseboats are the outriggers with mounted roofs common to Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The Moken kabang, for example, "are a marvel of ingenuity," according to anthropologist Pierre Ivanoff who studied them in the 1950s and 1960s. "Stable, light, able to carry five to eight people, they are capable of withstanding the worst storms of the Indian Ocean. They are seven to ten metres long, and one and a half metres wide. . . . Not a single nail is used in construction: the various sections are secured with wood and bamboo pegs, strands of rattan or various creepers," with palm leaves used for roofs and sails.

Again to outsiders, the boats look crowded. There is barely enough room to stand, let alone walk. Older men find their legs gnarled from the lack of movement. Yet here we fall into the trap of comparing our perception of space

on land and at sea with theirs. With endless horizons as a backdrop for the constant interplay between water, air and light, these people live open and free. The monsoons shape and regulate their lives. As the waves rise dangerously high with the rainy season, they seek the protection of the shore. The Orang Laut are settled on fixed sites in estuaries, while the Moken and Bajau move from one temporary mooring to another in lagoons or along beaches and the leeward edges of islands. This time is largely spent constructing boats or repairing them, while food is found hunting wild pigs, gathering fruits and vegetables and digging up tubers like yam. Once the dry season sets in, they ship off again.

The Moken also move from island to island, hunting sea turtles and collecting sand worms, shellfish, and clams for food. But paradox of paradoxes, they avoid the main fruit of the sea - fish! Sea-slugs are the closest they come and even these creatures are collected only to be sold to the Chinese, who love them. In contrast, the Orang Laut and the Bajau run after the fish, with the first group scouring estuary habitats and the second sifting through coral reefs and mangroves.

Clearly, the sea represents life. Children are always born on the houseboats, never on land. They play either on the strands or swimming around the boats. Women would never think of cooking ashore, even during the rainy season when their boats are moored along beaches.

In contrast, death and illness are bound to land. All of the sea people go ashore to heal or to bury their dead. Older people who feel that they have outlived their usefulness to the community often discreetly ask to be left on a deserted isle to die.

While spirits (hantu) roam everywhere - on trees, under water and rocks, in caves and even the air, their sole requirement of the sea-people is respect. The sea people believe that failure to respect the environment - the abode of the spirits - results in illness, conflict and death. A fisherman who dares to cast a net during the rainy season without performing the prescribed ritual inevitably suffers. The only cure lies in exorcism and appeasement. Basically, a shaman enters into a trance to invite the spirit to inhabit a wooden human image which is then brought to an island designated for the spirits. The dead are buried in common island cemeteries.

These associations of illness and death do not mean that land is the domain of evil or suffering for the boat-dwellers. It simply signifies that there are things, which belong to the land and activities which are better done ashore than on water. Thus, girls are named after tender flowers while boys' names often reflect the strong qualities of trees or animals.

However, through their contacts with coastal and plain dwellers, land has historically been a source of misfortune for sea people. They recount this in their songs, legends, and epics which are sad. They recollect how the Orang Laut, aside from taking care of the rulers' hunting dogs and other menial duties, were practically the indentured defenders of maritime routes for the great Kingdoms of the Straits of Malacca; how the Moken became pearl-divers for the Chinese, and the Bajau trepang (sea cucumber) collectors for the Tausug sultans. The setasks were considered to be lowly, worthy only of savages. And

yet, had it not been for these specialized roles, the sea people would have lost their cultural identity long ago.

Indeed, it looks as if fear of conversion to Islam, which swept the region from the fourteenth century on, greatly motivated the sea people to stay offshore. It is their best way of surviving and conserving their beliefs. All three groups are bound by a common thread: the opposition between us and them; Orang sama and Orang bagai, insiders and outsiders. Whereas their communities are structured on fleets organized around kinship principles, human relations are governed by the more fluid distinction between us and them. History has instilled in them a fear of those who do not belong to them. And their instinct is to flee - inevitably to the sea.

Today, it is increasingly rare to find the Orang Laut, Moken, and Bajau at their habitual moorings. Once again, they are fleeing. From what? From the onslaughts of blast-fishing, from the conversion of traditional fishing and collecting grounds into industrial production plants. Will they survive this time?

The Gazette (Montreal, Quebec)

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Burma's unspoiled archipelago: Foreigners are now welcome in the 800 uninhabited islands of the Mergui archipelago. The magic isn't gone yet, but there are plans for a five-star resort.

