

Twin hulls in Thai waters

Tom Cunliffe discovers that twin hulls can be heavenly during a Singha-soaked family cruise around north-east Thailand



ABOVE: The two Wharram cats. MAIN PICTURE: Tom and son-in-law Dan trim the sails of their 38ft Tiki, in Phang Nga Bay

Back in the 1870s, the captain of a tea clipper had two choices. Skimming down the South China Sea under a press of sail, the wall of Malaysia and Indonesia barred his passage out into the Indian Ocean. He could either pass south of Sumatra via the favoured Sunda Strait, or take the wider, longer Strait of Malacca. This was the route of the old opium clippers running the monsoons between Canton and Calcutta. At its northern opening lies Phuket in Thailand, and the Andaman Sea.

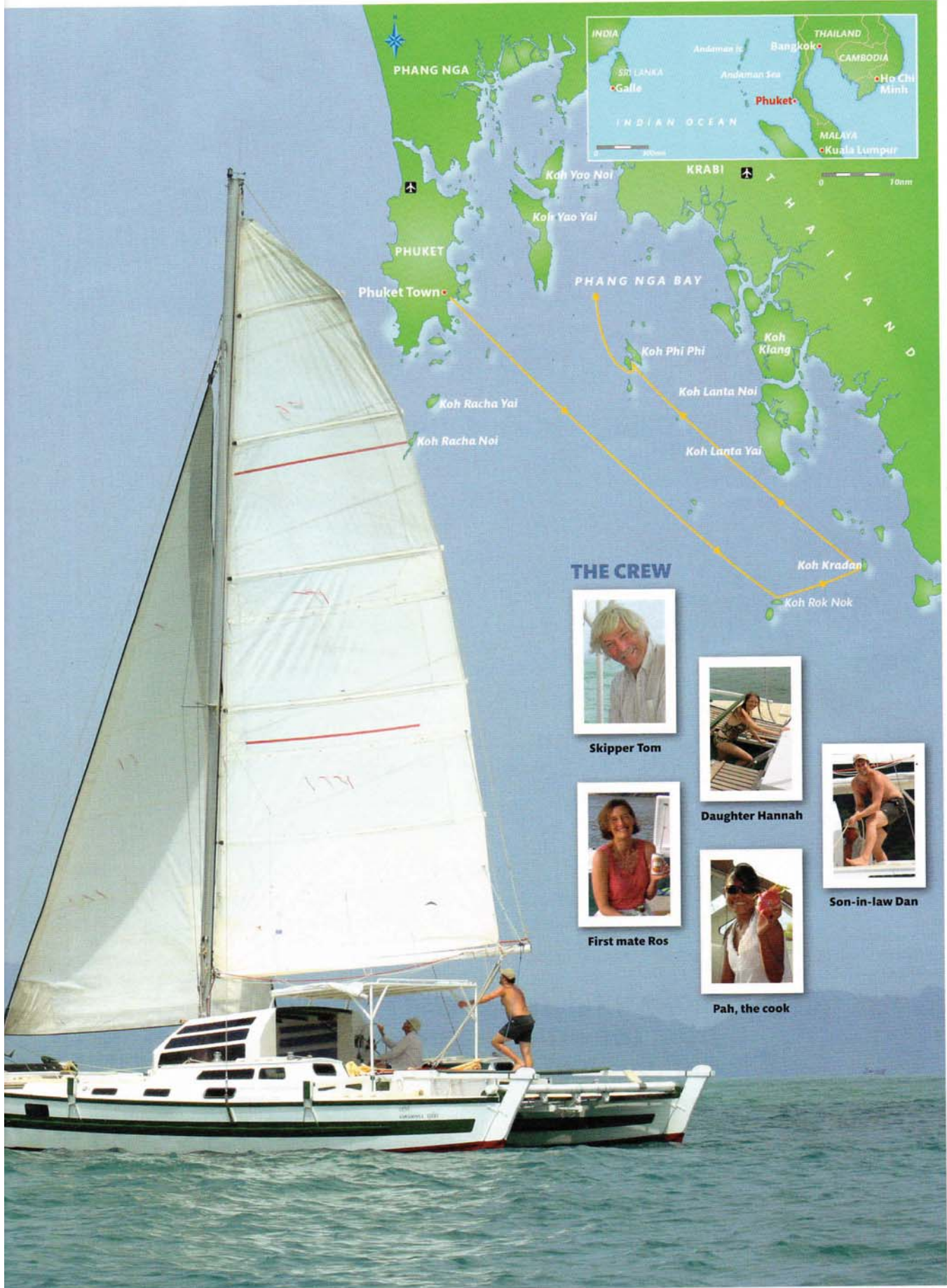
All my life I've been fascinated by the Far East, but I've no plans to take my own boat that way. The idea of chartering a standard production yacht in such waters holds little appeal, but I still dream. One day last autumn, however, an invitation from Max Jurgens materialised in my email inbox. Would I like a charter in Phuket?

