



Road to recovery

In search of an authentic cultural experience in Thailand, Jamie Johnston immerses himself in a village community still suffering the effects of the 2004 tsunami.

Research travel in Thailand on the internet and it can seem that full-moon parties on Koh Phi Phi are the main draw for visitors. That impression is enforced on arrival at Bangkok's celebrated Khao San Road and by a brief trip south on one of many package tours on offer. It isn't until we venture, independently, into the jungle of Khao Sok National Park, then to the small town of Kuraburi – a popular rest stop for those heading to the marine national park of Koh Surin – that we begin to find the space and cultural stimulation we desire.

We visit an eco-resort with a resident sea turtle conservation project on the stunning island of Koh Phra Thong and stroll along a pristine golden beach while a fiery sunset paints distant rain clouds. There's not another tourist in sight. But here we also witness the lingering effects of the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami. This is no Phuket or Khao Lak; there has been no large, corporate-funded rapid rebuilding here. Uprooted trees, half-standing buildings and debris are everywhere, although the resort has dusted itself off and done its best to reopen the doors that were not washed away. Nevertheless, the rain and unchecked view across the Andaman Sea bear a haunted quality.

We fall in love with the place to the extent that we decide to stay to teach English with North Andaman

Tsunami Relief (NATR), an organisation set up by Bodhi Garrett, marketing and conservation director of the Golden Buddha Beach resort. He was moved to action because Koh Phra Thong and its coastal villages were largely overlooked in the relief effort.

Through NATR we learn that the qualities that have attracted us to the area could be its undoing. With the cultural diversity of traditional Buddhist, Muslim and Moken communities living alongside one another, a largely undeveloped coastline, plenty of rare wildlife and some of the oldest jungle in the world, the Koh Phra Thong area is ripe for an ever-expanding tourism market. Ironically, the tsunami has facilitated intrusive commercial development, evidence of which can be seen in land disputes and the efforts of developers to prevent displaced villagers from returning to their homes.

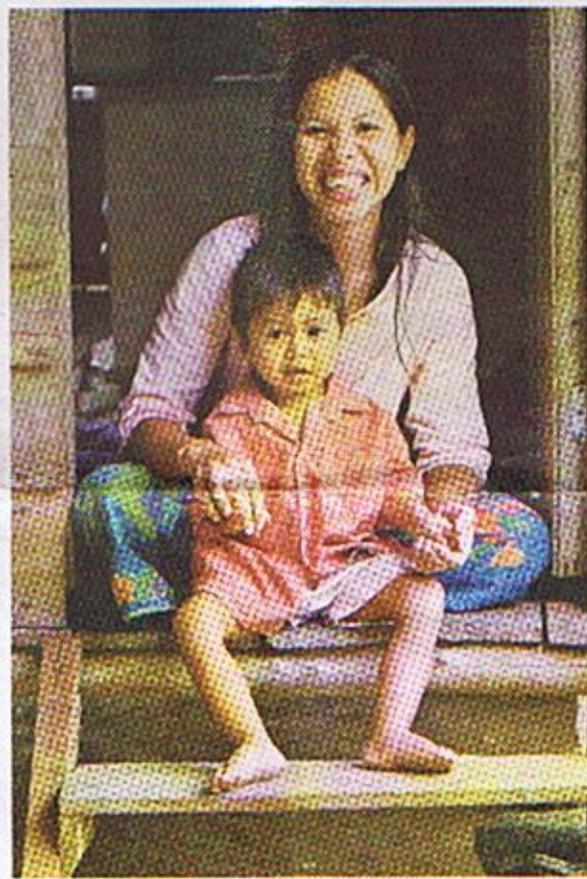
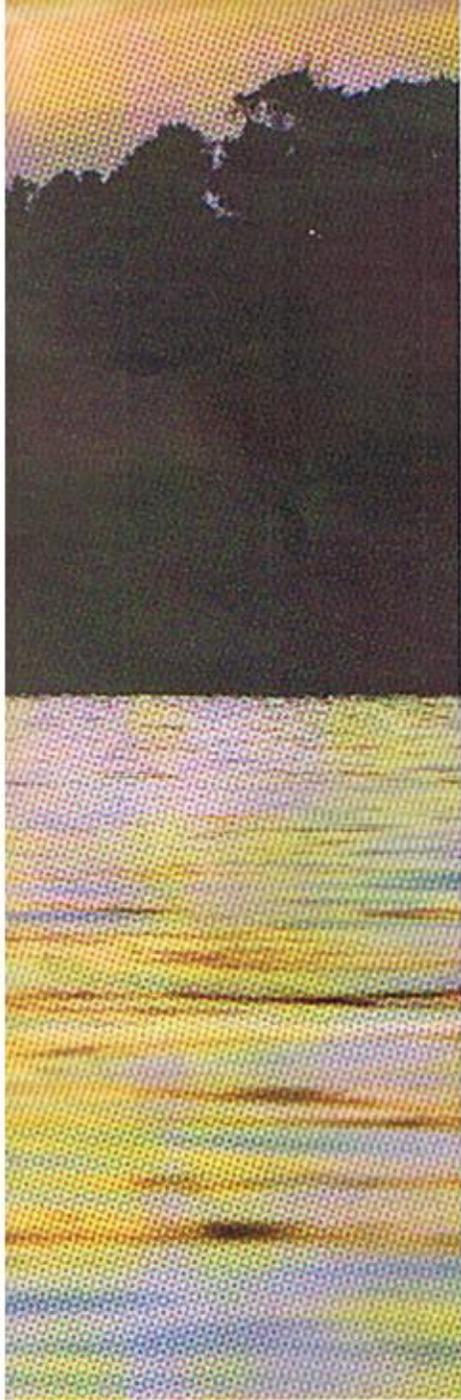
NATR also works with coastal communities in the Phang Nga and Ranong provinces, promoting a long-term strategy for development, which, when the organisation uses the term, means sustainable livelihoods, vocational training, education and income-generating projects.

