LAST OF THE MOKEN

They live off, on and in the sea like no one in the world. But how much longer can they do it?

Ngoy is leading me to the center of his universe. He's two steps in front of me in the shallow water off Ko Surin, a Thai island in the Andaman Sea. It's my third day with the mysterious sea people known as the Moken and, even through the translator in our company, I've built a special friendship with Ngoy. Because of our trust he has made me a rare offer. "You want to try something special? Let's take the *kabang*." He gestures to a solitary wood boat moored in the bay. For 4,000 years, kabangs were everything to the Moken: their transportation, their fishing boats and their homes. "We have just this one kabang left," says Ngoy.

STORY BY MICHAEL SHAPIRO

Young Moken learn old harp ooning methods, but how they hunt for fish underwater is what confounds the dive world.

JUSTINE EVANS/ALAMY

To Moken like Ngoy (right), home is underwater, where men routinely chase fish for three minutes with eyesight that mystifies experts. Topside, the islands carry sobering reminders.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: DAVID HENLEY/PHOTOGRAPHERS DIRECT; MICHAEL SHAPIRO; HEMIS/PHOTOSHOT; MICHAEL SHAPIRO THIS PAGE: JEN JUDGE

Take away Ngoy's smile and he'd be impossible to read. He hasn't even said good morning. The Moken people don't bother with hello, goodbye or thank you. "We see one another's eyes," Ngoy says. "That's enough." Often called "sea nomads," the Moken have drifted among the islands near what is now Thailand and Myanmar for centuries, usually in kabangs like this one, which took Ngoy's village six months to build. Most Moken now get around in Thai longtail boats, but they built a kabang to keep at least one tradition alive.

"We used to see long rows of kabangs on our way to Burma [Myanmar]," Ngoy says. "Caravans of them, like floating villages. Now we see hardly any."

The same could be said about the Moken themselves. They're disappearing. Lost to modernization, commercial fishing pressures and natural forces. Best estimates are that fewer than 10,000 Moken are left around the Andaman Sea.

The water is crystalline and the sky powder blue as Ngoy readies the kabang for a day of exploring. His features are distinctly Polynesian — round face, thick black hair, stout build, a stark contrast to the slender Thais and Burmese on the mainland. Dressed in a Hawaiian shirt with a fish print, Ngoy is one of his village's ambassadors to travelers, most of whom stay on his island less than an hour. During such a visit, "they see our boats and our houses," Ngoy says, "but they don't really see us."

Thai regulations prohibit the company from staying overnight in the Moken village, so I sleep in a tent on a nearby beach. We spend our days in the water with Ngoy and his family, but the kabang has been off-limits until now. As we board the kabang, Ngoy tells me that the vessel is carved from a single tree trunk and is 7 *wah* long (a wah is the height of a man). "Traditionally, we never use nails and hammers," Ngoy says. "We use twine to bind everything together." Ngoy cuts the top off a plastic bottle, turns it upside down and uses it to funnel gas into the motor. Before motors were widely used, kabangs were powered by sails and paddles as the Moken moved where the trade winds took them. Even that has changed though. Due to restrictions on Myanmar, this Moken group hasn't been allowed to return to their ancestral waters.

"When we kept moving, the fish would come back," Ngoy says. "Now it's harder to find fish. This area cannot replenish itself. When I was a child, I couldn't understand why we always had to move. Now I understand — the older generations knew."

We spend the morning snorkeling with Ngoy, his brother and a couple of teenage kids he calls nephews who may or may not be blood relatives. The water is full of butterflyfish, giant purple clams, little Nemos and vibrant coral. But then I see a larger form swimming at least 30 feet below me, something only seen in this water: Moken chasing fish. Two teenagers swim without flippers with the grace of mermaids and the strength and lung capacity of Michael Phelps. They're not carrying spears today — Ngoy tells me the most colorful fish don't have much meat and don't taste good — but if they were, these fish wouldn't have a chance.

> On the boat Ngoy's nephew says he'd like to stay in touch. "How?" I ask. "On Facebook," he says.

Back on the boat Ngoy starts to show me a spear when his nephew, Kaidaeng, who tells me he's 15, says he'd like to stay in touch.

"I'd like that, but how?" I say.

"On Facebook," he says, stating the obvious. "I have 1,600 friends."

