

Picnic in Paradise

With its beaches often voted as one of the best in the world, host island Andaman is a terrific place for divers and beach lovers.

Text Stephen Cunliffe

Comprising 572 densely forested tropical islands that historically housed a British naval base and penal colony, the Andamans have more recently reinvented themselves as an island paradise, attracting adventurous souls and weary tourists looking to rest and recuperate after the rigours of travel on the Indian mainland. The islands are rapidly carving out a deserved reputation as a mecca for sun-loving beach-goers and underwater enthusiasts who come to appreciate the Andamans' bountiful marine life.



Havelock

Surrounded by exciting marine creatures on all sides, we were exploring a small but stunning coral reef known as Johnny's Gorge, arguably the premier dive site within reach of Havelock. However, there was little opportunity to appreciate the beautiful coral as a kaleidoscope of swirling Batfish, Barracuda, Trevally, Snappers and giant, friendly Groupers competed for our attention. Glancing at my depth gauge, which read 28m, I realised we were in pretty deep and could only afford another ten minutes at this level before we would be forced to ascend.

All of a sudden, I felt someone yanking urgently on my foot. I effortlessly rolled over in the weightless environment and was greeted by the signal that every diver yearns for – one hand held vertically above the forehead in the shape of a fin. A shark had been sighted! I hurriedly scanned the water in the direction my wife and sister-in-law were frantically pointing, and soon spotted the large, harmless white-tipped reef shark lying on the sandy bottom alongside the reef. Our group of six wide-eyed divers exchanged jubilant looks of satisfaction as we hung motionless, savouring a moment with the most feared fish in the sea. Viewing this sleek oceanic predator was an electrifying experience, but all too soon, the Andaman Bubbles divemaster Rizwan Jadwet signalled that it was time to begin the slow ascent back towards the boat. As we began to fin upward, the shark swam closer and set hearts pounding as it glided past our elated group of scuba divers.

▲ The Andaman Islands remain largely un-blighted by tourism, making them one of the best destinations for a beach holiday.

“ Floating in the calm warm sea, while watching an elephant stroll along the palm-fringed sand, I felt as if I had died and gone to heaven. ”



Laura Westphal

▲ Above: Scuba diving and snorkelling allow underwater enthusiasts the opportunity to get up close and personal with a family of colourful clown fish that inhabit sea anemones.

