

**The Nation Newspaper –
January 1, 2005 – Explore**

AFTER THE DELUGE

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Last Sunday morning, a sea-canoe operator in Phuket suspected a tidal wave was about to hit. He writes of his efforts to warn others, and the recovery underway

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The tremors began at 7.58am. The long, low-frequency shakes lasted two minutes. It wasn't the shattering, sharp jolt one expects from a California quake, but it felt ominous. The tremors lasted long enough that I had time to put a bowl of water on the floor to verify the shakes. Sure enough, the water was rippling.

Once the tremors stopped, I mentioned tsunami. Everybody laughed while I talked about the "Big One". We still knew nothing about the quake and its direction, only that it was a long way off. There hasn't been a significant tsunami since the volcanic explosion of Krakatoa, Indonesia, in 1883, when perhaps 500,000 people died in coastal villages. I immediately went to the US Geological Service website. Only 15 minutes after the shake, there it was: an temblor that measured 8.3 on the Richter scale off the west coast of Sumatra. This was a Biggie. It grew to 9.0 – massive – and the aftershock was 7.3.

The Indian Ocean doesn't have a warning system, so my next stop was the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre. Their words were prophetic but typically bureaucratic. An "event" had occurred in the Indian Ocean west of Sumatra but would have no impact upon the Pacific Basin. Thanks for the news, guys.

Maybe Australia. This "event" could affect Western Australia. I e-mailed the Australian Bureau of Meterology at exactly 9am: "Any info on this morning's Sumatra quake and possible tsunami generation?"

The response took 24 minutes. Not bad, but not good enough.

"We have received an advice from the Tsunami Warning Centre in Hawaii. They opine that a tsunami threat does not exist for the Pacific. However, they do not discount the possibility of a tsunami near the epicentre, which was off the west coast of Northern Sumatra. We have no further information."

A few minutes later, it hit.

My response was not as polite:

"I read the same advisory from Hawaii. By now you have the news on the devastating tsunami here in Thailand and Southeast Asia. As a 20-year Hawaii resident, I am well acquainted with the Pacific Basin long-range alert system. Now that the barn door is open and hundreds have lost their lives, maybe it's time for one in the Indian Ocean. Even before I came to Thailand, I was well aware of the Sumatra-Andaman fault-line and its potential for generating tsunamis. It's time to develop a similar international

system for the Indian Ocean. Very frustrating for me to see today's fatalities – all due to lack of warning and education.”

Between e-mails, I called three hotels to watch for receding waters. I was unable to contact any managers, so I called my guide staff together, told them to watch for rapidly receding waters and sent them out to pick up our guests. I told my escort boat captain to move from the pier to deep waters.

Reports soon came from Patong and Bang Tao. My Patong transfer guide saw the wave hit. I told him to get over the hill. My Bang Tao transfer guide reported he couldn't reach the hotel because of the devastation.

I reminded everybody to look for receding waters and go to Ao Po, on Phuket's east coast. I soon got a phone call that waters in Ao Po were dropping fast. My wife told them to evacuate immediately. They got our guests off the pier with grace and speed, and warned the waterfront shopkeepers to run up the hill. Our escort boat shook from the tsunami but survived. Nobody in Ao Po was hurt. If the tsunami wrapped around to the northeast corner of Phuket, it was a biggie. My prediction of hundreds dead immediately changed to thousands.

I was surprised that the wave wrapped around Sumatra's north point with such strength. Sri Lanka and India were in the direct line of fire, but Phuket was a 70-degree turn for any defocused waves. The blessing was that the tsunami was seriously depleted in relation to the full-strength version that hit Sri Lanka.

Any low-lying area was in serious trouble. Patong took a strong hit. From the geography it was obvious that the further north the wave went, the stronger it was. Bang Tao simply exploded. Shops behind the hotels had pick-ups in their showrooms. Laguna wasn't as bad because the beach is a bit higher and the hotels are set back from the beaches (a trend started by environmental planning).

At JW Marriott, the alert food and beverages manager was on the beach. He didn't understand the ocean's drop, but he did have the presence of mind to evacuate the beach, saving everybody in front of the hotel. Just further north, 30 beach-goers died at a luxury hotel. The worst hit was the fairly new resort of Khao Lak, set right on the beach. The toll will run over 1,000 by the time the clean-up is finished.

Phi Phi and Koh Lanta may join Khao Lak in the history books, but it's too early to tell right now. Points in Krabi are just as susceptible.

A survey from Khao Lak to Kata Noi revealed the predictable. Any hotel located 10 metres or more on a cliff, bluff or mountainside escaped devastation. Windows were broken and guests were terrified, but the waters passed below.

It was simply the luck of the draw. Millionaires in low-lying beachfront villas were swamped, backpackers in off-the-beach bungalows unaffected.

Khao Lak will probably never recover, but Patong can be back in business in a few weeks. Many hotels have cleaned out their lobbies and are ready for check-ins.

We ran a sea canoe for 20 people on December 28 – only 40 hours after the tsunami. The bay was calm and beautiful. The next day I was on an overnight trip with people from Hawaii who grew up with tsunamis. We knew the Big One can be devastating and deadly, but once it's gone, it's gone.

I was amazed at how professional the police, Army and disaster services were. Thousands of Thais performed in a manner that would make the Hawaii Civil Defence system jealous.

With no tsunamis for generations, the Indian Ocean basin may have slept through the warning signs, but Thailand can be proud of its reaction to the terrible tragedy. What is over is over. Thailand is not Sri Lanka. Water is clean, rescue and clean-up well organised. Two hundred metres behind the beach, life goes on.

The clean-up will last a few weeks. What the Kingdom really needs is for those who loved it the first time around to return and give their support.

Knowing Thais, they will welcome them with open arms.

John Gray
Special to The Nation

The writer has run sea-canoe tours with his family in Phuket for more than 10 years.

(Note: John Gray is Thailand's original sea kayak explorer and operator, starting operations in January 1990.)