



Thailand's Islands & Beaches



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PLAN YOUR TRIP

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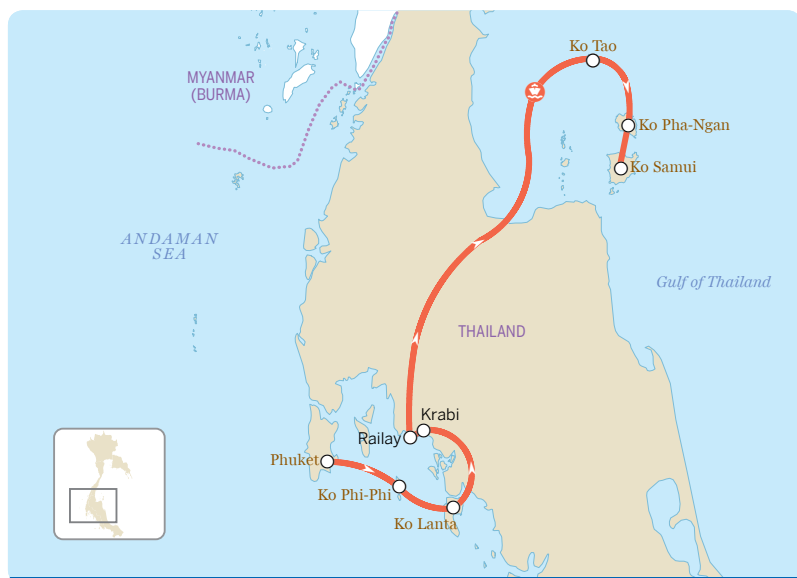
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Itineraries



First-time Thailand

Head directly to **Phuket** and pick a beach where you can recover from jet lag for a day or two before starting your journey along one of the finest stretches of coastline in the world. Serious party-goers should base themselves in lively, if a little sleazy, Patong, while tranquility lovers can choose the quieter northern beaches.

Once you're properly unwinding, hop on a boat to **Ko Phi-Phi** and join the legions of whisky-bucket-wielding backpackers as they sit in the soft sands of the island's signature hourglass bays, or take a boat to the quieter eastern side of the island. Soak in the beauty of this place for a couple of days, before riding another boat to **Ko Lanta**, where flat vistas of tawny shoreline and lapping waves await. From there, head via **Krabi** to **Railay**, where craggy spires of limestone are a rock-climbing heaven and some of the most awesome beaches and sea views on the planet await.

Now it's time to switch coasts, an easy journey of a few hours by bus or minivan. Choose one or two of the gulf's triad of idyllic islands – dive-centric **Ko Tao**, lazy, lie-in-the-sun **Ko Pha-Ngan** or luxury-focused **Ko Samui** – for around five days before your flight out. If you're up for some serious partying, arrange your visit to coincide with Ko Pha-Ngan's notorious Full Moon Party, which comes roaring to life every month on the southeastern shore.



Outdoor Underwater Adventures

It's not just gorgeous beaches here: a whole different universe lies underwater, where world-renowned dive sites and super snorkelling await. Above the sea, you can kayak to hidden caves, climb karst formations, or go animal-spotting while trekking through some of the oldest rainforest on earth.

Novice divers should head first to **Ko Tao**, still the cheapest and easiest place to learn how to blow bubbles. But there are dive schools on many islands, including **Ko Samui**, where plenty of operators will take you to the same dive sites if you're short on time. More experienced divers will want to make for **Khao Lak**. Day trips and live-aboard cruises (ranging from three days to a week) depart here daily from mid-October to mid-May for the diver's dream destination of the **Similan Islands**. The ultimate dive sites here include Ko Bon, where manta rays circle healthy reefs that attract a myriad of smaller fish. Further north is Richelieu Rock, the number-one dive site in Thailand and sometimes home to elusive whale sharks, and the **Surin Islands**, with crystal-clear water and perhaps the finest snorkelling in the country.

Kayakers can cruise through the jaw-dropping limestone karsts of **Ao Phang-Nga Marine National Park** in search of part-underwater caves and ancient rock art, or simply paddle off the many islands that rent out kayaks. Rock climbers can make for **Railay**, where you can join the monkeys and dangle from jungly cliffs that look down on dreamy beaches. There are plenty of routes for beginners, and no shortage of operators to (literally) show you the ropes. Then there's deep-water soloing, where the climb ends with a plunge into the turquoise sea. If you're on the track of wildlife, the jungle interiors of northern **Phuket** and **Ko Chang** have wildlife sanctuaries and national parks. Or make for the prehistoric rainforest of the **Khao Sok National Park** on the mainland to hike to hidden waterfalls and spot rare flowers.



