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# Holding On to What Was in the Andamans

By ERICA GIES

HIGH-END [diving](#) this was not. Off the coast of Havelock, part of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal, we bobbed along on a *dunghi*, an oversize, motorized [canoe](#), joined by only two other divers and two guides. A plain blue tarp pulled over curved bamboo stays provided shade, and our dive gear was piled unceremoniously in the back.

Then we descended. Ninety feet underwater we discovered an untrammelled paradise: thousands of fish wove through brightly colored coral peppered with striped crinoids, small marine animals who hold their tentacles curved like flowers. A six-foot-wide marbled stingray wafted by, as if in slow motion.

Three hours later, we were strolling along postcard-perfect Radhanagar Beach, aka Beach No. 7, on Havelock's northwest side, backed by towering mahua trees. And we had it all to ourselves, save for some fastidious crabs excavating their burrows, leaving behind chrysanthemum-shaped art.

Despite their relative proximity to millions of South Asians, the 572 Andaman and Nicobar islands were largely ignored until the 21st century. Just 38 are inhabited, and most are protected from development by the Indian government, leaving endemic fauna and flora untouched, and some native tribes off limits. Havelock is one of the few islands accessible to tourists, and though it is becoming a popular destination, mainly for Indians and some intrepid Western backpackers, it is still a world away from the bustle of mainland [Asia](#).

Paradoxically, it was damage caused by the 2004 tsunami and the subsequent government investment for rehabilitation that helped spawn a tourism industry. (Tourism investment, in fact, has been aimed solely at the Andamans; the Nicobars are closed to visitors.) Many locals are thrilled with the economic boost, but increased attention and visitor traffic invariably puts pristine areas at risk, despite protections. So the time to visit is now.

Getting to Havelock, an island of about 55 square miles, is a bit of a haul. From [Chennai](#), in South India, it's a two-hour flight to the capital of Port Blair, on South Andaman Island. Schedules for flights to Port Blair and for ferry trips from there to other Andaman locations are not coordinated, so getting to your destination means an overnight stay in the small town.

At least our stay in Port Blair gave us time to learn about the islands' fascinating history. We visited the Cellular Jail, in which the British housed political prisoners from [India's](#) independence movement. And the Anthropological Museum offers a mostly respectful introduction to the indigenous peoples, who have been genetically isolated for perhaps 60,000 years. One tribe, the Sentinelese, ensconced on its own island, resists outside contact to this day. For others, contact, which began in the mid-19th century, has threatened their culture, language and, in some cases, very existence. (Reuters [recently reported](#) that the Indian government ordered the arrest of a tour operator accused of exploiting the Jarawa tribe; most contact with the tribe is illegal under Indian law.)

After our stop in Port Blair, we traveled to Havelock, on the east side of the Andamans, where we stayed at the Barefoot at Havelock resort, partly owned by Susheel Dixit. Mr. Dixit grew up on Car Nicobar, the northernmost of the Nicobars, where his father taught chemistry to members of the Nicobarese tribe. During a rowing trip with friends in the '90s, he came upon Beach No. 7 and was intrigued. In 1995 he built a small house on a forested bit of land he purchased behind the beach. He later built a few bungalows, creating the first accommodations for visitors on Havelock.

“When I came in 2001, it was a very quiet place,” said Samit Sawhny, a 39-year-old Chennai native who went into business with Mr. Dixit along with some others. They took what was then a backpacker spot a bit more upscale. Initially, there was no electricity; Barefoot now features fans and air-conditioners, ayurvedic massage and a restaurant that serves Indian and Continental cuisine.

In the beginning, attracting visitors was a struggle. “There were only three flights a week around 2001,” Mr. Sawhny said, “not enough to develop tourism.”

The partners decided to sponsor charter flights out of [Bangkok](#) to demonstrate demand to airline operators. Their plan was interrupted by the tsunami, but it helped put the Andamans on the minds of Indian airlines; today four offer daily flights to the islands.

Development on the east side of Havelock has since been fast and furious, with several resorts now side by side. While Mr. Dixit is a bit wistful about the islands of his youth — “We don't want it to be like [Goa](#) and [Phuket](#),” he said — he appreciates the opportunities tourism bring locals.

“Everyone is benefiting,” he said, “from people who sold their land to the old woman selling papaya at the jetty on the beach.”

In addition to limiting the amount of land open to development, the territorial government is working on rules governing electricity generation and waste management.

Some resorts are already focusing on eco-consciousness. Barefoot encourages guests to conserve

water and electricity, and to use treated water from an on-site spring rather than bottled water. Most food is sourced locally. Each cabin has its own septic tank for natural dispersal of sewage, far from water sources. The resort is also planting endemic trees and does not use insecticides.

That's especially important, as it helps the resort's lush jungle grounds remain home to a variety of wildlife, including frogs, hermit crabs and snails, which troll the pathways nightly. From the open-air restaurant, we watched butterflies and [birds](#), including a neon-hued golden oriole and a kingfisher, with its oversize orange beak and iridescent blue feathers. One day I startled a slim green snake in its mad dash after a frog.

Barefoot is also focusing on hiring local people — employees hail mostly from Radhanagar, a nearby village — including women, something new for the local culture.

“Ladies are not supposed to work,” said Kanchan Mistry, a 28-year-old from Radhanagar, who lends her considerable charm to the restaurant service. “There is a sort of taboo. But my family is thinking different.”

She added that she likes working at the resort because she is able to contribute to her family's income and is learning English.

A few days after the diving trip, we took a boat to Elephant Beach on Havelock for [snorkeling](#) with Barefoot Scuba, the resort's dive shop partner. Unfortunately, the coral closest to the waterline is not what it once was. In 2010, water temperatures got too warm for too long, causing symbiotic algae to die and leaving the coral white, a phenomenon called coral bleaching. The culprit was a late monsoon, possibly caused by [climate change](#), which delayed the annual arrival of cooler water temperatures.

(Worldwide, 70 to 80 percent of reefs are under threat from bleaching, said Terry Gosliner, an expert in Indian and Pacific coral reefs and their biodiversity with the California Academy of Sciences.)

Nevertheless, there were plenty of reef dwellers among the bleached coral: parrotfish, butterflyfish, purple-lipped clams, sea slugs and Christmas tree worms. Farther down, as we had seen during our scuba trip, ocean life remains spectacular. Bright, jumbo-size Moorish idol fish trail dorsal fins longer than their bodies; dotting the seascape are healthy corals and fat purple barrel sponges, some occupied by spotted groupers.

Looking up to the light that day, I caught my breath: thousands of fish were schooling. Suddenly they pivoted en masse, like a drill team, and surrounded me — an experience made possible by the pristine nature of these waters.

## IF YOU GO

The best time to visit the Andamans is December to May; September to November can be rainy, but still pleasant. (Avoid June to August, which is monsoon season.) Foreigners must obtain a permit at the Port Blair airport and keep it with them.

There are daily flights on a variety of airlines from Delhi, Kolkata and [Chennai](#) to Port Blair. Round-trip fares are 11,500 to 23,000 rupees, or \$235 to \$470 at 49 rupees to the dollar.

A stay at **Barefoot at Havelock** ([barefootindia.com](#)) starts at 4,500 rupees, double occupancy. There are cabins for two, above, and also more expensive villas that can house several people. Breakfast is included.

At Beach No. 3 **Barefoot Scuba** ([diveandamans.com](#)) organizes scuba dives (two dives, plus lunch) for 4,000 rupees, and [snorkeling](#) trips to Elephant Beach for 1,200 rupees.



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