

TSUNAMI
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SCOTT COATES
TAKE 1

“I lost my five-year-old daughter, and five cousins in Phuket,” he says, trying his best to concentrate on the road.

“I just got back from my daughter’s funeral in Phuket last night. I stayed there for two days, but my head hurt too much. I had to come back here and get back to work, back to my life,” says a misty-eyed Surapol Khunthamas, 34, a minivan driver at Ao Nang, Krabi in southern Thailand.

While shuttling our party of five from the airport to our hotel at this tropical paradise, previously more famous for its towering limestone cliffs and silky-soft beaches than the now infamous tsunami waves of December 26, 2004, he took charge of the conversation. “How has your travel business been?, Do you still have lots of customers coming to Thailand?” these were but a few of the queries he fired my way as we made the 25km journey, seemingly more interested in my well being than his own. But that’s the Thai way, not to burden others with ones sorrow.

Bags out of the van and into our hotel, it was time to say goodbye. As Surapol wished us good luck, “Chock Dee Krap,” the traditional Thai parting, he also displayed that famous Thai smile.

After a quick check-in we strolled the 500m from our hotel to Ao Nang beach itself. It was during the walk I started to feel strange. I couldn’t put my finger on it. Then it hit me - there’s no one here. It was like we were in one of those ‘b-movies’ where everyone suddenly disappears.

It’s January 10, 2005, normally peak season and there’s only the odd foreigner here and there, scores of locals sitting idly, waiting for someone to serve.

After a thorough exploration I find it’s the same everywhere – unspoiled beauty without the usual crowds. But where’s the damage I’ve heard so much about on TV?

“We were very lucky in Ao Nang,” explains Mark Ossendryver, 39, a South African who’s called Thailand’s southern islands and beaches home for some time.

“The road was full of sand and debris right after the waves hit Ao Nang. There were some trees knocked over and a couple of long tail boats up on the road and some water damage to local businesses, but not much more,” explains this restaurant owner and photographer who moved here from harder-hit Ko Phi Phi with his wife and newborn son to start a new life.

He now finds himself in the same position as a lot of locals who depend on the four-month peak season, which started in mid-December, to get through the year; wondering what he will do.

“The major set back we are all experiencing now is the lack of tourists.

“Our beaches, hotels, shops, pubs and transport here are as good, if not better than before the waves hit. There are businesses closing on a daily basis which puts more and more locals out of jobs.”

Ossendryver and five Thai employees at his Café 154 can also now count themselves in this category.

“We just closed our restaurant which we only opened in October and with it go all our life savings. There are no tourists around and with the international press, there doesn't seem to be any light at the end of the tunnel,” he explains.

It's international press' seemingly blanket coverage that's frustrating many in this part of the country.

Tsunami waves hit some 300km of Thailand's southwestern coastline, resulting in major damage to only a handful of areas, namely Khao Lak, Ko Phi Phi and parts of Phuket, with many locales cleaned up and open for business only days after the tsunami, but now sitting empty, waiting for visitors.

It seems the main damage being done to Ao-Nang is by the media, not the wave itself. Because the island of Ko Phi-Phi belongs to Krabi Province, there is the wrong impression that the entire Krabi mainland was heavily damaged too. By lumping all beach destinations together and thinking in provincial categories, instead of differentiating between Krabi and heavily-hit Ko Phi-Phi the public abroad is being misled.

The fact of the matter is that aside from Ko Phi Phi, Khao Lak and a bit of Phuket it's business as usual.¹

And such media coverage is certainly having an effect. While some have seen their workplaces damaged, employees at businesses still standing are being laid off after European and Scandinavian tour agencies made mass cancellations at resorts in Krabi through to the end of January, said Krabi Chamber of Commerce vice president Pronchai Tantrasakul.

Compounding the problem, other tours have yet to confirm their bookings for February, capping off a heartbreaking high-tourist season. Some Krabi hotels and resorts have tried to keep their employees on the payroll by halving work hours and pay. Other operators continue to pay their employees a full salary. But with occupancy at 10 per cent, compared to 80 per cent prior to the tsunami, many have given their staff 10 days vacation. If tourism fails to recover next month, Pronchai said, the entire Krabi hotel and resort industry will lay off their 20,000-strong staff.²

While walking neighboring Hat Nopharathara Beach, there's little doubt that most residents are moving on with their lives, hoping things will soon return to 'normal'.

“Life must go on,” I'm told by many longtail boat drivers who are fixing their damaged boats - most very happy theirs were not totally destroyed like so many in these waters.

Getting back on the water seems to be of utmost importance, back to where they clearly feel most comfortable and their livelihoods are.

Despite hearing tales of boats destroyed, friends and family lost, something else prevails - smiles and a resolute belief that visitors will soon return. After all “It's safe, beautiful and the perfect time to visit,” I'm told by a group of boaters, something Ossendryver echoes.

¹ (04/01/05). Post tsunami update. *Image Asia*. Retrieved from http://www.image-asia.com/post_tsunami_hotel_beach_status.htm

² Srimalee, Somluck (11/012005). 50,000 'likely to lose their jobs' [Electronic version]. *The Nation*. Retrieved from <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/search/page.arcview.php?clid=6&id=110905&usrsses>

“We’re now moving into the best weather Thailand has to offer, there’re specials on hotels, in restaurants; everyone’s discounting their wares. There are not many people around so there’s the added benefit of getting the best of Thailand in high season but with lower prices and low season population.”

After four days of beaching, paddling, sundown jogs and enjoying tropical paradise it was too-soon time to bid adieu and head back to the reality of home. As we walked to the minivan waiting to whisk us to the airport, its door opened and out came our original driver Surapol, smiling.

“How was your trip,” he enquired?

Enroute to the terminal we traded stories, expressed disbelief about the weeks’ events and pondered the future of Ao Nang and nearby areas.

“Will they come back soon,” he asked, enquiring about the travelers who usually keep his days full of work?

I thought of what to say, deciding honestly was the way to go, “I hope so, but you may have to wait a while.”

His face expressed the disappointment of someone who already knew the answer then he smiled and stated, “mai pen rai” (never mind).

One month after disaster struck, with more than 5,384 people confirmed dead in Thailand and 3,132 still missing³, there’s no doubt certain parts of the south were devastated, lives lost and families forever changed. But without income in areas where tourism provides the vast majority of employment visitors are needed now. By coming and contributing to the local economy you will be doing something useful and constructive and still be having a wonderful holiday in one of Thailand's most scenic destinations.⁴

³ Khwankhom, Arthit. “Disaster literally haunts survivors.” The Nation, 26 January 2005. 2A.

⁴ Duke, (06/01/2005). Statement from Phuket.com. Retrieved from <http://wyswert.com/tsunamistatement>