



Phuket & the Northern Andaman Coast

Includes »

Phuket Town	246
Rawai	253
Hat Kata	254
Hat Patong	258
Ranong	270
Ko Phayam	273
Surin Islands Marine National Park	278
Khao Sok National Park	288
Similan Islands Marine National Park	293
Ao Phang-Nga & Phang-Nga	294
Ko Yao	297

Why Go?

Whether you've got designer-villa wishes, bamboo-hut desires or something in between, the northern Andaman coast serves it up hot with a 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. Here 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 skitish clouds of swallows.

Best Places to Eat

- » Rum Jungle (p253)
- » Ka Jok See (p249)
- » Tatonka (p268)
- » Mama's Restaurant (p292)
- » Cook (p249)

Best Places to Stay

- » Six Senses Hideaway (p298)
- » Mom Tri's Villa Royale (p255)
- » Twin Palms (p266)
- » Phuket 346 (p248)
- » Nangthong Beach Resort (p292)

When to Go

May to October is the rainy season. At this time, the sea swells kick up surf, many resorts close and others slash their prices. The Vegetarian Festival is held in late September or October and involves parades of pierced-face worshippers, endless firecrackers and great meatless food.

December to January is the high season for tourism. Prices soar, and accommodation and transport need to be booked in advance.

PHUKET PROVINCE

The island of Phuket has long been misunderstood. Firstly, the 'h' is silent. Ahem. And secondly, Phuket doesn't feel like an island at all. It's so huge (the biggest in Thailand) that you rarely get the sense that you're surrounded by water, which is probably the reason why the 'Ko' (meaning 'island') was dropped from its name. Dubbed the 'pearl of the Andaman' by marketing execs, this is Thailand's original flavour of tailor-made fun in the sun.

The island's 'sin city' of Patong is the biggest town and busiest beach. It's the ultimate gong show where podgy beach-aholics sizzle off their hangovers and go-go girls play ping-pong...without paddles. But ultimately the island's affinity for luxury far outshines its other stereotypes. Jet-setters come through in droves, getting pummelled during swanky spa sessions and swigging sundowners at one of the many fashion-forward nightspots. And you don't have to be an heiress to tap into Phuket's trendy to-do list. There's deep-sea diving, high-end dining, and white beaches that beckon you and your book – whatever your heart desires.



Activities

Diving & Snorkelling

Phuket enjoys an enviable central location relative to the Andaman's top diving destinations. The much-talked-about Similan Islands sit to the north, while dozens of dive sites orbit Ko Phi-Phi (p317) and Ko Lanta (p325) to the south. Of course, this means that trips from Phuket to these awesome destinations cost slightly more than from places closer to the sites since you'll be forking over extra dough for your boat's petrol. Most operators on Phuket take divers to the nine decent sites orbiting the island, like Ko Raya Noi and Ko Raya Yai (also called Ko Racha Noi and Ko Racha Yai), but these spots rank lower on the wow-o-meter. The reef off the southern tip of Raya Noi is the best spot, particularly good for experienced divers, with soft corals and pelagic fish species aplenty. Manta and marble rays are also frequently glimpsed here and, if you're lucky, you might even see a whale shark.

Typical one-day dive trips to nearby sites cost around 3500B, including two dives and equipment. Nondivers (and snorkellers) are permitted to join these trips for a significant discount. PADI Open Water certification

courses cost around 15,000B for three days of instruction and equipment hire.

Snorkelling is best along Phuket's western coast, particularly at the rocky headlands between beaches. Mask, snorkel and fins can be rented for around 250B a day. As with scuba diving, you'll find better snorkelling, with greater visibility and variety of marine life, along the shores of small outlying islands such as Ko Raya Yai and Ko Raya Noi.

As is the case elsewhere in the Andaman Sea, the best diving months are December to May when the weather is good and the sea is smooth and clear.

Recommended diving and snorkelling centres on Phuket include the following:

Sea Fun Divers

DIVING

(off Map p260; ☎0 7634 0480; www.seafundivers.com; 29 Soi Karon Nui, Patong) An outstanding and very professional diving operation. Standards are extremely high and service is impeccable. There's an office at Le Meridien resort in Patong, and a second location at Katathani Resort (p255) in Kata Noi.

Offspray Leisure

DIVING, SNORKELLING

(☎08 1894 1274; www.offsprayleisure.com; 43/87 Chalong Plaza, Chalong; trips from 2950B) A dive and snorkelling excursion company specialising in small-load, intimate trips to the reefs around Ko Phi-Phi.

Oi's Longtail

SNORKELLING

(☎08 1978 5728; 66 Moo 3, Hat Nai Yang; tours 1600B) Oi specialises in two-hour snorkelling tours of the reefs around Ko Waeo. Located at Bank Restaurant, opposite the long-tail boat harbour.

Dive Asia

DIVING

(Map p256; ☎0 7633 0598; www.diveasia.com; 24 Th Karon, Kata) There is a second location at 623 Th Karon near Hat Karon.

Adrenalin Sports

Cable Jungle Adventures

ADVENTURE SPORTS

(Map p242; ☎08 1977 4904; 232/17 Moo 8, Th Bansuanermit; per person 1600B; ☀9am-6pm) Tucked into the hills behind a quilt of pineapple fields, rubber plantations and mango groves is this maze of eight zip lines linking cliffs to ancient ficus trees. The zips range from 6m to 23m above the ground and the longest run is 100m long. Closed-toe shoes are a must.

Jungle Bungy Jump

ADVENTURE SPORTS

(Map p242; ☎0 7632 1351; www.phuketbungy.com; 61/3 Moo 6, Kathu; jump 1600B) In operation