

First Class Around The World

**DIVING OFF KOH NOI ISLAND
(PHUKET, KINGDOM OF THAILAND)**



Diving off Koh Noi Island at Phuket

by Murli Menon*

One is writing this from the cool confines of one's hill-side villa at [Mangosteen Resort and Spa at Phuket](#), in southern Thailand. The romance of traveling to an unknown destination is like learning to dive. You watch hundreds of swimmers effortlessly diving into the pool with the smallest of splashes. One works 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 close your eyes in silent anticipation. 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 after all the mental preparation and effort you may end up 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 one picks 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 one adorns one's diving mask, flippers and jumps into the middle of the ocean a hundred metres from this enchanting isle. One can see yellow coloured fishes swimming beneath the surface of the sea, without having to dip your eyes underwater. As one gets adjusted to the vacuum around one's nose and face and gets used to breathing through the mouth, one starts to enjoy the beauty of the ocean floor through one's magnifying goggles. It is like watching a three dimensional movie on a giant screen. Rainbow coloured coral and undersea gardens appear as the water becomes more transparent! One begins to enjoy every step of this underwater exploration.

Koi Noi or Coral island in Phuket is the dream destination of every diver. 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 amateur snorkelers, new divers learning the ropes as well as dive instructors and professional divers to visit Coral Island again and again. 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 ones pond facing room as eyes.

Much of the diving 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 encounters partially submerged corals too! One of the fishes that leaves a deep impact on you is the Panda clownfish, whose description is as beautiful as its unusual name. The larger holes among the corals are home to moray eels surrounded by green fishes which resemble symmetrically arranged green corals. However, as one dives to observe closely, these green eels disprse in the fraction of a second. One has just experienced the magic of camaflouge used by green eels to avoid predators!

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 needs to be seen to be believed.

As soon as one dives deeper and starts examining the ocean floor, one gets amazed at the variety of the coral genera. Giant corals resembling the dining tables at our homes lie undisturbed on the ocean beds. Aptly named table corals, they stretch for kilometres around this island and one can spend a day getting lost in this endless colony of corals. As one floats deeper into the sea, the colours and shapes of the corals keep changing at a rapid pace. One can sight corals with tiny spine like projections, lying on the bed of the ocean like fallen jackfruits. Green coloured traditional corals can also be seen. 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 this 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.

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 can be seen everywhere.

Observing the underwater flora and fauna at Koi Noi, is a voyage in discovery. New colours, shapes and forms are spring out of the water at every step. Innumerable microscopic fishes emerge out of the coral belts swimming in synchronicity. The symmetry, harmony and telepathic communication between these tiny fishes, which move as one seamless whole needs to be seen to be believed. Sea anemones sway gently in the waves. Starfishes are scattered in disarray all over. Sea urchins rest peacefully on the corals. Once in while one sights a giant sea-turtle or several starfishes.

The colourful fishes swimming through these coral reefs add to the beauty. 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 natures. Fishes sparkling like stars under the sea! As one explores the reefs further one realizes that the diversity of the corals are no less than 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.

The soft corals are full of life as they increase their length twice as much under the influence of strong currents. Its 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 snails delicate paintbrush pace, almost swimming in slow motion. Its pace, almost swims a pleasure watching these tiny group of turtles swimming across the giant corals huddling together for safety and comfort. 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 he 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!

As one progresses further, the size of the fishes become smaller and one sees many finger shaped, transparent, colourless fishes swimming alongside each other in large groups. These fishes take advantage of the formation to increase their effectiveness and efficiency. One can also sight many starfishes scattered all over the corals, resting in silence. Jellyfishes are everywhere. Sea anemones, a few stray clams and sea-urchins can also be seen. Once the novelty of the corals and fishes wear off, its time to explore the natural beauty of this sparsely populated island.

How to get there?

The nearest international airport to reach Koh Noi is the Suvarnabhoomi International Airport at Bangkok . There are several options for 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 low season (July to October) and is a value for money proposition by Indian standards. A standard double room costs approximately .500/- USD inclusive of American breakfast, Spa treatments at a Poolside Villa. High end, Americans and European tourists, frequent this eco-friendly property throughout 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 only 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.

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