Progress, if we feel the need to call it that, is evident that afternoon when Ngoy shows us, of all things, a small graveyard just above the palm-shaded beach. The headstones are unmarked but ritual objects have been placed on the graves. On one man's grave sits an old, battered TV set. "This is what this person liked," Ngoy says. "That's why it's here." ● *Next:* THE MOST NATURAL ENEMY

AMAZING SEA LIFE

Bajau People
Living mostly in the Philippines, Borneo and Malaysia, the Bajau people are known to spend five hours a day underwater. They ride nurse sharks and make swim goggles out of wood. Men will intentionally rupture their eardrums, allowing them to swim deeper and longer.

Jeju Mermaids
Off South Korea's Jeju Island, women free dive 60 feet for three-minute clips, looking for conch and octopus. Their only training is from each other, and they've had lots of it — some of these women are now 80 years old.

Tanya Streeter
Diving for shells while growing up in the Caymans was no big deal for Tanya, now 41. But she became a legend after being timed on one breath underwater: six minutes, 17 seconds.

SUN-REDDENED AND STILL WET FROM our snorkeling expedition, we come ashore in the kabang at Bon Yai Bay, Thailand, where a group of Moken, unable to be nomadic, has lived year-round since the 1990s. Bon Yai is a village of homes on stilts, a concrete-block school and a new health clinic. I find it odd that everything around me looks so new.

In front of the small and sandy village, Ngoy takes me to a copse of "spirit poles," or totem poles, each about as tall as we are, with painted faces and flags flapping above them. His people have no modern religion, Ngoy says. "We believe in our ancestors and in Mother Ocean."

The highlight of their year is the Lobong Festival, when Moken shamans perform rituals and the people dance for three or four nights. But Ngoy says he's worried about the festival because the shamans are getting old and no new shamans are being trained to replace them.

"When these people pass, who will take care of the festivities?" he asks. "Without the shaman, the festival would not be sacred."

As part of the festival, a scale model of a kabang, about 1 wah long, is built and filled with rice, papaya and other delicacies, then released into the sea. Ngoy says the offerings to the ancestors help keep evil spirits away from the village.

"Our people sometimes believe in bad luck," he says, "but by giving these things to the bad luck, it will not come after you."

But bad luck did come after the Moken on the morning of Dec. 26, 2004. That's when an earthquake that measured 9.1 on the Richter scale sent tsunami waves that washed over islands in the Andaman Sea and beyond. Ngoy says he was preparing a boat to go look for food that day when he noticed the tide going way out to sea. The Moken people have a legend that tells of a wave 7 wah high. The lesson of the legend, says Ngoy, is this: "If you see the water leaving, a big wave is coming, so go up [to high ground]."

At first Ngoy wasn't too worried about the water leaving the bay. But when suddenly his boat was sitting on dry land, Ngoy's wife reminded him of the story about the big wave. She put out her cooking fire and prepared to walk up the hill.

At first Ngoy wasn't worried about the water leaving the bay. But when his boat was on dry land, his wife reminded him about the big wave.

Because Moken roamed so much, they didn't acquire material items, and thus were not a target for pirates. But the ocean itself isn't always friendly, even with the help of spirit poles.

FROM TOP: MYLOUPE/AGEFOTO STOCK; CRYSTITE RF/ALAMY; OPPOSITE FROM TOP: NICHOLAS REYNARD/NGS; ANDREW FORBES/PHOTOGRAPHERS DIRECT

"As we were going up the hill a big wave started to come in, but we didn't run because we didn't fear it much," he says. "After the first wave we came down from the hill to pick up our plates and glasses. Most people thought it's probably over."

Then came the second and third waves, both of them much higher than the first and leaving nothing but catastrophe on Ko Surin.

"There were no houses left," says Ngoy. Amazingly, all the Moken on the island survived.

Still, the decline of the Moken population overall has been rapid. An advocacy group called Project Moken estimates 12,000 Moken roamed the Mergui Archipelago, a constellation of islands off the coast of Myanmar, prior to 2004. Today the population is perhaps a tenth of that.

From a seat on the shaded patio of Ngoy's thatched wood-and-bamboo hut, I notice that all the new houses have been built above the high-water line. All around us, during the heat of the day, Moken men and women sit under their homes, tell stories and play a Moken card game as Thai baht changes hands. ● *Next:* THE MOST IMPORTANT

TAKE THE DREAM TRIP

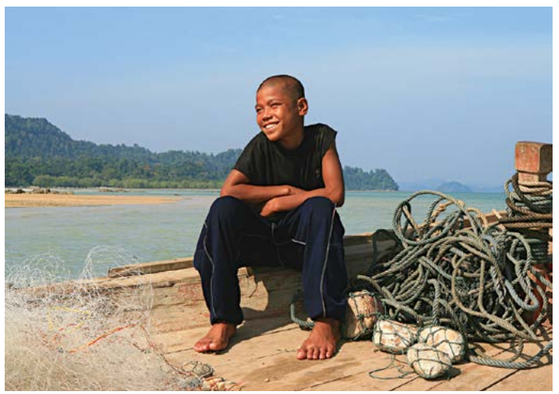
Think a number can have deep spiritual meaning? Google says San Francisco to Thailand is 7,777 miles.

