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PHUKET – ISLAND PARADISE

THAILAND HAS LONG BEEN KNOWN AS THE LAND OF SMILES, AND PHUKET HAS OFT BEEN DESCRIBED AS THE JEWEL OF THE ANDAMAN. FRIENDLY PEOPLE, BEAUTIFULLY WARM WEATHER, CLEAR BLUE WATER AND GLORIOUSLY WHITE BEACHES. SIX MONTHS AFTER THE DEVASTATING BOXING DAY TSUNAMI, I WENT TO INVESTIGATE JUST HOW AFFECTED THE REGION WAS, PARTICULARLY ON THE ISLAND OF PHUKET.





The island of Phuket formerly derived its wealth from the tin and rubber industries. A province in its own right, it is Thailand's largest island and remains the most popular destination spot for both locals and foreigners, thus boasting a highly developed infrastructure.

After four days in action-packed Bangkok with its 10 million inhabitants, congestion, chaos and crowds, landing at Phuket International Airport was akin to coming into port after a week of rough seas. Green vegetation instead of concrete and breathable air. Taxi drivers abound, yet don't haggle for business. Fares are booked at the airport desk and a set fee is paid dependant on the final destination - a mere 400 Baht (around NZ\$10) to Phuket City. Most of the car hire companies will meet your incoming flight, offering a variety of cars, jeeps or motorcycles, and many hotels run shuttles for guests.

Most roads were in fairly good condition. A few potholes here and there, but nothing insurmountable and works are ongoing in an effort to improve things. The majority of road signs are in Thai and English making it fairly easy to get around. However drivers aren't expensive if you don't feel up to self-navigating. My only hitch was in Phuket City after nightfall!

There are two major seasons - hot with rain from May to October, and just hot from November through April. The rainy season, or monsoon period, has developed a rather unwelcome reputation. In all honesty, showers last little more than two to three hours. Sure, you get wet, but it's a warm rain, it doesn't last long and you're dry an hour later. Average temperatures range from 25-32 deg C with a medium water temperature around 26-29 deg C.

Phuket's coastline boasts some of the world's most stunning beaches. An array of scenery to stun the most hardened traveller - crescents of white sandy beaches backed by swaying palms, secluded bays and jagged headlands. Having listened to the tsunami reports, I wasn't quite sure what to expect on making it to the western coastline of Phuket. Fronting the Andaman Sea, this side of the island reportedly felt the full brunt of the impact. To my absolute delight, I found the area relatively unscathed compared with the sensationalist reporting previously surfacing. Shops were

open, people were smiling, tourists were in evidence – and this in the middle of monsoon season! The eastern coastline wasn't even touched, suffering only what locals put down as an above average high tide.

Thailand's national disaster warning centre has now been officially opened by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. This is expected to restore confidence in Thailand as a destination. It will link its data with other earthquake and tsunami warning centres in Hawaii and Japan. Information will be disseminated and alerts issued via media, cell phones and coastal broadcast towers. Shinawatra stated that the system would alert at risk areas within 30 minutes. Plans are also afoot to install buoys which will further complete the warning system, with a completion date set for the end of 2006.

Whilst Phuket is a holiday destination, it's worth bearing in mind that many of the classier restaurants and bars, particularly in hotels and resorts, require a jacket and sometimes even a tie in the evenings. Because of the heat and humidity, pack mostly cottons and avoid nylon at all costs. Ladies, if you are planning on visiting a Temple, ensure you cover your shoulders. No shorts or mini skirts and do remember to take your shoes off! The usual personal safety precautions apply as much in Thailand as elsewhere in the world. It certainly pays to avoid drugs of any description and beware of having sex with minors – anyone under 18 is considered illegal! Litter controls are tightening nationwide with fines being imposed. And, as a special word of warning, be aware of unauthorised guides!

Whilst some damage was evident still, the vast majority of businesses are up and running and repairs are being carried out to the remainder with openings planned for the coming high season.

WHAT TO DO

Whilst most come here to relax and unwind amidst the exotic fauna and flora and marvel at the incredible sunsets, there is plenty of scope for just about anyone.

Four very fine golf courses provide a diverse range of holes. Since Tiger Woods came from nine strokes behind to win the 1998 Johnnie Walker Classic, Blue Canyon Country Club Canyon Course has been a perennial must-play for any golfer visiting Phuket. It's one of those courses you just have to play yourself to fully appreciate. The back nine features three of the more famous holes in Thailand golf, beginning with the 365 yard Par 4 13th. Bigger hitters, who usually have bigger egos, will almost certainly try to have a go and carry the canyon lurking below. The 221 yard Par 3 17th is the longest Par 3 in Thailand and one of the most difficult anywhere in the world. The caddies will remind you that Tiger hit 9-iron, which doesn't make you feel any better. Blue Canyon Country Club has plenty more to offer. The Lakes Course, another 18 holes of truly spectacular golf is also a must-play. It's also the choice of "relaxing" golfers, who can't do without a cart, as the Canyon Course has a walking-only policy. To book a round or golf package at Blue Canyon with a Kiwi, visit www.golfthink.com or email kiminglis@golfthink.com. Mission Hills Golf Resort & Spa is a Par 72. Nicklaus Design has added distinguishing quirks, like the two greens that offer alternative finishes on Hole 18. Other courses on the island include: Banyan Tree, located at Laguna Phuket, a Par 71; Loch Palm, a Par 72 surrounding Crystal Lake; Phuket Country Club, the Par 72 course being the first on the island. The 10th hole, 557 yards par 5, is one of the most unusual anywhere; a dog-leg right that snakes around an enormous lake and is reachable in one!



