

Community-Based Tourism Comes to Thailand's North Andaman Coast

How a small relief organization is helping tsunami-impacted rural coastal villages preserve their traditional ways in the face of tourism—and what you can do.

By Erik Rogers

Community-based tourism (CBT) is an approach to travel that I first learned of through Crooked Trails. A few years ago—newly liberated from a life of programming websites by the dot-com implosion—I'd set my sights on traveling to distant lands and expanding my cultural horizons, and I knew I wasn't going to find the awakening I sought by simply checking off a list of Lonely Planet destinations for any given country, while the faces of its peoples passed me by. So I chose to journey with Crooked Trails, first to the remote village of Vicos in the Peruvian Andes, where we lived in the homes of the *campesinos*, sharing in their meals, rituals, and daily life. The experience forever altered my perspectives of my own life and the world around me; I was so moved that as soon as I could I signed up for the Nepal trip, where I had an equally compelling experience helping build a school in the mountain village of Danda Gaun.



Crooked Trails also introduced me to Thailand, the country that I formed perhaps my strongest affinity for—so deep in fact that after the devastating tsunami, I was compelled to take action. Through Crooked Trails I volunteered with North Andaman Tsunami Relief (NATR), a small organization created specifically in response to the needs of the rural coastal villages of the north Andaman Sea. The people of these pristine and undiscovered communities were largely overlooked in the relief effort, with resort towns such as Phuket and Khao Lak reaping the bulk of foreign and domestic aid. NATR's unique model of long-term sustainable recovery for these villages through empowerment and self-reliance immediately resonated with me. Now, a year later, I've returned to Thailand to help continue this mission.

The villages NATR works with are located in a region of Thailand about three-hours north of Phuket, and home to some of the oldest undisturbed jungle terrain in the world. It's also about forty-eight miles from the Marine National Park of Ko Surin, which boasts the best diving and snorkelling in Thailand. Tourism in this extraordinary region of scenic and ecological diversity is an inevitable reality, so NATR identified a critical need to develop a long-term CBT program that will preserve the social and ecological integrity of the area while providing an appealing tourism service. NATR is now in the process of training selected locals in English and guiding skills, and working with the villagers to create a style of tourism that showcases both the exotic surroundings of the region as well as the rich cultural



heritage of its people. This program provides visitors with the opportunity to stay in a traditional village home and enjoy a meaningful exchange with the resilient and peaceful tsunami survivors of the north Andaman Sea.



I recently participated in a day-long trial of this program in the fishing village of Baan Pak Trium, a small community just north of NATR's office in Khuraburi, located on the edge of the coastal mangrove forests. Our first stop was the new community center, where some of the village women taught us the traditional method for making tie-die, a small but vital local industry. These women folded and banded cloth with

stupefying deftness, all the while displaying remarkable patience as we struggled to keep up. They then stirred the sheets with long wooden poles for half an hour in a caldron of bubbling earthy-brown dye—which they produced from fire ash and the mulched shavings of tree bark—allowing the color to soak in before finally rinsing the material in salt water. The patterns that emerged were intricate and beautiful.

After a delicious lunch of fresh seafood, rice, vegetables, eggs, roti, and sweet-milk curry, we boarded a longtail boat and navigated our way through a thick mangrove swamp as Mustafa, our guide, pointed out wild bird species hidden in the branches around us. Southern Thailand is home to more than 12,000 species of plants, 900 species of birds, and six percent of all mammal species on earth¹. Mustafa seemed to have an encyclopedic knowledge about all of them!



The boat came to rest on the desolate beach where, prior to the tsunami, the village of Pak Triam stood. As I walked among the scattered stilts and a bare patch of concrete—all that remains of the 23 homes and a school, respectively, that comprised the town—I silently pondered the awesome power of the sea, and the devastation these people have endured. In spite of their tragic losses, the survivors maintain an upbeat attitude towards life, and shared remarkable stories, including how the entire village opted to live in temporary tents until the new village, which was moved inland, was complete, rather than be shuffled into refugee camps.



We boarded the longtail again and made the short excursion downriver to one of the many fish farms (a relatively new development) in the area. The farm itself was a small hut surrounded by a matrix of tanks that seemed to hover above the water. Here red snapper, grouper, tarpon, barramundi, and even a few lion fish are fed, grown, and ultimately sold at market. We watched the farmer feed his schools, each tank subsequently becoming a veritable frenzy of fins and teeth.

1. Thom Henley, [Reefs to Rainforests, Mangroves to Mountains](#)

Now it was our turn to catch some fish. We glided over the emerald-colored Andaman sea in the longtail while the setting sun painted a canvas of low-lying clouds on the horizon an arresting fiery orange. By the time we anchored, several miles off the coast, the stars had emerged and we needed lights to see by. With the help of our guides we baited our hooks with prawns, and then set ourselves to the peaceful task of waiting for a bite as the boat rocked gently on the phosphorescent waters. I caught a grouper on my first cast; unfortunately, it proved beginner's luck, as the only other thing I caught that night was a line-snapping rock. Not surprisingly, the local fishermen fared better.



The next morning our village host, P' Ket, an amiable and spirited woman dressed in traditional Muslim garb of sarong and scarf, prepared a hardy breakfast of sticky rice, roti, and Chinese doughnuts, with coffee and tea. By 9:00 a.m. it was already time for us to go, but even after one day I left feeling that I had shared in the lives of the Pak Trium villagers.



A longer CBT itinerary can include visits to more villages, with additional activities such as snorkelling, gardening, guided nature-walks up scenic mountains or to waterfalls, harvesting cashew nuts, a visit to a gibbon sanctuary, and relaxing on the beach.

NATR now has a volunteer tourism program for groups or individuals who want to participate in community projects and experience a truly unique cultural exchange with the people of these villages. This is an opportunity for adventurous, community-minded travelers to come to Thailand and be involved in a community project, contribute to environmental restoration, and provide valuable feedback that will help us improve the program and ultimately empower the people of these villages to maintain local control of tourism while preserving their traditional ways. Some of the projects where volunteers can participate include:

- various construction projects
- mangrove restoration
- installing protective buoys around sensitive sea-grass areas
- helping in day-care center

If you'd like more information about the project, or if you'd like to donate or participate, please contact NATR at:

North Andaman Tsunami Relief
(66) 01 787 7344
relieffund@inet.co.th
www.northandamantsunamirelief.com