

# Condé Nast Traveller

SEPTEMBER 2021 £4.99

*Ibiza*

*Sicily*

*Croatia*

*Greece*

*South Africa*

*France*

*Thailand*

*Somerset*

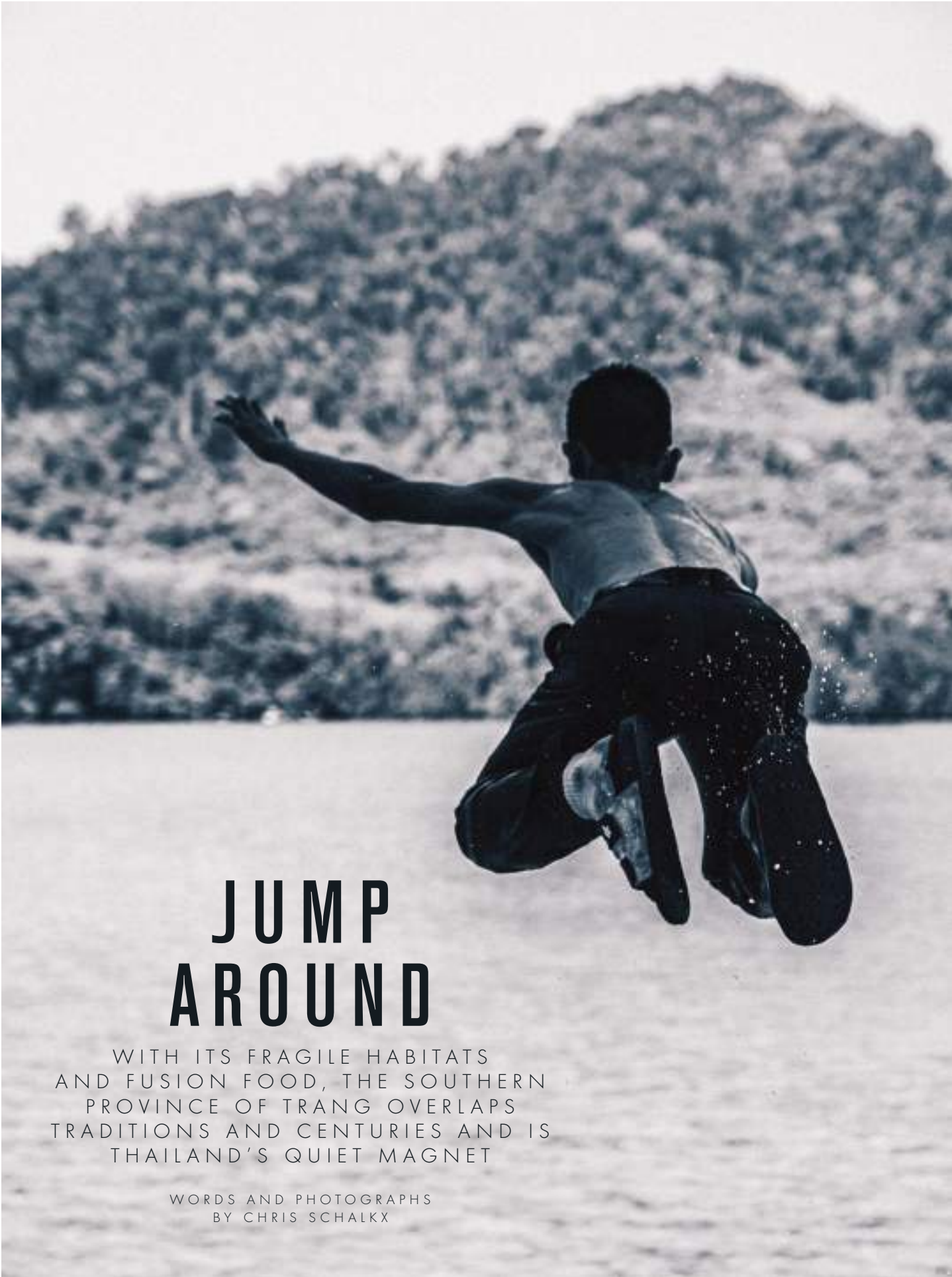
*Denmark*

*hot  
summer  
have*









# JUMP AROUND

WITH ITS FRAGILE HABITATS  
AND FUSION FOOD, THE SOUTHERN  
PROVINCE OF TRANG OVERLAPS  
TRADITIONS AND CENTURIES AND IS  
THAILAND'S QUIET MAGNET

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY CHRIS SCHALKX

EARLY MORNING IN THE CITY OF TRANG AND IT'S A CONFUSION of charcoal smoke and lemongrass. Around me, vendors hawk pineapples and bitter beans in thick southern accents. Motorcycles zoom to and fro, handlebars loaded with plastic bags bulging with tuna and prawns plucked from the Andaman Sea, 20 miles west, just hours earlier. And everybody, everywhere, is eating. From the cavernous belly of the market echoes the chack-a-chack of cleavers chopping roast pork. Whole hogs, scored and massaged with cinnamon, cloves and honey, are roasted to a crisp in giant ovens. They arrive wrapped in yesterday's news, diced into sweet morsels. So beloved is this *moo yang* that it appears in the province's official slogan, alongside 'generous people' and 'scenic beaches'.

Trang's breakfasts are equally famed. From 4am every day, the city turns into a cross-cultural buffet of stir-fries and noodle soups, grilled pork and gloopy rice dumplings. Open-air kitchens spill out onto pavements, with middle-aged women ladling fiery curries over rice. Opposite one of them, a headscarved vendor – most of Thailand's Muslim population live here in the south – prepares buttery roti. Other early risers crowd around market stalls like tiny Tokyo *omakase* joints, hunched over bowls of *jok*, a silky rice porridge with salted egg and matchsticks of ginger.

