

The Alluring World of Diving

Dive! Koh Tao!

Scuba diving—ah, it is something I have thought about for years. And I do not doubt that many of you adventurers who are willing to pick up and move your whole life to Thailand are all that different. There is something intriguing, mysterious, and alluring about being at the ocean floor. But, alas, in the States and much of the world, it is quite pricey. No one would confuse scuba diving as a poor man's sport, but if you move to Thailand, you won't find a more affordable, beautiful place to conquer this bucket list item.

At the very beginning of the March break, I took my baht that I had stashed away to go and get my open water PADI certification on what is my hands down favorite island in Thailand—Koh Tao (or Turtle Island, which should tell you a little something about what you might spot while you dive... wink, wink). This island offers serenity, escape from the crowds, and even on the most crowded days seems to be deserted compared to its' neighbors: Samui and Phagnan.



How to Get to Koh Tao

There are two ways in which to reach Koh Tao. One: catch a bus to Chumpon and then get on a fairly short boat ride. Two, the more common route amongst us Super gang, catch a night boat from the pier right here in Surat Thani town. A night boat is advantageous in that you do not miss any daylight hours. You would be sleeping regardless, and the night boat to Koh Tao is the nicest one I've been on. It is equipped with air conditioning! Trust me, when you are packed in like sardines on a plastic mat covered in a bed sheet with a matching, uncovered plastic pillow, it is much nicer to have air than a fan and an open window spraying in salt water. But beware, pack a blanket, because it can get frigid!



Different Companies: Same Certification

There are a dozen or so different dive sites that can be reached from Koh Tao. There are even more dive companies to choose from. In the not so recent past, this island has gained a reputation as a great place to train first time divers, which can be attributed to an almost constant water temperature of eighty degrees Fahrenheit, high visibility, and a variety of dive sites a short distance away. Not to mention, turtles, whale sharks, black reef tip sharks, clown fish (NEMO!), cleaner wrasse, and many types of beautiful tropical fish inhabit the surrounding ocean floor.

So what company do you choose? Well, you could do what Becky and I did, which was arrive, be handed brochures, and just go with the one that seems the most professional and cool. (Luckily, this did not backfire on us, but I wouldn't suggest it. Just because a company can make a trifolded piece of paper look good, does not mean that they are qualified or know what they are doing). Or you can keep reading this article; there are two popular amongst teachers here, so they are tried and true.

The first company is **Ban's**, and no, I am not biased because this is where I dove... Ban's is a diving resort. Almost everyone who stays at this beautiful beachside

hotel, equipped with two pools (for day one dive training) is doing some sort of diving. If you can fill a resort with divers, then that says something about the quality of your company. Furthermore, the owner has a niece who attends the school we all know and love—Thida!

But in all seriousness, Ban's has been awarded a plethora of awards over the years, with the most notable being: Best Dive Center/Resort in Thailand AND Asia Pacific Region 2009-2010. And if you are still nervous, they along with only one other dive center worldwide have trained and given certification to 100,000 students. That's a lot of practice, and as the saying goes, "practice makes perfect." To get your open water certification here, it costs 9,000 baht. This number can seem intimidating, but the bonus is that it includes four nights accommodation as well. Furthermore, if you just want to see if diving is your thing (this is true for other companies as well), you can do a Discover Scuba Diving course, which is only 2,000 baht and can be put toward final certification.

The second company that is a favorite of Surat Thanian teachers is **Scuba Junction**. I have heard from more than a few people that the instructors are just lovely, and that the experience here can seem a bit more personal than Ban's. To prove this, they do not have more than four divers in your group. At Ban's, I learned in a group of five (including myself), but I did see a few larger groups. I enjoyed that this allowed me to be more independent, plus there will be both an instructor and dive master with you (at either company), but I know that not everyone shares these feelings.

The other difference between here and Ban's? During your open water you get trained with dive computers. I learned on a compass, and Ban's does not introduce the diving computer until you are trying to attain your Advanced Certification. They are also the first and only 5 star SSI dive center on Koh Tao, which is a sort of a who's who of the world's most elite dive shops. With Scuba Junction, your accommodation will not be included, and nothing on Koh Tao is overly cheap. To get your PADI costs the same as Ban's at 9,000 baht, but if a small company and small group is what you are looking for, it can't be topped.

Regardless, both make conservation efforts for the coral and environment. Both have four-day courses, with the first day being just a half-day of instruction. Five dives are included, one of which is in the pool to begin practicing your skills and to provide previous experience before throwing you overboard into the ocean, while the other four are at various depths between twelve and eighteen meters. The equipment is safe, well taken care of, as are the boats. Both companies visit the same sites on any given day, and you can't lose while experiencing something so mind blowing no matter which you go with.



What It Takes to Get Your PADI

To get your PADI open water, or Professional Association of Diving Instructors, you need a little nerve, a little more time, and even more baht. It should cost about 9,000 baht, which is the equivalent of \$287. Many sites I have visited have stated that in order to get your PADI, you must pay for the book; however, this is not true

at Ban's (or most places anymore), which is why if you Google the price, you may see that it says 9,800 baht. If you do not wish to purchase the book, they loan you one for class, and you save 800 baht. On top of that, the prices for all the dive shops includes your equipment—you need not own a mask, fins, wetsuit, or any of the other gear necessary for exploring the salty goodness of the ocean. They have it all, and it is top quality. As I mentioned before, it is a three and a half day excursion, but if you are on a time crunch and contact them ahead, the two companies above would try to find a way to accommodate you.

So, scuba diving, eh?

I wasn't sure about diving. It's terrifying to see the underwater world, especially when the words shark, eel, and stingray are mentioned. Even more so than that, to imagine breathing through a regulator and trusting it with your life can be intimidating. But, Koh Tao does diving right, and the two companies above have proven themselves over and over. Diving burns about five to eight hundred calories a day, and it's so NOT strenuous that this is amazing. It is said that less than five percent of the ocean is explored, which makes it even more unknown than space. So what are you waiting for? You only live once, and I bet after diving once, you won't want to stop.

