



The Andamans Expedition, April-May 2026

Manipal SCUBA School, Centre for Wilderness Medicine

Kasturba Medical College, Manipal

Author-Dr.Freston Marc Sirur, MD,FAWM: 06.05.2026

Introduction

The Andamans is an archipelago of 500 odd islands, a part of India which is administered and governed by India. Well known for its vast wilderness, beauty, rainforests, indigenous tribes and vast coral reefs. Famous for its timber, forestry and botanical biodiversity, it was colonized by people from West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand, Burma and other Indian Mainland communities. Many of whom were brought over by the British when they colonized the islands. The islands are mainly divided into north, middle and south Andamans with Havelock, Narcondum, Great Nicobar and Little Andamans being the main islands. Various tribes inhabit the islands like the Jarawah, Great Nicobarese, Shompen, Sentinelese and Onge. The Caren are a tribe who settled in a hidden village called Webi in Mayabunder-Middle Andamans. They were brought to the islands by the British from Myanmar in the early 1900s. the islands boast of two volcanic islands namely Barren island and Narcondum, of which Barren Island is an active volcano about 100 Km off the island of Havelock now also known as Swaraj Deep.

Due to the distance and logistic challenges of resource procurement, it remains largely underdeveloped which significant challenges in access to health care. Yet the islands are now famous for their world class SCUBA diving experiences, training and opportunities for diving instructors and the like. This opens up the subject of diving and watersports emergencies.

The vast wilderness, mangroves, islands and waterways with isolated tribes and communities make it difficult to provide healthcare services particularly for time critical emergencies like snakebite, crocodile attacks, severe infections, drowning, decompression sickness, cardiac and neurological emergencies to name a few. The islands also have a populations of elephants which were brought to manage logging and other forestry activities due to the inaccessibility of the forests. However, very few to no reports of elephant attacks exist in comparison to the significant frequency of salt water crocodile attacks.



The expedition

The Twelve-day expedition started from the capital city of Port Blair on the 22nd of April 2026 with a plan to explore parts of south Andmans near Wandoor while being based out of Andamans and Nicobar Environment Team (ANET). Outreach with ATOAI and DIVEIndia, Meeting with key officers of the health department of the Andmans(snakebite Nodal officer and Port health officer). Further travel through Jirkatang, Baratang, Kadamthala and Mayabhunder in Middle Andamans were planned after returning to Port Blair for transit to Havelock for SCUBA diving and Forest surveys.

Outreach and exploration at ANET

ANET was set up and run by the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust and is now run by Dakshin Foundation. It is a traditionally built research station that engages in community engagement, environmental, coastal and marine research with a focus of education, outreach and long-term sustainability of the island life in balance with nature. On the 23rd of April 2026, coordinator and lead of the centre for Wilderness Medicine Dr. Freston Marc Sirur conducted a Wilderness first responder workshop for about forty members, youth leaders and researchers at ANET. Focusing on One Health perspectives, Wilderness and remote first response, pre-hospital transfer, Out of hospital cardiac arrest including CPR, communication and calling for help. The workshop was ideated several months prior when one of the researchers was bitten by a snake while walking inside the premises of ANET. The team at ANET had contacted Dr. Freston Marc Sirur for telemedical support through the course of researchers' care and treatment. The workshop also included a session on snakes of the Andamans, coexistence, snake bite prevention and first response. A number of participants shared their personal experiences with snakebite incidents.





Outreach with ATOAI-Andamans in Port Blair

On the 23rd of April 2026, another workshop was conducted in the second half of the day at Lemon tree hotel conference room for over a hundred forty participants from various tour operators, boat men, sport fishing operators, Lifeguards, ferry personnel and numerous other hospitality staff. The workshop focused on drowning rescue, oxygen administration on boats/ ferries, hypothermia management, trauma first response, safe transfer, teamwork and CPR. The session was led by Dr. Freston Marc Sirur. Following the workshop a session was conducted on the snakes of Andamans and snakebite first response by Mr. Aaron Fernandes and Dr. Freston Marc Sirur. The workshop with supported not only by the Adventure Tour Operators Association of India (ATOAI) but also by DIVEIndia and the Andaman and Nicobar tourism department. The workshop was ideated after an incident in December 2025 which involved a honeymooning couple, where the husband experienced a drowning incident while attempting SCUBA Diving for the first time. Dr. Freston who was present on the island (Havelock) at the time was called in to help with Management, resuscitation and safe transfer via ferry from Havelock to Port Blair (G.B Pant Hospital). The patient was admitted to the ICU and discharged healthy after four days of Admission.