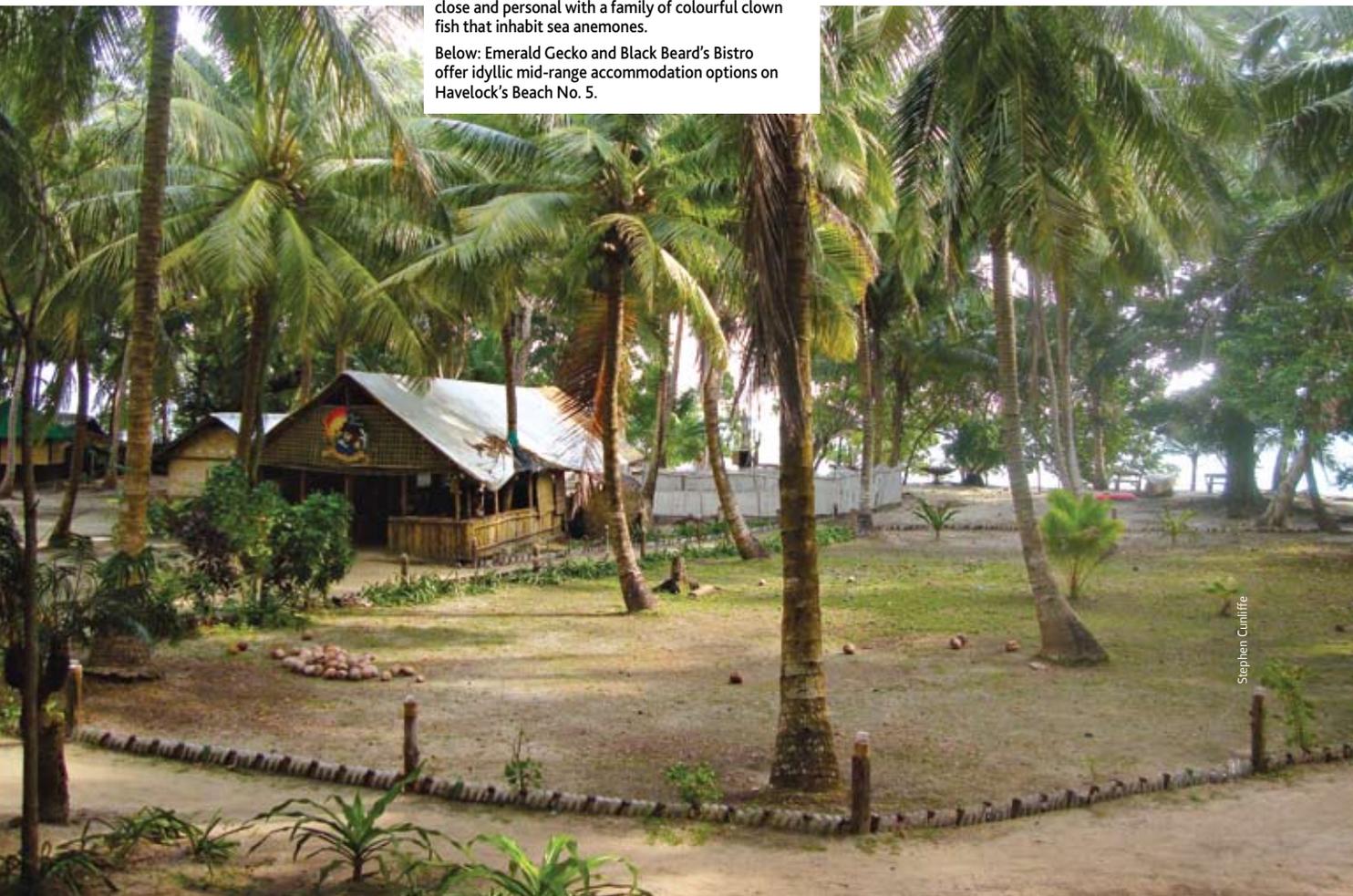
Below: Emerald Gecko and Black Beard's Bistro offer idyllic mid-range accommodation options on Havelock's Beach No. 5.

Seafood smorgasbord

There was great excitement back onboard the dive boat as we ate a hearty lunch and animatedly discussed the exceptionally varied marine life we had seen on our dives. Forget finding Nemo, we had seen Bruce!

Back on Havelock, we headed to Black Beard's Bistro at the Emerald Gecko to enjoy a celebratory beer before getting stuck with an impressive seafood menu that had my mouth watering long before I even placed an order. With fresh linefish steaks, king and tiger prawns, as well as a host of fish, prawn and chicken curries, we were spoilt for choice. Ordering a variety of different dishes for the table, everyone ended up devouring considerably more than an elegant sufficiency.

The only way to survive all the great food and beer was by dragging ourselves out of the hammocks and getting some exercise. On the days



