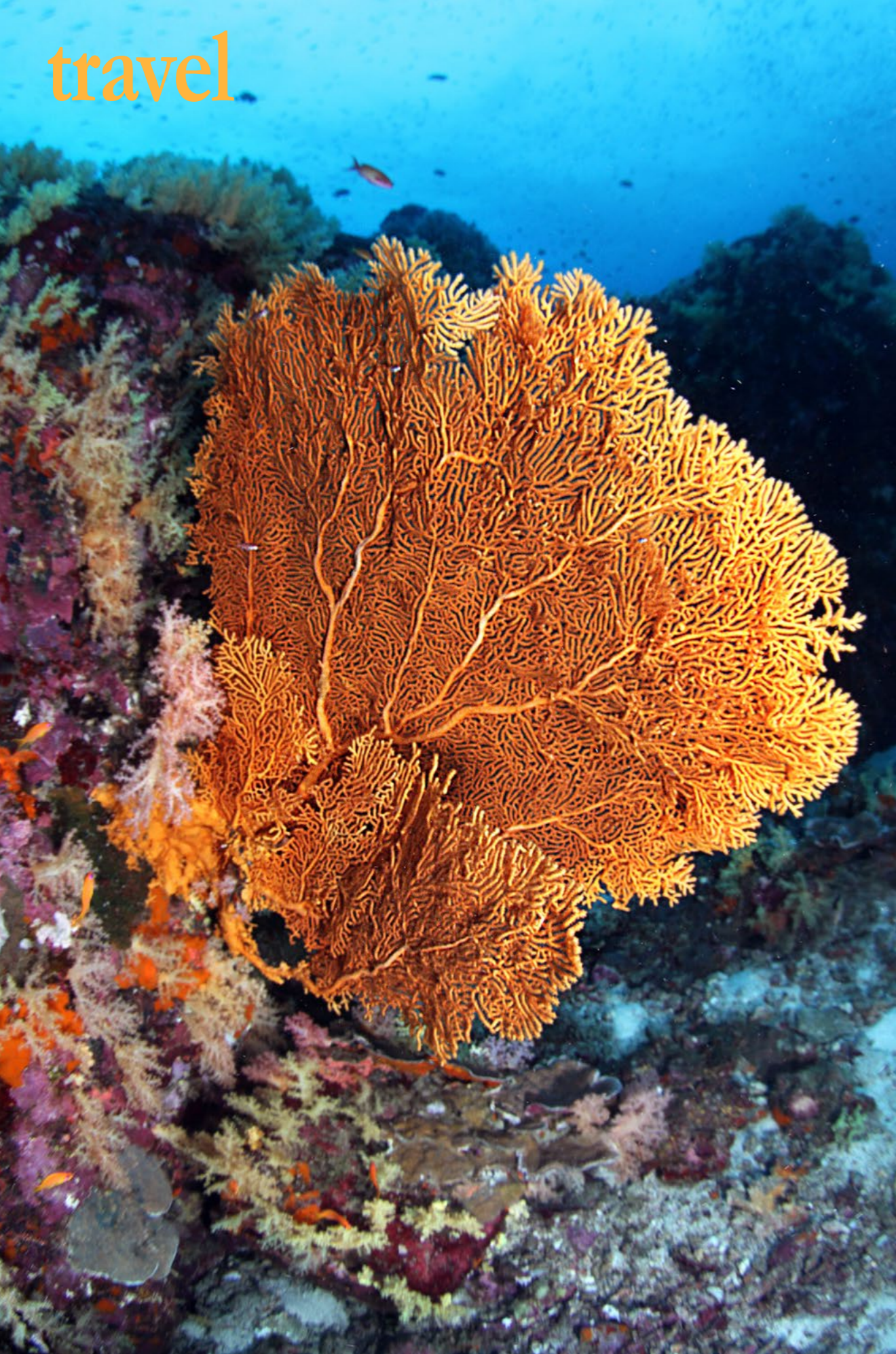


# Thailand's Khao Lak

Text by Kelly LaClaire  
Photos by Kate Clark

*Diving the Similan Islands*





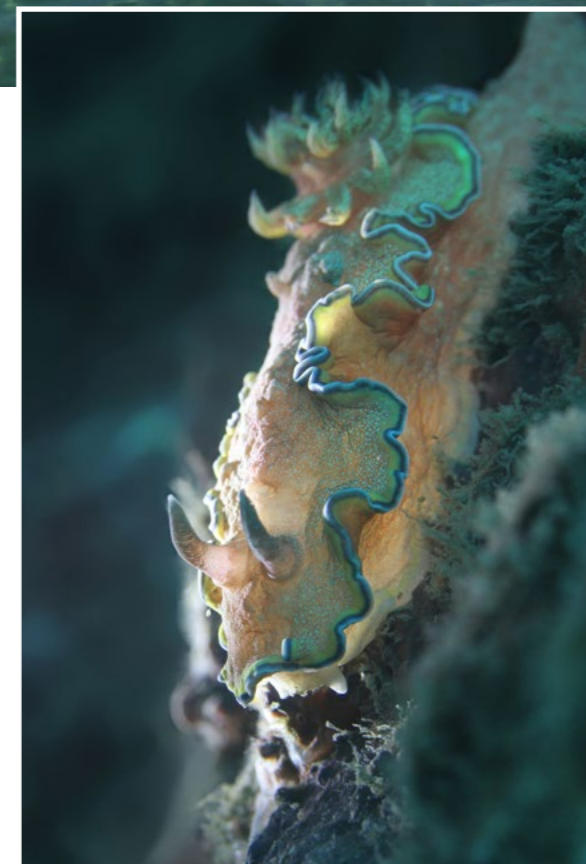
Gigantic orange fan coral on Koh Bon Pinnacle, Similan Islands National Park



