

WHARRAM IN *THE* ANDAMAN



Andy Struthers was looking for a sailing holiday with a difference. His last child had gone to university and he and his partner, and illustrator, Alison, wanted a break from the miserable time that is January in England; somewhere exotic that wouldn't break the bank.

We were looking for adventure afloat, but having checked the major charter company prices, decide that we had no wish to remortgage. I therefore opted for trawling the internet and after a while I found Makz who has been in the charter business for some 20 years, initially in the Red Sea and for the last 14 years in Thailand.

Makz runs Siam Sailing, which charts five Wharram catamarans in the Andaman Sea to the west of Thailand. Makz is a little different. He does not operate on the same basis as the larger charter companies. Instead, he provides his very own and highly personal service.

We flew out and were collected from Phuket airport very efficiently by mini van and driven, via 'Tesco Lotus' to do our provisioning, to a pretty bay and then left literally on the beach. We unloaded everything, including a vast amount of beer – we knew it was a largely Muslim area and I was deeply concerned about lack of beer – on the side of the road and



Andy takes the tiller.

then looked at each other. As nothing much happened, we found a bar on the beach and had a beer.

Soon Makz arrived and we met the boat. *Veni Vidi Vici* is a 30ft Wharram Tiki catamaran. She is a boat for living in the open – for us, the two hulls served as a clothes cupboard and a food store. With the hatches closed to keep out the spray, it was hot and sticky inside the hulls and we simply didn't need to go there.

We lived on the bridgedeck, which had a deck cabin open at the back, a fixed bimini and a large wooden platform at the stern with a great drop down swimming ladder in the middle of the platform. The deck cabin has seats during the day and a pullout double bunk for sleeping. A bonus was the huge fridge opposite the bunk, which kept everything cool, including the beers. The engine was an outboard mounted in the cockpit, which behaved beautifully and, when under sail, was fully lifted out of the water, which was excellent. We chose to have a two person sit on kayak rather than the RIB and outboard usually provided. The briefing was very Makz: "Try Langkawi – it's in Malaysia, so you are not allowed to go there, but they won't catch you. However, if they do it's your problem.

"Beach her wherever you want, go anywhere you want – no restrictions – up rivers as far as you want, just not to Burma, as they may shoot you."

So not quite the mainstream charter



Alison on a local longtail boat (above),
Anchored off Ko Muk (centre),
Cooking in the open (below).



company briefing.

So off we set and for the next four weeks we lived on the deck. The sailing was fine, particularly if the wind was abaft the beam. Trying to point was a lot harder – I knew it would be, but it was still a bit of a shock. Downwind the loose footed gaff main went well and there was a gennaker with a snuffer and clever tack line that you could move to windward and not only did it look good, but gave you a decent turn of speed. The trick was to get the wind right for the direction you were sailing. We were in the northeast monsoon season, so the prevailing wind was northeast, but we learned that this was true in the morning and particularly at night when it seemed to blow more than any other time, but afternoons were either calm or more often that not you had a westerly wind.

We set off and played with the sails and were soon making 5kn on a close reach and heading northeast. The sky was blue – it was hot – and it was very exciting. We travelled up the west coast of Koh Yao Yai, a long island that appeared to be nearly deserted, and then spotted a jetty and some habitation. We aimed at the shore and, feeling brave, and following Makz' instructions, ran

her onto the beach. This was the first time I had deliberately gone aground and I proved to be lucky on this occasion. There was a small restaurant up the beach and we had chicken fried with hot basil leaves, fried crab in spicy oyster sauce and noodles. Back to the boat for a last swim and then bed.

Life's a beach

In the morning we were aground, but soon floated off and headed north to the Phang Nga Bay area. This is the picture perfect bay with the islands coming straight out of the water like some strange space ship and you recognise them as you see them in all the pictures of sailing in Thailand. I expected that this area would be a tourist trap – I was mistaken. We headed for Koh Hong, which is one of a group of uninhabited small islands with a large lagoon on the south side entered by a narrow channel, and after our beaching success we decided to go in and anchor inside, knowing she would dry out. All worked well and as we dried, the wading birds arrived and started picking at the mud and we were surrounded by the high cliffs of this marvellous and wild place; the only boat there. We awoke inside



FACT SHEET

Boat: Wharram Tiki 30, LOA 9.5m (30ft), Beam 5.3m (16ft), Draught 0.45m (1ft 6in).

