

8 A-Z TRAVEL

Villagers open their homes to tourists



We check out a tsunami relief project that helps southern villages build sustainable tourism.

Rapeepat Mantanarat

NORTH Andaman Tsunami Relief, a non-government organisation established in 2004, trades under the name of Andaman Discoveries. Since 2007, it has worked with coastal communities, but evolved from offering emergency services and education, to focus on community-based tourism, environmental education, handicraft ventures and scholarships.

The company supports and trains village communities to develop sustainable tourism with the ultimate aim that each village can operate an enterprise independently. It channels tourists to villages participating in the project, but the villages are still free to source visitors or work with other companies.

Villages that Andaman Discoveries work with are mainly

on the northern Andaman coast between Ranong and Phang Nga. They are a mix of Muslim, Thai and Moken sea gypsy communities.

This year, the company is expanding activities for groups under niche categories – active lifestyle, culture and family programmes.

Active tours feature outdoor activities covering two to four days. A two-day programme involves homestay in Muang Kluang village, 52 km from Ranong town with kayaking through mangrove forests, palm basket weaving demonstration workshop and trekking in the Doi Roi mountain range.

Until this April, three-day active tours are available with similar two-day programmes, but an extra day can be added for either a snorkelling trip or a visit to a deserted island in the Laem Son National Park. From October to December, 2010, visitors can bamboo raft in Naka canal, a waterway famous for endangered lilies. Tours range

from one to four days.

Cultural tours mainly focus on village lifestyle and allow visitors to interact and learn about the local culture. Trips range from one to three days. A one-day trip takes place at Talae Nok or Tung Nang Dam villages. At Talae Nok, visitors can see how a community recovered from the tsunami and how it established a Nipa palm roof weaving and soap making cottage industry.

At Tung Nang Dam, activities are fish farming and orchid cultivation. It also includes tours to a beach and rubber and fruit plantations and classes in Thai dessert preparation.

A two-day programme available at Talae Nok will add a homestay, fishing and a batik workshop. If they opt for a three-night stay, additional activities include long-tail boat trips through the mangrove forest, Thai dessert making and a BBQ dinner on the beach.

A three-day programme includes a stay at a eco-lodge and features day activities at Tung

Nang Dam village and a transfer to an island about an hour away where Andaman Ecolodge is located, ideal to wind-down at the close of the trip.

Family packages, two to five days, start at Ta Lae Nok village and include activities such as a children's scavenger hunt around the village. In general, quotation for each tour include return transfers between Andaman Discoveries' office in Kuraburi and the villages, a visitor's/Volunteer handbook, English/Thai phrasebook, accommodation while at villages, all activities and equipment, all meals and refreshments as shown in the itinerary, translator, local guide, international Thai-speaking support staff, a contribution to the community fund, contribution to other social and environmental projects that focus on the north Andaman region and any local taxes.

Guests must conform to village culture. In Muslim village, they have to wear "polite" clothing (*shorts or skirt covering*

the knees), and no close physical contact with opposite sex.

Only local dishes are served and in Muslim villages poor is off the menu, but the organiser says visitors will enjoy fresh home cooking. They can also help the family in the kitchen or learn how to cook southern Thai dishes.

Guests stay in the same house with the host. Sleeping arrangements are back but comfortable – mattress, clean sheets, blankets, towels and mosquito nets. No hot showers or flush toilet, no air conditioner; only electric fans.

Host families and other villagers are kind, friendly and look after guests with warm hospitality, but language skill are a barrier. Staff are there to help translate.

Andaman Discoveries also offers volunteering programmes to take care of children, teach English or help a an orphanage or a facility for disabled children. Contact 087 917 7165 or email: info@andamandiscoveries.com or visit www.andamandiscoveries.com



Off to former shrimp ponds turned into Nipa Palm forest



Learning how to fish off the beach



Briefing before a mangrove tour



A batik painting class



How to weave a roof

* Photos by Andaman Discoveries