

# Islands of Thailand



Opposite page: Crowded anchorage, Koh Kut. Left: A VIP welcome at the Talay Sai Resort and Pearl Farm. Above: Fun briefing. Below: Stilted houses at Ao Salak Phet on Ko Chang where we joined *Mirrabooka*.



Tired of over-hyped hotspots? Yearning for something more natural and unspoiled? Then try Thailand, where chartering is a voyage of discovery, says **Stuart Heaver**.



Only a few minutes into the chart briefing with Phil, it quickly became apparent that chartering in the Ko Chang Archipelago, in the Gulf of Thailand, would be different from anything we'd experienced in the Caribbean. When I asked Phil about boat security he looked blank. "You can't lock the boats even if you want to," he said. "We've never had anything stolen in the last four years." That was certainly a contrast to experiences in St Lucia, where restaurant owners install burly security staff on your yacht while you eat ashore. Phil also explained that most places ashore didn't take credit cards and there were no ATMs on the smaller islands to the south. One recent client ran out of cash and was forced to barter cigarettes and beer to secure dinner in a local restaurant.

"Don't expect everyone to speak English and don't expect tourism on a plate," he explained. When I assured him that we quite liked 'alternative' destinations, he laughed. "Get down to southern Ko Kut and you're *way beyond* alternative, buddy." If you want to know anything about sailing in Thailand and Cambodia, Phil Harper is probably the man to ask. He learned to sail in Sydney Harbour as a youngster, travelled all over Asia as a civil engineer and



The skipper soaks up the relaxing atmosphere.

has been sailing in this part of Asia for over 15 years. "One day back in 1998 some sailing mates wanted to charter a boat for the weekend in Pattaya, which has fabulous marina facilities," explained Phil. "There were no boats available, so we started Gulf Charters ourselves." Gulf Charters is now widely regarded as the pioneer of sailing holidays in the Gulf of Thailand and organised this trip for my wife, Sarah, and me. Their main base is in Pattaya, where they also have a well-respected sailing school, catering for all ages and abilities. Less than three years ago it was the first to introduce charter yachts to Ko Chang from its Ao Salek Phet base about 100M to the south. Gulf Charters now offers eight yachts from this base and has trained up a Thai team to service and support them.

It is also offering charter boats from Cambodia for the first time. The Ko Chang archipelago has been designated a national park and consists of 52 islands situated at latitude 12°N, on the eastern side of the Gulf of Thailand, about 250M southeast of the capital Bangkok, close to the border with Cambodia. Being just north of the doldrums belt, it offers good sailing winds all year round with steady monsoon winds of 15-20kn from the NE in the dry season from November to April. In the wet season, the monsoon blows from the SW and the winds can be less predictable, but the temperature is warm and some of the best unpopulated anchorages are then in the lee. Our charter yacht for the week was a Catalina 309 called *Mirrabooka*. She was a new boat both to us and to



Catalina anchored off Koh Kut.

the charter fleet, having been bought less than a year earlier, and had only been sailed by four people, including the commissioning team, so was immaculate throughout.

### Setting off

We set sail in a gentle breeze just outside the bay of Ao Salek Phet with the warm late afternoon sun on the starboard bow, bound for Ko Mak, the

first larger island 12M to the south. Despite the feeling of undertaking the cruising equivalent of skiing 'off piste', there is perfect mobile phone coverage across the whole area and the Thai Navy charts are good, incorporating older UKHO soundings. Gulf Charters will text you any dramatic weather changes and issue a local SIM for your mobile so you can call in with any problems or to report your whereabouts. Phil and his team have contacts with resorts and fishermen along the coast should any emergency occur. The Ko Chang archipelago is definitely undiscovered by modern standards and a yacht is still something that locals like to wave at. There are no alongside berths outside the base, no marinas and no secure overnight moorings, so Phil urged caution and lots of cable when it came to anchoring. Navigation is »

### FOOD AND DRINK

We love Thai food, so the dining ashore was a delight. It is very cheap to eat ashore and even modest restaurants are scrupulously clean. Most menus have an English translation or helpful pictures or both. Gulf Charters sorted out onboard provisioning, but when we discovered that the average meal ashore was less than £5 for two, including drinks, we wished we had ordered less in the way of provisions. Wine is very expensive, but the local Chang beer is fine. Beware the local Sang Som rum and stick to the cocktails that were more expensive, but easier on the head the morning after.

