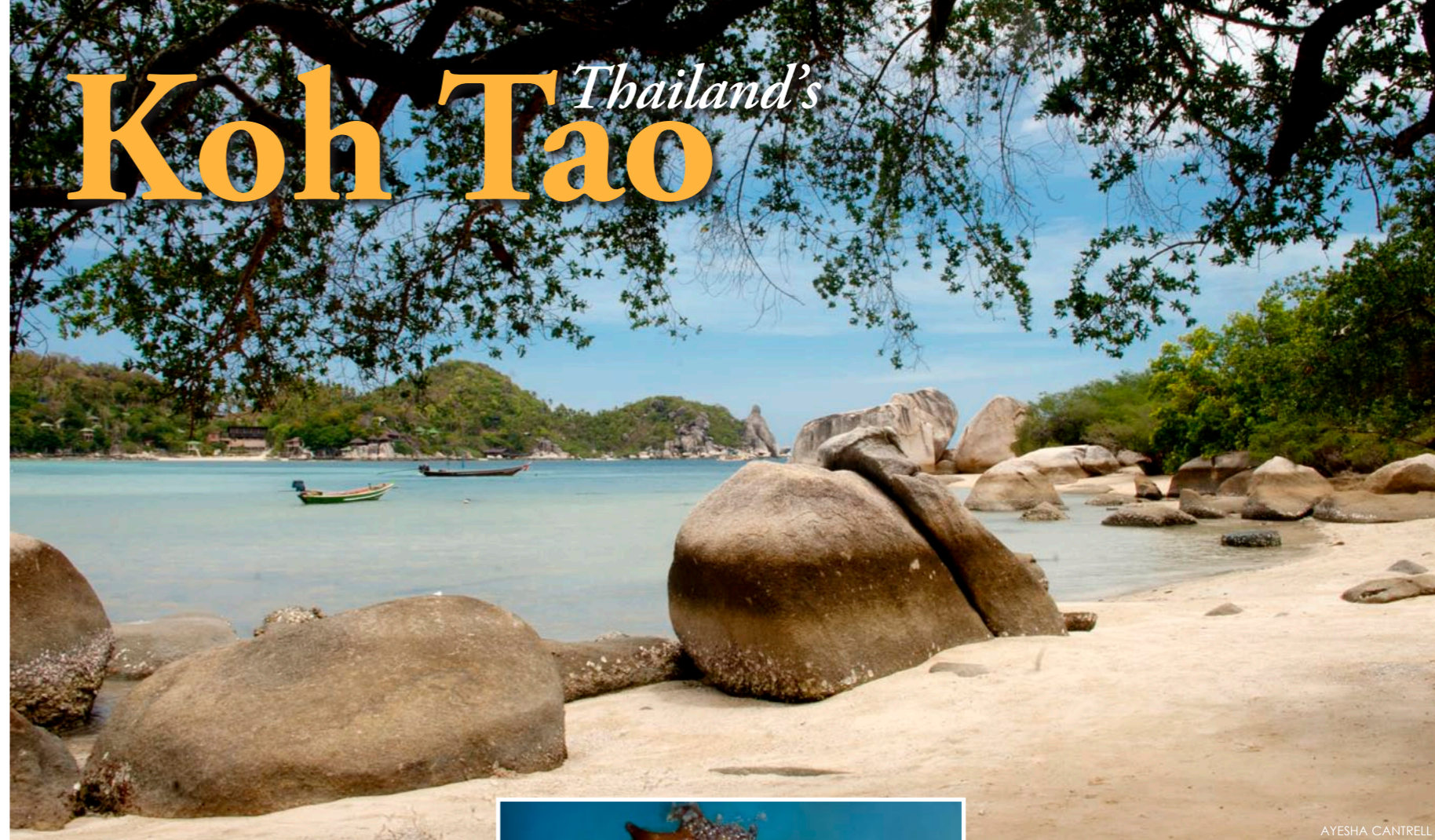




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Barrel sponge covered with segmented worms underneath the mooring line at Chumphon Pinnacle

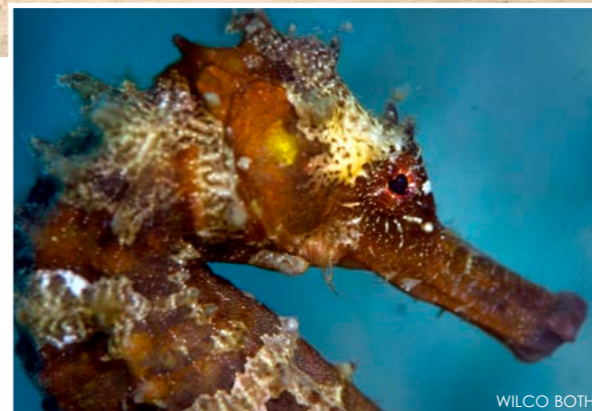


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Koh Tao *Thailand's*

Text by Ayesha Cantrell. Photos by Ayesha Cantrell, Wilco Both and Nick Shallcross

If anyone was to mention diving in Thailand to you, then you would most likely think of one of the west coast destinations. Hardly a thought would be given to the small island of Koh Tao, which lies off the east coast in the Gulf of Thailand. I live and dive here, so I find this lack of attention a little unfair. Yet, it's hardly surprising, as it's largely overlooked by dive travel specialists, and for the most part, dismissed as nothing more than a diver training centre. This apparent lack of appreciation is even more surprising when one



WILCO BOTH

Common seahorse, *Hippocampus kuda*, in the sand off Pottery Pinnacles

considers that the two coasts of Thailand are seasonally almost opposite. When the Similans and Surins are closed and weather plays havoc with conditions at other west coast locations, the east coast is bathed in brilliant sunshine, reflecting off seas the color of that well known blue-bottled gin brand.

