



Mangroves, Moken, and Guy in a Kayak

Ten Days in the Mergui Archipelago

Recently, I had an opportunity to join a research expedition to the Mergui Archipelago – a series of islands just north across the Burmese border from where I live in Thailand. I was invited on board the Sea Nomad by Andrea, a friendly and energetic Swiss-Italian biologist with a passion for birds and conservation. The trip was made possible by Luca, the ship's captain, and one of the first and only people to hold a permit allowing us to sail in restricted waters. Also on board was Felicity, an environmental education expert who had left her job in Sydney to pursue a more adventurous career. Our team on the Sea Nomad was made complete by Lujo, the ever smiling caretaker of the boat, and Chutay, a government-assigned guide who doubled as translator and chef.



Historically Mergui has been the domain of both Burma and Siam, but has always been a sparsely populated area, thereby retaining some of the natural splendor that long ago disappeared from the mainland. The lowland forests that have been replaced by villages and plantations, the old-growth jungle that is home to rare birds, the rivers without pipes and pollutant, can all be found in Mergui

In search of hard-to-find timber, more than a few Thai logging crews have illegally raided the islands over the last decade. In response, the Burmese government has actively encouraged poor fishermen to settle in the Mergui. The fishermen, in turn, are enticed by the rich fishing stocks, and villages have been growing quickly. With the fishermen come a host of unsustainable practices – hunting, egg gathering, forest burning, etc.

It is the combination of untouched ecosystems and increasing threats that inspired Andrea and Luca to take action. The Sea Nomad's mission is to research the ecosystems and species of interest in the Mergui Archipelago, and to promote conservation of the area through work with Burmese counterparts.

As for me – I had heard fantastic stories about Mergui, and had been waiting for an opportunity to visit Burma, but had also been concerned about supporting the military junta with my tourist dollars. So, this was the perfect chance – see the splendors of the Mergui, do something positive for Burma, and give the minimum amount possible to the generals in Yangon.



Day 1

With only seven days' notice to go on the trip, I prepared frantically, and left Kuraburi early on March 2. Driving north to the border, we passed the scenes of rural life in Southern Thailand – water buffalo, entire families crowded onto a small motorcycle, smiling children, and the ever-present string of mosques and Buddhist temples. After loading all of our gear and food into a small long-tail boat and shuttling across the mouth of the Salween Delta into Burma. In the Kawthong we were greeted by a sign saying drug smuggling was punishable by death. Ironic for a government who's known sources of income include the sale of methamphetamines and heroin. Following a long series of delays regarding permits, we finally boarded the Sea Nomad. Sadly, though, it was low tide, and we were stuck in the mud for the night.



Day 2

Sailed north, stayed at Kho Island. As we moved away from the city, the barren hills began to show signs of life, first in the form of neatly groomed plantations, and then becoming a patchwork of verdant green splashed with the bright magenta of the dipterocarp trees in bloom.

Day 3



I have spent plenty of time in mangrove forests, to be sure, and have a deep appreciation for these terraformers and role they play in giving life to the coral reefs. Many fish that spend their adult lives in the ocean are born and grow up in the twisted maze of tidal canals that is a mangrove forest. Mangroves are unaccommodating of human presence, and full of obstacles – mud pits, thorn bushes, impassable tangles of vines and roots make walking impossible. The best way to explore the saltwater forest is by boat.

And so it was on the third night of our journey, after dropping anchor at Bada Island and a delicious pasta meal, we hopped in the dinghy for our first mangrove exploration. The high tide and full moon allowed for easy entrance to the tidal creek and we quickly disappeared into the black expanse of trees. I the excited feeling in the pit of my stomach that comes with entering the unknown.

What was it about this forest?

Well, to start with it was old – one of the very few virgin mangrove stands remaining in Asia. The trees shot up to a hundred feet, and were covered in orchids, ferns, and moss. The arched support roots stretched off into the darkness, hiding the animals that croaked, chattered, and growled the night away. We paddled very little, as we were riding the incoming tide. A radiant blue hummingbird sat asleep on a branch, undisturbed by our torchlight. A monitor lizard lay waiting on a rock, although it looked unsettlingly like a baby crocodile.

