

“Paradise Lost and Found”: Beach and Island Tourism in Phuket, Thailand

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Introduction

Prior to the rise of island beach resorts as tourists destinations, it was primarily the sea which was visited for its medicinal properties (Page and Connell, 2006), an extension of the European practice of frequenting spa towns, although the sea initially “was there for fishing and not for gazing on” (Urry, 2002: 29). But the rise of seaside resorts happened when holidays became an established policy of employers, to support the “idea of civilizing the rough working class” of England (Urry citing Rojek, 2002: 19). These resorts hosted this social class in the south of England and later in the north at the turn of the twentieth century (Urry, 2002). Thus, the creation of coastal resorts and the more organized public practice of sea-bathing marked the beginning of the institutionalization of the seaside (Shaw and Williams, 2004), although by the second part of the eighteenth century “spontaneous and haphazard use of the beach” already took place (Shaw and Williams, 2004: 217). In due course, the English experience was replicated in other parts of Europe, including France, Belgium, Spain, and the North German states (see Shaw and Williams, 2004). However, decades of incremental growth in these tourist sites have subsequently resulted in rapid urbanization. Hence, mass tourism and migration, especially in the British case, turned these places into densely populated destinations (Urry, 2002).

While the tourist gaze, a Western phenomenon (Urry, 2002), became initially entrenched in Europe, it eventually spread to their peripheries, the so-called “pleasure periphery” (Shaw and Williams, 2004). At almost the same time that the development of tourism was taking place in England, the English colonies in the Caribbean were also becoming positioned to accommodate foreign tourists, as early as the 1890s. In Jamaica, by way of an example, the Jamaican International Exhibition in 1891 was held in its capital, Kingston. In anticipation of this event, Wilkinson (1997) cites the passage of laws like the Jamaica Hotels Law in 1891 and its amendment in 1904 to lure private investment in hotel construction, although these attempts were rather unsuccessful as the government later had to take over these establishments. However, tourism flourished after World War I, and by 1924 it was already the fourth largest industry after fruit (bananas), sugar, and coffee production. In 1922, the Jamaica Tourist Trade Development Board was founded “exclusively for overseas advertising” to market Jamaica as tourist destination (Wilkinson citing Taylor, 1997:192); and thus the initial construction of the island as “paradise” had begun.

In contrast, the Mediterranean coastline and the islands that dot it became enormously popular after World War II when attention moved away from the sea to the sun. The latter was “presumed to produce health and sexual attractiveness” (Urry citing Fiske, Ahmed and Lenced and Bolster, 2002:35), foregrounding the tanned body as the ideal. Tourism picked up this viewpoint, and its diffusion downwards through the social classes resulted in package holidays to Spain, France, Greece, Italy, and later Yugoslavia, North Africa and Turkey (Urry 2002:35-36).

The Pacific Islands, for their part, had attracted and fascinated various groups of people over time, long before the incursion of the tourist industry. Sailors in the 16th century colonized islands in Indonesia and the Philippines for their colonial empires. Even painters were inspired to portray the islands as idyllic and exotic, as in Gauguin's rendition of Tahitian life. Later, European and American anthropologists made numerous expeditions to study the kinship patterns, behaviors, and attitudes of the numerous tribes scattered around the Pacific. Meanwhile, intrepid travelers sought out the islands for their remoteness and hence the promise of adventure. But with the advent of the touristic gaze in these islands, most notably after World War II, they became "visible" as sites marked exclusively for leisure activities; among the so-called "sunworshippers." They provided a perfect getaway because sunshine is almost guaranteed the whole year round. Thus, by the close of the twentieth century, tourism was a major industry and an economic strategy for most of the Pacific Islands states (Harrison, 2003). Moreover, the idea of spending a holiday on palm-fringed and sun-drenched tropical isles with beaches of powdery white sand in these areas represented the "dream" getaway to many people, in part attributed to the proliferation of advertising in the form of brochures, posters, and postcards. These travelogues depicted these islands as the quintessential tropical destination as Cooper had authoritatively analyzed (Cooper 1994; see also Cohen, 1996; and Lockhart et.al., 1997). Indeed, mass tourism has become synonymous with the combined sun, sea, and sand experience.

