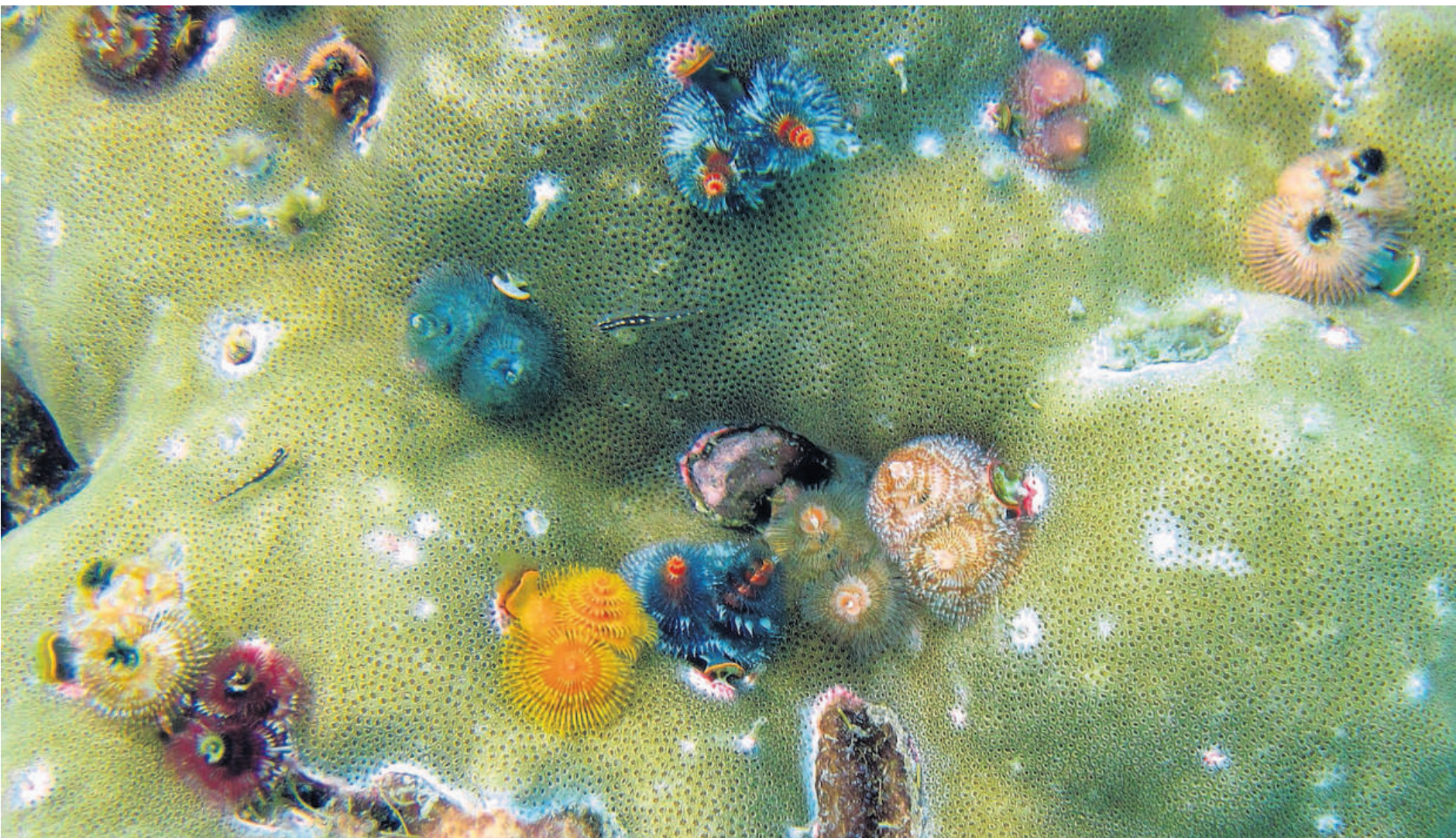




EXPLORE

RIDE LIKE THE WIND
Motorcycle rentals take tourists just about anywhere. **Page L2**

