

# The Lost World of Myanmar

Story by Denis D. Gray

Photos by John Everingham

It was called the "Lost World" and for good reason because that region where the Indian Ocean rolls toward Myanmar's southwestern coast slumbered in seclusion, isolated by remote geography and decades of xenophobic, military rule. Even the footprints of passing fishermen and the Moken, nomads of the sea, were rarely sighted on its 800 islands.

Today, the shimmering beaches are still all but deserted; only hornbills and monkeys break a primeval silence on jungled hillsides and the Moken, shy, gentle people who worship the spirits of nature

and traditionally roamed the waters, still try to draw their sustenance from the sea.

But the isolation of the Mergui archipelago is becoming a thing of the past, following the advent of a civilian government in Myanmar in 2011, which lifted travel bans and embraced international tourism. The last high tourist season saw the biggest ever influx of visitors, although that's still only some 2,000 – or 2.5 tourists for every island. And given the geography, some abiding restrictions and the expense, one of Asia's last tourism frontiers is unlikely to be inundated by mass tourism any time soon. The only access is via pricey live-aboard yachts

streets, nothing, a lost island world like a maritime Shangri-La. I had never seen anything like it. Nobody in our group had seen anything like it," the ex-lawyer, Christoph Schwanitz, told us. "We were absolutely enchanted." So much so that they bought into the yacht, went into partnership with its veteran captain and launched Burma Boating, which has recently added two others to its fleet.

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Our own voyage into one of Asia's last tourism frontiers took us in a northwesterly course from Kawthaung as the national flags of our group fluttered above – American, Australian, British, Indian and Thai. The ensuing six-day voyage was to combine sheer pleasure with probes into tourism development, the lives of the Moken and an environment thought by scientists to harbor some of the globe's most important marine biodiversity.

For two days we sailed on an unruffled sea, past jagged outcrops and extensive islands – one larger than the Republic of Singapore – rising to hills hundreds of meters high and clothed by dense vegetation. We would have our meals, prepared by an excellent Thai cook, comfortably seated in the open deck at the yacht's aft. Near sunset or earlier, the captain would park inside a sheltered bay off a deserted shore of an uninhabited island to which we might swim or reach by dinghy. Birdsong would emerge from the jungle canopy, with fishing eagles high overhead, as the sinking sun burnished the still shimmering beach and darkened the tropical green. When night fell, the only sounds on board were those of the sea gently lapping our anchored boat.

On our third day we cast anchor off Myanmar's only marine national park – Lampi, a place the Moken reverently called "Mother Island". The 204-square-kilometer park was established in 1996 but only until recently did it start to receive protection and the beginnings of a master plan to conserve a dazzling quantity and range of flora and fauna, from 228 species of birds to 73 different kinds of seaweed. Its forests are home to nearly 200 plant species, mouse deer, gibbons and macaques which stroll down to the beaches to feast on abundant crabs (they can choose from a menu of 42 species). Locals told us that there is even one wild elephant, a lone survivor of a small herd earlier transported to Lampi from the mainland.

Perhaps the highlight of our Lampi stop was a cruise along the island's western shore. We halted

or dive boats, most from neighboring Thailand.

That's the way we traveled, a group of eight friends, chartering a yacht from Kawthaung, a busy fishing port at the southernmost tip of Myanmar and opposite the Thai city of Ranong. Our 25-meter, two-masted ketch, the *Meta IV*, is owned by two enterprising young Germans, a working journalist and a former lawyer, who fell in love with the islands.

That occurred when they took a yachting holiday cruise to India's Andaman Islands but were barred from entry. So they turned around and headed to Myanmar and the Mergui archipelago.

"There was no infrastructure, no towns, no





just off a five-kilometer stretch of beach and launched a dinghy to penetrate a vast stretch of mangrove swamp, an eerie yet magical world of overpowering lushness. The dinghy eased its way through narrow channels, almost choked by gnarled roots, with pythons slumbering on overhanging tree branches. It seemed like a trip in time before humans walked the earth.