### WEATHER

Nov-Feb: Consistently sunny and warm with calm seas and F2-4 NE trade winds. Cool nights. Mar-May: Stronger winds, a few squally showers. Jun-Oct: Very hot/humid, heavy monsoon rainfall.



Clockwise from top left: Perfect beach. Catalina, Koh Raet. A stray dog visits a seafood restaurant on the pier of Ai Bang Bau. Sunset over Koh Chang. Yai Maisie, the Buddhist Monk and Sarah. Mai Sie island. Sam explains the secrets of pearl farming to Sarah.

### SAILING LOG

	Miles
Ao Salek Phet (Ko Chang)	
to Ao Suan Yai (Ko Mak)	15
Ai Suan Yai to Ko Rang	7
Ko Rang to Ao Chek Ki (Ko Kut)	18
Ao Chek Ki to Ao Phrao (SW Ko Kut)	14
Ao Phrao to Ko Maisei Lek via Ao Khlong Chao (Ko Kut)	22
Ko Maisei Lek to Ao Bang Bau (Ko Chang) via Bang Ao Phra (Ko Mak)	28
Ao Bang Bang Bau to Ao Salek Phet (Ko Chang)	7
<b>Total miles</b>	<b>111</b>

Distances are those logged and are not necessarily straight line mileages



### CHARTS WE USED

Gulf Charters produce their own sailing guide to the area. Thai Navy charts incorporate older UKHO soundings. (Imray are currently revising their Gulf of Thailand book, which will be available soon.)

### CHARTER OPERATOR

We booked our charter from the UK with Gulf Charters Thailand, whom we found on the internet. They offer a very personal approach, answering our endless questions and making suggestions by email. They are the longest established charter operator in the eastern Gulf of Thailand and will also offer holidays that mix sailing with tours into Thailand and Cambodia. They also organise a very sociable flotilla in April. The briefings and support were first class and they make a point of training local Thai staff in sailing skills, which we thought was admirable. The cost was €2,364 per week (2009) plus fuel and provisioning, which they also organise if required. **Contact Gulf Charters Thailand +66 38 237752 phil@gulfchartersthailand.com www.gulfchartersthailand.com**

mostly line of sight, except for old hands like me who insist on taking three-point fixes to plot on a chart, even with the benefit of GPS. The tidal range is less than 2m and there are no nasty tidal streams about.

Once settled on our course with Sarah at the helm, I had another look at the only sailing guide to the area, published by Gulf Charters. The guide is a useful combination of Phil's local knowledge, annotated images from Google Earth and informal pencil updates from former clients. "Watch out for coral head 100m NE of pier. Problem for tender at LW", read one note jotted in ours.

Sailing south in the warm light breezes of the late afternoon, *Mirrabooka* was a joy to handle, even though we were more than a bit rusty. Our overnight anchorage in 5m of clear blue water was a beautiful bay NW of the island of Ko Mak. En route to the deserted beach for a quick swim, our tender passed under the stern of an anchored Thai

squid fishing boat when wiry, tattooed fishermen flashed smiles and waved wildly at Sarah. They were clearly inviting us on board for supper but, slightly anxious that Sarah might end up on the menu, I waved back enthusiastically over my shoulder as we motored off at top speed. Back in the cockpit of *Mirrabooka*, after a wonderful swim, I enjoyed a tin of local Chang beer. There was no other vessel in sight except for the Thai squid fishing boat, which left the bay at sunset.