Traditional longtail boat of Thailand (above). PREVIOUS PAGE: Harlequin shrimp on Richeleu Rock, Surin National Park

My dive buddy, Kate, is trying to get a shot of a purple sea fan but she's having trouble with her strobes and my ADD is kicking in. This happens occasionally. I try to be a good buddy, I really do, but there's just so damn much to see underwater and I get antsy if we stop too long for a photograph. This is horribly unfair I know, and I feel ashamed of myself at times, but I'm afraid we're going to miss something fantastic if we linger. I start whining to myself about the intricacies of Kate's insanely complex

camera because I'm absolutely positive there's 15 whale sharks and a half dozen great whites just around the next coral head... so hurry up already, Kate, and let's get moving! This is the conversation I'm having with myself when I feel something tickle the back of my neck. It's not physical—it's more like a soft breath against my brain, a whispering ghost of premonition. I look up and my eyes widen as my heart begins to pound involuntarily. My mind goes quiet and time seems to slow down.



*Glossodoris cincta* nudibranch on Boonsung wreck



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Vendor at Bang Niang market; Local boy with elephant on beach in Taplamu; Rubber tree plantation in Khao Lak; Macaque monkeys in Khao Lak

### Khao Lak

I wasn't even supposed to be in Thailand. Kate and I had just finished a two-week diving assignment in Indonesia and my flight back to the United States was already booked. My wife's birthday was only a few days away and I needed to get home. But, as sometimes happens, fate intervened.

Just before leaving, Joaquim Hedelin, a Swedish transplant and owner of Liquid Adventures, invited our team to tag along on a four-day liveaboard safari around the Similan Islands. Now you tell me, just how exactly does an avid diver say no to something like that?

So, that night I called my amazing wife and with her blessing ("You'd be silly to pass this

up!" she said. "We can celebrate my birthday when you get back.") I was flying with Kate to Thailand the next evening.

An hour-long taxi ride north of Phuket International Airport brought us to the bustling beachside village of Khao Lak. Since our boat didn't leave for two days, we had plenty of time to take a look around and soak up the culture. Thailand is unique and captivating—a mash-up of third and first world cultures.

Scooters and overfilled tuk tuks weave precariously among high-end SUVs and Mercedes sedans on the same highways. iPods and blue-ray discs sit incongruously next to fly-riddled pig skins and barbecued crickets at the same outdoor mar-

kets. It's a land of elephants and monkeys, jungles and temples, where the heat saps the life out of you and the natural beauty fills you up again.

But it's the people that truly make Thailand so endearing. Thai folk are friendly and warm, shy but curious. Invite them into conversation and they respond with polite affection and ready humor. Each and every local I met I liked immediately and they seemed genuinely interested in the happiness of others.

After the devastation of the tsunami that wiped out the entire village in 2004, I had fully prepared myself for locals still mired in the suffering and pain of so much dissolution. But what I found were people smiling and living their lives with resilience

and a seemingly unbreakable spirit.

### Welcome aboard

It was to be my first trip on a liveaboard and I was feeling the anxious butterflies of anticipation. The boat crew, lithe men with quick movements, loaded our gear while the kitchen ladies welcomed us with friendly Thai greetings and broad smiles. After a quick tour of our new home, our group gathered on the foredeck for the departing ceremony.

Our captain and his family, who live on Liquid's 26-meter dive boat for six months a year, set out food and gift offerings to Buddha on the bow and then asked for safe travels. Fireworks concluded the prayers, frighten-



Writer Kelly LaClaire in swim-through at Deep Six off Island Seven (left) and Donald Duck Bay at Island Eight (right) of the Similan Islands



## Similan Islands

The waters around the Similans are prolific and abounding. So much so, the Liquid crew aptly calls one dive site “Fish Soup,” an area so packed with massing snapper and juvenile barracuda that you literally get lost in the twisting swarms of sea life.

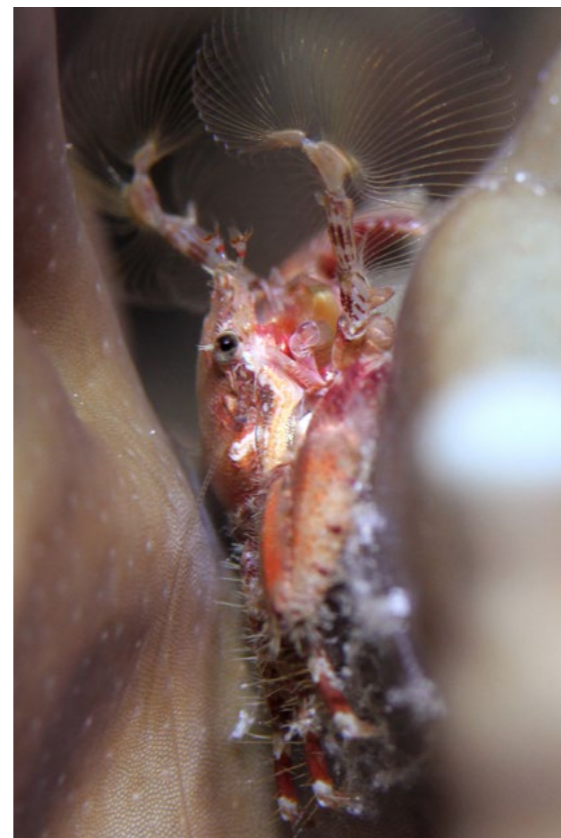
Our first site, Christmas Point, was surrounded by vast granite monoliths that towered over the sand and coral floor. Several groups of imposing trevally passed us as we finned among the giant boulders, eyeing us suspiciously like sentinels on patrol while a school of large sweetlips tried to hide under a rocky overhang.

ing away any evil spirits that may have been trying to stow away, and soon we were slipping out into the black night towards the Similan Islands.

