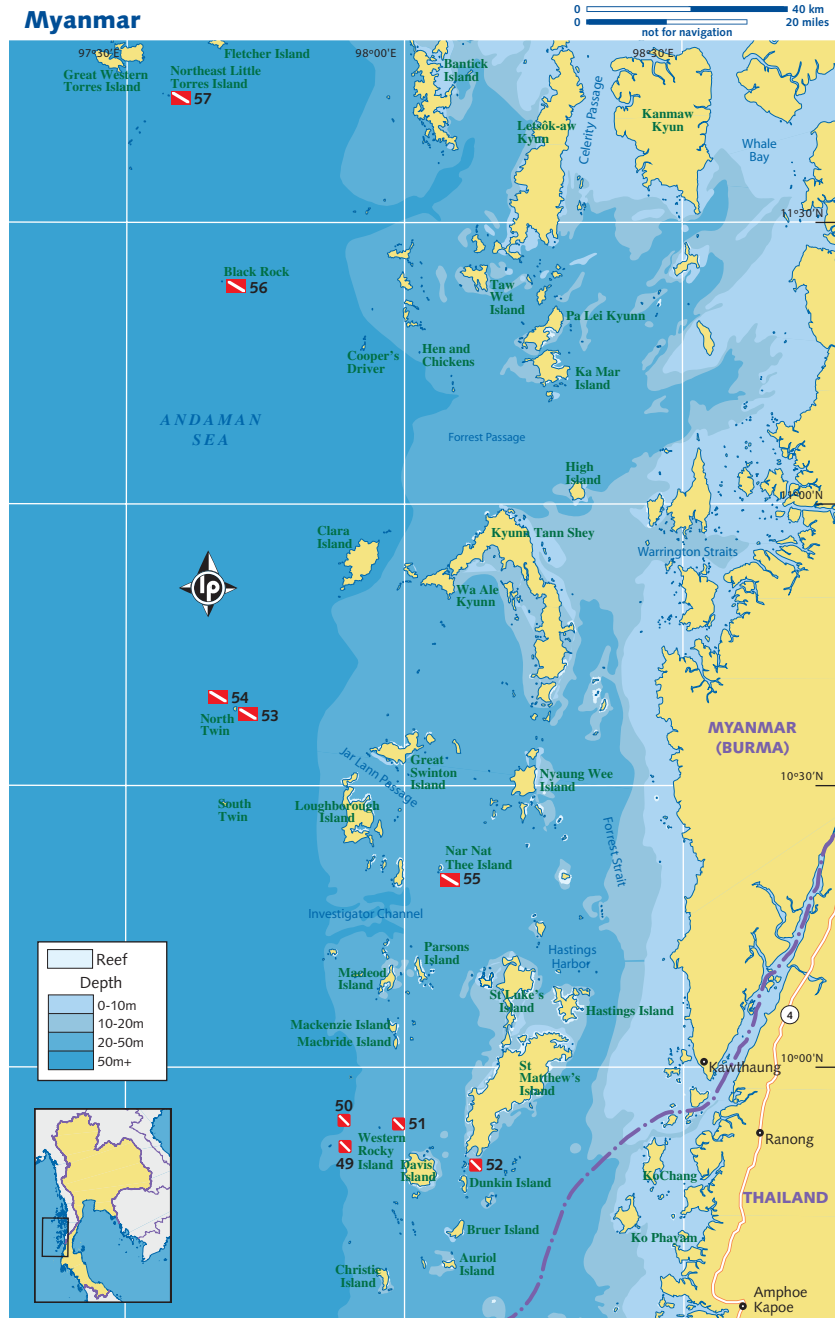


Myanmar



Myanmar (Formerly Burma)

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MERGUI ARCHIPELAGO

Western Myanmar is bordered by the Andaman Sea. Countless island, reef and rocky pinnacles fill the coastline and offer countless dive sites, many of which are still waiting to be discovered. The gateway city here is Kawthaung. Golden reclining Buddhas and temple spires greet ships coming into the straits to the city.

Diving in Myanmar is done by live aboard. It is normally a quick stop with a set fee, and entry and exit handled by your live aboard cruise director. Officials there will keep your passport until you return.

