

Sarah Lipman: Ko Phi Phi holds lessons for Haiti

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KO PHI PHI, Thailand -- As the ferryboat carrying hundreds of travelers and their battered backpacks headed toward the pier at Ko Phi Phi, I was unsure of what to expect of the island, yet excited to see it.

Aside from the superficial reasons to visit Ko Phi Phi -- where the 2000 [Leonardo DiCaprio](#) movie "The Beach" was filmed and which is touted in guidebooks as the "ultimate paradise" -- I was interested in the island for other reasons. On Dec. 26, 2004, the island was nearly destroyed by Sumatra's 9.0 magnitude earthquake, which traveled nearly 700 mph and resulted in a devastating tsunami that hit the Andaman Sea shores an hour later.

Though I did not know the island prior to the tsunami, I recall hearing of the Boxing Day "wave that shook the world," as it is referred to in and around the Andaman Sea coastline and surrounding islands. The monumental wave hit 12 countries and left 5,395 dead, 8,457 injured and 2,932 missing in Thailand alone. I remember seeing accounts on the nightly world news and reading of the destruction and the missing.

And not unlike the efforts currently taking place in light of the 7.0 magnitude earthquake that hit Haiti, I can recall watching telethons and [Red Cross](#) pledges to aid efforts to find the missing and start over amid the rubble.

Even prior to the quake in Haiti, I was eager to speak with survivors of the killer waves and hear their stories of courage and rebuilding. They survived the unthinkable on their east coast, something seen mainly in apocalyptic movies and infrequently in world events.

I didn't have to look far to find my first survivor, a small restaurant owner (a restaurant is more akin to a street cart in Thailand, with lawn chairs and foldup tables set up near a hot plate and mini-fridge) named Samee. Known as Mr. Soda by Thai locals, Western expatriates and backpackers, Samee has a sign posted next to his kitchen that briefly relates his story, inviting the diner to learn more about him over a cheap meal of pad thai and a mango shake.

After the waves hit, Samee found himself trapped beneath a building, struggling for survival. As Ko Phi Phi slowly began to rebuild its place, so did Samee. With the help of an English friend, he opened his food stall, now wildly popular among locals and tourists for its authentic Thai dishes and fruit smoothies at a budget price.



Samee and the Thais living on Ko Phi Phi credit Buddha for their survival and the survival of the island after such tragic devastation. It is not without his help and guidance that the locals of the island believe they could have rebuilt.

Immediately following the tsunami, there was a huge decrease in tourism to the area, for fear of another wave and time needed for redevelopment. However, in recent years tourism has picked back up and travelers not so keen on world news might never know of the devastation that once occurred.

At first glance, much of the island seems to be intact, as though no devastation had occurred. It still looks as picturesque as the postcards, with long-tailed boats floating in turquoise water. The sea still twinkles at night under the open sky, just as it did in "The Beach."

A walk farther into the island though, reveals signs pointing to the "Tsunami Village" where there is still much construction to be done. Under those signs, there are various newer signs with tsunami evacuation instructions and locations -- signs erected post-tsunami.

For me, the trip to Ko Phi Phi comes with uncanny timeliness as I catch glimpses of the news about Haiti. It made listening to the tsunami survivors that much more meaningful.

It also made me more hopeful for those in Haiti suffering the devastation in the wake of the earthquake and its aftershocks. Starting over is possible. Rebuilding is hard -- as the Thais on Ko Phi Phi can attest -- but with a little help from the rest of the world, in due time, Haiti will rise above the ruin.

Sarah Lipman is documenting her travels around the globe.

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