FOR STARTERS
Pick a way to Phuket — San Francisco through Shanghai, New York through Hong Kong, and others. From Phuket it's a 100-mile drive to the town of Khuraburi. Andaman Discoveries handles the boat shuttle to Ko Surin.

IF YOU'RE CURIOUS
In and around the water of Ko Surin are 9-foot water monitors, 200 species of coral and just 150 Moken. The snorkeling is among Asia's best, specifically Richelieu Rock, which local fishermen discovered with Jacques Cousteau.

IF YOU'RE SERIOUS
Andaman Discoveries offers a three-day, two-night stay at Mu Ko Surin National Park. Bungalows or tents are available. Cost, including meals and translator, is $600 per person — a large portion goes to Moken community projects. **andamandiscoveries.com**

The kabang (above) is more than a boat to Moken who have lived in them and were born in them. Young girls still use thanaka cream on the face, but many traditions (like the kabang) are slowly disappearing.



IMAGEBROKER/AGEFOTO STOCK; OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ANDREW FORBES/PHOTOGRAPHERS DIRECT; IMAGEBROKER/AGEFOTO STOCK; TK/PHOTOSHOT; MICHAEL SHAPIRO

NGOY IS BAREFOOT. THOUGH THE sea is their first home, he wants to show me how much the land means to the Moken. We leave our kabang behind and enter a forest of bird-song-filled trees.

"The trick to walking in the forest is not to go too fast or too slow," he advises. "Too fast and you can cut your feet. Too slow and the ants and mosquitoes will find you."

He pulls out his machete and hacks at a tree that seems to bleed when cut. "It is called the A-ya-la," Ngoy says. "We call it the blood tree. It has a soft wood that's good to make furniture."

Perhaps the greatest gift of the forest is the abundant bamboo. The Moken, Ngoy says, use it for building their homes and boats, they eat its shoots and, if they're thirsty, can cut the younger plants and drink their water.

We come out of the forest near the school where Ngoy's college-educated sister teaches. Many of the girls' faces are painted with thanaka, a paste made from ground bark that's common in Myanmar. The cream cools and protects the skin, but is also used for purely cosmetic reasons. I ask if we can take photos of the kids and they look straight into my lens. As we look directly into each other's eyes, I can't help but wonder about the future of the Moken children. Ngoy has two daughters, ages 4 and 11, living on the Thai mainland with their grandparents. I ask about his hopes for them.

When I ask what she wants to do someday, she says she dreams of working as a squid catcher so she can float under the stars at night.

"I want to teach my children" — and by "my children" he means all the kids in this village — "to make a kabang. I want to pass on knowledge, so Moken people can live by the sea in the future."

But, and I'm careful to ask this respectfully, won't it take more than building a kabang to ensure that the Moken ways live on?

"My first wish is for jobs here on the islands," Ngoy says. "If we have to go to the mainland, our community will disintegrate. A lot of people have no choice because there is not enough work here."

We climb the creaky steps to the shaded porch in front of Ngoy's home. A girl with a thick layer of thanaka on her face shyly peeks through the front door. She's wearing a purple shirt that says "So Happy." Her name is Gumduan and she's Ngoy's niece. When I ask what she wants to do someday, she says she dreams of working as a squid catcher along the Burmese coast, so she can float under the stars at night. I ask what her name means.

"Catching the moon," she says.

We step back into the kabang and motor away from the tiny village. I question Ngoy about modernity and nature buffeting the Moken from every side. His confidence is not shaken.

"In 50 years I believe we will still be here, maybe not like this, but we will be here," he says, noting again that the Moken have drifted among these islands for thousands of years.

One personal question has been hanging over our conversation, and now it's time to ask: "Where do you want your daughters to live, Ngoy?"

His answer is thoughtful, modern, and perfect: "That's up to them."

When we climb out of the kabang, I'm not sure how to thank Ngoy for allowing me inside the Moken life. I look at him. His copper-brown eyes hold my gaze, and without a word he turns toward the sea. ● **WEEKLY DREAM TRIPS:** islands.com/newsletter