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Ko Mak : A budding tourist attraction off Trat

Further up Ko Chang island is a palm haven that is just beginning to wake up to tourism

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If coconut trees had eyes and ears, it would be difficult to hide no matter where you happen to be on Ko Mak island further up the more famous Ko Chang off Trat province.

Almost as flat as the neighbouring island of Ko Kradad, Ko Mak has no imposing landmarks. Its name could mislead you into believing that it's has something to do with betel nut because that is what the word "Mak" means in Thai, but more precisely "Mak" is a prefix which according to old Thai usage is used to describe various fruits such as in Mak Phrao, where "Phrao" stands for coconut. The island derives its name from the coconut fruit.

Island resident Somsak Sutthitanakul (www.kohmak.com), says Chao Sua Seng first settled the island during the reign of King Rama V. He held the post of Palad Jeen or an officer in charge of Chinese affairs and pioneered coconut planting on Ko Mak. Later, he sold his coconut plantations to Luang Prompakdi or Plian Taveteekul, who also held the post of Palad Jeen. The latter hailed from Ban Koh Po in Prachankiriket province, now Ko Kong _ part of Cambodia.

After his death, Luang Prompakdi's children inherited the property and divided up all uncultivated land among their children and grandchildren. Eventually, all land was cultivated _ with either coconut or rubber. Today, most of Ko Mak is owned by four or five families, all descendants of Luang Prompakdi.

Coconut groves sprawl from coast to coast on this island with an area of 16 square kilometres and countless number of coconut trees.

"It's a common saying here that if the coconut fruit falls from the tree, the grove owner makes more money," quipped a resident of the island. Today however, the once flourishing coconut plantations are quietly giving way to tourism. It seems Ko Mak has picked a leaf from its bigger and more famous neighbour, Ko Chang, which is bustling with tourist activity.



Suan Yai beach has clear shallow water, ideal for swimming.



When the bungalows are fully booked, the tent is the only alternative.



Coconut trees outnumber everything else on the island and provide a restful setting for a holiday.



Monkey Island Resort.

Altogether, there are about 16 bungalows on Ko Mak and its neighbouring islands. Piyawan, who runs a bungalow on her family plot on Suan Yai (Big Garden) beach was educated in Bangkok but chose to return to her roots to cash in on its tourism potential.

Suan Yai's forte is its long crescent beach, the most appealing on the island, and a perfect spot to watch sunset because it faces the west. Next to her property is Ko Mak Resort, built earlier and sprawls southward to Fantasea Resort. Further up is Ko Mak Cococape Resort.

Piyawan said the plot next to hers in the north was owned by her aunt who still cultivates rubber and coconut.

From Suan Yai a 10-minute boat ride can deliver visitors to the smaller but privately-owned island Ko Kham. It has a bungalow. If you are not a guest of the island's owner you are charged a landing fee, 60 baht, which can be redeemed for a soft drink.

It seems Ko Mak has been spared so far because of its more famous and illustrious neighbours _ Ko Chang and Ko Kut _ both established destinations on the international tourist calendar, which is why I made it a point to look it up. Besides, the island recently celebrated its centenary year.

I had not realised that Bangkok-Ko Mak would take me a whole day's travel. Some people can traverse the globe in the same amount of time. I was just a few minutes late for the 7:00 a.m. bus bound for Trat so I had to wait for the next one which according the schedule would deliver me in Trat at 1:00 p.m. It's already time and I was still no way near Trat: two stops in Chanthaburi and Khloong district had delayed the bus. I was feeling restlessness since the only boat bound for Ko Mak was supposed to leave Laem Ngob pier at 3:00 p.m. There would be no second chance. And after reaching Trat I had to take a local transport and travel another 17 kilometres to get to the pier.

The bus delivered me in Trat at 2:00 p.m. and I rushed to the pier just in time to catch the boat. Far from a big ferry-type vessel like the one to Ko Chang, my craft was a small converted fishing boat which could carry about 30 passengers.

If you look at the map of Trat islands, Ko Mak is a small speck just around the corner. The boat plied southeast past Ko Chang before making a turn. Putrid brown water gradually changed to blue as it pulled past Ko Chang. I found time to open my lunch box and help myself to a quick meal. A score of Western teens bared themselves on the rooftop in the scorching sun. Perhaps they were trying to forget the winter frigid back home. Local passengers reacted the other way _ moving behind a sun protective mat that hung from one side of the vessel.



A 62-year-old house at Ao Nid pier. It belongs to a descendant of the family that once owned the island.



Ngob, a hat made from natural material worn by local farmers, adorns a reddish brown wall of a bungalow on Ko Mak.



A spectacular corner on the only hill on the island, Ko Mak Cococape Resort.

Travellers sat or laid back in cheap leaning plastic chairs but woke up in time to see the sun set behind an island which we're told was Ko Mak. The boat journey was long enough to prompt me into pondering about Ko Chang's yesteryear. The boat made a turn around Ko Mak's southeastern tip and anchored at Ao Nid pier. We disembarked.

Staff from the island's various resorts and bungalows were waiting to collect their guests. It took me a few minutes to spot and identify my minder. Even though the island is much smaller than Ko Chang, travellers are advised not to go looking for accommodation on their own, particularly after dusk.

