

FOOTPRINTS

For centuries the haunt of reclusive sea gypsies, Myanmar's remote Mergui Archipelago offers one of the region's most idyllic—and vulnerable—yachting destinations.

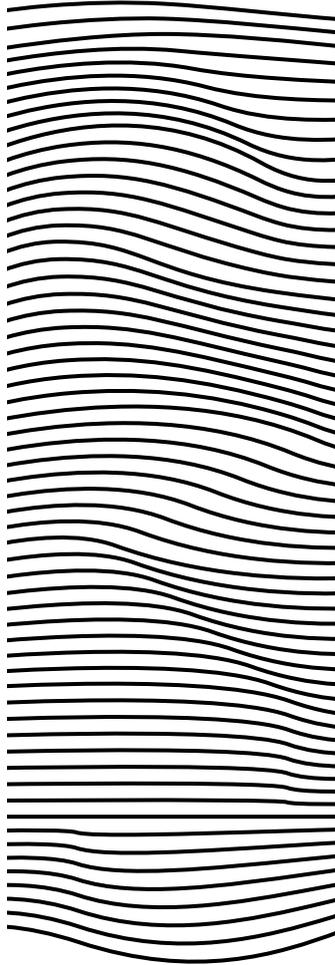
BY **KENDALL HILL** PHOTOGRAPHS BY **CHRISTOPHER WISE**

**A Beach of
One's Own**
Enjoying a solitary
moment on the
sandy shores of
Kyun Phi Lar Island.



**Whatever Floats
Your Boat**
Carrying up to eight
passengers at a
time, the 25-meter
ketch *Meta IV* is the
flagship of Burma
Boating's yacht
fleet.





In the 21st century it is difficult to imagine a corner of the world where 800 mostly uninhabited islands still exist in the heart of its most populous continent. Where annual visitors are measured in the hundreds, not the thousands. And where each morning, if I rise before my fellow sailors, I can swim to the nearest of these islands, leave the first footprints on its fine bleached sands, and inhale the honeyed perfume of blooming sea poison trees lining the shore.

This is how each day begins on a six-day sailing trip through the Mergui Archipelago in southern Myanmar, filled with pinch-me moments that more than reward the effort of getting here. Off-limits to tourism until the late 1990s, it is only in the last couple of years, since Myanmar opened up, that voyages through the islands have started to take off. Burma Boating, the outfit I'm sailing with, was one of the pioneers when they launched a website three years ago offering yacht charters. Within a fortnight they had their first reservation; in two months, they were booked out for the season. Demand was so strong they added a second boat in the first year; now they have six.

Cruising the Mergui

Burma Boating's five-night sailings depart Saturdays between late October and late April and cost from US\$2,050 per person twin share, including all meals, non-alcoholic drinks, and activities. Private charters are also available. For bookings, call 66-2/107-0445 or visit burma.boating.com.

Burma Boating's German co-founder, Christoph Schwanitz, tells me he discovered the islands by chance when he and a group of friends chartered a boat in Phuket to sail to India's Andaman Islands, about 800 kilometers to the northwest. Denied a visa, they instead set a course for the Mergui Archipelago, a day's sailing away.

"Nobody could tell us anything about it," Schwanitz recalls. The only other vessel he saw during a week at sea was *Eclipse*, the superyacht owned by Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich.

Things have changed, obviously, since then—dive boats and Burmese fishing boats are a more common sight now—but there is still a powerful sense of remoteness. Even getting here is an adventure: passengers must arrive in Kawthaung, Myanmar's southernmost point and the main gateway to the Mergui islands, by domestic flight from Yangon or via a long drive north from Phuket to the Thai border town of Ranong, and then make a slightly dodgy crossing of the Pakchan River by leaky longboat. But the sight of the 25-meter teak beauty *Meta IV* bobbing off Kawthaung's coast banishes any fears about this being some rough and ready expedition.

Our crew consists of Thai captain Ekachai Pongpaew, his uncle Chet, chef Wa, and our Burmese guide Aung Kyaw Kyaw (AK for short). They decide our precise itinerary according to prevailing winds and tides. "This is a relatively uncharted territory," Schwanitz says, "but we always have a Burmese guide on board and they know the area very well."

