



# The Day of Change

KELLY MAY changed the day Christmas 2004 was ravaged by a tidal Asian earthquake that killed nearly 250,000 people. “I became a different person,” she admits. She threw in her five-figure, expense-account social whirl career to join a grass roots development agency working closely with shattered villagers seeking economic recovery from miserable tragedy.

Today Kelly’s paid a living allowance only as director of Andaman Discoveries, dedicated to bringing community-based tourism with meaningful travel experience to the Thailand she loves and wants to protect.

That is why she does 12-hour, seven-day weeks.

The project is like a new baby, often crying out for compassion, comfort and understanding while Kelly and fellow staff strive for the moment it can stand on its own two feet, having blossomed into confident self reliance.

The memory of how her world turned upside down remains vivid:

*I was working in publishing and, luckily, deadlines had kept me in Bangkok when the tsunami struck. As the gravity of the situation hit home, I knew I could not sit and do nothing.*

*I jumped on a plane, knowing there must be some way I could contribute, even if just translating for survivors.*

*Little did I know I would end up in Wat Yan Yaos temple, the main collection centre for bodies.*

*Stepping out of a van, I joined Thai soldiers unloading dry ice onto stretchers.*

*As I grabbed a corner of one, we passed through to an area where the ground was covered with corpses,*

*bloated, disfigured, unrecognisable. It was hell on Earth. The ice was used to keep the corpses cool and created a shroud of fog throughout the temple grounds. The place was chaotic and left me no time to think what I was doing or witnessing.*

*I became an unofficial coordinator, assisting everywhere necessary, even helping doctors collect DNA samples from the dead victims.*

*I did not want my family in the UK to worry so I did not tell them what was going on. The secret was out when Mum saw me on BBC news translating for the Metropolitan Police.*

*The work – there was so much - was addictive. But after 10 days, I had to return to Bangkok to my account executive job.*

*I had to smile when the Thai press named me “Angel of the Andaman” for my relief efforts. I’d been a self-confessed Bangkok party animal. Now I returned South each weekend to volunteer.*

*It wasn’t long before the strain of juggling the two led to an ultimatum from my boss to choose between them.*

*My financial position wouldn’t allow me to become a full time volunteer, although it was hard to settle into my previous life, pretending everything was normal. My work became meaningless, the parties boring, and Bangkok became a shallow and empty place.*

*I knew whole lives and villages had to be rebuilt.*

A year going full pelt launching OK! celebrity magazine in Thailand distracted her but didn’t kill that yearning to return to the frontline.

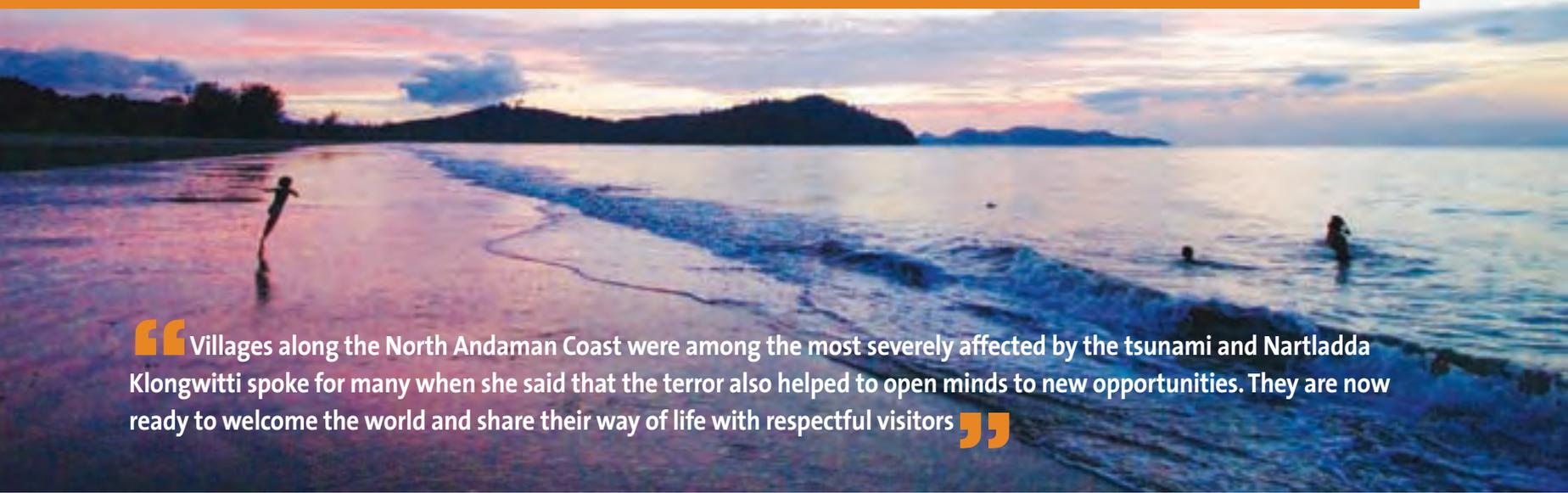
She quit and linked up with close friend Bodhi Garrett, who had founded North Andaman Tsunami Relief (NATR). Almost immediately she became its community-based tourism development manager.