Since I was the only person booked at Suchanaree Bungalow that day, I was quickly whisked out of the pier on a beaten motorbike and ridden over a dirt road through a labyrinth of coconut groves, while other tourists were hauled in a pickup truck driven in another direction.

My bungalow was small and peaceful. It's built with wood on stilts surrounded by coconut trees. The room was simple with a large mattress and mosquito net. There was one luxury _ an electric fan strapped to the wall. Next to the bedroom was the shower room.

"A lot more needs to be done," said the young bungalow owner. "Ten more bungalows will be added next year and the roofing, using dried leaves, will be introduced."

On the map, Ko Mak appears as a rectangular island with Suan Yai beach on its northwest. To the south is Ao Khao where most resorts and bungalows are located. There are no sandy beaches on the northern rim.

A tall cassia tree burst into yellow near Ao Nid pier. Nearby was a restaurant bearing similar name and next to it an old wooden building, monument to Ko Mak's past. Its owners have lived there for four generations and there are plans to turn it into a museum.

"It's 62 years old," said a young restaurant manager. I saw collectibles placed in a glass cabinet inside the house as he led me upstairs. Rooms are still available for tourist wanting to spend a night there.

Not far from Ao Nid pier will soon rise the island's biggest property, the Panorama Resort. It will comprise 350 rooms and cottages. It's huge compared to the 16 other bungalows on the island and nearby.

The sun has already slipped behind Suan Yai beach. A group of snorkellers are returning from a day-long outing. A boat will soon arrive at Ao Nid pier with a load of travellers eager to explore coconut island.



Suchanaree Resort.



Kohmak Resort.



Koh Mak Cococape Resort.



Baan Ko Mak.

Travel tips

Ko Mak offers a peaceful holiday escape. It is 60 kilometres from Trat and 40 kilometres off Laem Ngob pier. Trat is 315 kilometres from Bangkok. From Bangkok, travellers can fly to Trat on Bangkok Airways (02-265-5555, www.bangkokair.com) either on the 8:30 a.m. or 4:00 p.m. flight but if you take the latter you will miss the connecting ferry to Ko Mak. Two companies operate bus service to Trat from Ekamai Bus Terminal. To catch the 3:00 p.m. boat from Laem Ngob pier, travellers are advised to take the 7:00 a.m. bus that will deliver them in Trat around noon. The next bus leaves at 8:30 a.m. and arrives in Trat at 2:00 p.m. which means you are left with just an hour to get to the pier. The boat ride to Ko Mak takes three hours and costs 210 baht per person. And the boat returns to Laem Ngob pier at 8:30 a.m. the next day. Ko Kud Paradise (01-444-9259, 039-594-646) operates speed boat service from Laem Ngob pier to Ko Kud via Ko Mak every Friday and Saturday. The boat leaves the pier at 9:00 a.m. It takes one hour and forty-five minutes to Ko Mak. Travellers are advised to take at least four days off so that they can spend three nights on the island.

Suan Yai beach:

Suchanaree Resort

Tel: 01-810-7300, 039-532-351

Rates: 600 baht a night

It has five bungalows all equipped with fan. The resort is set amid coconut trees and offers a spectacular view of the sunset. The beach is perfect for swimming.

Kohmak Resort

Tel: 02-319-6714, www.kohmakresort.com

Rates: 400-2,500 baht

The first resort on the island, Kohmak Resort sprawls almost half of Suan Yai beach with a range of bungalows and villas, fan and air-conditioned rooms.

Fantasia Resort

Tel: 02-319-6714, 039-501-013, 039-522-134, www.kohmak.com

Rates: 100-600 baht

Koh Mak Cococape Resort

Tel: 02-711-2058, 711-3621 to 2, www.kohmakcococape.com

Rates: 500-4,500 baht.

Rooms perched on the hill have an attractive view of the Suan Yai beach.

Ao Khao Beach:

Monkey Island Resort

Tel: 01-901-3287, 09-926-8355

Rates: 700 baht for a room with shared bathroom, 1,700 baht for room with fan and 2,800 baht for air-conditioned room. A trendy resort, its 29 bamboo villas are built in three different designs. The Gorilla Hut is a family house with air-conditioning, Chimpanzee Hut is a fan house with roofless shower and balcony. The Baboon Hut is equipped with fan and shared shower. Other facilities include Monkey Shock Restaurant and Oran Utan Bar.

Baan Koh Mak

Tel: 09-895-7592, 01-803-9311, www.baan-koh-mak.com

Rates: 700 baht at normal time and 950 baht during holiday time.

There are 18 villas with fan and a restaurant located next to Monkey Island Resort.

Ko Mak Ao Kao Resort

Tel: 039-501-001,

www.komak-divers.com

Rates: 150-850 baht

T.K. Hut Resort

Tel: 039-521-848, 06-111-4378,

www.tk-hut.com

Rates: 150-650 baht

Lazy Day and Sunset have Robinson Crusoe-style accommodation with minimal facility. Each has a restaurant.

- Most resorts offer bicycle for rent. The dirt track provides for fascinating ride. Ko Mak Resort and others, such as T.K. Hut Resort, Cococape Resort have kayak for rent.