

DEPARTURES

March/April 2014

INTERNATIONAL STYLE

ON THE CÔTE D'AZUR • SHANGHAI INSIDE OUT
BERLIN'S EDGY COOL • SWING TIME IN CABO
A LONDON GARDEN PARTY • FLORENCE FOR MEN
AT HOME IN VENICE



The Angels of the

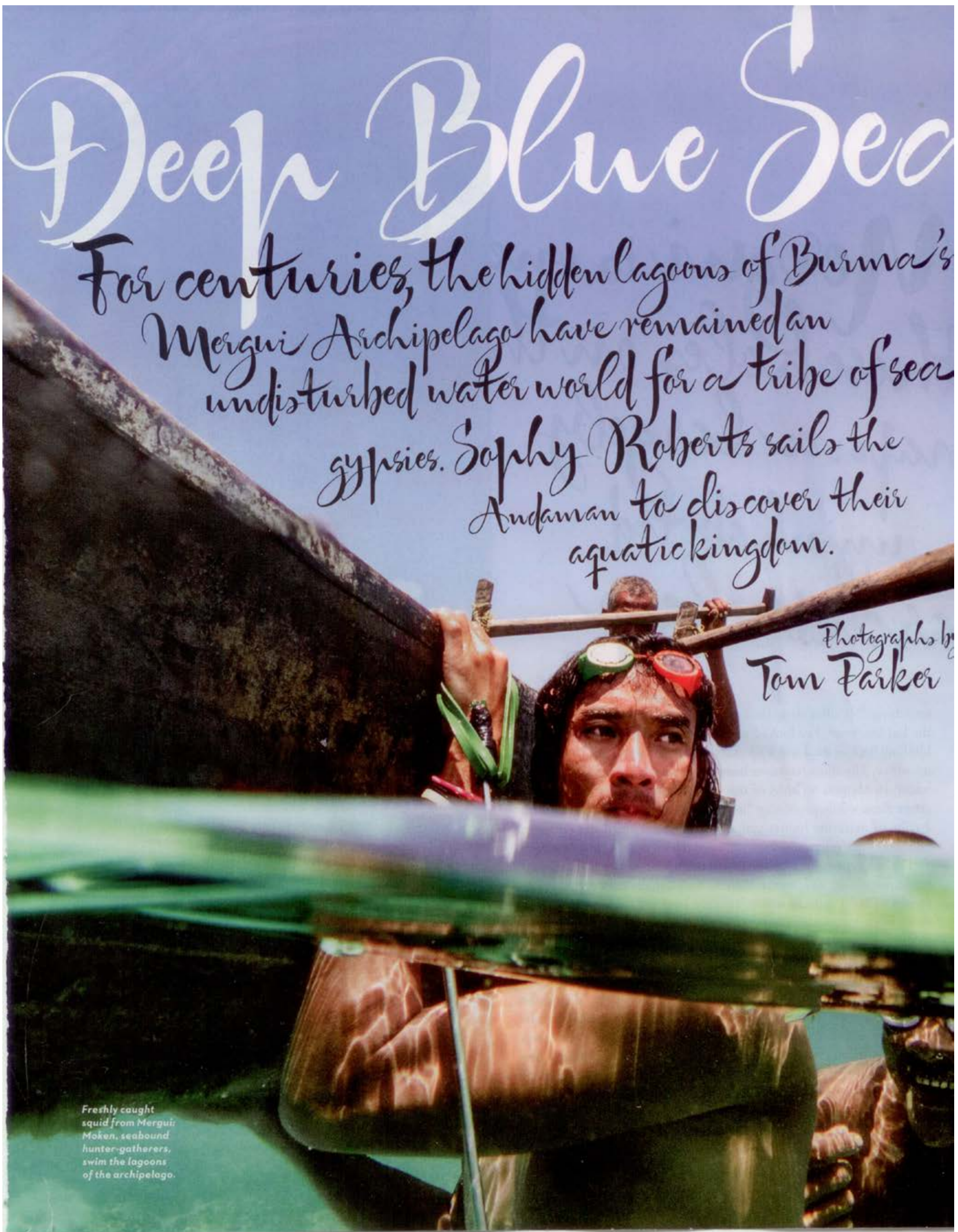


Deep Blue Sea

For centuries, the hidden lagoons of Burma's Mergui Archipelago have remained an undisturbed water world for a tribe of sea gypsies. Sophy Roberts sails the Andaman to discover their aquatic kingdom.

Photographs by
Tom Parker

Freshly caught squid from Mergui Moken, seabound hunter-gatherers, swim the lagoons of the archipelago.