Rig: Gaff, boomless mainsail, roller reefing jib and cruising chute.

Accommodation: Small double cabin in each hull with galley in one hull and heads in the other. Pull out double berth in deck cabin.

Makz: Can be contacted though www.sailing-charter-thailand.com

Sailing season and weather: You can sail all year round but the best time to go is between November and April. We were there in January and February and the temperature was 26°C when we woke up, rising to early 30s during the day. There was the occasional tropical downpour, but only late in the afternoon. Winds were variable, usually in the morning a F3-4 from the northeast dying down in the afternoon and then picking up in early evening. We had one fantastic sail when the tide tables went overboard with my Valentine card when the wind was probably F5-6.

Bugs: Not a big problem. There are mosquitoes, but if you are anchored off they do not cause a problem and, apart from one restaurant that put a can of Deet on the table as we arrived, it was a minor irritation only.

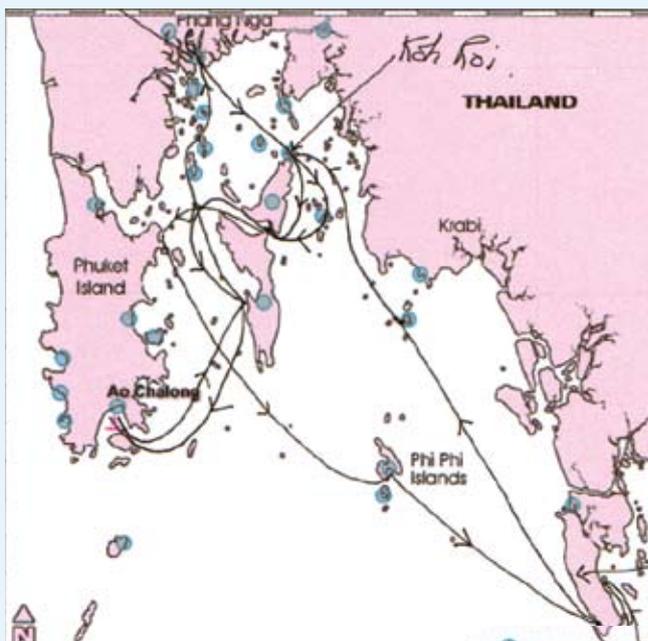
Clothes: We did the classic Brit thing and packed for every eventuality – and heaved two packed soft bags on board. Huge mistake. We lived in swimming things and a T-shirt and as we bought T-shirts on the way round we could have got away with hand luggage only. Do take goggles and flippers and a head torch and I took my own handheld GPS.

Navigation: I used Royal Thai Navy charts 307, 308, 309 and 333 and *South East Asia Pilot* (3rd edition). The charts were very good for passage planning and the pilot has the usual sketches for anchorages, although I found it became a bit imprecise when we were far south.

Eating out: There are restaurants on the shore or nearby on every inhabited island. The food is fantastic and the price for a good meal for two and a couple of beers each was about £10.

Money: Thai Bahts. There are very few places to change money, but also nearly no shops and very little to spend it on.

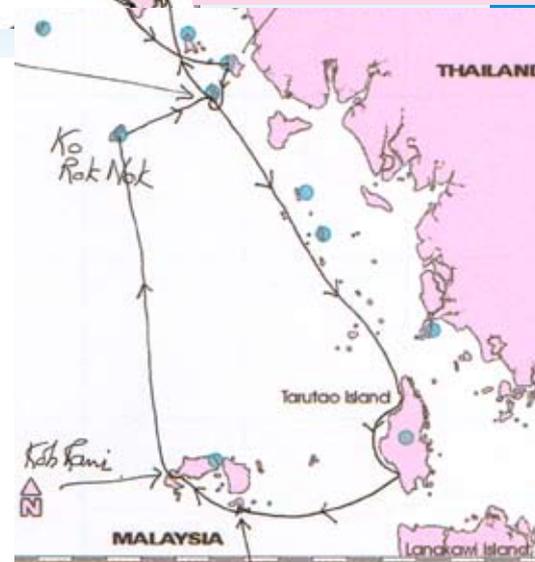
Moorings: Mainly anchor; no charge. There are visitors' buoys, which are meant to be yellow, but as we were thrown off one in Lipe didn't trust them. National parks offer visitors' buoys, which, because they are often over coral, should be used.



