

## Tourism & Scuba Diving returns to Thailand – tsunami 5 years on

Scuba Diving in Thailand has many rewards for Recreational Scuba Divers, and world class dive sites in Phuket and the Similan/Surin islands are recognised for their vibrant marine life, nutrient-rich coral reefs and clear blue, warm water. Adventurous tourists flocked to Thailand in search of palm fringed golden sand beaches, luxurious beachside accommodation, endless watersports and countless family activities, value for money that few tourists to Asia could resist. Late December 2004 saw an event that would scar the lives of so many people and my account of this tragedy is based on what happened on the Andaman Coast of Thailand, though I fully appreciate that other countries and continents were also affected.

In Thailand, more than 8,000 people were killed in the disaster, or have never been reunited with their families. This also included over 2,000 foreign tourists, most of which were taking holidays in and around Phuket. This southern province contributed approximately 40 percent of Thailand's annual tourism income. The Indian Ocean tsunami was triggered by an undersea earthquake off the Indonesian island of Sumatra, and as the huge waves of tumbling water struck the Andaman shores, Phuket and its surrounding regions suffered raw nature at its worst. Phuket Scuba Divers who were actually under water at the time, recall a surge of water that pushed and pulled with all its might. Dive Boats were smashed, snorkelers were dragged along the beaches, and sunbathers were completely overwhelmed by a wall of water crashing overhead.

As you may expect, tourism in this region suffered tremendously, and has not yet fully recovered. Scuba Divers in Thailand are trying other diving destinations and during the last five years, Scuba Diving in Pattaya has seen a positive increase in the number of divers making a trip to dive in the Gulf of Thailand. The Pattaya Scuba Diving community are united in their efforts to attract more tourists and also to satisfy its expanding number of residing expats. The islands near to Pattaya offer divers and snorkelers a mixture of shallow calm bays sheltered from the strong currents, to deep dives around World War II US Landing Crafts that have been intentionally sunk by the Thai Navy, creating artificial reefs. Most of the Pattaya Dive Sites can be reached by a dive boat within two hours and there are many PADI Dive Centers that offer daily Scuba Courses for beginners, Fun Diving Daytrips for certified divers and Snorkeling Tours for a relaxing day out to the Pattaya Islands.

### Information, tips and advice for Scuba Diving in Pattaya

Most of the Pattaya dive sites have year-round diving and a good variety of diverse dive sites. From shallow coral dives to wreck diving, deep diving and drift diving, there are numerous scuba activities that can entertain beginners and even the most experienced scuba divers. The Pattaya Near Islands include Koh Sak, Koh Larn and Koh Khrok. Koh Larn means 'Coral Island' in Thai, and the Thai's feel that Koh Sak and Koh Khrok resemble a mortar and pestle, so they named them after the kitchen tools that they use to crush peppers. The Pattaya Far Islands include Koh Rin, Koh Man Wichai and Koh Phai. Because these island dive sites are around 15 km from Pattaya, they tend to be less crowded by dive boats and water sport activities. The boat trip takes about 90 minutes to get there, but the clearer visibility and the vibrant marine life makes these Pattaya dive sites worth the trip.

Pattaya 'near' islands; Koh Sak – A sheltered, shallow bay, which makes this dive site ideal for beginners, novice divers, and snorkeling in Pattaya. The maximum depth is around 11 meters, with lots of hard coral formations providing a home to Rabbitfish, Butterflyfish, Octopus, Morays, Stingrays, Wrasse, Angelfish and Damselfish. Koh Larn – The Golden Bay on the western side of Koh Larn provides a variety of dive sites for divers of all levels. With hard and soft corals extending to 20 meters, this dive site is best known for spotting Tawny Nurse Sharks and blue spotted Rays. Koh Khrok – A finger shaped island that is suitable for drift diving. Maximum depth reaches around 12 meters, with an abundance of sea anemones, clown fish, nudibranchs, and turtles.