The purpose of the above sketch is to show how tourism area research gradually moved to those places where island tourism had had a remarkable economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impact. Thus, many studies dealt first with Europe, most notably the Mediterranean coastline of Spain, and France, and the isles of Cyprus and Malta. This was followed by studies of Caribbean tourism. Even though there had already been case studies of Pacific tourism in countries such as Fiji (see Oppermann, 1997), from the late 1980s and the 1990s, a number of scholars carried out studies of tourism in the wider Asia Pacific region (see Richter, 1989; Hitchcock et.al. 1993; Hall and Page, 1996; Hall, 1997; Picard and Wood, 1997; Eades and Yamashita, 1997; Chang, 2001; Apostolopoulos and Gayle, 2002; Harrison, 2003). Among the Southeast Asian nations, it is Thailand and Malaysia which have attracted the most international visitors (based on WTO figures), and hence both countries dominate the regional tourism industry in terms of tourist arrivals and income generation.

This paper discusses some aspects of Thailand tourism, focusing specifically on Phuket and nearby islands, based on research carried out between October 2003 and July 2004. This was before the tsunami that struck Phuket and the nearby *Phi Phi* islands on December 26, 2004. It examines the dynamics of beach and island tourism vis-à-vis the participation of the Thai state, as represented by its prime marketing agency, the Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT), and the local people, with their own set of culture and practices. Moreover, this study also discusses the process of "indexing" (Rojek, 1997) as a marketing tool in ensuring the reproduction of island tourism, together with the issue of sustainability.

Beach Tourism in Phuket

Traders, mostly Chinese, were the first foreigners to flock into the island of Phuket. They made great fortunes in the rubber plantation business and tin mining production (Cohen,

1996). The Portuguese-style houses in the capital, Phuket Town, are the most tangible evidence of its glorious past. These ventures eventually declined over the years, and it is the profits derived from the tourism industry at present that fuel the island's economic life. In Phuket, tourism is confined to areas away from the town center. The tourists congregate along the coast, especially the famous Patong beach. Here an urban community has evolved which did not exist before, a phenomenon found not just in Phuket, but in many places with beaches elsewhere, such as Kuta in Bali, Indonesia. This difference is significant for the relations between hosts and guests. For instance, in Chiang Mai, since tourist activities exist primarily within the old Chiang Mai area where local people live, the tourists have a higher level of interaction with the locals; but in Phuket, tourist interaction is most often limited to among themselves.

Cohen's field studies in the south of Thailand, in Phuket and Koh Samui, as described in "Thai Tourism" (Cohen 1996) preceded this research. While the foregoing exposition relies heavily on his ideas, the aim of this paper is to locate Phuket tourism historically, together with the role of the local people and their responses to the tourism industry. Their economic responses to the onset of tourism in Phuket are most evident in Cohen's four types of entrepreneurs namely:

“(1) the locals – natives of the villages immediately adjoining the beaches; (2) islanders – inhabitants of other areas of the island, particularly the island urban center; (3) mainlanders – people from other parts of the country, particularly the capital Bangkok; (4) foreigners – Westerners living on the islands (1996: 218).”

Investigating the tourist developments in two of the oldest beaches in Phuket – Patong and Kata/Karon – reveals the interplay of power between these types of entrepreneurs. Accordingly, Kata/Karon saw the initial development while Patong grew into a “city” in the early 1990s. When backpackers, the first foreign tourists to arrive, visited the Kata/Karon beach, the locals serviced their simple needs. However, with the arrival subsequently of thousands of tourists, the locals were unable to provide professional services. On the other hand, Patong beach, prior to 1979, was almost empty; but, when Kata/Karon stagnated, interest shifted to Patong. Starting in 1979, six new bungalows were constructed by outsiders, but eventually they were joined by numerous hotels, paving the way for the entry of mainland Thai and/or foreign-owned enterprises – a direct consequence of the Thai state's incorporation of Phuket tourism into its overall economic strategy.

