

# THE LAND

Havelock, in the Andaman Islands, is fast becoming popular with divers around the world for its variety of marine life. **Arun Katiyar** explores one of India's best-kept secrets



Even if you aren't a certified diver, you can still enjoy Havelock's marine life while snorkelling

What is the southernmost point of India? Eighth-standard geography tells us it is Kanyakumari. The thing about education is that it is suspect. I am on my way to Havelock, in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. It's a 1,300km flight from Chennai, and I am staring at a map of India, questioning my education. The southernmost tip of India is Indira Point in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Indira



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Point is closer to Indonesia than it is to mainland India. (Havelock is one of the peaks of a submerged range of mountains that extends from the Himalayas down to Myanmar and, finally, to Sumatra.) There is more that I learn. Eight five per cent of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands is forest reserves. Very little land is available for cultivation. At this point, I am thinking all this is going to have dramatic implications on the cost of food in Havelock, an island in the Ritchie's Archipelago, about 50km east of Port Blair, the capital of the Andaman & Nicobar islands. Everything must be flown in from over 1,300km, put on a boat for the next 50km and then on a rickshaw or a tempo for the last mile, until it reaches a restaurant kitchen. But, I am soon going to be proven wrong.

ALAMY (LEAD IMAGE)

# BELLOW

My city upbringing and known experiences are all going to fall apart in the next 10 days, as I live life on the island, diving in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, learning one more critical fact that high school failed to teach: that this planet is mis-named Earth. Seventy one per cent of this planet's surface is water. We should have instinctively called it Water. All these thoughts crowd my mind as I dive off Havelock, finding my way into the vast inner world of seas that has no road signs, governments, factories or internet.

If you take the early morning catamaran from Port Blair to Havelock, you will be on the island in less than 1.5 hours (the government ferry takes 2.5 hours). Havelock, all of 114 sq km, has a population of about 5,500. Its beaches are strangely named Beach No 5, Beach No 3 or Beach No 7. Don't snigger. Not just yet. Beach No 7, also known as Radha Beach, was named best beach in Asia by Time magazine in 2004. Perhaps, it is still among the best beaches around. There are largely Brits, Scandinavians and Germans on the island, the folks who discovered Havelock around nine years ago as a cheap diving destination. Many of them say it is among the best dive sites in the world.

I am staying between Beach 3 and 5, at Dive India, a collection of a dozen beach cabanas and a few Andaman-style huts. This is a dive school, not a resort. It is run by ex-management consultant Vandit Kalia. It doesn't have TV, newspapers, or even a table-tennis table. At Dive India, you are surrounded by a serious, captivating and all-pervasive dive culture. Amazingly, Havelock is still sheltered from the onslaught of package tours. Go there before it is overrun by tablet-totting tourists.

One day, at Havelock, I share the lunch table at The Full Moon Café with Arjun Junghare, a young engineering graduate. Junghare, who resigned from his job at Larsen & Toubro, is doing a dive master program. He plans to spend at least six to seven months a year working in a dive centre once he is through with his course. Junghare has dived in Australia, Malaysia, Thailand, Maldives, and the Philippines. He says that Havelock may not have large marine life, although it does have dolphins and sharks, but it has more variety than any dive site he has been to.

By now, you are thinking, "Hey, Havelock



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VIKAS NAIR

## THE DIVE SITES

There are 28 dive sites around Havelock. Here are our Top 3.

**The Wall:** If you are doing a dive certification, chances are you will go to the Wall. This is a nine-meter natural underwater wall at the south end of the Rosamund Shoal. When you reach the top edge of the Wall, the other side opens into a sheer 55-meter drop. You'll get to see plenty of barrel sponges,

whipped coral, fusiliers, snappers, groupers, octopus, starfish, damselfish and trigger fish. If you are lucky, this is where you can also get to spot a dolphin or two.

**Johnny's Gorge:** This is a mini plateau that is cracked and broken on the sides. Depths are from 23 meters to 30 meters. Look for larger fish like sharks, manta rays and eagle rays.

**SS Inchket:** A 90-metre Brit-

ish-era ship that floundered in a storm in 1952 while carrying coal and timber. The captain tried to beach the vessel, but it hit the reefs and the ship went down. Depths are from six meters to 19 meters. Sunk vessels tend to have plenty of places for fish to hide and you'll find sweetlips, groupers, blue-ringed angle fish. Exploring a shipwreck can also be a spooky experience, in a nice kind of way.

doesn't appear to be the boonies; it is India's best-kept secret." But, hang on, there is more. Havelock has 52 resorts and each one has a restaurant buzzing with life. That's the amount of diving happening at Havelock. Let me try and clue you in a little more. The village of Govind Nagar is the centre of Havelock, an island mostly populated by hunting and foraging tribes. The village gram pan-

chayat office is in Govind Nagar. The market place is a small 150-metre strip with 30 to 40 shops. It has three ATMs. The economy of the island revolves around diving and little else. Havelock is marked by its lack of visual pollution. There are no loud billboards, only small signs saying 'Laundry by Washing Machine' and 'Bicycle and Scooter Rent'. And, although there are a few rickshaws (at Rs 50 per km,



the most expensive I have used in India), the island doesn't have a single traffic signal, not a single scrap of paper on the streets and no heaps of garbage anywhere. It is all very elemental.