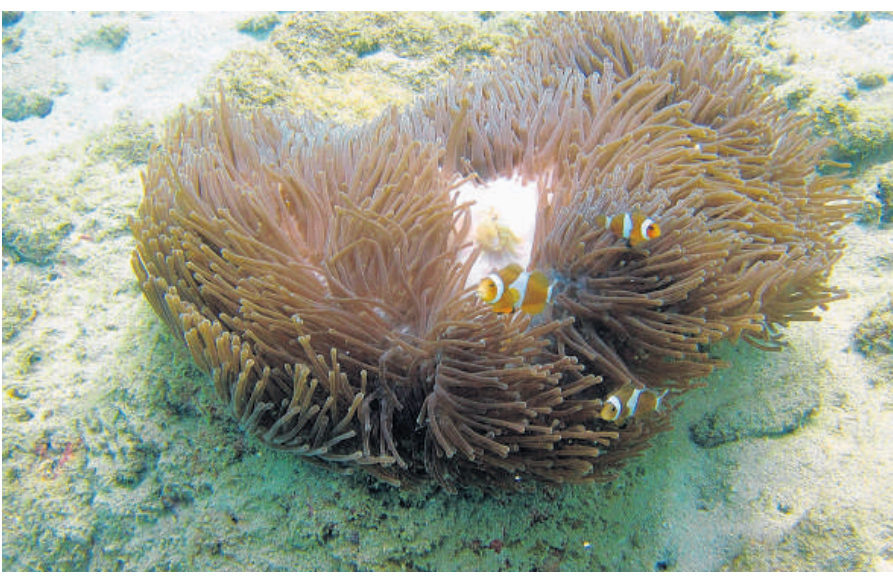


Christmas tree worms sprout from hard coral in the reefs around Havelock Island in India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which provide some of Asia's best yet least-heralded diving.

Remote area in the Andaman Sea has pristine reefs and beaches, but the accomodations can be rustic.



Olivier Baudouin (center) checks the gear of two students as they prepare for a Discover Scuba dive off Elephant Beach on Havelock Island. The island, in India's Andaman and Nicobar Island chain, is developing a reputation as a learner's paradise because scuba classes are smaller than at popular tourist destinations such as Thailand and Mexico.



Clown fish guard a sea anemone at the Anemone Reef dive site.

PLACES TO SEE ON INDIA'S MAINLAND, T5.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ADAM JADHAV • Special to the Post-Dispatch

NEAR HAVELOCK ISLAND, INDIA • Our rickety skiff takes on an alarming amount of water in the rolling Andaman Sea.

After an hour and a half, two other scuba divers and I arrive nearly seasick and absolutely soaked at our dive site, Johnny's Gorge. The divemaster scrambles to tie the boat to a buoy, which is nothing more than a cluster of plastic bottles bobbing in the wide-open ocean and anchored to a rock some 90 feet below.

The sea is angry and we all look a bit hesitant. The divemaster hops in to check the current and immediately and rapidly washes away.

This one isn't going to be easy.

We're the only dive boat to brave these waters today, but we shrug and gear up. We're paying good money to dive in India's Andaman Islands, a tourist destination so remote that even some veteran divers will never dip a fin in these waters. It'd be a waste not to try.

Once in, I kick hard for the front of the boat and catch the mooring line with a white-knuckle grip. I shout to the divemaster that I'm going down a few meters — to get out of the surf, to avoid the violently bobbing boat and to catch my breath.

After about 10 minutes, the divemaster comes down alone. He explains — with hand signals — that the other two divers were uneasy and aborted. Do I want to continue?

The waves are so strong we have to hold our gear bags down, the surf tosses our boat around like a

See INDIA • Page T5



The reefs around Havelock Island in India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands provide clear blue water and exotic sea life.



Hal Loebach, one of the museum's staff of three, looks over a Convair B-58 Hustler at the Octave Chanute Aerospace Museum.

Air history on display in Rantoul, Ill.

STORY AND PHOTO BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER • Special to the Post-Dispatch

RANTOUL, ILL. • "Wow, Dad, look at that airplane!"

Dad had no time to react before his young son took off running toward an F-105 Thunderchief, a supersonic bomber nicknamed "Thud" by the troops in Vietnam. It's one of more than 30 aircraft parked in the hangar and out on the tarmac that prompt shouts of joy — and some tears — at the Octave Chanute Aerospace Museum.

The largest aerospace museum in Illinois is modest compared to others around the country, but it's worth a trip to Rantoul, about 20 miles north of Champaign and 200 miles northeast of St. Louis. "We've got some priceless

pieces of history here," says Hal Loebach, one of the staff of three, who was a B-52 bombardier in the Vietnam War. "We feel it is important that the next generation get excited about aviation."

Chanute Air Force Base was founded in 1917. It trained 110 pilots for World War I and later operated a missile and aircraft technical training school. The museum opened after the base closed in 1993.

