

Thailand's Islands & Beaches

Researched 8–23 March, 2005, with additional updates June and July 2005

NOTE ON THIS UPDATE

This document updates pages 272–372 of Lonely Planet's 4th edition of *Thailand's Islands & Beaches*. Information is presented in the same order as that found in the book. Information on specific places is limited to those covered in the book, but many more establishments are open. Since conditions change rapidly, it is best to verify the situation before you travel. In general, when we say that a place is open we mean that most or all of the facilities are intact. Places not mentioned were unaffected. In some areas where construction work was busily going on it was not possible to find out when exactly places would reopen, but most are rebuilding as fast as possible.

For updated information on Thailand, see www.lonelyplanet.com/tsunami/thailand.

GENERAL CONDITIONS

With a few very striking exceptions, the great majority of tourist spots on Thailand's Andaman Coast are well and truly up and running, and of these most are already seamlessly repaired, if they were badly damaged at all. Indeed, a good many beaches and islands suffered more from the unspecified press footage and subsequent fall in visitor numbers than they did from the wave itself. Everywhere, local people cannot repeat enough: they are desperate for business. Empty restaurants and guesthouses will translate into empty plates, a sad irony for these people who have been through so much.

As seems to be the case in most places, the damage is astoundingly varied. Even across the one short stretch of coastline a devastated village will abut an almost untouched area. Almost everywhere the beach itself was not damaged by the tsunami and many places say the sand is more abundant and the water clearer than before.

The worst-hit places were parts of the west coast of Phuket island (Phuket Province), Ao Ton Sai and Ao Lao Dalam on Phi-Phi island (Krabi Province), and the west coast of Phang-Nga Province. We have given particular attention to these places.

Even then, no destination is currently off limits to tourists, and just about the only places where people are not actually already out swimming and sunbaking in growing numbers are Ao Lo Dalam on Phi-Phi island (note that the other parts of the island are OK and welcoming tourists) and the parts of the devastated shorefront and fishing islands of the Khao Lak/Takua Pa area in Phang-Nga Province.

Some places such as Kamala (Phuket island) and Ao Ton Sai (Phi-Phi island) are truly open to tourists and abuzz with reconstruction. The same goes for Patong (Phuket), though it is rebuilding at a far greater pace. It is your call as to whether you would like to holiday in such an environment. Locals say they are happy to see tourists coming back, and many are waiting to see a few more before they go on with reconstruction.

Bear in mind when visiting the badly affected areas that deep psychological scars remain, though they may not be immediately apparent. Many people have lost loved ones and are severely traumatised. Visitors should be respectful of this and of cultural differences in dealing with such trauma.

The Royal Thai Government declined international financial aid and only accepted 'technical assistance'. However, relief and recovery operations have been on the ground throughout the Andaman Coast, particularly in Phang-Nga Province. Aid workers hail from a mix of private

institutions, volunteer collectives and would-be soul savers from various churches. We have mentioned some under Phi-Phi island and Khao Lak.

While many buildings and businesses were destroyed, you can find places to stay or eat pretty much everywhere. General shops, providing phone and Internet services, and banks/money exchanges can be found throughout the affected coast, except on Phi-Phi. Dive outfits and travel agents are also open. There is absolutely no problem with drinking water or disease risks.

TRANSPORT

Transport is intact throughout affected areas in Thailand. This includes ferries, though some local boat services can be a little unreliable. It's best to be flexible with your travel plans.

NORTHERN ANDAMAN COAST

Some parts of Phuket island were seriously damaged but are recovering rapidly. The west coast of Phang-Nga Province around Khao Lak was very badly hit and will not be back on track for some time, but the Phang-Nga bay was almost untouched. Ranong's major tourist destinations are fine.

Ranong Province

Ranong town, Ko Chang and Ko Phayam are operating normally. All tourism and transport facilities are up and running in this area. While tourist destinations are fine, small fishing villages in the Ranong area were greatly affected. People were killed, homes were washed away, and communities lost a great many of the boats and nets upon which they depend to make a living. Thala Nok (80km south of Ranong) and Ban Bang Ben in Kapoe district were hit by the waves. It is believed that a large number of Burmese living and working in the Bang Ben area were killed or went missing following the tsunami; these are casualties that do not figure in the official statistics, as many were illegal migrants. Laemson National Park, situated 45km south of Ranong town, was damaged by the tsunami. Projects are under way to rehabilitate the mangrove forests.

Phang-Nga Province

The worst of the tsunami devastation and the most serious loss of life were in western Phang-Nga Province. The area between Thai Muang and Khura Buri was very badly hit. Phang-Nga bay was almost entirely unharmed.

