

Special points of interest:

- There are 35 dive shops on the small island of Koh Tao.
- 40 Baht = 1\$US
- The water temperature daily is 30 degrees Celsius (like a bath)
- World Cup games are usually shown live at 2am local time
- We are about 12 hours ahead of central US time

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The Island of Koh Tao, Thailand

You have to go to Thailand! There is no question about it. Diving, relaxation, international people, and diving diving. What a blast. Let me tell you a bit about the trip here.

We started with a flight to Bangkok. The Asia Hotel is walking distance from some of the big technology malls and a short tuk-tuk (motorbike taxi) from most other touristy sites of Bangkok. I really didn't spend any time doing the tourist thing. I just wanted to get to the island and dive.

We took a bus from Bangkok down to the port city of Chumphon. We jumped on a high speed catamaran ferry called Lompraya and spent two hours in the open air of the upper deck. It got a bit salty and wet, but that sure beats the vomit. These boats are dual hulled so they don't ride through the waves. Most people are throwing up into small plastic bags. The smell is enough to make the heartiest of travelers retch.

Once on the island of Koh Tao, we took a five minute taxi to Bans Island Resort. I had stayed there last Christmas so this was all smooth. Mario and I crashed for a while in our air conditioned room and headed for the bars and beaches. I talked to a couple of friends from Christmas and arranged to meet up with the course director about working for Bans. Then Mario and I headed to the center of the Island for my favorite bar called the Safety Stop. (great name for a dive bar)

Right after I got our beers from the bar, I noticed a familiar face at the bar! It was none other than James Hutchinson, one of the course instructors from Utila, Honduras. Jimmy had trained me as an instructor. What a small world. It turns out



Planet Scuba, The Safety Stop Bar, and the Dive shop across the street are all owned by the same company. Jimmy is in Koh Tao as the course director. (the head instructor that runs the diving operation) A few minutes later, I had arranged for Mario and I to stay in a room above the dive shop for half the price of Bans. Not only that, but the room has all the amenities, including wireless access. That comes in handy for diving research and allows Mario to work on his PhD in the room. Jimmy offered me a great price on a higher level of Diving Instructor as well as some guaranteed students for me to teach. We moved the very next day.

Nasserism!

Nasser has become famous in Thailand and Norway. After telling Nasser stories to a Norwegian diving couple, they had dreams about The Nasser. How funny is that?

Diving Paradise

Koh Tao means Turtle Island. I know all you turtles out there will get a kick out of that. The Crystal Dive shop is a partner company to ours so I borrowed their turtle for a picture.

There are about 35 dive shops on Koh Tao. It reminds me a lot of Caye Caulker, Belize and Utila, Honduras. There are more vehicles than the other islands but the crowd and prices are the same. It is about \$20US for a dive and anywhere from \$10-\$100US per night to stay overnight. Of course there are a lot of packages for diving. Planet Scuba is a medium sized dive operation with two equip-

ment shops, classrooms, three boats, 3 full-time instructors, several free-lance instructors, and a small army of Dive Masters or Dive Master Trainees.

The shop is a fully accredited PADI Five Star resort operation that offers a lot of training at all PADI levels.

The instructors are all professional and great to work with. I am so glad I didn't go through with Bans Resort. That is more like a fac-

tory! They push a lot of new divers through training and offer a lot of opportunities, but there is just too much machismo and testosterone going on over there. Planet Scuba is much more relaxed.



What do you mean by Specialties?

After you are certified to be an Open Water diver (beginner) you can specialize in Deep Diving (down to 30 meters), navigation, nitrox, equipment, first aid, multilevel diving, underwater naturalist, wreck diver, digital underwater photography, and many more. You don't have to be an advanced diver to do any of these. Most of the specialties require 3 or 4 dives and

some classroom work. Then you can make a habit of diving your specialty.

Now, in order to teach any of these to divers, an instructor has to study, do presentations to the course director, and lead some training dives. If an instructor has between 1 and 4 specialties, he/she is dubbed a Specialty Instructor. If that

same instructor has 5 or more specialties, he/she has achieved MSDT (Master Scuba Diver Trainer). So, my diving resume' has improved to MSDT so I can train Master Divers. Is this all getting through? Confused? Take a few PADI courses and it will become crystal clear.

This picture shows me studying at one of the early resta-

raunts, called Zest. I get breakfast, study for a few hours, give a classroom presentation, then dive in the afternoon. I was studying for my Underwater Naturalist class. We take the fish cards (I am holding) underwater to help identify vertebrates and invertebrates on the Naturalist dives.

The fish are mostly the same here, just different colors. But there are a lot of new experiences for me. I have never been attacked by trigger fish until Koh Tao. The Titan Trigger fish is territorial so they tend to go after divers and bite their fins. I find it amusing how talked up these fish are! We have also done a few shark dives. We dive with Nitrox down to 28meters for about 30 minutes and look for the reef sharks in the murky depths. I have also seen sea snakes, whale sharks, Indian Walker Scorpion fish, and a lot of others. If the vis was better Koh Tao would be perfect.



