



Phuket & the Andaman Coast

Includes »

Ko Phayam	608
Khao Sok National Park	611
Khao Lak & Around	612
Surin Islands Marine National Park.....	616
Similan Islands Marine National Park.....	617
Ao Phang-Nga	618
Phuket Island	622
Hat Patong	638
Krabi	650
Railay	657
Ko Phi-Phi Don	662
Ko Lanta	669
Trang Islands.....	680

Best Places to Eat

- » Trang Night Market (p676)
- » Rum Jungle (p634)
- » Ka Jok See (p631)
- » Tatonka (p647)

Best Places to Stay

- » Six Senses Hideaway (p621)
- » Mom Tri's Villa Royale (p635)
- » Indigo Pearl (p649)
- » Sukorn Beach Bungalows (p683)
- » Pak-up Hostel (p652)

Why Go?

The Andaman is Thailand's turquoise coast, that place on a 'Travel to Paradise' poster that makes you want to leave your job and live in flip-flops...forever. And for once, the beauty exceeds the hype. White beaches, cathedral-like limestone cliffs, neon corals and hundreds of jungle-covered isles extend down the Andaman Sea from the border of Myanmar to Malaysia. Photographs haven't yet fully captured the array of blues and greens, let alone the soft fingers of humidity on the skin or the feel of the world's softest sands between your toes. For this, you'll need to visit.

The catch is, the destination is no secret and the beaches are becoming more crowded with backpackers, package tourists and everyone in between. Flashy resorts are pushing out the bamboo shacks and authenticity now hides in the backroads. But your poster dream is still here – if you're willing to look.

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-faced 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.

RANONG PROVINCE

The first piece in the Andaman's puzzle of coastal provinces is the least-populated region in Thailand and also its most rainy, with up to eight months of showers per year. As a result, Ranong's forests are lush and green, but it means that it's swampy near the mainland coast where beaches are almost nonexistent.

Ranong Town

ระนอง

POP 24,500

On the eastern bank of the Sompae River's turbid, tea-brown estuary, the frontier town of Ranong is a short boat ride – or a filthy swim – from Myanmar. This border town par excellence (shabby, frenetic, slightly seedy) has a thriving Burmese population (keep an eye out for men wearing traditional *longyi*; Burmese sarong), a clutch of hot springs and some tremendous street food.

Today the town is basking in the transit tourism to Ko Phayam more than the visa runs it was once known for (visas given at

the border are only given for two weeks now). Meanwhile, more and more dive operators specialising in live-aboard trips to the Surin or Similan Islands and Burma Banks are establishing themselves here, adding a pinch of an expat feel.

Sights & Activities

Ranong lacks the sophistication of your standard spa town, but you can sample the waters at sacred, outdoor **Raksawarin Hot Springs** (Th Petchkasem; admission free; ☀8am-5pm), 2km east of town, and where there are pools hot enough to boil eggs (65°C); it's thought to possess miraculous healing powers.

Siam Hot Spa (☎0 7781 3551; www.siamhotsparanong.com; 73/3 Th Petchkasem), opposite the public springs, offers a more sterilised mineral-bath experience. You can dip into a jacuzzi (600B) or standard tubs (300B), and pair it with a salt scrub (550B) or a massage (200B).

Live-aboard diving trips to world-class bubble-blowing destinations, including the Burma Banks and the Surin and Similan Islands, are all the rage in Ranong. Try

BORDER CROSSING: RENEWING VISAS AT VICTORIA POINT

The dusty, tumbledown port at the southernmost tip of mainland Myanmar was named Victoria Point by the British, but is known as Ko Song (Second Island) by the Thais. The Burmese appellation, Kawthoung, is most likely a corruption of the Thai name. Most travellers come here to renew their visas, but the place also makes an interesting day trip.

The easiest way to renew your visa is to opt for one of the 'visa trips' (from 1000B per person including visa fees) offered by travel agencies in Ranong – check out Pon's (p607) – but it's relatively easy to do the legwork yourself.

When the Thailand–Myanmar border is open, boats to Kawthoung leave from the pier at Saphan Plaa (Pla Bridge, about 5km from the centre of Ranong). Take *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* (small pickup truck, also spelt *sǎwngthǎew*) 2 from Ranong (20B) to the pier, where captains of long-tail boats will lead you to the immigration window then to their boat (per person one-way/return 100/200B). When negotiating your price, confirm whether it is per person or per ride, and one-way or return. At the checkpoint, you must inform the authorities that you're a day visitor – in which case you will pay a fee of US\$10 (it must be a crisp bill, you can get one from harbour touts for about 500B). The only big hassles come from 'helpers' on the Myanmar side who offer to do everything from carrying your day pack to collecting forms and then ask for hefty tips.

It's possible to stay overnight in one of Victoria Point's dingy, overpriced hotels but note that this is a rough town and lone women in particular may not feel safe. If you have a valid Myanmar visa in your passport, you'll be permitted to stay for up to 28 days.

If you're just coming to renew your Thai visa, the whole process will take a minimum of two hours. Bear in mind when you are returning to Thailand that Myanmar's time is 30 minutes behind Thailand's. This has caused problems in the past for returning visitors who got through Burmese immigration before its closing time only to find the **Thai immigration office** (☎8.30am-4.30pm) closed. It's a good idea to double-check Thai immigration closing hours when leaving the country – if you don't get stamped in you'll have to return to Myanmar again the next day.