Diving in the region is sublime, having been rated as one of the top ten scuba diving destinations in the world. Whether you opt for a liveaboard or daytrip, divers of all levels are catered for. If you've never dived but would like to, there are numerous PADI and NAUI courses on offer. Sea kayaking, elephant trekking, spas, walks and treks, deep sea fishing, bird watching and snorkeling are just a few more things you can experience. Check out the waterfalls at Bang Pae and Ton Sai, visit the Phuket Shell Museum, shoot off steam at the shooting gallery, watch butterflies, discover orchids, go wild and do a bungee jump or get your heart racing on an ATV tour.

ACCOMMODATION

Phuket has something for everyone - from lavish five star resorts to backpackers' hotels. False reporting of the tsunami damage have done little to help fill the mostly empty 35,000 rooms, with properties in surrounding regions like Trang and Krabi also experiencing a slump simply by their proximity to Phuket, even though they weren't affected by the tsunami itself. Many operators are offering fantastic promotional deals in the hopes of attracting tourists back. Phuket has always been good value when compared to other tropical holiday destinations (like the Caribbean) and it's even more so now!

When it comes to choosing your hotel, there is no limit to what you can find. It more or less depends on what level of luxury you're after. Whilst impossible to list all the fine accommodations on offer in Phuket, at the upper end of the market one should definitely consider Laguna Phuket which includes the Dusit, Laguna Beach Resort, Banyan Tree, Sheraton Grande and Allamanda hotels. There are two spas, galleries, shopping, golf club and 30 bars and restaurants. Baan Sukhothai, Baan Yin Dee, Burasari, Club Andaman, Diamond Cliff, Impiana, Le Meridien, Grand Tropicana are all located at Patong and worth investigation. In and around Kata, check out Kata Beach Resort, Kata Palm Resort, Katathani Thani, The Aspasia and Mom Tris. At Karon, have a look at Andaman Sea View, Diamond Cottage, Hilton Phuket Arcadia and South Sea Karon. Kamala Beach area offers Kamala Bay Garden Resort, The Aquamarine as well as Kamala Beach Estate which is a luxury estate of houses, apartments and suites. At Surin try The Chedi or Twinpalms. Further north are the JW Marriott, Andaman White Beach and Pearl Village and Trisara. In the south around Chalong consider Le Royal Meridien and The Mangosteen.

With the exception of Diamond Cliff, Andaman Sea View (partially open) Impiana and Le Meridien (closed until further notice), all those listed above suffered no damage and are fully operational.

SPAS AND MASSAGE

This is one of Phuket's greatest offerings. Thai spas are world renown and Phuket boasts some of the finest. Most good hotels and resorts offer spa facilities. Angsana Spa, situate in Laguna Phuket, was high on my list of priorities. I thoroughly enjoyed my 90-minute Fusion session, a fabulous blend of Thai and Swedish techniques. Having arrived with a stiff neck and headache from all the driving,



Will you be there?



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the masseuse worked her magic and I left feeling relaxed and much more flexible, completely sated. The beautiful Asian themed décor, soothing background music and gentle voices of the staff set the tone from the moment you enter the front door. Enjoy a soothing footbath and cool drink to completely relax you, then take a private shower before the session begins. After your session, you'll be offered the choice of either showering or leaving the oils to pamper the skin. Your masseuse will then leave you in privacy to dress, whilst enjoying a fruity nibble and delicious herbal juice. Treatments offered include body polishes, massages, and facials.

Whatever your preference, from Thai to reflexology or total body health programs, Phuket has it. To make your spa experience the best it can be, shop around, be open to experimentation and, if looking for a little romance, definitely try a couple's treatment, perhaps on the beach or under a thatched roof next to a sparkling blue pool.

SHOPPING

Thailand is a shopper's paradise. Thai Silk is world renown and available just about anywhere. Locally made cotton garments are extremely cheap and there are quality tailors and dressmakers in abundance, with the more reputable ones offering a 24 hour service. Silverware, bronze, pewter, pottery, precious stones and jewellery are more good buys. Avoid turtle shell, ivory and souvenirs made from snakes and monitor lizards.

