

## **Free Rides to Burma**

by Collin Piprell

The tall, be-turbaned Thai-Sikh businessman hunches over the high-stakes roulette board with the grave concentration of a tailor at his cutting table. Following some arcane system, he uses both hands to place large stacks of chips on a series of numbers, ignoring a ravishing trophy sidekick perched on a stool beside him. The croupier spins the wheel, waits till it stops, and sweeps away yet another small fortune in chips. Right away, the gambler goes back to his cutting table, focused to the exclusion of all else. His friend, or maybe it's his niece, looks bored to tears.

Aside from the British casino manager, this writer is the only Westerner in the VIP gambling rooms. At 1pm on a Thursday, little groups of middle-aged, middle-class Asians, the majority of them women, sit here and there, lost in the immensity of the place. In the course of the night, I meet a honeymoon couple from Taiwan and a couple of charming dowagers from Bangkok. They're here for the fun. Most of these people seem to have their gambling under control.

I'm here for the writerly colour. Which comes at a price. The VIP rooms have charming receptionists and a step-through metal detector. So you have to check your pistol. Admittance as a member also means you have to wear long trousers and buy 10,000 baht in chips. A flash of clairvoyance tells me this purchase is more like a cover charge. (In my own defence, I'm short of sleep, and not playing blackjack at my best.)

The Andaman Club sits on the Burmese island of Thahtay Kyun, or Kho Son in Thai, which lies just south of Kawtaung, Burma's southernmost community, a lively market town with a population of 25,000. The Club is described for legal purposes as a "resort with gaming rooms". It welcomes visitors with its own Immigration office, roomy and staffed with especially courteous officials and the floors and toilets are granite. The hotel lobby has a single ATM machine, which should be one of the busiest in the region, verging on meltdown. But it wears a sign saying it's out of order — something to do with Thailand's anti-money laundering legislation. The reception areas and lobby are huge and airy, with high ceilings, heavy woods and stone everywhere, a sweeping staircase and enormous chandeliers. Looking northward from anywhere in the resort, you are presented with magnificent island views.

The hoi polloi rooms are packed with one-armed bandits, automatic blackjack machines, and lots more. Both these and the VIP rooms are open twenty-four hours a day. Which is unfortunate since, first thing in the morning, this writer has to board a boat for the Burmese islands north of here.

The most remarkable thing about the 800-island Mergui Archipelago is that such an extraordinary natural resource could lie so close to a major tourist area as Phuket and go largely unremarked for so long. Given the post-1940s isolationist regime in Rangoon, the Mergui Archipelago was off limits to visitors for decades. Over the past several years, however, the government has cautiously begun to develop tourism in the area. Among other things, this huge island group promises to become one of Asia's best sailing and sport-diving destinations. The southern islands of this group, mostly uninhabited, still support amazing rainforest and a diverse wildlife. Pristine white-sand beaches are so numerous they become commonplace.

A number of Phuket-based companies are running cruises in the Archipelago. SEAL, for example, offers sailing, diving, snorkelling, kayaking, forest-walking trips. Others do dedicated sailing or diving excursions.

Boat rides to the Andaman Club from Rayong — a Thai town on the mainland across from Kawtaung — are free. **By Collin Piprell**