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News

DISCOVER THAILAND**Escape to island hideaway**

Ignored by most until recently, Ko Moo off Trang coast is finally starting to come to grips with its largely unspoilt tourism potential

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On a clear day Petra island is visible from Ko Moo's western shoreline.



There are only a few resorts on Ko Moo, most of them built only recently.



A local boy shows off lobster he caught from the sea. He was later persuaded by tourists to set it free.



The majority of Ko Moo's population is Muslim and the food distinctly so.

Most people visiting the southern province of Trang head for the islands of Libong, Kradan, Muk, Waen, Ngai and others located along the central and northern coastlines. They usually bypass Ko Moo, or Sukorn Island, on the southern coast just 30 minutes by boat from the mainland. But that has turned out to be a blessing in disguise as Ko Moo, despite its proximity to the shore, has been able to retain most of its natural charms because it was among the last of the islands off Trang to be promoted as a tourist destination.

The overnight train from Bangkok delivered us to Trang city early in the morning. If you need a heavy breakfast to set you up for the rest of the day Trang is the place to be. Its typical dim sum breakfast set consists of dumplings, buns, long fritters and roasted pig, served with Chinese tea or coffee.

But if you want to stay light, Trang's home-grown coffee is the best way to begin the day with. No matter how well one tries to describe the taste of Trang coffee, it's never good enough. The best way to establish its credentials is to try it out yourself.

Coffee craze in Trang is so widespread that you can find the beverage being sold in the uptown bars, gardens and roadside stalls that grace the city. Ask any minibus driver, and he will take you to one where they serve the heavy Trang breakfast as well as the specialty coffee.

We walked across the street from the railway station on the left hand to the office of Trang Island Resort, the newest establishment there, which was supposed to be our abode and springboard for places of interest around the province over the next few days.

Fifty-five kilometres from the city is Samran beach. We saw fishing vessels moored to the piers and headed for Tah Seh pier, which is the closest point to Ko Moo.

Ko Moo or Ko Sukorn translates into English



The white sandy beach of Ko Takiang offers a nice spot to lie down after spending long hours of snorkelling in the sea.



Biking through paddy fields and local communities is a great way to learn about the islanders' way of life.

as Swine Island. Our boat driver and guide, Mr Nirat Thongprad, or Koni to his friends, told us that in the old days the island had a large population of wild boar and that's what gave the island its name.

We asked him if we could still expect to see them there, to which he replied with a smile that only the previous week a boar was spotted crossing the channel. The question was put to him in good faith because we knew that in the predominantly Muslim South the swine is certainly not the most favourite of pets.

It took some time to realise that Mr Nirat was only pulling our legs, although several decades earlier that might well have been case, but certainly not recently. Back then boars were often spotted crossing the channel but were driven to look for other pastures once people started settling on the island.

The island now has a population of some 2,300 farmer-fishermen who also grow rice, rubber and most importantly watermelon.

As expected, we saw no boars on the island but certainly spotted a fair number of water buffaloes roaming the roads. Paved single-lane roads zig-zagged through thick rubber plantations, patches of rice fields and along the beach. Hardly a car was seen as motorcycles and bicycles were the main modes of transportation.

We went sightseeing around the island, some of us on motorbikes, while others more sure of the strength in their legs took mountain bikes. On the way apart from cyclists heading in a direction opposite to us, the only other traffic we encountered was buffaloes, apparently free from duty on the paddy field as the planting season was well past.

We took off early the next day to watch villagers collect latex in rubber plantations that stretched over most of the hilly area. As we stopped to take pictures the villagers took the time to explain us how it was done. Cuts on rubber trees were made between 1-3 a.m. and villagers returned three to four hours later to collect the sap.



Water buffaloes still thrive on Ko Moo, although the wild boar has totally

"Come back and try it out sometimes. You'd like it," Koni intoned.

Well, perhaps next time, and with that we bid goodbye to the villagers.

Next we ventured into rice fields where watermelon where grew side by side.

Patches of golden and green rice fields against the backdrop of soaring coconut trees, light blue sky and azure sea called for several stops and many rolls of film.

Rice farming on the island is mostly for domestic consumption, unlike watermelon which is reputed for its sweetness and has a ready market outside Ko Moo. Too

disappeared from the scene.

bad, it wasn't the season for watermelon so we didn't get the opportunity to sample the fruit.

"Come back in March or April," Koni said invitingly.

