

Community-based tourism is the way



Kelly May has dedicated herself to helping residents of tsunami hit Khura Buri town in Phangnga through community tours.

Kelly May is following her greatest desire—to travel and experience different cultures. The Greenwich University graduate trained as a TEFL English teacher to work her way around the world.

Coming to work in Thailand opened up new doors for May. After a string of interesting career options, last year she settled for Andaman Discoveries—a non-profit tour service—as their director.

May, 29, gave up everything in Bangkok: a nice home, busy social life, to live in Khura Buri, a small town in Phangnga. She started working on community-based tourism projects in tsunami-hit communities and hasn't looked back since.

Tell us more about your work and what have been the biggest challenges.

I'm helping communities in tsunami-hit villages to develop and promote sustainable tourism. I may be the director but I do everything from answering enquiries, writing promotional materials, assisting as guide and translator for study groups and coordinating with volunteers and villagers to ensure everybody is happy.

Andaman Discoveries was established by the North Andaman Tsunami Relief

These volunteers are welcome to help in any way they can.

We all have something to share. Prices are set by villagers and 20 percent of the income from sales goes to a community fund that is used to finance projects that are collectively beneficial to the entire community, not just parties directly involved.

How have your travelling experiences influenced your work?

Before quitting my job as publisher of *OK!* celebrity magazine, I took my mom up north. We did one of those hill tribe tours. It was horrible. I felt like being taken around a human zoo to gawk at villagers. It wasn't certain if the villagers had been consulted whether they wanted tourists in their village and if they received any financial rewards for what ever they were doing or were asked to do. I didn't enjoy the experience and I'm sure the villagers didn't either.

The same can be said for Surin National Park and the plight of Moken sea gypsies whose traditional method of fishing is now banned and they have been forced to make a living making handicrafts that they sell to visiting tourists. Their plight inspired me to support such communities by giving them a chance to decide their own fu-

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Andaman Discoveries was established by the North Andaman Tsunami Relief (NATR) in response to villagers' request for community-based tourism, which if not handled properly can be a potentially destructive force, as we can see by the rapid over development of the touristy Phuket and Samui.

How about the economic benefits?

Yes, but for whom? The local people who serve and do the cleaning for tourists? I think not. These tourist destinations have sacrificed the local way of life and beautiful natural resources for high rises, resorts and similar developments for personal gains. Tacky cultural shows and watered down Thai cuisine are all that's offered to tourists wanting to explore the Land of Smiles.

So what do the communities offer?

The communities of North Andaman, with our assistance, offer something completely different, an authentic exchange between guests and villagers — what we would call meaningful tourism. It is aimed at people who care about places they travel to, about the social and environmental consequences of their trip.

We offer a type of tourism that does not demand the villagers to change their way of life or start building resorts and hotels.

It's a tourism that embraces culture, celebrates difference and encourages exchanges on a mutual level.

Tell us about your role in the community homestay project.

After the tsunami, many villages hit by the tragedy began participating in community-based tourism workshops and expressed interest in developing new activities and offering homestay to visiting tourists.

For the communities of the North Andaman, the rise in trawler fleet meant depleting fish stocks resulting in many subsistence level fishermen not being able to support their families by fishing alone. Fierce competition and surplus supply drove prices of commodities — like fish, cashew nut, fruits and rubber — down dramatically.

We serve as the link between the socially conscious traveller and communities that want to share their way of life with outsiders. We organise customised tours and help with volunteers keen to work in and visit those regions.

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What inspires your work?

The people. I came to volunteer with Khunying Pornthip straight after the tsunami at Wat Yan Yaos temple that was stacked with rows upon rows of rotting corpses of victims who perished in the tragedy.

I found myself doing different jobs which brought me the sobriquet 'the Angel of the Andamans.' One of my jobs was to help distraught relatives locate their loved ones or rather their bodies. Of course, it was an impossible task since the bodies were already beyond recognition.

I felt I had failed these people. But I promised that I would return and help tsunami-hit villagers rebuild their lives. I was fortunate enough to find myself working with Bodhi Garrett, the founder of NATR, an inspirational man with his own remarkable story.

Andaman Discoveries is my way of helping with the economic reconstruction of the region and to repay the Thai people for letting me stay in this beautiful country, which I now call home.

Tell us about your most memorable travel experiences.

Snorkelling in Moo Ko Surin National Park: if there is heaven on earth, then this is it. Snorkelling is such a perfect way to escape and relax. The silence, the colours and the beauty are truly amazing.

People who insist on touching and standing on the coral should be beaten with a stick.

The waterfall Seven Sacred Pools in a Khura Buri forest is probably the best kept secret in Thailand. Most just see the town as a transit point to Moo Ko Surin. There are loads of things to do and see in Khura Buri but it seems nobody knows that they exist.

The waterfall is a good two-hour hike deep into the jungle. I remember emerging from the jungle into this clearing and looking up at the waterfall. I thought I had died and arrived in heaven. You can climb right to the top and there are seven separate pools, one on each level, and I thought places like this could only exist in heaven.

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