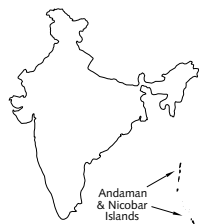


Andaman & Nicobar Islands



On old maps, the Andamans and Nicobars were the kind of islands whose inhabitants were depicted with dog heads or faces in their chests, surrounded by sea serpents coiled around a tempest-lashed sea known to Indians as Kalapani: The Black Waters. These were the islands that someone labelled, with a shaky hand, 'Here be Monsters'.

Likely, those maps were drawn by an early traveller who realised they had found a Very Good Thing and didn't want to share it with the rest of us.

Because the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are, unambiguously and without hyperbole, tropical bliss. If it weren't for the tragic fact their indigenous populations have largely been wiped out and displaced, they'd be practically perfect. That depressing addendum aside, what's the attraction here?

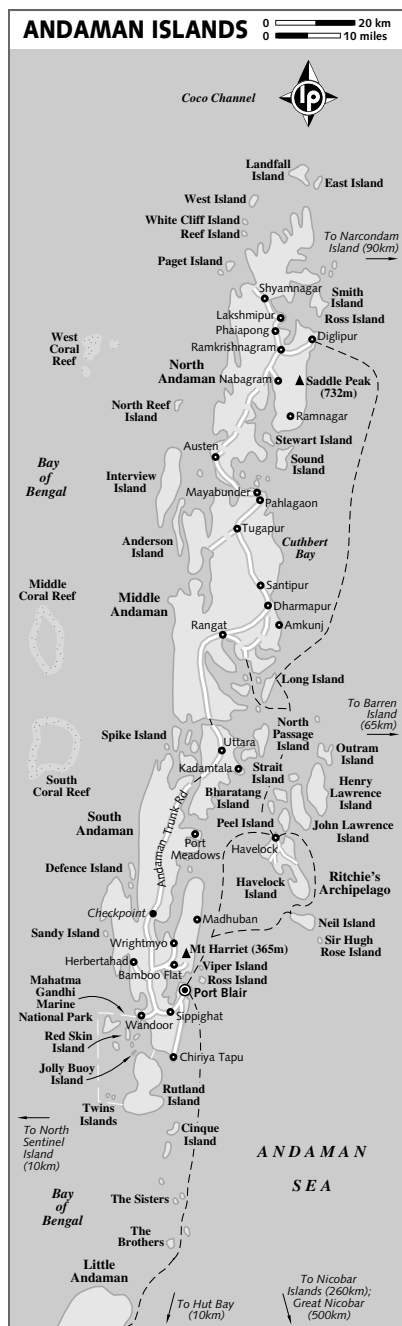
Blue, blue, blue and blue: oceans and skies, streaked with silver sheets of flying fish. Primal jungle cut by muddy rivers that run past villages as old as India itself, where some inhabitants still literally live in the Stone Age. Snow-white beaches melting under flame-and-purple sunsets, all populated by a friendly masala of South and Southeast Asian settlers and their laid-back descendants.

Unfortunately the Nicobars are off limits to tourists, but that still leaves hundreds of islands to explore. When you do choose to wander, it will likely be by ferry. When the salt cuts the waves and dolphins shimmer in front of the next oncoming Eden, you'll know you've found a wholly unexpected island allure to India.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Regress to infantile laziness and happiness on **Neil Island** (p1134)
- Snorkel and socialise on **Havelock Island** (p1133)
- Interact with a small town yet multicultural cast of Indians in **Port Blair** (p1127)
- Take a road trip through the jungle heart of the Andamans around **Mayabunder** and **Diglipur** (p1135)
- Find Butler Bay; call God; say thanks for paradise on **Little Andaman** (p1137)





History

The date of initial human settlement in the Andamans and Nicobars is lost to history. Anthropologists say stone-tool crafters have lived here for 2000 years, and scholars of human migration believe local indigenous tribes have roots in Negrito and Malay ethnic groups in Southeast Asia. Otherwise, these specks in the sea have been a constant source of legend to outside visitors.

Even the name 'Andaman' is thought to derive from 'Hanuman'; the Hindu monkey god supposedly used the islands as a stepping stone between India and Sri Lanka (although that really doesn't make geographic sense). The 10th-century Persian adventurer Buzurg Ibn Shahriyar described an island chain inhabited by cannibals, a story Marco Polo repeated with the slight embellishment that the natives had dog heads. With that said, stories of cannibalism may have been inflated by Malay pirates, who liked to use the archipelago as a secret raiding base. Tablets in Thanjavur (Tanjore) in Tamil Nadu named the archipelago Timaitivu: The Impure Islands.

None of the above was exactly tourism brochure stuff, but visitors kept coming: the Marathas in the late 17th century and 200 years later, the British, who used the Andamans as a penal colony for political dissidents. When WWII rolled around, some islanders greeted the invading Japanese as liberators, but despite installing Indian politicians as (puppet) administrators, the Japanese military proved to be far harsher occupiers than the British.

Following Independence in 1947, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were incorporated into the Indian Union. Migration from the mainland has inflated their population from a few thousand to more than 350,000; many of these arrivals were Bengali refugees fleeing the chaos of partition. During this influx, tribal land rights and environmental protection were often disregarded, and while some conditions are improving, the indigenous tribes remain largely in decline.

Many of the aftershocks of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake were concentrated off the coast of the islands, which were doubly devastated by the resulting tsunami and vibrations from the actual quakes. The Nicobars were especially hard hit; some estimate a fifth of the population was killed. Numerous citizens were relocated to Port Blair after the tsunami,