Dim sum gets top billing. Introduced by the merchants and tin miners who migrated here from Canton and southern China during the 19th century, it fuels workers on fishing

## EVERYBODY, EVERYWHERE, IS EATING. WHOLE HOGS ARE ROASTED IN GIANT OVENS AND ARRIVE WRAPPED IN YESTERDAY'S NEWS

boats, nipa-palm fields and rubber plantations. Trang's 70 or so dim-sum spots range from cacophonous mess halls to timeworn hole-in-the-walls with stuttering fans and oil-stained interiors. Behind forts of bamboo steaming baskets, cooks orchestrate hundreds of small metal plates filled with *shumai* pork dumplings, braised chicken feet and oozing pillow buns. At Sin Jiew, one of the oldest of the bunch, I sit next to families gathered on plastic stools around marble-topped tables. Our miniature forks poke pockets of shrimp and stuffed fried tofu. At the back of the shop, a coffee counter serves oily, turbo-strong *kopi*, another Chinese introduction, with a whisper of chicory and a thumb-thick bottom of sweet condensed milk. Outside, a man in a mottled apron dunks doughnuts into bubbling oil until puffy and golden, then sends them off with coconut custard on grease-blobbed paper.

It isn't just the food that feels decidedly Chinese here. All around town, as in Penang across the Malaysian border and Phuket, about a four-hour drive north, Chinese merchants built pastel-toned Sino-Portuguese shophouses with louvred shutters and ornamental details that look like piped icing. They built shrines too, with red lanterns and technicolour dragons prancing on the roofs – one for the Hokkien community, one for the Teochews, one for the Hakkas, and some for those who aren't choosy.