Once the formalities are done, your boat will head up to some beautiful islands and pinnacle dive sites. There are an estimated 800 islands in the 14,000 square mile region that is part of the vast Mergui Archipelago. It is much less developed here and there are also more small 'long tail' fishing boats around.

The Mergui Archipelago, a group of over 200 islands in the Andaman Sea, is where the Isthmus of Kra divides it from the lowland forests of the Sundaic region. The flora and fauna of these two regions overlap and as there has been no commercial, and low residential, development, the islands maintain a high level of natural biodiversity. Some of the wildlife has been exposed to poachers and illegal logging, but birdlife is still very good with hornbills, colorful king-

fishers, parrots, flycatchers and sunbirds all found here. Monkeys, snakes and fruit bats also thrive in the forests. Ground creatures include wild boars, monkeys, sea otters, monitor lizards and even wild elephants.

The islands thrive from this peninsular rainforest. Nutrients filter into coastal mangrove swamp that sends nutrients far out to sea.

The region's sites have only recently been explored and mapped by live aboard dive operators from Phuket, such as Fantasea's *Ocean Rover*, which went through countless negotiations and were allowed to dive here and pioneer new sites incredibly recently in 1997.

Much farther west, trips are now being made to the far reaches of the Andaman Sea and the Andaman Islands. Midway between Thailand and India, the peaks of a submerged mountain range create the Andaman and Nicobar Island chains.

Dive tourism is still in development stages in Andaman and Nicobar but new dive sites are being found on a seasonal basis. A few times a year, live aboards board passengers from Phuket, Thailand or from Port Blair, India.

Myanmar		GOOD	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
		SNORKELING			
49	WESTERN ROCKY ISLAND	•	•	•	•
50	FAN FOREST PINNACLE	•	•	•	•
51	NORTHERN ROCKY PINNACLE	•	•	•	•
52	MOULIN ROUGE	•	•	•	•
53	NORTH TWIN ISLAND (WEST RIDGE)	•	•	•	•
54	NORTH TWIN PLATEAU	•	•	•	•
55	THREE ISLETS	•	•	•	•
56	BLACK ROCK	•	•	•	•
57	NORTHEAST LITTLE TORRES ISLAND	•	•	•	•

A Taste of Kawthaung

Myanmar offers a rich and thrilling cultural mix, with dozens of different languages and peoples, and is a natural draw for the adventurous. Going to Myanmar is more complicated than just buying a ticket and visitors should read up a little before making a decision many later claim as a bad one. Firstly, this is not a democratic country. The government used forced labor to create or finish off the tourist-related sights and services, most of which are government run, and to many, international tourism is seen as a stamp of approval to the Myanmar Government. Also, the government forbids travel to many areas, particularly areas inhabited by minority groups. It's fairly impossible to visit without some money going to the military junta.

But the live aboard experience is a completely different animal. Tourists are not really considered to be in the country and must stay on their boat, even though the lush islands may look inviting. Some islands and rock dive sites do occasionally go 'off limits' for security reasons, but for the most part, divers are free to enjoy the comfort of their boat and the natural of the underwater world.

When leaving the country, divers are allowed to visit the city of Kawthaung, a vibrant little place a bit like a small Indian city. The stay is usually only for an hour, but

allows you to see some beautiful temples, enjoy the color of the streets, visit a market and buy some local sarongs or snacks. You can also make cell phone calls. There's really no point in trying to use the Internet or email while in Myanmar – it's often painfully slow if anything works at all.

Transport is mainly by motorbike, but most of the sites of interest can be covered on foot from the pier.

Diving tourists give locals, many of whom speak and understand English, access to a small bit of income and communication with the outside world and other cultures. The Burmese are very friendly and the vast majority of locals want you there. Also, the country's human-rights abuses are less likely to occur in areas that tourists frequent.

After a tour of the city, usually accompanied by some smiling and rather knowledgeable youngsters, divers get back on the boat and head back to Thai waters.



49 WESTERN ROCKY ISLAND

Location: 42 nautical miles (78km)

west-southwest of Kawthaung

Depth: 0-118ft (0-36m)

Access: Live aboard

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This is one of the finest dives in the region, with just about everything for everyone – an arch, a wall, lots of fish and

soft corals, and great little critters like ghost pipefish.

