

Andaman Discoveries

brings hope and international recognition to the north Andaman coast

A new kind of tourism has gained international recognition after the Tsunami by winning the Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Awards and finishing as runner-up in the Wild Asia Responsible Tourism Awards. Baz Daniel investigates.



*M*artladda Klongwitti or “Chim” as her friends call her, smiles as she welcomes the group of foreigners to her village on the Andaman Coast. Unlike the majority of visitors over the past few years, this group is not here to see the destruction wrought by the tsunami of 2004. Instead they are here as tourists to enjoy the cultural and natural splendour of Tung Nang Dam, a village of 35 houses situated in between the coral reefs and dense rainforests of southern Thailand.

Since rebuilding their lives after the tsunami, some villagers in rural Thailand are using tourism as a tool for community development. One such project, Andaman Discoveries, is based in villages along the north Andaman coast that were among the most severely affected by the destruction caused by the huge waves. With the assistance of international volunteers, villagers such as Chim’s now offer homestays, day tours, and other activities – allowing visitors to participate in the traditional way of life that so often eludes the casual tourist.

As she guides a group through the village,



Chim explains, “The tsunami was a terrible thing, but it also helped us to open our minds to new opportunities. We are now ready to welcome the world and share our way of life with respectful visitors.”

Unusually, new opportunities have been created by and for the community, allowing progress to coexist with the traditional fishing culture. A village committee approached tsunami relief groups and requested assistance in developing community-based tourism, leading to the formation of Andaman Discoveries – a non-profit NGO dedicated to linking development and tourism in tsunami affected villages.

As a result of its groundbreaking efforts, Andaman Discoveries was awarded the overall winner of the “Best for Preservation of Cultural Heritage” in the Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Awards in London this year, the biggest award of its kind in the world and it came second in the Wild Asia Responsible Tourism Award for Community or Family-run Homestays.

“Andaman Discoveries has recognized that the best custodians of cultural heritage are

the local people and they have worked with communities to empower them,” said Justin Francis, Director of Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Awards. The awards are organized by online travel agent www.responsibletravel.com in association with The Times newspaper and Geographical, the magazine of The Royal Geographical Society.

When asked what she has learned from her experience in Tung Nang Dam village, Chim declares, “We understand how to connect tourism with our culture and in a way that makes our village strong by supporting needs such as childrens’ activities, a community centre, orchid conservation and waste management awareness.”

Tourism, as Chim sees it, is complex - its inevitable spread across Southern Thailand has led to great economic benefit, but also to cultural and environmental change and degradation. With resorts, rebuilding and guests returning after the tsunami, Chim and other villagers are determined to use tourism as a tool for future community development benefiting them all.

“The ‘Preservation of Cultural Heritage’ category is a new category for 2007 and the standard of entries has been high. Andaman Discoveries has been short-listed for their approach to tourism by putting people first. They recognized that the best custodians of cultural heritage are the local people and they have worked with communities to empower them.”

**Justin Francis, Director,
Virgin Holidays Responsible
Tourism Awards**

The Incredible Story of Kelly May, the Assistant Director of Andaman Discoveries



เคลลี่เม่ ถ่ายรูปร่วมกับเพื่อนใหม่

Kelly May in a characteristic pose with her new friend.

“By creating quality experiences that bring equal cultural exchanges between guests and villagers, Andaman Discoveries assists communities in preserving their traditional ways of life and natural environment.”
Kelly May, Assistant Director of Andaman Discoveries.

“One of the strengths of Andaman Discoveries is its ability to work so closely with the community. They are part of it and work from within listening to the villagers’ ideas and guiding them towards making them reality. It’s the communities themselves who are driving this initiative.”
Rebecca Thomason, Responsible Tourism Coordinator, Wild Asia

Kelly May became known as the “Angel of the Tsunami” after she became involved in relief work in December 2004. Here she explains her transition from self-confessed party animal to well...angel.

“I had to smile when the Thai press named me ‘the Angel of the Andaman’ for my relief efforts straight after the tsunami. I was self-confessed Bangkok party animal, exploiting the benefits of working in publishing and a well-known face on the social circuit. Luckily, deadlines had kept me in Bangkok on that fateful day when the tsunami struck. As the gravity of the situation became known, I knew I could not sit back and do nothing. Donating money was not enough, I jumped on a plane and headed south, knowing there must be some way I could contribute, even if it was just translating for survivors.

