

# Devil's Island

The pit of hell or paradise? **Janaki Lenin** braves an expedition to the remotest island in the Andamans.

Photographs by **Kalyan Varma**

At daybreak, the 'Pit of Hell' emerged hazily from the horizon like a mirage. We had spent almost 24 hours fighting the wind across the Andaman Sea and, for much of that time, totally out of sight of land. Four hours later, we reached the end of our almost 260km voyage from Port Blair. We anchored off the northeastern shore at Police Post Bay, so-called for being one of the remotest camps of any police force in the world. Inexplicably, the ancient Portuguese called it 'Barata' (Cockroach) Bay, and this area was recognised by its groves of Burmese fishtail palms! Today, it has been replaced by extensive coconut, areca and banana plantations. A group of paramilitary police of the Indian Reserve Battalion safeguard India's claim to the most isolated island in the entire Andaman group. It seemed like a paid policeman's holiday but, as we found out later, these bravehearts marooned in the 'pit of hell' were homesick and afraid of the wild jungle.

There was no idyllic sandy beach but the island displayed all the other signifiers of an earthly paradise: a picturesque, densely forested hill looming 710m out

of the deep blue sea. So why the contrarian name: Narak-kund (Sanskrit for 'pit of hell')? Popular theory says that perhaps ancient Indian cartographers christened India's only volcano (now drily and unimaginatively called Barren Island) as an infernal sink. But over time (as early as the year 1701), the larger, extinct volcano lying 150km northeast of the rightful owner of the name became known as Narcondam. If a foolhardy crew was to fly from Port Blair to Yangon, he'd spy verdant Narcondam along the way, about 114 km east of North Andaman.

For the next three days, we were to live aboard the 48-foot yacht, the *Emerald Blue*, and commute to shore in an inflatable dinghy. April, with its calm waves before the monsoonal currents set in, was a good month to land. Narcondam is a 1,700m-high, solitary oceanic mountain, of which more than 1,000m lie below the surface of the sea. There were hardly any shallows and landing was tricky: the dinghy would have to surf onto a small ledge on the slope. Among the smooth round andesite boulders (of volcanic origin) bordering the shoreline, was a tiny little sandy beach with conveniently just enough space for all of us to make a quick jump into knee-deep water before the next wave came crashing in.

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This was the writer and her group's first view of Narcondam

A recent birdwatchers' news-letter had raised concerns about goats overrunning the island. Since the 1500s, it had been a common mariners' practice to drop off livestock such as goats, pigs, chickens and even giant tortoises on islands as nourishment for shipwrecked mariners. Indeed, Alexander Selkirk, the prototype Robinson Crusoe, survived four years as a castaway on one of the Juan Fernández islands, off Chile, on such feral goats. Narcondam was no exception: in 1899, A.O. Hume quoted Robert Tytler saying that "pigs, goats and fowls" had been released there. We don't know if these were eaten up by unfortunate sailors or whether they eventually died out but, in 1976, the Indian Police brought two pairs of goats to keep their personnel stationed on the island well-stocked with animal protein. Perhaps the men got sick of eating mutton every day because, by 1998, there were 400 of the voracious caprines rapidly eating their way through the native island vegetation. Ornithologists lobbied for the removal of these animals, going so far as to argue that the island was being held together by tree roots and implying that should forest regeneration be adversely affected, then not only the hornbill population but the whole island could collapse. So, checking on the goats was high on our agenda.

The air was still and very humid; a hill mynah high up in the canopy prattled away until silenced by the wild shrieking of a juvenile white-bellied sea eagle being mobbed by two pairs of squawking Narcondam hornbills. It was their nesting season, and predatory raptors were not welcome in the immediate air space. Further up, the boulders below a huge tree were splattered with little brown scat-spots, telltale evidence of a nest directly above our heads. Soon the parents returned after seeing off the eagle, victoriously chuckling to one another. This was our first good look at this charismatic species: the father was a handsome honey-brown fellow, while the female was an ordinary black. Since their enormous yellowish-red beaks were

in the way, they had to tilt their heads comically sideways in order to see us. By counting the rings on the casque above the beak, we could tell the male was six years old. Disgusted by our presence, they took off, screaming invectives.

