



**BEST OF FRIENDS:** Jack Barker's daughter Lucy with local children

# Feeling at home in a tsunami village

**L**ucy, aged eight, had been most dismayed at the idea of spending five days in a fishing-village homestay (staying in a local home). 'I want to stay in a hotel,' she wailed.

I assured her there would be a beach – then quickly checked this with the organisers. Yes, there was a beach, they said, but it was also a Muslim village, so no alcohol allowed. I kept this from my wife.

We were staying on the mainland just north of Phuket. We spoke no Thai and the villagers no English, so we were provided with a translator called Tui.

My first insight didn't need translation: it was the bathroom we'd be sharing with our hosts. The loo was two footpads over a hole in the ground and there was a makeshift shower. Three-year-old Wilf regarded any loo as a novelty and adapted quickly to this one and Lucy only needed it explained once.

Food preparation was done on mats on the kitchen floor and we stayed in the two front rooms, mosquito nets provided over our bed and two children's mattresses on the floor.

Lucy's first concern was that she couldn't see the sea. I'd half-expected a stilted waterfront wooden house, but that part of the village had been swept away by 2004's Christmas tsunami. Our village home was a concrete structure in the upper part of the village, half a mile inland. We set off to find the sea and immediately picked up a trail of village children who held hands with Lucy and played running games with Wilf.

As the sun set, at 6.30 sharp, all the village children had to dress up smartly for two hours' Islamic instruction. In daylight, there were

By Jack Barker

always children with us. Lucy would nip off with her friends, Nut and Noon, to help their mother shell cashew nuts. They had to shell five kilos to earn 50p.

Meals were lavish. Our hostess, Noolea, laid out feasts twice a day, ten dishes at a time.

Our various activities generally had a purpose. The only natural defence against tsunamis is the coastal mangrove forest and we replanted new shoots on a bare patch of riverbank. We also went on a fishing trip but, sadly, caught very little. The man of our house, Saw, no longer fished himself but drove his new pickup across southern Thailand to buy and sell squid for export to Japan.

We started the homestay smugly assuming our presence would help a community hit by the tsunami. But it eventually didn't feel that way. Our hosts were tolerant, friendly and hospitable, their diet healthy and delicious, and our contribution for board and lodging was a tiny fraction of that we'd have paid for a resort hotel. And we had a better time.

Mind you, our conversion wasn't permanent. You should have seen the smile on my face on the Thai Airways flight home when the drinks trolley rattled down the aisle.

● *Go Differently* (01799 521 950, [www.godifferently.com](http://www.godifferently.com)) features two nights' homestay in its two-week tours of Thailand: £850pp including domestic flights. You can also book homestays through *Andaman Discoveries* (00 66 87 917 7165, or [www.andamandiscoveries.com](http://www.andamandiscoveries.com)).