**Article De Volkskrant ‘at home with the Thai people at the Andaman Sea’**

Ten years after the tsunami, families at the Andaman Sea rent their rooms to tourists. Sleep on the ground, wash yourself in a bucket: that is the way to keep the mass tourism outside.

*Caption first photo (p. 1): playing children by the family Noon at Koh Phra Thong.*

You have to know wat you’re doing before you ask for cashew nuts at the Thai Island Koh Phra Thong. Before you know it jumps the head of the family, where you rent your room, on a scooter to get a 3 kilo bag of cashew nuts at the neighboor. His friends puts alreardy a rusty plate on a big fire. Your cashew nuts will be roasted on that plate.

Later you will be listening together to Thai music, smashing the charred nuts with a empty bottle of beer and you pass on the house made herbal liqueur. Then you really know that you are travelling. When you arrive you will think: what am I doing here? Three cabins on an open place, decorated with buffalo skulls and inhabited by card playing men who are wearing wide fishreman pants and call themselves Samnao; it’s thai for brats. But as 41 year old one you are glad that you are there. It no longer looks weird to you when the neighboor emerged with a lamp on his head and a harpoon in his hand. He puts with a generous gesture shiny shrimps on the table. Then he tells you: it’s for you lunch tomorrow.

They are brats there in Phra Thong. But they are really nice brats. Their island disappeared ten years ago through the tsunami, but the houses are build up again and some of the people make money by giving the tourists a place to sleep. It’s not up to you where you will stay: the people on the island divide the tourists honest about the eight homestays.

Oh and his friends like to jump in their blue jeeps and ride the tourists to the deserted beaches. They also like to pick fruit or collect vegetables in the forest.

*Caption second photo (p. 2): a lot of villages worry about them being fun enough for the tourists.*

**Eco tourisme**

Koh Phra Thong is a project of the NGO Andaman Discoveries. After the tsunami of 2004 they started to give food and cooking oil to the people, but now the organisation try to set up ecotourism in the same villages. The technical term for this is: community based tourism. By helping the villagers with opening up their houses and invent joint activities, they hope to get some extra income for the stricken villages. At the same time they are trying to offer the tourists something more sustainable and authenic then the beach resorts and the night markets which are really popular at the nearby holiday island Phuket.

a lot of villagers worry about them being fun enough for the tourists’ says Tui, the director of Andaman Discoveries. ‘We really have to convince the villagers’. Tui organizes English courses for the local guides. She also checks if the houses and the outside toilets are acceptable enough for the tourists. ‘We always send a translater with the tourists. This is beacause of the fact that it’s really fun to talk about each others lives and to do things together’. Andaman discoveries organizes also volunteering. For instance: giving english lesson to immigrant children from Burma. But they also have projects to protect the turtles or to recover the riverside.

The most popular destination are the Surin-islands. It’s a maritime national parc where the sea gypsies live. Those sea gypsies got a lot of attention after the tsunami, because of the fact that this Moken people didn’t let themselves surprise. A good sea gypsy knows that when the see withdraws suddenly, the Labong is coming. ‘Then you have to sail to deeper water or run up a mountain’, says sea gypsy Batoy. He says this wave was not that bad. ‘There was a time that even the mountains where disappeard under the water’.

*Caprion third picture(p. 4): a sea gypsy in her room which is made from bamboo and palm leaves.*

The 33 year old Batoy speaks a little bit Thai and likes to let see his villages. Teenagers wearing a sarong are listening to the radio, men smoke shag and an older lady wearing a bra lies in a hammock. By the waterside women and children are getting together with buckets and rusty knives. They are going to search for schells and sea cumcumbers for dinner. In the shadow of his house cuts a grandfather with tattoos a model boat and by the water crane are young mothers washing their babies. In short, the nomad village has a high Gauguin-content.