Looking out at the ocean at Chalock Ban Khao on the south of Koh Tao

So, which is best? This is an explosive debate for those who haunt the Internet forums. Living here, I'm probably not objective enough to answer it. What I will say is that they are simply different.

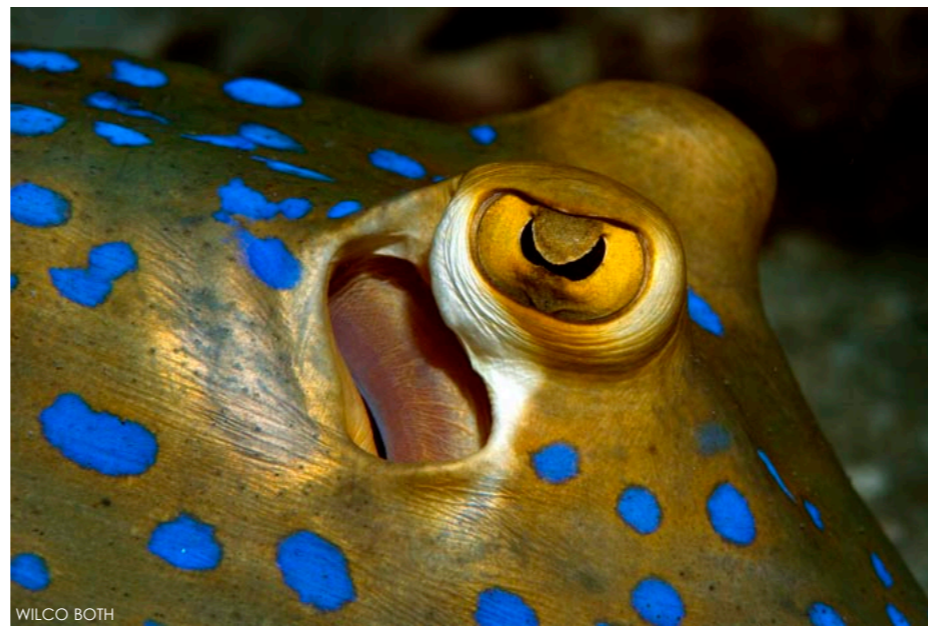
University of diving

So, let's get this on the table straight away. The island is home to around 40 dive centers and is a diving hot spot for those looking to learn anything dive related. It's probably one of the few places in the world where you can go to take training in any language with any of the major agencies to any level. It's all here, within walking distance, which makes it similar to a university town for divers only. Surely, this should not preclude Koh Tao from being a dive desti-





