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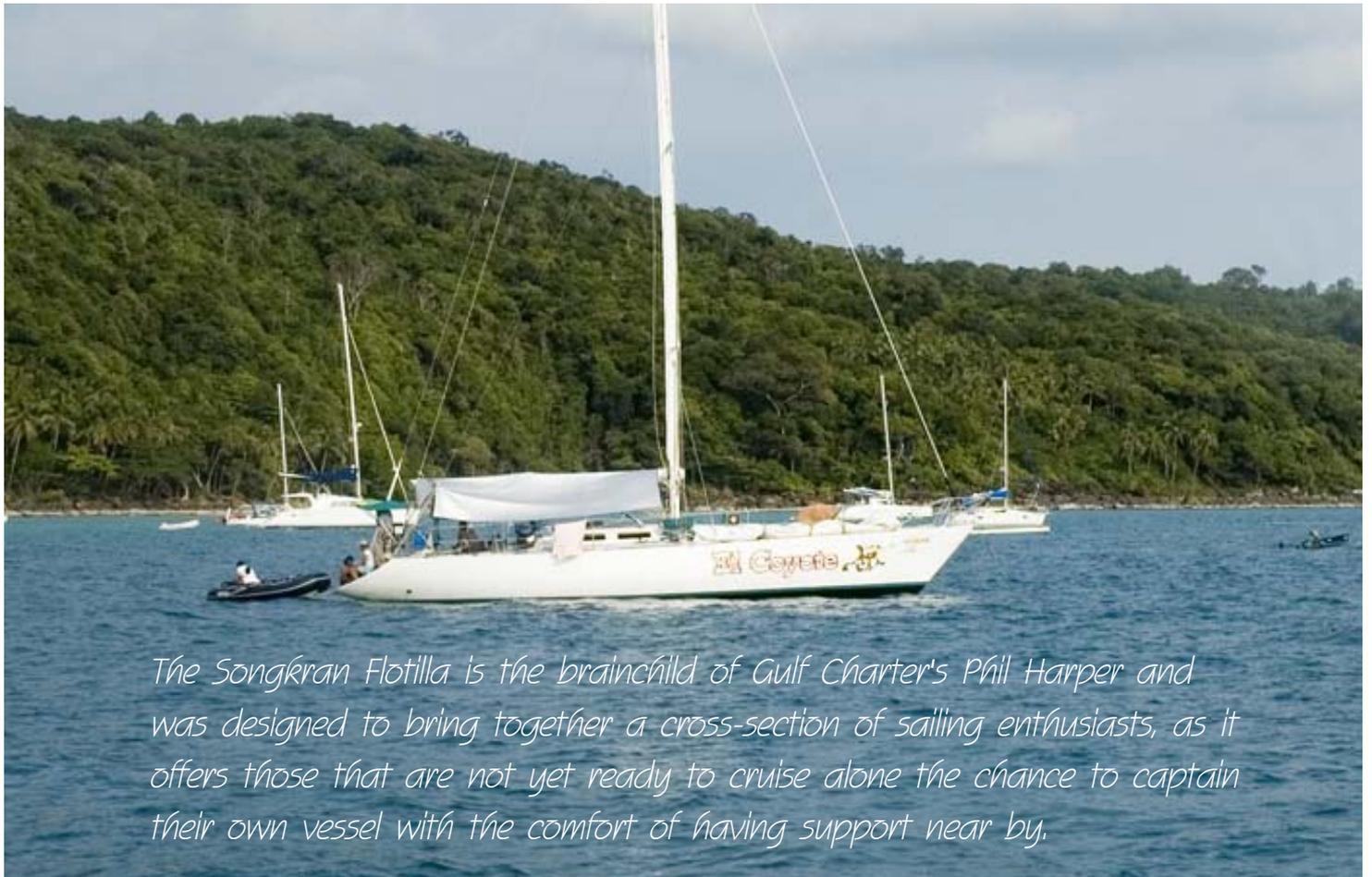
Volvo Ocean Race comes to Asia for first time



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# Gulf Charter's

By Scott Murray Photos by David Jezeph

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The Koh Chang-Koh Kood Archipelago has so much to offer the cruising yachtsman. With fair winds and protected waters, the area offers great sailing conditions. And good anchorages are abundant; you can moor off uninhabited beaches, or off the exclusive secluded beach resorts and restaurants. On Koh Kood, you can take a dinghy ride up the mangrove-lined river estuaries, and swim in a spectacular freshwater waterfall.

