



A taste of THAILAND

Coral sand beaches, limestone caves, mangrove swamps and crocodiles – Adrian Morgan discovers it all while exploring the islands and tropical rivers fringing the west coast of Thailand's Malay Peninsula

In the murky depths of my computer lurks a program that could précis the next 3,000 words down to just five: 'Thailand,' it would read '... excellent food... great sailing.' But what of the tropical islands, the liana-clad limestone sea caves, coral sand beaches and reefs, the mysterious rivers leading into the real jungly heart of Phuket's Andaman Sea coast, our Wharram Tiki 30, or the people we met?

What of Max, Siam Sailing's owner; a Dutchman who lives with his Australian partner and young daughter in an airy bungalow overlooking a tropical beach, whose favoured dress is a sarong, and mode of transport a 110cc moped and sidecar he calls his 'limousine' and which serves as taxi, rapid transport, and shopping trolley? And of his admonition to three strangers to

'go and explore; take the boat up rivers; put her ashore on sandy beaches'? Not what you expect to hear from a charter company.

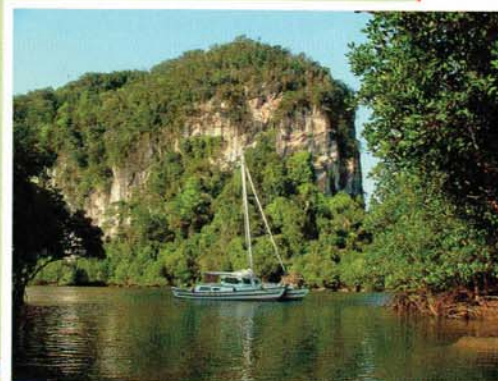
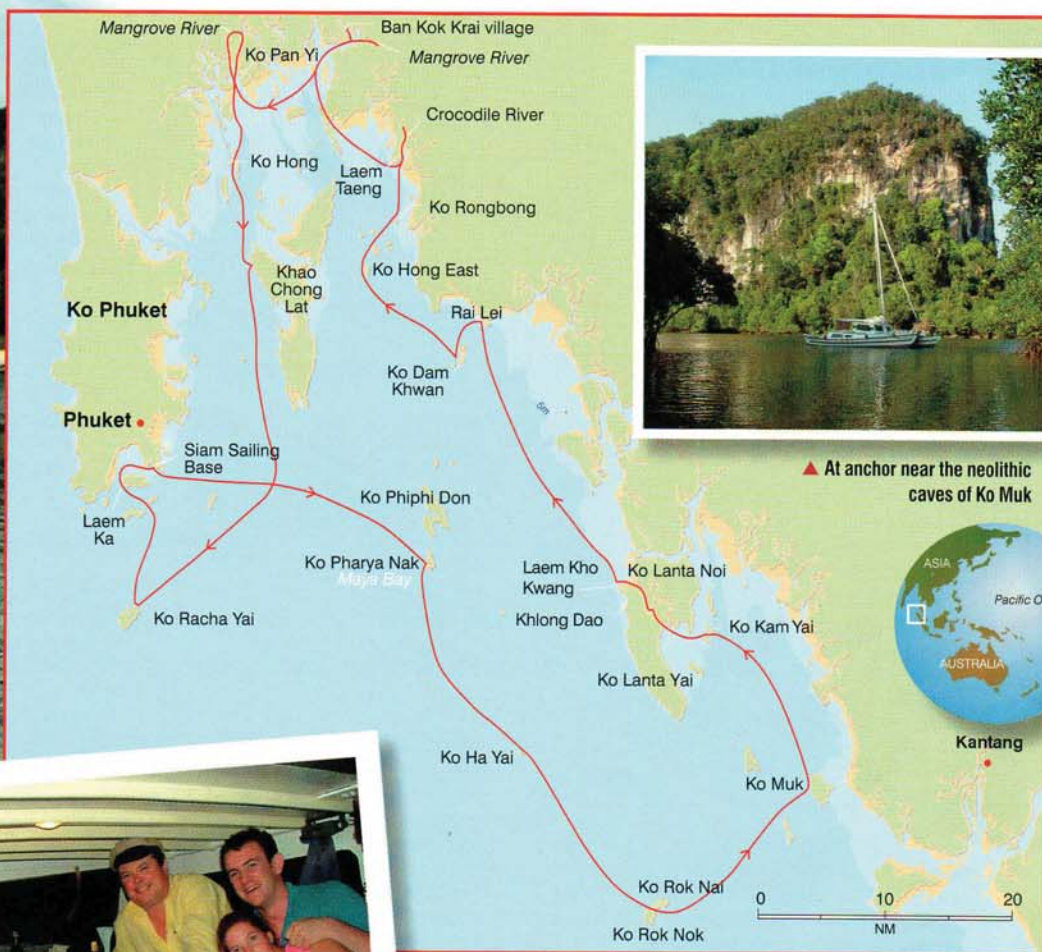
Years of running a dive charter yacht in the Red Sea and four Wharram cats based in Phuket have given Maxim Jurgens a laid-back attitude that should not be confused with complacency. The safety briefing was concise, yet thorough. He went through *Veni Vidi Vici*, the wood and glassfibre Tiki 30 that was to be our home for 10 days, in minute detail. He is not about to lose her, for the second time...