Meeting with Dr.Subrata Saha-Nodal officer for snakebite in the Andamans

On the 24th of April, Dr. Freston along with Mr. Aaron Fernandes (Chameleon Wildlife Organization) and Mrs. Madhuri Mondal (ANET-Dakshin Foundation) met Dr. Subrata Saha for an in-depth discussion about snakebite in the Andamans. The discussion delved into numerous topics such as pre-hospital response systems, Primary health centre capability, training gaps such as airway interventions and anti-venom administration, transfer criteria from PHC to tertiary care at Port Blair. Some of the best practices included presence of a large network of PHCs, ASV availability at all PHCs, Online training of PHC doctors, availability of Heli or fixed wing medevac at the discretion of the health department and availability of ambulances in most places. Some of the gaps identified were that none of the venomous snakes in Andamans are the same as those found in mainland India and therefore the mainland Anti-venom being used across the Andamans has an unknown efficacy against the envenoming by snakes such as the Andamans Krait, Andaman cobra, King cobra, Andamans pitviper and Nicobar pitviper. The lack of data management over the years, human resource crunches, need for advanced research, pre-hospital emergency services, advanced resuscitation skills amongst PHC doctors and limited tele communications between islands were identified as gaps and challenges in health care access for snake envenoming and other Wilderness emergencies.





Meeting with Dr. Avijit Roy- Port Health Director

On the 24th of April 2026, the team met Dr. Avijit Roy, MD, Port health Officer and expert in diving emergency treatment at Port Blair. Over 15 years Dr. Avijit Roy was involved in the emergency care and Hyperbaric therapy via diving chambers at INHS Dhanvantri for deep sea and diving related emergencies.

During the meeting discussions on the frequency, risk factors for communities involved in deep sea fishing, poaching and SCUBA related decompression took place. There were discussions on collaboration and joint research moving forward. Dr. Avijit Also shared research output related to his work including nitrogen narcosis and decompression sickness from cases treated at Port Blair- drawing focus on the Hukkah divers who dive upto 100m in search of lobsters and other marine resources. Interestingly, he was a professor and head of community medicine at AJIMS, Mangalore and at Yenepoya Medical college, Mangalore many almost 20 years prior.





First response and outreach at Kadamthala, Middle Andaman.

Moving further north to middle Andaman on the 25th of April, beyond the Jarawah reserves via the Andaman trunk road and numerous ferries, the team reached Kadamthala known for its recently inaugurated bridge across the river. Kadamthala is also known for crocodile attacks and human snake interactions particularly with the King Cobra and the Andamans Cobra. The workshop at the panchayath community hall was conducted for the Kadamthala Police officers as they are often the first responders along with the forest department. The Local PHC also participated and helped with the smooth conduct of the workshop.

Focus was given to first response in various wilderness emergencies including trauma due to animal attacks, snake bite, drowning, fire emergencies, road traffic injuries, Out-of-hospital Cardiac arrest and altered consciousness. The workshop was facilitated by the Kadamthala SHO Shain Nair. The officers also spoke about their personal experiences including a mention of how the widened roads coupled with driving while intoxicated has resulted in an increase in road traffic related death in the younger age group. About thirty to forty participants were in attendance.





Visit to Webi (Hidden village), Mayabhunder and the Caren community

The team proceeded to the Village of Webi on the 26th of April to visit the Caren community, to facilitate outreach with the first doctor in their community- an Anesthetist named Dr.Arnold. The Caren community are settlers brought by the British in the early 1900s. they are known for their food, bamboo cottage styled living, diving and boating skills as well as their exceptional strength. The team conducted a wilderness first response, CPR, teamwork in emergencies and safe transfer training program for about seventy community members.

In addition, Dr.Freston and Mr. Aaron investigated an incident involving a Laborer and a King cobra, where the laborer had captured and tortured the adult snake tying it with ropes and finally cutting it a third away from it's head, eventually traversing villages and bars while under the influence of alcohol with the snake around his neck. At some point the seemingly dead snake bit the laborer. He eventually died but the details leading to his death were lost.

The following day the team, including an experienced caren guide named Herrow from the Webi village visited the Karmatang forest reserve and beach to explore the jungle while searching for nocturnal fauna focusing on snakes, lizards and insects. The forest trail abounds large semi-ever green trees like Padauk and Mahua, eventually leading to the Karmatang turtle nesting beach which is also known for the presence of saltwater crocodiles.