The most poignant exhibit tells the story of the first all-black combat unit in the Army Air Corps. The 99th Pursuit Squadron was activated at Chanute Field in 1941 with 255 enlisted men and six officer candidates who became the

core of the Tuskegee Airmen.

Politically powerful individuals, including Eleanor Roosevelt and some members of Congress, had forced the War Department to form an all-black unit. In response, the Army Air Corps created what it called the "Great Experiment." Members were to learn aircraft maintenance at Chanute, then attend pilot training in Alabama. Military leaders believed that blacks could not learn to maintain aircraft or handle the stress of combat. They were wrong. The class scored the highest grade-point average in the history of the training center.

See MUSEUM • Page T4

INDIA • FROM T1

Remote islands offer beautiful challenges for deep-sea divers

bathtub toy, the current has me splayed out like a flag on the mooring line. To me, a new diver, this trip seems precarious, maybe even unwise.

Then I remind myself where I am: India, where there's almost no dive industry and where expecting everything to go perfectly is setting yourself up for disappointment. And whatever the conditions, I trust my divemaster, my gear and my training.

I flash a big thumbs-down, universal dive-speak for let's make for the bottom. After all, you only live once.

TO THE BEACH AND BEYOND

I first learned of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands eight years ago. A few pages of the Lonely Planet guidebook were practically a siren song: remote, idyllic beaches far off India's east coast on the backpacker road less traveled.

I was 19 and looking for a place to put my feet up at the end of a solo tour of India. But my tight budget and poor planning forced me to "settle" for Goa, India's former hippie paradise.

The Andamans would have to wait. When I started planning this trip, I realized just how far off the tourist radar the archipelago lies. Government figures from 2007 counted fewer than 150,000 tourists (only about 11,000 were foreigners); Disney's Magic Kingdom, which I've never seen, saw 17 million visitors that year.

Though there are more than 500 islands in the territory, fewer than 50 are accessible to tourists. As my jetliner descends, the island chain sparkles like a string of emeralds on a necklace of bright blue ocean. But the capital, Port Blair — the Andamans' sea and air link to mainland India — offers an anticlimactic greeting: a lush but sprawling burg of ramshackle construction and mounting pollution mixed with a bit of colonial history.

Most tourists have to spend at least a night in Port Blair because of the scheduling of inter-island ferries. The main attraction is the infamous, hulking Cellular Jail, where the British shipped Indian freedom fighters during the heady days of the Independence Movement. But with little else (beyond some decent fresh seafood), the capital is generally just a waypoint.

A day after landing, I hop a two-hour ferry ride for Havelock Island, the Andamans' biggest draw. Here, infrastructure, accommodation, food and indeed the general vibe fall decidedly in the backpacker category.

The main road from the jetty is lined with budget accommodations and the occasional mid-range resort. I spent most of my nights on the grounds of a dive shop in an A-frame made of bamboo and palm fronds, costing about \$3 a night. Sean Nordbo, manager of Barefoot Scuba, lovingly referred to my accommodation as a "chicken hut."

At least, it had a mosquito net, fan and an electric outlet.

"Tourism is still pretty new here," Nordbo said. "Diving started less than 10 years ago. Before that, the islands were really just for backpackers who came looking for good beaches."

Some "hotels" on the island are more like a commune of shacks and hammocks, where the crowd is a couple bottles of rum and an acoustic guitar away from a beach party.

"The island is so relaxed," said Bianca Bovell, who was honeymooning in India and diving with her husband. "It's the backpacker scene, absolutely, but then, we're still backpackers."

Havelock does offer some higher-end accommodations. I splurged on a plush bungalow for a few nights at \$125 a day at the Barefoot Resort (run by the scuba shop's parent company). Afternoons, I would wander 50 meters along a forest path then emerge on Radhanagar Beach.

The white sand spit is kept breathtakingly clear of trash and beach hawkers. On a good day, you can lay down a towel in a bend and see no other people, just the bright blue ocean, the even bluer sky and the green jungle. I've never seen a better sunset.

Beach No. 5, on the other side of the island, is even more isolated, and while the sand is not quite as clean, the water is Kool-Aid blue.

(Locals will remind you repeatedly that both beaches were deemed Asia's best in 2004 by Time Magazine.)

A few restaurants are flexing their culinary muscles. Nemo's is a recent hit with a menu that changes daily, a location ensconced in jungle and car pick-up service. On Christmas Eve, the menu included hot spiced wine, tomato consommé jelly with fresh crab, pan-fried duck breast and a passion fruit panna cotta for about \$33 a head.