Life on board is barefoot (no shoes allowed) and do-as-you-please, be that learning the ropes when the *Meta IV* is under sail, or lazing on a sun lounger with a book. Below deck lie four compact but comfortable double berths with en suites. To be honest I'm less concerned with the slightly cramped bed than with the onboard catering (which is generally excellent) and whether the icebox is fully stocked (generally yes).

On the first night my last-frontier fantasies are drowned out by the hornet engines and spotlights of fishing boats sheltering beside us in Octopus Bay. These noisy boats become a regular, but thankfully not constant, feature of our island days.

The other folk we encounter often are the ethnic Moken, or sea gypsies, who have lived a semi-nomadic existence on these waters for centuries. We usually spy them standing upright like paddleboarders in their dugouts, scissoring oars to propel themselves across the sea.

The Moken have fascinated me ever since I read that virtually all of them escaped unharmed from the 2004 tsunami. Some reports suggested the Mokens' superior sea lore helped them read the signs of the looming catastrophe and move to safety. AK argues the islands' natural geography would have protected them from the worst of the waves. Either way, I'm keen to meet these fascinating people.

The first morning in the Mergui brings a swim in the warm Andaman waters, a kayak excursion to Za Det Nge island, and a few more sobering facts about the reality of this “pristine” archipelago. The beach at Za Det Nge looks postcard-perfect from a distance, but up close it is a marine dump. The taproots of tropical trees are snagged with faded plastics, glass bottles, expired flip-flops, polystyrene floats, and the accumulated jetsam of the ocean. Even more shocking is the discovery, when snorkeling these translucent waters, that dynamite fishing has decimated the region’s coral reefs. This is not the virgin paradise I was expecting. The government neglect that has spared the Mergui islands from the ravages of development has also, apparently, spared them any attention at all.

But it is still a paradise of sorts, as we’re reminded when we arrive at Za Det Nge by kayak and a ball of hundreds of black fish surrounds us then bleeds like ink into the shallows. Or when we’re under sail, with the engine cut, and the only sounds are the thwack of waves against the hull and the slap and billow of cloth above us. Or lying in bed on sultry nights and gazing up through the skylight at the starry firmament.

Our first sight of Ma Kyone Galet village is a row of rickety shacks on stilts lining the shore of Bo Cho island. There is a small pagoda to the left, and above it a lush path leading to a gilded stupa. We anchor offshore on the morning of day two, excited by the prospect of visiting a Moken village.

AK warns us before we leave the *Meta IV* that we will need shoes. “There is rubbish everywhere of course because this is a remote area,” he explains. “When we walk on the beach we need to take care a lot.” He’s not kidding: the muddy sand is mined with nasty shards of broken glass. Minding our steps, we make it safely to dry land and wander along a sandy street offering small cakes to children and observing the locals observing us. Women and children take shelter in the shade of stilt houses, hoping to catch a cooling breeze off the water.

During a sudden downpour we take cover in a humble café where the flat-screen TV shows a football match in a distant country. The people are welcoming, and I get to chatting with the village nurse. She says the most common illnesses on the island are malaria and cardiovascular disease. There are also injuries from knife attacks, she says, using her

hands to make slashing motions at her neck and ears.

We spend a happy half hour in the schoolhouse with shy but smiling children, taking photos and playing games. To reach the school we first have to cross an arched bridge over a squalid creek that functions as a communal garbage dump. While hundreds live in this village, AK reckons only about 80 are Moken. He says they settled in this east-facing bay for protection from the southwest monsoons. The *New York Times* reported a different story in 2013, however—that the Moken were forcibly settled here by the military junta in the late 1990s.

That same report quoted Jacques Ivanoff, a renowned ethnologist who has spent decades documenting this fragile culture, talking about tourism in the Mergui. Ivanoff told the *Times*: “Even if I don’t really like it, if foreigners come respectfully and aren’t asking the Moken to recreate ceremonial traditions, maybe it means that more people will become aware.” Schwanitz also sought Ivanoff’s opinion before starting Burma Boating. “His main mission, apart from studying the Moken, was to keep tourism out because he was convinced that would destroy them,” Schwanitz explains. “But now he thinks some kind of well-managed tourism, something that involves them, is the only thing that might save the Mokens’ future. Otherwise they will get completely marginalized by development and logging.” (Instituto Oikos, an Italian NGO working in the archipelago, also advocates controlled ecotourism to protect the region and its people.)

