



AKAMA REPORT 6
8 March 2003

Hello again. This is a rather lengthy report so best grab a coffee and settle in for a long read.

In our short time at Rebak Marina (Rebak Island, Langkawi, Malaysia) we made many new friends. For our readers who are not boaters, this camaraderie and easy interaction among boaters is one of the things that distinguish boating from other leisure activities. For example, we were exploring a shoreline in our dinghy, when we started chatting with another couple who are doing the same thing. We then enjoyed each others company for drinks and snacks at sundown. It's the same around most of the marinas. We've met many wonderful people from Canada, South Africa, Indonesia, Britain, Australia, Germany, the USA...the list goes on.

While at Rebak Marina, we fixed two vexing problems aboard AKAMA. One was a fuel filling problem, which we fixed by re-aligning the diesel tank vent lines and by installing a cross-over pipe between the tops of the three tanks. The other was to get our wing engine operating without overheating. We also had some of the teak trim sealed and painted dark blue, to match the boot-stripe; this small improvement prompted someone to ask if we had the whole boat painted, so she must pass the 10-metre examination with flying colours.

Our insurance woes behind us (see Report 5), we've left Rebak Marina on 20 January to resume our cruising. We are cruising on the West Coast of Thailand and Malaysia. The only word that applies is gorgeous! This area is made for boating, with countless bays, thousands of islands, good anchorages, friendly people, stable governments, and mostly reasonable officials. The water in the open areas is crystal clear and we could see down for over 20 feet in many places. Of course, to cruise here you have to like warm (25 to 35 degrees) and humid (80 to 100), as this is what we get all year around. There are even a few good marinas scattered around the place, should one need some repairs, or a place to leave the boat for a while. Other than Sunsail which has a few sailboats here, we seem to be nearly alone in comprehending this. Day after day, we find beautiful bays in which to anchor, usually with no other yachts at all. There's room over here for tens of thousands of yachts, yet other than around a few popular tourist destinations the place is nearly yachtless.

As good as this area is for boating in general, it is a trawler-yacht paradise, mostly because of the weather. It is never "bad", as hurricanes never happen here. Indeed, we rarely get dangerously strong winds at all. It is usually fairly calm, especially around Singapore and southern Malaysia, much to the chagrin of our sailing friends. And, the boating is good year-round. During the NE monsoon (from about November to March) we boat on the west side of the Malay Peninsula; during the SW (from about May to September) we boat on the east side. During the two transition seasons, April and October, one can go just about anywhere, although we can get a lot of thunderstorms. Frankly though, boaters used to the variable weather in temperate waters would find the off-season boating on either coast reasonably good over here.

20 January 03: Our first foray, some of it in the company of S/Y Die Mouse, was around Langkawi and its dozens of out-islands (which is roughly 6d 22'N by 99d 48'E), and Southern Thailand, including the Butang Islands (west of Langkawi), and Tarutao Island (north of Langkawi), where they made one of the Survivor TV series).

The high points around Langkawi and Southern Thailand, where most of the water is quite clear, include:

- Looking ashore from our anchorage in an unnamed bay on Langkawi at a vaguely familiar building, then going ashore and finding out that it was the set of the movie Anna and the King (recent remake of the movie The King and I); it's now a museum.
- Sneaking ashore by dinghy in the Butangs (we were not officially cleared into Thailand or even out of Malaysia) with friends (Allan and Paul) to eat fresh-caught fish, BBQ-ed in the Thai style, at a beach restaurant.
- Anchoring in a secluded bay off Pulau Dayang Bunting (just south of Langkawi), on a hot tip from our friends Allan and Paul on Die Mouse IV. There were towering cliffs all around and only narrow passes in and out. Around us tropical birds screeched and monkeys frolicked in the trees. We motored up-current in the dinghy, and then paddled back in silence to observe the unspoiled surroundings.
- Hole-in-the-wall on the north-eastern part of Langkawi, where, thanks to having a mud map from our friend Warren Blake of S/Y Four Friends. We boated in our dinghy along a maze of mangrove rivers, through a cave with stalactites, through a narrow cut in the limestone cliffs, to a place where dozens of sea eagles soar. We took several wrong turns in the mangrove rivers and were a bit concerned that we might not get back through the cave before high tide; what an adventure!
- The west side of the Tarutao Island, which is somewhat sheltered from the NE monsoon winds by barrier islands, is very pretty in nice weather. The passage has little beaches, caves, coves and a few hidey holes, where one can anchor in a blow. One of the islands looks like a profile of Richard Nixon's head. At another spot there is a pier and building that look like a resort; we later found out that this used to be a prison. From our anchorage we were watching some local fishermen pull their wooden boats up onto a beach and take shelter in a cave. We could not help but think that fishermen around here have been doing that since before the dawn of history.