Tsunami survivor

Just over a year previously she was dumped on a reef by the Boxing Day tsunami. Flawlessly repaired by the Swiss boat builder in Phuket who made her, she is a survivor of the tidal wave which swept through the

region, and of which there is surprisingly little trace, other than scars in the memory of those who saw the wave and who lost friends and family.

And what of the food? To concentrate solely on the sailing would be to miss an essential part of the trip to Thailand before it even began. The night before we set sail Max took us to his favourite restaurant where 10 of us squatted round a table, jabbering with jet lag and surrounded by the authentic smells of real Thailand as dish after dish – some of them fearsomely spicy – appeared. Thai food would be a highlight of our holiday, but nothing came close to those extraordinary flavours, or the simple bowl of soup we had at lunch that day in a pavement café. The former (with unlimited beer) cost around £5 apiece; the latter about 50p each.



▲ At anchor near the neolithic caves of Ko Muk



MAIN Anchored ashore at Ko Rok Nok

ABOVE Our 10-day route along the Malay Peninsula

LEFT Adrian (left) with some of his friends and crew

anchorage some 30 miles south-east: a pair of perfect tropical islands, out on their own, part of the extensive Thai National Park. Here white sand beaches face each other across a narrow channel between two jungly islands. Four other boats were anchored in the channel. We drove the boat ashore, swam and beachcombed, photographed a monitor lizard and stumbled on a shrine in the shape of a huge phallus. That night we dinghied ashore and ate simply in the open with no one but hermit crabs for company.

Phallic shrines aside, the area is famous for its hong or roofless limestone sea caves. Most are readily accessible by dinghy. At Ko Muk you must swim through a terrifyingly low 240m (800ft) pitch-black tunnel in the side of a cliff to reach an inland lagoon. But then terror is easier to swallow when zillions of screaming, dog paddling Korean kids in Day-Glo lifejackets are following you. Waves booming, flashlights flashing – it was like entering the gates of Hell pursued by a legion of the damned. Strangely, it added to the surreality of the sunlit lagoon into which we miraculously burst.

Spectacular storm

Natural beauty abounds. Anchored off a ruined jetty on Ko Kam Yai we witnessed a spectacular electrical storm, playing in the thunderheads to the north over Ao Phang Nga and listened to parrots and

As for the sailing, we took Max at his word. We dropped anchor off coral sand beaches under coconut palms, sailed up claustrophobic mangrove rivers with inches under our keels, overlooked by limestone karst cliffs that appeared like spooky, dripping church candles, and nosed into lagoons where monkeys played on the shore and lianas dripped from the lips of craters. We also landed at villages that seldom see a yacht, shopped in Thai markets where a bag of fresh vegetables, a handful of chillies, two pineapples, a dozen eggs and a brace of mangoes cost pennies, and as we slipped through a cleft in the cliffs, far up a river in the north of Phang Nga Bay, may have seen the swirl of leaves and disturbed muddy water stirred up by a saltwater crocodile. It was an adventure, but we had the boss's blessing.

Setting off

Max suggested we circumnavigate the area covered by Royal Thai Navy chart 308, Phuket to Kantang, clockwise heading north from the boat's mooring in Ao Yon (Ao meaning bay) towards Ao Phang Nga, a shallow delta region. Short hops of no more than 25 miles a day would bring us full circle in 10 days or so. Running late after a four o'clock in the morning hair-raising departure (by limousine) from Max's restaurant, we headed south-east instead of north to Ko Phiphi Don's smaller, uninhabited southerly sister Ko Pharya Nak (Ko meaning an island) where the movie *The Beach* was filmed. By late afternoon the day trip boats had departed leaving just three yachts at anchor in an amphitheatre of weird limestone.