The next morning, our little group of seven gulped down steaming mugs of coffee before hurrying to the stern to gear up, some of us with toast still in our mouths. For several of the guests,

it was going to be the first dive in months and their excitement was infectious. One couple, who hadn't been in the water for a year, couldn't stop laughing while they raced to see who got ready the quickest.

Kate smiled at me while turning on my tank valve, “This is gonna be awesome.”



Porcelain crab feeding, Koh Tachai Reef

Centuries of swift current and erosion have carved out numerous archways and long, cave-like swim throughs. Kate found one with a sizeable air pocket acting as a natural ceiling mirror and had me take a closer look while she readied her camera.

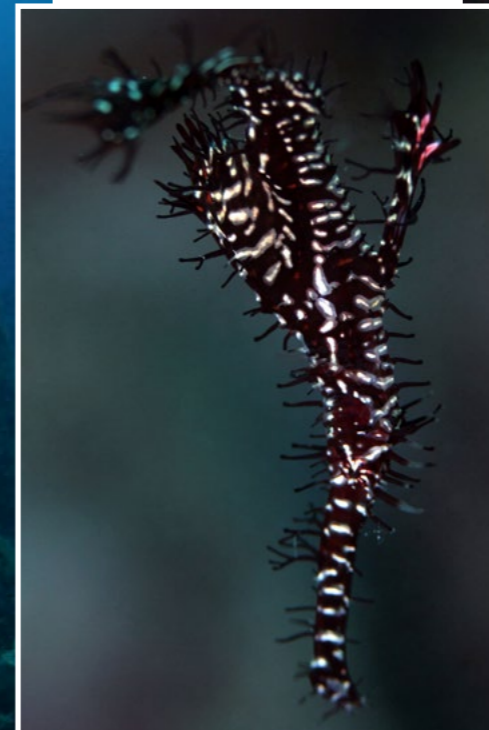
I marvel at Kate in these situations. All I have to do is swim where she directs me and smile on cue. She, on the other hand, has a much more arduous task. Capturing a magazine-quality underwater image isn't just difficult, it's damned near impossible. That may sound far-fetched, loyal reader, but let me assure you it isn't. Next time you're diving, try the following and see how you do:

While holding a 30-pound

camera, maintain perfect buoyancy even in swift current; direct your buddy with hand signals to get them into position and make sure the fish around you don't move; manually adjust your flash strobes into the correct position and check that they will fire with just enough light. Now, look through your leaky mask, through the tiny, foggy housing and focus your camera perfectly (remember if you get this step or any of these steps wrong, your picture will be worthless). Now, simply hold your breath so your bubbles don't get in the shot, conscientiously remembering to use only your fins to stay in exactly the same place without bumping into any coral around you and take the shot of a lifetime.



Squat shrimp at night, Koh Bon Reef



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Diver over technicolor soft coral covering, Koh Bon Pinnacle, Similan Island National Park; Ornate ghost pipefish and glassfish on Richeleu Rock, Surin National Park; Juvenile rock mover wrasse, West of Eden, Island Seven, Similan Islands; Liquid liveaboard crew and guests with writer Kelly LaClaire and underwater photographer Kate Clark (sitting in the center)



**Liveaboard lifestyle**

Back on the boat, the galley crew had prepared breakfast: omelets, fresh pineapple, spiced pancakes and watermelon wedges. Our group attacked it, swapping stories about the last dive between sips of coffee and juice.

"What's next?" someone asked Joquim.

"Whatever you want," he replied smiling. "You're on holiday! Our next dive is scheduled in an hour and a half, but this is your vacation—make yourself at home and do as you please."

This sums up the liveaboard experience for me. And for the next few days, our group fell into a blissful fog of utter contentment—passing our time napping, reading, eating, diving and then starting the whole process all over again. In a word, it was perfect and I didn't want it to end.

**Richelieu Rock**

The Andaman Sea is famous for a fierce, bitterly cold current that rolls through it. Local divers call it the green monster on account of its unpredictable surges and pea soup

consistency.

As I followed Kate off the stern and dropped with the swift current into the horseshoe-shaped reef of Richelieu Rock, I could see the emerald colored thermocline below us, rushing around the giant limestone pinnacle like an angry underwater sandstorm.

The tides around Richelieu Rock are densely packed with plankton and other nutrients, creating incredible biodiversity, making Thailand's most coveted dive site the perfect