Since Ko Moo is only a stone's throw from the mainland, you can travel to the island any time of the year. Contrary to most people's perception, the monsoon season is in fact a good time of the year for a holiday there. The sea is amazingly charming and the water is very still, especially before it's time for high tide.

Koni led us along the western coast where fishermen were busy separating their daily catch and mending fishing net and related equipment. Himself a fisherman, Koni owns some 40 long-tailed boats. We saw one villager separating crabs by their size, his catch that day, as Koni explained to us the fine points of fishing.

"It takes both knowledge and experience to make a decent catch," he said, as he tried to point to us the utility of various fishing devices that were spread out before us.

"You will need different sets of equipment for deep and shallow water fishing, and the same also applies for catching crab and shrimp: you need different types of nets," he added.



As we stood talking, some fishermen were preparing to take their boats out to sea. It was broad daylight.

"I thought fishermen only went out at night?" I asked.

"Not necessarily," replied Koni "You can fish anytime, day or night, depending on what kind of fish you are aiming for. For instance, if it's pla tu (mackerel), you go out at night, or squids for which a lot of lighting is required onboard. The squid is attracted to light."

All of a sudden the prospect of spending a day (or night) playing a fisherman began to look very tempting and Koni encouraged it.

"People around here call me the old man of the sea," said Koni, who is only 36 years old. He moved to Ko Moo 25 years ago. "My father was a teacher but he loved the sea more."

Obviously, they see traces of his father in him _ his untiring talk about the craft of fishing and his natural wit helps keep listeners alert and laughing.

As we went deeper into a more remote part of the island, we spotted several huge nets hanging from twin poles in high vertical angle. Koni sensed our curiosity but didn't say anything until we queried him about the nets. He smiled and paused as if deciding what to say.

"It's for catching water rails, seasonal birds that migrate here around the end of October. But it's illegal to catch them now," he said.

Ah ha! That explained his initial hesitation.

A simple device without any mechanical equipment was installed at the lower end of one pole enabling its operator to pull the net up and down as required.

We didn't see any water rails, only few bats hanging dead in the nets.

What could be a better way to end the day than with a cup of coffee and roti, a kind of Indian bread made from flour and available in a variety of flavours. The coffee shop was a good place to meet local folks. There weren't many as far as we could see, but the one we went to extended extremely friendly service.

"Do you know everybody on the island?" we asked Koni. Couldn't help wondering since almost everyone we passed stopped to greet him. "Of course not," he said embarrassingly.

The islanders live peacefully. There is no real violence or crime to worry about. Once there was a proposal to build a bridge connecting the island to the mainland at Ta Seh pier, but was rejected. "We were afraid that the bridge would facilitate access to strangers and petty criminals," he said.

Sai Yao beach where Trang Island Resort is located is on the western coast, facing Petra, Takiang and Lao Liang islands. Four bungalows have now been built complete with camping sites and a private beaches.

It was late in the evening and the sky was turning into a multitude of colours and lights as the sun, after a long day's work, was preparing for a long due rest. We could see it going down the horizon and into the ocean.

Ko Moo also serves as a springboard to other islands namely Petra, Takiang and Lao Liang. By speed boat, it takes only 18 minutes to reach Lao Liang, formerly concessioned to swallow nest collectors but now turned into a trendy camping site.

Its beautiful cliffs lend extra charms to Lao Liang as an interesting destination, particularly for rock climbers. For snorkelling buffs, the white, yellow and purple hues of soft corals provide an added attraction.

At the nearby Takiang island sits a lighthouse atop a landmark. In the sea around it colonies of green antler-shaped corals make for an impressive sight even at shallow depths.

For scuba divers, the famous Hin Daeng and Hin Muang, the two famous underwater cliffs completely covered with red and purple corals respectively, are only an hour and 15 minutes ride by speedboat.

Alternatively, a day trip to Adang and Rawi islands takes less than two hours by boat from Ko Moo.

The sun was about to set suggesting to me it was time to call it a day. I couldn't wait to get back to the coffee shop and place my usual order _ a glass of iced coffee and a plate of Indian bread coated with sugar.

Travel tips

Trang is 828 kilometres south of Bangkok. Daily bus, train and air services from Bangkok to Trang are available.

For schedule, contact respective transportation agencies: air-conditioned bus tel 02-435-1199, non-air conditioned bus 02-434-5557-8, train 02-223-7010, 02-223-7020 and plane 02-280-0060, 02-628-2000.