I visit Khanaporn 'Aum' Chanchedsak for lunch at her tiny chef's table Trang Ko'e. She's wearing a sarong and a *kebaya* tunic with floral batik and embroidery as intricate as the ceramic crockery lining her restaurant. Both nod to her Peranakan heritage, the fusion culture of the southern Chinese who settled along the Malay Peninsula and their Indonesian, Malay or Thai wives; her great-grandfather arrived here from Fujian to work on a pepper farm. Aum began to dig into the flavours of her ancestors after her

*Opposite, clockwise from top left: going for a swim on Koh Libong; gold shop in Kantang; the square in front of Trang's train station; window in Trang town; approaching Koh Ngai by boat; bananas for sale in Trang town; mooncake at Koh Chong café in Trang town; palm trees on Koh Libong; Koh Chong café. Previous pages, from left: bedroom at Thapwarin Resort on Koh Ngai; jumping off the pier on Koh Libong*











mother passed away and her father missed her home-cooked meals. ‘I learnt from my aunts,’ she says. ‘Then I thought, if my dad loves eating this, maybe others will too.’

Now, her place is booked out almost two months in advance. Mostly by Thais curious to taste Peranakan food, which is hard to find elsewhere. ‘But actually, some of the curries sold at the market are also rooted in Peranakan cooking,’ Aum explains. ‘It’s the original fusion.’ From her open kitchen, she offers me pork belly fried in Chinese wine with fermented rice. A bouncy egg custard with a punchy layer of shrimp paste, followed by rice dyed blue with butterfly pea and a hearty pineapple curry which, she explains, is influenced by the Indian Muslims who also settled here. Watching her prepare each dish, I understand why many cooks choose to focus on a less laborious cuisine. ‘If we were open this evening, I would’ve had to start cooking yesterday,’ she says, and goes on to talk about the 30-something steps of salting, drying, frying and infusing involved in making her *nasi kerabu*, a fishy rice salad.

But despite being one of the best – yet underrated – street-food destinations in Thailand, Trang’s centre is often just a coffee stop between the airport and the pier, from which the archipelago can be seen in the hazy distance. Its dozen or so islands are some of the prettiest in the country, secret southern escapes that still have bamboo huts instead of glossy hotels and pearly, undeveloped beaches. They also have unequalled wildlife and an

## CHILDREN CHEER ON A FRIEND HIGH UP A PALM TREE, THEN NARROWLY ESCAPE THE COCONUTS THAT LAND ON THE SAND

increasingly vocal group of environmentalists work hard to protect these vulnerable ecosystems. While most of the isles aren’t bigger than a jungle-dripping rock, guarded by fruit bats dozing on limestone walls, five welcome travellers: Koh Muk, Koh Libong, Koh Ngai, Koh Kradan and Koh Sukorn – although Sukorn is so out of the way that it’s rarely part of the island-hopper’s itinerary.

Koh Muk is the closest, a 30-minute sputter on a long-tail boat across to what looks like a narrow strip of palm-studded silver attached to bulbous green. It’s the most popular of the lot, but that doesn’t mean much. Compared to Koh Lipe, further south across the Andaman Sea, all of Trang’s isles are remarkably low key. No born-again yogis, no Vespa-riding expats. Even Koh Lanta, the next big island to the north, often praised for its barefoot appeal, feels like a tropical Disneyland in comparison. On the eastern side, a small village snakes inland from the pier, a jumble of dusty minimarts and scooter rentals, chalkboard signs touting two-for-one Singha beers and bright flags fluttering overhead as if for a perpetual birthday party. By the waterside are a few bars done up in Rastafari colours and sun-bleached flotsam. After dark, along the main street lit by fairy lights strung between palm trees, the catch of the day – blue marlin and banana-sized prawns – is grilled with chilli and ginger.

