

Thailand's 'angel' picks up prestigious award

by Julie McCord

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HEMEL Hempstead tsunami volunteer Kelly May, who earned the nickname 'angel' in Thailand, has won two international awards including one sponsored by Virgin Holidays.

The Gadebridge publishing executive was working in Bangkok when the tidal Asian earthquake struck in Christmas 2004.

Instantly, the self-confessed 'Bangkok party animal' jumped on a plane and headed south to see if she could help survivors of the catastrophe which killed nearly 250,000 people.

Three years later, the inspired 30-year-old is still doing a 12-hour, seven-days-a-week job at the frontline of economic reconstruction, working to bring prosperity to the devastated communities through tourism.

Weeks after her first spell as a relief worker, in the aftermath of the disaster, Kelly did briefly return to her five-figure salary job in Bangkok where she was involved with the launch of OK! celebrity magazine in Thailand.

But she told The Gazette: "I had become a different person and after witnessing the destruction it was hard to go back to my previous life and pretend everything was back to normal.

'After witnessing the destruction, it was hard to go back to my previous life'



AFTERMATH: of the tsunami, left.

"My work became meaningless, the parties boring and Bangkok became a shallow and empty place.

"I could not deal with my constant yearning to return to the south to assist the Thais I had met straight after the tsunami, so I made the decision to resign and become a volunteer."

Kelly is now paid only a living allowance to work as director of Andaman Discoveries - a community-based tourism project.

The company brings visitors into the villages to experience a very different Thailand to the one in the glossy holiday brochures.

Now Kelly's groundbreaking work has been recognised worldwide and Andaman Discoveries has been named winner of the Virgin Holidays responsible tourism

award and also runner-up in the similar Wild Asia tourism awards.

All profits from Kelly's project are spent on supporting education, conservation and work prospects, as well as cultural empowerment in the villages.

She explained: "Our tourists are not just budget travellers and students. They do not just watch people going about their daily lives but become part of it.

"They are encouraged to participate in simple hands-on activities, like weaving nipa palm leaves into roof material; roasting and shelling cashew nuts and weaving fishing nets.

"Our visitors are also encouraged to learn to speak some Thai with villagers during their stay.

"Many have told me their

time with us has been life-changing and inspirational and that is what makes it worth it for me."

Kelly added: "I receive only a modest living allowance, so am certainly not here for the money, so the motivations are much more personal and human.

"It is simply a dedication that extends beyond the modern desire for more possessions.

"Villagers in the region lead modest lives with few material possessions yet they are some of the happiest people I know.

"Surely, this says a lot about the state of consumer society and the constant demand for more?" she said.

● If you would like to learn more about Andaman Discoveries visit www.andamandiscoveries.com



DEDICATED: former party girl Kelly May swapped her former 'meaningless life' for an award-winning project providing life-changing opportunities to tourists in Thailand.