NICK SHALLCROSS



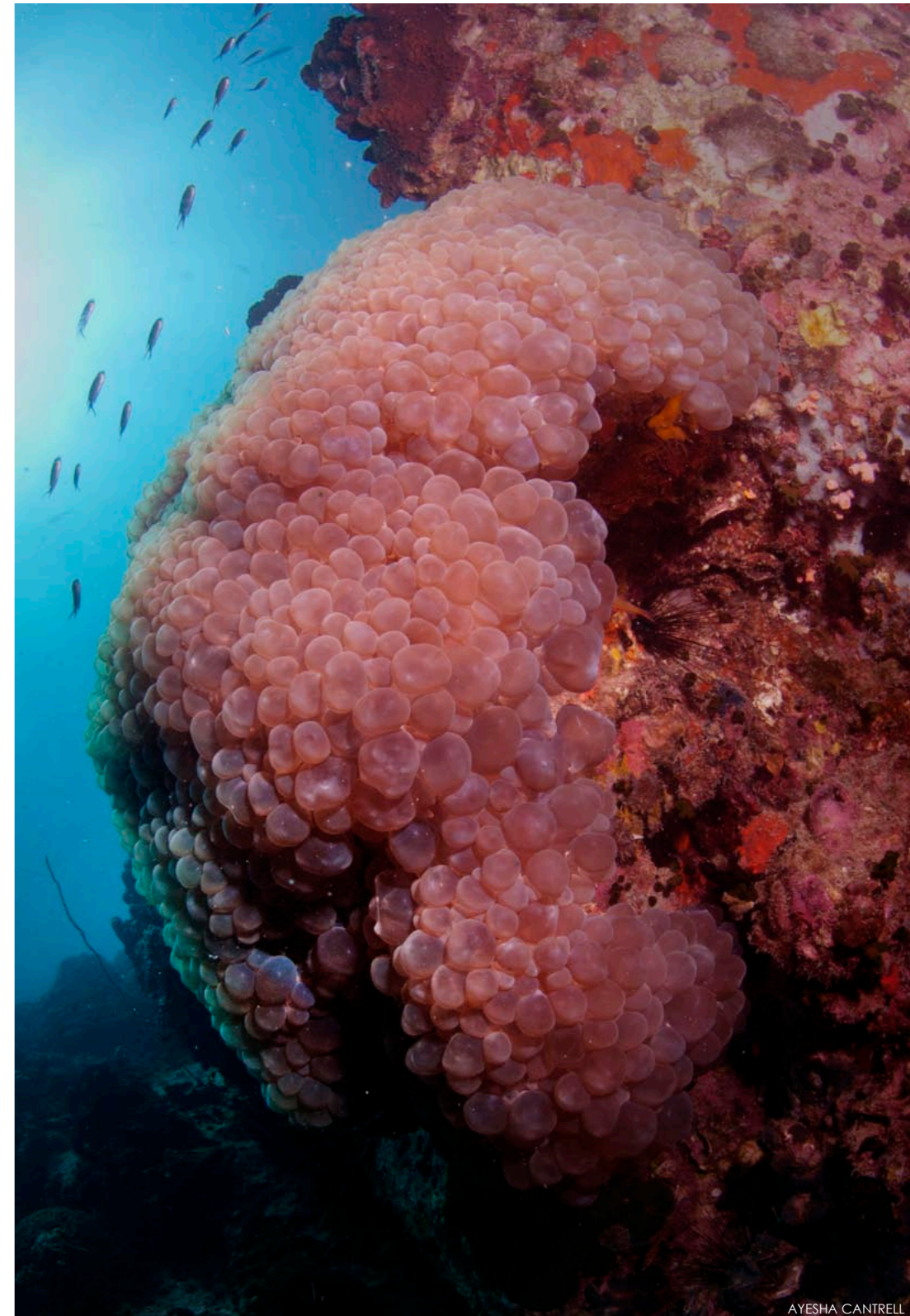
WILCO BOTH

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Polka dot nudibranch *Jorunna funebris* found in most numbers at Shark Island; Bluespotted ribbontail ray at White Rock; Bubble coral at White Rock; *Pseudobiceros bedfordi* courting at Twins

What's in a name?

Koh Tao actually means 'turtle island'. It was named for its appearance; from a certain approach, it does indeed look like a turtle. It's simply coincidence

that both the shiny polished green turtle and its somewhat unkempt looking cousin, the hawk-bill, choose to hang out here. Similarly, Shark Island—a small island and dive site that lies to the



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nation, too?
I arrived here many years ago to join the scuba fraternity, and I love the diving today as much as I did then. I saw my first whale shark here gliding around

Southwest Pinnacle—a truly awesome experience. I've enjoyed many such encounters here since. The individuals that pass by are usually around four to five meters in length and hardly ever more than two at a time. Koh Tao is not the *seeing-spots-before-the-eyes-splash-fest* for which other dive locations are famed, but it is one of the few places in the world where you might see these leviathans soar past you underwater.

Between a rock and a hard place

Southwest and Chumphon Pinnacle are the deepest sites here and are home to the frenetic reef life activity that you would expect of any open ocean site. Huge malabar groupers rest

languidly at cleaning stations and seem as reluctant to vacate as any armchair aficionado. Schools of pick handle, chevron and yellow-tailed barracuda twist past, fusiliers whirl in a yellow pulsing mass, and jack fish and mackerel stalk the unwary. Batfish shimmer in the current and anemones and their pink inhabitants carpet the pinnacle. What's not to like?

The two sites differ in their topography. Chumphon Pinnacle reminds me of Table Mountain in Cape Town, South Africa, whereas Southwest Pinnacle is a more typical pointy mountain shape. Like the majority of underwater formations here, they consist of boulders of varying shapes and sizes. The island's coastline is made from the same rugged material, which juts, overhangs and leans, making for interesting formations. Underwater, it is more so, creating swim-throughs, majestic pinnacles and plenty of hiding spots for their inhabitants.

The coral reef has grown up and around the boulders, creating pinnacles full of life with coral beds spanning in between. Coral is mainly of the hard type, and

I think that this is one thing that makes Koh Tao different. There are a myriad of different varieties here and some amazing hard coral gardens. Fantastic specimens of staghorn, brain, table, lettuce, knobby, porities, mushroom and slipper coral can all be seen in some great formations making an interesting and varied backdrop.

No matter how breathtaking the coral texture and formations are, it is all the same colour. Is this another reason that Koh Tao could seem lackluster when compared with saturated images of colorful soft coral in other locations? However, splashes of color are added by barrel sponges, with their segmented worms feeding on that which the sponge filters out, and Christmas tree worms adorn coral everywhere in glorious blues, yellows, reds, pinks, greens and variegated, adding a rainbow to the reef. I never tire of watching them hide and slowly emerge. In addition, butterflyfish, parrotfish, angelfish and luminous moon wrasse are conspicuous against the muted color of the hard coral reef.



NICK SHALLCROSS



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CLOCKWISE: Divers passing overhead at Chumphon Pinnacle; Titan trigger fish, *Balistiodes viridescens*, in attack mode at Green Rock; Comensal shrimp living in an anemone at Junkyard Reef



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Koh Tao

underwater world over for its defensive tactics. While titans can be seen or avoided at most sites here, Green Rock is the best place to see their slightly smaller and more passive yellow margin cousin. The sands around the rock are dotted with pits, but do take care, as there are titans around, too.

Green Rock itself is great fun for those who love a good swim-through. It's like a like a block of Swiss cheese, riddled with passages and crooked overhangs—a great place to spot wart slugs and banded sea crates as well.

After dark

White Rock is certainly worth several dive trips and definitely one at night. Its randomly heaped boulders and expansive coral gardens teem with life. Turtles frequent the site, and the eagle-eyed will have fun spotting scorpion fish and nudibranch.

At night, the dive site comes alive



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south—was named for its fin-like shape rather than its inhabitants. This is a great place to find polka-dot nudibranch and one of the only places you will see Weibels butterflyfish schooling.

Koh Tao legend has it that one of the first divers to explore the sites around the island was Italian, which is why we have sites called Red Rock, White Rock and Green Rock. Whether there's truth to this anecdote, I don't know, but it makes for a nice story.

Red Rock and White Rock sit just off the coast of Koh Nangyuan, which is actually a couple of small islands joined by a sandbar off the northwest coast of Koh Tao.

drop-off point for the gentle dive along the coast into Japanese Gardens. This coastline is home to the pink-tailed triggerfish -- a much shyer specimen than its much larger cousin, the infamous titan triggerfish.