Pattaya 'far' islands; Koh Rin – Koh Rin has many diving areas, including two small satellite islands called North Rock and South Rock. With an abundance of hard and soft corals, coral whips and feather stars, divers will not be disappointed with the aquatic creatures on view around these dive sites. The dive needn't be deep here to see nudibranchs, sharks, razorfish, pipefish and morays. Koh Man Wichai – Dives around this dive site in Pattaya can stretch down to 25 meters. There are two main dive sites, one being the 'Wall Dive' and the other being the 'Fingers'. Both areas provide a variety of corals including staghorn coral table corals, and here's where you're most likely to see larger fish such as Baraccuda, while you're in Pattaya diving. Koh Phai – The beaches of this island are restricted because it is controlled by the Royal Thai Navy. The south of the island provides the best diving, with the small sheltered bay offering ideal conditions for beginner divers and those refreshing their dive skills. Close to Koh Phai is the wreck of the HTMS Khram, a WW II landing craft that was sunk in 2003 to create an artificial reef and a dive site for wreck diving.

### Information about Wreck Diving in Pattaya

HTMS Khram Wreck – Early in 2003, the Thai Navy sank a decommissioned U.S. Warship between Koh Phai and Koh Larn island approx 15 km from Pattaya. The ship lies in 30 meters of water in the Gulf of Thailand, and was

intentionally sunk to provide a breeding ground for fish, and a wreck dive for scuba divers. The Thai Navy prepared the ship as a dive site, and it is free from arms, oil and most of the other hazards to divers. The large holes that were made in many areas allow penetration dives through the ships passages whilst remaining in natural daylight. The wreck dive is a scuba diving gift for fish lovers, with Baraccuda, Trevallys, Jacks, Fuseliers, Batfish, Turtles, Stonefish, Porcupinefish, Unicorn fish and Sharks to name just a few. HTMS Kood Wreck – Thailand dive sites are diving gifts for all divers, but wreck diving in Pattaya is nautical miles ahead! In September 2006, the Royal Thai Navy sunk the HTMS Kood a short 45 minute boat trip from Pattaya Beach. The Kood World War II US landing craft, became the nearest wreck to Pattaya, available for recreational divers with a diving certification above entry level. A sister ship of the HTMS Khram, the Kood is another fine example of a thriving artificial reef offering another great dive site in Pattaya. Just to the northeast of Koh Sak, the bottom of the wreck lies at 30 meters and the top of the tower at 12m. Hardeep Wreck – Originally an Indonesian-registered freighter, the Hardeep sank in 1943. More than sixty years of growth has seen the soft coral formations and tube sponge gardens firmly establish themselves, and the wreck provides a safe home for older and larger fish families. The fish life on the Hardeep Wreck includes Baraccuda, Angelfish, Jacks, Trevallys, Batfish and Butterflyfish. Laying on its starboard side in 27 meters of depth, the wreck is only 42 meters in length and contains some very large openings to allow divers a view of the engine room and crankshaft. Bremen Wreck – The Bremen is an 88 metre long Thai cargo ship that sank in the 1930's following an engine room explosion. The wreck now lies on the sandy bottom in 22 meters between Sattahip and Koh Khram. Though the wreck is badly broken, the bow and stern sections are still relatively intact, but the center part is mostly mangled steel. Wreck Penetration is generally not recommended on this dive. Though the currents can be strong here, if you plan your dive appropriately, the highlight of wreck diving the Bremen, is trying to spot the large Eagle Rays that thrive in these waters. The Bremen Wreck is situated in open water and experiences strong currents for much of the year. The optimum time to dive the Bremen is from December to March.

Pattaya, as a diving destination, cannot realistically compete with the natural underwater beauty of the pristine coral reefs of Phuket, but its aim for the near future is to attract scuba divers by hosting a special wreck diving region, having up to 5 new wrecks in the Pattaya diving area and helping to conserve and improve its marine environment. These artificial reefs provide a home for new coral formations and aquatic life, with the added bonus of being 'off limits' to the local fishermen which encourages larger fish to inhabit the wrecks. As Thailand continues to recover from the tragedy five years on, there's little physical evidence of one of history's worst natural disasters, other than an occasional Tsunami 'Hazard Zone' sign. Phuket remains one of Asia's premier holiday resort islands, and although tourism is down, few people blame the tsunami.