

# Thailand

## Life after the tsunami on James Bond Island

By Dominick A. Merie

Mysterious rock fortresses zoom out of the Andaman Sea like skyscrapers as you begin your descent at Phuket International Airport in southwest Thailand. It is an eerie sight, resembling a futuristic space colony.

This is Phang Nga (Pang Na) Bay, more commonly known as James Bond Island because several "007" movies have been filmed here, including practically the entire shoot of "The Man With The Golden Gun."

The area was also one of the hardest hit during the 2004 tsunami. About 6000 of the deaths-well over half the national count-occurred along this section of the coast. But for the strangely shaped rock islands, some of them the equivalent of 15-story buildings, the towering tsunami waves that covered them was like a brief return to many centuries ago.

The most accepted theory is that all of these islands were at one time entirely submerged in the sea. As the waters receded over many thousands of years, the exotic rock and limestone formations emerged and surged

upwards. There are high caves on some of the islands that contain seashell deposits, which lends strong support to this theory.

Who, or what, lived in these caves? That's still a riddle with numerous theories. But prehistoric rock art has been carved or painted onto the walls and ceilings of these caves-fish, bats, birds, elephants and some creatures that don't seem to fit any category.

It's about a 90-minute ride from Phuket airport to Phang Nga. Except for the ruins of a few small buildings, Phuket is back and running, completely rebuilt with new resorts opening regularly. There are few signs of the horrific tsunami, save for the souvenir shacks capitalizing on the disaster and an



occasional tsunami museum. But every local you talk to remembers exactly what he or she was doing that particular morning, and all seem comfortable relating their experiences.

We checked in at a relatively new boutique resort, The Sarojin, and proceeded to Phang Nga Bay early the next morning, arriving at low tide. We pushed off in a two-man motorboat through a narrow bayou-like channel rimmed by mangroves.

The trees were seemingly petrified into positions that were both grotesque and beautiful at the same time, their roots twisted like serpents under the clear water. A long list of reptiles, many of them poisonous, live in the

mangroves. We saw several snakes curled asleep on overhead branches and strange birds with long necks called the helmeted hornbill. Our guide, Lek, said hornbills can often grow to five-feet. Suddenly we burst into the open waters of the Andaman Sea and the panorama of the rock fortresses begins. It is a magnificent sight.

The first rock island we approach is Ko Panyi, a Muslim fishing village built on stilts in a nook of the limestone cliffs. We will return here for lunch, as this is the last human settlement before heading into James Bond country.

Some of the towering rock islands have distinctive silhouettes and local



fishermen have named them accordingly-Ko Ma Chu (Puppy Island), Ko Khao Tapu (Nail Island) and so on, although the latter looked more like an upside-down eggplant than a nail.

Finally we approach the star of this aquatic show, Ko Ping Khan (Leaning Island) where the James Bond films were shot. We docked and were able to walk about the island, once we got by the vendors lined up selling coral and shells that should have remained in the sea, along with some tacky 007 mementoes.

There are a couple of caves containing stalactites and stalagmites you can explore, and the hearty can climb to the top of James Bond Island for perhaps the most spectacular view of the bay.

Then it was outward into the sea again, where one scenic treasure after another unfolds. There are some islands you sail through rather than around, under aquatic grottoes where the waters appear to change colors several times.

Now it was time for lunch at Ko Panyi, but no exotic traditional fare greeted us. New piers containing restaurants have been built in front of the village, and the food is overpriced and fairly bland. Better to continue to the rickety village on stilts and try something like green papaya salad or sticky rice and shrimp in a banana leaf.



The roughly 2000 people in the village are said to have descended from two Java families who arrived here some 200 years ago. Besides alcohol, dogs and pigs are also forbidden. There are a number of small stands selling trinkets, and the residents seem genuinely friendly. As a main source of income, they raise grouper in floating cages, selling them to mainland restaurants. We were scheduled for a cooking class the next

day at The Sarojin, but instead of a kitchen or outdoor patio, the setting was the jungle. We drove to small dock about 45 minutes away where small boats with reclining seats and headrests awaited us. Then we motored off, one to a boat, perhaps looking like Pharaohs and Cleopatras.

About 30 minutes later we arrived at our jungle perch, where a "headwaiter" and the chef were waiting. In this beautiful but unusual setting, we



prepared yam nue yang (grilled beef salad), gaeng kiew warn gai (green chicken curry) and tom yam goong (spicy prawn soup). Then we were led by the headwaiter to a solitary table for two, with a sweeping view of our

spacious dining area.

A white linen lunch in the jungle--- now what could be more civilized than that?

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Writers Assn. He is based in Montreal, Quebec) For further information on southwest Thailand, try the website [www.tourismthailand.org](http://www.tourismthailand.org). For The Sarojin try [www.sarojin.com](http://www.sarojin.com))

Almost everyone living in Phuket and Phang Nga when the tsunami struck on Dec. 26, 2004 has a personal story to tell about the horrific event. We heard many during our brief stay there, but the most heartbreaking one came from our driver, a young man about 30, on the way to the airport as we were leaving. This is his story.

He was working as a cook at a restaurant near Patong Beach. One second he was preparing an omelet, and the next he was sucked up into a

mammoth wave that destroyed the small structure and carried him away like a helpless fish.

"I could not swim," he said, "the water was too strong." But he was whisked to the crest of the wave where he could breathe, and then deposited like a rag doll, battered, bruised and semi-conscious, on the third floor of a nearby building. Along the way, he was cut and injured on many parts of his body after being struck by shards of wood, glass and perhaps some other people who had been sucked up by the monster wave..

The nightmarish ordeal lasted less than two minutes, but he spent two months in a hospital recuperating. A



brother and sister weren't as lucky; they perished. His mother died a year later "of a broken heart." His father died a few months after, also heartbroken. Out of a family of five, one survivor. The young man recounted this ordeal with that typical Thai smile, but with the saddest eyes I have ever seen. "I hope you come back again," he said as he dropped us at the airport. "Looks like a nice day."