



Tourism Authority of Thailand

A NEW WAVE

IT'S BEEN FOUR YEARS SINCE THE TSUNAMI. A RESURGENCE OF ECO-TOURISM PROJECTS IN THE SOUTH OF THAILAND NOW UNDERLINE THE IMPORTANCE OF RESPECTING AND CARING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT.



Photography: Craig Lovell (unless otherwise credited)

FOR THIS TRIO OF ALTRUISTS AND TRAVEL ENTREPRENEURS, A SUSTAINABLE OPTION THAT ENRICHES AND RESPECTS LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT IS THE ONLY WAY TO GO...

WHEN THE TSUNAMI battered and rolled over the Thai islands and sea-hugging villages of the Andaman on December 26, 2004, Bodhi Garrett was working as the marketing director of the Golden Buddha Resort on the island of the same name. At the time he was visiting his family in California. Still, the house-high waves that claimed some 5,400 lives in southern Thailand also swept away his bungalow and all of his personal possessions.

Two days later he received an email offering a donation to help the survivors of tsunami-wrecked villages. As aid poured in from many big relief agencies, Bodhi looked at what wasn't being done, like repairing old houses and fishing boats, instead of building new ones, while encouraging handicraft and ecotourism projects that would sustain the local communities after the big donations dried up and the media moved on to other calamities.

CULTIVATING PRIDE

Equipping the villagers with computer, English, business and tour guide skills was all about empowering them with abilities that could be put to other uses, even when tourism fluctuated or floundered. The training programs also imbued them with a greater sense of cultural pride, which had ebbed to an all-time low after the disaster.

Originally called the North Andaman Tsunami Relief, the NGO and tour operator changed its name to **Andaman Discoveries** (www.andamandiscoveries.com) in early 2006, launching a range of eco-tours and home-stays close to their home base in Phang-Nga Province's town of Kuraburi. These programs grew out of meetings with local communities like Ban Talae Nok, where the villagers voiced their concerns and participated directly in both instigating and implementing them. This is the real trunk of what's called 'community-based tourism', an offshoot of eco-travel. Working up from a grassroots level is the opposite of what Bodhi calls the "top down model" utilized by bigger aid agencies and mass-tourism operators.

In the Muslim village of Ban Talae Nok ('Village by the Sea') two local guides, Ibrahim and Mohammad, point to the stretch of beach where the tsunami made a clean sweep. More than 40 villagers in a hamlet of 200 lost their lives. Seventeen children, many rehearsing in the school for a New Year performance, as well as their teacher, also died.

A LESSON IN ECOLOGY

From the cataclysm came a lesson in ecology: the mangrove forests bearding the village acted as a breakwater against the waves, says Ibrahim, with the help of Andaman Discoveries' Cultural Coordinator Piyawich Budhage-sorn. After the tsunami, the locals made a new regulation; anyone who cuts down a mangrove tree has to plant ten new ones.

Spearing through the water on a flat-bottomed boat, Ibrahim standing at the back to navigate with a long pole attached to the



engine, we take a whirlwind tour of the 1,000-acre mangrove forest. Three canals snake through here. The roots of the mangrove trees grow in tangles above and below the waterline. As the boat banks into another turn, we spot a crab-eating macaque scampering up a tree.

The village, hemmed in by forested mountains ghosted with mist, is a series of family portraits; women shelling cashew nuts on their verandahs, gaggles of schoolgirls in headscarves walking past goats, ducks and cows, and the door of almost every house is open. During dinner with our host family, sitting at a table outside and with a man grilling squid, half the neighbors stop by to chat. Thanks to Piyawich, the language gulf is bridged and the friendly, fascinating interaction proves that a hotel is not a home-stay.

SETTING A PRIME EXAMPLE

Adhering to cultural traditions, like prohibiting alcohol and bikinis in Muslim communities, while respecting the environs, has netted Andaman Discoveries a trophy case of awards. In recent years, they won the top prize at Virgin's Responsible Tourism Awards for Conservation of Cultural Heritage, as well as *Travel & Leisure* magazine's Community Outreach Global Vision Award.

Andaman Discoveries and its partners have become part of a bigger body of eco-conscious operators, hoping to make the North Andaman a greenbelt. The new **Koh Ra Ecolodge** (www.thaiecolodge.com) is another watershed project. Approaching the mountainous island on a longtail boat, while Brahminy kites swoop down to scoop fish from the water, the only thing visible is a Thai-style pavilion and crescent of sand. All of the stylish, bamboo-latticed bungalows are tucked away under a canopy of trees, eliminating the need for air-conditioning or even fans.

Off to one side of the huge wooden restaurant is a solar panel; it provides enough electricity to power the pavilion and computers during the day. When they install another four or five solar panels, the diesel-powered generators fueling the lights in the bungalows will become anachronisms. Behind the pavilion they are making an organic plot for carrots, onions, chili and lemongrass.

The founder and director of the Koh Ra

Ecolodge, Kim Obermeyer, says, "We hope the lodge will be a lesson in sustainable development that will also show other resort owners that sustainability can equal profitability in the long term." As Kim speaks in the restaurant, he spies a couple of hornbills in the top of a tree and points them out, just as they lift off and hang-glide through the sky.

REBUILDING LIVELIHOODS

Also in the restaurant is another confederate of Kim and Bodhi. When the tsunami struck the beach resort of Khao Lak – the hardest hit part of Thailand – Reid Langford came looking for a scuba-diving instructor whom he had trained as a means of salvaging her from demeaning bar work. She was unscathed. However, amid the debris scattered with bodies bloated by the seawater and blackened by the sun, Reid worked non-stop for five days taking photos of the dead so they could be identified by their loved ones.

In the aftermath, Reid wanted to do something more substantial to rebuild the livelihoods of locals. So he set up the **Ecotourism Training Center** (www.etcth.org) with donations from friends. Since 2005, the Californian and his cronies have trained dozens of impoverished or tsunami-afflicted locals as fully certified PADI Dive Instructors, well-schooled in reef conservation.

His new spin-off project is a commercial dive operation called SMART (Sustainable Marine Adventures & Responsible Travel), which will also deploy local dive instructors. Reid believes the new, community-centered brand can be applied to other countries in Southeast Asia.

With this new wave of green tourism in the North Andaman, travel options abound: from home-stays and batik-making in Muslim villages, kayaking and bird-watching at the Koh Ra Ecolodge, where Kim explains the bizarre mating habits of hornbills, to dive trips awash with local colors and reef-dwelling fish of every stripe and hue.

As Bodhi Garrett of Andaman Discoveries says, "Mass tourism will come to this area and hit like a tsunami. The only two options are the upscale kind, which benefits big business-people, or whether we can do it in a more sustainable way that enriches and respects local communities and the environment." ■