Suddenly there was a movement to my right. I snapped my head around and, just a few feet from me, saw a big snake swimming straight for the dinghy. Nervously, I slapped at the snake with my paddle to keep it away from the boat. "What are you doing?" Andrea demanded, looking at me like I was some sort of sadistic freak. In a single fluid motion, he pushed past me, grabbed the snake by the neck, and pulled it out of the water. "Look," he said, "It's just a python!" Why yes, it was a python. More specifically, it was a Burmese python, a.k.a. the largest snake in the world - they can grow up to thirty-three feet. Our specimen was a mere nine feet long. We examined and photographed the python, enjoying its beautiful markings, the bright green iridescence of its skin, and its seemingly full belly.

A little further up river we bumped into another of our reptilian friends – the mangrove viper. Undeterred by the mangrove vipers' poisonous bite and reputation for being quick to strike, Andrea proceeded to pick the snake up with his paddle and set it on the front of our dinghy. As if this was not quite enough danger, he then put the snake back on a tree, took out his camera and took close-up pictures, demanding that I paddle ever nearer to the branch, until we were within two feet of the damn snake. When I wryly suggested that we may be at risk of getting bitten, Andrea accurately observed that the viper was showing no signs of aggressive behavior. His lack of fear may also be due to the fact that his testes are made from titanium. Lucky for us, our no-legged friend remained in a good mood until we were done with the fashion shoot, and patiently watched us paddle back to the boat for a good night's sleep.



Day 4



As soon as dawn broke Lujo was up and active, making hot water and cleaning the deck. He pointed to the nearest mountain and advised that we wear shoes and have some breakfast. Our "mountain" was actually more like a large hill, really, but when you're hiking through the thick of it, it feels like Mount frickin' Everest, except with a lot more sweating. Stand in the wrong place, and something sharp will stab you, bugs will feast upon you, or ants will attack you. Stand in the right place, though, and you can catch some great views of birds, langurs, macaques, mouse deer, even bats sleeping under logs. And the soundtrack is unbeatable - a symphony of birds calling, insect humming, and the occasional crash of something big moving through the forest.

On the way back down the mountain we observed that lowlands of the island were prime habitat for of the rarest birds in the world, Gurney's pitta. Lujo, our guide, confirmed that he had actually seen this highly endangered species and correctly identified it in the bird book.

Back on the Sea Nomad, I ate a couple of biscuits, poured an energy drink into my water bottle and hopped into the kayak for a quick return to the snake-infested mangrove forest. With an outgoing tide that was lower than the night before, waves were breaking at the entrance of the tidal creek. I nervously surfed the kayak into the channel and began the first of what was to be many epic battles against the tidal forces of Mergui. When a mangrove channel drains, it moves



as fast as a river, and in the blazing sun, I grunted and paddled my way through the current. When I was finally able to find some shade, I was reminded of how peaceful the mangrove forest is in the light of day. Bright yellow boxfish and black striped reef fish darted about under the kayak. My beautiful reptile friends of last night were all sleeping peacefully and out of sight. The stillness of the air, the reflection of the tree and their wild roots in the water, the noticeable silence of the bugs and birds at midday – it soothed the mind.

That afternoon, we sailed to Bo Cho Island, where we camped on the Southern beach, next to a small cluster of recently built fishing huts. Back in to my trusty kayak, a.k.a. the Folbot, I paddled ashore to say hello. I was greeted by a contented looking group of Burmese families, who make a god deal of their money gathering sea cucumbers, which are popular China, apparently for their male stimulation abilities. As a quick aside – I have never understood why the Chinese, as a people in general, feel the need to consume any animal might induce erection. I mean, there are already well over one billion people in China, they obviously don't have a problem getting it up!