Max's outfit, Siam Sailing, contrasts sharply with the 'corporate' image of the typical sailing holiday. Not only is he a thoroughly barefoot sort of character, he uses only James Wharram's 'back-to-nature' catamarans. As it happens, I've known Wharram for years. I signed up on the spot, and my family – wife Ros, daughter Hannah and son-in-law Dan – came along for the ride.

Compared with the dreaded North Atlantic red-eye, the Singapore Airlines experience has a lot going for it. The flight over the Caspian Sea and Afghanistan is long. I am too – 6ft 6in in my Crocs – yet I stepped off the connecting aircraft to Phuket feeling as if I'd just driven down to the pub. Max sent a cab to pick us up and an hour later we were sucking down ice-cold Singhas under a palm tree. We had no clue where we were, but after a couple more drinks that didn't seem to matter. Then Max turned up on a classically downbeat motorbike and gave us our orders. Here was a man I could relate to.

The ladies beamed when he announced that for the first four of our eight days we'd be mollycoddled aboard *Tiare*, a Wharram-designed Islander 55 owned and operated through Max →





THE CREW



Skipper Tom



Daughter Hannah



First mate Ros



Pah, the cook



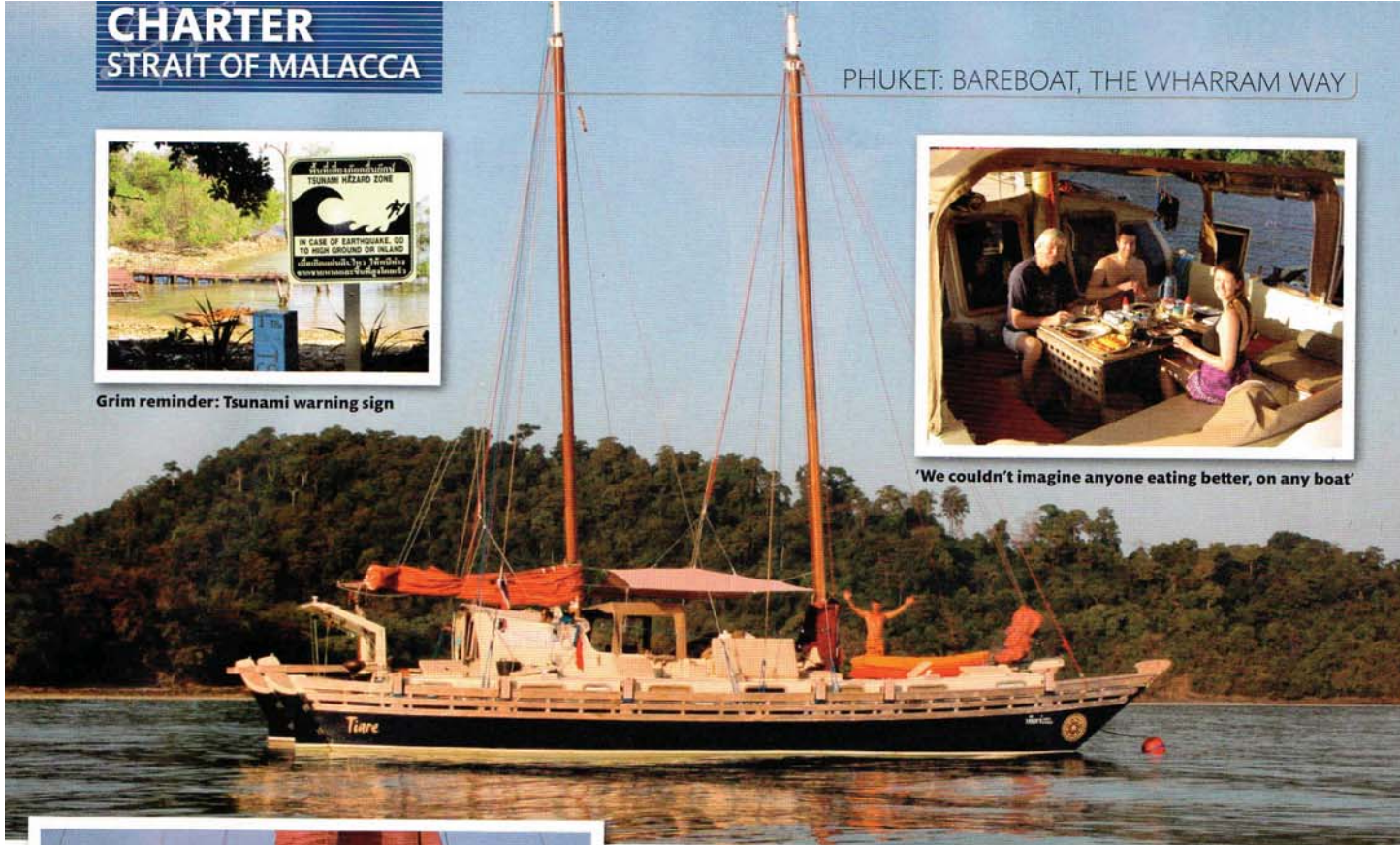
Son-in-law Dan



Grim reminder: Tsunami warning sign



'We couldn't imagine anyone eating better, on any boat'



All hands on deck: the crew haul up *Tiare's* huge sails

ABOVE: The 55ft schooner *Tiare*: 'One of the tightest ships I've ever sailed,' says Tom

by Alex, a young Spaniard with an enviable tally of miles under his belt. Even better was the news that Alex was backed up by his accomplished Thai cook, Pah. With them we'd sail 55 miles south-east to the islands of Koh Rok Nok, then northwards towards the holiday isles of Koh Phi Phi. Here, my son-in-law and I would get to run our own boat, a Tiki 38 catamaran, for the rest of our trip.