Several villages had expressed interest in exploring the potential of tourism as a means of economic reconstruction. From this emerged Andaman Discoveries, a long-term vehicle for sustainable projects.

Its web involves training, empowerment, creating realistic long-term economic opportunities.

A seven-month vocational course, with 26 adults from six communities, covered tourism aspects such

**“The curriculum was written from scratch specially designed for rural novices who had never even touched a computer. It was great, we had a bunch of goat farmers learning how to use them to help with their accounts!”**



“ Villages along the North Andaman Coast were among the most severely affected by the tsunami and Nartladda Klongwitti spoke for many when she said that the terror also helped to open minds to new opportunities. They are now ready to welcome the world and share their way of life with respectful visitors ”

as guiding, hospitality, small business management, community development, English and computers. It brought tears of pride to see graduates return to their villages as competent leaders.

A team of volunteers feed back information on progress about:

- local guides – often fishermen diverted from over-straining natural resources
- home-stay families’ enterprises
- handicraft cooperatives
- the vital cultural interaction with foreign guests.

“There is a vast gap between a community that has a desire to participate in such tourism and the end product of a meaningful and enjoyable experience,” says Kelly. “Our mission is to dovetail the two ends of the spectrum.”

Andaman Discoveries also directly supports community education, village-led conservation, and cultural empowerment, including work prospects that mean women are not lured away to factories on low wages, separated from their families.

Further projects include scholarships, mangrove reforestation, and a community centre.

Andaman Discoveries has done painstaking and

bridging groundwork for the gentle merging of visitor wish lists and villagers’ normal customs and routines.

Regular in-village workshops and quiet prompting have demonstrated that communication is possible without language skills. However, a Thai Phrasebook and home-stay pack has helped eliminate shyness and embarrassment on both sides.

Kelly, aged 30, says : “Cultural issues and Code of Conduct are discussed with each guest and volunteer at the pre-trip briefing before they even enter a village.

“This outlook was inspired by my own ignorance as a clueless foreigner when I first arrived in Thailand in 2001, unwittingly breaking every cultural rule because I had not taken the time to learn.

“My first year in Bangkok was terrible. I would hate anybody else to sample it. Visitors and volunteers spend a lot to come here and I feel a commitment to ensure they leave Andaman Discoveries as devoted to Thailand as me. I also care about villagers whom I have been living and working with for the past two years. They are my family.”

Village visits are limited to avoid negative impact but, conversely, a steady flow is required to maintain locals’ interest and stop the drift away to commercial cities by those who speak English. Those tourists eager to go native can stimulate young villagers to rediscover their traditions and not be seduced into ‘Westernisation’.

When numbers are down, Andaman

Discoveries send in pilot guests (volunteers) to give villagers practise for the real thing.

Kelly adds: “It is OK to make mistakes in the dress rehearsal.

“The home-stay is a unique gift of authentic insight. These people are among the happiest conceivable without material possessions. It means tourists take away more than souvenirs; they get a sense of what it means to rebuild your life from scratch and an appreciation for the simple things in life. People have told me their time with us has been inspirational. This is what makes it all worthwhile for me.

“Eighty per cent of each trip payment goes straight back into the community for everybody to benefit. It does not cost a lot to make a big difference. Just \$US30 allowed vocational graduate Raliya Petchmanee to start a rare orchid nursery to replace those poached from the surrounding jungle.

“We have come so far in the past - every tiny improvement a huge step forward. However, the budget is a problem. There is no charge to the villages and we have had to impose a 20 per cent administration fee to keep operating because we don’t have the volume even to think about making a profit.”



[www.andamandiscoveries.com](http://www.andamandiscoveries.com)



Mixing in... Kelly and young visitors are made to feel at home alongside the locals



Pictures Craig Lovell