

Discover Thailand

Connecting with nature

Where else but on Ko Ngai island off Trang province can you communicate with yourself and forge a connection with nature and the local people

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They said for a city life, each individual is like an island, isolated in the seas of crowds and detached from the environment. Ironic, maybe, for when I actually travelled to stay on an island where all the lines of communication were cut off, I felt so connected to people, nature and myself.



Ko Ngai has powdery beaches, two-toned seawater, coconut vegetation, cool breeze and plenty of marine and wildlife.

Among many pristine islands in the Andaman Sea, my destination for a vacation and meeting was Ko Ngai in Trang archipelago. Why the organiser chose this faraway place for a meeting on spirituality, I wonder. Mostly, when thinking about travelling to Trang beaches, famous names like Ko Muk, Ko Kradan, or Ko Libong often come to mind. But after staying on Ko Ngai for four days, the answer became clear. This less frequented island offered a unique sense of tranquility, peace and total relaxation.



Visitors start the morning with deep-breathing exercise.

About 720 kilometres southwest of Bangkok, the overnight train arrived at Trang station in the morning _ just the right time for breakfast. Odour of fresh coffee brew woke my appetite. Off the station were plenty of food shops offering from local to intercontinental delicacies.

After filling my stomach, I was ready to resume my journey to the island. Outside the station were a number of tour operators offering ferry and accommodation services to islands off Krabi and Trang coasts. However, advanced accommodation and transportation is recommended.

I got on the coach of Ko Ngai Fantasy Resort where I would be staying. After some 45 minutes, I arrived at Pak Meng beach pier where I embarked on a ferry heading towards Ko Ngai.

Cruising in the world-famous Krabi seawater was a prelude to relaxation and imagination stimulation. The 30-minute ride on board was not at all dull. I spent time contemplating and discussing with friends what we thought the limestone islands scattered here and there looked alike. One was like shark's fin, some shaped like women's breasts and some like...eh...gigantic rocks. We also cooked up some stories to go with our fantasy.



An alley flanked by coconut tress leading to the beach.

As I approached the destination, the view in front of my eyes was so inviting. The small tropical island was surrounded by seawater in two distinct tones _ navy blue and crystal emerald near the shore. The beige sand glowed in the midday sunlight. Coconut leaves danced gaily against the sea breeze. And once my feet landed on the beach, a soft and warm feeling ran up my spine. A school of tiny fish swam, curiously yet cautiously, around the arriving strangers. Another blessing, there weren't many people on the island.

The only thing that I felt at odd with on the island were plaster images of Pop Eye, Mickey Mouse, seals and crabs, in welcoming gestures at the entrance of Ko Ngai Fantasy Resort. Although I love all these cartoon characters, I did not fancy seeing them on the island. (After receiving several comments from tourists, myself included, they said, they planned to remove them soon).



When tide is low you can swim through Emerald Cave and emerge in a lagoon on the other side.

Our group stayed in a cosy Bali-style bungalow on the hill overlooking the flora and ocean views below. The resort is an extension of the original Thai-style Ko Ngai Resort, the only two luxurious resorts on the island. But given the beautiful atmosphere on the island, other accommodations from moderate to low-priced tents and wooden huts on the beach will do perfectly well too.

To some, vacation may mean fun-packed activities and a series of sightseeing trips but for me, sometimes, it's a time for indulgence in just staying idle. I decided to do things I could not do or experience in the city _ appreciating nature at full steam. So the mobile phone was switched off (in fact, the line was

disconnected), and I was in a room with no television, no radio or walkman.

Hardly an early bird, I dragged myself out of bed to observe the morning sun rising above the horizon, a sight almost impossible to witness among the skyscrapers and smog of Bangkok. On the beach, facing the giant yellow disc while its rays were still soft, I did some slow movement exercises like Yoga and Tai-chi. The breeze was gentle and fresh. The whole experience was so uplifting and calm.

Walking on the far-stretching powdery beach, especially during dawn and dusk, was also a delightful experience. From the resort, I could walk as far as to the very tip of the island.

At night time, instead of watching television, I gazed at stars and moonlight reflecting off the sea. Also, on shore, I spotted some shiny green lights _ fluorescent beach or fireflies playing against the waves. I picked them up on my fingertips and watched the lights until they faded away.



Bali-style resorts on the hill overlooking coconut vegetation and the azure sea.

The island was full of sounds of waves crashing against the shore and the ear-deafening singing of cicadas that were overwhelming. However, there was a kind of sound that I would have rather missed _ karaoke _ a haunting reminder of modern civilisation. While enjoying the sounds of waves and coconut leaves whistling against the winds, there you go, shrieking off-key vocals from other visitors on the island.

I could have spent days lazing out there, but since I was here I also wanted to take the opportunity to explore the famous islands of Had Chao Mai National Park. I settled for some marine and wild adventure. There are a wide range of activities on Ko Ngai including snorkelling, scuba diving, sea canoeing and boat tours to and around neighbouring islands.



Trekkers enjoyed walking amid the vast coconut vegetation leading to the beach.

I donned the fins and snorkelling gears, the aquatic world just a few strokes offshore. The beauty of soft coral reef in the area was astounding for a person who has not seen the wonders of world-class diving destinations like the Similans. First-time snorkellers cried in awe as they saw the nemo (crown fish) in the flesh, sea urchins and butterfly fish.

