That these islands exist in such an incompletely unspoilt state is entirely due to historical accident. For 50 years following the independence of Myanmar in 1947, salinarion policy served to keep foreigners out. Since 1997 access into the Mergui Archipelago became possible. Just 140 miles away to the south of this magnificent wilderness area lies the island of Phuket in Thailand, a popular mass tourism destination which is now experiencing a condominium property boom.

Of the 800 islands of the Mergui Archipelago only 50 or so are inhabited. Many of the islands are huge, some are larger than Singapore. A ban on logging in the Mergui has prevented the widespread deforestation that is common elsewhere in Asia. As a result, all of the islands are covered in thick jungle with majestic stands of Burmese Teak, Mahogany, strangler figs and other indigenous vegetation. Most beaches are backed by trees that tower to over 150ft tall while overhead there is the constant cacophony of birds and small animals feeding in the forest canopy. The beaches are covered in animal tracks – the only human footprints in sight are the ones behind you. Jungle walks in this area, while demanding, are also very rewarding with glimpses of the elusive wildlife and superb views through the forest of the deep blue ocean beyond.

The dramatic scenery continues underwater with magnificent coral reefs around many of the islands. The snorkelling and scuba diving in this area is superb. In March and April each year, migratory Sperm and Humpback whales visit the area. The water clarity increases as you go west and north in the Mergui Islands. There are relatively large tidal ranges in the Mergui Archipelago (4 metres at spring tide). Try to time your dive or snorkel just before high tide. The indigenous people of the Mergui Archipelago are the Moken (also known as Salones). These gentle, peaceful people are a source of fascination to anthropologists as they still cling to their traditional nomadic existence, despite attempts to settle them in permanent villages. Traditionally the Moken do not fish. They are hunter-gatherers, mainly living off shellfish collected in the inter-tidal zone. They also free-dive for shell fish and sea cucumbers, sometimes diving to amazing depths (fastened by large stones tied to their waists). They also occasionally hunt wild boar and small deer in the forest with the aid of their dogs. Each Moken family group lives on a flatboat (ban) of traditionally built wooden boats (kabang). Each member of the family also has his own personal dugout canoe used for foraging. When the Moken move from island to island, these dugout canoes are towed in a long chain behind their kabang.

We occasionally come across the Moken in the Mergui Archipelago. They pull into a nearby beach in their flatboats of boats. Adults, children, cats, dogs, chickens and ducks leap off each boat and rush into the jungle to forage. Suddenly, at some hidden signal, people and animals come rushing back out of the forest and jump on the boat just before it leaves for another anchorage. Their arrivals and departures seem random and without any obvious pattern of time or tide.

Sometimes the Moken cautiously approach our yacht with a gift of rock oysters or the launch of a wild boar after a successful hunt. They are always delighted when we give them a gift in return – a roll of cloth or a dive mask. If the Moken do not approach you then they want to be left alone.

Plan to visit the Mergui between November and July. Mid December to the end of February is the best time, with warm, sunny conditions, a reliable 20 knots of wind every day and flat seas. March and April have little wind and are very hot; these are the best months for diving and snorkelling. From May to July there are strong onshore winds and some thunderstorms. While there is large swell at this time of year, the many large islands still provide hundreds of well protected anchorages. There are occasional hurricanes in the Mergui from May to June and again from October to December. Be aware of the weather. There are many “hurricane holes” in the Mergui if necessary. From July to November there is sustained heavy rain in the Mergui Islands.

The charts of the Mergui are reasonable but not entirely accurate. They become less and less accurate as you go further north. There are a great many uncharted rocks (and islands!). Navigate with care, particularly north of 1°N where there are many rock pinacles that rise vertically from depths of over 60m. If you are on a large yacht, consider employing the services of a guide with real navigational knowledge of the area in addition to your MTT provided guide. (For information on guides and sailing permits, see Page 145)

**THE MERGUI ARCHIPELAGO**

Imagining more than eight hundred tropical islands spread over fourteen thousand square miles of Indian Ocean. Imagine mountainous, jungle covered islands that teem with wildlife, spectacular waterfalls that tumble directly onto white sandy beaches fringed by pristine coral reefs. Imagine no tourists and indigenous tribes with an exotic culture who live nomadic lives aboard their tiny boats. This place really does exist – it is the Mergui Archipelago off the south-west coast of Myanmar.