the lagoon and on the mud – my tidal calculation was apparently not quite correct, but it was a little hard, because I had been given one sheet of paper with the relevant dates on and time and height of water to cover the whole region, so it was more of a rough and ready guide than a precise art. We got organised – put the bed away – had a general tidy up – dried out wet things – put the kayak in the water ready to collect the kedge anchor. All went well until the water came back in and the kayak floated away as some idiot – no prizes who – had forgotten to tie it on. So I mud swam over to collect it to the surprise of the wading birds and properly covered in thick black mud returned to the boat and an immediate deck shower.

The following day we moved on to Koh Pan Yi, which is a fishing village built entirely on stilts on the side of another rocket shaped island. Prior to arriving, we had our only taste of river exploration which Makz had strongly recommended to us. We motored up the river with mangrove swamps as far as you could see on both sides and no sign of life other than the occasional fish jumping and the sea eagles high above. We followed instructions and headed for a tall cliff face, went round a final corner and saw the river go straight through a wall of rock in a natural tunnel under the mountain. The geography in Thailand was at all times extraordinary. We anchored and paddled our kayak under the mountain to the other side and sat back with a plate of prawns bought earlier from a local fishing boat.

Next day we discovered our favourite



uninhabited island, Koh Roi, which we visited twice and on each occasion we were the only people anchored. It is stunningly beautiful with the usual sheer cliffs and sea eagles circling above you – presumably to see if you are edible – and a small but perfect beach. We anchored and then kayaked ashore and explored through a cave in the cliff. We went right through the cave and inside the island it is hollowed out to leave a magical place surrounded by the inside of the cliffs with a lagoon and sandy beaches and a small shrine – these are known as 'hongs'. The place felt special and I did not want to talk other than in a very hushed whisper.

After some days wandering round the bay we decided to go south to Phi Phi. This was the setting for the film *The Beach* and is widely publicised as a magical, tropical island beauty spot. We were disappointed. As we came round the point to go into the main bay, we were



(Main pic) In Phang Nga Bay, Entrance to the hong at Ko Hong, (below), Beach at Ko Taratuo (bottom).

surrounded by day tripper boats returning to Phuket and we were hit by large waves, which came over the bow and into our living space where everything was stored and, inevitably, everything – bedding, clothes, books – were damp, wet or soaked. Not a great start. The town was heaving with people and full of tourist shops, but very quickly we had a beer in our hands – the food was great – and all was good again.

We island hopped on and soon reached Koh Muk and the famous Emerald Cave. A major tourist attraction in the area and on this occasion we decided to go for it. This cave is actually a 60m (200ft) tunnel leading to a completely landlocked lagoon, which is Thailand's largest *hong*. The *hong* itself is surrounded by tall, sheer cliffs and fringed by a beautiful beach and lush tropical forest. We moored to a large buoy outside and, donning our flippers, masks and head torches, brought for this occasion, set off alone into the darkness.

The only advice the guide book gives is to keep to the right hand wall, which opens up horrifying possibilities of what might happen if you stick to the left hand wall. We were like glue to the right hand wall and surprisingly quickly saw light in front and had arrived. We were lucky –

there were only three people there when we arrived and they soon left us alone. It was just as it said in the guidebooks and, what was particularly nice, was that there was no attempt to have anything in there – no bar, shop, nothing at all, and the Thai Government should be congratulated on taking this stand in restricting development not only here but on many of the islands we visited.

We spent a few days in this area and then made the trip south to the Malaysian border and the island of Taratuo. It is a breathtakingly beautiful, high and mountainous island just a few miles north of the Malaysian border. It has an interesting history as a penal colony and a pirate's lair and is deserted apart from two ranger stations and is now part of a large national park. We stayed the first night by the ranger station and the following night we went down the west coast and found a deserted bay and anchored. Apart from local fishing boats, we were alone with the forest and the ghosts of the pirates to keep us company. There was something almost overwhelming about Taratuo and we sailed on next day to the Butang Islands, which is a group of five large islands, only one of which is inhabited and is meant to be the new trendy hang out –





Moored off Ko Lanta (above), Floating village at Ko Pan Yi (this pic).