Back to the matter at hand – I sat for a while and had a rudimentary conversation in sign language, in which I managed to trade my pair of sunglasses for a sea cucumber and an energy drink. I have yet to test the viagra-esque properties of the sea cucumber, but mostly because it looks too much like a turd for me to even consider eating it. So, I'll start the bidding at \$50 plus shipping.

Day 5

Mid-morning, we sailed around to the north side of Bo Cho Island for a visit to the largest settlement in the area. The town was a cluster of typical one-room wooden houses, elevated by posts above the flies and garbage on the ground. We were greeted by a group of sailors who were already happily soused and ready to go out to sea. Reluctantly, I accepted a shot of the local fire water, and spent the next several minutes wondering if I had just consumed paint thinner. At the health clinic, the local nurse informed us that the town had about four hundred residents, and a school with ninety children. Malaria is one of the most serious health threats, Bo Cho Island has about twenty cases a month. Tragically, the nurse only receives enough medicine to treat five people a month.

Our next stop was to find a local hunter, who we hoped would take us on a hike and share with us his knowledge of the jungle. After some diligent searching, we found him, a man of about 25, with a groomed mustache and a self-assured manner. He told us that mainly he hunted pigs, deer, and monkeys, occasionally shooting the mother monkeys, and that he would be happy to show us anything we wanted.



It easy to see hunters as the enemy of conservation, but they can actually be tremendous allies. In fact, they often know more about the local ecosystems than scientists, as we learned when he described to us the mating and nesting habits of the local hornbill colony. More and more these days, conservationists are working closely with hunters, often hiring them to be the rangers for newly protected areas. We arranged to go on a night hike, and he agreed. When we returned to the village that evening, however, he was nowhere to be found.

I then walked to the outskirts of the village, where a series of much simpler huts were built close to the water. These were the homes of the Moken – a tribe of nomadic sea gypsies who

are the Mergui's original inhabitants. Traditionally, the Moken live on *kabang* (houseboats) during the dry season, traveling from island to island, gathering the food they eat from the coral reefs and everything else they need from the nearby forest. The average 20 foot *kabang* will be home to a family of five or six and a dog. Because of their "backwards" lifestyle, including their own language and spiritual tradition, the Moken have faced a lot of pressure to assimilate in recent years from the Burmese and Thai governments. I had heard stories that Mergui was the last refuge of the traditional Moken way of life, as the Thai authorities had settled and "educated" the Moken living further south.

So, I was surprised to see so many people in the Moken part of village in the middle of the dry season. As I came nearer however, I realized that very few men were present – women and children were everywhere, and I wondered if the Moken men were off fishing. The Moken often put hammocks underneath their stilt homes, where they talk and rest together during the heat of midday. I sat down with a group of women and was delighted to learn that one of them spoke Thai. Her name was Souy, and she was a widow at 50, with sadness



etched into the lines of her face. Yet her eyes were clear and she radiated the simple elegance that is so unique to people who live in harmony with the earth. It turned out we had friends in common, as we had both spent time in the Moken community of Koh Surin, just across the Thai border. I noticed that Souy was one of the very few in her group that did not smell of alcohol, and she often poked fun at her companions for their inebriated state.

"Where are all the men?" I inquired.

"Dead," she replied.

"Do you still make the *kabang*," I asked.

"No, those that know how have died, the women and children do not how to do the ceremonies and cut the trees."

"So, what do the women do for a living?"

"We harvest sea cucumbers and other animals from the reef for money, but we are very poor. I can't even afford a new roof for my house." Souy explained that, just ten years ago, the majority of the Mergui's population had been Moken, but now they were a minority in their own home.

I tried to find out more about where the missing men had gone, but Souy was apparently ready for a lighter topic of conversation. One of the few men present brought out a drum covered in the skin of monitor lizard. While he laid down a beat, Souy sang traditional Moken folk songs, the ladies pulled me up from my seat on the ground and we danced. My disco-inspired shuffle was no match for their elegant hand gestures and rhythmic swaying.