![Kawthaung approaches](image)

**KAWTHAUNG APPROACHES**

**Southern Channel**

Enter via the channel between Ko Khon and Ko Chang, Ko Khon has a lighthouse on it. The entry channel now also has a number of large steel lateral marks so keep a very good lookout at night in case these are unlit. From here follow the obvious channel east then north east to take you up the eastern side of Ko Mo. From here head for the eastern side of Pulau Ru just off the Andaman Club jetties and then into the Kawthaung anchorage.

**Western Channel**

Approach on a course of 090° heading for the highest point of Pulau Ru (Andaman Club Island). Once you have reached the southern point of Pulau Pin bear 062° and then head for it. This brings you through a shoal area and into the channel just south of Pulau Pin. The drying bank of rocks and mud to your south is marked by a post with an X topmark. From here head just to the south of Victoria Point on a course of 095°.

**Northern Channel**

While the channel to the west of Pulau Beach may look shallow on the chart, it is perfectly navigable with a minimum depth of 5m. On leaving Kawthaung, head south into the deep water channel to avoid the extensive mud bank to the west of Victoria Point. Once in mid channel, alter course to head for the monastery Pagoda on Pulau Pin (approx. 27°55’. Once the western point of Pulau Beain bears 315° turn and head just clear of it. There is a rock and coral reef that juts out off this point – the extent of the reef is marked with a wooden sticks with a cross on them. Gradually come onto a northerly heading aiming just to the west of Tanhe Island. There is a drying rock reef about marked with a metal beacon about ½ a mile to the west of Tanhe Island. Pass between this and Thane Island then continue on a northerly heading. After a further ½ a mile alter course on to 320° and hold this course until you are in more than 10 meters of water. Around the 10 meter depth there are substantial fish traps which are made of large bamboo staves driven into the mud bottom – keep a sharp lookout.

**Andaman sea Pilot | 2nd Edition**
Kawthaung is a fascinating town, particularly if you take the time to explore. The Buddhist monastery on the hill at the northern end of town is particularly worth a visit with impressive guardian dragons and great views over Kawthaung.

Kawthaung has a variety of good restaurants and bars along the waterfront. Honey Bear Hotel on the waterfront offers air-conditioned accommodation and is so proud of its two large generators, it has them arranged as a showpiece either side of the foyer.

The Myanmar navy operates checks on yachts in the Myanmar waters. It is easier to add your yacht onto the permit of one of the charter companies licensed to operate in the region. These fees make cruising in the Mergui Archipelago a relatively expensive proposition. You are however paying for access into a unique, unspoiled and very special area - there are very few places left in the world where you can explore over 800 jungle covered islands and have practically the whole 10,000 square miles of wilderness just to yourself.

Myanmar Sailing Permits

To cruise in the Mergui Archipelago you need to obtain cruising permits in advance. These are issued by the governmental travel agency Myanmar Tours & Travels (MTT) in Yangon. You can arrange your own permit, but it is easier to add your yacht onto the permit of one of the charter companies licensed to operate in the region. Once you have obtained a permit and at least 10 days prior to the start of your cruise, you will need to provide a detailed itinerary for your trip and passport information for passengers and crew to MTT.

When your yacht is in Myanmar waters you will have an official guide aboard at all times. This guide is provided by MTT and is responsible for making sure you comply with local regulations and do not go to islands that are off limits. The guides are usually friendly people who can help you with the day-to-day running of the yacht.