Surin & Similan Islands National Marine Parks

You can no longer stay on the damaged Surin Islands, but they can be visited daily in dive trips from coastal towns. The same goes for the Similans, where most dive sites are open but accommodation is closed. Camping may be possible, however, and you should be able to stay on these islands by next high season. Note that Khao Lak has a number of functioning guesthouses and dive shops running tours to the Surin and Similan Islands; they really need business.

Ko Pra Thong

This island and the fishing communities that inhabit it were very badly hit by the waves. The Golden Buddha Beach Resort plans to reopen on 1 December 2005. See the website (www.goldenbuddhabeach.com) for details on the resort and the island. Nearby Kho Khao island and the fishing villages on the surrounding coast and islands also suffered severe damage and many casualties.

Hat Khao Lak & Around

The damage done to Khao Lak and the stretch of coastline leading some 20km north towards Takua Pa simply defies the imagination. Whereas in other parts of Thailand the former shape of towns can be outlined from the broken buildings, much of Khao Lak is unrecognisable. The entire expanse of crowded beachfront living has been wiped off the map and turned into a vast empty lot by the waves and the huge cleanup operation. Aside from the broken concrete remains of some of the stronger hotels, the only things that hint at the existence of this once

thriving coastal resort area are the occasional hollow tiled pits of former swimming pools and the odd piece of dissected resort furniture. Over 4000 people died and thousands more were missing or injured in Phang-Nga Province. Thousands of hotel rooms are gone, and displaced locals are living in camps around Takua Pa.

Back from the beach in Bang La-on (the town commonly referred to as Khao Lak), most of the buildings on the higher parts around Hwy 4 survived or sustained bearable damage. In addition to several places to stay and eat, Sea Dragon Dive Centre, Phuket Divers and numerous other tour companies are open. There are Internet cafés, grocery and clothing stores and ATMs open in the town. There is also a bank branch, though hours remain sketchy. Tourist maps of the town are hard to find, as they are no longer being printed.

Further up the coast the villages at Hat Bang Niang and Hat Bang Sak were almost entirely destroyed. Almost the only businesses open are shops selling building supplies. A large marine vessel beached about 2km inland on the other side of the highway is becoming a kind of unofficial monument to the disaster.

It is unlikely that anyone would come here seeking a tropical holiday given the desolation along the beachfront. But the place has a purposeful and lively vibe to it thanks to the humanitarian operations that are almost single-handedly sustaining the local economy.

There is a Tsunami Volunteer Centre just at the edge of the forest south of Khao Lak town, and a variety of charities and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) are at work in the area. Long-term volunteers can stay in the centre's bungalows but most are encouraged to stay in town.

Sleeping & Eating

While most of the beachfront has been decimated by the waves and will take over a year to rebuild (if not much longer), accommodation can be found in numerous guesthouses and informal shops and shelters along both sides of Hwy 4 in the vicinity of Jai Bungalow and the surrounding strip near Mex's Bar. Numerous restaurants are open along the same part of the road. There are also several nice resorts that are lonely for customers in the headlands around the national park. Hotel listings for the area are available at www.khaolak-coop.com/khaolakbeach/KLHotelList.htm, or you can just ask anywhere in the town or at the volunteer centre.

A status list of Khao Lak accommodation:

Poseidon Bungalows – open
Jai – guesthouse and restaurant fully open
Khao Lak Sunset Resort – open
Garden Beach Resort – closed
Nang Thong Bay Resort I & II – closed
Green Beach – closed
Gerd & Noi Khao Lak Bungalow – closed
Khao Lak Laguna Resort – closed

Ao Phang-Nga & Phang-Nga

Most of the Phang-Nga bay experienced only a slight rise in water levels at the time the tsunami hit the western side of the long stem of land that makes up this province. Ko Phing Kan (aka James Bond Island) and the Muslim towns-on-stilts around Ko Panyi were not damaged. Ko Yao Yai and Ko Yao Noi incurred some property damage but no loss of life and are fine to visit.

Phuket Province

The waves struck the island's western side, but damage varies immensely from one beach to the next. The reconstruction is equally disparate: some places seem to have had a lot more public and private resources poured into them than others. But basically the reconstruction phase has been completed and the island is open for business and suffering greatly from the lack of visitors. Many places have slashed rates.

Ko Sireh & Laem Phanwa

Many *chao le* sea-gypsy homes were destroyed on Ko Sireh, but tourism facilities are all open. The cape of Laem Phanwa was sheltered from the tsunami, so it is also open for business.

