

DIRTY FEET AND INKY FINGERS
Community-Based Tourism on the North Andaman Coast

by Jared Young
jaredyoung23@hotmail.com
05-120-4837

For years, the tourism industry has been a vital part of the southern Thailand's economy, particularly in Phuket and Krabi (though Patong, with its neon glow and cluttered beach, might be proof that it has overstayed its welcome). Even in Tung Nang Dam, a small village on the North Andaman Coast, tourism is flourishing. There are, however, no luxury resorts, or wireless-equipped backpacker's hostels, or roadside markets teeming with Louis Vuitton knock-offs and Same Same, But Different T-shirts. It remains uncorrupted (so far) by such garish commercial ventures. Instead, the tourism industry in Tung Nam Dam is community-based, designed and operated by local villagers, with the entirety of the profits staying within the region, benefiting those who need it most. It's tourism, but on a grassroots level.

Think of it like this: Phuket and Tung Nam Dam; same same, but different.

Ban Pak Trium, like Tung Nang Dam, is a small community just north of Kuraburi, and it is here, on the edge of the coastal mangrove forests, that our two-day tour begins.

The village is deserted when we arrive. A case of bad timing, on our part: this is a Muslim village, and everyone is in the middle of their afternoon prayers. One man, however, has stayed behind to meet us. He is dressed in khaki from head to toe, wears black army-boots, and has a gigantic serrated hunting-knife hanging from his belt. His name is Mustafa, and he is our guide (don't worry, he is a gentle soul; he only uses the knife to cut apples and clean the dirt from beneath his fingernails).

Mustafa leads us to a small building where several women are demonstrating the art of Thai-dyeing. It is a small, but vital, local industry. It works like this: colored dyes are processed from the mulched shavings of tree bark (among other organic stuff); the spillage is boiled in large steel vats, and the cotton material – shirts and sheets and sarongs – is submerged for up to half an hour, and stirred continuously with long wooden poles, like boat oars.

The demonstration is fascinating, but we're distracted. Nearby, lounging on a broken bamboo bench, among fallen pieces of corrugated roof and stacked bags of concrete, is a troop of monkeys. Long-tailed macaques, Mustafa tells us. They loiter with the slouched postures and indifferent attitudes of teenage delinquents. "Do they live here?" we ask, and Mustafa, like an exasperated parent, sighs and shrugs his shoulders. "They're always hanging out."

In Thailand, tourism accounts for five-percent of the Gross Domestic Product, and while it can provide an area with a significant economic boost, it carries, like a recently dumped lover, a considerable amount of negative baggage. Communities might initially benefit from the construction and operation of a nearby luxury beach resort, but most of the profits end up elsewhere, and the ensuing social and environmental toll is impossible to measure.

In recent years, there has been increasing pressure on small communities to seek alternate forms of economic development. Community-based tourism, as such an alternative, is steadily gaining in popularity. Programs in Namibia and Botswana – and even in such unlikely places as Canada – are proving successful in their efforts to reform the industry.

The basic concept of community-based tourism (CBT) is simple: to maintain the cultural and ecological integrity of the area, while at the same time providing a basic tourism service that appeals to consumers. Sustainability is the name of the game, and the trick is to balance comfort and pleasure without disrupting the local way of life. Modest fishing villages like Baan Pak Trium and Tung Nang Dam, with their exotic surroundings and distinctive lifestyle, are perfectly suited for CBT; it's just a matter of finding, and preserving, that balance.

From Ban Pak Trium, we take a long-tail boat down the river, east towards the ocean, and stop at one of the many fish-farms that drift along the shoreline. Fish-farming, in this particular area, is a relatively new development. The concept is pretty self-explanatory: it's a farm, for fish. Red Snapper, Grouper, Tarpon, Barramundi (and even a few Lion Fish) are kept in small enclosures, fed, grown, and when they reach an appropriate size, sold at market.

We meet one of the fish-farmers, and he eagerly demonstrates his feeding technique; he cuts up a small fish, tosses the bloody pieces into the water, and we watch as the surface begins to boil. Fins and teeth flash through the water. These are not small fish. They squirm just below the surface, a single pulsating mass, like a slimy black brain, but the size of a whale, with hundreds of biting mouths. As we pile back into the boat, we are a little less excited about tomorrow's snorkeling trip.

Our next stop takes us to a small sandy island along the Andaman coast. It was once part of a long crescent beach that stretched north for several kilometers, but was broken apart by the tsunami; eighty percent of the land, here, was washed away, along with an entire village (the displaced villagers relocated at Ban Pak Trium, and now, to my dismay, have a macaque street-gang problem to deal with). The island is now a humble memorial site, just a spit of sand cluttered with year-old driftwood wreckage and squid traps. While we are exploring, another long-tail boat comes ashore, and two fisherman disembark. They have spent the day squid-fishing. Mustafa introduces us, and they show us a bucket of fresh-caught squid: they are pale-white and slick, slightly translucent. We reach into the bucket and pick them up. Among the tiny limp tentacles we notice tiny black spots, and touch them with our fingers. The ink sac, we're told, and in our excitement, like finger-painting children, we smear the black stuff all over our hands.

