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The lost world: Myanmar's Mergui islands

By Sophy Roberts

The 800 islands of Myanmar's Mergui archipelago are rarely visited and almost completely undeveloped. Now, as the country opens up, they could become the next frontier for Asian tourism



One of the many uninhabited islands in the Mergui archipelago, off the coast of southern Myanmar

The 2,000-odd Moken people, or sea gypsies, live among the 800 islands of the Mergui archipelago off southern Myanmar. The Moken claim that the islands, a chain that stretches some 400km, were detached from the mainland after a great mythological flood. Looking at them from our yacht, the story does not seem that far-fetched – we appear to have the entire Andaman Sea to ourselves.

The water is the bright, uncompromising blue of a child's felt-tip pen, turning to pale green where the sea thins around the sandbars. Around us are the high points of islands – scores of them, poking up from the water like the conical peaks of sunken volcanoes from a lost world. Each is covered in dense jungle of mahogany, teak and strangler figs that grow with such fecundity that they seem to devour the islands' flanks, advancing upon the ocean itself. Some isles have rocky foreshores; others have white beaches that run for miles. At one small island we drop anchor to snorkel in its creamy shallows where languid tides have moulded underwater ridges to create pockets full of shells.

The skipper of our 60ft ketch, Colona II, is Freddy Storheil, a 69-year-old Norwegian. Having sailed this archipelago more than 100 times over 17 years, his experience is precious in a place where knowledge is sparse. The islands are only known to a few keen divers and ethnographers, and to the outside world through occasional reports of illegal logging, dynamite fishing and in 1998, an alleged massacre of 59 civilians by Burmese military on Christie Island. Even Google is challenged by Mergui – searches throw up little of value because the islands have been visited by so few. A Mergui government official tells me that around 1,700 travellers have come during this year's main tourist season, which runs from October until the end of April.

In the three days since leaving the mainland port of Kawthaung, the access point for cruising the islands, the only boats we have encountered are a single tourist vessel, two Moken *kabang* or "mother boats" (the 10m-long boats on which the sea gypsies live), numerous Moken dugout canoes, and long-tail fishing boats. In the central and southern islands we're exploring, the biggest village is Ma Kyone Galet, on Bo Cho island. Of the 600 inhabitants, around 150 are Moken.



Travelling between villages sometimes takes a full day's sailing, through islands Storheil can navigate by sight. Still, he has never previously noticed the beach where we stop to swim – an exquisite, bristling bone-white, which is the best I have seen anywhere in the world. The island, a mile or more in circumference, is unnamed on the charts. "Mergui sometimes feels like you're exploring the New World," says Storheil. Except for one difference: in the age of Magellan, there was no red tape.

The islands were completely off limits to tourists until 1996, when the first parts of the archipelago were opened up to diveboats. Strict regulations remain, creating headaches for visitors, but at the same time protecting the islands from a tourist industry that has spent the past half-century gobbling up beaches from the Canaries to the Caribbean. One local tour operator tells me around 40 Myanmar boats are registered to operate in the area, though Storheil says there are only about four operating regularly. A few luxury charters come from Phuket in Thailand, a two-day journey for boats travelling at Colona II's six knots. All have to pay the permit fees: around \$4,000 for two years, as well as a \$100-a-head fee per passenger on each trip. Getting these permits used to take weeks when Mergui was defined as a "remote region" in "pre-democracy" Myanmar, but things are getting easier. Permits can now be granted on arrival in Kawthaung, a 90-minute flight from Yangon.

More changes were introduced on March 10: with a couple of weeks' notice, visitors can now enter and exit Myanmar via different ports of entry. This means end-to-end tours of the country are now possible – starting in the northern jungles, finishing on Mergui's beaches. Jay Tindall, co-founder of New York- and Bangkok-based tour operator Remote Lands, says this change will provide a significant boost for Mergui.