The Songkran Flotilla is the brainchild of Gulf Charter's Phil Harper and was designed to bring together a cross-section of

sailing enthusiasts, as it offers those that are not yet ready to cruise alone the chance to captain their own vessel with the comfort of having support near by. To the seasoned cruiser, it offers camaraderie at evening parties and a fast track to the best locations.

Phil's rationale for holding the Flotilla during Songkran is, "the Thai holiday doesn't match with any other major international holiday, so many people stay in Thailand,

But with all the traffic chaos, the marauding hordes and there constant bombardment of water, the ocean is just a better place to be."

Whether you are joining the Flotilla in a Gulf Charters yacht, or participating in your own vessel, the fee is 2000 baht per head and 1200 baht per child (under 15 years). This price includes evening meals and on the water support throughout the cruise, including ice runs and rubbish disposal.



# Songkran Flotilla

## Friday the 11<sup>th</sup> of April

Gulf Charters kicked off the event with a low key BBQ on Friday night at its base at Island View Resort at Ao Salakpet in Koh Chang. People chartering a yacht had access to the pier on Friday and were welcome to sleep aboard. Alternatively, participants could also rent rooms on the pier

## Saturday the 12<sup>th</sup> of April

The first day of the Flotilla started off at a leisurely pace; with some participants still arriving, doing their briefing, etc. The Flotilla headed out around lunch time for the sail across to Koh Mak via Koh Rang. The evening's party was held on the beach in the northeastern bay, a BBQ at the Koh Mak Resort.

## Sunday the 13<sup>th</sup> of April

The Flotilla headed out for its journey to Ao Yai on the southeastern end of Koh

Kood. The night's festivities were held in the fishing village, one of the highlights of the trip. This sleepy little spot rarely sees foreigners, never mind a fleet of yachts and they take the opportunity to host this event very seriously. Seafood lovers were treated to a special treat as the ladies of the village drummed up a memorable feast. As the evening wore on, all the participants got into the spirit of things by joining in with the karaoke and dancing around the tables.

## Monday the 14<sup>th</sup> of April

At this juncture of the Flotilla, everyone started enjoying the slower pace of island life and the cruising lifestyle. The evening's activities were held at Captain Hooks, a spectacular resort, located in a picture-perfect tropical island setting, with a coconut-tree lined white sandy beach. There was another spectacular buffet dinner on offering at the sunset-viewing platform over-

*Gulf Charters' sailing school doesn't generate huge amounts of money, but it does produce people who charter boats, buy them & even go into business with the company, like current CEO Ron Patston, a graduate of the school.*

Even canines can have fun exploring upriver at Koh Kood (below). You can take a dinghy up a mangrove-line estuary, using the Away Resort as your jump-off point. When the rains come, there's a fabulous waterfall a couple clicks upriver. As the Songkran flotilla is not a race, everyone has time to kick back, relax and enjoy the beautiful scenery (right). A Corsair (far right) shows its grace on the water whizzing by a fellow boat in the Songkran flotilla. The refurbished Gulf Charter tug (middle, far right) makes sure everyone has ice and disposes of everyone's garbage during the flotilla. A fire dancing show at Captain Hook's resort on the last night (bottom, far right).



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looking the beach and nearby islands and a fire-throwing performance was staged for entertainment that evening.

### Tuesday the 15<sup>th</sup> of April

The last day, and the Flotilla cruised the 25nm back to Koh Chang at a leisurely pace, with most yachts arriving back on the dock at around 2:00pm, just enough time for those that need to catch the last flight out that day. Those staying on, slept on their yacht that night and headed out the next morning.

### Location

The southern border of Thailand, close to Phuket, is some 400 miles north of the Equator at about 7 degrees N. The famous Doldrum Belt stretches from the equator north and south by 600 miles, or 10 degrees. In this belt, the wind and weather is unpredictable since it is the meeting of the southerly winds in the Northern Hemisphere and the northerly winds in the Southern Hemisphere.

Koh Samui lies right in the northern limit of the Doldrum Belt, so for half the year it is clear, and half the year it's inside the belt. North of Samui you are clear of the Belt at all times of the year, but subject to the monsoon winds that blow for half the year from the southwest and the other half from the northeast.