Provided your permit and documentation is all properly arranged in advance, checking in at Kawthaung is a quick and simple process and usually takes around half an hour to complete. When you arrive at Kawthaung, contact MTT to assist with the check in process. On arrival there are the following fees:

- Immigration visa US$20 p/person (valid 30 days)
- Guide’s entry fee of US$120 per person for 5 days (beyond 5 days US$10 per person per day)

This channel makes an excellent first and last night anchorage as it is only 15 miles from Kawthaung.

A beautiful anchorage just to the south-west of the sand spit in 8-10 metres of water on a white sand bottom. The surrounding islands offer all round protection.

Superb protection can be found mid channel. Anchor in 10 to 12 metres on white sand.

Approach from the south staying close to Victoria Point. Anchor in 5-8 metres to the eastern side of the channel between Pulau Nyor and the mainland. This anchorage is well protected and has excellent holding in thick, black mud. The large concrete jetty ashore has good diesel, fresh water and cooling ice. Approach the southern side of the jetty for diesel. Payment is in Thai baht.

The large concrete jetty ashore has good diesel, fresh water and cooling ice. Approach the southern side of the jetty for diesel. Payment is in Thai baht.

The Mergui Archipelago

The best overnight anchorage while in Kawthaung. Anchor just inside the bay in 6m just outside of the main current flow.

The Mergui Archipelago

Myauk Phyu

For a printable version of this information visit www.andamanseapilot.com/mergui-regis.htm
The Mergui Archipelago

**Mid Group**

The islands to the south of Pu Nala offer a wide variety of day and overnight anchorages.

We have chosen only one of the prettiest spots in this group, although you can spend days here exploring all the smaller rocky islands and hidden coves and beaches.

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**115 (Frost Island)** 10.28.00N 98.10.50E

46 miles from Kawthaung

The Frost brothers of South East Asia Liveaboards (SEAL) discovered this jewel anchorage.

Anchor in 12-15 metres off the white sand beach. The all-tide, sandy beach here is breathtaking, and the fringing coral reef provides excellent snorkelling. There are uncharted rocks to the south and west of this anchorage.

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**Potter Island North** 45 miles from Kawthaung

Another idyllic overnight anchorage with a spectacular white sand beach ashore. There are a variety of unusual trees along this beach including one of the biggest fig trees ever. Every evening the local hornbills congregate in this tree to squabble and squawk over delicacies.

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**Potter Island South** 44 miles from Kawthaung

Fantastic overnight anchorage with a white sand beach and a small spring ashore. Heading north from this anchorage there are several uncharted rocks along the coast of Potter Island.
KYUNN PHI LAR

It would be possible to spend several weeks exploring this spectacular island. I have only shown 4 anchorages – in reality there are many more great spots. The island has everything with superb beaches, great snorkelling and diving, loads of wildlife, good jungle walking and stunning scenery. Note that the chart provided shows much more detail and many offlying rocks that do not appear on the Admiralty chart. Be aware there may be more underwater “features” and keep a good bow watch in water shallower than 15m.

KYUNN PHI LAR EAST BAY
50 miles from Kawthaung
A stunning anchorage that is well protected even in North Easterlies. Anchor in 12m on a sand bottom clear of the fringing reef. There is great snorkelling from the anchorage to the southern point of the bay but beware of ferocious rip tides off the point. Ashore there is good jungle walking with a stream and a small waterfall. The mangrove estuaries around the southern point is perfect for kayaking, particularly in the evening when the local wildlife is on the move.

KYUNN PHI LAR NORTH BAY
55 miles from Kawthaung
An even more beautiful anchorage with a mile and a half crescent of gleaming white sand backed by pristine jungle ashore. Anchor in 5m in the middle of the eastern section of the bay between the small island and the east side of Kyunn Phi Lar. Do not go further west than this as there are lots of large coral bombies in this area. There is all tide access to the eastern end of the beach. Three miles to the north “Shark Cave” is a superb dive site with a cave swim through that is home to several grey reef sharks.