It was the same at Ko Rok Nok, our next

monkeys. Next morning we headed, with the rising tide, across the shallows between the Lanta islands. The channel is rimmed by mangroves. Think *Apocalypse Now* without the menace. At Ban El Saladim village – busy, hot, backpackers everywhere – we watered from a rickety jetty by a dive shop, had lunch (curry, noodles, chicken, rice), Chang beer and provisioned. Then we motored round the corner past Laem Kho Kwang, to Khlong Dao, a long, very shallow sandy beach and resort area with restaurants. This is the Thailand you get if you book a package holiday. We ate (expensively) ashore and checked our emails at an internet café.

The sailing was spectacular at times. In particular a cracking sail in flat water, spinnaker set and perfect close reach in a brisk north-easterly, the log touching nine knots, to Rai Lei, a well-known backpackers' beach (near the scene of *Veni Vidi Vici's* brush with the tsunami). With barely two hours' daylight, we set the spinnaker on a broad reach north-west to Ko Hong East, arriving just as night (abruptly) fell. The incoming tide next morning swirled our dinghy through the narrow channel into the hong, a sunlit paradise lagoon, enlivened by the presence not of Korean school kids this time but of large Italians in loud bathing costumes. Once again, bizarre.

Rivers of mystery

But the rivers were possibly the highlight. Behind Laem Taeng, a peninsula of sheer limestone, we discover a mysterious channel between the mangroves. Rounding a bend we are faced with Castle Greyskull cliffs; eyeless sockets, gothic candles dripping with molten wax. Under us, in the muddy water, something stirs. Was it a crocodile? Or a dugong? The sultry heat adds to the atmosphere. Finally discretion replaces valour and we high tail it back down river and anchor as night falls by the entrance. When I phone Max he's delighted.



▲ Max Jurgens's daughter Pip on *Veni Vidi Vici* at Siam Sailing's base on Phuket

'You've made my day,' he says. 'I've never been there myself...'

Another river winds into nowhere, past fishing huts and small settlements, narrowing all the time. Just when it appears we've reached a dead end, we chance upon a wooden restaurant, on stilts, bedecked in flowers. That's what makes sailing up rivers so much fun. You think you've reached the heart of darkness, only to find a restaurant (and for all we knew a motorway bridge around the next bend).

We tie up the boat, step ashore and spend a lazy hour over the second best meal of the trip so far. Shrimp tempura follows sea bass in chilli and lemon, and noodles and Chang beer and wow, was that spicy...

That night, after stopping to see a Neolithic cave – one of many in the area in which our ancestors made their home, complete with wall paintings and hand



▲ Motoring up the slightly creepy Crocodile river near Laem Teng

THE BOATS

Siam Sailing's two Tiki 30s and two 38s, should not be confused with those cobbled up from polyester and shuttering ply by Pacific dreamers in the 1960s, lured away by the charismatic James Wharram's promises of nakedness on trampolines under tropical skies. These are professionally built, although still tied together Wharram-style with parachute cord: hulls, crossbeams, hatch covers and even the loo seat...

This is the boat for living in the open with a deck cabin, roll-away bimini, trampolines, a bathing ladder, deck shower, airy cabins in both hulls, and a pull-out double berth on deck. Forward are two huge lockers which could swallow the children or excess baggage. *Veni Vidi Vici* devoured five adults and their gear (including two huge backpacks).

Sea gypsies

By day three we were living like sea gypsies. To shower we stripped naked under the fierce sun on the aft trampoline and used the freshwater hose. We washed our dishes (and clothes) in salt water on the teak after-deck, rinsed them in fresh from the hose and used the slats as a draining board. Our fridge was a vast, 100-litre affair placed just where you'd want it, on deck. And even under spinnaker in a Force 5, the dining room table stayed level.

The fridge runs on solar panels from dawn (about 7am) to dusk 12 hours later, the engine battery charges first, and there is no red crossover switch. 'Just leave everything on,' says Max.

Anchoring? The mooring bridle can be attached to loops in the rode every five metres.

prints – we head up a northern arm of the same river to Ban Kok Krai, a Thai village which is miles off the beaten track. A villager paddles out on an ancient windsurfer to share a coke.

Here we go ashore to stock up on fruit and vegetables. At the basic concrete pier I talk to a fisherman in a brand new longtail, donated by Reuters and Agence France Presse after the tsunami. Unique to Thailand, wooden, noisy and fast, longtails blast around with unsilenced diesels (loud = fast in Thai) balanced on a pivot, driving a slow turning two-blade propeller on the end of a long stick.

