

Northern Andaman Coast



Whether you've got designer-villa wishes, bamboo-hut desires or anything in between, the northern Andaman coast serves it up with a warm shot of turquoise ocean to wash it down. Phuket, on the southern extremity, is the audacious starlet of the region, flaunting glitzy five-star hotels that grace ultrawhite beaches, and where sleep is an afterthought to parties, water sports and spa pampering. Ranong, to the far north, is a mix of Burmese and Thais who eke out a living in a dusty frontier removed from the tourist industry. Travel the 300km between Ranong and Phuket and you'll see it all: Muslim and Moken stilt villages and vertical limestone karsts; resorts out of the pages of *Architectural Digest* and bays abuzz with jet skis; tangled mangrove swamps and skittish clouds of nesting swallows.

Phuket is the second-most visited location in Thailand (Pattaya is first) and its fame for fine dining, cabarets, general hedonism and outstanding beaches makes it easy to overlook the rest of this coast. But head north and you'll find the jaw-dropping underwater coral gardens of the Surin and Similan Islands, and the islands of Ko Chang and Ko Phayam, both blessed with sweet beach bungalows and a back-to-nature spirit. In the wet season, much of the far north shuts down and Phuket's beaches empty out, leaving fabulous deals on accommodation and the best surf in Thailand.

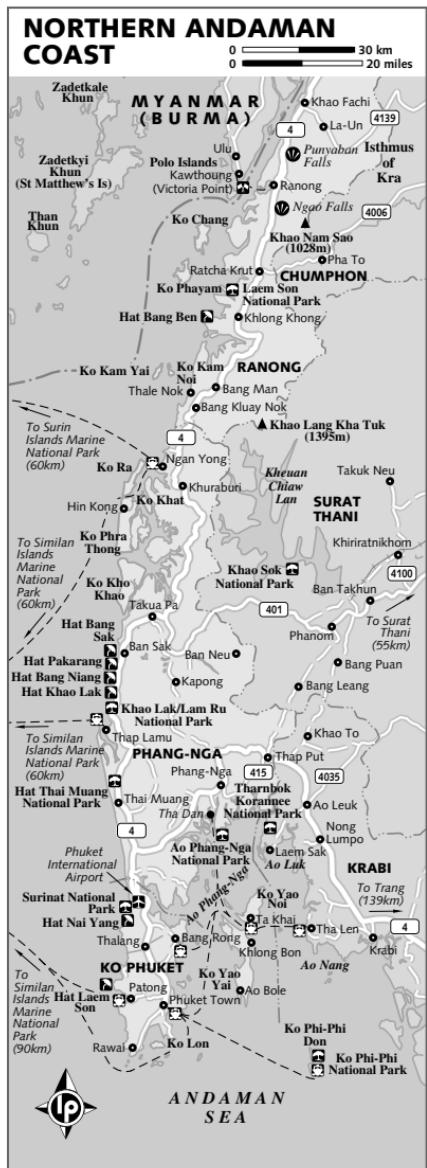
HIGHLIGHTS

- Searching for elusive whale sharks on a live-aboard cruise of the **Similan Islands Marine National Park** (p295) and **Surin Islands Marine National Park** (p289)
- Experiencing the beautiful beaches, sublime vistas and Thai-Muslim culture on **Ko Yao** (p300)
- Cruising the art galleries and hole-in-the-wall restaurants and bars of Old Phuket in **Phuket Town** (p308)
- Kayaking around the beautiful bay of **Ao Phang-Nga** (p297)
- Finding gluttonous hedonism in the hair-raising clubs and on the packed beaches of **Hat Patong** (p322) – love it or hate it
- Exploring the emerging jungled isles of **Ko Chang** (p275) and **Ko Phayam** (p277)



■ DRY SEASON: NOVEMBER–APRIL

■ WET SEASON: MAY–OCTOBER



Climate

The Andaman coast is wetter than the southern gulf provinces, with the low season months between May and October logging the highest rainfall. During this time, seas are rough and passenger boats to some islands, such as the Surin and Similan archipelagos, are suspended. On the upside, peninsular

Thailand is narrow, so if the weather turns sour on the Andaman coast, you can always pack your bags and chase the sun to the eastern seaboard.

National Parks

Some of the northern Andaman coast's most visited areas are national parks. Ao Phang-Nga National Park (p299) swarms with day-trippers drawn by the expanse of turquoise water and pristine islands – it's no wonder Scaramanga (of *The Man with the Golden Gun* fame) chose to build his lair here. Divers and snorkellers are now flocking to Surin Islands Marine National Park (p289) and Similan Islands Marine National Park (p295), mostly on two-day to week-long live-aboard cruises.

Even built up Phuket Province has its share of parks: Khao Phra Taew Royal Wildlife & Forest Reserve (p332) is a remnant rainforest in the heart of Phuket's concrete jungle and Sirinat National Park (p330) is one of the wildest coastal stretches on the island.

Further off the beaten track in the far north is Laem Son National Park (p277), where you'll find mangrove forests, stunning, empty beaches and turtle nesting sites.

RANONG & AROUND

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pop 27,772

Some consider this rough and ready border town and provincial capital rather charmless. Others dig the frontier atmosphere that comes with the setting – Ranong lies on the tea-brown Pak Chan estuary, and the local blend of Burmese and Thais working the underground angles of international commerce. For years, the town has been known as a visa-run gateway, but now tourists only get 15 days when crossing overland or by sea, so unless you're an expat looking for a long-stay extension, it makes (much) less sense to go this route. But with its natural hot springs, tremendous local food, and easy access to luscious Ko Chang and Ko Phayam, Ranong is still worth a night or two.

Information

IMMIGRATION OFFICES

The main Thai immigration office is on the road to Saphan Plaa, about halfway between town and the main piers, across from a