In the late 1970s, the Tourist Organization of Thailand, the precedent of TAT, commissioned Thai and Japanese consulting firms to come up with a development plan for Phuket. Accordingly, this favored “high-quality tourist enterprises” and thereby invited “investments by outsiders-mainlanders or foreigners who possess the means and know-how for such undertakings” (Tourist Organization of Thailand 1979 Plan, cited in Cohen, 1996: 221). As a result of this plan, both Patong and Kata/Karon beaches came to possess a multitude of tourist-related establishments. In 1993 alone, Kata/Karon had “550 service establishments on the beach, including about eighty restaurants, a hundred bars, thirty five travel agencies, and a wide variety of shops and personal services” (Cohen 1996: 229). But it was Patong which experienced the most rapid and intensified development. Aside from the high-rise hotels, it became host to three shopping malls, bank offices, money changing booths, and franchised food shops such as McDonald's, Starbucks, and Haagen Daz. It was most alive at night, when the night clubs (some displaying British,

Australian, or Irish flags), the restaurants at Thanon Thawiwong, and the infamous transvestite cabaret bar at Soi Bangla opened their doors. The touristic development so far outlined exhibited the shift from what Cohen calls “craft” to “industry” tourism. Hence, in terms of development, it was the outsiders, whether mainland Thai or foreigners, who provided the largest investments. The end result was the dislocation of the locals from their traditional occupations.

Observations during my field visits indicated that the local people involved in the industry devoted much of their time rendering tourist-oriented services as taxi drivers, restaurant workers, vendors, and the like. It became apparent that these people were beginning to base their identities on their occupational roles. While their participation was an expected consequence in direct response to the opportunities provided by the industry, there were results that need to be addressed. For instance, cursory observation in one of the island tours I joined bound for Phi Phi Island – more about this later – showed that local people had shifted their occupations from fishing jobs to become photographers, island guides, and waiters. The seasonality of the industry had repercussions upon the locals’ economic situation. Thus, when I visited Patong beach at the start of the off-season, in early May 2004, the tour promoter who booked my trip to Phi Phi had to sit around for hours during the day, patiently waiting for potential clients. Stores I frequented during my first visit near Thanon Rat-u-thit had closed up. Moreover, during the time when this research was conducted, Thailand was reeling from the relatively low tourist turnout brought about by SARS, the bird flu virus, and the impact of the Iraq invasion on the travel industry. When interviews were conducted with the locals, asking about their activities during the “SARS season,” the respondents told me that they were still relying on their tourist-related jobs. In other words, since the Thai state has integrated tourism in its overall economic scheme, then state intervention is also needed to provide support to the local people, such as training for other occupations during off-peak periods for tourist arrivals.

In almost all island beach resorts, the metaphor of paradise has been a major marketing strategy. Indeed, a great deal of researches in tourism studies has focused on the use of brochures, guides, and postcards as earlier stated that portray (or, better, misrepresent) islands as paradise (see Cooper, 1994; King, 1996). This is, of course, similar to the strategies of nation-states in paid advertisements in international media like CNN or BBC, such as “Incredible India,” “Malaysia, Truly Asia,” and “Unseen Thailand.” These often reinforce what Said (1978) calls the “Orientalist” construction of the east. Travel agents also participate in this image-making through their websites and publication of brochures advertising their package deals. Thus for its part, Phuket, Thailand’s biggest island located in the Andaman Sea, acquired the moniker of “Pearl of the Andaman” (see Parkes, 2001) to ignite the tourists’ imaginations. Cohen’s book (Cohen 1996) exposes the use of this paradise metaphor in connection with the islands in the south of Thailand. However, in this section this paper seeks to foreground a phenomenon not noted by Cohen, the practice of traveling to pristine islands to conjure up or recover a lost paradise.

