

# Secluded sails

Looking for a quintessential deserted Thai beach? Find it on a small-ship cruise, says Joanna Booth



**W**e all know what Thai beaches are supposed to look like. Expanses of pale, powdery sand. Lush, jungly foliage. That insanely clear water, glowing an intense shade of turquoise so recognisable it should be called 'Thai shallows' on paint charts. Throw in a long-tail boat or two for good measure.

They're not supposed to be crowded. Those brochure beaches never contain hordes of people cramming themselves onto every inch of sand.

But the truth is, many Thai beaches are busy. They're beautiful, affordable, easy to access – no wonder they're so popular. But popularity leads to problems. Maya Bay in Koh Phi Phi Leh, the setting for 2001 film *The Beach*, became so over-visited that last year, Thai authorities closed it indefinitely to allow the ecosystem to recover.

Finding a deserted, brochure-worthy beach is no longer easy. It can involve lugging your bags on and off multiple ferries, and

staying in a tent – or clients could just hop on a small-ship cruise. Zero effort, all the reward. I know which I'd recommend.

Cruising on *Panorama II*, a handsome, 50m motor yacht, I'm dropped off at a different secluded bay each day for sunbathing, snorkelling and a great many smug photos. Delicious lunches appear as if by magic (we all know it's down to Roy, the ship's chef and a dab hand at the barbecue), and at the end of the day, it's a brief long-tail boat journey back to my comfortable cabin, one of 25 onboard.

#### ANDAMAN ADVENTURES

Intrepid Travel's Cruising the Thai Islands from Phuket itinerary starts from a convenient gateway but soon leaves behind that busy island with its three-lane motorway and inflatable flamingos floating alongside the long-tail boats, for more rarefied shores.

We head for Mu Koh Surin National Park, a protected area encompassing a group of five islands in the Andaman Sea. ➤



PANORAMA II

*Panorama II's* 25 wood-trimmed, blue-hued cabins are comfortable, if compact, with twin or double-berth layouts. Most have windows, though a few lower-category – and lower-deck – options come with a porthole.

The public areas reflect the sociable, low-key style of cruising, with a wood-panelled lounge, a lounge-lined sun deck and a shady bar-restaurant. Meals are friendly occasions, with free seating at communal tables, and a varied buffet of Thai favourites and Western choices.

A swimming platform at the stern makes the Andaman Sea the swimming pool, and fins, masks, kayaks and stand-up paddleboards are free to use.

The crew are friendly and approachable, from bartender Ricky to the captain himself, who operates an open-bridge policy.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: An onboard cookery demonstration; paddleboarding; Mu Koh Kam beach; cabin on *Panorama II*

PICTURES: Intrepid Travel



Here we have our first snorkel expedition of the tour, and for some of the guests – mainly retired British, Australian and American couples enjoying the freedom of newly empty nests – their first try at snorkelling ever. With some hand-holding from our guide and dive expert Golf, it's a gentle introduction; the calm, warm waters are home to a rewarding amount of marine life, including schools of barracuda, bright angelfish and elegant Moorish idols darting among the coral.

Then the long-tail boats that function as our tenders bring us within wading distance of Ao Mai Ngam beach. Splashing through the shallows, we find a family of clownfish darting around an anemone, then settle down on the almost-deserted sand. After a lazy, idyllic few hours of sunbathing, swimming, eating and meandering along the beach, we do something a little more intrepid – and a little more quintessentially 'Intrepid'.

The Moken people, known as sea gypsies, have special

“ We are taught to make a fiery *som tam* papaya salad as the sun sets the Andaman ablaze

dispensation to settle in the national park; after all, these islands and waters have been their home for hundreds of years. At their village – a collection of basic wooden huts by the water's edge – we learn something of their unique culture, language and Animist belief system, and have the chance to support their community by buying the wooden and woven handicrafts they make to sell to visitors.

A RELAXING RHYTHM

This pace – interspersing a little activity, a lot of relaxation and a dash of culture – is maintained

throughout the cruise. In Laem Son National Park, almost on the border with Myanmar, there's the chance to experiment with the *Panorama's* sea kayaks in a sheltered bay, or simply kick back on the beach in the hours after lunch. Back on board *Panorama II*, our guide Ay organises a cookery demo, teaching us to make a fiery *som tam* papaya salad as the evening sun sets the Andaman Sea ablaze.

On an unassuming stretch of coast on the mainland, we visit the simple fishing village of Ban Tale Nok. The Boxing Day tsunami of 2004 hit this quiet hamlet of just 56 families hard, destroying half the homes and taking 47 lives. Intrepid's payments for our tour go to a community fund, and as well as wandering the quiet streets, we get to sit down with two women, Ma and Cha, who teach us to make *kanom jak*, a local coconut snack. They also show us the process of soap-making, one of the cottage industries the widows of this predominantly Muslim village have adopted to keep their ➤



ABOVE: Soap-making in Ban Tale Nok

PICTURE: Peregrine Adventures

families afloat financially. Scented with local ginger, turmeric, tamarind and mangosteen, most of their stock is snapped up by our group, as gifts for friends back home.

Our last port of call is Khao Lak which, despite being far from Thailand's busiest resort, feels somewhat hectic

“ Scented with ginger, turmeric, tamarind and mangosteen, their stock is snapped up by our group

in comparison with our previous deserted shores. We visit the wave-shaped Ban Nam Khem tsunami memorial, made all the more poignant by our experience in Ban Tale Nok, and there's also free time to get a cheap-as-chips Thai massage, shop for souvenirs or head to a bar.

With its relaxed pace, off-the-beaten-track itinerary and small-ship accommodation, this trip bridges the gap between an adventure tour and a mainstream cruise. More laid-back and featuring higher-end accommodation than most Intrepid itineraries, it would be a great introduction for first-time adventure travellers. But with a small group, a boutique ship and a relatively immersive excursion programme, it might well tempt adamant non-cruisers to take their maiden voyage. And for those who prefer not to share their stretch of sand, it's by far the best way to discover those Thai beaches that are still secluded enough to look like the brochure in real life. **TW**

**BOOK IT**

**Intrepid Travel's** nine-day Cruising the Thai Islands from Phuket trip visits Khao Lak, Mu Koh Kam, Koh Phayam and Koh Surin Tai on *Panorama II*. Prices start at £1,649 including most meals, guided sightseeing and a hotel night in Phuket before embarkation, but not flights. [intrepidtravel.com/uk](http://intrepidtravel.com/uk)

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