

Immediately to the south of Ko Ra, about one kilometre off the Khuraburi coast, **KO PHRA THONG** (Golden Buddha Island) also has some lovely beaches, the nicest of which, on the west coast, is 10km long and blessed with fine gold sand. This is the site of the *Golden Buddha Beach Resort* (☎081 892 2208, 🌐www.goldenbuddharesort.com; 📍📍), a tasteful complex of 25 individually styled wooden Thai-style homes, sleeping two to six. The resort is ninety minutes' boat ride from the pier and offers kayaking, diving and occasional yoga retreats plus a spa and clubhouse.

Ko Surin

Spectacularly varied and unusually shallow reefs, a palette of awesomely clear turquoise waters and dazzling white sands, and dense forests of lofty dipterocarps combine to make the islands of Mu **Ko Surin** National Park (open Nov 16–May 15; B400/200 entry fee for a week; 🌐www.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp) one of the must-visit destinations in south Thailand. It's very much an outdoors experience, with the bulk of accommodation in national park tents, no commerce on the islands at all, and twice-daily snorkelling the main activity. Many tour operators run snorkelling and diving day-trips from Khuraburi and Ranong, and there are diving live-aboards too, but independent travel is also recommended.

The most beautiful and easily explored of the reefs are those off the two main islands in the group, Ko Surin Nua (north) and Ko Surin Tai (south), which are separated only by a narrow channel. **Surin Nua**, slightly the larger at about 5km across, holds the national park headquarters, visitor centre and park accommodation. Across the channel, **Surin Tai** is the long-established home of a community of **Moken** *chao ley* (see p.335), who these days mostly make their living as longtail boatmen for snorkellers staying on Surin Nua. Their recent history has been an unhappy one: not only were their settlements destroyed in the 2004 tsunami, but the aid and outside intervention that followed has changed the community forever, amalgamating two villages, building new homes too close together and introducing various modern-day vices. Some tour companies take visitors on a walk around the village on Ao Bon and up the hill behind it, but unless you are able to hire an English-speaking Moken guide it's a dispiriting experience; if you do visit, you'll at least be making a positive contribution if you buy one of the woven-pandanus-leaf souvenirs the villagers make. One of the Moken traditions that does persist is the new year celebration that's held every April, during Songkhran, when *chao ley* from nearby islands (including those in Burmese waters) congregate here and, among other rites, release several hundred turtles into the sea, a symbol of longevity.

Practicalities

Because the islands are so far out at sea, Ko Surin is closed to visitors from mid-May to mid-November, when monsoon weather renders the sixty-kilometre trip a potentially suicidal undertaking. During the rest of the year, most visitors either do **snorkelling day-trips** to the islands from Khuraburi or Ko Ra (around B2500), join a multi-day snorkel trip from *Mr Gao* on Ko Phayam, or opt for live-aboard **dive trips** out of Khao Lak, Phuket, Ranong, Ko Chang or Ko Phayam, the majority of which also take in nearby Richelieu Rock, considered to be Thailand's top dive site (see p.000).

Independent travel to Ko Surin is highly recommended however, as this gives you the chance to base yourself on the islands and explore the countless different reefs over several days. During the season, **boats** to Ko Surin depart from Khuraburi pier, 7.5km northwest of Khuraburi town; agencies in the town sell

tickets and provide free transfers to the pier. The national park's slow boat departs the pier daily at 9am and returns from Ko Surin at 1pm (2–3hr; B1200 return); private speedboats depart at 9am and leave Ko Surin about 2.30pm (1hr 15min; B1600 return). Once on the islands, there's an efficient system of **boat hire** for access to the reefs: longtails depart twice a day from the campsites to four different reefs and charge B80 per person for about two hours. You can also charter your own for B2000. Snorkel sets cost B80 per day and there's kayak rental too.

All island **accommodation** is on Surin Nua and is provided by the national park. On the beach at **Ao Chong Khad**, near the park headquarters and pier, you have the choice between expensive en-suite national park bungalows (📍) and either renting a national park tent (B300–450 per day) or pitching your own (available for rent in Khuraburi) for B80 per day; bedding sets cost B60 per day. The nicer campsite, with tents and pitches but no bungalows, is at **Ao Mai Ngam**, reached via a two-kilometre trail from headquarters or by longtail. Both campsites have bathrooms, lockers (B30 per day) and dining rooms where meals are served at fixed times three times a day (B80–200); many people take their own supplies from Khuraburi instead. Bungalows need to be booked in advance either through the National Parks website (🌐www.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp) or at the Khuraburi pier office (☎076 491378), but tents should be available on spec except during public holidays and long weekends.

Khao Sok National Park

Most of the Andaman coast's highlights are, unsurprisingly, along the shoreline, but the stunning jungle-clad karsts of **KHAO SOK NATIONAL PARK** (🌐www.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp) are well worth heading inland for. Located about halfway between the southern peninsula's two coasts and easily accessible from Khao Lak, Phuket and Surat Thani, the park has become a popular stop on the travellers' route, offering a number of easy trails, a bit of amateur spelunking and some scenic rafter accommodation on **Cheow Lan Lake**. Much of the park, which protects the watershed of the Sok River and rises to a peak of nearly 1000m, is carpeted in impenetrable rainforest, home to gaurs, leopard cats and tigers among others – and up to 155 species of bird. The limestone crags that dominate almost every vista both on and away from the lake are breathtaking, never more so than in the early morning: waking up to the sound of hooting gibbons and the sight of thick white mist curling around the karst formations is an experience not quickly forgotten.

The park has two centres: the **tourist village** that has grown up around the park visitor centre and trailheads, and the dam, 65km further east, at the head of **Cheow Lan Lake**. Most visitors stay in the tourist village and organize their lake trips from there, but it's also feasible to do one or more nights at the lake first.

Arrival and information

Khao Sok, its tourist village and Cheow Lan Lake are all north off Highway 401, which is served by frequent **buses**: all services between the junction town of **Takua Pa**, 40km south of Khuraburi, and Surat Thani come this way, as do some Surat Thani services to and from Khao Lak and Phuket as well. Coming from Bangkok, Hua Hin or Chumphon, take a Surat Thani-bound bus as far as the Highway 401 junction, about 20km before Surat Thani, and change onto one for Takua Pa. If coming direct from Surat Thani, note that there have been complaints about the tourist **minibus** services to Khao Sok that leave at or after