Most of the diving is done around a main limestone island. The site also has some smaller pinnacles and outcroppings that can be dived, depending on the currents. The south side is a rough u-shaped bay protected on both sides, and is a good area to drop in. The sheer side of the colorfully encrusted rock drops down to about 80ft, then on to 100ft. In the deep reaches, keep an eye out for resting nurse sharks and leopard sharks.

Finning west, you will see a huge arch. This whole area is rich in smaller marine life and has some beautiful black corals (which actually appear white) on its floor. Soft corals, sea fans and other varied corals hold lots of tiny marine life. Look for glass shrimp, ornate ghost pipefish, an assortment of nudibranchs (including *Halgerda stricklandi*), flatworms, harlequin shrimp and painted frogfish. Take your time and look around. As the depths are somewhat deep, start low and work your way up as the various levels, exploring the many cracks and crevices. Multiple dives are usually done here, providing the opportunity for both wide angle and macro photography.

The huge arch usually has clouds upon clouds of baitfish at its entry and inside. This is the passageway to the western wall that holds some stunningly large and colorful soft corals and golden gorgonian sea fans. Keep an eye out for the pelagic life beyond the wall. Currents may be strong here; if there is no current, you can continue around the corner and explore the rest of the island.

Prior to reaching the arch, you'll see a cavern opening to the right along the south wall. This can be an interesting place to poke around – and it actually runs through to the other side of the island. But due to a silty bottom, the 80ft depth, a small north side exit and the presence of currents, this cavern should only be explored on a planned dive by advanced cavern divers.

The fish life here is prolific, with a resident school of yellowtail scad, golden trevallies, beautiful coachwhip jacks, clown triggerfish (somewhat of a rarity in these parts), red snappers, oriental sweetlips and Andaman sweetlips among the many others.

Work your way up the wall and look for the many scorpionfish, morays in the cracks (including giant, bartail, snowflake and white-eyes) and octopus.



A smaller male and female ornate ghost pipefish

50 FAN FOREST PINNACLE

Location: 5.4 nautical miles (10km) north of Western Rocky Island
Depth: 16-130ft (5-40m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This submerged limestone site is close to Western Rocky. Drop down to about 18ft to the top of the pinnacle and then descend to a forest of sea fans at 100ft or so. Down deep, look for marble rays and resting whitetip reef sharks.

The fish life is good and the cephalopods are numerous here with amorous octopus and mating cuttlefish a common sight. Bigger fish include great barracuda, blue-lined angelfish, lurking lionfish and bluespot stingrays.

This is a great dive for nudibranch lovers with *Glossodoris cincta* and the cryptic *Elysia ornata* found, among many others.



A male cuttlefish protects his female

51 NORTHERN ROCKY PINNACLE

Location: 38 nautical miles (72km) west-southwest of Kawthaung
Depth: 0-100ft (0-30m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Rocks and boulders offer great habitat to poke around in for smaller creatures. The south side of the island has a sloping sandy reef area with sea anemones and coral cover. Look for tiger tail sea-horses, decorator crabs and the occasional ribbon eel. Branching corals hold spindle cowries and feather stars.

The wall is full of cracks holding white-eye morays, painted spiny lobsters, devil scorpionfish and giant morays.

Net remnants and blast pots suggest fishermen visit this spot frequently. Yet it's still fishy, with great barracuda, rainbow runners, tall-fin spadefish and golden trevally on view.



An octopus moves along the wall while foraging near sunset



A tiny crab hitches a ride in the folds of a free-floating jellyfish

52

MOULIN ROUGE (SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?)

Location: 38 nautical miles (72km) west-southwest of Kawthaung
Depth: 0-118ft (0-36m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This new site off the tip of St Matthews Island has one visible rock and a drop to 90ft that offers lots of current, but also a chance to see schooling pelagic fish and good marine activity. The secondary name of 'Should I Stay or Should I

Go?' comes from the at-times wicked currents on an outgoing tide. Visibility can be good and also drop during the dive. Thus, one has to reach the decision to hang on for dear life or drift along – and off – the site.