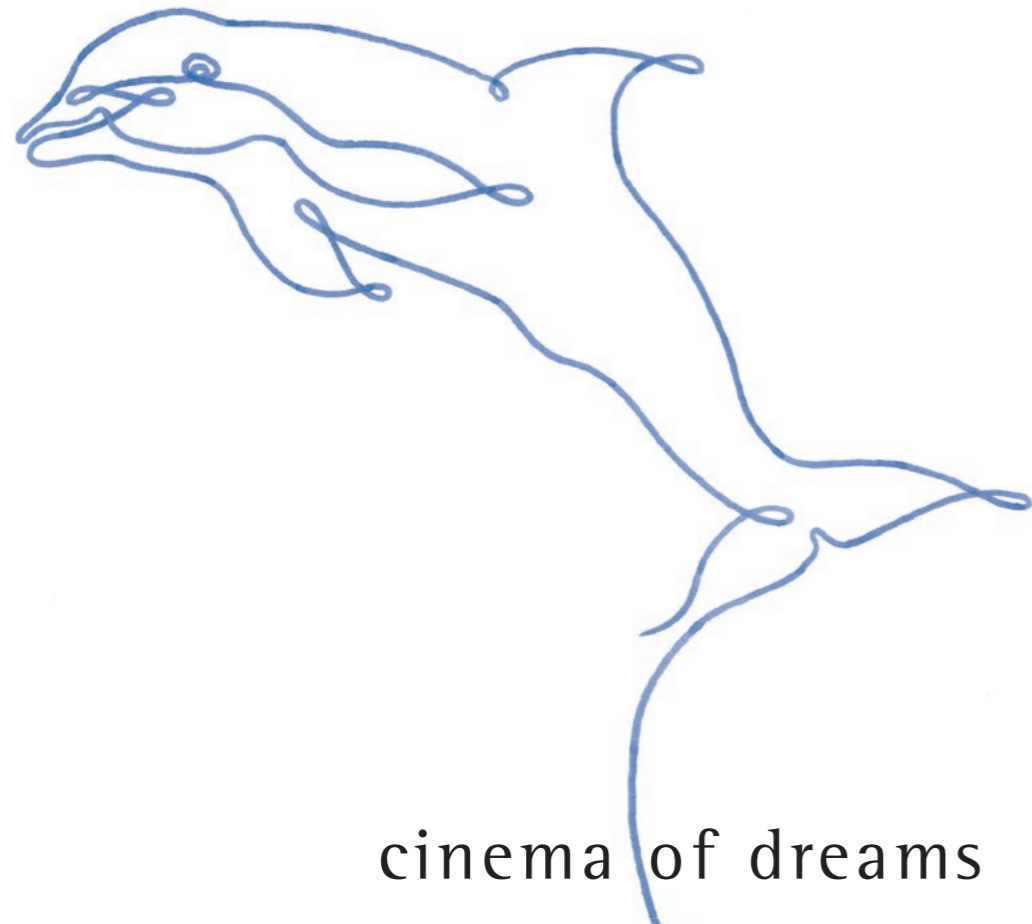
encounter with the occasional whale shark or a timid eagle ray can leave you slightly frustrated.

Kate had her macro lens on for this dive as one of guides had given us a map to a special rarity nesting at this site. We descended down into the frigid green monster and I immediately began cursing my decision to forgo a wetsuit. I gave Kate our "Holy mother of God—it's frickin' cold, so let's hurry this up!" hand signal and we fought the current toward a small collection of boulders.



SEACAM

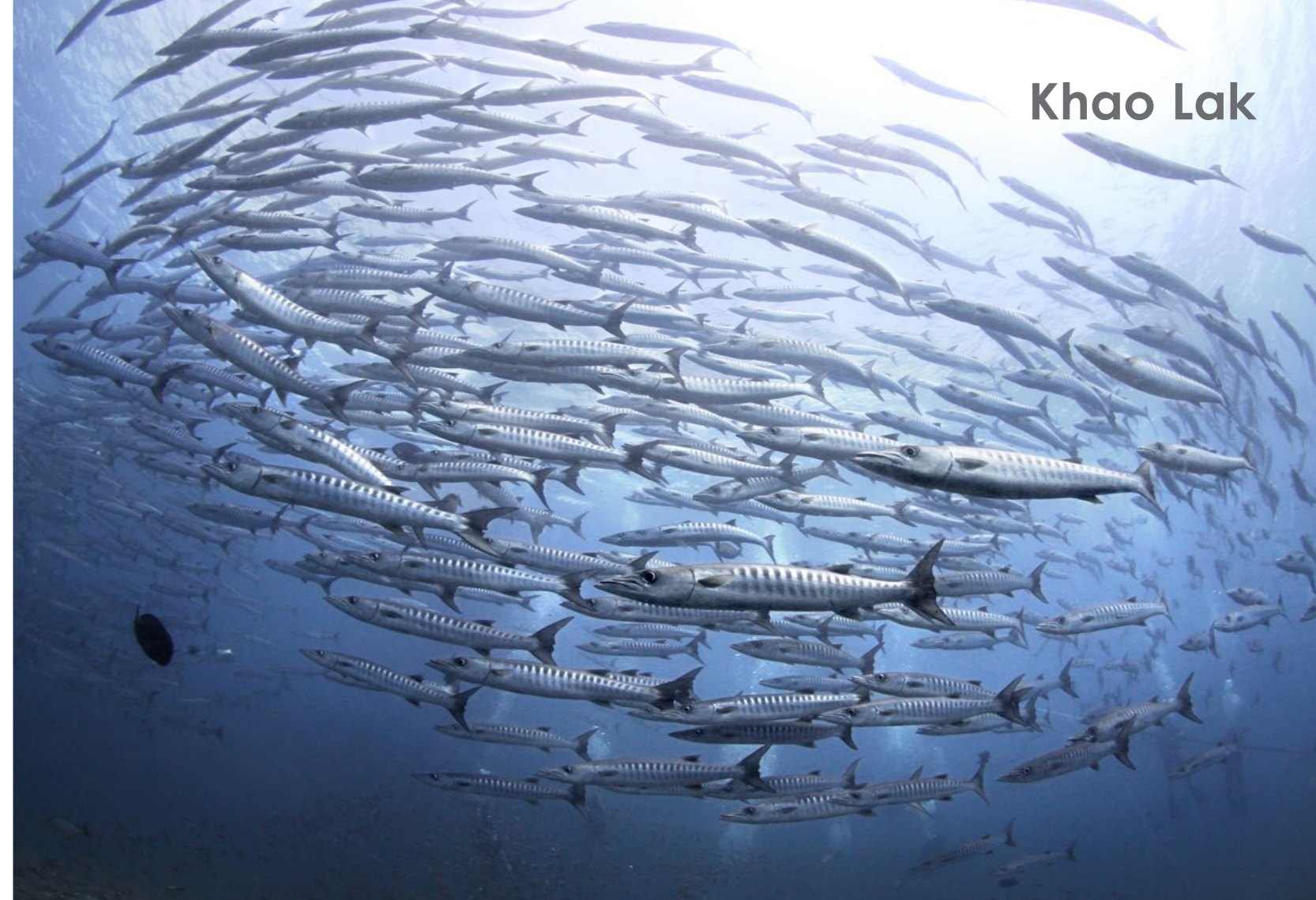
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Khao Lak



Tornado of blacktail barracuda, Koh Tachai Dome, Surin National Park; Reef cuttlefish (left) on Koh Bon Reef, Similan Islands

this particular species before, and in a moment, I had forgotten all about my trembling arms.

