

WINNER

Andaman Discoveries,
Thailand

Why it's cool to be Thai

Community-based tourism is helping Thai villagers make a living without sacrificing their culture and way of life

WHAT THE JUDGES SAID...

'Andaman Discoveries recognises that the best custodians of cultural heritage are the people who make it. They have worked with communities to empower them and to create a sense of place, identifying what villagers see as important, and using this information to develop tourist activities and making productive relationships with the industry'

There's a phrase among young Thais which sums up a growing desire to ape Western ideals. 'Go inter' means, 'go international' and it stems from a misconception that anything Western is trendy and cool while anything traditional is backward, outdated and undesirable.

Just a few hours' drive from the Southern Thailand tourist hotspots of Phuket or Samui, one new operator, Andaman Discoveries, is doing its best to redress the balance. Here, on the North Andaman coastline, rural villagers are inviting visitors into their homes and lives to experience their cultures and eco-systems in an authentic and 'respectful' way.

By interacting with visitors who have a genuine interest in traditional Thai culture and the local way of life, villagers, especially the young, are realising that what they have is 'cool' too, and understanding that their development does not have to be at the cost of their cultural heritage.

It is community-based tourism that embraces culture, celebrates difference and encourages exchanges on a mutual level. It also helps conserve the environment of this region which is still feeling the effects of the 2004 tsunami. In Ban Talae Nok, one of the places where Andaman Discoveries operates in, half the village was destroyed during the tsunami and 47 out of 228 people died. Many lost their homes and means of income, and had no savings. After the basic needs of food and shelter were met, discussions led to the subject of livelihood development. Villagers agreed that community-based tourism would allow them to generate additional income and support the continuity of their traditions and lifestyle.

Andaman Discoveries was able to support the villagers' efforts. As the flagship project of North Andaman Tsunami Relief, an independent non-profit organisation that has implemented more than 120 projects in 12 tsunami-affected communities, it is helping them to gain real economic benefit from tourism.

Eighty per cent of the income from each trip goes straight back into the community and includes a donation to a community fund which is used to sponsor adult education, a community centre,

environmental education, and daily aerobics, in order that the whole village benefits from the tours into the village, not only those directly involved in the homestay or guiding.

Unlike the tacky cultural shows and watered down Thai cuisine found among the high-rises and exploitative resorts down the coast, the Andaman communities offer what Andaman Discoveries director Kelly May calls 'meaningful tourism'.

“Tourists do not just watch people going about their daily lives, they become part of it”

Andaman's visitors can go on eco-tours, cultural tours, take part in interactive handicraft workshops and join volunteer placements. They can explore pristine eco-systems: take a traditional long-tail boat through dense mangrove forests; hike through lush rainforests that are alive with the sounds of exotic wildlife; snorkel in clear, emerald-coloured waters teeming with vibrant marine life; or simply do nothing and soak up the sun on a deserted island. At the end of the day, they could find themselves playing football with the locals on the beach, helping the villagers to prepare dinner or soaking up a stunning sunset.

'By encouraging tourists to participate in simple hands-on activities, like weaving palm leaves into roof material, roasting and shelling cashew nuts and weaving fishing nets, both tourist and villager can interact in a relaxed environment. Tourists do not just watch people going about their daily lives, they become part of it,' says Kelly. 'Guests love the fact that they do not see another Westerner during their time with us. It's a special feeling to be the only Westerner in a village.'

Community-based tourism requires more than a brief workshop or simply picking out

which houses would serve as homestays. Andaman Discoveries does a lot of groundwork even before real tourists are sent into a village. In the early days, it ran a seven-month vocational training scheme with 26 adults from six communities, covering aspects of tourism, guiding, hospitality, small-business management, community development, English and computers. These graduates have returned to their villages to become the leaders of community-led development and tourism. One project that assisted with this rediscovery and renewed appreciation was the writing, publishing and distribution of a book *Sense of Place, Sense of Pride*, written by 30 villagers from six communities about their villages and traditional way of life.

Andaman Discoveries also provides a Thai phrasebook and homestay pack to visitors and encourages them to learn some of the Thai language with villagers during their stay.

Cultural issues are discussed with each guest and volunteer at the pre-trip briefing before they even go 'in village'.

Kelly explains: 'This information 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 about the country that I was coming to live and work in. In fact, my first year in Bangkok was terrible. The volunteer company provided no information or support and I arrived in a foreign country, completely alone, in a school that had no previous experience of dealing with a young foreigner in a new country. Andaman Discoveries' personalised service and extensive support materials are provided because I would hate any one to go through what I did when I arrived in Thailand.'

Visitors to Andaman Discoveries take more than souvenirs back home; they take a sense of what it means to rebuild your life from scratch and an appreciation of the simple things in life. 'People have told me their time with us has been life-changing and inspirational,' adds Kelly. 'That makes it worth it for me.'

www.andamandiscoveries.com