Mergui is one of those holes on the map: a largely uninhabited archipelago

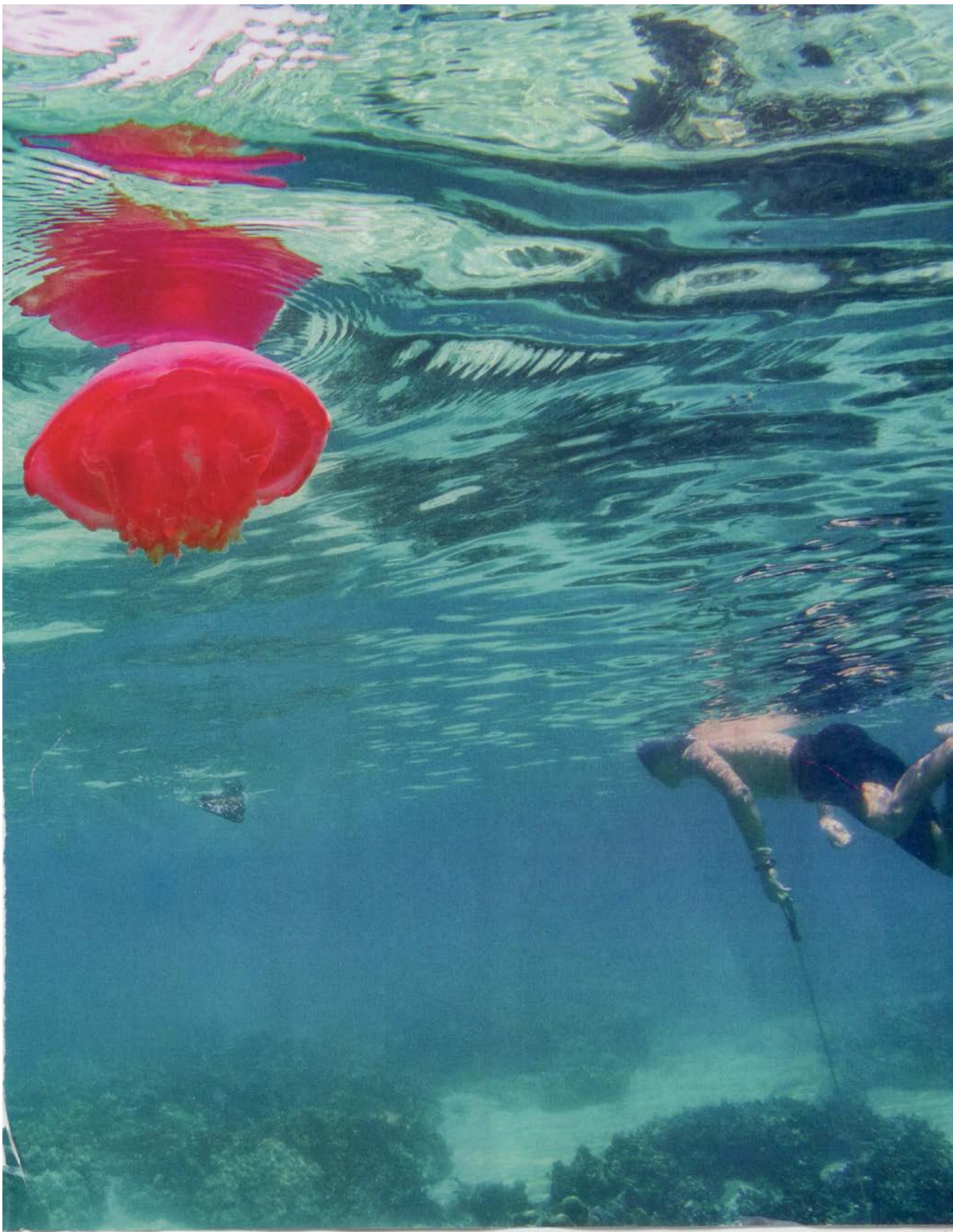
stretching 250 miles along the lower reaches of Burma's coastline. For the last five years, I've looked at the islands every day, each tiny dot blinking back at me from a \$3 chart of the Andaman Sea hanging in my office. The allure has never been about some new, far-flung Aman resort: In Mergui, no hotel of this caliber exists. Rather, I wanted to cruise these wildly promising "lost" islands to encounter the Moken, a tribe of maritime hunter-gatherers that has roamed the 800 isles and islets since migrating from southern China some 4,000 years ago.