The titan trigger is the largest in the triggerfish family and is famed the

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Longfin bannerfish, *heniochus acuminatus*, can be seen all over Koh Tao

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Huge barrel sponge at Shark Island; Amazing hard coral formations at Mango Bay; Orsaki Flatworm, *Maiazone orsaki*, at Twins; Malabar grouper, *Epinephelus malabaricus*, being cleaned on the west side of Chumphon Pinnacle; Durban dancing shrimp at the pinnacles of Hin Ngam



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with chevron barracuda hunting by your torchlight, bluespotted ribbontail rays marauding in the sand and multicolored feather stars unfurling and strolling around the reef. For many divers, the opportunity to peer at a sleeping titan triggerfish is a must, and White Rock is where you'll find them tucked up for the night.

Twins is a fun site in the daytime and has been expanded with artificial reef structures designed to give new divers somewhere to practice their buoyancy. At night, it's a cool critter corner. While you are not so likely to see barracuda hunting, you and your buddy will probably be the only divers there. You are likely to see a turtle turn-

ing in for the night as well as a myriad of shrimp, black and white sole, numerous varieties of crabs and a range of camouflaged critters.

Fighting talk

Diving has taken me all over the world, yet nowhere else have I encountered fish with the punch that they pack in Koh Tao. This is

not just limited to the triggers, which, to my mind, seem abnormally large versus the specimens I have seen elsewhere.

The farmer damselfish quite often give you nasty nips, as you approach their algae garden and are as feisty and territorial as

a dog with a bone. Watch them driven to distraction when a huge school of juvenile parrotfish scours the reef for food. The cleaner fish and moon wrasse seem to be unable to distinguish divers from fish; woe betides you if you jump in





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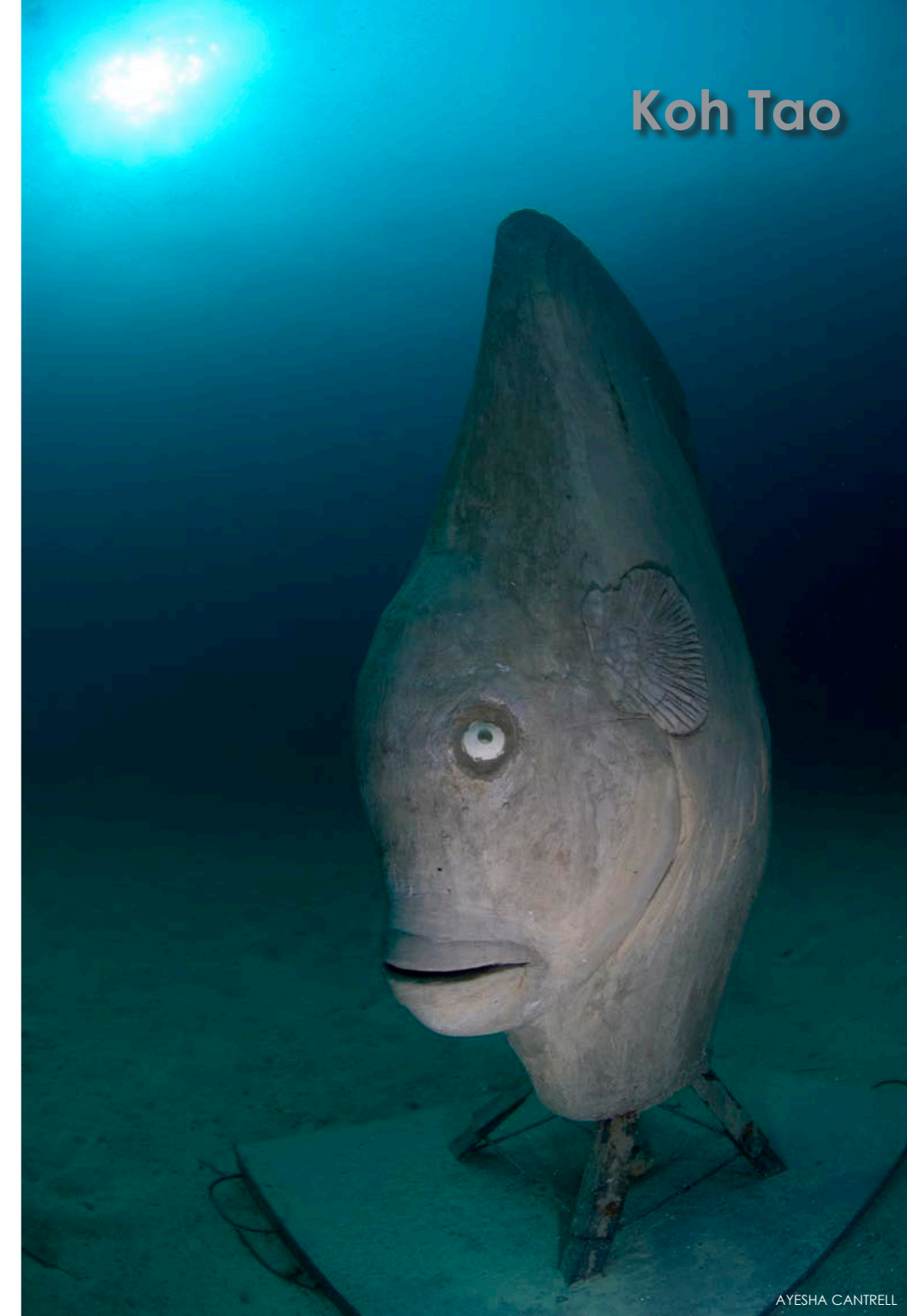


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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Coral nursery structure in Aow Leuk Bay; Saddleback anemonefish and eggs on a discarded bottle off Pottery; Nudibranch *Chromodoris aureopurpurea* on sand close to Pottery Pinnacle; Batfish statue in a buoyancy training area near Koh Nangyuan; Hermit crab at Hin Ngam; Gym equipment, one of the structures at Junkyard Reef



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with any cuts or scrapes. The saddleback anem-

onefish will quite literally rear up and head-butt you, and given half a chance, give you a decent nip, too.