By Debra Cummings

Something bounced and yelped on the shoreline in the pink shadows of dawn, something frolicking in the curl of surf shimmering along the beach.

It was too early to read and I was too sticky to sleep, so I'd gone on deck with my binoculars to scan the ribbon of sand 100 feet away for life.

"Monkeys," whispered "Boy," popping up from the galley behind me, handing me a tin cup clinking with icy lemon-grass tea. "They dance there every morning."

The moment was bewitching: 17 monkeys clapping and playing in the surf. The monkeys used to have the surf to themselves. In the '30s foreigners were barred from the 800 uninhabited islands of the Mergui archipelago.

But last year, in the wake of a massive tourism campaign, the Burmese government relented and let the Frost family from Britain sail 51-foot trimarans full of snorkelers and divers into the area.

Last October I was among the first 50 passengers that the Frosts' company - South East Asia Liveboards - brought into the area.

The islands were once the gateway to Siam. Instead of going around the Malay Peninsula, Indian traders would sail through the islands and then up the Pakchan River to the Gulf of Siam, a shortcut that saved them three weeks.

Burma has been condemned for its brutal human-rights record, but its very isolation intrigues the West. And the fact that the country didn't want us - not our science, our trade, our tourism, not even our medicine - creates a mystique so seductive it's tempting to brush aside Burmese history.

But open the covers of Siamese White and Burma's past becomes a morbid page-turner.

There was King Thibaw, for example, a power-smitten 19-year-old who knocked off 80 relatives in the 19th century by having them sewn up in sacks of red velvet and then trampled to death by royal elephants.

And then he tried to rid his empire of smallpox in 1880 by sacrificing 100 men, 100 girls, 100 soldiers and 100 foreigners to the gods. That's when the British intervened and exiled Thibaw to Rantigiri, off the Bombay coast, after a brief showdown with the king's French allies.

In 1886 Burma became a province of British India, and trade in teak, tin, rice and petroleum increased by 20 per cent almost overnight. Immigrants poured in from Madras and Bengal, boosting the Indian population in Lower Burma to 583,000 by 1930.

But coups, revolutions, death squads, student massacres and opium dealers plagued Burma. In 1987, the UN named the country the "least-developed country in the world," with a per-capita income of less than \$ 200 U.S. a year and a foreign debt of \$ 3.5 billion. On March 18, 1988, soldiers gunned down thousands of student protesters in what has become known as Bloody Friday. Burma is potentially one of the richest countries in Asia, bursting with rubies, sapphires, jade, gold, silver, teak, zinc and rubber. But the country is bankrupt. All those problems seemed far away on the Wanderlust, however, where "Boy" - the crew insisted he liked this name - had whipped up a breakfast of fluffy lemon pancakes, drizzled with honey and chopped mangoes.

He worked miracles like this three times a day. With two gas burners, he produced divinely sweet curries, silky coconut shrimp soup, minty salads and lots of sticky rice.

We sailed north for 240 kilometres from Kawthoung, a Burmese border town that looked like a set from an Indiana Jones flick, stopping to snorkel off islands with British names like Hastings and Swinton's, and others with more Burmese names, like Pulau Bada, Pu Nala and Lampir.

Except for the occasional fishing boat, we saw no one and no sign of civilization. We sailed by rocky cliffs framing white ribbons of sand, curls of coral, tall vine-strapped trees sagging with spiky fruits and alive with sea eagles, kites, hornbills and kingfishers.

We eventually reached the higgledly-piggledy village of Nala, home to the Moken, or sea gypsies, who live as they did hundreds of years ago on a diet of sea cucumbers and fish.

Their children giggled and pointed at us "big noses," a term the Thai and Burmese use to describe foreigners, but not a palm reached out for money. After all, what would they do with it? There are no stores for hundreds of miles. The Moken are semi-nomadic; they stay in one place for several years until the sea cucumbers are depleted, and then sail off to another cove to repeat the cycle.

The villagers took us to the main Buddhist temple, where the village monk lived in a humble tin-roofed home (grand, mind you, when compared with the villagers' shanties). His only material comforts were eight bamboo mats, one

table and four saffron-coloured robes. Oh, and a television with a satellite dish where all the villagers gather once a day to watch the news.

