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DISCOVER THAILAND**Castaway island**

Thailand's second largest island after Phuket, Ko Chang's pristine natural beauty is beginning to attract foreign travellers in ever increasing numbers

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Exotic and fresh, Ko Chang island off Trat province is an emerging holiday destination. It is now on the itinerary of most intrepid European travellers to Southeast Asia. What lures them is a sense of being castaway on a remote island with thick jungle cover that until not long ago few people dared to penetrate. And after spending a week on the island they can move on to Cambodia overland or by boat.



Day-long boat tours allow travellers to enjoy snorkelling and swimming off Ko Chang's several islands.

Although Thai tourists seeking peace of mind have long treated Ko Chang as a castaway island, it's only two years ago that tourism took off in a big way there now that the question of accessibility is no longer a factor since it's linked to the mainland by regular ferry service.



Ko Wai promises solitude and stunning beauty of a tropical island.

The name Ko Chang, or Elephant Island, derives from its sheer size _ 30 kilometres long and 14 kilometres wide _ the second largest in Thailand after Phuket. It's situated eight kilometres off Laem Ngob district in Trat. The Robinson Crusoe-style aura that initially surrounded it has now taken a more touristic overtone helped in part by the building of a metalled road around the island to facilitate travel and exploration.



Nothing pornographic here ... just a sign posted on a coconut tree advertising a bar.

Because the island is huge, visitors arriving there first time can expect a hard time deciding which way to proceed. To the west of the island are the beaches Khlong Son, White Sand, Khlong Phrao, Bai Lan and Lonely.

Between Khlong Phrao and Bai Lan Bay is Kai Bae, a peaceful white sandy strip that still retains much of Ko Chang's original charm, while the White Sand beach is full of bungalows, luxury resorts and tourist shops. The resorts offer basic amenities combining peace and comfort for the visiting tourist.



Off Ko Chang lie several islets that can be visited on a day trip.

The sky was overcast this mid-February morning. Converted fishing vessels moored at Bangbao village on the southern tip of Ko Chang. Each had a sign pointing to where they would be heading. Then it started raining, effectively ending any hopes of setting out to sea. I had travelled six hours from Bangkok to be here and the heavens weren't willing.

"I'm sorry. It's better if we wait until tomorrow," suggested Ming, the boat tour salesman.

With that my mood sunk further. I had rushed there from White Sand beach early that morning not even caring to stop for breakfast in order to be there in time for the boat's departure. I repaired to Blue cafe restaurant to seek shelter from the rain and ordered food.

Shortly afterward a band of tourists arrived hoping, like me, the rain would soon stop and so it did and we were given the good news that the boats would set off soon.

A boat was preparing to leave for Ko Mak. It was packed with beach lovers. Another vessel was full of dive and snorkelling buffs. At about 10:00 a.m., well behind schedule, we departed heading into the silvery grey realm of the sea.

The sky was still cloudy and intimidating but the rain had stopped. The fishing boats handled the strong winds and rough sea well. We were still in Bangbao cove but some of the passengers were already throwing up suffering from sea sickness. Most islands around here are actually hills rising from the sea bed, as is Ko Chang. Shortly afterward, the boat sailed past Ko Khoom and an hour later we made our first stop at a cluster of rocks called Ko Kra.

The treasures under the sea here may not be as beautiful as those around Phuket but they are still worth admiring nonetheless. Most of the marine life we see in aquariums around the country can be found here, although it's a bit of a let down when it comes to live coral. The seabed was full of giant clams. The currents were pretty strong, driving snorkellers off-balance.

By noon we were back on board. Lunch was served as we headed for our second stop, Ko Rang. On the way we passed Ko Mak, visible in the distance.

"Where is Ko Kut? Can we see it from here?," I asked a boatman. "You can't see it today. It's hazy," he replied.

We sailed past Ko Yak, a small cluster of rocks in the direction of the larger Ko Rang, and stopped at Ko Loan for a second round of snorkelling. Ko Loan is an islet on the fringes of Ko Rang.