Cheaper restaurants — often little more than shacks thatched in palm — also serve up decent fare, and fresh-caught seafood is on most menus. Ten dollars can get you a feast of grouper, barracuda or sometimes even tiger prawns, crab or lobster with sides. A good bowl of prawn fried rice with a glass of mango juice will run less than \$5.

The sea breeze, of course, is free.

BEAUTY BENEATH THE WAVES

Some of Asia's most pristine reefs await just offshore. The islands are largely under the scuba diving radar; many fish ID books don't even mention them, and dive shops here are still mapping many reefs.

The lower demand makes Havelock a haven for newbies. I was a scuba virgin and I did my coursework with only one other student. Popular outfits in Florida or the Caribbean might have a single instructor teaching more than a dozen people.

Also, consider that Havelock this year had fewer than 10 dive shops. Thailand's



Diving instructor Elin Lindqvist plays with a batfish near Anemone Reef, a dive site off Havelock Island.



Dive boats travel the water near Lighthouse Reef just north of the Havelock Island jetty.

Top places to see in India

A visit to India may be a once-in-a-lifetime trip. If you decide to spend a few extra days not in island paradise, here are some suggestions:

- **The Taj Mahal** in Agra is one of the world's most beautiful monuments. The word icon is overused and a cliché, but the Taj deserves it. The Agra fort is worth seeing.
- **Jaipur** is the gateway city to Rajasthan, India's land of forts, palaces and deserts. It's part of a popular tourist circuit and easily accessible from Delhi.
- **Khajuraho** is off the beaten path. The journey will take more than a few days, but India's complex of thousand-year-old erotic temples is mind-boggling.
- **Varanasi** is also further afield, but the holy and ancient city is perhaps the best representation of chaotic and colorful India.
- **Darjeeling** and India's green hills in the northeast produce some of the world's best tea. Tibetan and Nepalese cultures mix here beautifully. The city is also a jumping-off point for longer visits to the Himalayas. It's not an easy journey, but one well worth it.
- **Delhi**, even for a couple days, can be a good way to whet your appetite for a future Indian excursion. Skip the popular Red Fort but wander the old city's mystifying alleys in Chandni Chowk, visit nearby Jama Masjid, eat great kebabs and see the historic Qutab Minar and adjoining Mehrauli Archaeological Park.

Writer Adam Jadhav is biased against Mumbai; "It's a wonderful city but a little too modern, sweaty and crowded if you're on a limited budget or tight schedule."

tourist mecca, Phuket, which is just across the Andaman Sea and closer than the Indian mainland, boasts almost 200, according to guidebooks.

"There are just so few divers here," said



An empty giant clam shell sits off Elephant Beach, Havelock Island.

dive instructor Elin Lindqvist. "That's what makes Havelock so great, because there are very few dive spots in the world where you can be relatively alone with such untouched reefs."

Some veteran divers say infrastructure is still lacking, but listen to enough dive stories and you'll hear Havelock and the surround compared to some of the world's top-tier sites. Juliette Odinga, an interior decorator from Switzerland, ranked the Andamans with the Galapagos Islands. Maryland scientist Robert W. Paul said colleagues compared some sites with Australia's Great Barrier Reef. English dive instructor Gill Blair said the Great Blue Hole, a famous site in Belize, is no better than Johnny's Gorge.

Which is precisely where I am, in murderous current, when the divemaster asks if I want to abort. After considering it, I furiously say no.

When we hit bottom, almost 90 feet below the surface, I'm pleasantly surprised: the ocean is calm, clear, and nearly current-free — literally an open aquarium.

We swim lazily amid giant Napoleon wrasses, schools of sawtooth barracuda, prowling big-eyed trevally, elegant but poisonous lionfish and all manner of small reef fish. And as we round a bend of coral, we spot three whitetip reef sharks, each about 5 feet long, resting on the sandy ocean floor.

My eyes go wide and I scream a few obscenities, which are lost in bubbles. The sharks, about 20 feet away and practically harmless, eye us suspiciously but barely move.

And then we swim a bit closer. Again, you only live once.

Adam Jadhav is a freelance writer living in India. His blog is adamjadhav.com.

IF YOU GO DIVING IN INDIA

When to go • The season for diving in the Andamans is roughly October through April or May. December and January are the peak months for tourism (prices for accommodation and flights go up), but some instructors say March water is the usually the best.