Skimming shallows

By mid afternoon next day we are bowling across the shallows of Ao Phang Nga (3.2m, 0.9m, 0.1m, -1.7m) on a rising tide towards the Muslim fishing village of Ko Pan Yi – via another of Max's mysterious mangrove rivers. The village nestles against a small limestone mountain and is built entirely on wood and concrete stilts. Stalls line every yard of the narrow walkways. Some houses are clearly owned by wealthy fishermen or merchants and have elaborate facades, gold leaf railings and marble floors. The place feels placid and when we ask for beers the



Bowling along under spinnaker – often at up to nine knots – heading for Ko Pan Yi



Anchor in a metre, bowline the bridle to the first loop and you have a 5:1 scope. The electric anchor windlass is a luxury we never used. Headsail? Pull the furling line. Engine? No choke – the four-stroke 9.9hp Yamaha fires first

or second push. Fuel? 100 litres in a stainless steel tank. Fuel gauge? A wooden stick, marked in 10-litre gradations. We used 60 litres in 10 days, covering well over 300 miles under sail and power equally. At cruising revs the Tiki

makes around five knots.

The Tiki 30 sleeps four to six adults in comfort – a couple in either hull (bed width 1.05m), with another couple on the pull-out double berth in the deck cabin (the best place). A Tiki 38 sleeps eight.



▲ Towering limestone outcrop typical of the area

young Muslim waitresses giggle. Perhaps the total lack of alcohol is responsible for the atmosphere.

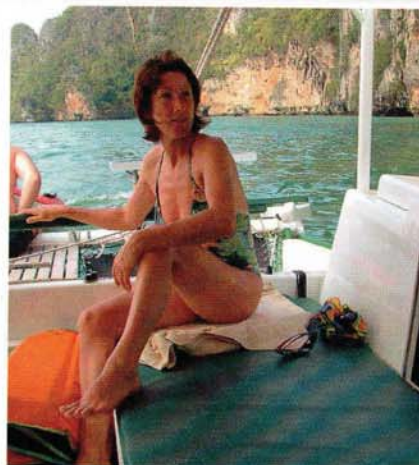
Ko Pan Yi is pleasantly shady, under its huge series of tin roofs. At seven next morning we have it to ourselves. We are regaled by scents, sights and colourful sounds. Sarongs at 180 baht (£2.50) wooden elephants, spices, exotic tat, more

sarongs. The place is waking up and the vendors aim to practise their patter on three sleepy Brits.

We lunch at anchor in a lagoon off Ko Hong and dinghy into another liana-dripping hong. This time a fleet of plastic sea canoes has beaten us to it, but no Koreans. A National Guard dinghy bumps alongside. They require 200 baht apiece and could they cadge a cigarette or two? We roll them 10 which they sniff suspiciously before breaking out into broad smiles. It must be hell marooned on a coral island with no fags. Ashore a big, grey-whiskered monkey with a long tail is scouring the rock pools for shellfish.

Our last stop, Ko Racha Yai, gave us the first and only glimpse of what it must have been like on the day the tsunami struck. A barman tells us of the day the sea came with the power of a river in spate. At first he was anxious to save his deckchairs; then his life. One woman was drowned. No physical sign of the tsunami remains, merely memories seen in the face of the barman. We eat at table on the beach. Every now and then a larger wave tumbles on to the shore and we look up from our curry.

A lazy sail brings us full circle where Max is waiting on the beach, glad to see his boat



▲ Adrian's partner Rona at the tiller near Rai Lei

back in one piece. Everything apart from the echo sounder has worked perfectly: the fridge has kept the beers cool, we've 40 litres of petrol left in the tank and, miraculously, we have about 100 litres of the 250 litres of fresh water left in the port tank. That evening we go back to Max's restaurant, it's that good. Have him take you there in his limousine (if you dare...). ▶