Eat Your Way Along the Coast

The lure of white-sand beaches and jade-green seas may have brought you here, but we're betting that the superb cuisine you'll encounter will stay in your memories for just as long.

A couple of hours' drive south of Bangkok, **Pattaya** offers excellent seafood and a wide variety of international choices. Ignore the go-go bars and tuck in. From Pattaya, take the two-hour catamaran ferry across the Gulf of Thailand to **Hua Hin**, where seafood markets and pier restaurants await. The dishes you'll experience here will be as Thai as they come – cooked with local taste buds in mind – as this is a key destination for domestic travellers from all over the country.

After gorging yourself for a couple of days, your next stop is **Phuket**. From Hua Hin, take a minivan directly to either of Bangkok's two airports and fly there, or alternatively catch the overnight bus. Thailand's largest island offers the most varied eating experiences of all the islands and beaches. There's brilliant street food and fantastic night markets in Phuket Town, and super seafood along every beach, as well as fusion eateries and an ever-increasing number of international restaurants, including exclusive fine-dining options hidden away in the high-end resorts. You'll also find top-rated Thai cooking schools here.

If you're still hungry after all that, consider continuing your gastronomic tour by taking the bus from Phuket to **Hat Yai** for some of the best and most authentic Chinese food in Thailand. From Hat Yai you can hop on a train north to sleepy **Nakhon Si Thammarat**, home to some superb restaurants, before jumping aboard a minivan to speed along the coast further north to **Ao Khanom** for lunch or dinner with gorgeous views over the Gulf of Thailand (keeping an eye out for the local pink dolphins). If your taste buds are still hopping, keep venturing to **Ko Samui** and the other islands of the Lower Gulf via **Surat Thani**, where a succession of outstanding restaurants leads all the way to **Ko Tao**.

4
WEEKS

The Full Monty

A month? This is not just any old beach trip; it allows enough time to sample the full range of southern Thailand's islands, beaches and jungle-clad national parks.

Start your journey in Thailand's capital, **Bangkok**, before heading south. Your first stop is beach-lined **Ko Samet**, where Bangkokians and expats let loose on weekends. Follow the coast to sleepy **Trat**, then hop on a boat for one of the Ko Chang archipelago's many islands. Hike the jungle interior of **Ko Chang**, the largest and most developed island in the region. Hop over to flat but beachy **Ko Mak** or rugged **Ko Kut**.

Next, backtrack to Trat and take a bus to **Pattaya**, from where it is a two-hour catamaran ride to **Hua Hin**, the preferred holiday destination of the Thai royals and upmarket locals. It's home to a thriving local and expat scene with seafood markets and charming shanty piers. Trek the craggy hills of quiet **Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park** before making your way out to **Ko Tao** (via Chumphon) where you can strap on your tank for an underwater adventure. Move over to **Ko Pha-Ngan** for subdued beachside relaxing. **Ko Samui**, next door, offers a bit more variety and has a magical stash of holiday fodder to suit every budget and desire.

From Ko Samui stop in at mainland **Khao Sok National Park** (via Surat Thani), known to be one of the oldest stretches of jungle in the world. After trekking in the rainforest, unwind on the beaches at **Khao Lak**, from where you can also take a day trip or live-aboard diving excursion to the world-famous dive sites of the **Surin Islands** and **Similan Islands Marine National Parks**. Travel down the coast to **Phuket** and sample Thailand's finest iteration of luxury hospitality. Paddle around the majestic limestone islets of quiet **Phang-Nga** then sleep beneath the ethereal crags of **Ko Phi-Phi** after a night of beach dancing and fire twirling. Scale the stone towers of **Railay** next door, zoom around the flat tracts of land on mellow **Ko Lanta**, then hop on a boat bound for the **Trang Islands** – paradise found. One last archipelago awaits those who travel further south towards the Malaysian border – **Ko Lipe** is the island of choice for those looking for stunning beaches with a fun, social vibe.



Lesser-Known Islands

Buck the travel trends and take the sea lanes less travelled through some of the least-known beaches and islands of southern Thailand, switching from west to east and back again.