31 January: After Langkawi and Southern Thailand, we went farther north stopping at Phetra Island, Koh Kradan, Koh Muk, and Koh Phiphi Don. We spent two nights at Koh Phiphi, regarded by whoever makes these determinations as the world's second most lovely island. By the way, it is on one of the beaches near here that they made the movie The Beach (there was a big hoo-hah about that, because the movie people told the Thais that the place was just what they were looking for they came in with a crew and re-landscaped the place. The Thai Government was furious). Frankly, while the island scenery was great, the excessive tourism has spoiled it. Speed boats delivering day-trippers to overcrowded beaches run rampant. Also, most of the stores and shops are trashy to the extreme. On the other hand, we found a lovely little bay in which to anchor; during the day it was lousy with tourists and speed boats, but by the evening we had it to ourselves. We also found a secluded little beach where LA had a swim among numerous friendly and colourful fish.

5 February: After Phiphi we went to Phuket, the main tourist island in these parts. By the way, the ph sound in Thai is not spoken as an F, but as a P. So, Phuket is not pronounced the way you might think. On the other hand, the way Phiphi Islands is pronounced should provoke a grin. Along the way we saw a small and remote islet on which there is nothing but a few palm trees, a lovely sandy beach, and hundreds of beach umbrellas. Even though there is virtually nothing there, some enterprising soul has set up a beach cafe to which tourists are taken by speed boat. Amazing! We also saw the first of many little rickety fishermen's huts. They build these on rocky outcrops and use them when they need a rest

or if they get caught in inclement weather. Some are literally perched atop rocks in the middle of the sea just big enough to hold them. Others are fastened to the sides of mountains and the fishermen have to climb up with ropes.

We spent over a week in Boat Lagoon, the fanciest marina at Phuket, because it is where the best craftsmen seem to be based. This is a planned stop to get some carpentry and upholstery work done. AKAMA's upholstery was looking rather tattered and the foam was never the best, especially in the saloon, dining area and in the pilothouse. So we replaced it with navy blue, Thai water buffalo hide over new, sculpted foam cushions. Also, we've added another shelf in the crew room and had some minor repairs made. The most notable repair is to fix some rotted interior wood in the master stateroom. Over many years water had been seeping through some improperly bedded deck fittings into the space between the port hull side and the plywood that finishes it. We fixed the leak over a year ago, but too late. Eventually, the decorative boards started to pop off and the paint is cracking, both due to dry rot. So, out with the old and in with the new! While at Phuket, we purchased a polyethylene, 2-person kayak. It is sort of a cross between a proper kayak and a surf board. You sit atop the thing, in moulded depressions, rather than sitting inside; more on that in a minute.

14 February: After the carpentry work was finished and the upholstery was measured, we left Phuket to cruise Phang Nga Bay, which is north and east of Phuket. The water in Phang Nga Bay, while clean, is a bit murky due to silt from three rivers that flow into it. In a few places, it is also loaded with biological curiosities. At one island we marvelled at the tiny critters that floated by our boat by the millions. Some looked like tiny shrimp, others like baby worms or snakes. Many were totally new to us, looking like nothing we'd ever seen before.

The big attraction here is the scenic islands, which include huge limestone cliffs, bays and coves, sandpit islands and countless spots to anchor. The most fascinating thing about the islands of this part of Thailand is the hong (Thai for 'room'). A hong is a cave with the entrance at about water level, into which one can walk, swim or even boat. Every hong is different; some are dark, dead-end caves while others are caves leading to large chambers. Some open into atria (i.e., hollow islands, like a doughnut, with the hong allowing access to the centre). Actually, there are hong in other areas too; we saw our first nice one on Koh Muk, on the way up from Langkawi. At low water the hong opening is big enough to admit a dinghy. Once inside, the hong is large, and it is covered with spectacular rock formations and stalactites.

