

A trip to a Thai island where beatnik embraces New Age was a memorable experience for Andy Devane

LOCATED IN Jangwat province, in the Southern Gulf of Thailand, Koh Phangan lies 70km from mainland Thailand and is part of the group of 40 granite islands that make up the Samui Archipelago. The island's place is deeply enshrined in the hearts of Thai people because of its great spiritual importance and natural beauty.

This privileged status has been helped no end by the fact that it has received royal visits from four of the nation's kings, with the Great Rama V travelling here no less than 10 times.

More than 90 per cent of Phangan is covered in unspoilt tropical forest and is home to an extraordinary amount of wildlife, including turtles and birds of paradise. Until 600 years ago the island remained completely uninhabited by humans; the first arrivals were Buddhist monks who divinely recognised the tranquil splendour on offer and settled on the hilltops overlooking Thongsala, the present-day capital.

We stayed on the northeast coast of Phangan, which is astounding in many ways. From the outset it is uncannily reminiscent of Alex Garland's novel *The Beach*. We arrived by throwing our shoes from a battered boat before disembarking with our luggage into knee-deep water, then retrieving our footwear from a scorching sandy shore. From here we were closely observed by those already resident, who feared that their Eden had been invaded by unworthy guests.

Once we appeared to pass the test we were shown to our lodgings. This involved crawling under and over sea rocks to reveal a series of tree houses perched on stilts with views of an empty, glittering bay.

Back on the beach a bohemian attitude to every aspect of life was immediately obvious. A great deal of importance was attached to the noble art of daytime sleeping. Since the early 1970s Koh Phangan has been quietly etched on the hippy trail, and it has retained an almost hallowed reputation as a Mecca for the beautiful people.

These days the island sees the return of the original flower children, now middle-aged and with their own kids, who also wear the obligatory flowers in their hair. This is not to say that those in their 20s and 30s are excluded from all the fun - far from it: this is where beatnik embraces New Age. Everyone has a sense of discovery: these are seasoned travellers, sun-kissed nature-lovers and artists, a migratory species continuously inching eastwards in search of self.

We dined on the beach that night under the stars, surrounded by joss sticks in the sand and hippies in hammocks. Electricity is a relatively new and haphazard addition to this part of Phangan; it is on from late morning until around midnight.

Once plunged into darkness, the island loses its gentle ambience, and we remembered that we were staying on the edge of a jungle. Suddenly, sinisterly, we were surrounded by animal noises. It felt as if we were being watched by a million eyes. Carefully we crept our perilous way back over boulders towards our hut, our route lit by the moon.

Inside it was pitch black and extremely hot. I had brought a tiny torch, from a Christmas cracker, which helped guide us to the outdoor bathroom. During the night we were woken by frantic knocking on every wall; monkeys raged wildly outside, shaking our shutters, banging on our door, jumping on our roof. The expletives I directed at them in my traumatised state made little difference - if anything it spurred them on. Their terrorising of us persisted until dawn. As the sun rose over the bay we slowly ventured outside, nervous wrecks, victims of the flip side of paradise.

I clambered downhill to the serenity of the water's edge and watched crabs scuttle between the snoring rocks while white terns skimmed the morning sky. Nearby flowed a mantra of Hare Krishna chanting while, on the balcony next door, a group of Oxford boys dressed in flamboyant dressing gowns quietly strummed Rastafarian tunes on their guitars. A lizard the size of a crocodile slithered down the cliff, and soon the soaring screech of crickets reached a crescendo, coinciding with a blisteringly hot sun.

Young people began arriving in their droves for the monthly full-moon party, a rave on the epicurean shores of Haad Rin, in the south. According to those in the know, these parties have lost all proportion compared to the legendary get-togethers started all those halcyon years ago in the late 1980s. Nowadays, undercover narcotics police mingle among the party-goers and take great pride in handing out hefty fines to those caught in possession of drugs, with some offenders later receiving severe prison sentences.

The island is indeed special. An exotic hideaway in the middle of nowhere surrounded by the kind of scenery normally seen only in National Geographic, Koh Phangan is imminently recommendable for a multitude of reasons. Learning to live without the conveniences of modern technology is harder than it sounds but a worthwhile exercise nonetheless. The food is healthy, the complete lack of light pollution in a night sky is terrific, the interaction with Mother Nature is an educational, if at times stressful, experience, the swimming and diving are heavenly, and the characters encountered are all memorable for their great love of life and their gentleness.

As our location is wedged between a small cove and a sprawling jungle, access is limited to either a mud track through forests or to an arrival by sea. There is no airport on the island, although Bangkok Airways provides more than 40 daily flights to neighbouring Koh Samui. It is also possible to arrive in Phangan via the three and a half hour ferry trip from Suratthani, on the mainland.

But as for directions to where we stayed, you'll just have to discover it yourselves - it's a secret.

© 2008 The Irish Times

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times