Look for large shoals of fish attracted by the currents and nutrients passing through. Jacks, barracuda and various snappers, as well as sweetlips and drum are found in the water column, and dog-tooth tuna also roam in.

The soft corals are brilliant and there's also very good invertebrate life. Seek shelter behind some of the outcrops and look for small marine life, including very colorful nudibranchs, tubastrea corals and sea anemones.

Bombing the Reefs

Blast fishing has unfortunately been practiced in Myanmar (in many cases by Thai fishermen), and many reefs show some kind of blast damage. Divers may spot a ceramic urn on the bottom and think it the relic of an old shipwreck. These are actually used to hold combustibles for blast fishing.

The areas that have been hit show amazing resilience. Perhaps it's the nutrient-rich water and tidal flow that help so much. Soft corals, anemones, sea fan and smaller marine life like nudibranchs, cuttlefish, eels and migratory fish seem to keep the reefs alive and extremely diverse. In many cases, those not looking for specific damage would not be aware it had occurred.

Blast fishing has stopped for now, following a government raid on the bomb storage areas in Ranong. The increase in violence in the south of Thailand makes it improbable that the Thai government will let civilians to have caches or arms around, which is good news for the reefs.

It's hoped increased interest in ecotourism and live aboard diving, and the money it brings, will be a real plus for the overall marine environment.



A leopard moray peeks from its lair

53

NORTH TWIN ISLAND (WEST RIDGE)

Location: 67 nautical miles (124km) northwest of Kawthaung
Depth: 16-118ft (5-36m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Most live aboards visit the western side of this island and a site called West Ridge. Here a pinnacle comes to within 15ft of the surface and slopes in a long plain to 120ft or so.

Follow the ridge on the north for the most fish action. The currents feed a good selection of gorgonian fans, colorful soft corals and hard corals that seem to have escaped the bombing that has cleared them from other reefs.

Fish can include barracuda, feeding Spanish mackerel, tallfin spade-fish schools and a variety of angelfish. Whitetip reef sharks are sometimes seen as well.

The anemones here have a good number of porcelain crabs living with them, while giant morays and roaming octopus can be seen in the shallower parts of the reef.



54 NORTH TWIN PLATEAU

Location: 1 nautical mile (1.9km) northwest of North Twin Island
Depth: 50-130ft (15-40m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



North Twin Plateau can have strong currents, but the marine life is also quite active and varied.

There are plenty of places to hide from the current here, as the plateau has scattered boulders and a sandy bottom. It is a big reef, so start deep and toward the end with stronger currents to increase your chances of seeing activity. Deeper parts of the site have been known to hold white tips and resting leopard sharks.

Move up, admiring the many fan and soft corals. Rainbow runners, mackerel, queenfish and jacks all frequent the site, while schooling rainbow runners sweep in and mangrove red snappers make this reef home.

55 THREE ISLETS

Location: 53 nautical miles (99km) northwest of Kawthaung
Depth: 0-90ft (0-27m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



The three rock islets, one small and two large, break the water's surface. The underwater topography and various little eco-systems here make for a good dive with plenty to see, both big and small. Well-suited for multi-level dive profiles, it takes several dives to take it all in. Live aboards frequently spend a full day, or a good portion of a full day, here.

One fascinating feature of the middle island is a large canyon which starts rather wide on the north end then narrows into what is all but a box canyon. A fairly wide-open tunnel at 50ft goes through to the other side of the island. However, the current can really flow through here, so make sure to go through the tunnel with the current (not against it). Large, fat nurse sharks feast on the spiny lobsters that hole up here and are sometimes found by the first divers coming through.

Resident grey reef sharks are also often found in this canyon. Normally open-water sharks that like the edges of reef walls, they probably like the ease of coasting with the inner current and drifting back again, similar to what they do on the open reef. The schooling fish may also make easy meals for predators in this confined area.

Close to the entrance of the tunnel is an arch covered with bright yellow sponges and often more large schools of juvenile fish.

The rocks and fissures on the outer walls of the islet are riddled with cracks and crevices that provide shelter and holdfasts for an enormous volume of



A Blenny sits in colonial tunicates



fish and invertebrate life. Large jellies drift by with tiny passengers like juvenile filefish, tiny jacks, transparent shrimp and large crabs.