Photographer Kalyan Varma urgently beckoned us over and pointed to a rusty brown bird lurking in the undergrowth. It was a slaty-legged crake, a species not recorded in the Andaman Islands before. Kalyan had been washing his face by the pool when he felt something pecking the



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Clockwise from this picture: a pod of dolphins visible in the clear waters; a Narcondam hornbill, less than 500 of which remain on the island; a crake; and a Chinese pond heron

Velcro on his footwear. It's hard to tell whether the crake was mystified by the man or by his Texas. In an ironic situation for a photographer, the bird was much too close to his long lens for a picture!

The hornbills would have been similarly trusting of the first humans they had met. Indeed in 1898, the commanding officer of the *Elphinstone*, Lt J.H. St John, had observed that the birds were tame. But in the intervening century, they had been shot for museum specimens by visiting ornithologists, as well as for the pot by the police force, so sadly the hornbills have become fearful of humans, just like any mainland animal. Not only the birds, St John says even water monitors were as "tame as pet mice and one climbed into the lap of the Chief Commissioner's niece and seemed to be quite at home". Needless to say, these lizards were now scarce (apparently hunted by the resident humans) and the few big ones that we encountered went crashing into the undergrowth. The only trusting animals were the numerous skinks who investigated the falling crumbs from our mid-day snacks.

Back at the boat, all of us jumped in the water to cool off after the long sweaty day. In the distance we could hear the hornbills squawking, there was a freshly caught snapper frying in the galley and we had the rare privilege of being in one of the most spectacular and isolated spots in the world. Narcondam, the hell-hole? No way! More appropriate would be Swargam, the heavenly abode! The

only fine print is that the sun rises at an ungodly 5am in this paradise.

Very early one morning, we set sail for the west coast. My main goal was to climb the summit, and we hoped to follow the detailed route mentioned in the latest edition (2009/2010) of the *Southeast Asia Pilot* (the Andaman section appears to have been written by two British nationals and it would be interesting to know how they got permission to go ashore). The estimated duration of ascent was three hours for the “reasonably fit and agile”, and descent was likely to take another two hours. It sounded like it could be done all in a day’s walk but much depended on our ability to land. That morning, the currents were strong and the waves crashed roughly over the rocky beach which was the designated starting point. Nick Band, the captain, made a quick reconnaissance and the prognosis was grim: landing there was a definite recipe for broken legs. Plan B was to attempt an ascent from a beach on the north coast of Narcondam.

**W**e managed to land but not without getting soaked by the turbulent waves. Within a few paces of starting up the hill slope, we were startled to see a trail. Goats? Rom Whitaker, however, noticed the path leading into the roots of a tree. Any goat would have to be a midget to crawl into that tiny space; it could only have been a rat trail. The climb became steadily steeper and more difficult to negotiate, with fallen,



Clockwise from this picture: Narcondam is home to many large trees and giant lianas; evolution has equipped tent spiders with the ability to snare flying insects in the forest canopy; a bent-toed gecko; and a young water monitor lizard



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rotting logs blocking the path. Marvelling at the massive dhup trees that rose high and lofty and their fin-like buttresses, provided a welcome break from the arduous climb. It became steeper and more slippery; dislodged rocks rolled perilously downhill barely missing people behind and, like gibbons, we used our arms to take our weight as footholds couldn’t be trusted. It was tempting to think that no human had climbed this ridge before but, in this increasingly explored world, one cannot say that with any certainty.

**A** cool breeze blowing gently off the sea invigorated our catch-our-breath stops. Four hours from the starting point, we reached the top of a 430m hill, but the summit of Narcondam still towered over us. Several humans had left evidence of their presence here by gouging their names on trees; the culprits must have come from the police camp at the foot of the hill on the eastern side. To reach the tallest peak, we would have to descend at least 100m to a valley and then climb another 400m. Shankar Raman declared, “It will take just 2,000 paces to climb that hill.” It seemed so simple, but there wasn’t enough time to do it and camping up there was out of the question. The vegetation at the higher elevations looked denser than the deciduous forest we had just climbed and, therefore, the going would be slower.

After a half-hour rest, our clothes were still wet with sweat, but we decided to make a move. The descent was even more slippery than the ascent. We tried to climb down gingerly without dislodging any rocks but a few did escape. Like lumberjacks, we hollered down to the people ahead, “Rock!”, but with the slope being so steep there was little they could do to get out of the way in time. Fortunately the rocks missed them; but once, Naveen actually jumped up in the air acrobatically to avoid being hit by a tumbling boulder. Quickly we learnt to wait till the others were behind a tree before sliding down a tricky incline.



