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Mergui Islands show growing potential for marine tourism

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The development of marine tourism, namely diving, charter and private yacht cruises in Myanmar's southern Mergui archipelago has huge potential, despite bureaucratic challenges.

The Asia Pacific Superyacht Conference and boat show was held in Singapore between April 8 and 11, where industry specialists discussed future trends of developing marine tourism and private yachting in Myanmar.

“Tourism development is the fastest growing industry in Myanmar. If done correctly there is huge potential for turning the islands into a popular yachting destination,” said John Farrell, a consultant from Myanmar Yacht Services.

The Mergui Archipelago encompasses over 10,000 square kilometres of virgin tropical islands in southern Myanmar with relatively little development and huge potential as a tourist destination.

Presently only 50 private yachts and dive boats visit southern Myanmar each year, most arrive from Phuket in Thailand, which boasts four marinas and a booming yachting industry.

There are only two resorts and no marinas in the Mergui islands and the current process for boats entering Myanmar is cumbersome and expensive, discouraging smaller yachts from visiting for extended periods.

More hotels and resorts are being built on the islands, and this will inevitably lead to an increase in tourism, including more diving and charter boats. But yacht companies are waiting to see how local and central authorities update their entry procedures.

“Yachts have been entering the Mergui Archipelago since the mid 90's but costs and paperwork are still from that era,” said John Farrell, a consultant and yachtsman with extensive experience in Southeast Asia.

“In Phuket it takes 30 minutes with no pre-arrival documents to clear a boat and crew. In Kawthaung, processing can take more than half a day and paperwork must be submitted weeks before,” he added.

This was the 6th Asia Pacific Superyacht conference and showed growing interest among regional industry specialists in the untapped potential of Myanmar as a marine destination.