Stephen Cumliffe



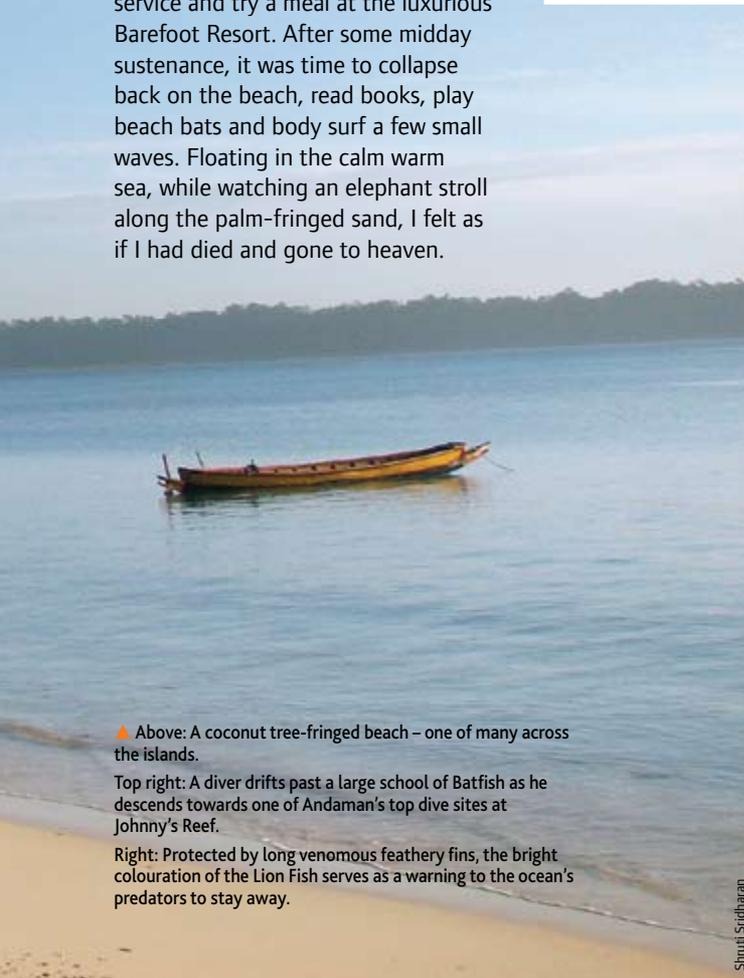
Charmed

we weren't diving, we hired bicycles and headed off to explore Havelock. A challenging ride over steep hills took us to Beach No. 7 at Radhanagar. This idyllic crescent-shaped white-sand beach shot to fame in 2004 when *Time Magazine* rated it as the best beach in Asia. Lapped by crystal-clear turquoise waters and backing onto a pristine forest of tall bullet-wood trees, it offers the ultimate beach experience with scenes that look as if they have been plucked straight from the pages of an advertising brochure.

Vendors sell snacks, cold water, soft drinks and even chop open coconuts for thirsty beach-goers in need of refreshment. Those looking for a swankier beachside dining experience might choose to brave the surly service and try a meal at the luxurious Barefoot Resort. After some midday sustenance, it was time to collapse back on the beach, read books, play beach bats and body surf a few small waves. Floating in the calm warm sea, while watching an elephant stroll along the palm-fringed sand, I felt as if I had died and gone to heaven.



Stephen Cunliffe



▲ Above: A coconut tree-fringed beach – one of many across the islands.