NATR has been exploring the potential of community-based tourism (CBT) by setting up pilot home-stay tours in tsunami-hit villages. These amount to a cultural exchange

in which tourists stay with i
tourism ensures a commu
suffer; instead, with the
visitors, it is allowed to flo

So what can you expect
first CBT experience come
Triam (population 119). Af
original settlement, sweep
claiming the lives of two ch
the mainland. The new villa
of bright blue and white ho
water containers: a commo
On arrival, we are greeted
ing guide, Mustafa, and the
Mustafa gives a voice to the
our presence. He takes us t
woman who has opened he

Ma Da lives in a small, s
floors are tiled and pictures
adorn the walls. She explai
accepted the idea of CBT b
participating. She believes
providing for her family's lo
small way of eking out a livi
sources of revenue, such as



Clockwise from far left: sunset sea-kayaking in Surin marine park; enjoying a homestay meal with fisherman Superman shows off his catch; a villager and her son, who has opened her door to tourists.

political, religious and social sensitivity. If NATR is to make great strides, it may be that visitors who experience the warmth of authentic Thai hospitality soon feel they hold all the aces.

Getting there: Thai International Airways (www.thaiair.com) flies from Hong Kong to Phuket via Bangkok. North Andaman Travel Relief, based in Phang Nga, can arrange homestays as well as transport for the one-hour drive from Phuket to Kuraburi. Go with Booth Garrett on tel: 66 87 912 7165 or a realfund@inet.co.th. See the organisation's website: 69 233 191 126/contact.html. For accommodation in Phuket, contact the Sino House Hotel (1 Mantrae Road, Muang, 83 221 398, e-mail: info@sinohousephuket.com, www.sinohousephuket.com).

rubber tapping. This reinforces the importance of CBT fitting into community life, not the other way round. Mustafa is keen to point out that CBT gives the community the opportunity to manage tourism on their own terms, in their own time.

At the community centre, we meet a group of women who are part of a natural dye collective. We help tie the material with patterns and watch the material change in natural dyes: fire-ash and mulched tree bark for an earthy brown, rhododendron for a light purple and turmeric for sharp yellow. Our itinerary says "12-2pm relax", so we do. We relax on hammocks while the rest of us explore and meet other residents.

At noon, we take to the sea on a long-tail boat with a fisherman called Superman. Donning a mask and holding a spear, he dives into the water and splashes. Mustafa points out he is also diving to his traps. He has no floats or other location markers, thus his traps cannot be tampered with. While Superman is busy, Mustafa has us watching the sky. We are lucky to see a native hornbill passing overhead but don't see the famous helicopter rotor-sounding wings.

At a *krachang* – a floating fish farm – inland, we see thousands of nanaroves. Each mesh tank becomes a frenzy

of fins and teeth when the farmer throws in scraps of food. He fattens red snapper, grouper, tarpon, barramundi and a few lion fish for export.

At mealtimes, we are bombarded with sweet-milk curries, fresh seafood, eggs, organic vegetables and white rice. Because it is a Muslim village, there is no alcohol or pork and we have been briefed on suitable attire, especially for women. This ensures guests avoid the kind of cultural embarrassment that occurs daily with uninformed tourists in resorts such as Khao Lak and Railay.

For the finale, we go back to sea for a few hours of night fishing. Blessed with a three-quarter moon, twinkling stars and a sedate swell, we chat and drop our prawn-baited hooks, with some success. Before we are allowed to leave the next morning, we are given coffee, sticky rice, roti, Chinese doughnuts and a fond farewell.

We have stayed mere days, but NATR organises trips for "voluntourists" who stay for weeks, enjoying the same activities we have as well as taking part in community-based projects such as daycare, English teaching and construction. It also offers training programmes for local people focusing on adventure, community and eco- (ACE) tourism.

ACE Expert team members aim to ensure successful, community-driven tourism in their villages, engendering