

Sailing Thailand's Virgin Islands

A diary of a part-time St. Simons Island resident
Nathan Russo's trip to Southeast Asia

This was my third trip to Thailand and I didn't plan to go sailing. Having just sold my 44 ft Beneteau a few months before, I was having seller's remorse and the itch to go sailing again. Along came an opportunity to sail around the Koh Chang Archipelago. Koh Chang is the second largest island in Thailand in the Gulf of Siam near the Cambodian border. Until five years ago it was almost devoid of all tourism since most of it had been designated as a National Park. Since then the island has been opened to limited development and now on the west side of the island there are over 30 world class resorts on some of the most beautiful palm fringed beaches to be found anywhere in the world.

As if this weren't enough to make the island a desirable spot for sailing, an archipelago to the south of the island enhances the experience even more. I only had three days to see the area but I think one could easily spend 10 days sailing leisurely from island to island and not get bored - that's assuming sailing, beautiful palm fringed quiet anchorages, great seafood, and swimming with tropical fish on beautiful reefs is your idea of fun.

I had met Phil Harper, the owner of Gulf Charters a few years before when I was considering shipping my Beneteau to Thailand. When I called him to ask about availability of a boat he stated that most of the boats had been transferred to a base at the south end of Kho Chang, Salakphet. This location is becoming the sailing center for the island and it is rumored that one of the largest sail charter companies in the world is considering locating a base here. In addition, there are a number of crewed yachts that operate out of this location. Phil said he had a 3-day window open on an Oceanis 32 at the end of February and asked whether I was interested. If so, he thought he might be able to go with us. Since Phil had been sailing these waters for many years, I jumped at that opportunity. Because the archipelago of 52 islands extends south for over 30 miles use of a chase boat for repairs is somewhat limited and charters with limited mechanical abilities might consider taking a Thai crewmember that could make minor repairs if required. He could also be helpful in sailing the boat and had a lot of local navigational experience. The best time for sailing around this area is from December thru March. At anytime of the year, when sailing in this area it is imperative to have a big bimini cover, because at mid day the sun can get very hot.

On To Koh Chang:

Charter groups would probably want to rent a driver and mini van for the trip down to Koh Chang about 250 km southeast of Pattaya. The minivan with driver and ferry fee RT per person based on four people should be about \$100/person. Depending on the charter company/hotel you use the evening prior to your charter, once you get off the ferry they will either pick you up for free or there could be a \$5/person charge to get you to Salak Phet at the south end of the Koh Chang.

The evening I arrived, I stayed at Island View Resort for just 900 baht (\$26/night), which is the location of Gulf Charters yachts. The owner sent an employee by ferry to pick me up and then when we got back to the hotel area, he used a motorbike with baggage sidecar to get our bags down to the docks. This strange contraption was small enough to drive right down onto the dock to the hotel, which sits on concrete stilts right over the water. It is a beautiful location with spectacular sunrises.

At Salak Phet there are currently only two western style facilities to accommodate charters. Because Gulf Charters is located at Island View Resort I stayed there the night before and after the charter. My room was very comfortable, clean and the AC never missed a beat. The on premises restaurant offers excellent western and Thai food. Best of all the cost was just 900 baht per night (\$26), a great deal even for Thailand. If you want something a little more upscale in a traditional Thai bungalow with teak floors and traditional furniture, you might want to stay at Salak Phet Seafood & Resort. It is here that you will find the base for Thida Yachting, a German company that operates

Bangkok to Pattaya

If you're spending all that money to travel halfway around the world, you will want to spend a few days in Bangkok before heading down to Pattaya, which puts you in the right direction for the Koh Chang (Elephant Island). Now you could fly directly to Trat from Bangkok after sightseeing in Bangkok, but I think Pattaya is a place worth seeing. As they say in Thai "lau ta Kuhn" - up to you.

Pattaya is one of the largest resort cities in Thailand. Before the Vietnam war, it was a sleepy fishing village. The American military started it on the road to a resort when it established a support airbase that regularly handled B-52s at U-tapao just 35 km south of Pattaya. Pattaya became the R&R city for the troops supporting the base and for many of the troops in Vietnam. It is true that it still has a reputation for being one

two crewed yachts from this base.

Whether you bareboat charter or opt for a crewed yacht you will need to have the charter company provision for you since there is limited provisioning available at Salak Phet and dragging provisions with you from anywhere in Thailand is really not an option.

Peter the owner of Island View Resort arrived in Thailand over 20 years ago from Germany and he owns a 42ft Swan, he does not charter it out though. He and his Thai wife operate the resort and his wife's Thai cooking is unbelievable, but she's also great cooking up an English/American breakfast. Almost every restaurant you go to in Thailand that offers western breakfasts will usually serve great bacon in the morning.

After a good dinner and a great night's sleep, the next morning I met up with my friend Richard and his Thai girlfriend, Mint, for our 3-day sail through the Koh Chang archipelago, joined by Phil Harper. Our home

It was well into March for us but the winds were still coming out of the NE, so we had to make some last minute adjustments to the itinerary.

