

ภูเก็ต - Phuket

Phuket is an island (เกาะ) in the Andaman Sea (a part of the Indian Ocean), a province in Southern Thailand (จังหวัดภูเก็ต), and the name of the town (เมืองภูเก็ต) which is the provincial capital. The area is filled with natural beauty and wonderful beaches. Thus tourists flock to Phuket from around the world. In some ways the area is to Europe like Hawaii is to the United States.



Map of Phuket and Surrounding Provinces

On the west side of the island is the Andaman Sea; on the east side is Phang Nga (พังงา) Bay. Phang Nga (จังหวัดพังงา) is the province to the north of Phuket. Krabi (จังหวัดกระบี่) is the province to the east of Phuket across Phang Nga bay. All three provinces suffered significant damage from the December 26, 2004 Tsunami that was triggered by a mammoth earthquake in Indonesia. Khao Lak is a town in Phang Nga province on the Andaman Sea to the north of Phuket. It was Khao Lak that was featured in the HBO docu-drama on the Tsunami.

Each side of Phuket Island is quite different. The Andaman Sea features beautiful clear blue waters, while Phang Nga Bay features amazing limestone islands (Karsts). In the bay the water is not so clear, and not so blue either (it seemed to be a blue green color). I think that this is due to (1) the bay being quite shallow and (2) the bottom being muddy rather than sandy. Karst topography is “a landscape shaped by the dissolution of a layer or layers of soluble bedrock, usually carbonate rock such as limestone or dolomite”. The Karst topography in Phang Nga bay includes some 40 islands that jut straight up out of the bay. The first mountains that are found north of Bangkok are rather jagged as well. I’m wondering if they are also a Karst formation?



Reed at the Hotel's reflecting pool.



Mai Khaw Beach at the Marriott Resort

Resorts can be found all along the west side of Phuket Island. We stayed at the Marriott Resort which is located at the far north-west of Phuket Island. The resort is beautiful and there is a small commercial district (Turtle Village) nearby that provides shopping and reasonably priced places to eat (with free WiFi!). The pools were unique. Rather than have white plaster bottoms they were all done with dark tile. The tile made the water look dark, in one pool almost black, yet the water was clear and clean.



One of three pools at the Marriott Resort

The water in the reflecting pool is clear, yet due to the tile it looks brown in color. The Marriott is located on Mai Khaw (ไม้ขาว) (White wood) beach. The beach is beautiful, but the land falls off rapidly to the water and undertow currents there are often a problem. The only problem with the Marriott is that it is a long way to Phuket Town, most of the other beaches, and the dock for boat rides through Phang Nga bay, though the latter is closer than the others.

Phi Phi Islands (เกาะพีพี)

The Phi Phi islands are located about 50 kilometers east and just a bit south of Phuket town. These islands are part of Krabi province. There are two main islands Phi Phi Leh and Phi Phi Don. Phi Phi Leh is not inhabited (by humans); while there are several resorts on the larger island Phi Phi Don. Much of the island of Phi Phi Don was destroyed in the Tsunami of 2006 and over 700 people were killed there. The island has largely been rebuilt since that time. The waters in the area are beautiful, warm and blue. Most tourists visit the islands by speed boat from Phuket town. The movie “The Beach” (2000) was mostly filmed on Phi Phi Leh. The Andaman Sea is beautiful, the waters warm, which is the main draw for tourists to Phuket.



Map of PhiPhi Islands - Don is the big island and Ley is the smaller island at the bottom

<p>The Bay on Phi Phi Leh where “The Beach” was filmed.</p>	<p>Small inlet on Phi Phi Leh</p>	<p>Phi Phi Leh - Multi-colored waters</p>
<p>View of Phi Phi Don. Note the spectacular cliffs behind the city</p>	<p>Monkey Beach near Phi Phi Don. This monkey is trying to drink a Pepsi!</p>	<p>Speed Boats from Phuket crowd the waters near Phi Phi Don.</p>



Reed on a docile Water Buffalo






Island Safari – Not far from Phuket town is a place called Island Safari. It is a showplace for Elephants, Monkeys, Water Buffalo and Thai flora. No trip to Thailand is complete without a ride on an Elephant. At the park you can ride a cart pulled by an Asian Ox, ride an Elephant through the jungle on the hillside, watch an Elephant show where the Elephants throw darts at balloons, dunk basketballs, kick soccer goals, and gently step on people laying down and give them a kiss with their trunks.