Looking back at my time in Mergui, I came into contact with perhaps seventy Moken women, and only fifteen adult men. Apparently the recent influx of Burmese has introduced new diseases to the Mergui, and it is likely that the Burmese receive preferential medical treatment, including access to malaria medications. A year earlier, I had also helped a Moken man recently arrived from Burma seek medical treatment for a gunshot wound. He told me that he had been fishing on a reef one day when a Burmese military boat started shooting at

him. So, lack of medical attention may not be the only factor contributing to the absence of Moken men in the Mergui.

We said our goodbyes to the Moken and to Bo Cho village, and navigated the dinghy across the tidal channel to a small beach on the next island to the north. Just above the high tide line I could see an assortment of brightly painted wooden poles, seemingly in the form of human beings.

“It gay yar,” explained Lujo. As we reached the totem poles, I saw that each pole was in front of a small dirt mound, and understood that Lujo was telling me we were in the Moken graveyard. The number of fresh graves was disturbing, at least fifteen mounds had been put in since the end of the rainy season in October, and some looked as though they had been buried within the last few weeks.

To hear the stories was sad, but to look at the reality of how quickly the Moken were disappearing was heartbreaking. Yes, I had my intellectual analysis of the reasons for the Moken’s decline, but it did nothing to ease my grief for the suffering they endured. Items had been left by the side of the graves – gifts to accompany the dead on their journey. Mostly, the offerings consisted of local cigars and whisky, but we also found toys and children’s items next more than a few graves.



At a team meeting back on the Sea Nomad, we discussed how our findings in Bo Cho village influenced our mission to help preserve the natural splendor of the Mergui. I suggested that the majority of unsustainable behavior – hunting, overfishing, etc. – was coming from the newly arrived Burmese population, and we should focus on conservation efforts on these communities. The best way to “protect” the Moken is probably to just let them be.

I had come to the Mergui hoping to be inspired by the Moken, to learn from their way of life, to absorb some of their simple elegance. But, wherever we seek heaven, there is also hell to be found. The old songs are being lost, and the droning lullaby of diesel engines now puts us to sleep at night, making us forget the pulse of *pachamama*. To be sure, there are still untouched clusters of Moken in the Mergui Archipelago, living the life they know best. Wherever I went, though, they were not to be found, because I was part of the same modernizing force that had subdued Souy and her friends. Their best hope is to be exposed to as little of the outside world as possible. So, I wish the last of the nomadic Moken luck, and hope that our paths do not cross, because that will be the end of their way.

Day 6

The next day we sailed onward to Lampi, the largest of the islands we visited. Lampi is uninhabited, and has been officially designated as a national park, but with no de facto protection. Andrea once again advised us that it was time to put on shoes, and we geared up. On the beach I noticed a large hole in the sand, with a distinct set of tracks leading it up to it from the waters edge. A sea turtle nest! Had they already hatched? Looking down at my feet, I noticed a half-smoked cigar and the broken remnants of a few eggs.



Apparently, they had not hatched, but instead had served as a delicious meal for a local villager. From the size of the tracks, we guessed that they had been Green or Olive-Ridley turtles.

Moving into the interior of the island we passed through beach forest, mangroves, and into an open savannah where cinnamon bee-eaters darted to and from the nests in the ground. Looking down, I noticed an enormously large piece of dung, perhaps the size of a loaf of bread.

“Um, Andrea,” I stammered, “this looks like...”

“Yes, it’s elephant shit,” he replied, “and they are supposed to be quite aggressive – they killed a fisherman on the beach a few years ago, so keep your ears and eyes open, and if they come for you, don’t run, don’t act afraid, don’t even move, it’s the only way you will survive.”

So, how on earth does a population of elephants come to live on a relatively small island sixty kilometers from the mainland? Well, when Thai loggers come to raid the Mergui, they often bring elephants with them. One such raid was busted by the Burmese government, and the authorities, not knowing what to do, released the elephants on Lampi, where they quickly gained a reputation for destroying fishing boats and protecting their newfound home.

