

Andaman Coast



As airfares soar and vacation time dwindles, we tighten the grip on our 'travel bibles' in hopes of planning the best trip ever. This is a daunting task, especially for those of us on the relentless quest for '-est'. Fortunately, the Andaman Coast is the ultimate land of superlatives: the tallest karst formations, the longest beaches, the softest sands, the bluest water – the list goes on.

Along the coast, boats from Khao Lak idle between the Similan and Surin islands, dropping scuba buffs deep down into the greatest dive sights around. Further south, Phuket, the biggest island, is the region's hedonistic launching pad, offering a glimmer of what's to come next.

The Andaman's signature pinnacles of jagged jungle-clad slate come to a stunning climax in Krabi. The region's earthen fortresses lie frozen in the sea – each one protected by a halo of neon reefs. Ko Phi-Phi Don's unimaginable beauty exceeds even the highest expectations. Scurry up to viewpoints for change-your-life vistas of the island's idyllic hourglass-shaped sandbar. At Railay, climbers take in the scenery as they dangle like ornaments on a giant Christmas tree.

Down in Trang, the skyscraping swell of iconic limestone starts to sink back into the deep, but not before punctuating the coastline with a handful of anthropomorphic islets. This quiet getaway, the Andaman's best-kept secret (until now), is the mystical stomping ground of the local sea gypsies, who cast their lines amongst the finest blooms of snorkel-worthy coral. Save these islands for the end of your journey – we guarantee you'll be impressed.

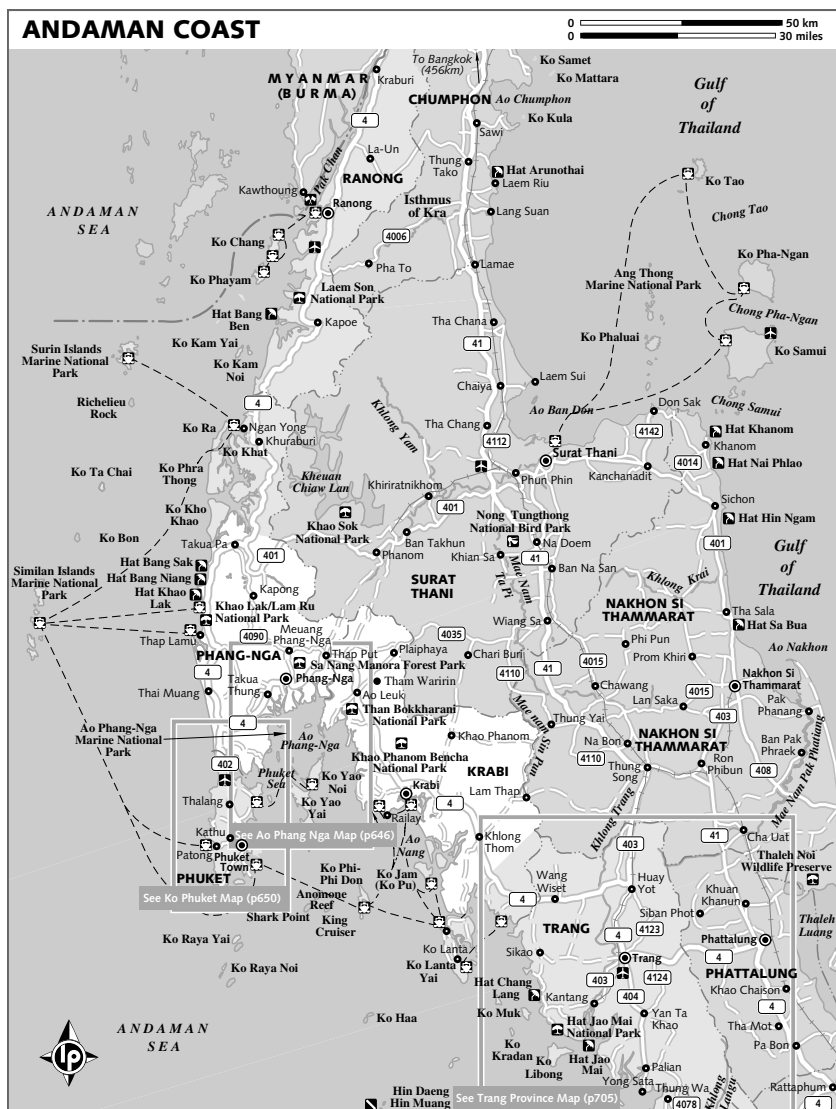
HIGHLIGHTS

- Cavorting with curious pufferfish in the necklaces of fiery coral draped around each of the **Trang Islands** (p709)
- Tooling around on your motorbike uncovering local markets and desolate beaches on **Ko Lanta** (p698)
- Tempting your tastebuds with a heady mix of gourmet treats and street-side eats on **Phuket** (p672)
- Slinking into the sea for a sunrise dive while cruising through Thailand's top scuba sites on a live-aboard from **Khao Lak** (p641)
- Spotting colourful hornbills and prancing monkeys from your wooden canoe while paddling between the peaks of **Khao Sok National Park** (p639)
- Floating in a sea of lapis lazuli while staring up at the astounding limestone crags on **Ko Phi-Phi** (p692)



■ BEST TIME TO VISIT: DECEMBER–APRIL

■ POPULATION: 1.13 MILLION



Climate

A main concern when visiting Thailand's southern provinces is the weather. The Andaman Coast receives more rain than the southern gulf provinces – with May to October being the months of heaviest downpours. During this time, passenger boat frequency to the islands slows, and in many

instances ferries suspend their service (most in the far south).

National Parks

This region has more than its share of national parks. Ao Phang-Nga (p647) offers limestone cliffs, islands and caves to explore by sea kayaking, scuba diving or