Harlequin shrimp seem to glow underwater as if they are constantly backlit by some hidden light source radiating inside their tiny little bodies. We watched them feeding for several

The viz gets sketchy in that tidal wave of freezing green water, but somehow Kate managed to find the right spot and we were soon watching two striking harlequin shrimp feeding on the broken leg of a blue starfish. I had never seen

minutes before Kate wrapped her arms around herself and shivered—Bbbrrrrrr!

I nodded and we slowly finned upwards into warmer water, greeted by a cautious and hesitant cuttlefish. He flashed a multitude of

changing color patterns, extending his middle two tentacles at me. "You see this?" he seemed to say, "This gesture means the same below water as it does on the surface, big guy. So why don't you go back where you came from and leave me alone."

I wasn't too offended, I was intruding after all, and a quick look at my computer told me that my air was—shocker—running low anyway. So, we gave the guarded cephalopod an apologetic wave and headed up to our safety stop.

### The Dome of Awesomeness

The single greatest day of diving in my life was spent at the island of Koh Tachai. Kate and I met on the top deck early to share a cup of





Great manta ray (left) off Koh Tachai Dome, Surin National Park; Koh Bon Island (right) off the West Ridge, is a famous spot for diving with mantas



The group was buzzing as we slipped into our gear. A quick check among the guests revealed that most all of us had yet to see a manta in the wild and the prospect had each and every one of us nearly shaking with anticipation.

We weren't three meters down the mooring line when a massive school of barracuda swam by us in a lazy, twisting cyclone. They were followed by a group of batfish and a leery pack of trevally.

The dive site came more into focus as we dropped and I could see a giant granite dome at the center of the site surrounded by coral heads and rocky outcroppings scattered along the sea bed. We leveled off at around 20 meters and were greeted by a large green moray hissing at a banded sea snake who was hunting too close the grumpy eel's den.

Thousands of fusiliers swarmed the site and I was astounded at the amount of life making this island reef their home. There was so much activity and so many species to see my attention was being pulled in a hundred different directions at once. I turned to Kate and gave her a large "Are you kidding me?!" smile. She nodded furiously in agreement.

A curious hawksbill turtle glided by and we followed it for a few meters to a giant purple sea fan. It was here that Kate stopped for a photograph and my lack of attention span began to get the best of me. So far, this dive site had been amazing and the thought of missing anything was almost too much for me. Then the giant manta

ray passed overhead and nothing else seemed to matter.

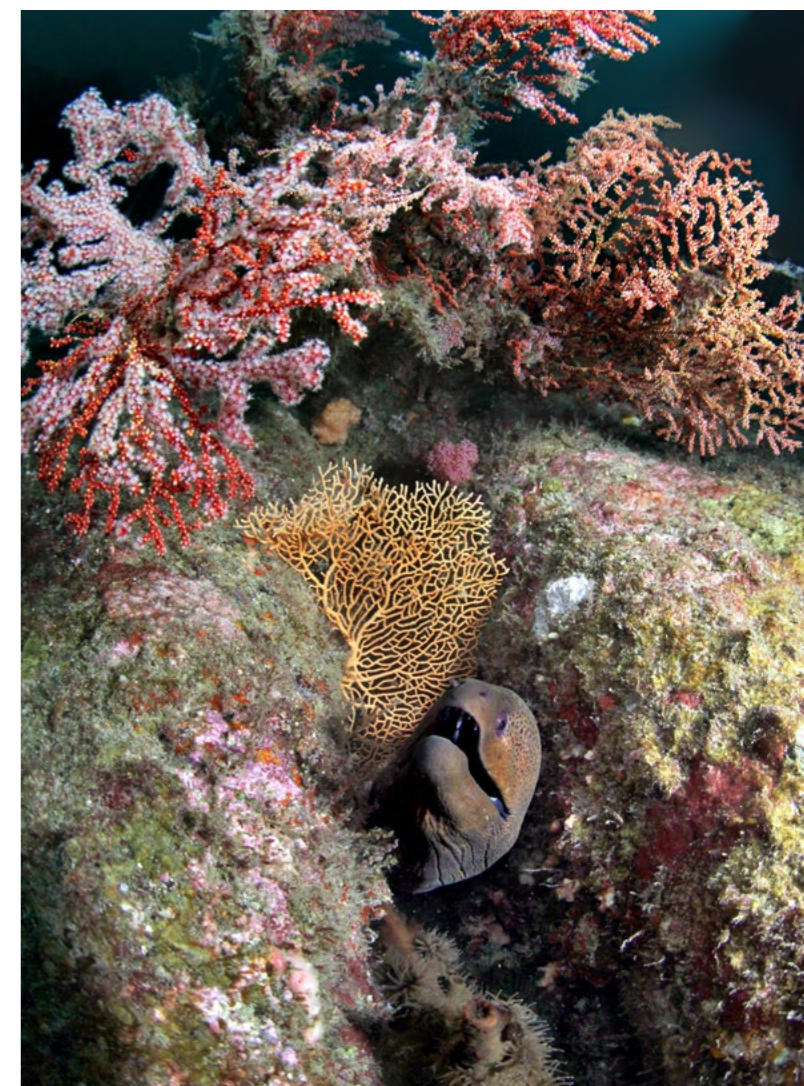
It was easily 15 feet from tip to tip, as big and alien as a flying saucer. The massive underbelly flashed gray and white while long, delicate gills rippled from its own wake. I was instantly mesmerized and my regulator almost fell out of my mouth, but somehow I managed to give Kate three soft taps on the shoulder.

