

The Volontourists

Story by Jamie M. Johnston

It wasn't long before we fell in love with Ko Phra Thong, an island on the Andaman Sea, just off the coast of Kuraburi, and one of the hardest hit places by the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004. We decided to stay and teach English with the pioneering group, North Andaman Tsunami Relief (NATR).

At NATR (where we became full-time volunteers) we quickly learned that all the qualities that had attracted us to the area could also be its undoing. Culturally diverse, and with abundant wildlife and a raw, natural beauty, the area is ripe for tourism; yet this there is a danger of local communities being unprepared for this expansion, both in terms of job skills and cultural resilience.

NATR works with the coastal communities of the Kuraburi and Suksamran Districts (Phang-Nga and Ranong provinces, respectively) to facilitate a long-term strategy for development. The difference is that "development", when NATR uses the term, is about sustainable livelihoods, vocational training, education, and income-generating projects, most notably through Community-Based Tourism (CBT), which runs pilot homestay tours in the tsunami-affected villages. CBT ensures the community's unique heritage isn't degraded and, with the extra income from small numbers of visitors, is instead allowed to flourish.

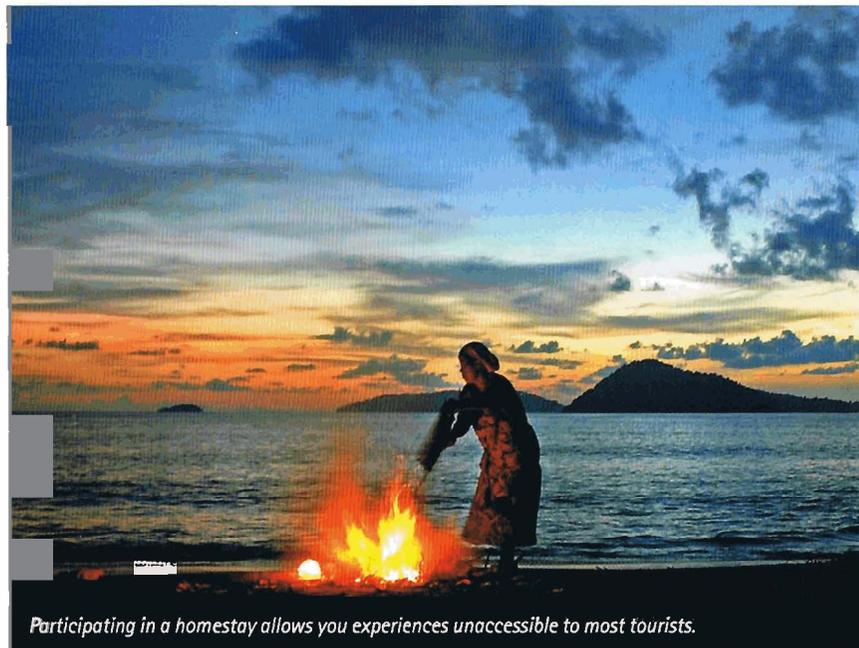
Central to Community-Based Tourism is cultural exchange; the visits are as intriguing for the locals as they are for the tourists.



So what can you expect on a CBT home-stay tour? Well, I had my first experience of one in the village Ban Pak Triam (population: 119), a village on the peninsula that was nearly washed away by the tsunami. Upon arrival, we were greeted by our Muslim English-speaking guide, Mustafa, who took us to our home-stay to meet the woman who had opened her doors for six strangers. Ma Da, like the majority of residents, lives in a small, two-storey house. The floors are tiled and pictures of the Thai King adorn the walls. She explained, through Mustafa, that CBT wasn't the sole answer to providing for her family's long-term future, but rather one more small way of eking out a living. All this reinforced the importance to us of how CBT 'fits' into the host community, not the other way around.

We were then led to the community centre where a group of women run a tie-dye collective. We participated in 'tying' the material with elastic bands to create patterns, and saw how the material is then boiled in natural dyes: rhododendron flowers for a light purple, and turmeric for a sharp yellow:

We visited a *krachang* – floating fish farm – further inland amongst the mangroves. Each mesh tank became a frenzy of fins, teeth and writhing bodies when the farmer threw in scraps of food. He fattens red snapper, grouper, tarpon, barramundi and even a few lion fish for local markets



and for export to places like Japan and Malaysia. Mealtimes, we were bombarded with sweet-milk curries, fresh seafood, eggs, organic vegetables and the obligatory white rice.

For the grand finale we went out to sea with a larger crew for a few hours of night fishing. Blessed with a three-quarter moon, twinkling stars and a fairly sedate swell we chatted, and dropped our prawn-baited hooks. The next morning, before we left, we were given coffee, sticky rice, roti and Chinese doughnuts.

Our experience had us in agreement that for a successful CBT stay, you need a specific type of tourist – the 'voluntourist': one who wants to respect and observe customs and experience culture first hand.

Trip Information:

Trips can be customised around various activities (catering to any group size), and include opportunities to harvest and roast cashew-nuts, visit a Gibbon sanctuary, help in mangrove restoration, explore how natural rubber is made and participate in other handicraft ventures like card- or soap-making. ●

Andaman Discoveries: Community-based Tourism in Southern Thailand



Come Look

Experience the real Thailand on a customised community-based tour in traditional villages just off the beaten track in the North Andaman in Southern Thailand, through Andaman Discoveries and North Andaman Tsunami Relief.

Come Rest

For multi-day tour, in-village homestays are recommended, in order to experience genuine hospitality and really engage with the villagers.

Come Play

Explore mangroves via longtail/row boat; hike through virgin jungle; visit tsunami-handicraft cooperatives; learn how to cook Thai food and speak Thai with villagers; volunteer on a community-based project; relax on a deserted palm-fringed beach.

Unforgettable Because

This undiscovered part of Thailand will captivate those who wish to experience traditional ways of life. By visiting you can play an active part in the economic reconstruction of this tsunami-ravaged area.

Come Pay

Average cost is USD 40 per person, per day and includes all activities, meals and refreshments, accommodation, transfers and English-speaking guide/Western staff.

Contact

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How to get There

Andaman Discoveries is centrally located in Kuraburi, Phang Nga province.