However, at the very tip of the island accessible only by boat was a natural rock formation that looked like the statue of a standing Khaun Yin Bhodisattava. Here, local fishermen said, was a paradise for scuba divers as the underwater cliff housed an abundance of marine life and multi-coloured coral reef. It's where warm and cold currents meet, they said. According to them, the diving season here ran from November to April and some years even until June.

If snorkelling and diving around Ko Ngai is not enough, then islands in the vicinity offer a splendid experience of the underwater world. Popular destinations are Ko Chuek, Ko Kradan, Ko Muk and Ko Rog.

Ko Chuek (Rope Island) is within sight of Ko Ngai but it takes about 15-20 minutes to get there by long-tailed boat. I was wondering why this seemingly circular rock was called Rope Island, and I found

the answer shortly later as us snorkellers had to hold on to a rope laid over the coral area to prevent us from being swept away by the strong current at that depth.

Ko Kradan, I was told, was home to a rich variety of marine life and beautiful coral and according to locals, although its beauty has faded over the years, it still has plenty to offer visitors. I wonder if the faded beauty had anything to do with the increasing popularity of underwater wedding that the authorities have been promoting in recent years.

Ko Muk, as its name suggests, was once clustered with shells with pearls. But not anymore. Now it's more known and much visited for its famous emerald cave, a limestone tunnel that leads to the small lagoon inside. The reflection of water on the cave wall as well as the colour of seawater there is clear crystal emerald. Apart from its spectacular beauty, what visitors love about this place is perhaps the thrill of swimming into the 80-metre pitched dark cave and to see light again at the end of the tunnel which opens to a breathtaking small lagoon. I liked lying on the beach and stared the azure sky. On the cliff around the lagoon were some macaques and big crabs crawling on the rocks.

Apart from the underwater world, Ko Ngai is also home to wildlife and birds. A tour guide, who has been living on the island for decades, took me and my friends into the wild, crisscrossing the narrow earthen trail shrouded by trees. He stopped occasionally to explain herbs and plants and educating us city people about nature.

“Here is whai (ratan), you know, plants you use to make beautiful basketry.” Then the guide pointed at shrubs with spiked leaves. “These plants cause itching. Just drop the leaves in water and who ever comes in contact with it will experience severe itching,” he said with a smile as if he had just let us on to a secret.

Walking in the woods was also like walking in a music dome. Our guide whistled variously to mimic the sounds of birds on the trees. He pointed to the branches where the melody of chirping of birds was coming from. To my delight, I saw some yellow thingies swooping down the treetops. We were told that there were quite a number of hornbills in the forest too. Sometimes, when we looked up higher beyond the treetops we saw red hawks, their wings spread out gliding majestically against the wind.

Apart from the exhilarating sights and sounds in the woods, we were warned to look out for danger crawling under our feet or creeping on twigs. If bitten by giant black ants, the guide said, it could cause bleeding and skin irritation. And while we were walking down a semi-muddy lane, someone shouted “don't touch that twig”. Upon closer inspection I had to hold my breath _ the wriggling snake camouflaged itself so well that I almost held on to it for support. The guide said it looked like a viper.

After this rush of adrenaline, we finally arrived at Violet Bay, so-called because the beach there is laden with violet-hued pebbles and rocks. Here was the place where most fishermen lived and moored theirboats.

Going back into the woods via another route we came to a simple wooden hut. The sea view in this area was beautiful, but the sand was not as fine as on other beaches. However, the vast plain grass amid the coconut vegetation offered splendid scenery and soothing environment.

It may take three to five days for visitors to cover all the interesting places included in the tour package to Ko Ngai and islands nearby. Some people may find staying there for a longer period of time boring. I did not have the chance to try that out, although I truly wished to stay there longer.

As me and my friends were about to board our boat for the return leg to Trang mainland, we felt as if we were parting our newly found home. Somebody's mobile phone rang, and we were jolted. It shook us back to reality. It had become an unfamiliar sound while we were on Ko Ngai.

After all, there was the home we had to come back to _ one with traffic jam, blaring car horns, constant beeping of cell phones, polluted air and skyscrapers. Anticipating those things, I was already feeling deflated.

Travel tips

How to get there

You can go to Trang by air, train or bus.

By air: Thai International Airways offers daily flights (one and a half hour) from Bangkok to Trang.

By train: Trains leave twice daily from Bangkok for Trang. The express train leaves Hua Lamphong Station at 5:05 p.m. and reaches Trang at 7:35 a.m. the next morning. Rapid train leaves at 18.20 p.m. and arrives in Trang 10.16 a.m.

By bus: By bus it takes about 12 hours to reach Trang. There are daily morning and evening coaches leaving Bangkok 's Southern Terminal at Sai Tai Mai. The first bus leaves Bangkok at 7:00 a.m. and arrive in Trang at 5:00 p.m.; evening coaches leave at 6:30, 7:00, 7:30, and 8:00 p.m. and arrive in Trang starting 6.30 a.m. the next day.

The cost for VIP coach is 750 baht/person, and for the ordinary 38-seat bus 484 baht/person

From Trang take a local transport to the ferry terminal at Pak Meng. The distance is 40 km. The ferry ride takes about 15-30 minutes.

All resorts on the island offer snorkelling and touring packages and transportation.

What to do

There are plenty of activities you can do on Ko Ngai such as snorkelling, canoeing, trekking, diving and touring other islands. Diving lessons are also offered. Resorts offer tour packages that include various activities and transportation.

Vi kan boka alla resor ter på Koh Ngai, titta under "våra Hotell" på hemsidan eller ring/maila oss.

