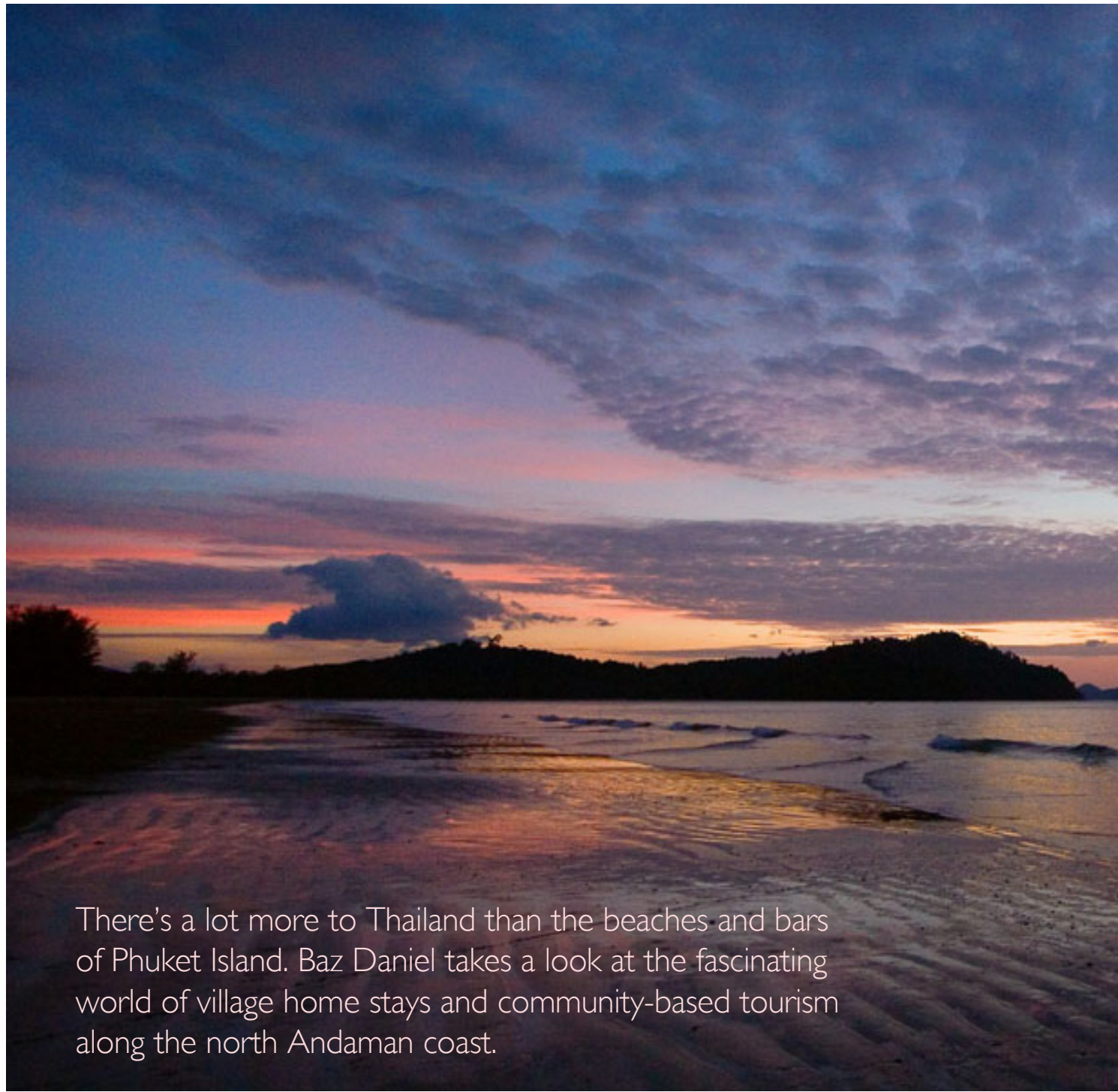




There's a lot more to Thailand than the beaches and bars of Phuket Island. Baz Daniel takes a look at the fascinating world of village home stays and community-based tourism along the north Andaman coast.