The sea gypsies, as they are called in English, or, even more dramatic, *vagabonds de la mer* in French, traditionally exist on the water for up to eight months a year, striking land only during the monsoon, from June to September. They travel in flotillas of a dozen or so dugout canoes, with extended family pulled behind in a 32-foot *kabang*, or "mother boat," hollowed out of a single tree trunk, on which they live, and these nail-free constructions somehow survive the region's running seas. Their days are spent fishing, diving for oysters and crabs and foraging foreshores for mollusks and sea snails. Early travelers described the Moken as ghosts; you'd see them, then in an instant they'd disappear. It's a skill linked to their ancient history of survival: The Moken endured exploitation and harassment from Chinese traders, Japanese occupiers and British colonialists. The tribe has dwindled from 5,000, according to a 1911 British census, to 2,000, as counted in a 2005 Burmese census.

Finding the Mergui's Moken was therefore never going to be a walk in the park—a situation compounded by the sheer complexities of



Diving in Mergui's crystalline waters among coral and jellyfish



traveling such an undeveloped wilderness in politically sensitive territory. Prior to the country's 2010 quasi-democratic elections and the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, Mergui was defined as a "remote region"—junta-speak for an area of Burma requiring complicated tourism permits. A large number of islands were completely off-limits. In 2009 I started looking for a reliable travel fixer with Mergui experience. It wasn't until 2013 that I cracked it with a New York- and Bangkok-based tour operator specializing in Asia called Remote Lands (see "The Details"). Co-founder Catherine Heald suggested the itinerary of a recently returned New York banker: chartering a \$10,000-a-day yacht from Phuket, Thailand, a two-day sail away. Our budget allowed for a simple six-berth sailing vessel instead, also from Phuket, with a nervous Heald explaining how our Norwegian skipper, Freddy Storheil, was the most experienced in the Mergui, but his boat's air-conditioning might not work.

It didn't matter. Mergui is one of those destinations where the luxury lies in the territory, not the cooling systems. Besides, since the tourism boycott was lifted in 2010, Burma has been booked out. Hotel rooms in Rangoon are hard to come by. Amid the scramble I kept hearing Mergui being tipped as the Next Big Thing: the "wild west of Burma," "Southeast Asia's last resort," where Tay Za, a contentious Burmese billionaire businessman, had allegedly just bought an island. "In ten years Mergui is going to be completely developed," Heald said. "This is a rare moment in our lives to penetrate a part of the world where there's so little information, you simply don't know what to expect."

We're deep

into the archipelago, and I'm completely obsessed by the lonely beauty of the place. The vegetation is a richer emerald than anything I've ever come across, the cobalt waters are more turquoise and the grains of sand are like tiny ground-up diamonds. It feels like Thailand 20 years ago, before Leonardo DiCaprio found *The Beach*.