The next morning was calm and bright, so we motorsailed to an uninhabited desert island called Ko Rang, 4M to the west. Even motorsailing was tolerable with the Yanmar diesel humming quietly along.

We anchored *Mirrabooka* in 4m of water on a firm sand seabed, where the anchor was clearly visible. We snorkelled in brochure-blue water and saw isolated purple coral heads, extraordinary sea urchins and leopard fish. The beach was deserted – just white sand, coconut palms – oh, and more white sand.

### Fresh Pina Colada

That evening found us further south, in the northern part of Ao Chek Ki, off Ko Kut and close to the Captain Hook Resort. Our tender was received by one of the tiny Thai waitresses, who impressed me by catching the painter first time and executing a faultless round turn and two half hitches around the jetty post.

The Pina Colada that Sarah ordered was apparently the finest she'd ever had, made with fresh pineapple and coconut milk. Sarah has sampled more than a few over the years, so this is quite a compliment. Dinner of seafood and noodles was delicious. There were six people in the

restaurant, including us, and the total cost for the dinner, including drinks, was less than £4 for both of us.

The next morning we set off in the tender in search of Klong Yai Ki waterfall. We took the tender across the shallow canal that cuts between the Captain Hook resort and the beach, careful to choose high tide and follow the same course as local fishing boats. Everyone smiled and waved as we passed their homes mounted on stilts with rough planking forming floors under wooden tiled or thatched roofs. The mangroves bordering the canal looked like twisted talons as we headed into the jungle powered by the 5hp outboard.

We secured the tender on a rough jetty at the end of the canal and proceeded into the jungle on foot. There were no signposts and the only sound was that of birdsong and the rustle of lizards scuttling off into the undergrowth as our footsteps approached. A steep stepped path through the jungle led us down to a beautiful

boulder river valley and natural waterfall about 50ft high with a cool freshwater pool that we swam in.

The NE Trades made an appearance in the middle of the week, but like everything else in Ko Chang, they seemed benign and helpful, rather than threatening. In the last three days we saw only two other sailing vessels and never had to reef



the sails. We had to keep a careful lookout for fishing floats, some of which were connected to each other by nylon line, and stay well clear of fishing boats, but otherwise

this was stress-free sailing of the most enjoyable kind.

*Mirrabooka* handled perfectly and from the small seat in the quarter of the cockpit it was just possible for those with long legs to adopt the 'toe steering' position, leaving both hands free for consumption of Chang beer. Not recommended by the Royal Yachting Association, I'm sure, but still rather relaxing in such wonderful sailing conditions.

"This is the sailing I like," exclaimed Sarah as we approached another perfect anchorage under full sail on a beam reach. "I am not cold, I am not frightened and I'm not bored. It's just lovely."

In the south of Ko Kut, where the fishing villages are located, things are even less developed. It is wise to approach these anchorages with caution. Many of the bays are bound by a bar of dead coral heads, but we found none of them shelved to any less than 4m on the sounder. The sounder showed clearly the lumpy coral heads and fish »

### OUR BOAT

*Mirrabooka* is a 2008-launched Catalina 309. She is superbly equipped and rigged with a furling mainsail. Gulf Charters is the local agent for Catalina, the USA's biggest production boatbuilder based in Florida.

There are two double cabins: one spacious and airy in the forepeak, the other less so, under the cockpit in the starboard quarter.

Unlike most boats we have chartered in the past, *Mirrabooka* had great battery capacity, a sounder, a chart plotter that actually worked, a full set of flares and emergency equipment, first aid box, fridge and cool box and even small details like an AC inverter, for phone charging.

Our only minor quibble was the rope-only windlass, which meant 10m of heavy chain cable came in by hand every time we weighed anchor. A vigorous morning workout for me, but Sarah could not have managed it on her own.

We never experienced winds of more than 15kn, but the yacht had a lovely feel from the helm. Best of all for a two-handed crew, a furling mainsail. No need for me to go on deck for reefing if the conditions got lumpy, which is always Sarah's key concern about sailing as a couple.