World Cup? Yes. But late!

Koh Tao is a destination for people from all over the world. I mean from everywhere. It is common to be sitting at dinner with people from six different countries all speaking English.

Alex and Patti are friends from Italy. Alex is doing the divemaster with PS and his girlfriend Patti is working a few odd jobs around the island. She speaks 4 or 5 languages so she gets along with everyone quite easily.

The other dive instructors are Aussies or English mostly. Very few Americans end up here. I have met a few from Texas, and

New York but after a few minutes the conversations get a bit boring. We Americans tend to limit our vacations to two or three weeks tops. Everyone else is on World Trips for six months to a year. It is truly amazing where and how long people travel.

So, World Cup? Yes, the games were on. I couldn't watch the late games. They were live at 2am. I usually get up around 6am and dive all day or study, so 2am is more in Mario's realm. He stays out all night and parties. It is not unusual for him to end up serving drinks behind the bar in the early

mornings and sleeping half the day away. Why not. He has done a lot of work on his PhD in psychology. Usually he is coming in around 7am. That's a good thing because his wife calls him daily at that time and he is awake.

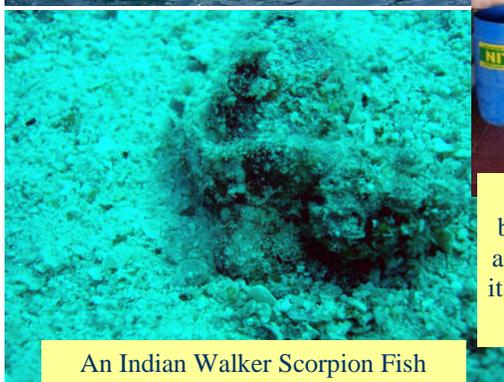
I was cheering for Germany but they didn't make it. But Alex was a party animal when Italy won. The bars all have digital projectors and big screens set up to show movies or World Cup games.

If any of you are world travelers with questions, I can get answers.

The Dog
Mario has a dog that adopted him. For some reason, this dog follows Mario everywhere! Maybe the dog heard that Mario had saved another Island dog from drowning while he was snorkeling!



All boat diving.



An Indian Walker Scorpion Fish



Adding Enriched Oxygen blends takes a little training and different dive tables, but it gives you more time at certain depths.



Christmas tree worms are everywhere.



Preparing for the Fin/Ear specialty.

A Monthly Newsletter from the life of Greg Lemoine



Greg, Mario, and Dorothy go on a visa run to Burma. It's a real version of Planes, Trains, and Automobiles. Except, it is ferry, minibus, ferry, minibus and back.

The visa run set up through the Adaman Club is painless and highly organized!



Run for the Border! (not Taco Bell)

Thailand allows for one, two, and three month visas. I didn't even think about the fact I would be staying for so long. If you overstay your visa, which was only one month for me, then you end up paying a daily fee for any days over that one month.

Everyone on the island has the same problem, so the companies set up visa runs to Burma or Malaysia. What a riot. It was a 24 hour trip to step over the border, gamble for an hour in Burma at the Andaman Club and get back on the ferry.

The map on page one gives you an idea of the trip. It goes like this... the high speed ferry leaves at 10am for Chumpon on the coast. It is a

two hour ferry. Then a minibus takes you two hours by land to Ranong. There you leave go through customs and leave Thailand. This ferry leaves immediately for Burma. After 45 minutes you land at the Andaman Resort Hotel and spend an hour wandering around. Gambling is legal in Burma, so you can throw away some money in the slots or pay a membership fee and go to their casino upstairs. After an hour or so they take you back to the ferry and get your passport back with a Burma stamp on it. (Yes, I have been to Burma. If not for just an hour.)

The rest of the trip is just the opposite. The ferry takes you

back to Thailand, where you get a new entry visa for another month. Then it is more minibus back to Chumpon. The usual trip is then taking a night ferry to Koh Tao arriving at 5:30am. Dorothy did the night boat. Mario and I holed up in a local motel and got a good night's sleep before we caught the morning high-speed catamaran back.

All in all, that is a lot of travel for a stamp in my passport! Yet, when in Rome...

There are a lot of amazing things to do in Thailand but I am stuck on the diving. I regularly have discussions with people traveling the world. Thailand is one of their favorite stops. Many people end up here on the island for

a couple of months or more. I won't get stuck. Teaching is my profession and diving is my passion.

If you want to know more about Thailand just go onto the web. A lot of divers have discussion boards and travelers from all over the world make Koh Tao their destination.

I recommend the diving but I cannot say much more about life here. There is a lot to do in the north, easy access to Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia, and Malaysia is just a short boat ride away.

Travel safe everyone. I am.

-Greg