

DISASTER TOURISTS RUSH TO OGLE THE DEVASTATION

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PATONG BEACH, Thailand - Amid the death and destruction of Phuket's most famous beach, an American tourist was enthusiastically snapping photos of rubble and wrecked buildings yesterday.

Terry Blanton of Florida had flown into Phuket with one thing on his mind: taking pictures of the devastation caused by the tsunami. He and a friend had spent \$300 (U.S.) on airplane tickets from Bangkok for their whirlwind three-hour tour of the disaster zone.

He seemed slightly disappointed by what he saw. "I thought it would be a lot worse," he said.

Mr. Blanton, who works as a U.S. military contractor in Baghdad, was on vacation in Bangkok when the tsunami struck. He decided to book a flight to the afflicted region.

"I want to send pictures back home to the United States so that my family and friends can see the wrath of Mother Nature," he said. "It shows how fragile life really is."

He is among hundreds of tourists wandering around the disaster zone, peering at the ruins and taking photos of the destruction.

One rode around Patong Beach on the back of a taxi motorbike, snapping pictures as he raced past gutted buildings. Others strolled down the beachfront street, cameras in hand, looking for ruins to photograph even as emergency helicopters roared overhead on their way to another disaster site.

On the road into the devastated beach resorts of Khao Lak, north of Phuket, one panoramic spot has become a popular viewpoint for gawkers. They park their cars and block the highway as they walk across to the viewpoint for photos of the flattened 10-kilometre strip of beach hotels where thousands were swept to their deaths.

Call it disaster tourism - the magnetic lure of tragedy, the morbid fascination with death, combined with the financial resources of affluent tourists who are mobile enough to travel almost anywhere.

In an era of digital cameras and electronic communication, every tourist can become a mini-CNN, eagerly transmitting their own version of the news to friends back home by e-mail and cell phone. And with the massive television coverage that the tsunami has generated over the past week, many tourists see no reason to restrain themselves from joining the frenzy.

Some Thais are offended by the antics.

"It makes me feel uncomfortable," said Capt. Chainarong Supapan, a Thai army officer whose military unit was helping clean up the rubble at Patong Beach. He said he had seen dozens of tourists snapping photos of the destruction as he struggles to clean it up.

"It makes me ask what they are doing here," he said. "They should be helping us. Instead of helping us, they are just staring and taking photos."

Police officer Thanee Sukkho was equally disturbed by what he was seeing during his patrols.

"I feel uncomfortable with it," he said. "People are in great pain here. This is not a happy scene."

Many Westerners have been shocked to learn that tourists are continuing to frolic in the sun of southern Thailand at a time of widespread death and catastrophe. Yet the issue of tourist ethics is a complex debate, with arguments on both sides. Not everyone believes that tourists are doing the right thing if they simply disappear from Thailand at a time when its economy is suffering.

"It's a real Catch-22 - what do you do?" asked Noah Redfern, a 27-year-old Welsh tourist who visited the scene during a stopover on a flight to Singapore.

"It's bizarre to be on a beach with all this destruction around you," he said. "But if the tourists spend their money somewhere else, the local people will be even worse off. You can see that the merchants here are desperate. I have a lot of friends who have gone away from Thailand because of this disaster, and that's the worst thing, because so many Thais are dependent on tourism."

To make the most of his one-day stopover at Phuket, he was snapping photos of the destroyed shops and wrecked cars at Patong Beach. "This is historic," he said.

Some visitors have pitched in, devoting time to the relief effort. But many residents of Patong Beach said they don't mind those who just gawk.

"They're just curious," said Chantima Larkarphun, owner of a shop that the tsunami reduced to wooden debris. "Everyone has a right to take photos. They just want to see and know."

Just down the street, 34 people were killed in the basement of the Ocean Plaza supermarket when the tsunamis flooded in. Two bodies were still buried in the debris yesterday, and the stench of death lingered. But the security guards outside the supermarket said they didn't mind the photo-takes.

“I feel okay about it.” Said Chaowalit Chotikoru, one of the guards. “I expected this. It’s normal –people are curious about this big disaster. They have a right to do this.”