Koh Lipe.

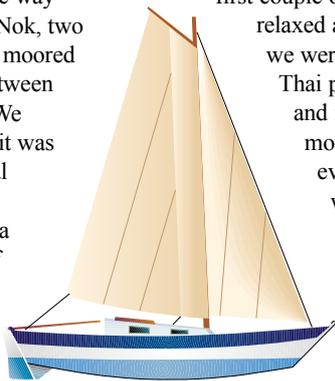
We sailed into the bay at Lipe and it looked beautiful, a wonderful long beach fringed by the most perfect white sand with restaurants and ramshackle bars along the beach. We kayaked ashore; the ‘gap year students’ were there, indeed Lipe had been well and truly ‘gapped’. But despite the maze of bars, shops, restaurants, travel shops, even a (very good) chemist in the interior, it was still relaxing and we didn’t feel out of place.

We moved on to Koh Rawi which was as far south and as remote as we got. We then turned north and headed back towards 7°N and a long passage. We stayed out to sea away from the inshore islands we had passed on the way down and reached Ko Rok Nok, two perfect tropical islands, and moored on a buoy in the channel between the islands on a coral reef. We stayed there three nights as it was idyllic. It is another National Park area and there is very basic camping allowed and a small open air restaurant, of which we became very fond. Also, real toilets, which were a pleasant change, although on

my first visit early one morning I walked in to see a ranger pulling what I thought was a large plastic beach toy in the shape of a crocodile out of one of the cubicles. I hit the roof when the beach toy swung round making a hideous noise and was firstly not a beach toy and secondly very unhappy. It was a monitor lizard and it finally took five rangers and a lasso to persuade the beast to leave the men’s loos – almost put me off the daily ablutions.

We gently retraced our steps and did another run round the Pha Nga Bay and drifted back to Makz’ bay south of Phuket. It really was the holiday of a lifetime – the intention was to relax and properly get away from it all. After the first couple of weeks we were very relaxed and by the fourth week we were talking to fish. The

Thai people were charming and it was undoubtedly the most beautiful place I have ever been to, but mainly we just enjoyed the solitude – it is rare in 21st century Britain to really, genuinely, get away from it all and on this trip we did just that.



Navigation

Navigational instruments consisted of a fish-finder depth sounder – useful as the coral reefs come at you like a wall – and a handheld chartplotter tied to the side of the cabin. And that’s it. There are no marinas outside Phuket Island and you anchor or very occasionally get a mooring buoy. There is a VHF, but little point in using it and we didn’t – no coastguards and no one keeping a listening watch. Makz gave us a local mobile and texted through the forecast every morning, which is very useful, although after a while it did get rather repetitive. Still sunny then? I had the charts in advance, so had a rough plan in mind, which worked out well. Mostly, the navigation was pilotage and you could see the next island and from there the island after and so on. I think in four weeks I saw about five navigational marks and ships’ lights at night were amazing – rather than the rather dull and predictable red for port and green for starboard, the idea seemed to be to get as many lights on the boat of as many different colours as possible. We did no night sailing.

Anchoring

We learned a lot. Prior to going, I admit openly that anchoring was something other people did and I kept quiet about. Very occasionally we would anchor for lunch and that was about it. A month of anchoring later and I now trust my anchor and can leave the boat without feeling certain she will not be there when I return. I will still not be anchoring inside Newtown Creek, because it just looks horribly tight, but hope now to use it more at home than before.

Wharram catamarans

In the mid 50s, based on his research into ancient Polynesian boat design, James Wharram built the first offshore catamaran in Britain and sailed out into the Atlantic. While the world’s yachting community was busy dismissing such designs as a worthy, seagoing vessels, James was landing his 23ft 6in ‘Double Hulled Canoe’ in the West Indies. There he built a second 40ft Polynesian style Catamaran and sailed back to the UK, accompanied by two young German girls. He was the first to sail a catamaran across the North Atlantic

50 years on – with 10,000 sets of plans sold and thousands built, Wharram cats can be seen in harbours across the world maintaining their reputation for surviving wind and wave. (See ST167 for a recent account of a transatlantic on a Tiki 21).