Hat Patong

One of the worst-hit parts of the island, Patong received the most national and international media attention, which skewed the impression of overall damage on Phuket. While tourists have been scared off, a lot of resources have been poured into the beach area to bring about a remarkably rapid recovery.

Properties along the beachfront and down the small side streets leading from the beach were the worst hit. These areas are now a mixture of well-concealed rubble, frantic construction and already brand-new buildings. While the water did get as far as the second street back from the beach, all the shops and hotels along here are fine and can be assumed to be open for business along with the rest of the town.

The Immigration Office is open, and there is no shortage of services, bars and shops. Some local stalls and vendors are gone, and the beachfront shopping mall, supermarket and certain beach-facing bars remain closed for repairs.

Sleeping

Even the very damaged hotels on the southern end of the beach are set to reopen by July, 2005. If a place is not mentioned here it is because it was sufficiently far from the shore to be OK.

Casuarina Patong Garden Resort – closed until further notice

Impiana Phuket Cabana – open

Patong Beach Bungalow – closed but rebuilding; should open in October

Patong Garden Resort – open

Of the three restaurants nestled up on the cliffs towards the road to Kamala, Baan Rim Pa and Otowa are fine and open for business. Next-door Da Maurizio, unfortunately lower down the cliff, was wiped out and is currently being rebuilt.

Hat Karon

The Karon beach strip is fine. During the tsunami there was a high rise in water levels, which caused floods but not severe damage. Most of the resorts are set well back from the shore in any case. Past the roundabout cars were washed into a hotel, creating some damage; other cars were washed as far as the reservoir, and some of the seafood restaurants that had windows are now open air. Little stands on the beach selling bananas, water and such things were washed away; their vendors cannot afford to set up again. Restaurants and places to stay listed in the guide are all open.

Hat Kata

Kata received more of a sudden inundation than a huge wave. There are now very few signs of damage, or indeed of the tsunami having ever occurred. Most of the accommodation and restaurants were built on the interior side of the road next to the beach and up the hill. All listed hotels and restaurants are open.

Hat Nai Han

Little Hat Nai Han was hard hit but recovered very quickly. Some buildings were extremely damaged, while others were fine, depending on their position on the hill. Some little beachside restaurants were destroyed. Towards Yanui Bay, the damage was more severe: two bungalows were completely wiped out. The monastery was not damaged. All places mentioned in the guide are open, with the exception of Yanui Bay View Bungalows, which was totally destroyed, as was the nearby beachfront restaurant.

Hat Rawai & Hat Laem Ka

Rawai was protected by a large sand bank and was open for business the day after the tsunami. The water washed a few cars and boats up onto the beach road. Beachfront guesthouses and restaurants suffered only minor flood damage. Most people on Rawai learnt about the extent of the tsunami disaster from watching television. However, the little seafood restaurants and noodle shops down the northern end of the beach were heavily damaged. Unfortunately, the wave brought many rocks and sandy rubble onto the beach at Rawai. Around on Laem Ka the beach and bungalows are fine. The nearby sea-gypsy village suffered loss of life and significant property damage.

Hat Kamala

Kamala was one of the worst-hit parts of Phuket. The town suffered considerable loss of life and property damage. The resorts and seafood restaurants that dominated the beach were torn apart by waves that ploughed through the town at roof height. The area in front of the school was wiped out, and over 200 homes along with a day-care centre and a temple were completely destroyed. Many more buildings were severely damaged. Official death tolls seem to be underestimated here, and outside assistance was slow to arrive. Despite the deep trauma suffered, the town is very busily and bravely rebuilding its broken homes and businesses.

There are now many places to stay and eat, as well as Internet cafés and general stores.

Baan Chaba – closed; will reopen around October if all goes well

Benjamin Resort – Only the ground floor sustained damage; the upper floors are fine and open for business. Little bars and restaurants are open nearby.

Papa Crab Guesthouse – nearly rebuilt

Kamala Dreams – open

Phuket Kamala Resort – closed until further notice

Kamala Beach Estate – open; damage to low-lying bungalows, but other facilities OK

Kamala Seafood – open

Balcony Bar & Restaurant – fine

Toto Italian Restaurant – destroyed

Phuket Fantasea – Open. That the water got far enough to damage the restaurant and canteen shows the force of the wave.

Laem Singh – They say camping is not an option on the cape, but full-moon parties were advertised as early as March.