The only unfortunate thing in the village is the burned tourists, some still wearing their life jackets, which are walking with big eyes between the huts. Sometimes a tourist climbs on a stairs en puts his camera in a doorway. ‘That is what we don’t want anymore’, says headman Ngaey. ‘We feel like we are some kind of attraction’. Together with Andaman Discoveries he selected some villagers which are going to be guides. ‘Now the tourists come with a guide from the mainland. They are telling nonsense about us’.

The local guide Batoy jumps of his longtailboat. He has a reputation to loose under water. Normally divers move slowely over the coral reef in their neopreme suits, a strong sea gypsy holds his breath for four minutes and moves easy and free. Batoy disappeares in the deep, he puts his upperbody in dark crevices, swims a piece on with a sea turtle and hangs upside down between rocks.

*Caption fourth picture (p.5): earlier we lived on the mainland during the rainy season’.*

The one big annoyance Adaman Discoveries has is the fact that is it forbidden to sleep in a Moken-village*.* Tui says:’ The rangers say that is to unhygienic to sleep there. But they are just satisfied to rent their own tents and sell their own food’. The Mokens can live in the national parc, unless their are satisfied with the houses of palmleaves which are only for own use and they have to put their children to schools. Headman Ngaey says:’ i miss the freedom from the past. Earlier we lived on the mainland during the rainy season’.

At the moment the last boat with tourists has left from the island, the atmosphere in the village changes. Families are going to sit in front of their doors, television are turned on and teenage girls are walking around topless. This is putting up a question: why do the tourist have to cover their bodies? Ngaey: ‘this is an example of wrong information. We want women to cover their lower body with a sarong. But futher there is no problem’.

In a treehouse which is located more landward in the misty rainforest, tells the American Bodhi Garett that it isn’t easy to develop eco tourism in Thailand. The founder of Andaman discoveries was a volunteer by the turtles at Koh Phra Thong and collected after the tsunami 4,7 million dollars. ‘There is a lot of money in South-Thailand. But the income from the tourism are unequally divided. We try to help the simple families and to save this area from a new kind of Phuket’. Unfortunately their are not that many families in the area of Khao Sok that want to work durable. They don’t want it, because they are already earning money with tourism and are afraid of losing that when they are going to work more durable’.

*Caption fifth photo (p.6): guide Pu sails on the Cheow Lanlake*

**Floating hotels**

But sometimes it does work. Look at local guide Pu. He teached hisselve english and got a course by a tour operator. Now he is sailing around the Cheow Lanlake, it’s a popular touristic destination. ‘I know the way better than other guides’, says Pu, while he tacks along the dead three which are stabbing up out of the water. He doesn’t bring tourists to floating hotels which doesn’t have a decent waste management. Andaman Discoveries has made a documentary to get attention at this problem.

Pu: ‘asain tourist only want to sail for one our. After that one our they want to drink in a floating hotel. European tourists are looking for more peace and like to sail for two hours. We sail three hours; we have a license for the protected section of the national parc’.

There waits a fishing camp. At least, that’s what it’s called. It’s nothing more than some sagging rafts with some huts on it. Who wants to go to the kitchen or toilets has to balance between the bobbing trunks. The guets are Thai fathers with their sons. They left before sunrise to hunt at catfishes. Again you can think: what am I doing here? But then you get the food which is fresh captive of the day. In the woods you hear the sound of breaking branches. An elephant appears, walks down the waterside and jumps into the water. Never knew: elephants can swim just like sea gypsies.

**How and what**

A week in different homestays with Andaman Discoveries costs about 1.000 euro per person (included meals, guide and transport).

A transfer from Phuket airpot costs about 80 euros. KLM flies everyday straight to Bangkok, starting at 719 euro. Turkish airlines flies twice a day via Istanbul, starting at 614 euros. The price of a return flight from Bangkok to Phuket costst about 159 euros by Bangkok airways.

A lot of places in South Thailand are thinking about and remembering on 25,26 and 27 december the tsunami of 2004. This natural disaster deceased the lives of 230 thousand people.