

Paradise 'rises above the waves'

Koh Phi Phi, Thailand, was declared uninhabitable following the December 2004 tsunami. The wave struck the island in its heart. Official figures list 753 people as dead. At least 1,000 more are missing. But, five months on, this community has undergone a rebirth. Islanders and volunteers have worked side by side to clean streets and reefs, repair homes and bring back smiles. This island paradise is back on its feet and ready for business.

Two expats, one concerned tourist, two wheelbarrows, and well over 7,000 tons of rubble. This was the scene on January 28, 2005 when Darren Windett, a British security systems' designer, stepped ashore at an abandoned Phi Phi island. Darren was accompanied by Jenny and Neil, a couple who lost their business and nearly their lives in the December 26 tsunami.



Within a week, hand-written flyers posted in nearby resorts had attracted a further 70 volunteers, largely tourists, to work by their side. The Thai armed forces had cleared the majority of the bodies and bungalow ruins, but the island was still far from habitable. Together they started the task of clearing up, which, in the absence of either international aid agency support or further government funding, was completed almost entirely by hand.

“When I arrived in February, the streets were still shoulder height in rubble, with parts of the island completely cut off,” said Dion Wells, a US Sales Manager, who quit his job to come and help. “Cleaning by hand was really hard, but it meant we recovered evidence about who was here,” explained Wells. “We collected hundreds of passports, identity cards, luggage labels; anything that could provide information for families about what happened to their loved ones, all of which would otherwise have been lost to a landfill site.”

This work was essential for many still awaiting answers about those they had lost.

As the team got stuck into the rubble on Phi Phi, over on the mainland in the nearby province of Krabi, Emiel Kok, a Dutch-born former Phi Phi resident, was working with the tsunami victims who had fled the island.

“I was at home with my partner Ralph Toll when the tsunami hit,” Emiel said. “After speaking to a close friend on the island it became clear that help was needed. We decided that I would go over and assist my friends, while Ralph stayed home to organise support and funding.

“When I arrived in Krabi it was chaos. Many people were still suffering from shock and there was no consistent supply of food or water. People just walked around, not knowing where to go or whom to turn to.”

Emiel located his friends and set up *Help International Phi Phi* (Hi Phi Phi) as a central meeting point next to the local mosque. This facility provided victims with a place to gather, grieve and coordinate the search for relatives. Immediate funding was provided by the Chance 4 All foundation, of which both Ralph and Emiel are board members.



"This enabled us to move quickly. In the first days we just went out to buy basic items such as baby milk, rice and fruit," Emiel said.

At the same time, a team of 25 Thai friends came to help and gathered as many details as they could on the situation at hand. A survey was started to register missing people and property. Some days over 1,000 people were provided with assistance.

"So many islanders missed everything they once owned, but most tragically: friends and family they loved. In less than five minutes, over 100 children lost one or both parents. It was essential to detail each personal situation to provide direct assistance," said Emiel.

In the meantime, Ralph Toll developed the Hi Phi Phi website.

"So many people were worried about the situation. They had friends and family on the island. We wanted to inform them as much as we could and as quickly as possible."

In the weeks following the tsunami many small charities popped up.

"It was heartwarming to see how many people wanted to help, but in order to achieve anything we had to work together," said Emiel.

Hi Phi Phi became an umbrella initiative to streamline such efforts.

"At one point we had four groups all wanting to rebuild the school," explained Emiel. "Despite all good intentions, a joint structure is essential to ensure that funds are allocated most effectively. Through the cooperation we were able to create together a single education fund for the children of Phi Phi. No complex organization was necessary to achieve this goal. We simply supported each other by showing what had been achieved and communicating what was left to do. The most important thing was listening to the local people about what they needed. It is their land, their homes, their community."

To this end, funds were set up that are managed by local people themselves.



It wasn't long before the clean-up job on the island was combined with the work on the mainland. Hi Phi Phi not only funded the purchase of additional tools and equipment for the clear-up operations, but also provided a small, basic source of income for islanders. This helped to bring back a daily routine, enabling them to support their families at times when all other income opportunities had vanished. "The spirit of the Phi Phi people was so impressive; their energy and strength motivated us all," said Darren Windett.

But also the growing number of volunteers helped things to move forward. Since the start, over 2,000 volunteers have now passed through, helping for anything from a day to several months.

Emma Lacey-Williams, one of the many British volunteers, originally came for two days back in February but is still on Phi Phi nearly four months later.

"I saw a need for long-term volunteers, people who could help provide continuity and take on more responsibility," Emma explained. "I had the time and the energy so it was clear to me that I should stay."

Her ticket home has long since expired, and she doesn't know how long she'll stay.

