

# Andaman Islands

By Nancy Zrymiak

The Andaman Islands are located in the Bay of Bengal, closer to Burma and Thailand than mainland India. The archipelago consists of over 500 islands, hilly and treed, of which less than 40 are inhabited. The islands are home to some of the world's most primitive tribes and exotic beaches. Crystal clear waters provide diving and snorkelling enthusiasts with views of abundant sea life and thriving coral.

The Andaman's are remote and can only be reached by air via Chennai or Kolkata. From Bangalore it is a one hour flight to Chennai and a two hour hop across the ocean to the main hub of Port Blair. Upon arrival at Port Blair airport, visitors line up to obtain a 30-day permit which details areas they may travel to, and those that are restricted.

Some of the islands have been home to primitive tribal groups since prehistoric times and visitors are prohibited from having contact with them. A few of the tribes are hostile and have no outside contact at all. Other tribes have had some contact with outsiders and are provided with food, clothing, housing and medicine by the Indian authorities. Port Blair, on the other hand, enjoys a rich history and modern amenities. It is worth spending a day or two here to tour the town as well as the Cellular Jail. During colonial rule, Indian freedom fighters struggled for independence and were incarcerated in the jail. It is now a National Memorial and every evening there is a sound and light show depicting the activists' plight.

There are other places within the Andaman Islands to explore of course. One of the more popular is Havelock Island, a two hour ferry ride from Port Blair. Havelock is relatively quiet and untouched; thatched roof huts are the norm (try to book an air conditioned one). Still, there are good reasons why tourists venture out to this remote island. Havelock boasts one of the best beaches in Asia (according to Time 2004). Radhanagar

## *The Andamans – quick facts*

**Location:** Bay of Bengal  
**Population:** 356,152 (2001 census)  
**Capital:** Port Blair  
**How to get there:** By air from Chennai or Kolkata  
By sea, 3-4 sailings a month from Chennai or Kolkata  
1 sailing a month from Vishakapatnam  
**Best time to visit:** November to end April  
**Languages:** Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, local tribal languages  
**Local Festivals:**  
Island Tourism Festival – 2 weeks in December/January  
Subhash Mela – held in Havelock each January, celebrating the birth of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose  
Vivekanada Mela – held on Neil Island each January, celebrating the birth of Swami Vivekananda  
Block Mela – held in Diglipur every January/February



Elephants spotted in the forest, Havelock Island.

Beach, more commonly known as Beach #7, is a white sandy beach lined with trees, stretching for two km. Think of clear, warm, turquoise water and amazing sunsets every night and you start to get the picture. Add an elephant or two in the ocean, walking along the beach or in the forest – and you've got the wow factor.

Diving and snorkelling opportunities are fantastic just off Havelock and nearby underwater sites. Neil's Cove is an easy place to snorkel as it is just around the bend from Beach #7 and accessible from the beach. There are many varieties of fish in smaller numbers and some nice patches of colourful coral. South Button Island is one of the best spots in the Andaman's for snorkelling and diving. From Havelock, a boat can easily be arranged to take the one-and-a-half hour ride to this tiny overgrown rock in the middle of the ocean. South Button attracts thousands of fish at any given time. The water is clear and the coral magnificent in all shapes and sizes. Take a leisurely fifty minute swim around South Button (or glide, depending on the current), all the while in awe of this underwater wonderland.

The Andaman Islands are yet another area of India, surrounded in a bit of mystery and a lot of beauty. On one hand it is easy to fall into the relaxed rhythm of the locals; simple and unhurried; on the other hand it is easy to want to explore and experience all that the Andaman Islands have to offer.

*Cautionary Note: Since Nancy wrote this article, a student has been killed by a salt-water crocodile while swimming. Authorities report that there have been 24 attacks in the last 25 years. Salt-water crocodiles are common in the Andamans and grow very large (up to 20 feet), so anyone planning to snorkel or dive should be aware of the possible risk.*