Kick off in the bustling frontier town of **Ranong** on the eastern bank of the Sompae River, a 45-minute boat ride from the Myanmar border, before sinking your tanned tootsies into the warm white sands of a beach on the nearby, sparsely populated island of **Ko Phayam**. Take more time out on no-frills 'Little' **Ko Chang** (not to be confused with the 'big' Ko Chang in Trat Province near Cambodia), a rustic getaway with an easygoing, almost horizontal vibe. You can trade some serious diver tips in **Khao Lak** further south and hop aboard a day-long diving and snorkelling excursion to the **Similan** and **Surin Islands**, or push the boat out on a live-aboard for three to five days.

Back on mainland terra firma, flip coasts and zip east, breaking the journey in **Khao Sok National Park** to immerse yourself in some of the oldest rainforest jungle on the planet and hunt out one of the world's largest flowers, or go hiking, kayaking, rafting or boating. Don't overlook **Surat Thani** – a traditional Thai town with a large Thai-Chinese population and a scattering of colourful Chinese temples – on your way east. You'll find lazy beach days waiting once you reach the gulf's **Ao Khanom**, minus the pockets of overdevelopment and crowds on Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Tao. Hopefully the local pink dolphins will muster an appearance.

Travel south to explore the rich, cultural centre of **Nakhon Si Thammarat**, a likeable and historic city that is home to one of Thailand's most significant and sacred Buddhist temples. Head back to the Andaman Coast to pick up where you left off: island-hopping. Take your pick from the lonely limestone specks of the **Trang Islands** – perhaps the allure of white sand-fringed Ko Kradan, sleepy Ko Sukorn or lush, wildlife rich Ko Libong – then wander south for a snorkelling excursion with the *chow lair* ('sea gypsies') on whisper-quiet **Ko Rawi** or **Ko Adang** north of Ko Lipe.



Exploring the Eastern Seaboard

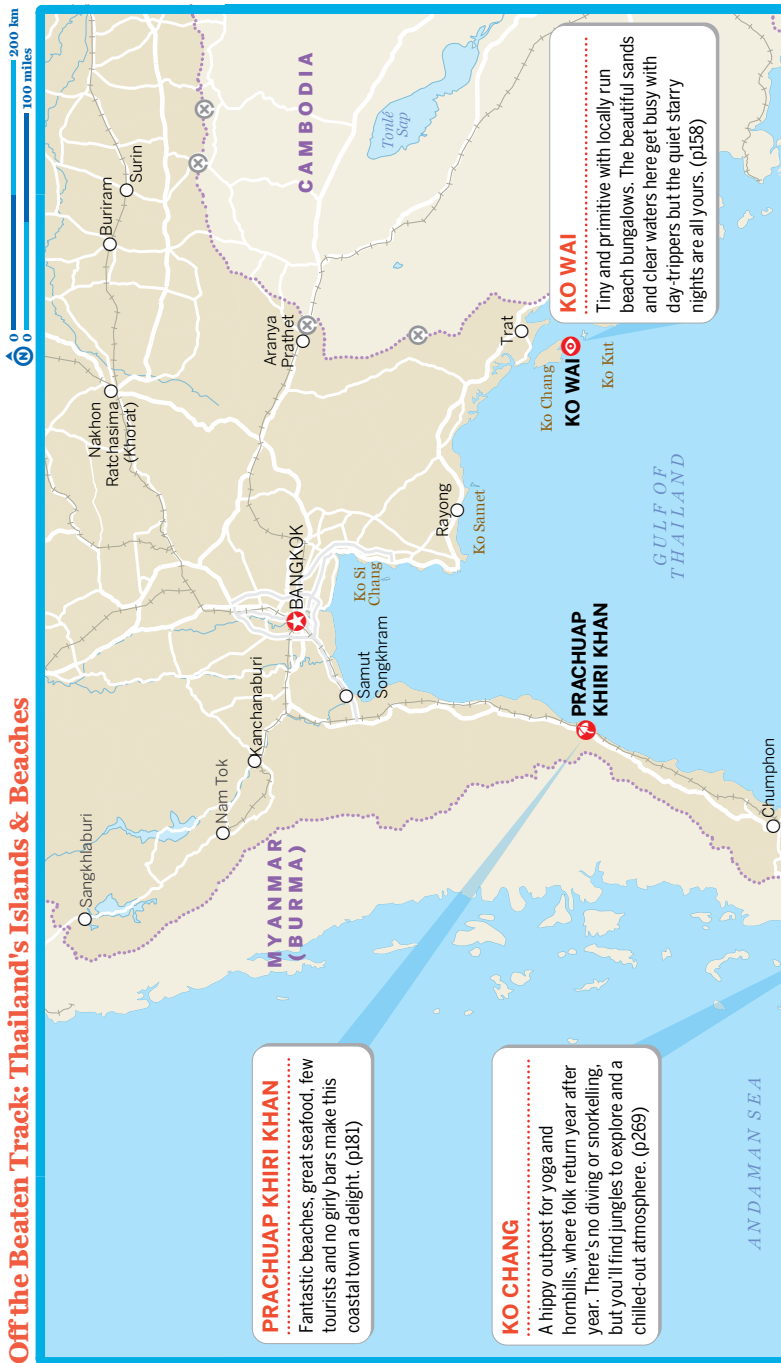
Thailand's southern coast is undoubtedly home to the kingdom's true treasure islands, but there's plenty to enjoy on the eastern seaboard too. If you're pushed for time or Cambodia-bound, give these islands a go.