To list everything that can be seen at this site would almost create a book in itself. The more unusual species include burrfish, Andaman mimic filefish, longsnout and Schultz's pipefish, frogfish, tiger tail seahorses, mating and egg-laying cuttlefish, squid, octopus, banded sea kraits, orangutan spider crabs, a whole array of nudibranchs, bartail, snowflake and giant moray eels and several species of shrimp (hinge-beak shrimp are thick at most cleaning stations).

Harp corals are found in the sandy areas near the rocky reef. Photographers should do some wide angle and then switch to macro trying different focal lengths on each dive. The result will be a kaleidoscope of colorful and unusual images.

56 BLACK ROCK

Location: 103 nautical miles (190km) north-northwest of Kawthaung
Depth: 10-130ft (3-40m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Advanced



The name Black Rock pretty much says it all. Above water there's a big, black rock and just below the waterline to way down deep is a site full of marine life. It's a superb site and a macro photographer's dream with a tremendous amount of life, including a large variety of nudibranchs (and swimming nudis), small sea hares, porcelain crabs, harlequin, barber pole, white-banded and ghost boxer shrimps, spindle cowries, filament wrasse and leopard moray eels.

The outer reaches of the rock can be exposed to currents so take care, but this often attracts fish shoals (like big schools of snapper, jacks and chevron barracudas) to swirl just off the reef. Leopard sharks, marble rays, wahoo, white-tip reef sharks, spotted eagle rays and even manta rays have been reported cruising along the reef. One of the Holy Grail of fishes – a purple *Rhinopias frondosa* – was also found at Black Rock.



57 NORTHEAST LITTLE TORRES ISLAND

Location: 123 nautical miles (228km) north-northwest of Kawthaung
Depth: 30-130ft (10-40m)
Access: Live aboard
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This small island is surrounded by deep water. Schooling fish frequent the area and most dives are done along a submerged ridge on the west end. The deeper parts of the reef, at 100ft, hold nice sea fans and some hard corals. The blue water area is active with lots of fusiliers and fish schools moving about,

and the island is also known for occasionally producing mobula rays which like to school and swim in groups. They don't usually come in to the reef like their larger manta cousins, but will be in blue water. Their front feeding fins are closer together.

Divers can swim out to a point and then work back up either side, depending on the current, to see clouds of silversides hovering over sea anemones and hard coral formations. Look out for ornate ghost pipefish as well.



Burma Banks

The Burma Banks were once a main reason to go to Myanmar. Shark action here, especially schooling silvertips, made it a shark junkie's dream. However, one suspects that fishing companies must have someone employed to read diving magazines and guide books, find the good shark dives and wipe out anything with teeth for the insidious Asian shark fin trade. Pioneered by Ocean Rover as far back as 1990, the Banks are now not so sharky. Some tawny nurse sharks and whitetip reef sharks remain, but these can be seen at other sites.

Assess the pros and cons of heading out to the Banks, as this area and its sites are a series of totally submerged seamounts. At the shallowest point, the top of one seamount is at 50ft, while the rest are deeper, somewhat current-swept and not heavily overgrown with coral or other big marine life. All around, the ocean floor drops to 1400ft in wide open sea and international waters (still part of the Myanmar 200-mile EEZ) with no protection from weather. It is a long haul from the popular dive areas farther south and east in Burmese waters.

Getting to Burma Banks also chews up quite a bit of travel time. As they are 60 to 70 miles from the nearest dive sites, one may want to forego the trip in favor of more time at the shallower and more productive dives that have a much greater diversity of species and corals.

That said, visibility out here is normally superb with gin clear water, and the site offers some beautiful wide angle photography opportunities, including large table corals, fish schools and the chance to see predators like dogtooth tuna. The rare Strickland's triggerfish has also been found at Burma Banks.

There are no mooring buoys; the current can be very strong and most dives start around 60ft to 80ft at the sea mount tops, making the dives short and open-water decompression a must. This is definitely experienced diver country. Enjoy this unique area of the sea if you go. If not, you will have plenty to see at the Myanmar inshore sites.

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