While the anemones that cover the reefs are home to the charming pink anemonefish, you have to head out into the sand to find "Nemo". The best place to do this is to depart from Pottery Pinnacle, around the outskirts of Junkyard Reef or North Sairee. You need a guide who knows where he or she is going, but the specimens are fabulous -- you won't be disappointed. Not only will you be blessed with numerous examples, they often have eggs, as well. You can actually see the eyes in these tiny bubbles, and watching the adults nurture them is mesmerizing.

Around and about, you are quite likely to be treated with some newsworthy nudibranch and flatworms. Pottering around in the sand is usually very rewarding and often turns up filefish, pufferfish, pipefish, mantis shrimp, crabs and even seahorses.

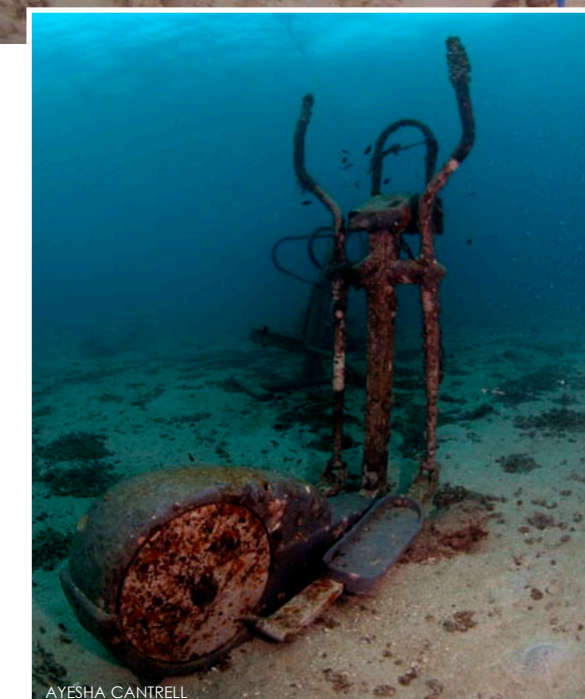
Wrecked

There are many wrecks littering the Gulf of Thailand, but the greater number are in the 50-70m depth range. Koh Tao is the jump-off point for a liveaboard to visit these wrecks, and if you are trained to this depth, then it's a remarkable trip. The WWII USS Lagarto lies in little over 70m of water. She's fully intact and sits upright in warm clear water. There are other wrecks of the same vintage, P.O.W carriers, munitions ships, drill platforms and many more, and the best bit is that they are virtually un-dived.

Don't worry though—Koh Tao has a cou-

ple of wrecks in recreational depths. The MV Trident, which is credited for finding many of the above wrecks, was laid to rest to begin a new life as a wreck herself. She was scuttled in September 2010 and is already encrusted with life. She lies in just over 35m of water just to the south of the island. Barracuda and grouper already haunt the vessel, and the small fry that use the wreck for protection are prolific. She can be a more challenging dive. Due to her location, she is prone to current, so make sure you choose a centre that dives her according to local tide tables.

The most recent metal addition went



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down in June 2011. The HTMS Sattakut served her time as a landing craft for infantry. Launched in 1944, as part of the U.S. Navy, she saw action in the Pacific Theatre of War before being transferred to Thailand in 1947 for use by the Royal Thai Navy. She was donated to Koh

Tao with the purpose of creating a new dive site and artificial reef. Unfortunately, bad weather hit on the day she was to be sunk. The result was that, not only did she sink in the wrong place, but she was also lying on her side in silt. This wasn't



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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The bow of the *HTMS Sattakut*; Diver and green sea turtle at Hin Pee Wee; Hin Wong Bay on the east coast of Koh Tao; Deck gun (below) on the *HTMS Sattakut* thankfully undamaged while being encouraged to rest upright

exactly the plan!

In late July, efforts were made to move her to her planned destination where she sat upright for less than 24 hours. Clearly, her belligerence was not to be tamed. Thanks to careful engineering, she now sits proudly upright. She is 48m long, has guns both fore and aft, and lies at a depth of 30m. Fish

life moved in quickly, and a large green turtle splits its time between the wreck and the neighboring dive site Hin Pee Wee.

She is perfect for penetration with large clear passage ways and roomy corridors. Most divers tour the wreck then head off from the bow and complete the shallower portion of their dive at Hin Pee Wee. Banded sea snakes are a common sight here, along with the myriad of usual reefs suspects, and it's a more pleasant way to end your dive versus hanging in the blue.

