

HIGHLY COMMENDED Andaman Discoveries,



Old cool Thai

DARUNEE PAKDEE, or Cha as her friends call her, smiles as she welcomes the group of visitors to her village on the Andaman Coast, two-and-a-half hours north of Phuket. Ban Talae Nok is a village of 67 homes situated between the coral reefs and dense rainforests of Southern Thailand.

Their visit is part of a community tourism project assisted by Andaman Discoveries, continuing work that saw it win this category at the 2007 Responsible Tourism Awards.

Most of Cha's village was destroyed in the 2004 tsunami, and, due to declining fish stocks and mangrove destruction, she was unable to return to her traditional fishing lifestyle. With the development of community tourism, however, both young and old see the value of preserving everyday Thai culture. 'We are beginning to understand how to connect tourism with our way of life, and share with people the natural environment that we depend on for our culture and livelihood,' she explains.

Community members such as Cha offer homestays, eco-tours, and other activities – allowing visitors to participate in a way of life that so often eludes the casual tourist.

Andaman Discoveries was founded in 2006 and works as part of the North Andaman Community Tourism Network, serving as a bridge between local villages and the private sector. Its goal is to develop a network of

community-based tourism villages in the region and exchanges have already begun.

In the past two years, community tourism has generated US\$20,000 income for villagers, while also funding orchid conservation, a children's centre and other community projects.

Anna, a visitor from the US, who spent five days at Balan Tae Nok, said: 'My time spent here was amazing! We made soap, peeled cashew nuts, tapped rubber trees, and wove palm roofs. I also toured an animal rescue centre, participated in activities with the children, and had a delicious Thai cookery lesson! I ended by teaching English in the Kuraburi High School. All the people I met made me feel welcome.'

Thamrong Chompusri, director of Andaman Discoveries, added: 'Community tourism goes beyond enjoying a new culture while supporting sustainable development – it's also a great way to make lifelong friends.'

www.andamandiscoveries.com

WHAT THE JUDGES SAID

'This award recognises how Andaman is using tourism to benefit and empower the community – providing education, training, and economic opportunities – and helping it to share its culture through workshops for tourists to learn how to make handicrafts, cook and harvest cashews and rubber.'

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