Just on sunset, Alex and Pah pitched up with *Tiare*, anchored and dinghied ashore. We loaded our kit on board after a hairy launch through what seemed perpetual surf, then all seven of us sloped off to Max's favourite restaurant. All around us, Thais were tucking in to their curried frog. The food was beyond compare.

That night, I began to understand some of the advantages of catamarans. A wicked surge was sweeping the anchorage and when I went on deck for a look round in the moonlight, a nearby monohull was rolling fit to throw all hands out of

you seem always to be dropping your hook on a lee shore, but time builds confidence and the night breeze rarely amounts to more than a temporary nuisance.

Sailing with Alex was a delight. His gear really worked, so we could shape the big gaff sails to

their bunks. We, however, rode the waves in splendour with our 30ft (9.7m) beam gently heaving up and down. What to them was a spiteful swell was to us the easy breathing of a benevolent ocean.

Alex was up with the pelicans and the big cat made short work of the trip to Koh Rok Nok, logging an easy 9 knots on the dawn wind. During the north-east monsoon, the wind blows sweetly in the morning, slinks off home for lunch, then pipes up, perhaps from the other direction, as the sun goes down.

At first, this is disconcerting because

'Colossal outcrops rise vertically from the ocean, undercut by millennia of wave action'

perfection. He loved and respected his boat and never tired of getting the most out of her. He hated to start his engines (one in each hull) almost as much as he abhorred dirt and mess on board. Without being obtrusive, Alex ran one of the tightest ships I've ever sailed.