The fishermen exchange a perplexed look. “You might want to wash that off,” they say to us. “That stuff stains.”

It’s another twenty minutes before we reach our final destination: Tung Nang Dam, population: 115. After landing on the beach, we are greeted by a pair of local women dressed in traditional Muslim sarongs and scarves, and they escort us down a dusty road to the village.

The homestay program here in the fishing village of Tung Nang Dam has been long in the making. For years, a local woman, P’pim, has sought to bring tourists to the area, particularly in the wake of the tsunami when the village was initially overlooked by both foreign and domestic aid organizations. P’pim says, simply: “I want people to know that we’re here.” It is only recently, mentored by an NGO operating out of nearby Kuraburi, that their tourism endeavor has come to fruition.

On this particular trip, our homestay patron is a man named **Donald**. We will be staying in his home, a two-story Thai-style house surrounded by a lush garden and roving gangs of goats that, throughout the day, bleat and moan like cars in a traffic jam. Like everyone we have so far met, **Donald** is eager to share with us the details of his life; he waxes philosophical on topics ranging from politics to economics to the genetics of his family tree. What we learn about the culture and history of the area, we learn from **Donald**. And then some (for a seventy year-old man, he is inexhaustible).

Our dinner is prepared by **Donald**’s family, and we eat together, cross-legged on the floor. Southern curry and chili paste and fried squid (the quality of which you might find in a gourmet restaurant). In the evening, after we chat with some of the villagers over coffee and tea, we retire to bed: we have been given the largest room in the house, bedecked with mosquito nets and overlooking the garden. In every minor detail of our accommodation, the Thai virtue of **jai-gwaang** (generous heart) is evident: we are not paying customers; we are guests of honor.

The next morning, after a heavy breakfast of rice porridge and squid (it’s definitely squid season), Mustafa takes us out in the boat. From a makeshift dock in the middle of the mangrove forest, we set off, navigating the twisting river towards open water. It’s low-tide when we depart, and the roots of the mangrove trees are revealed: curved gray branches that reach into the mud, like domed bird-cages. A bird emerges from the tangle of muddy fingers and skims the surface of the water. “Black-Capped Kingfisher,” Mustafa tells us; his knowledge of birds is encyclopedic; he hopes to one day start a bird-watching tour along this tributary.

We spend the afternoon on an egg-shaped island a few miles from shore (named, appropriately, Koh Kai, or Egg Island). We are, for the most part, inexperienced snorkelers, but once Mustafa has fixed the masks and tubes to our faces, the rest comes naturally; we glide across the still surface of the water, in random darting bursts like the fish below. The reef, here, was destroyed by the tsunami, but we can see, among the grayish knobs and bulges, that the coral is returning; bright white spots on the brackish

surface, like the pane of a dusty window wiped clean. Fish gather in the gloomy cracks and crevasses; surely not as many as there used to be, but they are returning. Among the ruins, they are rebuilding their homes.

In the evening, we eat more squid. Barbecued, this time, over an open fire. The villagers are shy around us, and we are shy around them, but here, in the darkness, in the flickering light of the fire, a little bit of that uncertainty is washed away; their children play among our feet, and if there exists a universal constant, it is surely the mischievousness of children: in their laughter and shrieks the familiarity of home is as discernible as the smell of smoke.

The villagers in Tung Nang Dam live hand to mouth: they catch fish, they sell fish, they eat fish; it is their daily, monthly, and yearly routine. Our presence has interrupted it, somewhat, and that exemplifies the struggle of community-based tourism: how do you provide for tourists without disrupting the schedules and habits of the community? Every time we are taken somewhere in a boat, that boat is prevented from fulfilling its fishing duties. How do you calculate the worth of our tour against the number of fish that are lost because of it?

Nonetheless, during our time in Ban Pak Trium and Tung Nang Dam, we have learned a great deal about the community. We visit fishing boats in the middle of the ocean, we indulge in the local cuisine, we harvest cashew-nuts and smash open their blackened shells with blocks of wood. In these tiny increments, we live their lives. That, in essence, is the allure of a homestay program: the interaction, the sense of inclusion.

And our learning is not limited to these tangible experiences: P'im shows us pictures of her three daughters, and tells us how, with only her wits and a fishing boat named Duckhead (like Egg Island, appropriately named: it looked like the head of a duck), she was able to put them through university. Mustafa tells us about his conversion to the Muslim faith, local fisherman tell us thrilling tales of capsized boats and stalking sharks, and, of course, there are **Donald**'s conversational meanderings, which never seem to end (or become less interesting).

These are the souvenirs that we bring back with us. These stories. Not plastic trinkets. Not T-shirts.

We leave in the morning, before the sun reaches its peak; backwards through the Mangrove forest, towards the Kuraburi Pier. The soles of our feet, after days of walking barefoot on dirt paths, have grown calloused and black. Small pebbles from the beach on Koh Kai are still hiding in the pinkish gaps between our toes. But it's not just these gritty bits that we are bringing back with us from the village.

And that, essentially, is the point: To get your feet dirty. To stain your hands with ink. To eat squid, swim in saltwater, and break bread with friends. To live, for just a little while, like you were born somewhere else.