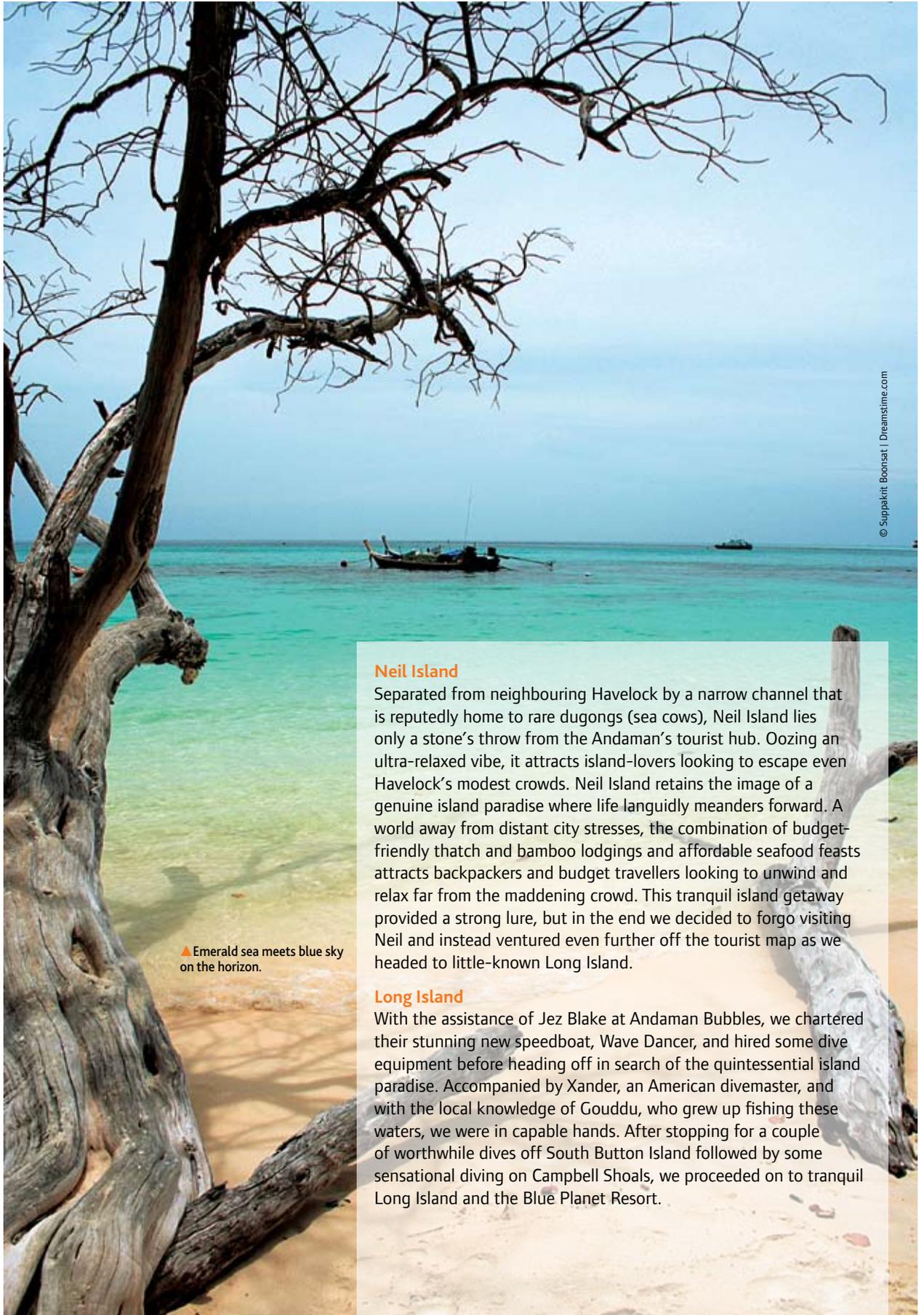
Top right: A diver drifts past a large school of Batfish as he descends towards one of Andaman's top dive sites at Johnny's Reef.

Right: Protected by long venomous feathery fins, the bright colouration of the Lion Fish serves as a warning to the ocean's predators to stay away.