The red tape may be loosening its grip, but foreigners who aren't on boats in Mergui still have their movement restricted to within 5km of Kawthaung's immigration office, which limits them to a few bars lining the waterfront, a night at the Honey Bear Hotel, or a 15-minute speedboat ride to the archipelago's first resort, the Andaman Club. I was warned that government minders accompanied every vessel. In the early days, they carried firearms but today our "official" works for the tourist department, not the military. He is articulate, English-speaking, and has a deep knowledge of the area. He also works as the boat's chef and divemaster, and he and a second guide translate so I can understand the Moken's complex and compelling story.

Unable to cut down trees since 1997's logging ban, the Moken say they can no longer build the boats that let them go to sea for up to eight months a year. Fishing restrictions and competition mean they can't rely on trading goods such as sea slugs and pearl oysters, which they used to collect while free-diving to depths of 25m. Instead, most members of this vanishing tribe – exploited over centuries by Chinese traders, Malay pirates, Japanese occupiers and British colonialists – are trying to convert to a more sedentary way of life. It is not an easy transition and in the villages created for the Moken by the government, trash is everywhere. The Moken themselves describe the cultural erosion taking place in a gentle, unaccusing way.

But, still, something of the sea gypsies' old ways exist. We swim with Moken children off the back of our boat and the way they move seems more fish than man. We watch them spear fish, with spectacular efficiency – so accustomed are they to their environment that they have developed a way of improving their sight under water by overruling the eye's reflex to widen the pupils.

The disappearing Moken, however, are only one side of Mergui's story. The other lies beneath the water. Among the islands we visit, much of the coral is dead – pockmarked with craters from dynamite fishing. One former divemaster and resort manager I speak to says that among scuba enthusiasts, the Mergui archipelago has a reputation for being "fished out and bombed out", its treasures spent.



One of the Moken people, also known as sea gypsies, who live among the Mergui



A manta ray

While the marine degradation is, indeed, significant, others will argue that Mergui's story isn't over, it is only just beginning. Storheil says some decent dive sites remain; locals talk about Black Rock, where manta rays gather. More than anything, there is space and wilderness without any signs of humanity.

On yet another beach, I run my fingers through sand ground to soft powder by the southwest monsoon that passes through from May to October. At a guess, the sand must run for about 5km, the lack of development put into sharp relief when destinations such as the Maldives have resorts squeezing 64 luxury villas out of beaches just 950m long. Look at Mergui in this way and the archipelago thrums with potential – the flat, seaplane-friendly ocean in the dry season, the larger islands' freshwater waterfalls and streams.

This potential is not lost on investors, who are crawling all over Myanmar. Tay Za, who is one of Myanmar's biggest tycoons (and who has been criticised by the US government for links with the former regime), recently bought an island. Gerald Schreiber, a German investor in Myanmar who owns Amara Ocean Resort in Ngapali, is launching a luxury six-cabin sailing boat in Mergui from November. And the big boats are coming in, too, in search of new frontiers. The 149ft Princess Iolanthe is now available for charter in the archipelago at €150,000 per week, and, according to the South China Morning Post, Le Grand Bleu, a 370ft superyacht formerly owned by Roman Abramovich, was seen in the area this month.

Storheil says he was recently moored off Palu Bada when his peace was abruptly interrupted by two Russians riding jet-skis. And he tells me the passengers on the Colona II's next trip will be Scandinavian hoteliers, seeking not encounters with Moken, but islands suitable for a resort.

The superyachts may be arriving but I am content with Colona II, eating lobster for dinner and sleeping on deck in a part of the world that feels like it has slipped off the map. I listen to Storheil's stories, to hornbills, swifts and wild animals concealed in jungles where one day, perhaps, a honeymoon suite will stand in place of ancient banyans with roots like melted wax. Perhaps such a future can bring a better life to the people of the archipelago, yet I remain unsure about how much development this spectacular but fragile place can stand.

Details

Sophy Roberts' trip was part-funded by Remote Lands. A four-night cruise around Mergui aboard Colona II with skipper, chef and divemaster, costs from \$2,000 a day for a party of four. Larger luxury yachts are available by contacting Catherine Heald on Catherine@remotelands.com

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