The conditions underneath were appalling. The seabed was strewn with dead

A beach strewn with rocks on Ko Chang island.



Kai Bae beach still retains much of Ko Chang's original beauty.



The pick-up truck is the most popular mode of transportation on Ko Chang.



Coconut trees overlooking the beach provide the perfect landscaping.

coral and black sea urchins. I made a quick tour and got back on board where I was told that there were more colourful coral reef in another part of Ko Loan. It's getting late. I was hopeful that my luck would hold at our next stop. Later in the afternoon, the sky cleared and it was sunny again.

We were now moving in the direction of Ko Wai. Unlike Ko Rang and Ko Khoom, Ko Wai has a fishing village and a few bungalows. The beach was sandy white lined with coconut trees and the water a clear emerald inviting me for a swim. I spotted a few tourists snorkelling in the shallow water of the cove. A young tourist was fishing by the pier. We got off the boat and wandered around the island. If Ko Chang is a retreat from cities, Ko Wai is an escape from Ko Chang with only basic amenities at your disposal.

"Electricity is available only from 5:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.," said the bungalow owner as I called in for a glass of fruit juice. No juice or shake before 5:00 p.m., I was told. The bungalow, made from wood, had thatched roof. It had no electric fans. You can come here straight from Laem Ngob pier on the Trat mainland.

It was 4:00 p.m. and we were craving for action again. Some went swimming, others snorkelling and still others for a game of beach volleyball. Then we headed back for Bangbao. The breeze was cooler on the return leg. We changed into outfits we had started the day in and enjoyed the ride back.

When the boat reached Bangbao pier the crowd quickly dispersed. Some tourists went shopping before heading off to their bungalows and hotels. Soon all activity at the pier came to a standstill.

Outside pick-up trucks stood waiting ready to take passengers to Kai Bae, White Sand and other beaches.

"You come back here next time and you will see the place has turned into a coffee bar or a restaurant," said Kan, who lives by the pier and works as a salesgirl for boat tour operators.

I headed for Kai Bae which has some lovely bungalows and resorts by the beach.

One of them is KB Bungalow. Kaibae Beach Resort, on the other hand, has a dining pavillion that has thatched roof right by the beach. It has both bungalow and modern resort-style accommodation.

Kai Bae offers a great view of Ko Man Nai, an islet. If you crave adventure Ko Bae Hut organises boat and kayaking tours. You can also rent a kayak for 500 baht/day.

Travel tips

Accommodation on Kai Bae beach

KO CHANG AND NEARBY ISLETS



Kai Bae Hut
KB Bungalow
Kaibae Beach Resort,
Mam Kaibae Beach Resort
Kai Bae Beach Resort
Sea View Resort
Chang Park Resort & Spa
Koh Chang Cliff Beach Resort

Trips to nearby islands

Ruanya Phun Tour (06-152-1733) at Bangbao Village sells boat tickets.

A one-day trip to neighbourhood islands costs 400 baht/person, including snorkelling gears and lunch.

Ko Wai: This island lies off Ko Chang in the southwest. It echoes of Ko Chang of yesteryear. It only has thatched bungalows.

The island has a bungalow resort. There is daily boat service departing Laem Ngob Pier at 3:00 p.m.

How to get there

Buses leave for Trat every day from Mo Chit and Ekamai bus terminals in Bangkok. It

takes almost six hours from Bangkok as buses stop enroute in Chanthaburi and Khloong.

Travellers are advised to leave Bangkok early in the morning in order to reach Ko Chang in the afternoon.

Cherd Chai Tour offers air-conditioned buses. The first bus leaves at 6:00 a.m. If travellers leave after 11:00 a.m., they will reach in Trat in the evening, too late to move on to Ko Chang as the last ferry departs at 7:00 p.m. on weekends.

Please note there are four piers operating boat service to Ko Chang.

Laem Ngob operates fishing vessels that have been converted to ferries for the purpose. Ko Chang Ferry, Ko Chang Centre Point and Ferry Ko Chang are the three main ferry service providers in Trat province that operate next to each another.