Getting there • Most flights to Port Blair, the Andaman capital, go through Calcutta or Chennai, two of India's major east coast ports. More planes are arriving each year and there is talk of direct service from international destinations such as Thailand. Several ships also sail each month, but arranging a berth requires going to a shipping office in India.

Getting to India often requires a layover in the Middle East or Europe, but some American carriers are offering direct flights from Chicago and New York to Delhi, India's capital city. Round-trip fares vary from as much as \$2,000 around Christmas and New Year's Eve to less than \$1,000 in March or April.

Visas/permits • India requires a tourist visa, obtainable through Travisa; online application is at indiavisa.travisaoutsourcing.com.

Visiting the Andamans also requires a permit, granted free on arrival at the airport and good for up to 30 days. Bring proof of an onward ticket; if you arrive without one, you'll only be given a permit for 15 days, extendable by another 15. You will be asked to produce your permit at hotels, on ferries and elsewhere.

Getting around • Travel agencies in Port Blair can handle buses and air reservations. Inter-island travel is done by ferry; some hotels will book ferry tickets for guests, though frequently you must visit the ticket office at Phoenix Bay Jetty, which can mean exasperating, wild queues. (Consider it part of the Indian experience.) Bring your passport, arrive by 10 a.m., grab a ticket form and line up at a window. There is a separate line for women. Most people book the next available ferry for Havelock.

Transportation in town is mostly on foot or by autorickshaw (a sort of three-wheeled minicab), which involves a bit of haggling. Bicycles can be rented on Havelock for less than \$2 per day; motor scooters run about \$6 plus petrol.

Information • Guidebooks provide a good starting point. I live by the Lonely Planet, while other travelers swear by the Rough Guide. The Andaman and Nicobar government's clunky Web site (and.nic.in) also has information.

Money • ATMs are abundant in the rest of India, though the machines on the islands aren't always filled with cash. Let your bank know you're going abroad. Traveler's checks are a backup but outdated. Bigger hotels will take a credit card.

Port Blair • Hotel Sabra (+9103192233618, hotelesabra@yahoo.co.in) in Aberdeen Bazaar is centrally located and clean. Despite its name, Raja Monsoon Villa (+910319224133) has no villas; it is near Aberdeen Bazaar and the main mosque. Rooms in both range from \$12 to \$25. Fortune Resort Bay Island (fortunehotels.in) is Port Blair's swankiest accommodation. Rooms are around \$125. Its deck, bar and restaurant are worth visiting if you stay someplace less expensive.

Find great seafood at New Lighthouse Restaurant, where a plate of tandoori tiger prawns can run \$15 or more depending on weight. Aberdeen Bazaar and the surround are filled with cheap eats; \$2 can get you fantastic masala dosa and chai from the usually busy Annapurna.

Havelock Island • The island's economy fluctuates greatly; businesses close, prices change and hotels are renovated, often from season to season.

Barefoot Scuba (diveandamans.com) and Dive India (diveindia.com) are the two most popular dive shops. Andaman Bubbles (andamanbubbles.com) is a newer, but decent outfit. Other operators exist; shop around, but prices are mostly uniform. Dive shops can also help arrange accommodation and even transportation.

Most of the island's accommodations are along the road from the jetty to Beach No. 5. Most are in the budget to mid-level range. Even if a hotel calls itself a "resort," lower your expectations. During December and January, prices usually go up and a reservation is advisable; outside of those months, if you're flexible, you can show up and find a room.

Barefoot Scuba offers A-frame huts for about \$3 a night plus upscale tents and cottages for \$50 or more. Coconut Grove (+9103192282427) has a backpacker party scene and small cottages for \$12 a night. Emerald Gecko (emerald-gecko.com) has huts for \$11 a night and bungalows for about \$40. Wild Orchid (wildorchidandaman.com), which also has one of the island's best restaurants, offers rooms that go from \$45 to \$85, depending on the season.

Barefoot Resort (barefootindia.com) has beautiful environs, fantastic service and a location just off the best beach in India. The rooms, restaurant and bar drip with charm; the beds are fantastic; the showers are hot and strong. But it remains a jungle resort — mosquito nets are still required and some tourists complain that luxury is lacking compared to similarly priced hotels in the West. Rates vary widely by season. A basic, plush cottage runs between \$150 and \$250 depending on the month. In the high season, the resort's most expensive villa costs a whopping \$430.

Restaurants come and go. Wild Orchid has been getting good reviews for a few years; Nemo's is a new contender as is B3 by the jetty. Lots of cheap and decent restaurants front the main roads. Ask around for recommendations.