



Life's a Beach

By Paul Lees • Photos by Jez Tryner

Thailand's sun-kissed beaches are as diverse as the visitors who flock to them, featuring everything from highly developed resort destinations with spas, sports amenities and unbelievable shopping opportunities to cottages on secluded shores. For the purist in search of isolated coves with emerald seas gently lapping on powdery-white sand, Koh Lanta Yai is the place go.

Koh Lanta Yai is the main island in the Mu Koh Lanta Marine National Park, and it's the only island in the park adequately prepared to take in seasonal visitors. The main stopping-off point is the northern port of Saladan, where the majority of Koh Lanta's dive centres are located, nestled among a handful of banks, restaurants and currency exchanges. The atmosphere is pleasant; there're no high-rise buildings on the island, and no large bridges spanning the narrow strait between Koh Lanta Yai and the smaller island of Koh Lanta Noi.

Left: Typical Hin Daeng reef scene

Koh Lanta, Thailand
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Although Koh Lanta Yai is in the marine park, most of the island is open to the public, with only the southern part of the island designated as a protected zone. On the northwestern side of the island, many of the family-run garden resorts featuring bamboo bungalows still grace the beachfront. Further south, new development projects are popping up, with a number of resorts and spas nestled among the tropical vegetation or perched on hilltops overlooking the marine park. The new projects are gradually giving the island more family appeal, without taking away its renowned charm.



Moving off terra firma, the park's seascape features some of the finest underwater scenery found in Thai waters, particularly at the open-ocean sites of Hin Mouang and neighbouring Hin Daeng. Both of these underwater monoliths attract lots of marine life, including visiting pelagics. Great and chevron barracuda, dogtooth tuna, and rainbow runners are all regularly seen hanging in the blue or simply passing by. Whale sharks and manta rays are also frequent visitors, giving divers something to search for in the blue.



Above: Common lionfish (*Pterois volitans*)

Top Left: Deer Neck Point, the northern headland of Koh Lanta Yai

Bottom Left: Juvenile clown triggerfish (*Balistoides conspicillum*) taking refuge under a reef wall overhang off Koh Ha Yai



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Diving Hin Mouang has been likened to coming across the submerged sister of Australia's Ayers Rock. The site comprises a series of six pinnacles interconnected at depths ranging from eight to sixteen metres. A rich garden of brilliant purple anemones carpets the top of the predominant pinnacle, hence the site name Hin Mouang, which means "purple rock" in Thai. A sheer wall descends to reach a narrow platform at forty metres before it plunges down further. The walls themselves are relatively barren, highlighted by scattered seafans and orange encrusting sponges, and there are a number of narrow valleys cut into the rock face. Soft corals and gorgonians make their homes among these crevices, extracting nutrients from the surrounding currents.

A mere five hundred metres away is another popular dive site called Hin Daeng, which means "red rock" in Thai, referring to the lavish garden of red soft corals blanketing the area's upper slopes and walls. While Hin Mouang is totally submerged, Hin Daeng breaks the surface at low tide. The main rocks here slope downward as a series of walls with intermittent shelves at varying depths.

In contrast, the waters around the tiny island group of Koh Ha are relatively shallow, especially the waters around the limestone formations, which are only suitable for snorkelling. Around the outer perimeter of these formations is a different story altogether, however, with dive sites suitable for all divers, including those on training



Above: The Koh Ha island group

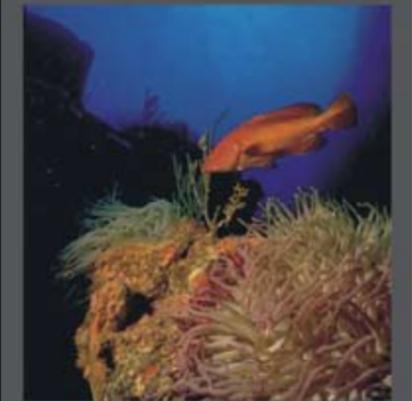
Top Left: Whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*) encounters are common at a number of sites around the marine park.

Left: Manta rays (*Manta birostris*) are a familiar sight off Hin Daeng.



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One of two entrances to the large cave at Koh Ha Yai

courses. There're even a couple of enjoyable caves — ones that don't require any special training, as they have adequate air spaces above.

One of the islands has a particularly large cave with two entrances, which open up into two connecting cathedrals that rise an inspiring 30 metres above sea level. Most impressively, it's not dark inside, as light enters through the waters below. 🏊

Local Colour

Throughout southern Thailand, development has been balanced with environmental concerns. The region is an enchanting and alluring destination for visitors of all interests and backgrounds, from sport enthusiasts to beach lovers from all walks of life.

Koh Lanta Yai, or "Island of Long Beaches" as it's known, is great for people wanting to get away from it all. Most of the island's western coastline is graced with beaches, although many areas in the southern parts can be somewhat rocky. 🏊



fins Factfile



Getting there: Most major airlines, including budget airlines such as [Tiger Airways](#) and [Jetstar Asia](#), fly to Thailand, with some offering direct services into Krabi International Airport. Koh Lanta Yai can then be reached via minibus or taxi, both of which can be arranged by the island's dive operators.

Dive season and climate: Tropical climate, with the dive season ranging from November to April. For most diving, a 3 mm suit or equivalent should be sufficient.

Documents and taxes: Visas are not required for stays of up to 90 days for most nationalities. If in doubt, please check with your local Thai consular office. Passports should be valid for at least six months from date of entry. Departure tax for all international flights is 500 Baht per passenger, and must be paid in cash after checking-in.

Communication: On Koh Lanta itself, domestic GSM network and international roaming are available although coverage is somewhat limited. There are internet cafes on the island, and local access numbers for internet/ email roaming are available via the iPass network.

Electricity: 220V, 50Hz



Currency: Thai Baht ([Currency Exchange](#))

Tipping: Optional, but appreciated

Health and safety: Generally recommended vaccinations include hepatitis A, tetanus and typhoid. Malaria is present in some areas. Mosquito repellent is widely available.

Time zone: GMT + 7 hrs

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