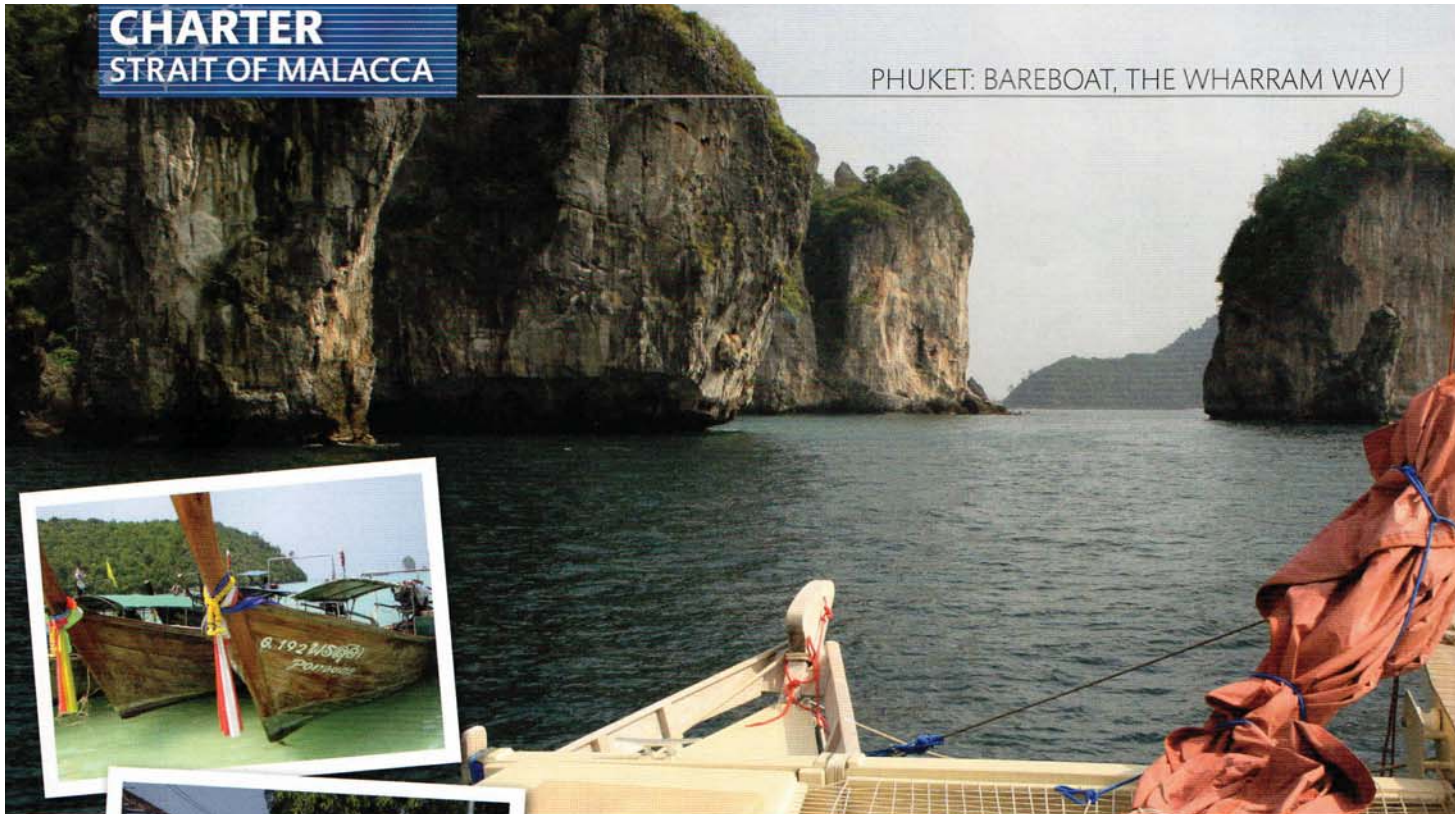
At Koh Rok Nok we climbed the 207m to the summit and noted the tsunami warnings behind the virgin white-sand beach before the last of the pre-lunch airs wafted us across to

Koh Kradan island. Here, in the middle of the jungle, an American called Wally runs his hotel and restaurant, Lost Paradise, like none other on Planet Earth. This place is not to be missed with its rum drinks, great food, thatched huts and unexpected examples of humanity. Wally, a Papa Hemingway facsimile who sailed to the island on his yacht from the USA and decided there was no point in going further, holds court behind the bar. If you can't find the drink you want, he invites you to help yourself.

Next day we cruised northwards toward the dramatically towering islands of Phang Nga Bay. Pah's seafood spectaculars, noodles, spicy unknowns and artistically cut exotic fruit kept on coming until we couldn't imagine anyone eating better, on any boat, anywhere. Not only could Pah cook, she also had a sense of humour and was a smart deckhand.

In Koh Phi Phi we reluctantly left Alex and Pah to take possession of our own clean, well-prepared 38ft Tiki catamaran. These islands had taken a hit from the tsunami three years ago, but the locals dusted themselves off and started all over again with tourist shops, paraglider rides, beach restaurants and throbbing dusk-to-dawn muzak – for those who want it. We didn't, so we sailed away on the morning breeze.

