



deep sea drama

Murli Menon gives a first-hand experience of how it feels to go deep sea diving in Koh Noi at Phuket





without having to dip underwater. As I get adjusted to the vacuum around my nose and face and get used to breathing through the mouth, I start to enjoy the beauty of the ocean floor through my magnifying goggles. It is like watching a three-dimensional film on a giant screen. Rainbow coloured coral and undersea gardens appear as the water becomes more transparent!

THE DIVER'S DREAM DESTINATION

At Koh Noi the varieties of corals and the rich biodiversity of marine life coupled with clear warm waters and powdery white sandy beaches make it an irresistible magnet that draws



PIC: MURLI MENON

We are in Koh Noi or Coral Island in Phuket. The dream destination of every diver. Learning to dive is like travelling to an unknown destination. You watch hundreds of swimmers effortlessly diving into the pool with the smallest of splashes. You work up the courage to climb up the steps and as you are perched on your toes at the outer edge of the diving platform, you do not know how the dive will turn out to be. A perfect Greg Louganis type of dive,

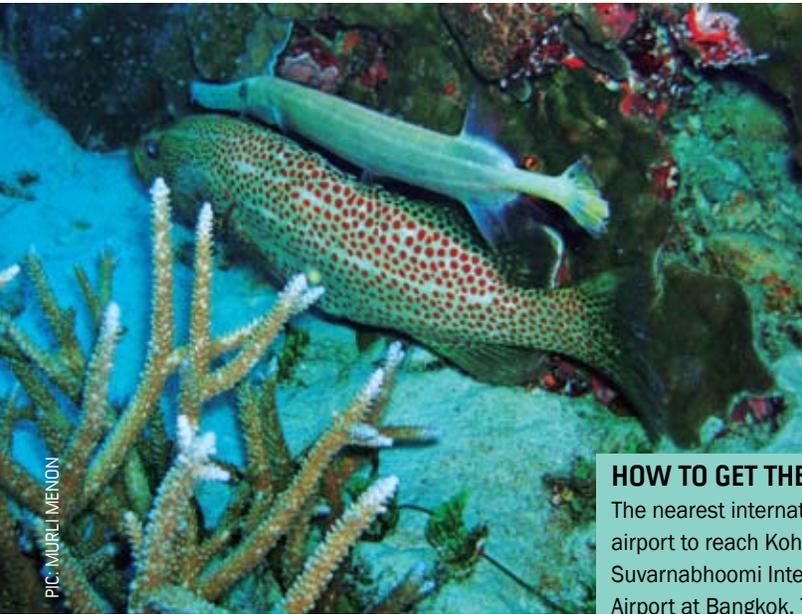
an awkward tumble into the water, or will you land upside down or fall like a lifeless stone into the water, your mind numb and body paralysed with fear!

The boat ride from Phuket to Koh Noi Island for diving is dramatic. Several small uninhabited islands emerge out of the blue waters as we pick up speed. The green cover and limestone caves impart a wild beauty to all these islands. The waters become clearer as we near Koh Noi.

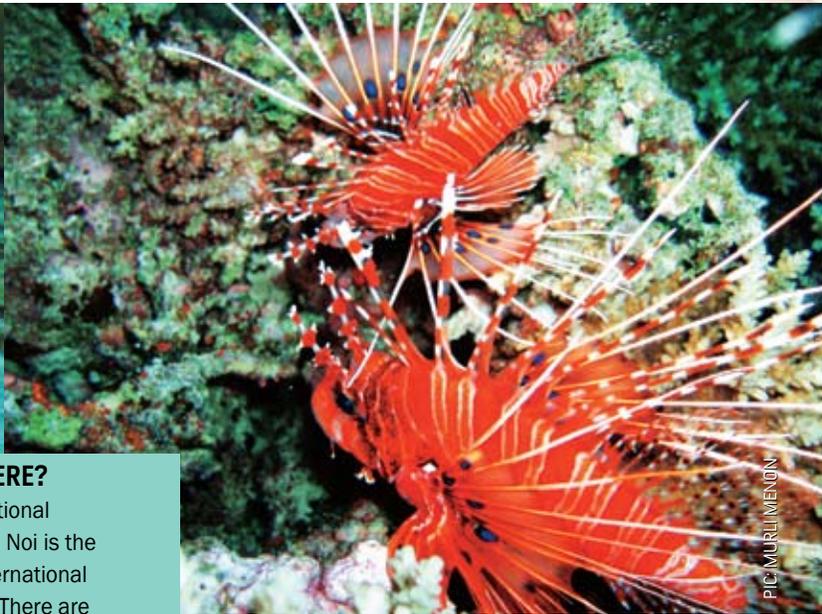
The ocean resembles a blue looking-glass as I don the diving mask, flippers and jump into the middle of the ocean a hundred metres from this enchanting isle. I see yellow coloured fishes swimming beneath the surface

amateur snorkelers, divers learning the ropes as well as dive instructors and professional divers. The aquatic world at the bottom of the ocean is not only incredibly beautiful, but observing the various genera of coral and hundreds of varieties of fishes swimming alongside, is in itself a treat to one's eyes.