Shruti Sridharan



Stephen Cunliffe



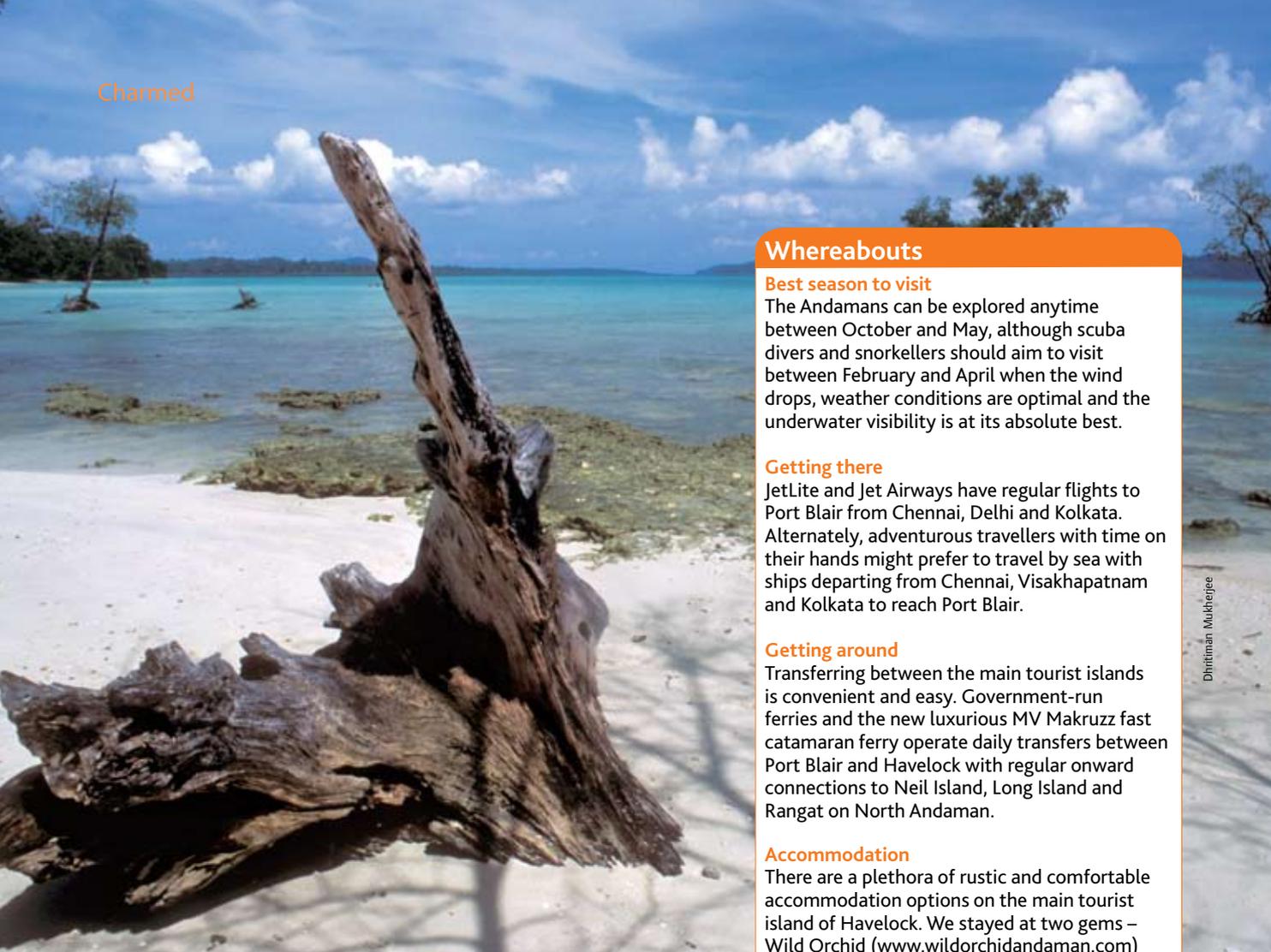
▲ Emerald sea meets blue sky on the horizon.

Neil Island

Separated from neighbouring Havelock by a narrow channel that is reputedly home to rare dugongs (sea cows), Neil Island lies only a stone's throw from the Andaman's tourist hub. Oozing an ultra-relaxed vibe, it attracts island-lovers looking to escape even Havelock's modest crowds. Neil Island retains the image of a genuine island paradise where life languidly meanders forward. A world away from distant city stresses, the combination of budget-friendly thatch and bamboo lodgings and affordable seafood feasts attracts backpackers and budget travellers looking to unwind and relax far from the maddening crowd. This tranquil island getaway provided a strong lure, but in the end we decided to forgo visiting Neil and instead ventured even further off the tourist map as we headed to little-known Long Island.