away. This means you can make two dives and be on the beach by lunchtime—



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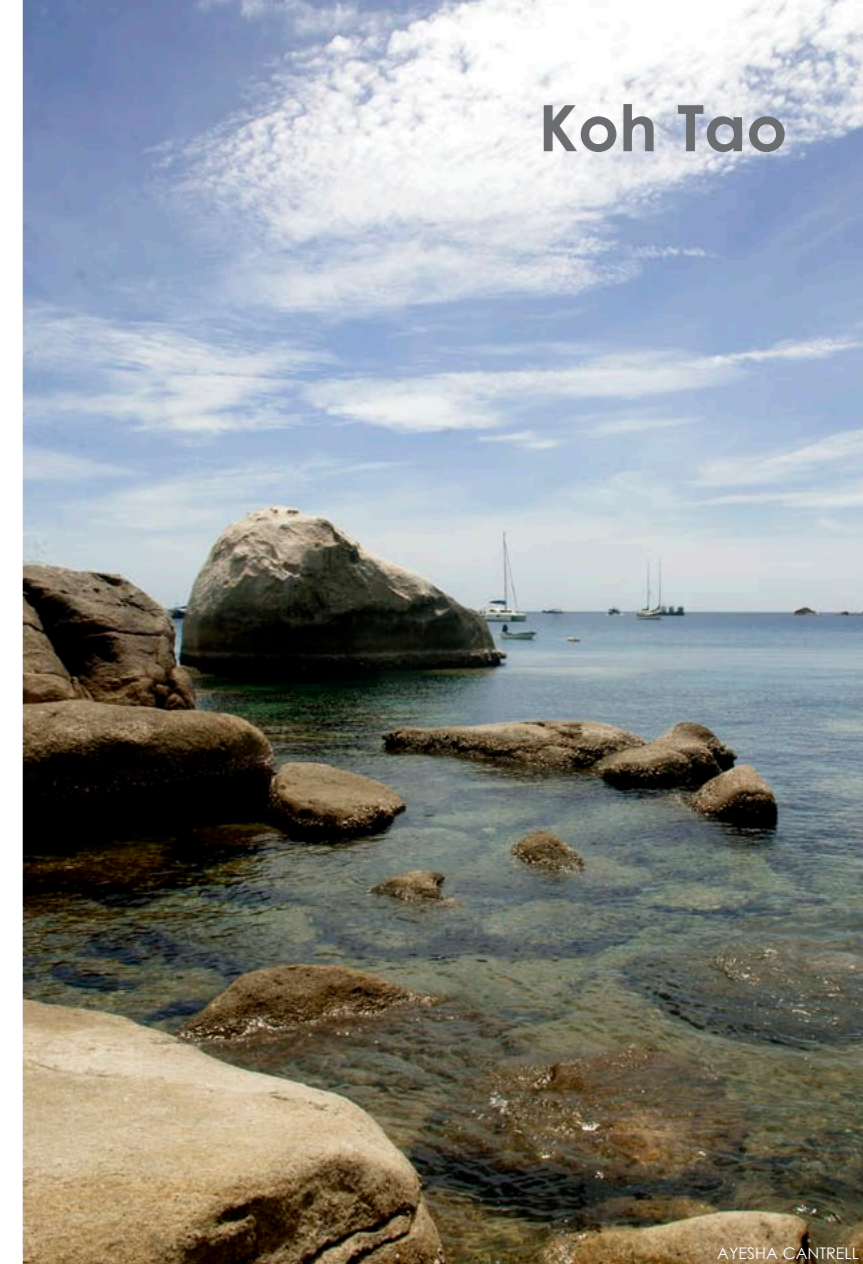
Topside activities

Dive sites are accessed by boat, and the furthest site is little over 40 minutes



WILCO BOTH

Hermit crab trying to hide



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Barrel sponge surrounded fairy basslets *pseudanthias* at Chumphon Pinnacle

perfect for those who travel with families or non-divers. There's lots to entertain them, too, so they may hardly notice that you are gone.

Non-diving daredevils will enjoy the flying trapeze school, the island to island zip line, rock climbing and cliff jumping. Beachcombers will enjoy exploring the many bays on Koh Tao, taking a kayak out for a spin to explore the boulder-forged, rugged coastline and plunging in to snorkel and enjoy the ocean sites from the surface. Cooking and massage courses are available as well, spas are a-plenty, and there's even ten-pin bowl-

ing and mini golf. Of course, land-loving travelling companions may just want to relax, soak up the sun and rip through those holiday novels. But there are also opportunities for families to learn about the local environment and how to protect the fragile ecosystems.

Environmental

The bleaching incident that damaged many reefs all over the region a few years ago did impact the reefs on Koh Tao, but not to the extent seen elsewhere. By and large, the reef stood up well and recovered, leaving the area in



SOURCE: MASTER DIVERS

Map of Koa Tao dive sites



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This could be you at the flying trapeze school in Sairee

comparatively much better condition. A journalist recently asked me about the effect of divers on the environment and in a concentrated area like Koh Tao,

this was probably a valid question. My answer was that the impact was positive. There are many environmentalists on this small rock who tirelessly educate on the issues facing the ocean. Divers cannot fail to come away with some new understanding of the challenges facing the ocean and what they can do to help.



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Giant hairy hermit crab at Twins

Over the years, many different environmental projects have been undertaken, from the safeguarding, rearing and releasing of juvenile turtles, to sponsored swims for shark charities.

You will find reef and wild life monitoring programs in place, as well as artificial nurseries and artificial reefs, too. These sites have been successful in offering new habitats, growing and transplanting of coral as well as relieving pressure on other sites. If you want to learn and know more about the environment, then the knowledge and experience is here. If not, make sure you visit one of these sites; they're a great place to spot both the unusual and juvenile specimens.





AYESHA CANTRELL



Diver and photographer Ayesha Cantrell

anything at all, it's perfect. Junior divers and those new to diving will gain some valuable experience without too much challenge, yet still be awed. It's a wonderful location for children to learn to dive, and it won't break the bank either. So, if you fit into any of these groups, be a devil and put this overlooked isle on your shortlist. ■

Ayesha Cantrell is a PADI and SSI Instructor and part owner of Master Divers on Koh Tao, Thailand. She is a passionate photographer, loves writing and amongst other things managed the marketing and blog for her dive centre but given half a chance is underwater with her camera shooting fish.

Bubbles or fish?

With the number of dive centres on Koh Tao, it would be easy to imagine that every dive here is as crowded as the SS Thistlegorm wreck in the Red Sea. While this can happen, visiting outside of the peak months of January, February, July and August will ensure a more peaceful experience. The month of June would be my overall recommendation of when to come. The hottest time of the year March-May has passed and visitor numbers are low. Seas are calm, and the visibility is usually good. As with any dive holiday, choosing the right company to dive with can make or break your holiday, and in this instance, can have a bearing on the number of divers one sees. Look for centres with small boats that guarantee small groups and make an effort to avoid the crowds.