On the return leg of the forest trail the team found a specimen of the Andamans Krait- one of the most venomous snakes of the islands with no specific antivenom available. A photographic record of the snake was taken.

On the 28th of April the team returned to Port Blair and transferred to Havelock by Ferry on the 29th of April 2026.







Meeta Nala Trek at Havelock

As a part of the expedition plan, the team proceeded in finding medically significant snakes to understand the risk of snakebite in the Andamans based on rapid surveys in commonly frequented wilderness areas like Meeta Nala, which is a seasonal freshwater forest stream that drains in the to bay at Havelock. With a rocky bed covered in dried leaves of large forest trees like Padauk and Gurjan.

On the trail, the team spotted the Andamans Pit viper, Andamans Krait, Andamans Wolf Snake, Andamans Keelback and Dog faced Water snake. The latter three being non-venomous. However, the frequency of spotting the Andamans Krait and Pit viper draw significant concern in the likelihood of bites taking place. Without a specific anti-venom, one begs to think what if the human snake interactions increase and what then of the need for a specific anti-venom.

Importantly, tourism in the Andamans is strongly interlinked with its unique and endemic biodiversity. The need for upskilling and capacity building of the health system in Havelock is imminent.

The team also spotted endemic fish, frogs and centipedes, highlighting the immense biodiversity and conservation needs of natural spaces in the Andamans.





Environment impact views

Unfortunately, one of the biggest challenges on the islands is freshwater resources. Pollution by tourists and settlers and that which is brought over by ocean currents has resulted in plastic and chemical pollution of the coastal areas and waterways in the islands. A force multiplier on the matter of pollution is the influx and use of single use plastics widely across the islands. Solid waste management on the islands is an incredibly expensive and difficult matter to solve. Besides this, the island's main source of power supply is diesel electric generators. Some solar panel farms exist, however the limited land area available prove to be challenges. A sustainable future with steady supply of energy will be dependent on multiple sources like wind, tidal and solar. A future, fully dependent on fossil fuels is impossible and the transition must take place as soon as possible. Another important aspect is the volume of tourists that the facilities and resources can support without becoming unsustainable in any one of the Sustainable Development Goals.





SCUBA diving at Havelock and the Barren island expedition

On the 30th of April Dr. Freston facilitated by DIVEIndia proceeded to dive at two well known dive sites names Johnny's gorge and Jacksons Bar, diving upto depths of 29 meters where upto four atmospheres of pressure are exerted on the human body. The dives were approximately 40 minutes long. The dive teams observed extensive corals, rock formations and large schools of fish like Barracuda, Trevally and Snappers. The Team also practiced for the diving at Barren Island which is about 100 KM East of Havelock. Due to the strong cold currents experienced at the volcano reefs the team practiced using coral hooks to hold positions in case currents that could pull away a diver into the depths were experienced.

Dive at Jackson's bar and Johnny's gorge





The Barren Island Expedition-1st May 2026

On the morning of the May 1st 2026, four speed boats sped out towards barren island starting at 3 am in the morning. Three boats- White tip, Goblin and Hammer Head carried a mix of Diving expeditioners, enough gear for three deep dives at different sites around the volcano and seasoned dive instructors to guide the group and respond to any emergency at depth or at the surface. A fourth boat was commissioned as the rescue boat.

All four boats approached Barren Island to reach by 7 AM. With the sun rising just above the smoking volcano the expedition team looked in awe of the beauty and power of it. An interface where air, fire, earth and water meet to create an extremely special place- one with immense biodiversity, thriving coral reefs and underwater cliffs. Yet, this thriving island has the power within itself to destroy everything around it while being the creator of it. The expedition was pre-poned by a day due to the expected changing weather conditions, rough seas and thunderstorms.

The team began diving by 7:30AM targeting three dives at different sites with surface intervals between the dives. The three dive sites were Black Magic, Purple Haze and Just Missed it. Each dive started with a quick descent to 30M where pressures exerted on the body are around four atmospheres.

Dive at Black Magic, Purple Haze, Just Missed it and coral garden









Between the dives the team snorkeled at two sites near the lava outflow in the sea and at pre-historic rock cut cliffs and underwater caves.

By early evening the team started the journey back to the island of Havelock.

The final two days were spent recovering from the deep dives as per pre-flight norms to avoid decompression sickness induced by sudden drop in altitude and reflecting on the learnings the expedition, future prospects, opportunities and collaborations that will bring mutual benefit to the islands, academia and research output.