<p>The jungle hillside at Island Safari</p>	<p>Reed and Sherry on the Elephant, while the mahout takes a photo of Les and Laura.</p>	<p>A monkey tries to make a new friend of Sherry</p>
<p>Laura kissed by the Elephant</p>	<p>Rice field with Thai Scare Crows</p>	<p>Demonstration of the traditional use of the Water Buffalo for farming</p>



Panoramic view of Karst Islands in Phang Naa bay

Phang Nga Bay – This is a starkly beautiful area of the world. The bay is located just east and a bit north of Phuket Island. Phang Nga bay features numerous Karst Islands. These limestone cliffs jut straight up out of the water. Most Americans may have only seen this area in the 1975 James Bond movie “Man with the Golden Gun”. That movie, which was filmed primarily in Thailand, features a Karst Island as the hideout of the evil Scaramanga.

		
<p>Reed near James Bond Rock</p>	<p>Entry to one of many caves exposed depending on tide</p>	
		
<p>Kayaking around the Islands</p>	<p>Wind and tides can erode the area around the Karst leaving strange forms much like stalactites and stalagmites</p>	<p>Many boats make daily trips into the Karst Islands of Phang Nga bay</p>

The islands are unique land forms. The action of the rising and falling of the tides has caused the sides of the islands to erode in many places. Such action has caused caves to be formed which in some cases have broken through to the interior of the island and formed a sea lake that rises and falls with the tide. The tide level must be just right to enter the various caves among the karst islands. When we departed Phuket by airplane to return to Bangkok we flew over these islands. It was a spectacular sight from the air.

Phuket Beaches – The west side of Phuket is full of nice beaches. One day we visited Kamala, Patong and Kata. Kamala was my favorite with its’ nice sand, quiet atmosphere and gentle waves. Patong is the main tourist beach on the island. It is the place to go if you want your Waikiki experience in Phuket. Kata is a nice beach with bigger waves. When we visited there was a surfing tournament taking place. We also experienced some rain while at the beach, but rain in the tropics does little to hinder your enjoyment of the beach. It was also here on the beach that Reed got his first Thai massage.



Kamala Beach



Kata Beach



Patong Beach

One nice thing about these beaches is that you don't have to bring your own beach chair; you can just rent one for one US dollar per day (or less). Further, beach vendors are likely to come by and offer you most anything for purchase. For many Europeans and Asians, Phuket has become one of the best beach destinations. It is true that many Japanese travel to Hawaii for their beach vacation, but for those in the rest of Asia, much of Europe and the Middle East, Phuket is an attractive beach destination.

Phuket Fantasea – This is an amusement park near Kamala. For Thailand this is a rather unique place. It offers 4 different things (a) dinner, (b) a theatrical production in the evening, (c) shopping, and (d) arcade games. To my knowledge there is nothing quite like it elsewhere in Thailand. The dinner pavilion is done in Thai style

architecture, while the theater is done in Cambodian style. We attended because we got free tickets from attending the Marriott's sales presentation. The food was just average at best. The theatrical performance was a menagerie of stuff. On the one hand it tried to be a Las Vegas style production, while on the other hand it tried to be a Thai cultural experience. It would have been better if it had focused on one or the other, but as it was a mix of both it seemed rather confusing.



Fantasea Theater

Phuket Province – As you travel south of Bangkok there is an increase in the number of people who are of the Muslim faith. The southern most provinces in Thailand are in fact predominantly Muslim. In Phuket province it seems to be about half Buddhist and half Muslim.

Besides tourism, another major source of income is from rubber. Formerly there was a lot of tin mined in the province, but the tin mines for the most part have now disappeared. You can find rubber trees all over the island. A rubber tree has about a thirty year lifespan. Old trees must be taken out and new ones planted. While the new young trees are maturing (about 5-7 years), they make good use of the land by growing pineapple between the rows of trees.

The main highway in Phuket is quite nice and well landscaped. It runs from the Sarasin Bridge joining Phang Nga province in the north to Phuket and Patong in the south.



A Mosque on Phuket Island



Rubber Tree - Planted in rows



The main Highway in Phuket