On the Nightboat
By Amber McCarthy

Surat Thani is the jumping off point to the 3 main islands of the east coast. Koh Samui, Koh Phagnon, and Koh Tao. There are 2 ways to get there. You can take a combination of a 1-hour bus ride and a ferry ride, or you can take the night boat from right in town. The question is, "Is it worth it?" The answer is yes. The answer is also no.

The night boats leave from the "pier" in Surat Thani, very close to Super English. If you're ever missing seeing a bunch of lost looking white people, head down there for dinner and that's where they'll be. There are several food carts set up and lots of tables, so you can grab dinner and some beers before departing. It's best to buy your ticket earlier in the day to ensure there's space. The boats leave at 11pm, but you can get on the boat sooner and try to get to sleep before the boats leave the dock.

I was pleasantly surprised the first time I took the night boat. I just kept thinking about a drawing I saw in a Junior High history book of what it was like to sleep on a slave ship. The night boat's are nothing like this. You have your own mat and a pillow with a clean pillowcase on it and enough space to lie comfortably as long as you aren't stuck next to someone with no concept of personal space.

Koh Samui is the biggest and the most tourist-infested of the islands. It's the closest, so the bus and ferry ride *should* only take you 2-3 hours, but sometimes the boat driver is cautious, or drunk, and it takes 5 hours instead. The night boat takes longer, but since it leaves at 11pm, that means you arrive ridiculously early in the morning. It's 300 baht for the night boat to Samui and just under that for the bus/ferry combo. The only time that it would be worth it to take the night boat to Samui is if you are off work late in the evening on a Friday and really want to go there for the weekend. That's the only time.

Koh Phang-ngan is the island in the middle and a bit farther. The night boat here is 400 baht and the bus/ferry combo is 320. The deciding factor is when you want to get there. The night boat arrives around 6am. The earliest bus/ferry leaves Surat at 6:30am. If you want to beat the crowd and get there bright and early, take the night boat. If you have half a day to spend traveling, take the ferry. This island is the one that I would say you could go either way with. Again, definitely take the night boat if you are off late from work and want to get there ASAP.

Koh Tao is the farthest island and the night boat gets in at around 7am. It's 550 baht and it is 100% worth it to take the night boat here. There aren't usually rowdy party goers on the boat, so it's quiet and everyone goes to sleep when the boat leaves and you are able to get a decent night's sleep. When we went to Koh Tao, we took the night boat there and the ferry back. The (cheap) ferry was just as expensive and it ended up taking us almost 7 hours to get home because they decided to kick us off in Koh Phagnon to change boats. Trust me; take the night boat both ways if you can. Koh Tao is so far away that it ends up being a complete waste of a day if you have to take the ferry and bus.

The upsides to the night boat:

You get to sleep on a comfy mat and wake up in paradise.
It's not that much more expensive than the bus/ferry combo.
You don't waste any day time traveling.
It's sort of like a free night of accommodation.

The downsides to the night boat:

It's noisy. Bring earplugs. That engine is loud.
If it's stormy, prepare to be rocked all night long. Not in a good way.
If you're going to Koh Phagnon before a big party, you'll probably have a bunch of noisy drunk people keeping you up.

It gets cold in the middle of the night, so if you don't have something to cover yourself up, you might not get much sleep. Bring a beach towel.

It's really hard to go to the bathroom on a raised squat pot in a rocking boat without peeing all over your feet and/or pants.