Kate let out a shriek of surprise and shot off to get along side it, sea fan and buddy forgotten in her excitement. I generally don't have too much trouble keeping up with her but this was different; she was gone in an instant and I was swimming as hard as I could just to keep her fins and the shadow of the giant ray in my sights. Thankfully, after only a minute, Kate came to a stop and the manta turned on its side, wings displayed in a vast, far reaching triangle, and swooped back towards us.

By now the whole group had seen it and they swiftly gathered in a loose semi circle to marvel at its elegance. Our guides had their hands held out, asking us to stay put lest we spook the gentle giant and chase it away. As it

tea and watch the sunrise before joining our friends for a light breakfast and morning briefing. The currents could be fast here, we were told, and as such, lots of nutrients swirl around this dive site, attracting all kinds of life, including

manta rays. We were told that the last few groups had not seen any of the giant rays, and they might be gone for the year, but if we did have a chance at spotting them, this was going to be the place.



Giant moray eel and corals, Koh Tachai Dome





banked around us a second time, the manta gracefully fluttered its enormous wings and passed within touching distance of Kate and me.

The manta danced around us, swimming in wide dignified circles for the next few minutes while our wide-eyed group watched in delight. When my gauge reached 200 psi I knew I could wait no longer—I had to get to 15 feet or face the consequences. As I sat at my safety stop, holding onto the mooring line, I watched in envy as Kate joined the few

of our group who still had plenty of air.

At the surface I saw the captain on the upper deck, smiling and holding out his arms like an airplane. “Manta!” he laughed. “Manta, manta, manta-aaaaa!”

### Take two

For the next hour and a half, we eyed our dive computers like school kids waiting for the summer bell to ring. Everyone in our group was itching to get back in the water. Another boat in the area had

spotted the manta again and the surface interval couldn't end fast enough.

As soon as the first computer squawked, we stepped off stern and sank down along the mooring line, and again, I was shocked at the multitudes of life. Thousands of Randall's fusiliers darted around the smooth granite boulders chasing swarms of powder blue surgeonfish in a dizzying game of tag among the corals.

We heard a frantic rattle from a guide's noisemaker and turned to see

the manta swooping in for another look, this time followed by a second giant ray, slightly smaller but every bit as breathtaking.

There is something ethereal about manta rays that pull you towards them, some inexplicable quality that cannot be defined. Perhaps it's their delightful gentleness or their prodigious size that does it; perhaps it's the sheer extraterrestrial quality of them. But whatever it is, they possess a sort of magnetic force that keeps your fascination piqued and

### THAILAND TRAVEL TIPS

Thailand is a wonderful country, but the East is much different from the West, and if you're from the United States, Canada or Europe, you may want to keep the following in mind before you go:

**Say no to plastic!** – Most Asian countries love plastic, and Thailand is no exception. Anything you buy—a pack of gum, a candy bar, a single bottle of water, anything—will most likely be handed to you in a plastic bag. Please tell the person behind the counter you do not need it. The roadsides, beaches and oceans have enough plastic polluting them already; try your best not to add to it.

**Tipping** – Tipping your dive guide or an ex-pat waiter or waitress is totally acceptable in Thailand. However, if you stop by a roadside food cart (and I highly recommend you do, some of the best food to be found is from these local carts) tipping can be offensive. Local Thai people believe in helping others for the joy of it and handing them a couple bills for their service can be confusing and slightly distasteful for them. If you unsure what the protocol is in a specific establishment, don't tip and you will be safe.

**Bring hand sanitizer** – Sanitation rules in Thailand are not the same as you may be used to. Many public bathrooms do not have sinks and a few restaurants won't either. It's not something to worry about, just bring a couple travel-sized bottles of hand sanitizer for you and the kids and you'll be fine.