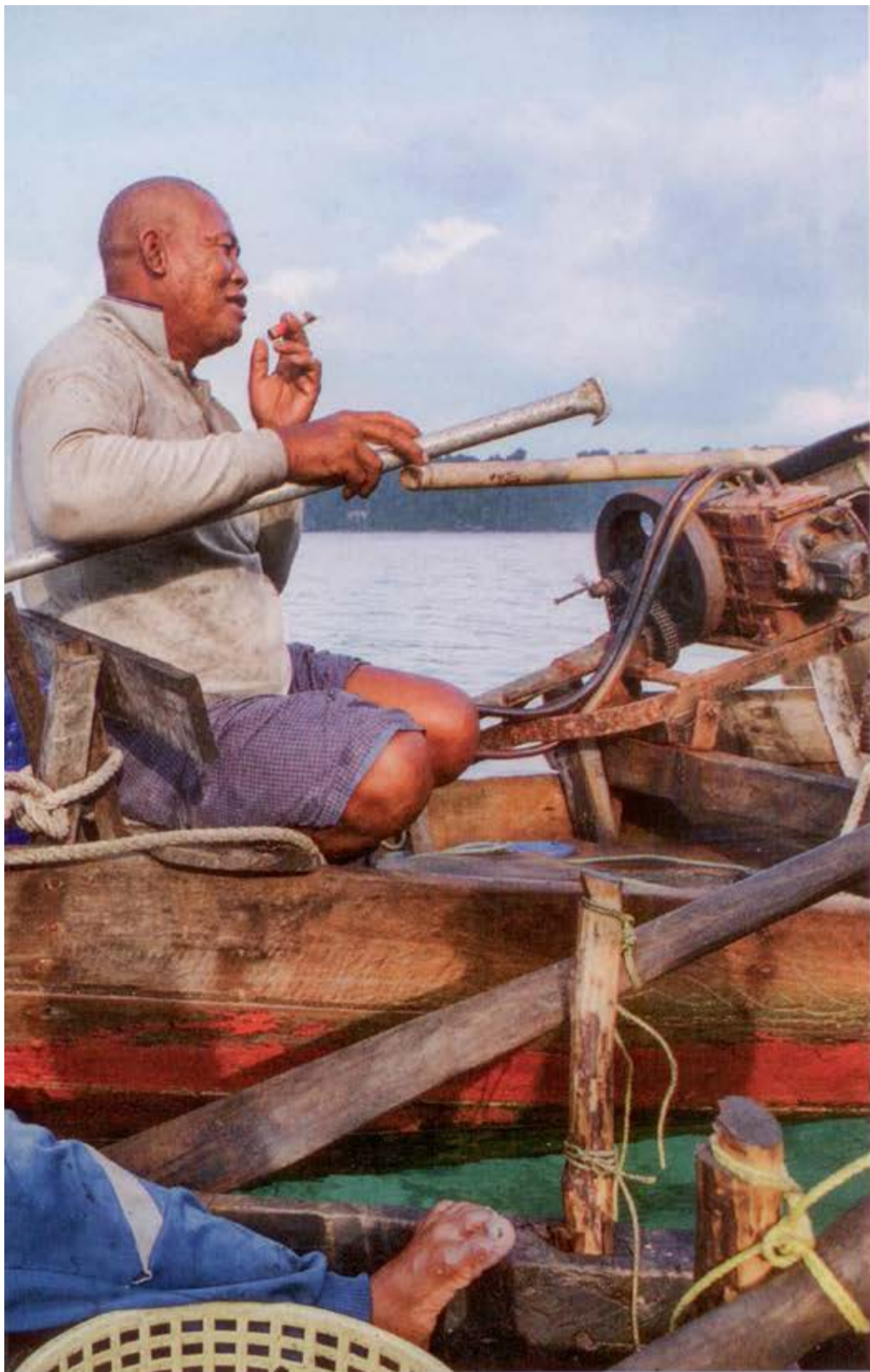
Near the shoreline is a group of Moken. They come toward us in their dugouts. The men row with a commanding elegance: They stand up tall, paddling with crossed oars. As they get closer, some dive into the sea, their confidence in the water making them appear more fish than man—the way they let themselves be carried by the current as far as it needs to take them, and then when the pull has softened and they can feel a change in its direction, they swim back toward our boat, rolling onto their backs with the knowledge that they can somehow float on the surface indefinitely.

I slip into the water. Among the Moken, stories of free diving as deep as 80 feet are not uncommon. One of them kicks to maybe 15 feet below, beyond my clear vision. While I'm floundering with my snorkel, he's scavenging the seabed; he sees the ocean's secrets while I see only speckled light, dizzy from having held my breath too long. (The photographer accompanying me needs diving gear and oxygen to shoot him.)

This is it—the moment I've been chasing. Except it also isn't. For shortly after the Moken surfaces with a spiky urchin in his hands, he wants a bagful of rice and a few cans of beer. He has performed and seeks payment for his endeavors. We're foreigners; we've brought the cautious Moken an opportunity for trade. Previously they dived for sea slugs on behalf of Chinese merchants who, prior to World War II, repaid the Moken with protection from pirates. Now the Moken dive for us. They say they see about one foreigner a week from October to April. Our

Clockwise from top left: A Moken father and his son fish in the early morning; Moken paddle their dugout canoe; the Mergui Archipelago from the air; a spiny lobster just pulled from the sea; young Moken diving deep.





The Details

Remote Lands can organize flexible four-night itineraries in Mergui aboard Colona II with a skipper, chef and dive master (from \$2,000 a day for four people, including all permits; 646-415-8092; remotelands.com); larger yachts can be requested by contacting Catherine Heald (catherine@remotelands.com). Asian Wings Airways (asianwingsair.com), Air Bagan (airbagan.com) and Air KBZ (airkbz.com) all fly to Kawthaung, an hour-and-20-minute flight from Rangoon. Kawthaung, at Burma's southern tip, is the port of exit for cruising the island and where every visitor has to register with immigration and pay the permit fees. Note: Mergui is best avoided during monsoon season, from around the end of May to mid-October.



Burmese guide and interpreter, Myat Saw Htat, sighs: "I think in 20 years, the traditional Moken living on the sea will be gone forever."