KYUNN PHI LAR SOUTH BAY
53 miles from Kawthaung
Yet another great anchorage in this well protected horseshoe shaped bay. Anchor in 8m clear of the reef on a sand bottom. The shallow fringing reef is excellent for snorkelling. The huge mangrove estuaries to the west of this anchorage are fascinating to explore by dinghy or kayak. There are lots of pythons that live in this estuary – they are completely harmless and tend to snooze on low branches that overhang the water.

KYUNN PHI LAR SOUTH WEST BAY
55 miles from Kawthaung
Probably the most spectacular anchorage of the lot. Anchor in 15m on sand clear of the reef edge. The reef comes up very quickly further inshore. There is tidal access to the stunning beach but be careful you do not end up stuck inshore of the reef on a falling tide. The small rocky islands and outcrops off the west end of Kyunn Phi Lar have great snorkelling and some amazing rock archways.

KYUNN MEE GYEE
The eastern side of Kyunn Mee Gyee has a military base and is off limits. The previously superb dive sites of North and South Sentinel islands have been heavily dynamite fished and as a result have no surviving fish or coral.

KYUNN MEE GYEE SOUTHWEST BAY
67 miles from Kawthaung
Anchor in 8 metres on a sandy bottom off the fringing reef in the south bay. There is a superb beach ashore and great jungle walking. The water clarity in this area is exceptional.

KYUNN MEE GYEE WATERFALL BAY
70 miles from Kawthaung
Anchor in 12-15 metres on white sand to the southern side of the bay. The visibility here is so good that you can see the bottom in 30 metres of water. At the southern end of the beach is a spectacular waterfall that brings crystal clear, cold mountain water down to the beach.
**KYU NN TANN SHEY (LAMPI GROUP)**

**KYU NN TANN SHEY**

It is possible to anchor just about anywhere off the western coast of Lampi Island. Lampi is the largest island in this southern group and, apart from the occasional nomadic fishing village, is uninhabited. The size of Lampi allows it to support much larger wild animals including leopard and a small herd of elephant.

**THE WEST COAST OF LAMPI**

50 miles from Kaw Thaung

Anchor anywhere on sand in 6-12 metres. The Mangrove River is superb for dinghy exploring with plenty of wildlife and huge century-old mangrove trees towering overhead.

**SALET GALET**

14 miles from Lampi/Pu Nala Channel

The channel of water separating the islands of Lampi and Wa-Ale Kyunn is about 200 metres wide and about 2 miles long. On either side, the channel is banked with steep sloping rainforest and by fringing coral reef below. Anchorage in the middle of the channel is in 10-15 metres. This anchorage is safe to sit out any storm. Salet Galet is an area of outstanding beauty and is a good place to spot monkeys, wild pigs, hornbills, sea eagles and other creatures. There is a great jungle walk up west peak on Lampi with spectacular views over Salet Galet channel. The mangrove river on Wa-Ale Kyunn is ideal for kayaking and ends in a small fresh water stream and waterfall.

**PU NALA (BO CHO)**

4 miles from Lampi/Pu Nala Channel

Enter the passage either side of the small rock island and south of the drying rock in mid-channel. Anchor in 7-10 metres on a mud and sand bottom off the eastern end of the small village. The currents can run up to 3 knots at mid-tide so put out plenty of chain.

This village is the only habitation in the area and is definitely worth a visit. The local monk at the Buddhist temple is a very welcoming and interesting character. A local boat builder has recently set up shop behind the bridge in the village. He is constructing traditional Moken boats that are being hand sown from trees on site. Take your camera.

**PU NALA**

5 miles from Lampi/Pu Nala Channel

A small island with a spectacular white sand beach backed by casuarina trees. Anchor in 6-8m on a sand bottom clear of the fringing reef.

**KO PHAHT**

8 miles from Lampi/Pu Nala Channel

This is a highly unusual area of mangroves and shallow waterways which is ideal for exploring by kayak and dinghy. There are around 30 small beaches on these islands and probably as many anchorages. The islands support a thriving bird and wildlife population. It is common to see flocks of over 100 wreathed hornbills competing for a particularly desirable perch on the highest trees. There are also Asian wild cats, fruit bats and macaque monkeys that make this home.