In the mid 1970s, Phuket was not thought of as a top holiday destination; however, in less than a decade, the two beaches, Kata/Karon and Patong underwent major transformation that encouraged mass tourism to flourish. Patong beach, the site of this research, virtually became a city by itself. During the peak season, the beach became overcrowded, and was always raucous when bars open at night. In this scenario, where then was the promised paradise, or at least the privacy to be left alone away from the

prying eyes of thousands of tourists? Chris Taylor, longtime *Lonely Planet* writer, has quite cynically concluded that the exclusivity of tourism lies depends on the price of its day rates. He says, “if you can afford them, welcome to paradise, sanitized, home to the right people, the unruly local world kept at bay by the security guards and the fences” (Taylor 2004: 67). In Phuket the era of exclusivity was marked by the opening of the integrated beach resort, exemplified by Laguna Phuket, with starting day rates between \$250-300, which were “planned environments with a number of hotels which share infrastructure, recreational features and other facilities” (Wong 1998: 248). For those mass tourists who could not afford the cost of a totally exclusive resort but desired a slice of paradise, so to speak, the island tours could offer such an experience. Hence, private TAT-licensed operators dominated the conduct of tours within and beyond the island. In contrast to the northern city of Chiang Mai, where pictures of hill tribes are ubiquitous, images of pristine islands were to be seen all over Phuket. One tour took Patong tourists to cruise or to snorkel in far away Phi Phi Island. Although these tours were arranged to allow tourists to spend time beyond Phuket’s beaches, they also fitted the overall touristic experience they was promised, especially in brochures and travel advertisements. The images of these materials give an impression of tranquility or serenity, indeed, the ultimate holiday experience, but which Patong tourists could no longer experience because of the rabid commercialism in the area. Thus, as one brochure said, “:Let’s Explore ... The Wonder of Paradise *MAYA PHI PHI KHAI ISLAND* Take Leisure and ...leave your cares behind.” The packaged tours to *Phi Phi*, away from the madding crowd of Patong beach thus served to regain the promise of paradise attributed to Phuket, which had been lost due to intense tourist activities.

Another reason why some Patong tourists engaged in these island tours, aside from the influence of the paradise metaphor, has something to do with a site having been “indexed.” Chris Rojek speaks of this process, where a particular sight has acquired intertextual representations from say, brochures, flyers, poems, novels, movies, and the like, thereby popularizing the sight and making it more accessible. Rojek writes:

The process of indexing refers to the set of visual, textual and symbolic representations to the original object. It is important to recognize that representational culture is not a uniform entity. Rather one might speak of files of representation. A file of representation refers to the medium and conventions associated with signifying a sight. As examples of files of representation relevant to tourist culture one might point to travellers’ tales, printed texts (travel flyers, brochures, as well as novels and poems such as Joyce’s “Dublin” in *Ulysses*..., dramatic and cinematic traditions... “New York” in the films of Martin Scorsese...Metaphorical, allegorical and false information remains a resource in the pattern of tourist culture as an object of reverie, dreaming and speculation. (1997: 53)

In Phuket tourism, two island tours came to be marketed based on the use of their landscape as a backdrop in the making of Hollywood movies. One was an afternoon cruise to Phang-Nga Bay to an island popularly known now as “Jims Bond” Island, a location for the James Bond movie, *The Man with the Golden Gun*. Another tour featured a cruise to Maya bay, made famous in the Leonardo Di Caprio movie, *The Beach*, based on Alex Harland’s novel of the same name. Rojek in this regard notes the indexing of tourist sights bearing cinematic influences.

Tour guides frame the history of the area in terms of set-pieces from the film... Cinematic events are dragged on to the physical landscape and the physical landscape is then reinterpreted in terms of the cinematic events. (1997: 54)

Thus at Maya Bay, the guide carefully narrated the scenes in the *The Beach* that were filmed in that area, including how Di Caprio, the star, casually wandered around the island. When the boat set its anchor, he then invited everyone for a 30-minute swim, to snorkel, or a mere to sunbathe. However, the peace and tranquility of the island soon gave way to the arrival of loads of tourists brought by other boats. Hence, once again, the paradise image was shattered.