Back at the boat, we jumped into the water to cool off. In the distance, we could hear the hornbills squawking, there was a freshly caught snapper frying in the galley and we had the rare privilege of being in one of the most spectacular and isolated spots in the world

Nick, our boatman, goes out in a small 'Gemini' to check for a suitable landing spot; and Pigeon Island, off the northwest coast of Narcondam

Back at the police camp, we chatted about life on the island. They complained about hordes of rats that destroyed everything. We had caught glimpses of the rodents scurrying around in the trees near the plantations. Could they have jumped ship and colonised the island? In 1893, Major David Prain noted that "a rat swarms everywhere" and was the commonest mammal on the island. A decade ago we had experienced a similar situation on South Sentinel Island, another remote island, almost 400km to the southwest, so perhaps it was normal for a high density of rats to live on these isolated islands. Or maybe some early ship seeded these islands with rats as a surer food source than goats and pigs! Of goats, we had seen nary a sign; no pellets or tracks. Thankfully, besides a pair seen by a few policemen the previous week, an almost thorough removal had been executed.

Just past noon, with three sails hoisted, we set course for Port Blair. When a strong wind picked up behind us, Nick



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cut the engine, unfurled the two additional sails and, silently, except for the sound of the yacht knifing through the waves, we sailed the old-fashioned way. Occasionally, we had to change direction to avoid colliding with oil tankers and cargo ships. From the early days of shipping, the distinctive profile of Narcondam has been a navigation aid, and even today this area appears to be a busy shipping

corridor. As the island disappeared over the horizon, the nagging thought of not having reached the summit had me making plans for a return. That would entail the gauntlet of getting permits again. The devil in my head suggested: to hell with them, go on a fishing/diving trip and then find an excuse to climb the hill. Apparently, by their very nature, the Gardens of Eden lead humans astray! •

## THE INFORMATION



**GETTING THERE** PORT BLAIR There are daily flights from Chennai and Kolkata on Air India, Jet Airways and Kingfisher Red (fares start from approx. Rs 4,000 one way). **TO NARCONDAM** Until recently, access to Narcondam was only by Coast Guard boat, which offered two options – either four hours or a few weeks on the island! Signing on with a Thai liveaboard boat is the only way to visit and comply with regulations that do not permit camping on the island. On our Emerald Blue

boat, it costs ₹725 per day for up to six people. The package gives you captain and cook, accommodation, all meals, use of boat equipment, kayaks, dinghy, snorkelling gear, etc. It does not include forest department fees, land transport or alcohol (available for a reasonable price on board). For more details, see [www.sail-thailand.com](http://www.sail-thailand.com).

**PERMITS** Only Indians are allowed to land on Narcondam; foreigners are prohibited, but they may dive and fish off the boat. Foreign vessels need clearance for all passengers from Port Management Board, Coast Guard and, before and after the trip, from Immigration and Customs. Since Narcondam is a wildlife sanctuary, a landing permit issued by the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), Port Blair, is required. This allows passengers to land on the island but not spend the night. Landing fee is Rs 1,000 per person. Photo ID is necessary.

**DIVING** These waters are well-known for large oceanic creatures such as mantas, reef sharks, hammerheads, whales and large marlin. Visibility between December and May is spectacular, but there are fairly strong currents around Narcondam. There are varied underwater rock formations, sea

caves, crevices and archways to explore. The coral is reportedly the healthiest in the Andaman group, with scores of enormous sea fans growing out of the slope as far below as the eye can see. Barrel sponges abound, some of them large enough for an adult human to slip into! Large numbers of small reef fish, as well as big eye trevally, puffer, snapper, dog-tooth tuna, or rainbow runner can also be easily seen.

The Thai liveaboards are familiar with dive-spots around Narcondam and they have named several, such as the Estate, Chimneys, HQ Pinnacle, Ooh La La, Manta Bay, Lion Rock and Bubbles. For scuba diving, the Emerald Blue has a compressor and 4x10l steel tanks. There is no dive master on board, and all divers should have certification. The boat can take a maximum of three divers or two divers and four non-diving passengers. There is power on board for charging batteries.

**WHAT TO CARRY** Swimsuit, flip-flops, hat, sunscreen, binoculars, camera, snorkelling mask/diving gear, sunglasses, hiking shoes, water bottle, snacks (energy bars, dry fruits and nuts), torch, light towel, toiletries, essential medication (including seasickness pills).

Janaki Lenin