We snorkled two to three times every day, but our best day was spent off a secluded, jungle-lined beach on Great Swinton Island

The sea floor was covered with schools of parrot fish, elegant longfin batfish, silver anchovies, blue-striped snappers, speckled sea snakes, dotted harlequin bass and the purple velvety mouths of anemones. The reefs varied from dull brown to glowing purple and yellow walls that rippled like Thai silk.

The five days drifted by lazily. Once we took the Zodiac 6 kilometres upriver on Lampi Island and trekked through a jungle full of massive teak logs and howling monkeys. On another, we ran for 8 kilometres along a hard sandy beach.

We saw seven dappled stingrays off Great Swinton Island, slept under a blanket of stars and marveled at trees that looked like wobbly, crooked Dr. Seuss creations.

And then we were back in Kawthoung, which, after five days in Asian wilderness, had come to look almost progressive, sophisticated even.

Since October two other companies, Fantasy Diver and Dive Asia Pacific, have gained licenses to ply the Mergui, and the Frosts are inking a deal to build a five-star resort in Crescent Bay, 40 miles north of Kawthoung.

Now's the time to see the Mergui, before the rest of the world does. If You Go Getting there. Liveboards' trips start in Phuket, Thailand, and the closest gateway city is Bangkok. Several carriers fly to Bangkok from Vancouver - Cathay Pacific, Korean Airlines, Singapore, Malaysian and Canadian Airlines. Korean

UNESCO Courier

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The myth of the Moken: twixt land and sea

By Ivanoff, Jacques

The Moken are a seafaring people who populate the waters off the Bay of Bengal in India. The Moken know how to grow crops but they prefer to live on the sea in obedience to an old myth.

Although they know how to grow crops, the Moken prefer to live on the sea through fidelity to their foundation myth, the story of Gaman and Sibian.

The Moken are a nomadic seafaring folk who, living to all appearances on the fringes of human society, ply the waters of the Mergui archipelago, off the Tenasserim coast in the Bay of Bengal. No documentary evidence subsists from the period before British colonial expansion into this region to throw light on the mysterious past of these people who live afloat on extraordinary craft, use the resources of their environment in a curious way, and avoid all contact with the outside world.

Employing so-called "archaic" technology--the harpoon and the adze being their main implements--and clad only in skimpy loin-cloths, the Moken practise a purely symbolic type of agriculture and refuse technical innovation in any shape

or form, including the use of more efficient gear such as fish traps and nets that could increase their catches; they have made a deliberate choice to go on using only pointed or pronged harpoons.

A mistaken explanation was long put upon this choice by observers who saw the Moken only during the dry season and sent back a garbled account of their constant comings and goings, their apparent lack of any system of beliefs, and what seemed on the surface to be the looseness of the nomadic structure, as evidenced by the scattered and shifting dispositions of the fishing fleets. In fact, when the rains come the Moken go ashore on the inhabited islands of the archipelago, where they grow rice, sorghum and millet. They do not, however, eat the crops they harvest. They use a few handfuls of rice for ritual purposes, in particular at the festival of the "Post of the Spirits", which occurs during the fifth lunar month and represents a recapitulation of the whole pre-Islamic and proto-Malay period of Malay history. Since, moreover, the only agricultural produce they do consume is obtained by way of trade, they are thus demonstrating that, while they are familiar with agricultural practices, they at the same time reject them.

During the rainy season, Moken society again becomes strongly bonded, and the various pieces of the nomadic jigsaw puzzle, with its different levels of social integration--by boat, fleet and subgroup--come together. This seasonal transition to a sedentary way of life awakens powerful unifying forces of which an upsurge of religious activity is the most visible expression.

This alternation between the rainy season and the dry season, between coming together and dispersing, between a nomadic and a sedentary mode of life, between fishing and farming and between food-gathering and a self-imposed food shortage--the price the community pays for infringing its own rule of keeping on the move--is not by any means determined by the forces of nature alone: a logical explanation is to be found in the mythical account of the Moken's origins.