Surin

Surin beach was remarkably unscathed, given its proximity to Kamala and Bang Tao, which were very badly damaged. All businesses are open. There are restaurants up and running along the beach. The ultra-chic resorts around the point were all hit by the wave but now look impeccable.

Bang Tao

The beachside town of Bang Tao sustained heavy damage, though most of the huge, fancy resorts around the Laguna Phuket complex are fine. A number of prawn fisheries and restaurants were wiped out between the beach and the road from Surin. A number of beachfront bungalows were reduced to rubble though several are now operating.

The organisation Hands on Thailand worked hard to rebuild Bang Tao, and the town is now back on its feet. See www.handsonthailand.org for information.

Bangtao Lagoon Bungalows – damaged but now open

Bangtao Beach Cottage – destroyed

Lotus Restaurant – open

Hat Nai Thon

This lovely beach was almost untouched. Water only came up onto the beach and didn't even make it across the road to the businesses facing the sea.

Naithon Beach Resort – no damage

Tien Seng Guesthouse – no damage

Nai Yang

Nai Yang was badly hit by powerful, high waves that reached a long way inland. Most beachfront restaurants and bars were destroyed, but new ones have sprouted all over the place. There's no shortage of services or facilities here.

Nai Yang Beach Resort – partly damaged but fine

Sirinat National Park camping and Phuket camping – no bungalows in view at site

Crown Nai Yang Suite Hotel – open

Southern Andaman Coast

Krabi Province

With the notable exception of Phi-Phi island and a small part of Ko Lanta, the tsunami had a minimal effect on Krabi Province, and there was generally limited damage to property and boats. More than anything Krabi is now suffering from the lack of tourists.

Ao Nang

The beachfront promenade of Ao Nang was very lightly affected but was open for business the next day. Water was stopped, among other things, by the ridge between the road and the beach, and it only reached the doorstep of many shops. Apparently the massage ladies warned people off the beach after hearing that the wave had hit Phuket. Some places were flooded with dirty water and many long-tail boats were smashed onto the shore, but the town was cleaned up and just about everything reopened within a week. Even the little beach-edge restaurants are now open in a new building. On nearby Chicken Island (no accommodation) there was some loss of life. On Ko Poda the bungalow is open as before.

Around Ao Nang

Hat Noppharat Thara

Beachfront restaurants and bungalows encountered some limited property damage here, but almost all are open. Businesses are closed due to lack of customers, not tsunami damage.

Locals cleaned up the beach and removed some of the rubble brought in by the wave and it all looks lovely. It's best to call ahead for these places; they may have closed over the low season from lack of business, but they will open if they know you are coming.

Government bungalows – currently closed for improvements

Andaman Inn – open and staying open

Emerald Bungalows – open after some repairs

Long Beach Bungalows – fine but closed from lack of business

Sara Cove (now called Pan Bungalow) – open

Some of the little restaurants near the creek were destroyed but are repaired now; some are open but most have no customers.

Ao Nam Mao

This bay is fine and accommodation is open.

Railay

Beautiful Railay beach suffered only minimal damage, principally broken boats. Businesses on the western and eastern sides and at Hat Tham Phra Nang and Hat Ton Sai are all open. Most businesses have been open since 1 January.

Ko Phi-Phi

Ko Phi-Phi Don is a very striking sight for those arriving by boat. The point where the two half-moon bays of Ao Lo Dalam and Ao Ton Sai meet – once a bustling, crowded den of shops, bars and bungalows – is now a desolate space of rubble, hollowed-out buildings and downed trees. The waves came from both sides into this thin, overdeveloped apple-core of sand.

Many people running from the wave on the Ao Ton Sai side were then tragically met by the even stronger waves coming into Ao Lo Dalam. The destruction and loss of life was significant in this part of the island, and many displaced residents remain in Krabi.

Still, the pace of the recovery is more rapid and advanced than most official accounts suggest. The reconstruction of Phi-Phi is controversial, as many stakeholders do not want the

island to be overbuilt as it was in the past. Some areas are being 'rezoned' or reclaimed as national or marine parks; meanwhile, local people want their livelihoods back and are hastily trying to re-establish their businesses regardless.

Suffice it to say that Phi-Phi is not closed and most of the eastern side of the island has been only lightly affected by the waves. Led by an organisation called Help International Phi Phi (www.hiphipi.com), the island has been cleaned up by volunteers, and many businesses are now open even in the worst-hit part of the beach. HiPhiPhi is based in Carlito's bar on Ao Ton Sai. Even along much of Ao Ton Sai, you can already enjoy beaches, bungalows and bars that are essentially being revived by the volunteer economy. Internet facilities, massage places, diving and climbing outfits, and little general stores are open already, and more are sprouting each day on this part of the island. The long-tail boats are out and about taking people to Phi-Phi Leh and around Phi-Phi Don, and the locals declare they are happy to see you and your money. Ferries are running between Phi-Phi and Krabi, Phuket, Ko Lanta and Ao Nang as usual.