**Left: They've got almost everything on the pier of Ao Bang Bau. Middle: Waterfall. Above: Gulf Charters' team at Koh Chang base.**

## HOW TO GET THERE

Gulf Charters doesn't offer flights, but the first step is to get to Bangkok Airport in Thailand on one of the big airlines (Thai Air or BA). We flew from Hong Kong, but the many flights from Heathrow are quite competitively priced.

From Bangkok there is a connecting flight to Trat of about 1 hour 15 mins on Bangkok Airways, which was excellent and quite cheap. Alternatively, you can go by bus, which is much cheaper (less than £10) and quite comfortable, but takes about five hours. From Trat, Gulf Charters organises a taxi transfer on the delightful car ferry to the island of Ko Chang and then by road to the base.

and then the seabed sloping down again to firm and level sand. Once over the bar the beach shelved gently again and it was possible to anchor in 4-5m with good holding.

Our waiter at the unnamed beach restaurant, who took to his bed between courses, encouraged us to sample the local Sang Som rum. The label proclaims proudly that it is 'Distilled, aged and bottled in Nakornpratum, Thailand, under Thai government supervision'. Judging by the headache I suffered the morning after, the Thai government might try supervising a bit more closely.

Like many women, Sarah can identify a retail opportunity in almost any location – however remote. She found a brochure for a pearl farm (and shop) located on a small island called Ko Mai Sie Lek and was very keen to find it. On approaching some traditional timber buildings on stilts on the shore at Ko Mai Sie Lek (off the NE coast of Ko Kut), we decided to anchor off and

look for the pearl farm. The wind eased, but this was a lee shore, so I didn't want to hang about too long. On landing by tender, a Thai gentleman appeared, smiling, and took our painter.

"Welcome to my island. You're very lucky and will be my personal guests on Maisie Island," he announced. There was no time period mentioned in his welcome and I feared that this could be a longer run ashore than we had planned. Neither of us had the courage to ask about the pearl farm.

Yai Maisie turned out to be a charming and genuine host and we were treated to a tour of his coconut and cashew nut plantation and introduced to the resident Buddhist monk. Inevitably, we stayed for dinner with his family, while I kept glancing anxiously at *Mirrabooka* and praying the wind stayed calm until pudding was finished. Yai refused to accept any payment or gift, gave us a complimentary bottle of his homemade honey and asked us to sign his visitors' book.

## Retail opportunity

Phil had warned us that things were "way beyond alternative". Talay Sai Resort and Pearl Farm is in fact located just half a mile further south and we visited it the next morning after a breakfast of fresh local honey on toast.

We received a fascinating demonstration from Sam of the different types of pearl, before being gently ushered towards their shop. There was no heavy selling or pressurising involved – just the usual gentle Thai charm. Regrettably, our wedding anniversary was approaching, so I exited Talay Say somewhat poorer than when I entered, but Sarah is delighted with her authentic Thai cultured pearl necklace with matching earrings.

Our final run ashore was a call at Ao Bang Bau on the return leg, a settlement based largely on a single concrete pier and just about the only other major retail opportunity on the trip.

"They've got every damn thing on that pier," said Phil – and he was probably

right. Dive schools, boat and scooter hire, wood craft, seafood, Lacoste shirts, carved Buddhas, stray dogs, silk scarves, exotic fruit and just about anything else, all along a concrete pier just 3m wide.

As we weighed anchor in Ao Bang Bao, the wind increased and the sun disappeared behind light grey clouds for the first time. *Mirrabooka* ran effortlessly downwind under the full genoa back to Gulf Charters' base.

It had been a marvellous privilege to experience such an unspoilt sailing area.

If you enjoy the feeling of discovery and have an adventurous spirit, then this is the spot for you. You will never be squeezing into crowded anchorages, cursing the loud music from neighbouring boats or missing the last lobster at dinner in the Ko Chang archipelago – that's for sure.