“September is my deadline. I have to be home to start university then,” Emma said. Her story of an extended stay is not unfamiliar. Dion Wells, who stopped counting after his eighth ticket change explained: “What’s happening here is so motivating that the decision to stay is always easy; it’s the decision to leave that’s tough.”

In addition to the funding from friends and relatives back home, a simple donation bucket on the island also helped to generate the money needed to buy water, food and tools for the cleaning teams. When Ellie and Rachel, two UK volunteers, found a box of undamaged postcards amongst the debris, the idea for the Hi Phi Phi shop was conceived. The shop now boasts an array of books, batiks made by children from the island living in the refugee camp on nearby Krabi and t-shirts printed on damaged stock. The proceeds go towards paying the Thai workers and many reparation projects. A recent addition is the book of pictures and accounts of the tsunami by the children of Phi Phi. This book came out of an art therapy project to help the children come to terms with their experience.



Jim Whittle, a British web designer, together with his wife Maeve is taking two months out of a once-in-a-lifetime world trip, to stay and help. Working with Ralph he has created a new section for the website providing up to date tourist information about the island. He describes being overwhelmed by the practical attitude of the group. “There’s a tremendous spontaneity. All that’s required is a good suggestion or an idea and someone gets on and does it. It’s an extraordinary experience to work here.”

In the past five months islanders and volunteers helped to clean out and restart more than 150 businesses, with more opening everyday. In February El’s jewellery shop was the first business to reopen. El, having stayed behind when the island was evacuated, was found by Darren on his first day trying to clear the rubble from her shop with her bare hands. His offer of help marked the beginning of their efforts to get local people back to business.

Now in May, and fast approaching the six month anniversary of the tsunami, the clearing of over five-feet-high piles of rubble in the main part of town is finished. For many newcomers it is hard to imagine the way it was just a few weeks earlier. A guided walk, run every morning, shows tourists and new volunteers around the island, explaining how the two waves hit destroying everything in their paths. People on the tour are told of what previously stood in the now empty spaces and of the work that has taken place since January to fill the voids.

The current situation is also heartwarming for the tourists who were on Phi Phi when the tsunami struck. As Gary Marshal explained: “I was on Phi Phi with my family when the tsunami hit and we escaped by a miracle. Recently my wife and I came back. To be honest: I was dreading this visit. When we left it was a place of indescribable horror - I vowed at the time never to return. But here I am, less than five months later, and falling in love with the place once again. These months have been a rollercoaster but now I am cured - I have reached some form of closure.”

At this moment, there are still many projects taking place, most focused on protecting the island from further damage during the rainy season. Over 300 coconut trees have been replanted to help prevent the top soil being washed away, and 100 kilograms of grass seed has been spread to protect the land further and bring some much-needed greenery to the worst-hit areas. A memorial garden is also near completion which will offer a place of peace and tranquility to remember those lost. The new temporary nursing facility has just been opened in a former hotel to provide a safe place for islanders, volunteers and tourists to be treated for minor ailments and injuries. Caz Whigham, a Dundee medical student taking time away from her studies to help on Phi Phi, is one of the voluntary nursing team. "Before I came to Thailand I had a complete phobia of feet, I didn't even like looking at my own. Now I must treat about 20 pairs of volunteers' feet a day for cuts, scrapes and insect bites so I've definitely been cured," joked Whigham.



Phi Phi is standing up again. The streets are clean, flowers are blooming, and thanks to enormous efforts from volunteer diving and snorkeling teams, debris has been removed from the bays. The sea is as clear and turquoise as it ever was. Hotels are up and running and there's plenty of nightlife to keep the evenings as hot as the days. However, since tourism is down by 90%, and as the island heads into its traditional low-season, the economy is in a very fragile position.

With the majority of the island's residents still living in either temporary accommodation or with their families on the mainland, the Phi Phi community is still far from fully recovered.

"It is very worrying," Emiel explained. "Money is running low, there's still no sign of the millions pledged by the big aid agencies."

Emiel and Ralph, having personally financed a large proportion of Hi Phi Phi's work, are also coming to the end of their own resources. "We have a house half-built at home, but nothing left to complete it with," said Emiel. "I need to go home but I can't leave Phi Phi at the same time since so many projects must be financed. We will do our utmost to try to find new support to see them through and ensure continuation."

Despite worries about the future, much has already been achieved. Recently the Hi Phi Phi initiative received three certificates of recognition from the governor of the Krabi province, Mr. Arnont Promnart.

"We are very grateful for his support. For it is a symbol for the energy and positivity of all islanders and volunteers. We have deep respect for the strength of this unique community," said Emiel.

Commitment to the project remains high, with several of the original team still here leading the way. Others have had to head home to raise money to fund further efforts or - in the case of founding volunteers such as Jenny and Neil - to get married.



A photo journal of all steps towards recovery can be found at www.hiphphi.com