

Andaman Dreaming

By Jez Tryner

It had been a while since I dived around Mu Koh Similan Marine National Park in Thailand's Andaman Sea. To be honest, my recollection of the Similans was a bit hazy and unclear. The only thing that had stuck in my mind was the superb water clarity and amazing colours. Maybe it had all been a bit too much for my poor brain to handle!

For this trip I made sure I was on a luxury liveaboard boat, secure in the knowledge that even if the diving wasn't terrific, at least we were reaping the benefits of five-star service, but my worries were



unnecessary. The water was clear and blue, even now, in the low season, due to the island's granite formation and its distance from the mainland; in fact it was even clearer than I remembered. Sunlight reflecting off the white sand created an underwater lighting situation that was nothing short of amazing. Whether at 40 metres or 10 metres, there was no apparent difference in the brightness underwater. On the surface, the waters glowed with an azure blue that I've only ever seen in movies and personally didn't believe existed in the real world. But

Top: A diver swimming through schooling glassfish around a large gorgonian sea fan at East of Eden off Island Number 7

Opposite Page: The stunning contrast of blue water and white sand at the start of East of Eden/ Andaman Reef, Island Number 7

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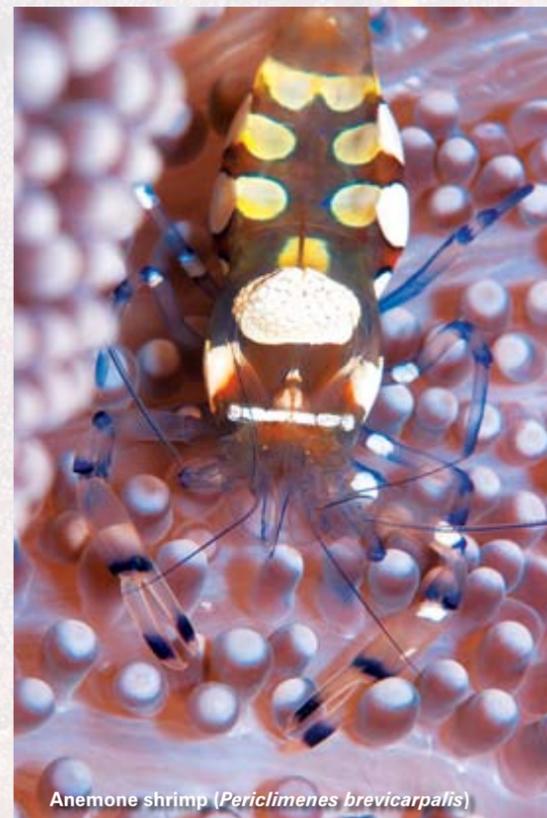
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Red *Dendronephthya* soft and fan corals on Anita's Reef off Island Number 5



Anemone shrimp (*Periclimenes brevicarpalis*)

let's face it — diving in the Similans is not the real world.

The topography underwater is mainly a rocky landscape with monstrous boulders and fringing reefs covered in hard corals as well as the trademark red and purple soft corals. It's also home to many species of fish not seen elsewhere in the Andaman Sea.

From leopard sharks and shovelnose rays, to mantas, whale sharks and hunting giant trevallies, you'll never get bored...maybe a little stiff-necked from spinning your head around on a 360-degree axis throughout the dive, but definitely not bored.

The macro-life is great, with all sorts of blennies, gobies, juvenile rockmover wrasse, nudibranchs galore and the ever-elusive frogfish to keep you on your toes — but it's the blue you have to watch for, as this is often where divers discover the surprises the Similans has in store.

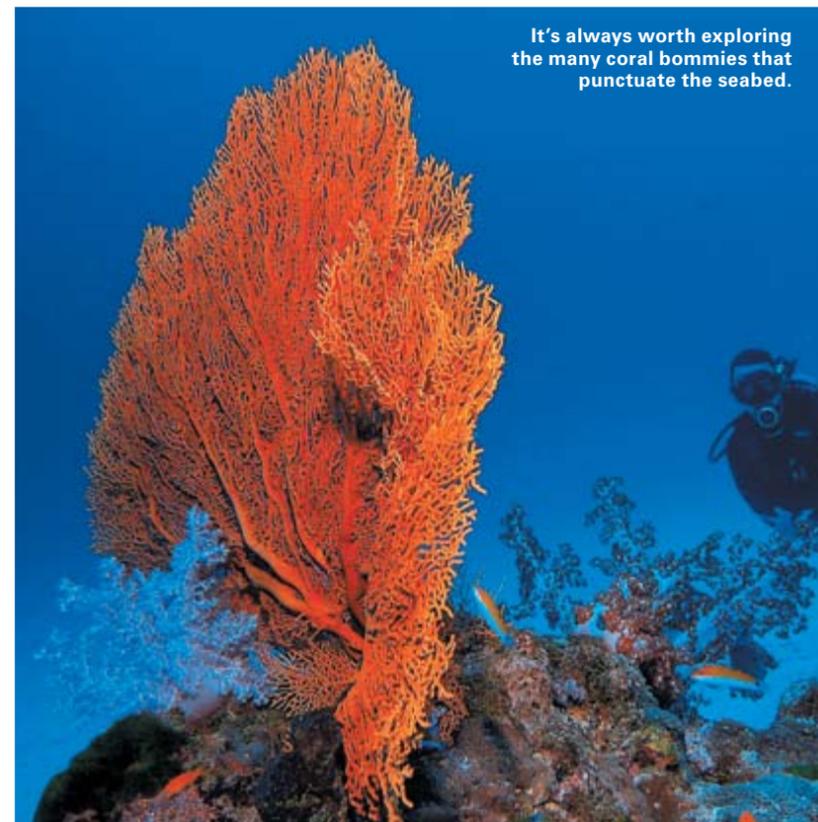
One of my favourite sites is the stunningly beautiful East of Eden, also known as Andaman Reef, depending on whom you ask. It's a sloping sandy reef dotted with bommies covered in purple and red soft corals that contrast with the white-sand bottom and



Beaked leatherjackets (*Oxymonacanthus longirostris*) are common among staghorn corals.

swirling glass fish to create a surreal landscape. The crowning glory of the reef is a huge coral bommie, starting at 12 metres and ending at 24 metres, that is literally covered in soft corals and gorgonian sea fans of all sizes and colours. It's just not possible to stack any more soft corals onto this one bommie.