The Tiki rattled off the miles whenever she got a wind in her hair, and when she didn't, we cranked up her useful diesel engine. I'd had some concerns about living space, but the set-up worked surprisingly well for four adults in an outdoor, adventure-cruising sort of way. It was obvious that she'd also be great for families with young children. The weather in February only really cooked up in the early afternoon, and →



ABOVE: 'Longtail' boats; Hannah on a shopping spree

at night we slept comfortably under sheets. The dreaded mosquitoes were a virtual no-show.

Having made the culture-leap from the magnificent 55ft *Tiare*, we soon settled back to real life and cruised ever deeper into the bay

ABOVE: The dramatic rock formations in Phang Nga Bay form a fascinating seascape

with its remarkable island scenery. Colossal outcrops rise vertically from the ocean, undercut by millennia of wave action and covered in vegetation. In the hazy monsoon they appeared in the distance like phantoms, some leaning at impossible angles. They are hard to land on, but offlying sand bars sometimes offer anchorage, so the potential for exploration is huge. The catamaran, with a draught of just 2ft 6in (0.75m), made short work of the shallow waters until the hot, still afternoons slipped us the wink that it was snorkelling time around the reef edges. Finally, the evening breeze signalled the end of another day and sent us to the commodious fridge to mix a sundowner.

Our last night found us anchored alone off a village built on stilts in shoal water by Muslim fishermen moving east 200 years ago. We flagged a ride ashore in a 'longtail' boat with an old car engine perched like a demon outboard on top of a drive shaft that hit the water 10ft astern. Up at living level, we wandered through dark, silent alleys where snapshots of a different life to our own jumped out at us. Clean, attentive children sat at school while women chatted in barely furnished rooms, and men in white knelt at prayer inside the open mosque. Back on board, the moon rose as the call of the muezzin echoed over the running tide to remind us that God is great. Truly, this was a charter with a difference. ▲

» CHARTERS WITH SIAM SAILING - www.sailing-charter-thailand.com

FLIGHT

Phuket is a 14-hour flight from the UK, with a change at Singapore. Approx £700 return

BOATS

TIARE - Fully crewed, customised Wharram Islander 55

Accommodation: 4 double en suite cabins, 4 single cabins. Huge areas of uncluttered, shaded deck
Rig Gaff schooner

Cost (Full board, 7 days, 7 nights)

- Up to 4 guests: £3,770
- 6 guests: £5,060
- 8 guests: £5,460

TIKI 38

Accommodation 2 double cabins, 2 single cabins, 1 shower/heads, deck shower **LOA** 11.6m (38ft 1in)
Beam 6.2m (20ft 4in) **Draught** 0.75m (2ft 6in) **Rig** Bermudian sloop, fully-battened main, roller genoa and cruising chute



Tiare



Tiki 38

Engine: 26hp diesel (twin-circuit hydraulic drive gives twin-screw manoeuvring) **Cost** (Bareboat, 7 days, 7 nights, regardless of crew size): approx £1,840 including fuel, basic provisions, bottled water, linen, transfers to and from airport

TIKI 30

Accommodation 'Friendly' double cabin in each hull, one double or two single berths in deck cabin
LOA 9.5m (30ft) **Beam** 5.3m (16ft)

Draught 0.45m (1ft 6in) **Rig** 'Soft wing' sloop, roller-furling jib and cruising chute **Engine** 9.9hp four-stroke outboard **Cost** (Bareboat, 7 days, 7 nights, regardless of crew size) approx £1,260 including fuel, basic provisions, bottled water, linen, transfers to and from airport

EXTRAS

There are no extras beyond food and drinks. You can even spend an extra night on board free of charge

at the beginning or end of the charter, if it helps your flight schedule. 15% discount from May to November

SAILING SEASON

All year round, but the dry season of the north-east monsoon, which runs from November to April, makes a great winter break

WEATHER

At 8°N latitude, Phuket is well within the tropics. Temperatures average between 24 and 35°C. Winds in the morning and evening rarely exceed Force 6 and typically are Force 4 or less

BUGS

Stay out of the mangroves and mosquitoes are no problem during the monsoon. Max and his team try hard to beat the cockroach menace but they can't 'bomb' the boat every week and a careless charterer can leave unwanted 'friends' behind. We found a troupe of roaches on the Tiki, but most of them succumbed to a spray of insecticide and Max assured us we'd been unlucky. *Tiare* was totally bug-free