Phuket hosts visitors with a variety of interests and aspirations. For many, a vacation here means happily

whiling away their days lying prone on white sand as gentle waves break over their toes and they sip sweet libations. Then there are the “semi-adventurous” types who power through a relentless circuit of scuba and snorkelling trips, or swim in so-called deserted island lagoons, which just happen to have fifteen other tour boats visiting that day. However, for those who

travel with a well-honed sense of curiosity, there is always the urge to go deeper and scratch below the surface of standard tourist offerings to try to find a glimpse of authenticity.

Luckily, the surrounding countryside, not far from Phuket, offers the opportunity of becoming intimately involved in the lives of local villagers through an off-the-beaten track organization named Andaman Discoveries www.andamandiscoveries.com

Andaman Discoveries operate out of Kuraburi, a small town along the Andaman

Discovering the Real Thailand



coast about three hours north of Phuket. The town is barely a blip on the map; it is however the jumping off point for tours to Koh Surin National Park. Apart from that, you probably would never have heard of it. Here in this rather dusty little town you'll find the unprepossessing offices of Andaman Discoveries who run village home stays and community-based tourist programmes in the surrounding countryside and villages.

You can take a tour that lasts from a single day to a whole week, during which time

you will visit villages such as Ban Talae Nok, Tung Nam Dam, and Phak Triam. Ask your friends if they have heard of such places and you'll doubtless receive blank stares. This is a good thing because it means that tourism development has not yet arrived in such authentic little towns and villages and that their traditional coastal livelihoods are unspoiled and in tact. Andaman Discoveries offers a range of participatory activities such as soap making with the villagers, rubber tapping, fishing, hiking, snorkelling and cooking traditional meals.

การมีส่วนร่วมในการท่องเที่ยวแบบอาศัยอยู่กับคนท้องถิ่น
เปิดโอกาสให้ได้รับประสบการณ์ที่ไม่สามารถพบในการ
ท่องเที่ยวแบบธรรมดา

*Involvement in home stays and community-based
tourism opens up experiences that the casual tourist
rarely sees.*



การทำงานตามนิมิตหมายขององค์การบรรเทาทุกข์ภัยสึนามิ
อันดามันเหนือได้สร้างโอกาสใหม่ๆ จากหายนะ

*The visionary work of the North Andaman Tsunami
Relief organization has created new opportunities
out of disaster.*

There are a host of activities to choose from to fit the interests and fitness levels of every visitor.

The village of Ban Talae Nok suffered a heavy loss of life in the tsunami, with half the village being physically removed from the map. Out of the disaster new opportunities were sought and the North Andaman Tsunami Relief organization helped the villagers start the Ban Talae Nok soap cooperative. Two years later, the hand-made soap business is growing and employs fifteen of the village ladies, providing a welcome boost of employment, self-empowerment and income. Touring the soap-making facilities you'll receive an educational demonstration in the process and ingredients involved in producing these quality soaps. Seeing and hearing the employees discuss the cooperative imparts a sense of the personal impact of the tsunami and the rebuilding that has been created out of it.

Visitors who are looking for a more active form of participatory activity will not be disappointed by the energetic hike to Eagle Mountain. The mountain takes about two hours to climb and offers fabulous views and opportunities to explore and learn about the local flora and fauna on the way. Each of Andaman Discovery's activities is led by an English-speaking guide who accompanies the group for the duration of the tour. On the way to the top the guide will stop the group for talks and discussions at several points of interest, so that this interpretive hike imparts much wisdom

about the biodiversity and natural history of the area.

At one stop, for example, a beautiful tall banyan tree is grasped in a stranglehold by thick fig vines. The guide estimates that the tree has only about ten years left to live, but illustrates the interconnected relationships of nature by pointing out that the fig tree vines that will eventually kill the tree provides food for monkeys, birds, and even humans.

