

Phi Phi Island Marine Park

Phi Phi Ley, Bida Nai & Bida Nok

by Tobias Reitmayr

I would say I know this place like my vest pocket (literal translation from German). After almost 4 years diving fulltime in these waters, I feel extremely familiar with the waters around Phi Phi Island in South West Thailand. But still there are creatures I have not come across and conditions of the sea that still surprise me. And that is what the thrill of this Andaman Sea is about; you don't know what awaits you after the next coralhead and the currents might be very different from what the tide chart tells you. I've lived and worked in other places and seas but have not experienced the kind of oceanic moodiness that I find here.

This tiny group of islands lies around 40 km off the Phuket peninsula in Thai waters on the continental shelf with depths of around 30m everywhere. The Islands consist of impressive limestone rocks enthroning the dark and sometimes troubled waters. The seasons are defined by the south west monsoon that brings rain and waves in the months from around May to September. Best traveling time could be after the busiest months of November, December, and January

when the conditions are still good but the island is not that crowded. A morning and an afternoon ferry runs everyday between Phi Phi and Phuket or Krabi. Over the years tourism kept growing thanks to the proximity of the huge holiday destination Phuket and the Hollywood movie The Beach in 1998. A massive backlash came with the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, but the tourism industry came back surprisingly quickly to its previous level.

There are around 15 dive shops gathered mainly around the tiny village of Ton Sai on the main Island of Phi Phi Don. The islands are designated a marine park which bans fishing in the surrounding waters. Trips go out every day to the local dive spots of Phi Phi Ley with its famous Beach of Maya Bay and the two amazing southern rocks of Bida Nok and Bida Nai. The trips go out in the morning or afternoon reaching the local sites in about 20-40 mins, depending on the boat. In the following I will describe the diving around Phi Phi Ley and the Bida islands.

Compared to the East side of



Canon EOS 350d, Sea&Sea housing, Canon 18-55mm, YS-90auto, 1/200, f8, manual mode

Thailand with its famous dive spots around the island of Koh Tao and Samui and Phangan, the Andaman sea offers a much higher diversity of marine life.

Bida Nai & Bida Nok **'The two raisins in the cake'**

Hardly do you find a day without a dive boat on these two rocks in the southern marine park. Even from the surrounding mainland divers are



Phi_Phi_viewpoint : view of Ton Sai village from the viewpoint

taking the 2-3 hour long journey one way by boat to get a glimpse of the fringing reefs around these two rocks located about 300m away from each other.

Walls, swim throughs, overhangs, caves and sandy slopes are encountered on these circular dives ranging from 0-30m depth. In the morning there can be wonderful light and I love to have a wide angle setup then with me. Visibility can be very different, in high season around



Canon EOS 350d, Sea&Sea housing, Canon 18-55mm, YS-90auto, 1/125, f10, manual mode

10-25m and in low season 4-15m, depending very much on the local conditions. Hard coral fields with Acropora, leather corals, huge gorgonians, sea whips colonise the slopes of the shallow areas. The walls are covered with Dendronephthya soft corals of all colors that spread their arms into the current, barrel sponges and bubble corals are abundant. Between the two rocks lies Fantasy Reef, a great and mystical outcrop surrounded by staghorn corals. Here we find groups of huge Pickhandle Barracudas, Tall-fin Batfish, Bigmouth and Bigeye Trevallies and snappers. There is a good chance of encountering leopard sharks, seasonally the very shy but gracious Black Tip Reef Sharks, sometimes Bamboo Sharks and Hawksbill Turtles are seen commonly. Macro lovers will be able to dive on the Bidas over and over again: seahorses, Ghostpipefish, Durban Dance Shrimp, Squat lobster



Canon EOS 350d, Sea&Sea housing, Canon 10-22mm, YS-90auto, 1/100, f8, manual mode

and shrimp, Anemone crab, Longnose Filefish, Frogfish, various species of sea slugs. Of course you want to have an experienced guide with you to find the specimen of interest. Also the currents around full and black moon can be strong and limit your range of diving on these rocks especially on the smaller one Bida Nai.

Phi Phi Ley

This uninhabited 3km long island is famous for The Beach, for its birds nests which are harvested by local families as delicacies, and of course the diving. Located 2km south of the main island Phi Phi Don, it hosts many different dive sites around its coast, being totally accessible only in high season due to the western waves that make the west side too rough in low season. In general the sites are more pleasant for beginners than the Bidas when strong currents are expected but visibility seems to be a little lower here.

Also here you find very diverse dive sites with



Canon Powershot A95, Canon housing, internal flash, automatic settings

walls, boulders, overhangs and coral fields. It's home to similar marine life as the Bidas, but with slightly less diversity. Leafy Ghostpipefish, Pipefish and Razor Shrimpfish have adjusted themselves to the debris from the plants of the island. On almost every dive Hawksbill Turtles can be found resting, feeding or catching a breath. Close to Maya Bay exist several interesting flooded cave systems with dripstones and a specialized marine life community. Staghorn corals and tree soft corals are more abundant on the east side where less wave movement is found over the year. Harlequin shrimp, clown frogfish, the comet and the Longnose Filefish are further macro highlights on Phi Phi Ley. Although the sites were only moderately affected by the tsunami in 2004 we find the north east destroyed table coral fields. The local diver community has some reef rebuilding projects running here.

I can highly recommend these islands to the underwater photo community, I have had an uncountable number of wonderful photo dives here and hopefully more too. To me it makes sense



Canon EOS 350d, Sea&Sea housing, Canon 18-55mm, YS-90auto, 1/100, f8, manual mode

to be based on the island for photo trips as it is the closest and most convenient way to access the dive sites (2 dives 8am and 1pm). Several breathtaking diving areas that are also reachable from Phi Phi I haven't even mentioned: The Shark Point Marine Park with the King Cruiser Ship Wreck and Anemone Reef, as well as the extra-terrestrial underwater sea mounts of Hin Daeng and Hin Muang (only accessible in high season). The Phi Phi Island Marine Park is also a good alternative to the world famous Similan Island Marine Park 65km west of Khao Lak in Thailand, as

it hosts a similar marine life and is accessible with only half day trips.

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