Simple fun

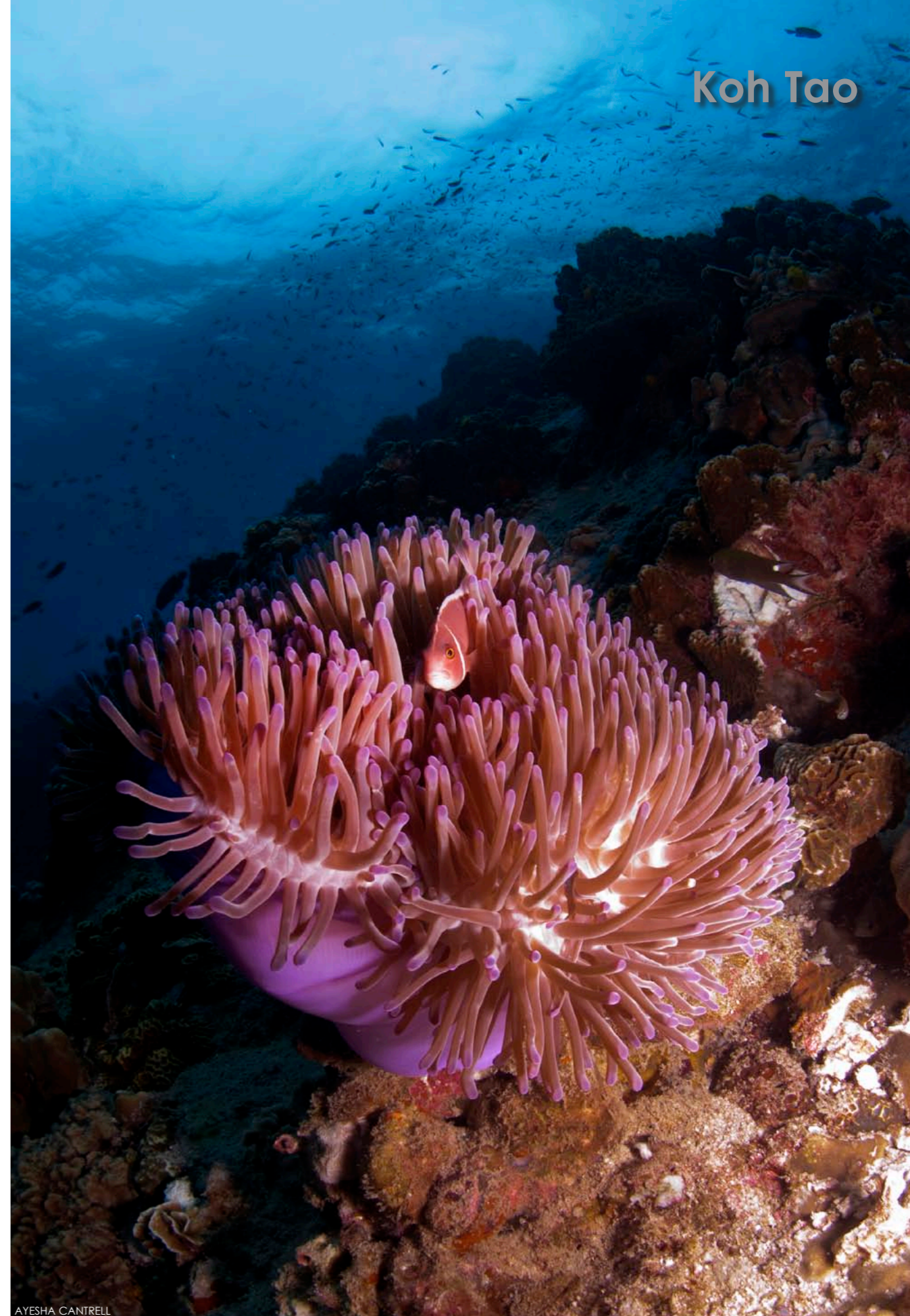
While Koh Tao doesn't enjoy the fame given to locations drenched in colour, it certainly has its merits. It's a great location if you want to take in some of the culture Thailand has to offer such as... and also spend some time diving. If you trawl destinations looking for somewhere

to go that divers and non-divers will enjoy, then Koh Tao should be on your shortlist.

The diving schedule is ideal, and there's plenty to occupy the non-divers as well. If you just like easy diving or want relaxed conditions to practice your photography, or if you want to learn



WILCO BOTH



AYESHA CANTRELL

Pink anemonefish (above) at White Rock; Black blotched porcupine fish (top left) at Pottery; Sea hare *Aplysia dactylomela* at Junkyard Reef (left)

fact file



Thailand



SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACT BOOK

History In the mid-14th century, a unified Thai kingdom was established. It was known as Siam until 1939. Out of all the Southeast Asian countries, Thailand is the only one that has never been taken over by a European nation. In 1932, a peaceful revolution led to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. Thailand was allied with Japan during World War II. But in 1954, it became a U.S. treaty ally. Thailand sent troops to Korea and fought alongside Americans in Vietnam. In 2006, a military coup resulted in the overthrow of Prime Minister Thaksin Chinnawat. Since then, turmoil in the government between pro- and anti-Thaksin parties has wreaked havoc in the governing of the country, which was further tested by historic flooding in 2011. In addition, thousands of people were killed and wounded in separatist uprisings in the southern ethnic Malay-Muslim provinces in

2004. These challenges have hampered the plans of constitutional reform of the current government led by the Puea Thai party. Government: constitutional monarchy. Capital: Bangkok

Geography Thailand is located in Southeastern Asia. It borders the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand, southeast of Myanmar. Thailand is in control of the only land route from Asia to Malaysia and Singapore. Terrain consists of a central plain, the Khorat Plateau in the east and mountainous areas. Coastline: 3,219km. Lowest point: Gulf of Thailand at 0m. Highest point: Doi Inthanon at 2,576m.