If we prove rare visitors this far into the islands, we're by no means first-contact tourists. That said, most travelers stick to the government-ordained path, visiting a squalid, purpose-built village called Bo Chu, a day's sail from Kawthaung, at Burma's southern tip, where 20 years ago the Moken were encouraged to settle by the regime. With trash everywhere, it's as if these nomadic water people simply don't know how to live on land.

The only reason people go to Bo Chu is because before the new government, traveling "off-piste" through Mergui was hard. Controlling government minders were assigned to every dive boat; they usually carried a gun. You couldn't ask questions. At least the red tape is now disintegrating. The tortuous permit system has been eased. "Short of a couple of places, I can now sail and visit everywhere," says Storheil. In March 2013 came more changes: With a couple weeks' notice, visitors can now enter and leave Burma via different ports of entry (previously one had to travel in and out of the same place), meaning end-to-end tours of the country are possible for the first time—starting in the Burmese Himalayas and finishing on Mergui's beaches before exiting into the plush resorts of Thailand. This increases Mergui's appeal exponentially. Even if such developments mean more visitors—even if the Moken are not the romantic Tintin-esque *vagabonds de la mer* I'd first imagined—I can't think of islands more intensely seductive.

Our skipper,

70-year-old Freddy Storheil, has more of a hide than a skin—tough, sun-scored leather. Over the years he's run a diving outfit in Egypt's Red Sea and taken crews in to film *Rajan*, the famous swimming elephant of the Andaman and the Nicobar Islands. Based out of Phuket for the last 15 years, he has led many trips to the Burma Banks, the holy grail of big pelagic dives west of Mergui, as well as more than 100 journeys through the archipelago. He knows the region so well, he can navigate the islands by sight, taking on narrow channels in his 60-foot, red-sailed ketch, *Colona II*. He does this nimbly with a crew of three.

As to Heald's briefing—she was right. Storheil's boat is quite simple (and the air-conditioning is far from great). But we're comfortable enough and safe. We eat juicy lobster bought from local fishermen: Burmese mainlanders, not the Moken, who trawl the waters at night. Our days pass gently, interspersed with snorkeling, dives, beach drop-offs and visits to local villages where we watch the Moken cook up scavenged oysters on the fringe of old-growth forests. The villages always line the shores, with houses built on stilts. There are simple schools and shops, the communities—dominated by Burmese fishermen—as poor as I'd ever come across.

We meet Moken who were born on the boats; now a number have intermarried with the colonizing Burmese with the rapid switch toward a non-nomadic lifestyle. We learn why a plastic plane hangs from a Moken shrine; they call it the "bird goddess," which is testimony to how strange the sight of airplanes must have once appeared. And we go to Lampi Island—at 80 square miles, one of Burma's largest national parks—where we swim in still black pools.

Storheil's stories flow easily. He says there have been reports of elephants on Lampi. ("I'm sure there's still wildlife in this jungle, but there's no way you're going to see it, or even

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THE TAIL

A Burmese fishing boat
off Nyang Wee Island



COVER Salvatore Ferragamo suit and shirt at Salvatore Ferragamo, 866-337-7242. Ermenegildo Zegna hat and tie at zegna.com. Giorgio Armani belt at armani.com. Brunello Cucinelli pocket square (\$140) at Brunello Cucinelli New York, 212-627-9202.

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penetrate it.") In the 1930s, there were reports of tigers, known to swim island to island, and panthers. Storheil used to see flotillas; now he sees single Moken rather than whole family groups. He talks about the shark-fin industry, how he used to see sharks often but now there are none. ("Once I came across 20, 30 on a beach, all their fins cut off, pinned to a line to dry.") In 1997 he brought a group of divers to a cave, one of his favorite places in Mergui. The entry was too narrow for the boat, so they swam in. When they surfaced, the divers had half a dozen semiautomatic guns pointed at their heads. Inadvertently, they'd entered into the heart of the lucrative and illegal bird's-nest trade—another Indian Ocean delicacy harvested for expensive Chinese soups.

As to his charters, in the last couple of years a growing proportion have been for real estate developers—South Koreans, Swedes, Finns. There are a few private superyachts, says Storheil; only recently he woke up to the sound of Jet Skis, ridden by Russians. For now, however, I see no other tourist vessel but ours. We talk about how Mergui is going to keep on changing. "Within the next few years, sailing around these deserted islands and beaches will be history," says Storheil. Whether that's a good or bad thing for the Moken, none of us are sure. All I know is, this journey is a compelling, crazy and ethically complex luxury like no other I've yet experienced—here, in the land of *vagabonds de la mer*, where I feel like I'm sailing Eden after the flood in the last boat left afloat. ♦



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