Hiding in cracks and crannies and among the sea fans are stunning nudibranchs, beautiful red jewel coral groupers, the occasional frogfish and masses of glassfish. It's a wondrous site.



It's always worth exploring the many coral bommies that punctuate the seabed.

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An orange-fin anemonefish (*Amphiprion chrysopterus*) in a beaded sea anemone (*Heteractis aurora*), Christmas Point, Island Number 9

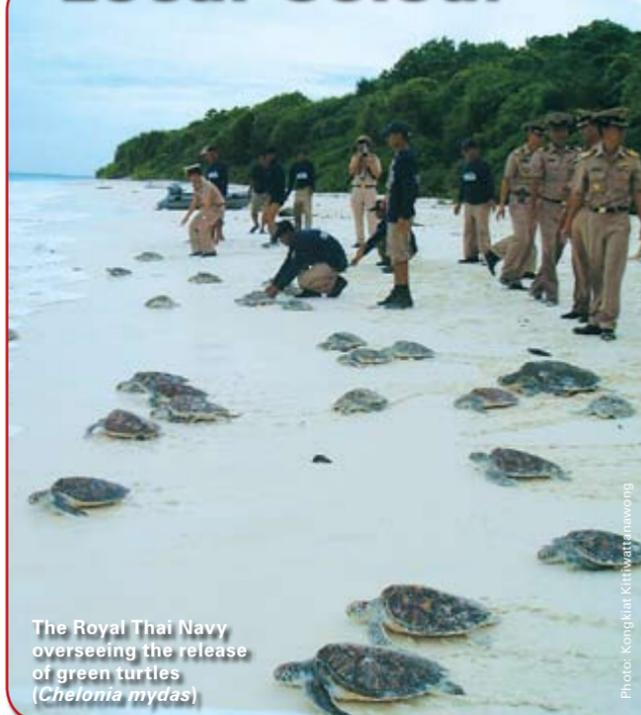
One word of warning though, there's a monster moray eel that lives under a table coral near the main bommie. The eel goes by many names, depending on your dive operator. Sometimes it's a little too friendly, so keep your hands folded under your arms.

One of the highlights of any liveaboard trip to the Similans is Elephant Head Rock, which is as different from East of Eden as you can imagine, even though it's only a short distance away. Massive boulders the size of two or three houses form the basis of this site, creating a multitude of excellent swim-throughs that all sorts of fish use as their daytime resting area. In the blue, I spotted some of the biggest giant trevallies I'd ever seen endlessly hunting for breakfast, and there's always the possibility of something bigger coming along. The boulders have hard and soft corals growing on them and there's generally a good chance of a couple of turtles checking you out.

It is no wonder that the Similan Islands are considered one of Thailand's best dive spots! 🐬

Jez Tryner is a full-time underwater cameraman for both video and photography. He works on liveaboards around the world.

Local Colour



The Royal Thai Navy overseeing the release of green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*)

Photo: Kongkiat Kitwattanasong

Koh Huyong, or Island Number 1 in the Mu Koh Similan Marine National Park, was recently discovered by the Royal Thai Navy to be the nesting site for the second largest aggregation of green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) in Thailand.

Every year, over 70,000 tourists visit the Similans, of which Koh Huyong is the most restricted due to a sea turtle conservation plan that limits the number of tourists allowed to go ashore. Visitors are not permitted to stay overnight and lighting on boats is forbidden when anchored in front of the island at night.

The island has only one 800-metre long nesting beach, and the beach's profile changes seasonally. During the NW monsoon, the northern end is affected by powerful wave action that leaves the sand in steep hill-like formations, while the southern end of the beach experiences the same phenomenon during the SW monsoon. Only green turtles have been recorded nesting at Huyong Island. 🐬

fins factfile

Cut out and keep this fins factfile for handy travel reference!



Getting there: The Similans are accessible by both daytrips and liveaboard excursions that mostly operate from Koh Phuket and Khao Lak. The nearest airport is on Phuket Island. Many major airlines fly to Bangkok, with scores more offering direct service into Phuket International Airport. Phuket is also a major destination for budget airlines, including [Tiger Airways](#) and [Jetstar Asia](#).

Dive season and climate: Tropical climate, with the dive season ranging from November to April. Diving is possible in the rainy season from May through to October, but trips to the Similans generally cease for this period. Water temperatures are generally warm, and for most diving, a 3 mm suit or equivalent should be sufficient.

Documents and taxes: In most cases, visas are not required for stays of up to 90 days for most countries. 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 Phuket and Khao Lak, domestic GSM network and international roaming is widely available. Obtaining a signal around the Similans is possible, but only in the vicinity of Island Number 4.

Electricity: 220V, 50Hz



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

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 and highly recommended.

Time zone: GMT + 7 hrs

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