Climate Thailand is tropical with a warm, rainy, cloudy southwest monsoon from mid-May to September and a dry, cool northeast monsoon from November to mid-March. The southern

isthmus is always hot and humid.

Water temperature is 28-30°C.

Natural hazards include droughts and subsidence of land in the Bangkok area due to

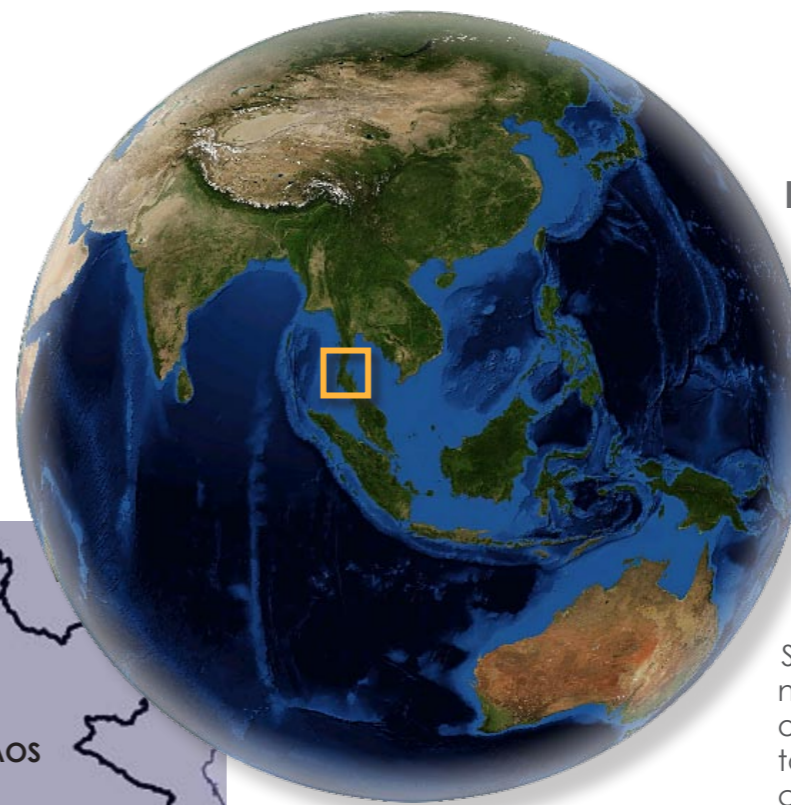
depletion of the water table.

Environment Thailand suffers from air pollution due to vehicle emissions, water pollution due to organic and factory wastes, deforestation and soil erosion, as well as illegal hunting, which is threatening wildlife populations. Thailand is party to the following agreements: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Hazardous Wastes, Marine Life Conservation, Ozone Layer Protection, Tropical Timber 83, Tropical Timber 94, Wetlands

Economy Thailand has a well-developed infrastructure and an economy of free-enterprise, with pro-investment policies and strong export industries. It has enjoyed solid growth since 2000 after recovering from the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98. Thai exports, which consist primarily

RIGHT: Global map with location of Koh Tao Island

BELOW: Location of Koh Tao Island on Thailand map



of machinery and electronic components, agricultural commodities and jewelry, make up half the GDP. However, the country felt the effects of the global financial crisis of 2008-09, which severely cut Thailand's exports. Since then, the economy has contracted and expanded, until the historic flooding of Bangkok in 2011 crippled the industrial and manufacturing sector. However, recovery is expected with modest growth in 2012.

Population 67,091,089 (July 2012 est.) Ethnic groups: Thai 75%, Chinese 14%, other groups 11%. Religions: Buddhist (official) 94.6%, Muslim 4.6%, Christian 0.7%, other religions 0.1% (2000 census). Living with HIV/AIDS: 530,000 (2009 est.) Internet users: 17.483 million (2009)

Currency Thai Baht (THB). Credit cards are widely accepted in hotels and dive centres but incur a 3% charge. Exchange rates: 1EUR=40.20THB; 1USD=30.83THB; 1GBP=50.11THB; 1AUD=32.21THB; 1SGD=25.17THB

Language Thai, English (secondary language for upper class), ethnic and regional dialects

Getting There Depending on the departure point, consider flying into Bangkok, Singapore or Kuala Lumpur and then connect to Koh Samui, where one can catch a ferry to Koh Tao. If landing after midday, overnight in Koh Samui and catch a ferry the next day. For those on a budget, overland travel from Bangkok to Chumphon by rail or bus is cheaper. From Chumphon, catch a ferry to Koh Tao.

Visa Passports must be valid for at least six months upon entry. A 30-day visa exemption will be issued upon arrival for holders of Australian, U.S., European and New Zealand passports.

Health There is a high degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea; vectorborne diseases such as dengue fever, Japanese encephalitis, and malaria; animal contact disease such as rabies; water contact disease such as leptospirosis. H5N1 avian influenza has occurred in this country but poses a small risk to tourists, those who have close contact with birds (2009)

Decompression Chambers The closest decompression chamber is on the neighboring island of Koh Samui: SSS NETWORK / Samui Hyperbaric Services of Thailand 34/8 Moo 4 Bophut, Koh Samui, Surat Thani, Thailand 84320 Phone: +66 (0)77 427 427 Emergency: +66 (0)81 081 9555 www.sssnetwork.com



Sand lizardfish at Japanese Gardens

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