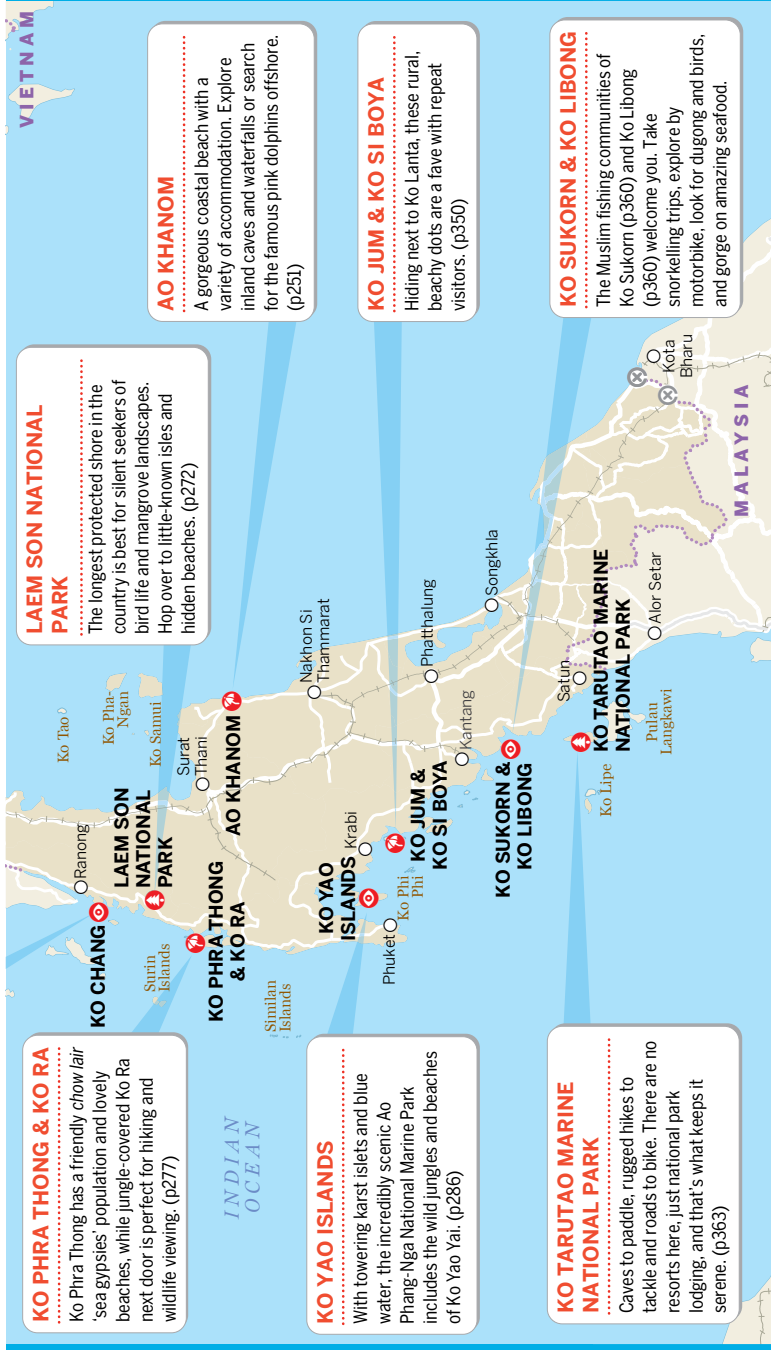
Once the least-visited coastal region of Thailand, the islands of the eastern gulf are easily accessible from Bangkok and are popular for beach-combing, diving, snorkelling, hiking and kayaking. The beach and long promenade at **Bang Saen**, the nearest stretch of sand to Bangkok, is a mere hour away from the capital (so gets busy at weekends). From here it's a short journey to the seaside town of **Si Racha** and the nearby rocky island retreat of **Ko Si Chang**; the island isn't strong for beaches, but it's great to explore.