To conclude, these island tours implicitly reflect the search for the authentic, the hidden and the mysterious following MacCannell (1999), indeed, the same rationale that informs hill tribe tourism in Chiang Mai in which I also participated in. These activities, devised for the tourist gaze, are intended to fill the gap in tourist areas that have waned in relation to their original image or promise of uniqueness or tranquility, most often due to urbanization. Ultimately, this process results in the relentless search for attractins that are uninhabited or deserted. And this is the philosophy behind the TAT-led “Unseen Thailand” campaign which calls for the encouragement, exploitation and presentation tourists, both local and foreign, of previously unseen tourist sites (Bangkok Post 2004a). Therefore, it is suggested here that even though tourists’ desires may or may not include the need for the “authentic” – since, following Cohen, they may have various intentions (Selwyn 1996: 3) – the state, through its various agencies such as TAT or TAT-licensed tour agencies in the case of Thailand, persists in projecting the “authentic” by way of exotic representations. This is where problems occur because certain practices are advanced and favored which in the long run undermine the sustainability of the industry.

To illustrate, a *Bangkok Post* reprint taken from an editorial of *Khao Sod* entitled “Don’t rush to exploit” dealt with the discovery of four thousand wild orchids in Mancha Khiri district of Khon Khaen province. Proceeding from this development, the TAT, accordingly, declared it as a new attraction in line with its “Unseen in Thailand” campaign. The editorial criticized this hasty action because it lacked the necessity of detailed academic research to determine whether those orchids can withstand the impact of tourism. It states:

The idea of turning the orchid grove into tourist attraction is fine. But the TAT must first make a detailed study of the area... Academic research must be carried out to determine whether a natural attraction can be opened to tourists. If tourism can be developed, a further study must be made to determine how many tourists should be accepted.

Strict measures must be adopted to protect our fragile eco-system. This national heritage could be lost forever if we are careless, or put profits before environmental protection...

The opinion of local people must also be taken into consideration before any tourism development is carried out. (Bangkok Post 2004b)

While the editorial does not portray tourism *per se* in bad light, its main argument is grounded on the primacy of environmental protection of fragile eco-system over careless

state action. Thus, while it is widely acknowledged that tourism is good for the nation-state's economy, it is also believed that it destroys the environment, which in the long run will bring more harm than good.

For instance Phuket, in the early 1990s, has started to experience environmental hazards brought about by tourism, such as water shortage, sewerage, waste, and pollution (Cohen 1996: 228) There have been measures taken to address those problems such as building a waste water disposal system, but still with the volume of tourists coming in, Phuket cannot manage itself at a sustainable level. Phuket's provincial government has armed itself with an incinerator to deal with the 350 tons of garbage; though the machine can only handle 250 tons, resulting in between 50 and 100 tons piling up daily. With regards to water consumption, the province/island can only supply up to 30,000 cubic meters, but the demand is 40,000 cubic meters (*Siangtai Times* 2004a). This situation is aggravated during the tourist peak season when the tourists, estimated at 400,000, outnumber the locals who number only around 300,000 (Sukin 2004: 1A). This situation prompted Phuket's provincial authorities to conduct a seminar, and one solution proposed was zoning Phuket, "the first ever in the history of the island" (Sukin 2004: 1A). And it is not only Phuket: Koh Samui is experiencing the same fate (Bandisak 2004: 2), and so are some of the other islands featured in the island tours, like the Similan Islands, Thailand's prime diving spot (Fein 2004:8A). For this research, I had the chance to explore that area, and I observed the unregulated number of boats coming to these islands, with hordes of divers. Similarly, a writer talks about the state of Thailand's national parks, wherein some have seen the frenzied construction of park facilities to keep up with the competition from other resorts (Techawongtham 2003: 15). Clearly, these disastrous conditions should lead to a review of the downside of the industry or, more concretely, its negative impact upon the environment and the ecological balance. Such a review would allow tourism to flourish, but at the same time encourage the protection of the resources upon which the industry depends.

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