

WILD MERGUI

WORDS AND PHOTOS PAUL JOHNSON

Myanmar's Mergui archipelago offers visitors the chance to see native tribes, untouched tropical forests and a wealth of wildlife





The author's charter yacht, *Asia*.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Johnson has been running high end luxury charters in Southeast Asia for the last 12 years. He is one of the authors of the *Southeast Asia Pilot* – the definitive guide book to Southeast Asia (www.southeastasiapilot.com). Paul is the owner and captain of the new 100-foot sailing yacht *Asia*, which offers five-star adventure sailing, diving, surfing and kayaking holidays in the Mergui Archipelago (Myanmar), the Andaman Islands (India), Malaysia and Thailand. *Asia* is a custom-built performance sailing yacht with luxury accommodation for up to ten guests.

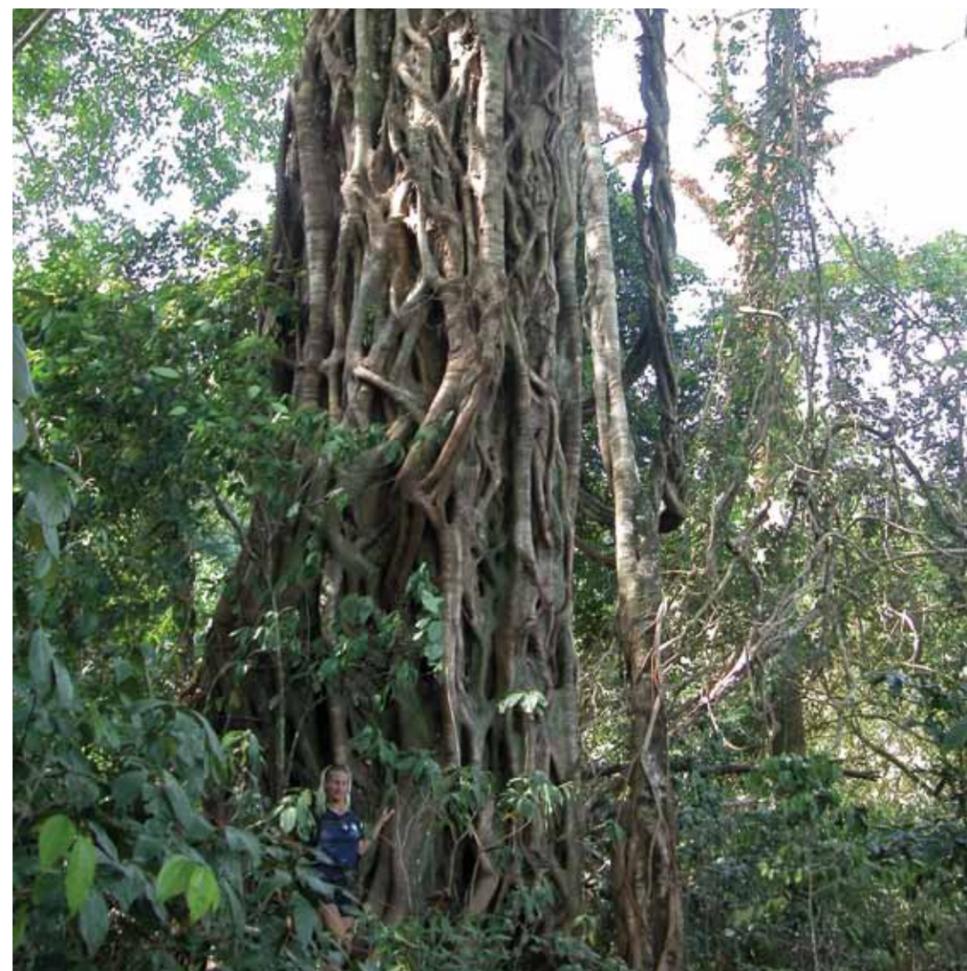
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► **IMAGINE A CHARTER DESTINATION THAT HAS MORE THAN EIGHT HUNDRED TROPICAL ISLANDS SPREAD OVER FOURTEEN THOUSAND SQUARE MILES OF INDIAN OCEAN.** Imagine mountainous islands covered with jungle and teeming with wildlife. Or spectacular waterfalls that tumble directly onto white sandy beaches fringed by pristine coral reefs. Imagine a place with no tourists and populated by indigenous hunter-gatherer tribes with an exotic culture who live nomadic lives aboard their tiny boats. This place really does exist – it is the Mergui Archipelago, off the southwest coast of Myanmar.

That the islands of the Mergui Archipelago exist in such an incredibly unspoiled state is entirely due to historical accident. For 50 years following the independence of Myanmar in 1947, isolationist policies served to keep foreigners out. However, since 1997, access into the Mergui Archipelago has become possible. Today, a small handful of licensed operators offer luxury yacht charter and dive live-aboard adventure trips into the remote wilderness of the Mergui Islands. Just a four-hour drive away to the south lies the island of Phuket in Thailand,



A Mokeu sea gypsy village in the Mergui.



A giant strangler fig.

a popular mass tourism destination and a yachting hub for Southeast Asia.

The Mergui Archipelago takes its name from the historical trading port of Mergui with a superb natural harbour at the northern end of the archipelago. Established around 1500, Mergui's strategic position ensured its rapid growth into a major trade entrepot. Sailing ships of the time, faced with the fickle winds, uncharted reefs and pirates of the Malacca Straights to the south, preferred to offload their trade goods in Mergui. From here the goods were trans-shipped by elephant convoy across the Malaysian Peninsula to the ancient kingdoms of Ayutthaya, Cambodia and southern China. The invention of the steam driven cargo ship lessened the importance of Mergui and it gracefully declined into the sleepy market town it is today.