The key to the symbolic link between man, sea and boat is provided by the epic of Gaman, which sets forth the cultural motivations that have enabled the Moken to keep their identity intact throughout the changing fortunes of their history, withstanding, one after another, Islam, the agricultural way of life, missionaries, colonization, and the pressures exerted by expansionist nation-states that wanted to bring them under their control and acculturate them. Gaman, a Muslim Malay, was the consort of Queen Sibian but was enamoured of his young sister-in-law Ken and became her lover. By this act Ken transgressed society's taboo against "mounting", i.e. taking the place of, one's elder. Outraged, Queen Sibian decreed that thereafter it would be forbidden to dwell on land, a ban symbolized by her ordering Ken to be cast into the sea (lemo Ken--the "immersion of Ken") and that ever thereafter boats must be dugouts hewn from a single balk of timber, with indentations fore and aft ("a mouth that eats and a rear that defecates"), symbolizing the unending cycle of ingestion, digestion and evacuation.

Thus it came about that the Moken were condemned to a life at sea, cut off from their terrestrial roots and from the royal bounty. The golden age was over. Sibian's sentence was to weigh heavily upon the subsequent fate of the Moken

and to provide the members of the new, nomadic community with a common criterion of identity: a Moken is anyone who accepts that name and builds his boats in accordance with Sibian's precepts.

This drama of forbidden love brings us to the heart of the factors that determine the Moken's sense of identity. By her immersion in the sea, Ken came to symbolize a community casting off its terrestrial moorings, as embodied by Sibian. This is why the Moken cannot return to terra firma, which nonetheless remains symbolically present in the community in the form of yams and other traditional foods.

The mythical account of the origins of the Moken yields, upon analysis, an explanation of certain features specific to them, such as their self-imposed poverty and the fact that they do not amass property, their rejection of technical innovations and the fact that they do not consume their own agricultural produce, characteristics that, among these "sedentary nomads", take on an ideological aspect rooted in the myth itself: the Moken derive their nomad identity from the judgment that sentenced them to a life afloat, the symbolic immersion of Ken--"lemono nganyan Ken", as commanded by Sibian.

The initial contact between Gaman and Sibian represents the relations between the Malays and the coastal civilization. The coming of Gaman the Malay betokens the intrusion of the rice-growing world into the Moken community.

The Moken did not adopt rice-growing and were driven out by it. According to the epic, there were at the time tens of thousands of them, and they had reached a point where they had to choose either to extend their territory and take up farming or to stabilize their population level and gather their food. Gaman acted as the catalyst in this clash of opposing life-styles.

In the myth, Sibian and her people are shown as an uncivilized sedentary society, while Gaman appears as a civilized nomad. By taking rice with them in the wanderings that followed the transgression committed by Ken and Gaman, the Moken were in effect bearing civilization with them, thus redefining the terms and becoming, by virtue of the rice, a society both nomadic and civilized. By accompanying the Moken to the islands of the Mergui archipelago, Gaman comes to represent the rice borne away by a community that rejects the sedentary agricultural way of life but which, as a concession to the ascendancy of a dominant people for whom rice represents civilization, does not refuse to eat cultivated crops.

Sea and cereal thus became inseparably connected. Since the time when Gaman and rice, i.e. Islam and rice-growing, appeared on the scene, the Moken have been sea-going nomads, using their catch as currency wherewith to obtain rice for their own consumption. Only in the light of this ambivalent attitude of the Moken to rice can one understand their refusal to grow it for that purpose and their acceptance of the economic tyranny of the taukes, the Chinese traders and middlemen from whom they obtain it.

Furthermore, by leaving rice-growing to others, the Moken are asserting their particular identity: rice-growers, whether Muslim or Buddhist, facilitate their self-awareness. Malays and Chinese are the middlemen preferred by the Moken who, like Gaman, barter pearls and other products of the sea for rice and other consumer goods, such as clothing. By enfolded their commercial links within a

system of kinship, the middlemen secure the loyalty of the Moken, though it would perhaps be more truthful to put it the other way round. . . . The middlemen's ships ride in the midst of the Moken fleets which they exploit, and the Moken boats nuzzle up to their huge bellies to take on supplies. The hull of the Moken boat, with its analogies to the human body, carries hewn into its flanks the history of the Moken people. The "mouth that eats" (okang makan) and the "rear that defecates" (butut mae) represent in visual and technical terms the nomad belief that accumulation spells death. The "belly" (lake), i.e. the hold, cannot take in food unless it also discharges itself. The middlemen's ship is thus needed by the Moken, who accept as a necessary compromise the resultant reduction in their mobility.