

Euphorbia antiquorum and James Bond



1. Limestone islands in Phang Nga Bay

While sightseeing in the picturesque islands of Thailand's peninsular southwest (Fig. 1), I was surprised to see succulents. The limestone islands of Phang Nga Bay, in Phang Nga province, were covered in *Euphorbia antiquorum* L. (Figs. 2-5), the type of the genus. *E. antiquorum* resembles and is closely related to *E. lactea* Haw., which is ubiquitous in cultivation. By contrast, I don't recall ever seeing *E. antiquorum* in cultivation. *E. antiquorum* plants in Phang Nga Bay were usually perched precipitously upon crevices in the cliffs, sometimes rooted only a few meters above sea level (Fig. 3), but were quite vigorous and always growing upright. Several specimens were over 5 meters tall (Fig. 5). With an adequate foothold in the limestone, plants had a candelabra branching habit that is so typical of succulent euphorbias. Many of the islands in Phang Nga Bay appeared to contain this species of *Euphorbia*. *E. antiquorum* is native to Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, and

Indonesia, including on islands in the Andaman Sea (Binoj Kumar & Balakrishnan 1991; Esser 2005).

Esser (2005) lists 28 species of *Euphorbia* in Thailand, but he only lists one-quarter of these as being "succulent, spiny, cactus-like". Of these seven succulent taxa, only *E. antiquorum* appears to include peninsular Thailand as part of its native range. *E. milii* Des Moul. and *E. trigona* Roxb. are of African origin, *E. lactea* and *E. neriifolia* L. are probably of Indian origin, and, in Thailand, all four species are only known from cultivation. The remaining two succulent taxa listed by Esser (2005) from Thailand are *E. lacei* Craib, which is probably a synonym of *E. trigona* or *E. barnhartii* Croizat, and *E. sp.*, which may be synonymous with *E. antiquorum*. Thus seeing a cactus-like *Euphorbia* in the islands of peninsular Thailand probably should have come as a surprise.

I took the photo of Koh Tapu (Fig. 6) – which is colloquially known as James Bond Island due to filming of the movie "The man with the golden gun" there – while standing next to *Euphorbia antiquorum*. Most of the other tourists probably thought I was crazy for



2. *Euphorbia antiquorum*, candelabrum branching. 3. *Euphorbia antiquorum* with mangroves in background. 4. *Euphorbia antiquorum* and *Sarcostemma cf. acidum* growing in cracks in vertical cliffs on Koh Tapu.



5. Same plant as in Fig. 4, but note tall and largely unbranched *E. antiquorum* clinging to cliff.





6. Koh Tapu, aka James Bond Island.

taking more photos of plants than of scenery. This locale also contained two other semi-succulents, *Hoya* sp., possibly *H. lacunosa* Blume (which was in flower, but my photos were out of focus) growing epiphytically on some of the broad leafed angiosperm trees and what appears to be another asclepiad, maybe *Sarcostemma acidum* Voigt growing from rock crevices (Figs. 4 and 5).

Phang Nga Bay is about half way between the southernmost point in Burma and the northernmost point in Malaysia. Phang Nga Bay is on the western side, Andaman Sea side, of peninsular Thailand, at roughly 8°N.

Koh Tapu is a huge tourist attraction, so is easy to get to. Fly into Phuket's airport, which mostly lands Boeing 747 and 777 aircraft; drive northeast for an hour to a boat operator; and then take a 'long tail boat' for roughly 20 minutes. However, it worth taking a slower-speed boat ride to see the mangrove forests, mostly red and black mangroves, which also contain lovely palm trees, especially huge stands of the mangrove palm, *Nypa fruticans* Wurmb. And don't forget to clean your camera lens often with all the salt spray on the Andaman Sea, which I had neglected to do.

References

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Acknowledgments

Thanks to Lily Visanuvimol and Nop Ariyaphanneekun for arranging my trip.