Little did I know I would end up in Wat Yan Yaos temple, the main collection centre for the bodies. Stepping out of the van, I joined a group of Thai soldiers unloading dry ice onto stretchers. As I grabbed a corner of a stretcher, we passed through a barrier to an area, which I can only describe as like a scene from Michael Jackson’s Thriller music video.

The ground was covered with corpses, bloated, disfigured and unrecognizable. It was hell on Earth, and then some. Dry ice was used

to keep the corpses cool and created a fog throughout the temple grounds. The place was chaotic and left me no time to think about what I was doing, or what I was witnessing.

I became an unofficial coordinator, assisting in all areas, doing anything that was necessary, even helping doctors collect DNA samples from the dead victims. I did not tell my family back in the UK what I was doing, as I did not want them to worry. The secret was out when my Mum saw me on the BBC news translating for the Metropolitan police.

The work was addictive, there was so much to do, but after 10 days, I had to return to Bangkok and the office. Working as an account executive from Monday to Friday, I returned to the south each weekend to volunteer. It was not long before the strain of juggling my regular job with crisis relief became too much and my boss gave me an ultimatum, I had to choose between my job and the south. I was not in a financial position to become a full-time volunteer, so I returned to Bangkok. However, after witnessing the destruction, it was hard to go back to my previous life in Bangkok and move on, pretending everything was back to normal. I knew that down south, whole lives and villages had to be rebuilt.

My work became meaningless, the parties boring and Bangkok became a shallow and empty place. I returned from the south a

very different person. I thought a change of job would solve my discontentment, so I jumped at the chance to launch OK! Celebrity magazine for Thailand in 2005.

My increased workload acted as a distraction, but did not deal with a constant yearning to return to the south to assist the Thais I had met and helped straight after the tsunami, so after attending the one-year anniversary, I made the decision to resign and become a volunteer. A close friend, Bodhi Garrett, founded the North Andaman Tsunami Relief, a grass roots development agency working closely with villagers in the area of economic recovery and he offered me a position within the organization working in marketing and promotion. As I joined the organization, the community-based tourism development manager Charlotte Johnston was coming to the end of her placement and I was asked to take over. It was a daunting task, but I felt up to the challenge and so I started my new life living on the Andaman coast and helping run this wonderful organization that has received global accolades. It's a terrific endorsement of what we have tried to do.

"Andaman Discoveries' mission is to provide sustainable development of livelihoods by serving as a bridge for respectful visitors and volunteers. Andaman Discoveries also directly supports community education, village-led conservation, and cultural empowerment. Examples of our projects include scholarships, mangrove reforestation, and a community center."

Photo by Craig Lovell



Fact File:

Andaman Discoveries and Responsible Tourism Awards

The Virgin Holiday Responsible Awards

The Virgin Holiday Responsible Awards, the biggest of its kind in the world, are organized by online travel agent responsibletravel.com, in association with *The Times*, World Travel Market and *Geographical Magazine* - the magazine of The Royal Geographical Society.

For the fourth year running World Travel Market is playing host to the Responsible Tourism Awards. Sponsored for the first time by Virgin Holidays, the Awards celebrate tourism ventures that make a positive contribution to conservation and the economies of local communities while minimizing any negative impacts of tourism.

Wild Asia Responsible Tourism Awards

The awards act as an inspiration to others to implement responsible practices for the benefit of communities and their natural resources.

Andaman Discoveries

Based in Thailand, two-and-a-half hours north of Phuket, Andaman Discoveries enables self-sufficiency and autonomy in the area of community-based tourism and community-led development. Andaman Discoveries acts as the bridge to connect communities who want to participate in tourism and those people or volunteers who want to experience traditional lifestyles and pristine eco-systems, away from traditional touristy destinations. Andaman Discoveries provides local people with a complimentary source of income while continuing their traditional way of life and protects the natural environment. When supporting Andaman Discoveries, you give villagers the chance to participate in tourism, bringing empowerment, unity and identity to the community. Eighty percent of each trip's revenue goes straight back into the community and includes a donation to a community fund to allow the whole village to benefit from tourism.

For more information please call Kelly May on + 66 (0) 87 9177 165 or visit www.andamandiscoveries.com