



LEFT-RIGHT: Have the freedom of your own chartered yacht; take off on your own sea kayak

KOH CHANG

As soon as the ferry slips from the dock at Ao Thammachat, the big city feels a thousand miles away. Gaze toward the jungle covered mountains of Koh Chang or Elephant Island and hear the gentle lap of the waves and feel the welcome breeze on your face.

Koh Chang and its 52 neighbouring islands offer a natural alternative to the constant buzz of modern urban life. And the further you venture in this beautiful marine park, the more alternative it tends to be.

Probably the perfect way to island hop is at your own pace on a private yacht. You don't need to be an expert to enjoy the freedom of exploration under sail. Koh Chang boasts its own yacht charter base at Salek Phet and you can book a skippered charter and head towards the largely unexplored waters bordering Thailand and Cambodia.

After the anchor splashes into the clear waters off a deserted island, take the dinghy ashore to explore empty white sand beaches or just swim in crystal water. The only other people you are likely to see are the local squid fishermen resting on their brightly painted boats in the heat of the sun before their busy night of labour ahead.

If time is short, the outer islands around Koh Chang can also be reached by fast motorboat. These can be pre-booked and boarded from the famous bustling pier of Bang Bao. This narrow concrete finger pointing into the Gulf of Thailand is the home to craft shops, motor scooters, dive shops, hotels and restaurants, all perched on weathered timber stilts above the water.

Bang Bao Boat will take you to the two other major islands south in the archipelago, Koh Mak and Koh Kut. Koh Mak is both privately owned and flat, which makes it unique in these parts and ideal for walking

THE PERFECT WAY TO ISLAND HOP IS AT YOUR OWN PACE ON A PRIVATE YACHT

Getting to Koh Chang

Ferries for Koh Chang can be reached by car, private mini-bus or taxi from Bangkok in three to four hours on a fast motorway route south via Klang, Chantaburi and Trat. Public Transfer buses leave Suvarnabhumi Airport and Ekamai Bus Station several times per day and are air-conditioned and inexpensive but they take a little longer. The ferry journey itself is only 30 minutes.

Elephant Trekking

Since Koh Chang means "elephant island", it's not surprising that the founder of the Asian Elephant Foundation and conservationist, Pittaya Homkraitas, should set up his first elephant camp and make his home on Koh Chang. He set up Ban Kwan Chang Elephant Camp (meaning "the home of the elephant's keeper") as a community project in Klongson Village in the northern jungle of Koh Chang. Here, stray elephants are kept close to nature and a new generation of mahouts are trained. Visitors take elephant treks through the forests and learn about elephants and their complex relationship with their handlers. Tel: +66 1919 3995



Kids jumping off boat photo: Corbis; Kayak photo: Getty Images; Elephant ride photo: Photolibary

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A whole new world beckons underwater

or cycling. There are no cars, taxis, jet skis or high-rise hotels because the families who own the island have banned them in a valiant attempt to keep Koh Mak ethical and green.

If speedboats are a little fast and brash for your taste, then a snorkelling trip to one of the many pristine coral reefs in the marine park will provide a glimpse of the islands from above and below sea level. Around the small island of Koh Rang are some of the finest underwater habitats in the region and many local dive companies work hard to protect them by running marine conservation programmes such as Project Nemo, which helped return clown fish to the area. As Kristen Holstein of **BB Divers** explains, "it is protecting the environment of Koh Chang but it is also protecting our livelihoods."

If you are someone who prefers to stay within easy reach of the chilled cocktails, room service and spa facilities on dry land, then simply hire a kayak and embark on nothing more rigorous than a gentle paddle around the beautiful bays, creeks and mangrove forests of Koh Chang.

Whichever way you choose to float your boat, you might find yourself seduced by the easy pace of island life on the Koh Chang archipelago and more than a little reluctant to return to the bustle and sophistication of Bangkok. ★

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