Sleeping & Eating

There is an ever-growing and changing list of places to stay on Ao Ton Sai, Hat Hin Khom and even around the devastated Tourist Village. Most places along Ao Lo Dalam were destroyed. The area of the island from Hat Yao to Laem Tong did not suffer from any kind of major damage. Hat Yao beach is looking impeccable, while on Ao Lo Bakao the resort never even closed. You can get here easily from the pier in Ao Ton Sai. Meanwhile Hat Laem Tong (6km from devastated Ao Ton Sai) only sustained mild damage and swiftly reopened. Visit the website www.hiphipi.com for a list of accommodation.

Ao Ton Sai

Phi-Phi Island Cabanas Resort – open
Ton Sai Village – destroyed
Phi-Phi Hotel – closed but may reopen soon
Phi-Phi Banyan Villa – open
Chao Koh Phi Phi Lodge – open
Apache Bar – open

Tourist Village

Pier Guest House – closed
Lion Guesthouse – closed
Infinity House – closed
JJ Guest House – closed
Twin Palm – destroyed
Tara Inn – destroyed
Rock Backpacker – closed
Rim Na Villa – open; 24 rooms operating
Chan Guest House – destroyed
Mama Restaurant – closed but planning to reopen
Thai Cuisine – opening 'soon'
Pee Pee Bakery – will reopen on Ao Ton Sai
Pum Restaurant – relocated to arcade near Adventure Club; will open soon
Pluto Gelati – destroyed
Food market – destroyed
Tiger Bar – open
Tin-Tin's Bar – destroyed
Reggae Bar – open soon

Ao Lo Dalam

Chong Khao – closed
PP Princess Resort – closed and severely damaged but has plans to reopen
PP Charlie Beach Resort – destroyed but plans to rebuild
Phi-Phi Pavilion Resort – destroyed
Home Parkklong Seaside – destroyed

PP Viewpoint Resort – open, though often full with volunteers
Ciao Bella – destroyed
Jungle Bar – destroyed

Hat Kin Khom

Phi-Phi Don Chukit Resort – open
Phi-Phi Andaman – open
Pee Pee Villa – 30 bungalows open
PP Andaman Legacy – open
Andaman Beach Resort – open
Bayview Resort – open
HC Andersen restaurant – closed
Hippies bar/restaurant – open

Hat Hin Khao

Maphrao Resort – will reopen soon

Hat Yao

Phi-Phi Long Beach – open
Phi-Phi Paradise Pearl Resort – open

Hat Rantee

Rantee Hut – open

Ao Lo Bakao

Pee Pee Island Village – open

Hat Laem Tong

Holiday Inn Phi-Phi Island – open
PP Coral Resort – open but may be closed for renovations
Phi-Phi Natural Resort – open

Ko Jam (Ko Pu) & Ko Si Boya

Ko Jam was hit by the waves and suffered considerable property damage. Many beachside bungalows were broken into pieces or swept away, but there was no loss of life. One bungalow on the island was brand new and opened just a few hours before it was destroyed by the tsunami. The island is busy preparing for next season, but you can still visit now and find places to stay and eat. The same goes for Ko Siboya. You can be dropped off at these islands from the ferries heading to and from Ko Lanta and Krabi; return is the next day.

New Bungalows – damaged but open
Joy Bungalow – lost several huts; currently making repairs
Andaman Beach Resort – damaged but open
Siboya Bungalows (www.siboyabungalows.com) – open

Ko Lanta

Contrary to popular opinion, most of Ko Lanta survived the tsunami relatively unscathed. While a wall of water did arrive straight into the beachside accommodation on the western side of the island, most sustained limited property damage and were cleaned up and reopened during the week that followed the tsunami. The beach is looking better than ever according to all accounts. The exception to this is the cape on the northwestern end of the island along Laem Kaw Kwang. This narrow neck of land took the waves on both sides, resulting in some destruction. Kaw Kwang Beach Bungalows is closed for repairs, along with approximately 10 other resorts (out of a total of 150). Everything else can be considered fine. Even the seafood restaurants on stilts around Ban Sala Dan are intact. Many resorts are offering special packages to compensate for the lull in visitor numbers. All ferries and modes of transport are running to the usual schedules.