Most department stores won't barter, but you can haggle to your heart's content at the independently owned stores and definitely at the markets. The Thai's have a great sense of humour – smile and joke while bartering, and you can often reduce the price even further. As a guide, expect to pay at least 30% less than the original asking price. Mind you, the prices were so reasonable that I actually felt guilty bartering and often paid close to full price.

Many of the larger stores will ship internationally and will sort out all the necessary paperwork. Otherwise, for smaller items, pop along to the post office and they'll often wrap the item for you, too. The VAT (local tax) is currently 7%. If you intend to reclaim this on departure, the shopkeeper must complete a PP10 form. Purchases need to be over 5000 Baht to qualify. You'll need your passport

with you when shopping and claim the refund at your international departure point or via post. Be aware that you must leave within 60 days of purchase to qualify for a refund and you can't claim on gemstones or weapons.

SAILING EVENTS AND BOAT SHOWS

Phuket is considered to be the yachting centre for Southeast Asia and events are gaining international popularity. The waters from Singapore and Malaysia up the Malacca Straits to the Andaman Sea and Phuket play host to thousands of vessels and some of the finest marina's and boating facilities in the region. The climate is tropical with year-round sailing. November to April sees winds of 8-15 knots NE, while June to September brings the south west winds ranging from 10-18 knots.

Ao Chalong is where you'll need to clear immigration and customs for a fee of 300 Baht plus and additional 10 Baht per passenger. Have the ship's papers handy as well as all crew documentation and valid passports (and extra photocopies) and visas. Be aware that the ship's captain is liable for all passengers and crew and a bond is usually payable, although the Marine Association of Thailand are currently lobbying against this.

The Phuket Kings Cup Regatta is the longest running and possibly Asia's largest, taking place early December (4-10th 2005). This is a week long event that is a highlight on the Phuket social calendar with parties, five days of racing, around 1,000 participants and about 100 boats from over 20 countries.

Phuket Invitational Superyacht Rendezvous is for the owners, guests and crew of visiting superyachts and takes place the week before Christmas (19-20 December 2005). The event comprises a fishing tournament, cocktail party onboard a participating yacht as well as a gala dinner party with live entertainment and, of course, the sailing event. Principal sponsor Feedship, have recognised the event's importance and welcome the initiative. Many of the invited yachts are customers of SEAL Superyachts Asia who provide professional yacht support services in Phuket and also in Malaysia, The Seychelles, The Maldives, Myanmar and Singapore. Whether superyachts need assistance with government formalities, provisioning, crew placement or basic marine services, SEAL are



the folk who can assist.

The **Andaman Sea Rally** (13-27 January 2006) takes both sail and motor boats from Phuket to the Andaman Islands. Allow around 2 full weeks if you intend to complete the rally in both directions, with a few days in between to explore the 572 island archipelago. At time of going to print, 19 boats were already entered for the 2006 event.

Phang Nga Bay Regatta (27-31 January 2006) is a very relaxed event running during the Chinese New Year. The four day race takes yachts around spectacular sights, including Phi Phi and the bays of Krabi.

Evason Phuket Race Week 2005 will just be ending as we go to print with this issue. It was first held in 2004 and is expected to become an annual event. Grenville Fordham of organisers Image Asia said: "Running a new regatta in post-tsunami Phuket has given us more than a few headaches." Sponsorship has been a major issue, with the tsunami after effects being felt by all. However, things are looking up with Evason Phuket Resort taking on title sponsorship. Raimon Land, major property developers, are now also involved in the region's only major low-season event, as are the island's three marinas. Andy Dowden (ex King's Cup) and a director of Image Asia, is confident of over 30 boats this year. The strong low season breezes should see some exhilarating racing with the likes of Mark Horwood (Image Asia Attitude), Josh Lee (Vino by Watermark), Scott Duncanson (Securicor Som Tam Express) and David Bell (Pink Pussycat) fighting it out in the racing class. Bob Mott (Chameleon) and Andy Stephens (RPM Switchblade) will go head to head with 11 other confirmed entries in the IRC class. There are also 10 confirmed multihulls in two divisions, and a club class with six confirmed.

Phuket Boat Show (PIMEX) 2005 (8-11 December 2005) is into its third year with over 100 national and international exhibitors - everything from luxury yachts and charter boats to the latest in marine equipment and the very best of Phuket lifestyle. It is held at the Boat Lagoon and opens on the Kings Cup Regatta lay day. Four air conditioned halls, on-water exhibition berths and open air hardstand space, as well as bar, restaurant and hospitality areas ensure there is something for everyone.

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If you've ever considered owning a boat in a foreign port, there's never been a better time than now consider Phuket. Mooring fees are reasonable and the Government's recent abolition of the taxes on imported vessels, make it very attractive indeed. And, with the deals available during this post-tsunami recovery period, including cheaper-than-chips flights, now is the most opportune time to take a well-deserved holiday, plan a company conference in the region. Not only are you guaranteed the trip of a lifetime with an enviable price tag, you'll also be assisting Phuket operators to stay in business, ensuring that this paradise and its amenities aren't lost forever. ■



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