Near the top of the climb, a clearing opens a window to amazing views to the east, highlighting a tapestry of ecosystems from winding mangrove-lined rivers, to jungle carpeted mountains. The summit of Eagle Mountain affords a sweeping vista to the west along miles of undeveloped coast line, a unique Savannah type of grassland environment, where apart from the lack of zebras, you might think you were in Africa. Beyond is the vast expanse of the Andaman Sea, dotted with the verdant rocks of uninhabited islands. Taking in the view in both directions one is inspired to marvel at the expanse of undeveloped natural beauty of this region, just a short drive from the throngs in Phuket.

When you stay in one of the simple and abundantly welcoming village houses during your home stay, you'll be amazed by the warmth and friendliness of the villagers. Although their culture is so different from your own, you'll find a kinship of human sharing, which makes you feel like an honoured visitor,

greeted by an abundance of smiles on each and every meeting. This heartwarming authenticity is the core of the cultural exchange that is made possible by Andaman Discoveries. Spending time in the home of your host gives you a unique glimpse into the relaxed lifestyle of their extended family culture. After a full day of adventure you settle into simple, accommodation with your host family. Amenities are sparse, yet basic comforts are provided. If, however, the thought of missing nights of air-conditioning and soft luxurious bedding makes your hair stand on end, fear not as Andaman Discoveries offers a variety of alternative accommodation to suit all tastes.

Finding yourself eating in the traditional family style, circled by your hosts and savouring the array of simple, delicious local dishes laid before you, you quickly realize that the meals are a highlight of the tour. The culinary adventurers can partake in the whirlwind of preparation and cooking in the kitchen in order to help produce dinner. After an experience of such gracious hospitality you may feel the urge to impart a token of appreciation. One couple recently left a parting gift of a picture of themselves as well as a calendar displaying birds from their home of England; both items still hang prominently from the thatched bamboo wall of their hosts.

If words like “uninhabited” and “pristine” stir your blood you will definitely want to partake in the snorkelling trip. Pushing off from an empty beach in a traditional Thai long boat you’re soon cruising along with nothing but the endless blue of sea and sky all around you. Drifting past islands that almost blind you with the intensity of their white sand, palm trees,

rain forest vegetation and rocks, you get the sensation that paradise lost has been found once more. The boat is soon anchoring near a reef where the only other boats you may see are those of local fishermen. Flipping overboard into the warm waters you can swim amid stunningly colourful corals and abundant marine life. The natural splendour and solitude of the trip will leave you tanned, smiling and thanking your lucky stars that you linked up with Andaman Discoveries.

Bodhi Garrett who founded Andaman Discoveries is proud to relate that several recent visitors have even gone so far as to say that their tour provided a “life-changing experience”. The welcoming villagers that they came to know gave them a unique glimpse into the traditional, unadulterated lifestyles that exist in a simple dance with time and progress. The chance to experience the pristine natural environment of the region surrounding Kuraburi is one that is rare in our modern world and particularly so close to a developed region like Phuket.

It feels good to know that your activities are helping to steer the ship of development in a way that values and honours these natural areas and traditional lifestyles. It also feels good to travel this way, and participate in such an authentic experience, which is also helping restore the lives and livelihoods of those affected by the tsunami.

It’s a view of the real Thailand which is well worth experiencing.

For more information or to book a tour visit Andaman Discoveries on the web at www.andamandiscoveries.com.

นักท่องเที่ยวได้รับประสบการณ์การทำสบู่และรีดยางพาราในชั้นต้น แต่สีสันของการท่องเที่ยวแบบนี้อยู่ที่การรับประทานอาหารร่วมกับเจ้าบ้าน

Visitors experience soap making and rubber curing at first hand, but group meals are always the highlight.

PHOTOS BY NATR

