

Blessing in disguise

Ko Taen is a complete contrast from its neighbour, Samui, and it's beginning to reap the benefits

Story and photos by Yvonne Bohwongprasert

I couldn't help feeling a sense of deja vu walking through the picturesque fishing village of Ko Taen, a small island just south of Ko Samui.

Once it was home to a prosperous self-governed fishing community with its own school, today it is a tiny reserve attracting nature enthusiasts.

Long-tail boats from Ko Samui's Thongkrut pier take 20 minutes to deliver visitors there. The past three years Ko Taen has become a haven for diving, snorkelling and trekking through evergreen forest and villages, most of which are deserted because half the inhabitants have migrated to work in touristy Ko Samui.

The island has a population of just 30 people, not counting the tourists who easily outnumber them. As there are only three registered resorts on this emerging holiday island, it can only cater to a small groups of visitors.

These resorts also arrange trekking tours around the island. What makes Ko Taen stand out from other up-and-coming island destinations is its ability to offer excellent hiking trails, some of which are easy, while others serious all-day treks through the jungle.

The island may be largely uninhabited, but it has several nature study points maintained by the Ko Taen Conservation Club.

The two major attractions on Ko Taen are Ao Ok, a bay popular among snorkellers for its coral reefs, and Ao Tok that boasts a sandy white beach and large patches of mangrove forest.

Ko Taen boasts of giant clams; boulder corals, sponges and occasionally very large crabs can also be spotted. Some divers have also bumped into colourful nudibranchs or sea slugs.

Dive sites on this island are also a little deeper than the ones around Samui. Dive masters say water currents at some sites can be very strong, while visibility is usually poor. Most dives are done to a depth of about 10-12 metres.

Meesak Diewvanit, the village chief and owner of Taen Village Bungalow said that the island is a perfect alternative to chaotic Samui.



The eastern part of environmental-friendly Ko Taen island has a long beach and the sea next to it is rich in coral reef, while its western coast has patches of mangrove forest.



Ko Taen at sunset is a stunning scene to behold.



Offering stunning view and peaceful ambience, Ko Taen is the place to be if you crave privacy.

According to him, the local legend that dogs can't survive a night on the island because there is a curse on the animals holds no water. He said it has probably to do with high frequency calls emitted by the millions of bats that inhabit the island. The bats can be seen leaving their hideouts at dusk forming long black lines in the sky.

Meesak attributed the island's dwindling population to families, mostly Muslim, moving out in search of better income elsewhere.

He said its tourism potential stems from its pristine beauty and rustic ambience that can't be found on developed islands.

"As a proprietor of a resort my biggest worry is poor infrastructure and no electricity. We have to rely on ourselves," he lamented. "We receive a lot of overseas guests who generate valuable revenue.

Another headache is rising oil prices."

But he is also happy in a kind of way: the island has distinguished itself as an ecotourism paradise and succeeded in pulling in tourists from its more fancied neighbour, Samui.



Lush hills and virgin forest make Ko Taen a great place for trekking as these two women found out.