



# An angel spreads her wings

**Kelly May, director of Andaman Discoveries, earned a much more evocative title after joining the relief effort straight after the Asian tsunami on Boxing Day 2004. Here she recalls how she became known as the 'Angel of the Andaman'**

**'I HAD TO SMILE WHEN THE THAI PRESS** called me that. I was a self-confessed Bangkok party animal, working in publishing, and a well-known face on the social circuit. But as the gravity of the tsunami unfolded, I knew I could not sit back and do nothing. I jumped on a plane and headed south, knowing there must be some way I could contribute.

'Stepping out of the van, I joined a group of Thai soldiers unloading dry ice onto stretchers. As I grabbed a corner of a stretcher, we passed through a barrier into Wat Yan Yaos temple, the main collection centre for bodies, which I can only describe as hell on Earth – and then some. The ground was covered with corpses, bloated, disfigured and unrecognisable. Dry ice was used to keep the corpses cool and created a fog throughout the temple grounds.

'I became an unofficial coordinator, assisting in all areas, doing anything that was necessary, even helping doctors collect DNA samples from the dead.

'After witnessing the destruction, it was hard to go back to my previous life in Bangkok and move on, pretending every

thing was back to normal. I knew that down South, whole lives had to be rebuilt.

'My work became meaningless, the parties boring, and Bangkok became a shallow and empty place. A change of job proved a distraction for a while, but eventually I decided to resign and become a volunteer. A close friend, Bodhi Garrett, had founded North Andaman Tsunami Relief, a grass-roots development agency working closely with villagers on economic recovery and he offered me a job. In August 2006 I took over the community-based tourism project which was in its early stages. Several villages had expressed an interest in exploring the potential of tourism, and some had been involved in a three-day workshop. It was from this that Andaman Discoveries emerged, as a long-term vehicle for sustainable development projects that grew out of tsunami relief.

'I would love to stay in Thailand and carry on assisting the villagers. But I am also concerned that when funding runs out, I will be left with nothing but memories. I have no security, financial or otherwise and I just cannot go on like this indefinitely.'

*"I was a self-confessed Bangkok party animal!"*