Long Island

With the assistance of Jez Blake at Andaman Bubbles, we chartered their stunning new speedboat, Wave Dancer, and hired some dive equipment before heading off in search of the quintessential island paradise. Accompanied by Xander, an American divemaster, and with the local knowledge of Gouddu, who grew up fishing these waters, we were in capable hands. After stopping for a couple of worthwhile dives off South Button Island followed by some sensational diving on Campbell Shoals, we proceeded on to tranquil Long Island and the Blue Planet Resort.



Dhritiman Mukherjee

▲ Above: The distinctness of the flora and fauna present on the islands wows all tourists, with many opting to go underwater for better views.

Lurking off the beaten track, Long Island is relatively easy to get to with your own boat or via the government ferry. The 40-sq-km island is home to a community of around 3,000 people, most of them resettled from mainland India, and with a mix of Hindi, Bengali and Tamil, it exudes an almost cosmopolitan charm. Despite years of logging, much of the forest remains and the island is pleasantly devoid of motor vehicles or roads. The best way to get around is on foot, so we hired a local guide for the hour-and-a-half's walk through pristine forest to Lalaji Beach on the north shore of the island. Arriving on a beautiful narrow sliver of a beach in a wild and charming bay, this abandoned stretch of sand seemed the perfect setting for a Robinson Crusoe-style movie about marooned sailors. Our young guide split open a couple of coconuts for us before melting back into the jungle and leaving us to savour the moment alone. It was time to lie back on our private beach and enjoy a picnic in paradise.

After a two-hour trek back along the seashore towards Blue Planet, we stopped at the little beach near the resort to watch a spectacular sunset. It made me wonder, could life get any better than this?

The Andamans are a rare island paradise, still undiscovered by the mass tourism market. But make sure you visit before the tourist hordes discover this tropical seaside Shangri-la.

Whereabouts

Best season to visit

The Andamans can be explored anytime between October and May, although scuba divers and snorkellers should aim to visit between February and April when the wind drops, weather conditions are optimal and the underwater visibility is at its absolute best.

Getting there

JetLite and Jet Airways have regular flights to Port Blair from Chennai, Delhi and Kolkata. Alternately, adventurous travellers with time on their hands might prefer to travel by sea with ships departing from Chennai, Visakhapatnam and Kolkata to reach Port Blair.

Getting around

Transferring between the main tourist islands is convenient and easy. Government-run ferries and the new luxurious MV Makruzz fast catamaran ferry operate daily transfers between Port Blair and Havelock with regular onward connections to Neil Island, Long Island and Rangat on North Andaman.

Accommodation

There are a plethora of rustic and comfortable accommodation options on the main tourist island of Havelock. We stayed at two gems – Wild Orchid (www.wildorchidandaman.com) and Emerald Gecko (www.emerald-gecko.com). Both are located on Beach No. 5 and have outstanding restaurants with bar facilities. For efficient reservation handling, contact Lynda at emeraldgeckoindia@gmail.com. On Long Island, there is only one lodging option – the basic, clean and comfortable Blue Planet Resort (www.blueplanetandamans.com) with restaurant.

For more information

Log on to www.tourism.andaman.nic.in

Travel tips:

The following dive operators are the most well-established, professional and safety-conscious Havelock-based companies operating in the Andamans. While all three outfits offer dive safaris, Andaman Bubbles comes highly recommended.

Andaman Bubbles: www.andamanbubbles.com,
Barefoot Scuba: www.diveandamans.com,
Dive India: www.diveindia.com

All foreigners, despite the fact they are coming from mainland India, are required to complete immigration formalities and acquire Restricted Area Permits upon arrival at Veer Savarkar airport. These permits are valid for a maximum of 45 days and extensions are not permitted.