Once around Koh Wai we set course for Koh Rang to the west of Koh Mak where Phil said we might find a quiet spot for lunch and excellent snorkeling around a small rock outcropping just off the southwest shore of Koh Rang- he was right. As many years as he has been in the area he had never been to this spot before and it was not in his guide. It was however on the tour boat route because as we got closer we saw several mooring buoys near the rocks and even an underwater net completely encircling the rocks, permanently anchored to the seabed. It prevented boats from getting too close to the rocks that had a huge field of coral surrounding them- in essence protecting the coral field. When we arrived only one tour boat with just a few people was there, but not more than an hour later a big boat

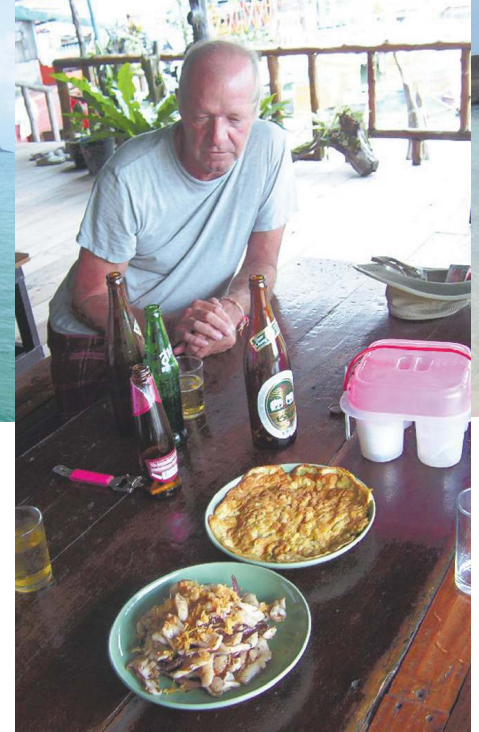
typical southeast island, beautiful white beach, fringed with palm trees as far as the eye could see. Before going ashore for dinner we had to watch the spectacular sun set and have our happy hour. Rum works with sunsets even in Thailand, but a little bit more expensive than what we are used to paying in the Caribbean. Ashore there were two restaurants. One at the north end of the beach and one at the south end; Phil had already been to the one at north end so we decided to eat at the south end restaurant.

The next morning we got up really early, had a quick cup of real Thai coffee (the best) and had the anchor off the bottom by sunrise. Phil's surprise was that we would sail around the south end of the island up the east coast to a fishing harbor called Ao Salat - a real Thai fishing village and no resorts. The purpose of our visit: a real Thai breakfast. Fish and eggs in Thailand are consumed anytime of the day. Breakfast for the four of us at a fisherman's restaurant was

the other harbor. The four of us got into the back of a song tell (2 aisle seat) pick up truck and paid 200 baht (\$2.50) each for one way.

Ao Suan Yai Bay is on the northwest side of Koh Mak and the resorts are a little more manicured, many of them have grass and flower gardens around them and air conditioning. However, the per night rates are also a little more than those at Kao Bay. Cocopace Resort for instance has exquisite bungalows with a/c and a pool to die for starting at \$70/night to \$300/night. They are not right on the beach but have wonderful views. We spent about an hour walking around the bay deciding what would make the best anchorage spots when we came back here again. Before we knew it, we were back in the song tell pick up heading back to Kao Bay and the boat.

It was 5pm by the time we got back to the boat and normally most charters would be putting down anchor for the night. We



for the next few days would be a Beneteau, Oceanis 32, more than big enough for the 4 of us. It had an adequate electronics package including VHF radio, wind instruments and of course GPS. According to Phil and some other bareboat companies I spoke to in Thailand, most of them did not maintain VHF base stations but depended more on mobile phone communication. And it was true; there was almost no area we sailed within the archipelago that we could not reach the base, which Phil called regularly to keep up on the day's events.

Phil had chartered out for us a circular track through the Koh Chang archipelago for the three days. Our plan for the first day was to sail by the beaches of Koh Wai checking out anchorages and then sail southwest to Koh Rang for lunch and snorkeling off a small key on the east side of the island. There are good winds in this area of Thailand from December through March.

Once we had breakfast and our gear and provisions were aboard we headed for Koh Wai just 5 miles from Salak Phet. Sailing by the northern side of the island we could easily see the two or three small bungalow resorts and one or two restaurants that are on the beach on this side of the island. Phil said this north side had some good snorkeling areas which were easily evidenced by the various shades of pastel green and blue water as we sailed along this shore. We even saw Manfred's yacht "Talee" anchored in an exquisite spot over some coral heads about 3 meters down. Phil said this area was a favorite for charters being so close to Koh Chang and having good restaurants ashore, good anchoring conditions most of the year and really nice snorkeling.

Phil told us that in December through February the winds normally come out of the northeast and starting in March, change to the southwest. The time of your arrival in the area determines what anchorages are going to be tenable for lunchtime and evenings.

came with about 30 people. By this time we had already had lunch and snorkeled in the coral field, which was like swimming in a fish bowl.

Winds got lighter in the afternoon, and we missed the anchorage we were heading for on Koh Kood, so decided to head further south on the island to get a good head start in the morning. If you have enough time, Koh Kood itself warrants four to five days on its own. There are no major resorts on the island, and there are so many palm lined, pristine white sand beaches, not to mention well-protected anchorages and even waterfalls to walk to from the beach if you arrive in the right season (December through February). Not much water is running by March. The island is 129 sq kilometers, and the eastern most island of Thailand, just north of the Cambodian border. 10 years earlier Phil said the area was swarming with pirates but with the tourist development of Koh Chang the Thai government had put much more security into this area and the pirates found pickings better some place else. With or without the security and even though all of Phil's yachts have a GPS, this is not the area to be pulling into anchorages at night unless absolutely necessary- there are no navigational aides in the entire Koh Chang archipelago and shouts for help on the VHF in English will probably go unnoticed. Our bay anchorage for the night was Bang Bang Bao. Just the kind of place you would imagine in your mind as the

Top row from left, Map location of Koh Chang, Eastern influence, a Coke vendor. Idyllic beaches, oceanfront resorts. Tourist oasis along coast.

Bottom row from left, A Bareboat. Phil Harper enjoying a Thai breakfast. Nathan Russo soaking up the sun on a beautiful Southeast Asian beach.

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