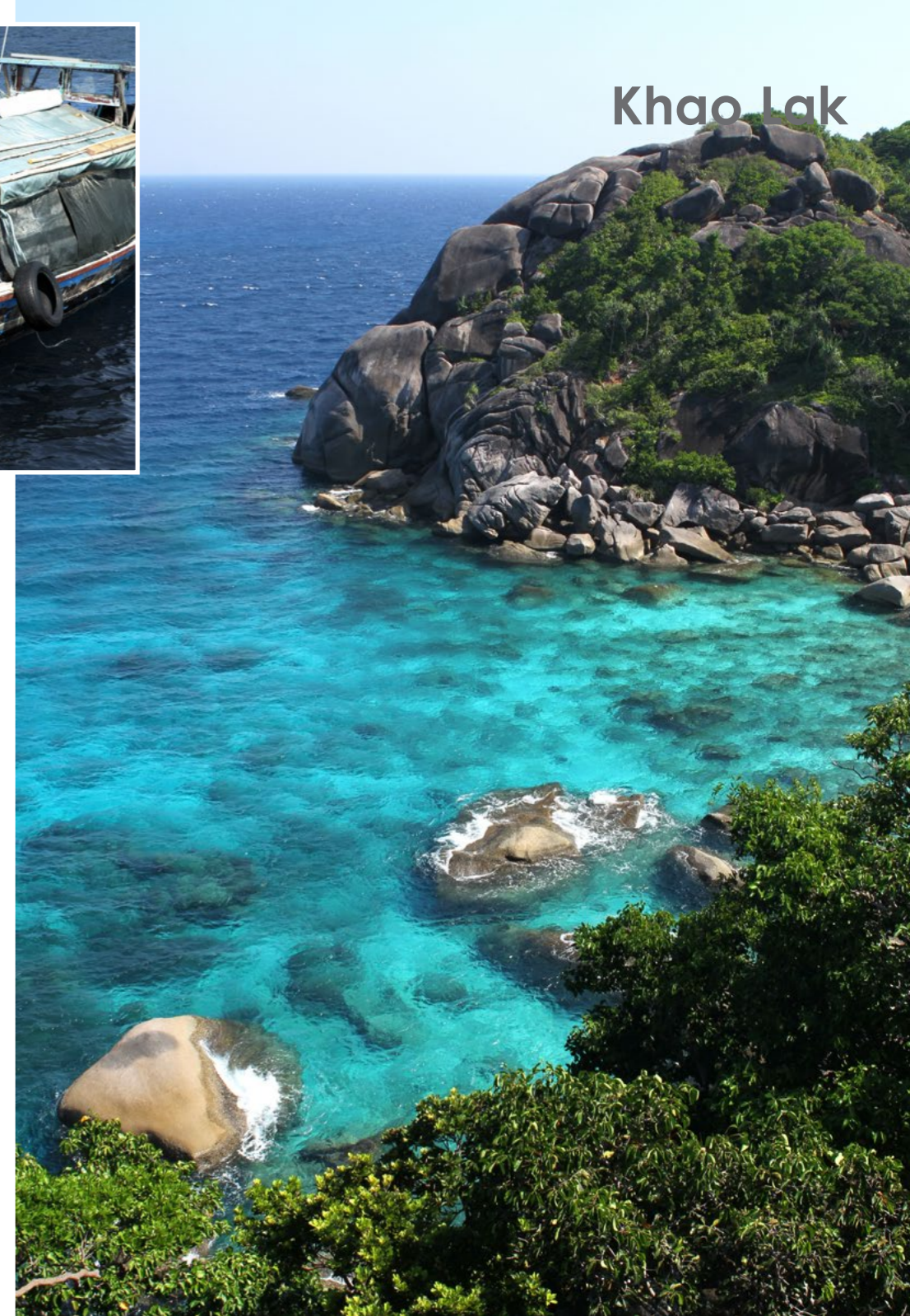
**Bring toilet paper!** – I don't think this needs too much explanation; just please believe me and remember to put a few extra rolls in your suitcase. Make sure you keep some with you wherever you go.

**Bring an anti-diarrheal medication** – Again, this is probably self-explanatory and possibly self-evident, but Western stomachs are not always well adapted for Eastern cuisine and their preparations. □





PREVIOUS PAGE: View from bow of Liquid liveaboard. THIS PAGE: Liveaboards in the morning light just off Koh Bon Island, Similan Island National Park; The clear turquoise waters of Island Eight, Similan Islands (right); Local boat villager (above) and swing on Koh Tachai Beach (bottom left) in Surin National Park



we never seemed to tire of it.

They circled us for the next hour, swimming in great sweeping double helix patterns. Every diver in our group remained almost motionless, watching with awe as the slight current swept us around the granite monolith at the center of Koh Tachai. My tank lasted 80 minutes, although I had to suck my tank dry to do it, and for the first time Kate and I ended our dive simultaneously.

I know, as a “responsible diver” I’m not supposed to tell you that. I’m supposed to tell you that at 750 psi I slowly headed up towards the surface for a safety stop, but that isn’t what happened at all. I was completely enthralled by what I was seeing and the thought of getting out of the water any earlier than I absolutely had to was unthinkable.

By the time we surfaced, the needle of my air gauge was deep into the red (almost touching the pin, in fact) and as we passed our fins to the boat boy, he looked at it reproachfully, shaking his head. “Every time with the mantas,” he said under his breath. “Every time.”

### Farewell

I knew I was going to enjoy the liveaboard experience; that was plainly obvious. I mean, seriously, what could be more satisfying than being on a beautiful boat (and Liquid’s boat is beautiful) and diving four or five times a day in pristine waters? What I wasn’t prepared for is just how much I would love it. I am not exaggerating when I tell you that spending a dive holiday on a liveaboard is just about the most insanely fan-

tastic thing anyone could do.

Guests are pampered from the moment they wake up to the moment their head hits the pillow. All the diving you can stand, all the tasty food you could eat, all the sunshine and beauty your body can absorb, combined with the absolute absence of everyday distractions. Every minute you spend out at sea and exploring the underwater environment acts as a soothing salve to the countless scrapes and bruises that day-to-day living inflicts upon you.

When you leave, you’ll feel both exhausted and invigorated at the same time and, like any goodbye, stepping off that ship won’t be easy. It will call to you again and again, when you’re at your desk, when you’re sitting in traffic, when you’re sleeping and dreaming your heavenly scuba

dreams, because liveaboards get in your blood like some strange addictive chemical—and once you’re hooked, you’re hooked.

So, if you’re planning on treating yourself to a diving vacation in the near future—and you should be planning one, you work hard after all and you deserve it—let me highly recommend several blissful and relaxing days diving

from a liveaboard. I promise you won’t regret it. □

*Travel writer Kelly LaClaire and underwater photographer Kate Clark are cousins based in Portland, Oregon. They travel as a team because Kelly is afraid of spiders and needs Kate to kill them for him if one gets into his hotel room.*



**LIVEBOARD TIPS**

If you have never been on a live-aboard before, here is a short list of helpful hints to consider:

**Don't dive if you don't want to** – This is the first rule of liveaboard trips. Diving is tiring and can wear you out. Diving four or five times a day can be downright exhausting and it is totally alright if you need to skip a dive or two, especially on the last couple days of the trip. You are on vacation after all, so if don't feel like diving and you would rather sit on the sun deck and read, by all means do so. No one will think less of you.

**BYOC** – That stands for Bring Your Own Coffee. In many Asian countries (and some other countries as well) instant coffee is all you will find. Therefore, if you like a nice quality cup of coffee in the morning, then remember to bring a couple pounds of your own favorite grind with you. Also, you may have to bring a small press or pour-over cup as some live-

aboards won't have actually coffee pots on hand. Ask your operator.