But on Lampi we also encountered some of the troubles brewing in this otherwise veritable paradise. Before our mangrove venture, we spent time in Ma Kyone Galet, a village on Lampi and one of the very few settlements across the archipelago. The village,

as of a 2012 count, is home to some 280 Moken and from a distance seems like the classic tropical idyll. On closer inspection its beach is awash with empty liquor bottles, broken glass and plastic, symbolic of the decline of traditional Moken culture as it collides with the modern world.

Although no accurate census is available, about 2,000 Moken – “the soul of the archipelago”, as they have been described – are believed to inhabit the region, significantly reduced through migration, intermarriage with Burmese and deaths of males through alcohol and drug abuse.

Often referred to as sea gypsies, these Austroesians

people migrated to the offshore islands of western Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand, probably from China, as early as 4,000 years ago, and until recent times spent most of each year roaming this region in their hand hewn houseboats – among the last of the world’s hunter-gatherers. From these kabang, they collected mollusks and sea cucumbers, speared fish and dove into ear-busting depths to find valuable pearl oysters. Today, very few still live the nomadic life, having been moved into island settlements by the government or driven to find work on mainland mines and farms. Only a few old men still know how to build the kabangs, fashioned as symbolic

representations of humans, from mouth to anus.

“In twenty, thirty years the Burmese will dominate Moken culture. Only a little of it may remain,” Khin Maung Htwe, a Burmese villager married to a Moken, told us.

Unfortunately, that’s not the only sad side of

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Lampi or the archipelago because beneath the surface of its crystalline waters and in secluded swaths of the forests, man’s depredations are increasingly evident – blast fishing, inshore trawling, illegal logging, wildlife poaching and simply more outsiders moving in and making their mark. Like so many near pristine places in the world, the race is now on to protect the treasure trove that is still found in these islands before it’s too late and emptied forever.

Whether the impact of coming tourism will add to the despoiling of Shangri-La or help save it is still a matter of speculation.

During our six-day trip, we encountered only four other tourist-carrying vessels and one shark-sleek super yacht, signs that the Lost World is on the map of the world’s super rich. In 2013, one of the mega yachts carried a Russian couple to a deserted island – a “unique Robinson Crusoe setting,” the organizers said – for a wedding complete with chanting Buddhist monks, harps and xylophones imported for the occasion.

A dozen concessions have been granted for island resorts and others are being negotiated while Myanmar’s richest tycoon, Tay Za, is already building one on an unfortunately named Chin Kite Kyunn, Mosquito Bite Island.

To date, only a single hotel exists, the Myanmar







Andaman Resort on McLeod Island, its 22 bungalows tucked under forest cover deep within a U-shaped bay. Less than two hours by speedboat from Kawthauing, the resort has been receiving divers and those who scour the globe in search of tranquil places.

We met two of them during our stop-over, super-fit 71-year-old Manfred Kuchenmuller and his wife Margaret, a couple from Vancouver, Canada, who had opted out of a vacation in Thailand, fearing swarms of backpackers and all-night beach parties. They looked forward to days of snorkeling and hiking up the steep hillside above the resort.

"We wanted somewhere more secluded, less touristy, less traveled. We just wanted to come to some place where there was just nature," Margaret said, and her husband interjected: "Pristine. I think a lot of people search for that. But this is definitely a place which meets those expectations."



As we sailed, somewhat sadly, back to the "real world", we read a book in the ship's library by Walter Grainge White, a missionary who had lived among the Moken nearly a hundred years ago, speaking their language and studying their customs. He warned that they might one day be absorbed by more dominant



*...they might one day be absorbed by more dominant neighbors.*

neighbors. But he also described a near-Eden, one in which the Moken stood their rightful place: "In this dream I see the Mergui Archipelago, one of the beauty spots of the East, not denuded of its jungle and laid bare, but planted with flourishing settlements...the beauty of its bays preserved."

We all hoped that White's vision would become the future of the Lost World. ■



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