In the northeast monsoon, you get drier winds blowing off the continent of Asia with crystal clear days and flat seas in the lee of the land mass. In the southwest monsoon, you get a bit more swell and a southwest wind that has picked up moisture from the Indian Ocean. This time sees more showers and

squalls but plenty of good sailing wind.

Koh Kood at 105sqkm is the second largest island in Trat Province, has ample anchorages is accessible only by water. Ao Yai Village (where the Flotilla stopped on the third night) is the last Thai fishing village before you hit Cambodian waters, and is inhabited by many Cambodian fishermen.

Koh Mak is the third largest island in Trat Province and covers 13sqkm. It is surrounded by small islands (Koh Kham lies due west off the northern tip and is joined to Koh Mak by a sandbar). It has been inhabited for over 100 years, and coconut farming is the island's primary occupation.

Trat is only 50 minutes by air from Suvarnabhumi. From there it's a short van ride to the Laem Ngop pier, where you can take a ferry across to Koh Chang, the largest in a group of 40 islands stretching over 30 miles to the crystal clear waters to Koh Kood. Koh Chang is the best preserved holiday destination in Thailand as 70% of it is still virgin rainforest, but that may not last long.

### Gulf Charters

Gulf Charters manages its fleet of 10 catamaran and keelboat sailing yachts ranging from 32-52ft directly, but not through an add-on agent program. It offers yacht charter options ranging from bareboat through to complete sailing holidays.

In 2006, it established the first bareboat charter base on Koh Chang at Ao Salak Phet (116 miles from Ocean Marina) on the southern end of Koh Chang.

Besides teaching people how to sail, Gulf Charters trains staff for megayachts and is doing so through the International



Yachtmaster Training Program? (IYT). The company is Asia's only certified IYT facility, offering courses from beginner through to Yachtmaster. These courses can be combined with yacht charter options to deliver complete learning sailing holidays, giving you accreditation that is recognized in over 24 countries and by major yacht charter companies and sailing groups such as Sunsail? and Moorings?

Gulf Charters' sailing school doesn't generate huge amounts of money, but it produces people who charter boats, and then buy them and those who even go into business with Gulf like current CEO Ron Patston, a graduate of the school.

Gulf Charters was started by Phil, George Romanyk, and Robbie Gilchrist back in 2001, because they couldn't believe how difficult it was to rent a yacht in the Pattaya area. Back then Ocean Marina was only running at about 40 percent capacity and only had a handful of proper sailing boats. Gulf Charters started out by bringing up Seraph from Ao Chalong in Phuket and running day cruises because that's what the tour agencies in Pattaya wanted. The skipper of Seraph back then, Tim McMahon, now runs Gulf Charters' sailing school.

Then with the dropping of the high import duty in 2003, Gulf Charters was able to pick up several ex-charter yachts and from there went on to build their bareboat charter fleet.

Phil, who learned to speak Thai by working as an installation engineer on the shop floor of a cement mill, said the company eventually decided to set up a second location in Koh Chang because "it's a beautiful



location. People can sail for a couple hours and then go have dinner ashore in a nice restaurant at a fancy resort. The anchorages are also protected, there are steady winds, fairly predictable seasons and we are above the doldrums."

Phil sees the opening of Vietnam and Cambodia as a significant event in the yachting world and says it won't be long before the boating lane down from China to Ocean Marina becomes one of the most popular in the region. Yachting in China is booming and those yachtsmen need somewhere to go. And Gulf Charters is already offering tours into Cambodia.

Phil, who likes to refer to Pattaya as Bangkok Beach, says Pattaya has a great reputation as a water-sports centre. Some of the country's best windsurfers and kiteboarders are based there and Ocean Marina has a yacht racing series that no other marina in Thailand can match. He sees the future for sailing along the whole Eastern Seaboard as very bright indeed. ☺

[www.gulfchartersthailand.com](http://www.gulfchartersthailand.com)



<b>1<sup>st</sup> Day</b>
Koh Chang Gulf Charters Base.
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Day</b>
Koh Mak, northwestern Bay.
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Day</b>
Koh Kood, Ao Yai fishing village.
<b>4<sup>th</sup> Day</b>
Koh Kood, Captain Hooks Resort.
<b>5<sup>th</sup> Day</b>
Return to Koh Chang, Gulf Charters Base.