With its tidal swamps and beach forests, coconut and areca nut palms and mangroves and mango plantations, Havelock feels like Goa long forgotten.

There are barely 125 hunting and foraging communities left in the world. Five of the 125 communities – Onge, Jarawa, Great Andamanese, Shompen and Sentinelese -- inhabit the Andamans. The Onge stayed away from urban contact until recently. The Sentinelese still do. For the 10 days we spent on Havelock, we didn't have television or email. It was liberating. Adil Khan and his Irish wife, Niamh Moran, who run The Full Moon Café, have tried to adapt to the island. Secretly, I believe Khan and Moran want to live like the Sentinelese. For the moment, they encourage guests to refill their water bottles from a cooler rather than create piles of plastic bottles. No, they don't put plastic straws in their glasses of fresh-fruit drinks or iced teas either (God lives in the details). All the fish, and there is plenty of it on the menu, is wild and line caught. Nothing is from a fish farm in Chennai or off a trawler. If they don't catch a barracuda on a given day, the delicious steak is off the menu. They try, as far as possible, not to fly anything in from the mainland. If it

is on the islands, it is on the menu. As a consequence, generous portions of food, with local produce tastefully plated, turn up at prices that won't hurt. Khan, a production engineer,

gave up his career to settle down here with Moran, a student of literature. That explains the many wonderful multilingual books on the restaurant's bookshelf, which everyone gravitates towards.

All the conversation at The Full Moon Café is about diving. No one is in a hurry. As the sun goes down, everyone is contemplating waking up early in the morning for their first dive of the day. They are all keen to be enveloped by a world in which they will see more friendly animal life in an hour than they have, perhaps, experienced in a lifetime. ☺

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#### THE DETAILS

##### **Diving Courses**

There are three popular international dive certifications: PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors), SSI (Scuba Schools International) and NAUI (National Association of Underwater Instructors). The difference between the courses is nominal, and so is the cost. All three lead to the same thing: you become an independent diver and can go down up to 30 metres (the limits of recreational diving) anywhere in the world. Just show your dive certification and your dive log books and you will be allowed to rent equipment from a dive shop and go on a dive.

##### **Havelock has four large dive shops:**

Andaman Bubbles (andamanbubbles.com), Barefoot Scuba (diveandamans.com), Dive India (diveindia.com), and Ocean

Tribe (ocean-tribe.com). Entry-level courses start at between Rs 17,500 and Rs 20,000. This would be a four-day open water course that ends in a certification. You get study material, hands-on training with equipment, four open-water dives (up to 18m), and you give a test. Those who pass get certified.

Individual afternoon and night dives cost between Rs 3,000 and Rs 4,500 (for certified divers only). Non-certified divers can do fun dives for Rs 4,500 each. Advanced courses cost up to Rs 50,000. The costs include equipment rental, boat trips, instructors or dive leaders, and tea and snacks on the dives.

##### **Accommodation**

You can stay at several lodges, hotels and resorts. The rooms cost between Rs 500 a night (Andaman-style huts, shared toilets) and

Rs 6,500 a night (air conditioning, flat-screen TV, refrigerator, hot water in the bath, ocean view). If you don't wish to stay at Andaman Bubbles, Barefoot Scuba, Dive India or Ocean Tribe, you can go to the Symphony Palms (symphonyalmshavelock.com), which has rooms priced between Rs 4,500 and Rs 6,500.

##### **Photography**

Try and take along an underwater camera to capture your dives. Most dive shops will rent one out for about Rs 1,000 a day. Some dive shops also have underwater cameras for sale.

##### **Getting there**

A private catamaran runs between Port Blair and Havelock. Tickets are Rs 1,100. The government ferry is Rs 600 (one way).

##### **Getting around**

If you are doing more than four to six dives, it is a good idea to take a day

off between dives and toodle around the island. Bicycles can be rented for Rs 70 a day and Honda scooters for Rs 350 a day. By evenings, the weather is cool and just cycling through the mango-tree-lined roads can be relaxing. Stop by at road side stalls to grab a cup of tea and meet other divers.

##### **Best time to go**

From February to April the weather is predictable, the sea is calm and the light is good, improving visibility under water. If you are learning to dive, this is, perhaps, the best time to go. September and October are quiet months and hardcore divers swear by this period. From November to February some storms can be expected, turning the surface of the sea choppy (the water below the surface, however, remains perfectly calm).