Inland, rubber trees and untamed forest tumble down the karst mountains of the west coast. A handful of trails wind around hairpin bends to epic views and lonely stretches of sand that change name depending on who you ask for directions – Sapphire Beach or Haad Sabai, Ruby Beach or Ao Phairin. On Haad Farang – Charlie Beach in local lingo – I sip pineapple smoothies while watching a solitary swimmer dip in and out of the gentle surf. Children cheer on a friend high up a palm tree and then narrowly escape the coconuts that land on the ground with a soft but lethal thud. Charlie used

to have one hotel right on the seafront – until 2018, when it was demolished for having been built on national park land. Now the beach is a peaceful spot for sunset drinks on the rickety wooden terrace that sits on a rocky outcrop.

One morning further along the west coast, I plunge into the sea in front of a narrow gash in the cliffside. ‘In there?’ I ask the captain. ‘In there,’ he nods. I make the five-minute swim through inky darkness, in water several degrees cooler than outside. My torch lights up bats and knobby stalactites hanging within arm’s reach. Just as it becomes too claustrophobic, the tunnel opens onto a clear lagoon encircled by towering limestone. Emerald Cave they call it, because of the greenish shimmer reflected on the walls when the sun shines directly overhead. Every captain will tell you that pirates hid their treasures here; some will spin yarns about monkeys hauling the loot up its ridges. In the low season, when the cave is closed off to visitors, fishermen climb up looking for edible bird nests – to be turned into soup – perhaps keeping half an eye out for something glinting beneath the vines.

Back on Charlie, Supaporn ‘Su’ Chaisawat makes me a seafood lunch at her Nature Hill hotel on a jungle-covered slope near the beach entrance. She’s from the mainland but grew up visiting Koh Muk with her father, who sold charcoal from a rowboat between

## THE ADRENALIN RUSH AT SIGHTING A DUGONG STARTLES ME - IT’S LIKE THE CURSED LOVECHILD OF A SEAL AND A BLOBFISH

the islands. Ten years ago, she moved here to open a backpacker bar with her cousin. ‘Koh Muk is charming, but increasingly rubbish is a problem,’ she sighs, referring to the bottles washed up on shore and the plastic litter in the mangroves around the village. ‘Many people are too *sabai sabai*, too easygoing, to do anything about it.’ Neil, her French boyfriend, heads up the area’s chapter of Trash Hero, which organises beach clean-ups with visiting volunteers.

When I mention to the man hoisting my luggage into the boat that I’m off to Koh Libong, he pouts. ‘Stay on Muk,’ he says. ‘Libong beaches no good.’ I tell him that the beaches aren’t the reason I’m going there. Libong is Trang’s biggest island, with the largest population but the fewest visitors. Tourism hasn’t left much of a mark – a handful of hotels gather at its south-western tip, the rest is swathed in coconut groves and rubber trees. The main village barnacles the western coast and life comes to a stop when the onion-domed mosque calls to prayer. The 6,000 inhabitants share one ATM, and there’s no 7-Eleven store – the locals warned that they’d burn it down if one ever popped up. The boatman has a point about the beaches: rockier compared to Muk’s sands, they’re largely undeveloped and not very swimmable, at least for humans.

The following day I’m in a boat with Bang Man, my guide, crouched on the wooden bow, following a trail of gnawed seagrass floating in the shallows. ‘*Tao. Tao. Tao,*’ he mumbles, pointing at turtles the size of woks sliding under the glassy surface. A needlefish shoots out of the water like an angry silver bullet. An hour passes. Suddenly, the engine stutters to a halt. ‘*Payoon, payoon!*’ Man shouts, and right beside us, for a split second, I see a light-grey creature flipping its tail. The adrenalin rush startles me. It’s a dugong, a close cousin of the manatee, which looks like the cursed lovechild of a seal and a blobfish, with a dolphin tail and a snout like a vacuum cleaner. The anticipation has been building up to this moment ever since I left the airport: marble dugongs are carved into the fountain on

*Opposite, clockwise from top left: main street in Trang town; bar owner on Koh Muk; the beach at Thapwarin Resort; nipa-palm baskets; coffee stall on Koh Libong; Koh Muk seen from the water; Peranakan ceramics at Trang Ko’e restaurant; temple entrance in Kantang*











the city's main roundabout, dangle from streetlights in Kantang and are scribbled in graffiti on sun-baked walls. Anthropomorphic dugongs with tiny sunglasses hawk diving trips and pork buns, and gift shops all around the province sell little dugongs sculpted from sandalwood that smell heavenly when you rub their bellies.

