

Holidays with a difference

Eco-tourism with a difference, **Emily Gilbert** takes us through her experience and tells us what it involved.

Before coming here I was always very skeptical of eco-tourism and its benefits for the communities involved and surrounding environment. However, when I was offered to work with Andaman Discoveries in the South of Thailand, I went into it with an open mind.

Andaman Discoveries does eco-tourism with a difference. Having started as North Andaman Tsunami Relief Fund (NATR) on the 26th December 2004, emergency relief for villages on the Andaman Coast was the main aim of the rapidly formed organization. Indeed the small, motivated team of individuals initially gave food, shelter and met the basic needs of thousands of people who had lost everything. However, unlike many other non-profit, non-governmental organisations, this group of people did not leave as soon as the basic needs were covered. Instead, having lost everything himself including his

home, job and many friends in the boxing day Tsunami, Bodhi Garrett, founder of NATR, worked with the villagers to ensure that they had sustainable livelihoods and a secure future. With many of them having lost their fishing boats and villages, these people had to adapt their ways of life to regenerate income and support their families.

The participatory approach that Bodhi took allowed villagers to have their own say, another great quality that many organizations do not incorporate. It was from doing this that eco-tourism was born. Living on the beautiful and very popular Andaman Coast, boasting miles of pure white sands, crystal blue waters and tiny islands dotting the horizon, these villagers are very aware of the adverse effects of mass tourism around them. Tourists who come to relax, or for a good time of parties and drinking, often forget the importance of the sur-

rounding cultures and environment, something that these traditional villages value and do not want to sacrifice. The idea therefore of the villages' and Andaman Discoveries' work is to allow a few tourists at a time to come into their unique lives in order to experience their ways of living, whilst participating in interesting activities and having the opportunity to volunteer if they wish.

Activities and volunteer opportunities include jungle hikes and snorkeling off deserted islands, mangrove restoration, orchid conservation, soap making and batik workshops, long-boat and big-net fishing, weaving nipa-palm leaves to sell for roofs, teaching in the schools, eco-tours, rubber-tapping, cooking Thai food, fruit and cashew nut harvesting- the list is endless.

Andaman Discoveries also offers a homestay programme which is very popular with many people who go into the villages. The whole experience is unique and fascinating. As the only westerners in the villages, it really gives you the chance to interact with the local people and gain an insight into their



lives that you otherwise would not have.

Also unique about Andaman Discoveries is the lack of long-term commitment needed. People can come for anything from a day to a few months. To date,

Andaman Discoveries' volun-tourists range from 7 years to 73 years. It really is a holiday suitable for every kind of traveler. Whether you are traveling alone, as a couple, in a group, or as a family, there is something for

everyone and I highly recommend it.

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