Ivanoff’s cautious blessing makes me feel slightly better about intruding on this village, but it can’t erase the glaring inequity between them and us—our shiny yacht versus their grinding existence. I read later that material possessions mean nothing to the Moken; their language has no words for “want” or “mine.” Even so, the visit dispels any romantic notions I had about the nomadic life of the sea gypsies. Back on the boat, AK tells me that rampant overfishing is threatening their survival. Last year, he asked one Moken family what they would do if they could no longer feed themselves from the sea. “If we can’t find the sea produce, we just die,” they told him.

“After this, I am really so sad for these people,” AK says.

To lift the mood Ekachai takes us to 115, better known as Honeymoon Island for the outrageous

WE LOAD THE COCKTAILS, BEER, AND SNACKS ONTO THE DINGHY AND HEAD TO THE BEACH WHERE THE CREW HAS BUILT A BONFIRE AND EKACHAI IS STRUMMING HIS GUITAR FOR ADDED SUNSET ATMOSPHERE

Cruise Control

Opposite, clockwise from top left: One of the four cabins on *Meta IV*; carried squid and grilled chicken from the boat’s galley; captain Ekachai Pongpaew charting a course through the islands; the first mate at the wheel.



**An Archipelago
Apart**

Many of the Mergui islands' craggy coastlines remained uncharted until recently. Opposite:
At anchor under a star-studded sky.









Coastal Encounters

Above, from left: Local fauna; a Moken sea gypsy in his dugout canoe. Opposite: A shore excursion to Kyun Phi Lar Island.

romance of its setting. There we swim and snorkel and marvel at the brochure-perfect beauty before motoring on to Kyun Phi Lar where our captain has promised us a “powder beach” (and he’s right—the sand feels like talcum powder between the toes). As we approach the island, the water erupts with fish leaping into the air and skidding along the surface on their tails. This is a very good omen for dinner.

We are not alone at Kyun Phi Lar. There are two Moken boats anchored at one end of the beach, silhouetted in the afternoon sun. They see us too and before long a delegation—two youngish men and a girl with curly, sun-streaked hair—pulls up to our yacht in a dugout. The crew brings them eggs, rice, fish, water, and sweets (and later a bottle of rum and cigarettes), and they give us a special treat in return—two lobsters.

The situation calls for cocktails. Each night one of us is in charge of sundowners, and tonight it is me. I decide that a rum-based concoction with mango, kiwi, and orange sounds good, but it turns out like a boozy smoothie. Regardless, we load the cocktails, beer, and snacks onto the dinghy and head to the beach where the crew has built a bonfire and Ekachai is strumming his guitar for added sunset at-

mosphere. In the pixelated twilight the sea turns to glass, a silvery blue mirror reflecting the last light in the sky. We snap photographs madly to remind ourselves that these islands really can be Asia’s Arcadia. Back on the boat, dinner under the stars. Chef Wa and Jiang Jing, our enthusiastic Chinese shipmate, have been busy catching tropical fish. An hour later Wa serves their haul sashimi-style as an appetizer to his *pièce de résistance*, the lobster.

I ask him how he’s cooked it. “Lobster thermidor,” he says, as if that’s the most natural dish to serve on a boat in the middle of nowhere. It’s one of those moments—in fact, one of those days—to treasure from the trip.

For now, charter yachts and dive boats are the only way to see the Mergui Archipelago. There is just one island resort, near Kawthaung; Schwanitz has heard of other developers with licenses to build hotels in the archipelago, but nothing has happened yet. “So far it hasn’t changed much because you can only get here by boat,” he says. “There are no villages, no roads, no telephone or Internet, and only two sources of fresh water. But 10 years from now, I’m sure this will be a very, very different world.” ●

Before the Mast
Captain Gener Paduga adjusting
the jib of the
Balatik, a 22-meter
outrigger that is the
largest traditional
paraw in the
Philippines.