Keeping a watch for enraged pachyderms, we came into a large clearing, perhaps the size of two football fields. In World War II, the Japanese had cleared a portion of the savannah to build an airfield that would support their conquest of Southeast Asia. Past the landing strip, the real forest began, and almost immediately I found three species of flowering orchids. As we walked toward the base of the hills, the trees and bushes of the forest were replaced by a dizzying assortment of palms, rattan vines, and ferns. The surroundings felt so foreign and ancient that I half-expected to see a dinosaur meandering by.



Day 7

We had now arrived at Hornbill Island – home to a large population of Pouched Hornbills who flock together each night in the island’s towering old-growth trees. Andrea had counted 115 individuals, making it a significant area for the conservation of this uncommon species. Hornbills, however, did not have a monopoly on the island. As the sun rose over the sea, birds of all kinds sang and darted back and forth in the canopy – eagles, kites, pigeons, kingfishers, sunbirds, orioles, drongos, and so on. The Folbot once again became a handy tool, and I was dispatched to count birds on the opposite side of the island.



I barely managed to get my kayak ashore before the outgoing neap tide exposed large mounds of coral, where thousands of bright red crabs foraged on the rarely-exposed reef. Stranded for the time being, I relaxed and counted the hornbills as they flew overhead – the noisy *swoosh swoosh* of their wings filling the air, the bright yellow of their enormous bills enriched by the afternoon sunlight. Sitting on the beach at sunset, I was struck by the stillness. The tranquility of this sandy shore was in stark contrast to the densely packed life found in the reef below and the rainforest above. The leaves of the

trees and bones of the animals eventually found their way here, as did the dead coral and shells from the sea. The beach, then, was a place of death, but also a place of transformation, a cyclical exchange between the land and the water.

Days 8 and 9

The adventures, research, and insights continued over the next few days. We made our way far up an inland river, swimming through murky freshwater swamps (more snakes!), and then hauling our dinghy a long way downstream to catch up with the retreating tide. We watched and counted birds in every possible location. We encountered a pod of dolphins who frolicked at the front of our boat. We shaved off all of the hair on our bodies and did cranio-sacral therapy (just kidding). We did, however, discover that the secret to life is still mystery, but an enjoyable one nonetheless.



As we sailed south towards Thailand, the air became hazy with smoke. Since our visit to Lampi only two days ago, someone had set fire to all of the lowland forests on the island. We went ashore to find the beach forest and savannah completely burned. The blooming orchids, the cinnamon bee-eater nests, the fields of golden grass, they had all been incinerated. Mystified by the destruction, we asked for an explanation, but neither Luca nor our Burmese companions had ever seen anything like it.



We all agreed that such widespread burning could only occur with tacit permission from the military. Perhaps, we concluded, people were trying to settle the land and claim productive use, hoping to be granted title to the land in the future. Often, when an area is on the verge of being protected, corrupt businessmen will settle the land and claim that they are entitled to ownership. The fact that this area is perfect for resort development, or at least will be if the

political situation improves, has not escaped the rich and powerful in Burma.

Day 10

On my last morning in the Mergui, I awoke knowing that I would miss these Islands, that I would yearn to come back, to learn more about this place. Bringing my attention to the present, I dove into the clear blue water and swam to the nearest island. Walking along the beach, I wondered if my time here had made a difference, what it was that I could learn. As the sandy beach turned into rocky shore, an oblong white object caught my eye. Picking it up, I realized it was a dolphin skull in almost perfect condition. I vividly remembered the dolphins from day before, how, as they swam near our boat, one had turned sideways and looked me in the eye.

There is still untouched natural beauty to be found and enjoyed in the world, but wherever it is, it is likely under threat. For those of us that love nature, who take solace in the embrace of the forest, the desert, or the sea, it is no longer enough just to observe. It is of vital importance to the health of the planet that we come to these places in service, to try and give a little more than we take. The dolphin skull that now sits on my porch is a constant reminder.