Our first stop out of Phuket was Koh Rang Yai (Yai means big in Thai), where our kayak was given its first try-out. This maiden voyage was spectacular. As we got onto the kayak, it flipped upside down, dumping us into the drink. There was a considerable current running and the water was rough; so we struggled to grab the kayak, and gather up the paddles, water bottles, hats and the like. Then, we and our collection of flotsam were drifting rapidly away from AKAMA! Long-time readers of our chronicles will recall that we had a harrowing experience at Pulau Tioman (Report 1), with the current sweeping us away from our dinghy when we were snorkelling. Because of this lesson learned, we had the presence of mind to stream a line and buoy out behind AKAMA prior to getting on the kayak; this saved us from being swept away as we were able to swim to it, grab it, and pull ourselves back to AKAMA. In any case, there was no real danger, as another boat was anchored nearby and one of the persons aboard motored over in their dinghy and offered to help us out. We declined the offer, realizing that we had to make the recovery unaided, mainly to heal our wounded pride, but also to assure ourselves that we could do it if it happens again and no help is available. Nevertheless, when we encountered the other couple ashore we bought them a drink as a reward for their gallantry.

Next, we went north to Koh Phanak, which has three nice hong. There is one on the west side where they take all the tourists; it is a very large and dark cave. But, we found another, much smaller hong about a half mile north of it, which is just barely passable in a dinghy at low tide. Once through it, we were in a hollow spot in the island, about 400 feet in diameter, surrounded by cliffs with the sun shining down from above; it was breathtakingly beautiful. We explored another hong on the east side of Phanak. This one is mostly above the water, the opening of which appears to be a sand beach; in fact it is millions of tiny shells and broken bits of bigger ones. The cave that runs back from this is huge and fascinating. Way in the back we encountered some sink holes. Not being experienced spelunkers we went no further for fear that we might fall into one or the surface might collapse under our weight, creating a new one. While we were approaching one of the hong on Phanak, a large pink dolphin surfaced twice near our dinghy; what a thrill!

From Phanak we went north to Koh Hong (several islands in this area are named that). As you might guess from its name, it is known for its hong, which were spectacular. We then stopped at Koh Deng Yai, just for brunch, not overnight, after which we did a "fly-past" and took some photos of James Bond Island (Koh Phing Kan), where they made the movie, *The Man With The Golden Gun*. We might have landed, but it had hoards of tourists on it and we had been there once before. Our next overnight was at Koh Chong Lat, where we had a lovely anchorage among two islets between Chong Lat and the Thai mainland.

The next day, after stopping at Koh Kluhi for a quick look-see, we went to Koh Roi. One of the best hong, which can be entered on foot at all but high tide is on Koh Roi. Why this is not a tourist destination we can't understand. In any case, you land the dinghy and walk up a sand beach, through a 7-foot cave into a circular room perhaps 150-metres across. It has a sand beach inside, a little tidal stream around the edge, with small fishes and so on, and a bunch of mangroves in the middle. The walls are limestone pillars, sort of like Stone Henge but with no gaps between the rocks and way, way higher. Overhead a few eagles soared.

After Roi we went to Koh Kudu Yai, where we anchored in a narrow strait between two islands. It was so gorgeous and peaceful that we stayed an extra day. On the beach we watched monkeys scavenging the shore for food. They turn over rocks and grab things before they scurry away. Perhaps the most fascinating thing they do is dig up clams and other shells, then use a rock to crack the shell open.

After all those islands and near seclusion for a week, we anchored off Ao Nang Beach at Krabi (7d 57'N by 96d 50'E). This is a world famous resort area with all the amenities. Long tail boats ply the bay in huge numbers, taking tourists here and there. The waters here are very clear, although most of the coral is long gone. Just west of here we passed a palace, perched high on the side of a mountain, overlooking the sea; we thought it was a monastery at first. The east end of Ao Nang is distinguished by huge limestone cliffs, the most prominent of which is Cannibal Rock, which rises up out of the sea like a huge phallic symbol. Indeed, there is a shrine to the phallus in a cave at Krabi-no kidding; we have photos to prove it.

22 February: After visiting Krabi. We returned to Phuket via a few more drop-dead gorgeous islands (like most around here, with the requisite topless tourists on the beach). We rounded the southern tip of Phuket just at sunset. On the shore there were thousands of people with cameras, waiting to photograph the sunset and perhaps see the green flash. Just as the sun was hitting the horizon, AKAMA was between them and the sun. She must be a silhouette on a thousand photographs by now; we sure wish we had one.

From Nai Harn, we cruised up the west side of Phuket, putting our bow into most of the interesting bays along the way. This side of the island faces the Andaman Sea, which leads to India and Sri Lanka, so the water here is generally crystal clear. In many cases, we could see our anchor in the sand well over 10 metres down. With such clear water, we had hoped that the snorkelling would be great. Alas, most of the coral is marginal and the fishes sparse. Of course, we are spoilt, as we cruised last year in the Anambas Islands see Report 4), which are spectacular in this regard.