The flora and fauna of the Mergui Archipelago has never been properly surveyed. A preliminary survey in the 1930's by the forestry department of the British colonial government listed the following as resident in the islands: tiger, leopard, bear, elephant, rhinoceros, wild boar, sambar, barking deer, tapir, mouse deer, flying lemur, gibbons, macaque monkeys, sea otters, pythons, cobras, crocodiles, monitor lizards, leatherback turtles and hawksbill turtles. Much of this wildlife remains undisturbed to this day.

Overhead the birdlife is equally prolific and unusual. Great flocks of noisy hornbills fly past every dawn and dusk. The jungle covered islands are home to the exotic "bird



A Moken Kabang (house boat) anchored for the night.

of paradise", parrots and tiny sunbirds. Around the shoreline, reef egrets, sea eagles, Brahminy kites, fishing owls and nocturnal night herons catch fish for a living.

Of the eight hundred islands of the Mergui Archipelago, only a dozen or so are permanently inhabited. Many of the islands are huge; some are larger than Singapore.



A ban on logging in the Mergui has prevented the widespread deforestation that is common elsewhere in Asia. As a result, all of the islands are covered in thick jungle with majestic stands of Burmese Teak, Mahogany, Pandak, strangler figs and other indigenous vegetation. Most beaches are backed by trees that tower to over 150 feet tall. Overhead, there is the constant cacophony of birds and small animals feeding in the forest canopy. The beaches are covered in animal tracks – the only human footprints in sight are the ones behind you. Jungle walks in this area, while demanding, are also very rewarding, with glimpses of the elusive wildlife and superb views through the forest of the deep blue ocean beyond.

The dramatic scenery continues underwater, with magnificent coral reefs around many of the islands. The snorkelling and scuba diving in this area is superb. Sharks, whale sharks, dolphins, manta rays, mobula rays and fish are prolific. In March and April each year, large numbers of Sperm and Humpback whales visit the area. Two years ago, we had a memorable opportunity to snorkel with two Sperm whales that were resting on the surface.



Top: The author prepares a meal.
Middle: A jungle walk in Mergui.
Bottom: Young Buddhist monks in Mergui.

Useful Info

VISAS

Normally all visitors to Myanmar require tourist visas to be obtained in advance. However, yacht charter operators in the Mergui Archipelago have a special arrangement for 30 day tourist visas to be issued on arrival in Kawthaung.

CRUISING PERMITS FOR PRIVATE YACHTS

All yachts wishing to visit the Mergui Archipelago must have a yacht permit issued by the Myanmar Government. While you can obtain this yacht permit for yourself this is a convoluted and expensive process. It is a better idea to ask one of the charter companies that operate in the Mergui Archipelago to add your yacht onto their existing permit for a fee. Companies that offer this service are:

BOAT YACHT CHARTERS	www.boat-yacht-charters.com
FARAWAY	www.far-way.net
ASIA PACIFIC SUPERYACHTS	www.asia-pacific-superyachts.com
SEAL	www.seal-superyachts.com

GETTING THERE

The starting point for all yacht charters into the Mergui Archipelago is the border trading town of Kawthaung – a veritable smugglers den. While there are supposedly daily flights from Yangon to Kawthaung in reality these flights are infrequent and unreliable. For this reason it is far better to travel to the Thai town of Ranong which is on the opposite bank of the Pak Chan river from Kawthaung. A connecting longtail boat across the Pak Chan river takes about 20 minutes and is an experience itself.

THERE ARE BASICALLY THREE OPTIONS FOR TRAVELLING TO RANONG:

- An air-conditioned minibus from Phuket takes about four hours by road.
- There are seaplane and helicopter services available from Phuket which can pick you up at the front door of your west coast hotel and whisk you to Ranong in about 40 minutes with superb scenery the entire flight.
- For those who want to escape to nowhere as quickly as possible there are private charter flights out of Bangkok which takes about 40 minutes to fly to Ranong.

Unfortunately, over the last few years some areas have been badly damaged by the destructive practise of dynamite fishing. The Myanmar Government has reacted very positively to lobbying by environmental groups and is now working actively to stop dynamite fishing and has also introduced new legislation banning shark fishing in the Mergui Islands. These are certainly steps in the right direction but only time will tell how effectively these new regulations will be enforced in a predominately uninhabited area.

THE MOKEN TRIBE

The indigenous people of the Mergui Archipelago are the Moken (also known as Salones). These gentle, peaceful people are a source of complete fascination to anthropologists as they still cling to their traditional nomadic, hunter-gatherer existence despite attempts to settle them in permanent villages. Traditionally the Moken do not fish. They are hunter-gatherers mainly living off shellfish collected in the inter-tidal zone. They also free dive for shellfish and sea cucumbers, sometimes going to amazing depths ballasted by large stones tied to their waists. The Moken also occasionally hunt wild boar and small deer in the forest with the aid of their dogs.

Each Moken family group lives on a flotilla (ban) of traditionally built wooden boats (kabang). Each member of the family also has their own personal dugout canoe that they use for foraging. When the Moken move from island to island, these dugout canoes are towed in a long chain behind their kabang.

We occasionally come across the Moken in the Mergui Archipelago. They pull into a nearby beach in their flotilla of boats. Adults, children, cats, dogs, chickens and ducks leap off each boat and rush into the jungle to forage. Suddenly, at some hidden signal, people and animals come rushing back out of the forest and jump on the boat just before it leaves for another anchorage. Their arrivals and departures seem random and follow no obvious pattern of time or tide.

Sometimes the Moken cautiously approach our yacht with a gift of rock oysters or maybe the haunch of a wild boar after a successful hunt. They are always delighted when we give them a gift in return – a roll of cloth or an old dive mask. ■■■