

The Illusive Andaman Islands: Worth the Effort to Get There!

About 50,000 years ago, humans migrating out of Africa and walking across the Middle East and Asia likely used the Andaman Islands as stepping stones to cross the sea to Indonesia and Australia. We know this because the last remnants of their ancestors still live on different islands in Stone Age tribal groups, now protected from intrusion by the Indian government. Fast forward to the modern era where there is hardly a patch of the planet that humans have not trod. Yet most people have no idea where the Andaman Islands are located, never mind how to get there. I would have been among them until I found myself living in Kolkata (Calcutta), India in 2012.



This slim north/south necklace of hundreds of mostly unsettled tropical islands parallels the coast of Myanmar (Burma) along the eastern shore of the Bay of Bengal. The Andamans are 1,000 kilometres or a two-hour flight from Kolkata, about the same from Chennai (Madras) further down the east coast of India. Determined international travellers most commonly fly from those two cities to the administrative capital of Port Blair (pop. 100,000) on Grand Andaman Island. The hardest adventurers may alternatively sample a two- or three-night ferry ride from the Indian mainland.

Those in search of a sun and sand vacation will quickly move on to Havelock Island, a 1.5 hour ferry ride by the privately-owned 280-passenger Makruzz catamaran or 2.5 hours aboard the older, cheaper government ferry. Out of curiosity, I travelled one way on each of them. Port Blair's incoming and outgoing flights don't dovetail with either ferry schedule to Havelock, so an overnight stay in the capital each way is a must.



Being keen on archaeology and history, I enjoyed several days around Port Blair whose highlights include an extensive anthropological museum that graphically walks visitors through 50,000 years of human presence in the islands, and the British Raj living museum of Ross Island. Today a ten-minute ferry ride across the harbour, it was the centre of administration during British colonial rule until India's independence in 1947.

Ross Island alone is worth a half day visit with well-maintained walking paths and plenty of outlooks to picnic or contemplate the arrogance and frailties of mighty empires. It is frankly unnerving but remarkably moving to see the sturdy colonial buildings, military barracks, once-gracious family homes and churches already so dramatically reclaimed by their natural surroundings in a mere sixty years.



As the darkest witness to British occupation, the monstrous, seven-wing Cellular Jail in Port Blair was opened in 1906 exclusively to confine Indian independence fighters ... as a museum this 693-cell honeycomb of tiny solitary confinement spaces today makes an impressive testimony to the life and death of its many prisoners. There is a son-et-lumiere show worth seeing inside the jail. Check for English show times.

Port Blair's best choice of accommodation is the Fortune Resort Bay Island (fortunehotels.in/resort/Port_Blair-Fortune_Resort_Bay_Island.aspx), perched on a cliff overlooking the Bay of Bengal, with a constantly changing tableau of freighters, ferries and yachts passing by below. The staff is well informed and helpful, the buffet is always plentiful, and the rooms are a comfortable four-star, together with the most abundant and imaginative stock of room amenities I have ever seen.

Not overcrowded and definitely demonstrating life in the slow lane, Havelock Island (pop. 6,000) is one of the few where visitors are permitted to go. It is a world-class diving and snorkeling paradise, the ultimate playground for swimming and surfing off fine sand beaches as well as kayak exploration among protected coves and mangrove forests. Roads are mainly one lane and paved with potholes, and the small fleet of three-wheeled tuk-tuk taxis are elusive when you need them. After the first day, I abandoned my lifetime self-prohibition on riding a motor bike or scooter, and with an attitude of fatalism rented a shock absorber-less scooter for US\$8 a day to randomly explore the 100 sq km island.



Andaman Bubbles Dive Centre (andamanbubbles.com) runs a top-notch operation that serves beginners to veteran divers. I spent a day on a comfortable dive boat with a dozen scuba enthusiasts from Britain and Europe and the leaders got unanimous rave reviews for their safety practices and their knowledge of coral reefs teeming with marine life. With another company, Barefoot Scuba (diveandamans.com), I enjoyed a morning of guided sea kayak exploration.

For an island of its size, there is a fair supply of accommodation from one-star hostels to three- and four-star beach resorts, but booking ahead is essential. Meals on Havelock are a pleasure with plenty of fresh seafood and prices from budget to multi-course fine dining. The two best accommodations are Barefoot at Havelock (barefootindia.com) and Wild Orchid (wildorchidandaman.com), each blessed with creative menus to compete with any in the world. Even if you are not staying there, do book a lunch or dinner.

In a more remote natural location than Wild Orchid and an extra 20 minutes on that scooter, Barefoot at Havelock exclusively fronts what Time magazine has dubbed one of Asia's best beaches, a two km swath of fine white sand fringed with verdant rainforest. Even more so at sunset, it is unforgettable with colour-tinged wave crests reflecting off the orange-red sky.

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