In this area is a gentle slope with hard coral gardens, sandy bottom and unbroken coral blocks that stretch for several hundred feet. Colourful varieties of cloudfish and parrotfish .can be seen swimming in circles through the innumerable crevices within the coral gardens. As one swims towards the white sandy beach, one



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encounters partially submerged corals too! A fish that leaves an impact on you is the Panda clownfish, which is as unusual as its name. The larger holes among the corals are home to moray eels surrounded by green fishes which resemble symmetrically arranged green corals. However, as I dive to observe them closely, these green eels disperse in the fraction of a second. I have just experienced the magic of camouflage used by green eels to avoid predators!

FLOORED

Diving in the afternoon helps one to explore the underwater coral gardens. One can observe the colonies of corals and the marine life which shelter under these corals. At times one sees lots of colourful fishes swimming in synchronicity across the transparent deep blue waters. The symmetry, harmony and telepathic communication between these tiny fishes, which move as one seamless whole has to be seen to be believed.

As I dive deeper and start examining the ocean floor, I am amazed at the variety of the coral genera. Giant corals resembling dining tables lie undisturbed on the ocean beds. Apty named table corals, they stretch for kilometres

HOW TO GET THERE?

The nearest international airport to reach Koh Noi is the Suvarnabhoomi International Airport at Bangkok. There are several options for Indian tourists to get to Koh Noi from Bangkok. From Bangkok, one must fly to Phuket. From Phuket airport, one has to transfer to Phuket bus station.

WHERE TO STAY?

Mangosteen Resort and Spa at Phuket is a value for money proposition which offers five star comforts at three star rates during the low season (July to October). A standard double room costs approximately .3000/- inclusive of American breakfast. Budget conscious, middle-class Europeans frequent this eco-friendly property at this time of the year.

WHERE TO EAT?

Many small restaurants serving Thai cuisine dot Koh Noi. Freshly steamed banana in palm jaggery sweetened coconut milk is a nutritious meal in itself, which vegans will relish. The food at the high profile hotels is for the gastronomically adventurous who like greasy food. Fresh tropical fruits including durians, mangosteens, pineapples, tender coconuts and jack-fruits are available at the local market.

around this island and one can spend a day getting lost in this endless colony of corals. As I float yet deeper into the sea, the colours and shapes of the corals change at a rapid pace. I sight corals with tiny spine like projections lying on the bed of the ocean like fallen jackfruits. There are also the green coloured traditional corals. A majority of the coral gardens are either deep brown or rust in colour, but at times one can see splashes of green, orange or red and these contrasting colours illuminated by the molten gold of the reflected sunlight and the clear blue waters project a picture of unparalleled natural beauty painted by nature's delicate paintbrush, dipped in the colours of the rainbow.

COLOURFUL VOYAGE

It is a pleasure to watch schools of tiny fishes finding their way through the corals like shooting stars. One explores the hidden treasures of nature, tucked away under calm seas, in the folds of limestone formations, millions of years old. Some of the fishes one encounters while diving include flying fish and silverfish. Yellow coloured heart shaped fishes painted with black stripes are everywhere.



Observing the underwater flora and fauna at Koi Noi, is a voyage in discovery. New colours, shapes and forms spring out of the water at every moment. Innumerable microscopic fishes emerge out of the coral belts swimming in synchronicity. Sea anemones sway gently in the waves. Starfishes are scattered in disarray all over. Sea urchins rest peacefully on the corals. Once in a while one sights a giant sea-turtle or several starfishes.

Some of the transparent fishes sparkle like twinkling stars in the shimmering afternoon sunlight and appear to vanish for a few seconds before being visible again. This is indeed an incredible miracle of nature. Fishes

sparkling like stars under the sea! As one explores the reefs further one realises that the diversity of the corals are no less than that of the hundreds of species of colourful fishes that swim through them. The corals that can be seen adorning the ocean floor include giant barrel sponges sandwiched between colonies of mushroom corals.

LIGHT AND LIFE

The soft corals are full of life as they increase their length twice as much under the influence of strong currents. It's like watching an ant under a magnifying lens! Christmas tree worms carpet the surface of banana leaves shaped corals. Starfishes and sea

clams rest on rocks and enjoy the faint traces of sunlight that illuminate their undersea homes. A few sea turtles move at snail's pace, almost swimming in slow motion. The most amazing thing about diving is the ability to be able to observe the almost humanlike emotions that play across the faces of these undersea miracles of nature. One can almost see the smug look on the face of the rainbow coloured parrotfish. Or the elegant poise of the light purple coloured and delicate cloudfish. One can never forget the sinister look in the eyes of the scorpionfish as it awaits its next victim. The bubbly laughter on the faces of the clown fish is apparent for all to see! 

