

“The Impact of Tsunami on Tourism Enquiries in Thailand: One Year Aftermath”

By

**Pongsak Hoontrakul ^π & Sunil Sahadev
Sasin of Chulalongkorn Univ., Thailand**

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It has been one year since the tsunami devastated the costal areas of south east Asia. One of the sectors that really had to bear the brunt of the catastrophe was the tourism Industry. Since the tsunami occurred during the peak of tourist season in Thailand, its impact was severe with thousands of tourists who came to enjoy their holiday in Thailand perishing to the deadly waves. The destruction of the infrastructure was severe with hundreds of hotel properties damaged either partially or completely. However with some help from the government and external agencies, the Thailand tourism industry had been able recover from the set back in no time. Many of these affected hotels have been rebuilt and are now functioning normally. The main set back was for the tourist destinations in the Andaman area like Phuket and Krabi. In fact the greatest devastation was seen in the island of Ko Phi Phi and Khao Lak (see Fig. 1).

An equally important factor to the revival of the industry has been psychological problem associated with tsunami. Since the aftermath of the tsunami has been covered in great detail in many of the major world networks, people saw the destruction, heart breaking stories of the demise of the loved ones and also gory pictures of dead bodies, and the injured. Certainly these fleeting images will come to the memories of several potential tourists when they decide to come to Thailand for a vacation. The impact of this would be long standing and difficult to erase from the public memory for a long time. While these problems persist, it is equally important to find whether there has been any shift in the enquiry patterns for specific locations in Thailand pre and post tsunami.

We looked at the data provide by www.MoreThailand.com, a well-known online inbound travel intermediary which operates from Bangkok to investigate any change in

^π All correspondence is at Pongsak Hoontrakul, Senior Research Fellow, Sasin-GIBA, Chulalongkorn University, Sasa Patasala Building, 8th floor, Soi Chulalongkorn 12 (2), Phyathai Road, Bangkok 10330, Thailand. Private Tel. (662) 954 1689 ; Fax (662) 954 1690 ; Email : pongsak@hoontrakul.com

patterns. Two major points were noted (i) shift in interests within a particular destination and (ii) shift in the nationality profile of the visitors. Since the main impact of the tsunami was felt on the two main Andaman sea based destinations viz. Krabi and Phuket, we limited our search to these main destinations. The results prove to be quite interesting.

In Phuket, Patong beach retains its position as the most preferred place by more than 55% of the visitors pre and post tsunami. There is also a renewed interest in Kata beach post tsunami. As a total percentage, the Kata beach attracted almost 30% tourists after tsunami while before tsunami it was only 16%. This jump in customer preference is significant even when we consider the relatively small sample size. This renewed interest is probably a result of a lack of interest in other destinations like Karon beach, Kamala Beach, Rawai beach and Nai Harn beach. In terms of nationality profile, there seems to be very little difference between pre tsunami as well as post tsunami in Phuket.

Krabi was severely affected by the tsunami. There seems to be a significant shift in the pattern of demand. Before tsunami, the most preferred destination within Krabi was Koh Phi Phi. In the tsunami aftermath, tourist arrival pattern has changed in Phi Phi island. Before the tsunami, almost 35% of those who visited Krabi went to Phi Phi island, while now hardly 15% of the visitors prefer Phi Phi island. The major beneficiary of this shift is Ao Nang and Railay beach. Ao Nang has become the preferred destination for most of Krabi holiday makers. Almost half of those who visit Krabi prefer Ao Nang that was just 25% before Tsunami. Similarly Railay beach now attracts almost 30% of those who visit Krabi which is up from about 15% before tsunami. However the total number of visitors to Krabi has seen a marked decline with just half the number of visitors now visiting Krabi during this high season compared to the high season before tsunami. In terms of nationality profile, there is little difference with the same pattern seen in the enquiry before and after the tsunami. Yet, it is interesting to note that Scandinavian tourists have shifted their destination from Phi Phi Island to Ao Nang, perhaps due to the lack of hotel availability in the island.

Figure I : Tsunami Impacted Areas Map in Southern Thailand on December 26, 04. Source: www.MoreThailand.com