Every major bay on the west coast of Phuket is occupied by at least one major hotel, sometimes five or six of them. The sand beaches (the beaches in Thailand are all public property) are clean and the swimming is excellent. There are many world-class restaurants, and plenty of local ones. Of course, this means that there are also tourists by the thousands, but only on the main beaches; the rest are quite vacant.

25 February: We were anchored beside Koh Kala, on the west side of Phuket, with some friends, sheltering from the ground swell that had developed. For the nautically challenged, we would point out that swell is continuous waves that travel great distances in the open ocean. They are usually long period (spaced far apart) and can be very high. They are not a problem, except that near shore they get bigger as they encounter the shallower water, and they can be somewhat uncomfortable to travel into or to have abeam. They are also a pain when anchored, as the boat tends to roll continuously in them, which is why we tucked in behind an island, where the effect is much less.

Behind Koh Kala we discovered a small stream which, above low tide, we could navigate in our dinghies. The small stream led to a shallow and narrow canal that was apparently dug by the tin miners. Some of it was mangrove river. We followed it and a few of its tributaries for miles, enjoying the sights, especially the tropical birds that would suddenly take flight as we approached. Eventually, the canal went behind all of the posh resorts farther south. We continued on going under bridges and through control dams (most of the gates long since rusted inoperative in the position they were left). Finally, we got to a narrow stream in which was floating the bloated carcass of a small dead pig or large dog (we did not investigate closely). We figured that we'd seen it all at that point and returned to our boats for cocktails.

28 February: Next, we did a fly past of Koh Racha Noi (racha is pronounced raya and means king and noi means small), then anchored in a lovely bay at Koh Racha Yai. These islands, just south of Phuket, have the clearest water that we have encountered to date. Even in over 50-feet we could see to the bottom. On shore is a funky little resort on a white sand beach, with nearly all the buildings made of cane, bamboo and thatch. The snorkelling and diving here is fantastic; while the coral is rather marginal, the fishes are amazing in both the quantity and variety. If any of our readers are looking for a place to swim, dive, snorkel, sun bathe on white sand, and get away from it all then this is it. Of course, you will be living in a thatch hut, not a 5-star hotel with air-conditioning and hot and cold running maids; but then, isn't that what you want to get away from?

3 March: We returned to Boat Lagoon to take delivery of our new upholstery and to check out of Thailand (the upholstery fit perfectly and looks marvellous!). They had very little space available and asked if we would mind a slip with a little mud at low tide. We said that as long as it was soft there should be no problem. Little did we know that at lower low water we would be hard aground with no water around us, "afloat" in only wet mud! Apparently they had dredged the slip not long ago and it has already silted up, a continual problem in a marina that was once a swamp. The problem was exasperated by the fact that we are in spring tides. For the non-nautical of our readers, spring tides occur when the moon is new or full; at this time the highs and lows are extreme. The more moderate

tides, called neaps occur in between. Springs are caused by the sun, the moon and the earth being in alignment. Anyway, once the boat went aground the seawater intakes became plugged with mud and we were totally disabled. This is no big deal, as everything works when we float free and blow out the hoses, but while aground we could not run the air-conditioners. Fortunately, it wasn't a hot night.

4 March: We left Boat lagoon on the high tide and returned to Langkawi, via Koh Phiphi and Koh Rok Nok. The latter has absolutely the clearest water in the area, and some fairly decent coral (well some alive anyway) and lots of fish. This was definitely worth the stop. We arrived in Rebak Marina on LA's birthday and had a little party at the marina restaurant. This chapter is now over and before we return to Sebana Cove to prepare for our next adventure, we will take part in the Langkawi Regatta, as a volunteer boat.

Before closing, a few words about fishing are in order. We bought fishing rods, hand lines and all sorts of other paraphernalia with which to catch the elusive critters. So far the fish are batting 1000 and AKAMA 0. We lost three hooks, one to a fish (it also took all the line off the reel). We lost one to a fisherman's net and one due to poor rigging. The only things caught so far were a net buoy and another fisherman's lure. He passed too close our stern and hooked our line. He thought he had a big one until he saw us reeling him in! We know that there are fish here, as one of the interesting sights is watching the fishermen pull in their big nets full of fish, with some considerable envy. Sometimes they stop by the boat and offer to sell their catch, and prawns, which are sometimes the gigantic tiger prawns.

Well, that's it for now.