**ANAKENA BAY**

96 miles from Kaw Thaung

A beautiful deep bay, with a gradual sloping sandy bottom. Good anchorage is found in 6-8 metres on a sand bottom. The beach is approximately 1 mile long, with a tidal river at the southern end ideal for kayaking and dinghy exploration trips. There is a thriving bird population and lots of wildlife, including pythons and huge monitor lizards. Dommel also supports larger game including buffalo and wild boar. There is a rumour among the local fishermen that the almost-extinct Asian rhinoceros may still survive in the thick forest.

**ANTARC TICA BAY - WSW OF A VELINE HILL**

6 miles from Anakena Bay

A beautiful anchorage off the northern of the 3 beaches in 15 metres on sand. This is another great area for wildlife enthusiasts with superb kayaking and jungle walking. The floating structures and the buildings ashore in the southwest bay of Dommel are a pearl farm which is off limits. Stay well clear of this and do not anchor anywhere near this.

**YANNEKEE BAY (SOUTHERN TIP)**

12 miles from Anakena Bay

Another ideal anchorage for jungle walks, kayaking and wildlife viewing. Anchor in 5 – 7 metres on sand off a very gently shelving beach. This is a great place for exploratory trips by dinghy.

The northern island group east of Dommel has spectacular limestone karsts similar to Phang Nga Bay in Thailand. If you look carefully you will find a lagoon hidden inside the island with access through caves that you can swim through.
**Approaches to Mergui Port**

**Iron Passage**

Approach from north through the Iron Passage between Thamihla Kyun and Kadon Kyun (King Island). There is plenty of water through the passage although there can be strong currents.

Travelling south after navigating the passage is straightforward until you come to the lighthouse (Fl.8M) at the northern approaches to Mergui Port. The light is a significant structure and can be seen quite clearly.

Pass to the west of the light within 100-150 metres. The waters are shallow during the approach and there are mud flats that dry at low tide further to the west of the light. This area is known as the Mergui Bar.

The port is visible at this point and further south in town is another quick flashing navigational light which may be more difficult to see. The depth of water will remain constant until reaching the anchored vessels in front of the town. The best anchorage is to be found slightly south of the town directly in front of the large reclining Buddha image on Pataw Island. Depth of water is approximately 15 metres and the holding is good but strong currents prevail. Boat traffic is a little less hectic here.

**Fell Passage**

The shorter route to Mergui Port for shallow draft vessels is the Fell Passage which saves about 25 miles. The depth of water through the passage is never less than 3 metres in the centre of the channel. The navigation is straightforward, although by looking at the chart it does seem daunting. This route is not advisable at spring low tides.

**Mergui Town**

There are three floating pontoons that provide shore access. The middle of the three should be used. It is safe to leave tenders tied to the inner-side of the pontoon.

You need to check in at the port offices, as well as the harbourmaster, immigration and customs offices, which are located at the entrance to the floating pontoons, before proceeding into the town.

Mergui is a fascinating town with a colourful history. Established around 1500, Mergui’s strategic position ensured its rapid growth into a major trade entrepot. Sailing ships of the time, faced with the fickle winds, uncharted reefs and pirates of the Malacca Straights to the south, preferred to offload their trade goods in Mergui. From here the goods were trans-shipped by elephant convoy across the Malaysian Peninsula to the ancient kingdoms of Ayutthaya, Cambodia and southern China. The invention of the steam driven cargo ship lessened the importance of Mergui and it gracefully declined into the market town it is today.

The importance of Mergui on a historic Indian Ocean trade route can still be clearly seen today. There is an interesting mix of Chinese, Indian, Arabic and Burmese influences. Take the time to explore the back streets of Mergui: visit the Chinese tea shop, the market bazaar, the temples and the various restaurants to really get a feel for the unique culture of Mergui.

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