Skipping the supercharged beach scene and go-go bars of **Pattaya** is no great loss – but consider taking your pick of its excellent international restaurant scene and admiring its astonishing temple-like Sanctuary of Truth. Head further down the coast to join flashpackers on the gorgeous white-sand beaches and fire-juggling shows of slender and forested **Ko Samet**. Bangkokians let loose on big boisterous weekends, but there's more than enough room to escape, journeying from cove to cove along the lovely coastal foot-path. Despite its fame, the island hasn't been overdeveloped yet and many of its sleeping options are still rustic and old-school.

Back on the mainland, follow the coast around to the traditional charms of sleepy **Trat**, then hop on a boat for one of the Ko Chang archipelago's myriad islands. Hike the lush interior of rugged, jungle-topped **Ko Chang**, the largest and most developed island in the region, or pop yourself into a kayak to size up the island from the waves. Some excellent dive sites await the underwater-inclined; choose between Ko Rang, Ko Yak, Ko Tong Lang and Ko Laun, all reachable from Ko Chang. If you want to get off the beaten track, spend a night on secluded, pint-sized **Ko Mak** or reef-fringed **Ko Wai**, where you can snorkel in crystal waters. Hardcore Robinson Crusoe types can go one step further on neighbouring, ultra-simple Ko Kham. Spend a few hours walking the talcum-powder-soft sands of nightlife-free **Ko Kut** to round off your journey.

Off the Beaten Track: Thailand's Islands & Beaches





Behind the Scenes

SEND US YOUR FEEDBACK

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THIS BOOK

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Map Legend

Sights

- Beach
- Bird Sanctuary
- Buddhist
- Castle/Palace
- Christian
- Confucian
- Hindu
- Islamic
- Jain
- Jewish
- Monument
- Museum/Gallery/Historic Building
- Ruin
- Shinto
- Sikh
- Taoist
- Winery/Vineyard
- Zoo/Wildlife Sanctuary
- Other Sight

Activities, Courses & Tours

- Bodysurfing
- Diving
- Canoeing/Kayaking
- Course/Tour
- Sento Hot Baths/Onsen
- Skiing
- Snorkelling
- Surfing
- Swimming/Pool
- Walking
- Windsurfing
- Other Activity

Sleeping

- Sleeping
- Camping
- Hut/Shelter

Eating

- Eating

Drinking & Nightlife

- Drinking & Nightlife
- Cafe

Entertainment

- Entertainment

Shopping

- Shopping

Information

- Bank
- Embassy/Consulate
- Hospital/Medical
- Internet
- Police
- Post Office
- Telephone
- Toilet
- Tourist Information
- Other Information

Geographic

- Beach
- Gate
- Hut/Shelter
- Lighthouse
- Lookout
- Mountain/Volcano
- Oasis
- Park
- Pass
- Picnic Area
- Waterfall

Population

- Capital (National)
- Capital (State/Province)
- City/Large Town
- Town/Village

Transport

- Airport
- Border crossing
- Bus
- Cable car/Funicular
- Cycling
- Ferry
- Metro/MRT/MTR station
- Monorail
- Parking
- Petrol station
- Skytrain/Subway station
- Taxi
- Train station/Railway
- Tram
- Underground station
- Other Transport

Routes

- Tollway
- Freeway
- Primary
- Secondary
- Tertiary
- Lane
- Unsealed road
- Road under construction
- Plaza/Mall
- Steps
- Tunnel
- Pedestrian overpass
- Walking Tour
- Walking Tour detour
- Path/Walking Trail

Boundaries

- International
- State/Province
- Disputed
- Regional/Suburb
- Marine Park
- Cliff
- Wall

Hydrography

- River, Creek
- Intermittent River
- Canal
- Water
- Dry/Salt/Intermittent Lake
- Reef

Areas

- Airport/Runway
- Beach/Desert
- Cemetery (Christian)
- Cemetery (Other)
- Glacier
- Mudflat
- Park/Forest
- Sight (Building)
- Sportsground
- Swamp/Mangrove

Note: Not all symbols displayed above appear on the maps in this book



OUR STORY

A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that's all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, *Across Asia on the Cheap*. Within a week they'd sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.

Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Franklin, London, Melbourne, Oakland, Dublin, Beijing and Delhi, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony's belief that 'a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse'.

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