**Take care of your ears** – Diving 20 or 30 times in the span of four or five days is almost guaranteed to give you an ear infection if you're not very careful. To avoid this, ask your doctor about a prescription of Otic Domeboro Solution. It is a tad costly, but well worth it—having to stop diving for a day or two can be a real downer! There are over-the-counter solutions as well but the above has been proven to be the most effective.

**Take electrolytes** – Electrolyte packets can be purchased in almost any drugstore and are made to dissolve in a glass of water. You will be near the Equator and Thailand is both hot and humid, meaning you will be sweating and losing a lot of water and salt. Taking one or two packets a day with plenty of water will help keep your energy up and may assist in keeping your intestines happy.

**Dietary needs** – Although the boat will have plenty of amazing food and drinks, it may not have specific foods you may need or want. Usually, liveaboard operators are happy to store specific drinks or special foods for you if they can. So if you are vegan or vegetarian or diabetic, just ask the operator before you book your trip and they will do their best to accommodate you.

**Bring a dive net** – This isn't a must, but I would ask you to consider it. Small mesh bags can be purchased for very little money (or the boat may have their own) that can be attached to your BCD and used to store trash while you are diving. Unfortunately, on nearly every dive you take, a piece of discarded plastic or trash will be found somewhere around the dive site. Taking a mesh bag will allow you to pick up what you find and bring it back topside for proper disposal. The oceans need good stewards and divers should strive to be those people. □

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The 3D anatomical design, with pre-bent arms and legs with stretch panels and gender specific construction ensures a comfortable fit and a relaxing body position in the water. 3D-moulded real rubber kneepads are perfect for the diving instructor who spends a lot of time on his/her knees in the water while teaching.

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The W4 also features double computer strap anchors with anti slip, comfort front neck zipper, inner plush lining, seat and shoulder antislip reinforcement.



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# fact file



## Khao Lak, Thailand



SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, WWW.SSSNETWORK.COM

**History** In the mid-14th century, a unified Thai kingdom was established. It was known as Siam until 1939. Out of all the Southeast Asian countries, Thailand is the only one that has never been taken over by a European nation. In 1932, a peaceful revolution led to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. Thailand was allied with Japan during World War II. But in 1954, it became a U.S. treaty ally. Thailand sent troops to Korea and fought alongside Americans in Vietnam. In 2006, a military coup resulted in the overthrow of Prime Minister Thaksin Ch-

innawat. Since then, turmoil in the government between pro- and anti-Thaksin parties has wreaked havoc in the governing of the country, which was further tested by historic flooding in 2011. In addition, thousands of people were killed and wounded in separatist uprisings in the southern ethnic Malay-Muslim provinces in 2004. These challenges have hampered the plans of constitutional reform of the current government led by the Puea Thai party. Government: constitutional monarchy. Capital: Bangkok

**Geography** Thailand is located in Southeastern Asia. It borders the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand, southeast of Myanmar. Thailand is in control of the only land route from Asia to Malaysia and Singapore. Terrain consists of a central plain, the Khorat Plateau in the east and mountainous areas. Coastline: 3,219km. Lowest point: Gulf of Thailand at 0m. Highest point: Doi Inthanon at 2,576m.

**Climate** Thailand is tropical with a warm, rainy, cloudy southwest monsoon from mid-May to September and a dry, cool north-

east monsoon from November to mid-March. The southern isthmus is always hot and humid. Water temperature is 28-30°C. Natural hazards include droughts and subsidence of land in the Bangkok area due to depletion of the water table.

**Environment** Thailand suffers from air pollution due to vehicle emissions, water pollution due to organic and factory wastes, deforestation and soil erosion, as well as illegal hunting, which is threatening wildlife populations.

**Economy** Thailand has a well-developed infrastructure and an economy of free-enterprise, with pro-investment policies and strong export industries. It has enjoyed solid growth since 2000 after recovering from the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98. Thai exports, which consist primarily of machinery and electronic components,

RIGHT: Global map with location of Khao Lak  
BELOW: Location of Khao Lak on Thailand map



agricultural commodities and jewelry, make up half the GDP. However, the country felt the effects of the global financial crisis of 2008-09, which severely cut Thailand's exports. Since then, the economy has contracted and expanded, until the historic flooding of Bangkok in 2011 crippled the industrial and manufacturing sector. However, recovery is expected with modest growth in 2012.

**Population** 67,091,089 (July 2012 est.) Ethnic groups: Thai 75%, Chinese 14%, other groups 11%. Religions: Buddhist (official) 94.6%, Muslim 4.6%, Christian 0.7%, other religions 0.1% (2000 census). Living with HIV/AIDS: 530,000 (2009 est.) Internet users: 17.483 million (2009)

**Currency** Thai Baht (THB). Credit cards are widely accepted in hotels and dive centres but incur a 3% charge. Exchange rates: 1USD=31.90THB; 1EUR=42.49THB; 1GBP=53.02THB; 1AUD=29.70THB; 1SGD=25.58THB

**Language** Thai, English (secondary language for upper class), ethnic and regional dialects

**Visa** Passports must be valid for at least six months upon entry. A 30-day visa exemption will be issued upon arrival for holders of Australian, U.S., European and New Zealand passports.

**Health** There is a high degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea; vectorborne diseases such as dengue fever, Japanese encephalitis, and malaria; animal contact disease such as rabies; water contact disease such as leptospirosis. H5N1 avian influenza has occurred in this country but poses a small risk to tourists, those who have close contact with birds (2009)

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### Websites

Tourism Authority Thailand  
[www.tourismthailand.org](http://www.tourismthailand.org)



Grasshopper snacks for sale at Bang Niang Night Market



Diver with bluespotted stingray, Boonsung wreck