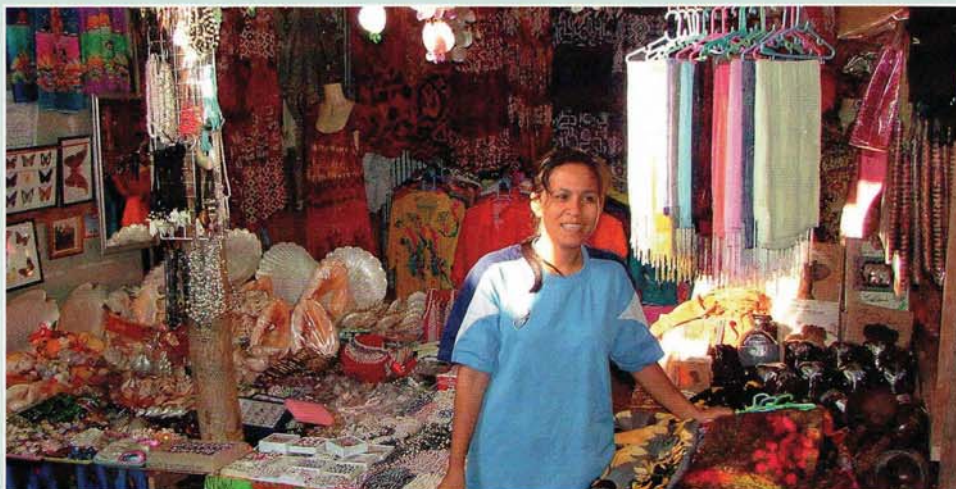
SAILING THAILAND – FACT BOX

■ **Food:** stocking the boat took two of us about an hour at a supermarket a few miles by catamaran across Ao Chalong Bay from Max's base at Ao Yon, where we bought pasta, noodles, crackers, olives, tomato paste, Chang beer, butter, milk, soft drinks, a mighty slab of New Zealand cheddar, bacon, snacks etc. The vegetables (including plenty of little red chillies) tomatoes, coriander and a few potatoes (translated from the Thai as 'strange foreign root') we bought at the market. Bread came from a smart, air-conditioned Swiss-run bakery. The total came to around £120 and lasted the best part of two weeks. Max transported all, crew and provisions, back to the dinghy in his limousine – an experience never to be forgotten. The fridge swallowed all the perishables, plus a bag of ice to kick things off. Dried foods were stowed in the cavernous cockpit lockers.

■ **Clothes:** we flew with only cabin baggage and half my gear remained unused. A sarong, t-shirts, shoes, swimming costume and going away gear would be enough. Anything else you can buy in Thailand very cheaply. A light rain jacket is handy.



▲ A fisherman with crawfish for sale pulls alongside in his longtail boat



▲ A cheerful market trader and her colourful stall at Ko Pan Yi

■ **Climate:** hot. North-east monsoon (November to May). In mid-February temperatures reached the mid-30s at midday and shade was essential for all but mad dogs...

■ **Time:** GMT +7hr

■ **Sun:** 15 minutes maximum at first, and plenty of sun screen.

■ **Bugs:** we had no trouble with mosquitoes, but sprayed ourselves with a Deet-based aerosol before going ashore.

■ **Moorings:** the holding is almost too good, thick mud mostly. The many sturdy mooring buoys are free (West Country harbour masters please note!).

■ **Navigation:** pilotage, water colour to gauge depth over reefs, with plenty of mild challenges like sneaking into twisty, uncharted rivers. Well charted, and no strong currents. Tidal range about 2m – useful for getting over shallows, and adds interest to navigation.

■ **The people:** smiling, quiet (not a raised voice in two weeks), and impossible to understand. Gestures for fish/water/vegetables, etc, made absolutely no sense. We bought crayfish and fish from passing longtails.

■ **Food:** superb, simple and very hot (those afraid of chilli should take care, though not all dishes are hot). Wonderful fresh flavours, fried pork like you remember from childhood, limes, chicken and free range eggs.

Tip: Stick to local restaurants.

■ **Inventory:** plastic-covered Thai Navy charts; binoculars, chart plotter, Andaman Sea Pilot book; Garmin GPS and echo sounder; mobile phone, with plenty of pre-paid time.

Who would it suit?

People willing to get up early. East Coast sailors used to watching the echo sounder. Anyone for whom comfort means open air living, a shower under the skies, a kitchen sink as big as the ocean and an

icebox the size of an elephant. Divers (the area is a prime dive spot). And not? Anyone with an immutable prejudice towards the boats of James Wharram and loose clothing; the old at heart...

COSTS

■ Two weeks on a Tiki 30 between 1 November and 1 May costs Thai baht 147,420, or £2,136 (baht 69/£). Prices reduce by 15% outside this period.

■ Flights: £518 per person. KLM Edinburgh/Amsterdam/Singapore and Silk Air Singapore/Phuket. Baht 500 departure tax. We booked our flights through the excellent Croydon-based Dial a Flight (tel: 0208 225 1120)

■ Siam Sailing also has a Wharram Islander 55 for fully crewed charter. A traditional beach house is available for those who wish to stay ashore for a few days after the charter (highly recommended).

PILOTS AND GUIDES

■ **Pilot:** *The Andaman Sea Pilot* is the standard text, with chartlets of most of the islands, but lacking general information. E-mail: pilot@image-asia.com

■ *Cruising Guide to Southeast Asia* by Davies and Morgan, Imray, £30. Excellent on customs, climate, weather, pirates, etc and a useful dictionary of common Thai words. Of limited value for those holidaying to small islands. Quote: the area '...has more tsunamis than any other part of the world's oceans'.

■ Many charts and guides available from www.ybw.com Tel: 02380 333051



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