But despite their popularity the animals are surprisingly hard to spot. Only 130 feed on seagrass around the archipelago, and most of them are concentrated in the ocean surrounding Koh Libong. 'When I was young, there were about 500,' says Tipusa Sangsawang, a guard at one of the watchpoints looking out over a protected area just off the coast. 'I'd see them every day. When they got stuck in low tide, we'd push them back in.' But numbers have dwindled over the years, and the now-endangered species face threats from stray fishing nets, contaminated waste water and occasionally poaching – no longer for their meat ('Not good, a bit like chewy beef,' Sangsawang says) but for their small tusks, which are believed to have aphrodisiac powers.

In 2019, an orphaned baby dugong found stranded on a beach in Krabi was brought to Koh Libong for round-the-clock care. She became a celebrity: the country fell in love with beady-eyed little Marium and followed her every move on social media. Sadly, she didn't survive. In August that year, news of her passing ripped through the country. An autopsy revealed the cause of death: eight strips of plastic lodged in her stomach. 'I could talk about Marium all day, but it would only make me cry,' her former caretaker, Suwit Sarasit, tells me at his home in Libong's main village. 'I held her and fed her bottles of milk – she was like

## THE PLACE IS LOVELY BECAUSE OF EVERYTHING IT LACKS: VILLAGES, STORES, FULL-MOON PARTIES, AND THE PERCEPTION OF TIME

my baby.' Marium's death was a wake-up call, not only for him but for everyone here. Next to his house, I spot drums crammed with plastic bags and bottles collected from the shore.

While long, narrow Koh Kradan, between Libong and Ngai, is undeniably beautiful with its creamy, hammock-filled beach, it is on Ngai that I find what I and many other island-chasers long for. This small spot is the prettiest of them all, with the sparkliest water and the blondest sand, flanked by a trim of coral reef that, from above, makes it look like a work by Christo skirted in turquoise cloth. Farmers from nearby Koh Lanta once claimed part of the interior for coconut plantations, but other than that the forest on its hilly spine has remained untouched for centuries.

Ngai is lovely because of everything it lacks: villages, convenience stores, full-moon parties, and often the perception of time. There are no scooters. There aren't even roads. And despite a few infinity-pool places to stay lining the only developed beach, it still feels like the Thai island escape that exists on Kodak film, long before mass tourism took hold. It has a go-slow vibe, with swings of salt-frizzled rope hanging from leaning palm trees and thatched-roof cottages almost invisible in the jungle fringe.

On my last evening, I stroll down the main beach. Cicada song rolls over the island like a stadium wave. A couple of hornbills rustle the palm leaves and a lone dog lolls in the shade of a gnarled driftwood trunk, so blissed out it only lifts half an ear when I pass by. Among the confetti of tiny shells beneath my feet, I find a piece of glass the size of my palm, milky and smoothed like a pearly gem by the ever-grinding waves of the Andaman Sea. And despite having once been yet another discarded bottle, it feels strangely uplifting. Proof of the power of nature; that whatever you throw at it, the ocean still has the last word. 🍷

## GETTING AROUND

Smiling Albino ([smilingalbino.com](http://smilingalbino.com)) offers individual itineraries around Trang from £200 per person per day. For more information about the region, visit [fanclubthailand.co.uk](http://fanclubthailand.co.uk)

*Opposite, clockwise from top left:* temple offering, building, dim-sum restaurant, local and Koh Chong café, all in Trang town; sorting crabs on Koh Muk; temple interior and dim-sum dishes in Trang town; Charlie Beach on Koh Muk