

## **BEACH AND COASTAL SURVEY OF THAILAND: WHAT FUTURE FOR SURF TOURISM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

There are surfers on vacation looking for waves. Surfing and surf tourism run parallel: they are focused upon location-specific destinations where natural resources and phenomena occur conducive to the sport; and traveling for the sake of surfing new places is as old as the sport itself. This research serves to improve the overall understanding of surf tourism in Thailand and to offer recommendations for sustainability and quality of experience. As an investigation, three ideas within the broad environment of Thailand have been rationalized: to survey and assess the coastal resource in order to determine the plausibility and practicability for surf tourism in Thailand (including the discovery and documentation of surf breaks); to interpret surf tourist characteristics Phuket, Thailand, through unstructured and semi-structured personal interviews; and to answer the question: “What future for surf tourism in Thailand?” This research has identified and assessed five of Thailand’s provincial areas most suited for surf tourism, and has identified that contrary to popular belief there are a large number of areas suitable for surfing and surf tourism, including those for advanced, intermediate, and beginner surfers. In all, 80 surfing areas were surveyed. A refined Thailand-specific definition for surf tourism is suggested, reflecting the natural environment and the characteristics of the current surf tourists. The paper concludes by identifying the future prospects, challenges, and related issues for sustainable surf tourism in Thailand.

Key words: surfing, surf tourism, coastal survey, Phuket, Thailand

### **INTRODUCTION**

The global surf tourism industry has grown significantly since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When measuring the economic scale of the surfing industry, including travel, surf-branded clothing, and the manufacture of surfboards, it has been estimated to be in the order of ten billion USD per annum with some ten million surfers worldwide (Buckley 2002a,b). At the turn of the twenty first century, surf tourism researchers (such as Buckley) began to study and describe the structure of the surf tourism industry in terms of the impacts caused to natural and cultural host environments, the distribution of the product, the main issue facing the industry (capacity management) as well as a general description of the market (Fluker 2003). Surf tourism is a relative newcomer to hospitality and tourism research and this paper addresses surf tourism in an academic context, serving as the first body of work of its kind ever written for Thailand.

Surf tourism became prolific in the mid-twentieth century. Ponting (2006) makes obvious the link between surf tourism and the media, beginning with the early literary works of Mark Twain

and Jack London in Hawaii, a 1907 Hawaii tourism marketing strategy, a number of films beginning with the first *Gidget* movie in 1959, and musical hits of the *Beach Boys* as early as 1961. Surf tourism as concept was taken global in the 1962 film release *The Endless Summer* by Bruce Brown, a documentary film featuring two young and enthusiastic California surfers who followed the summer season around the globe in search of new surf breaks and the 'perfect wave'. *The Endless Summer* epitomizes the ideal of early surf tourism and introduced the concept of surf tourism to the wider world, surfers and non-surfers alike.

Today, surf tourism, like the tourism industry as a whole, has grown profoundly and is represented by numerous market segments. Current trends in surf tourism may include highly experienced surfers traveling to locations such as Hawaii, Indonesia, South Africa, or Western Australia to experience large and high quality waves; intermediate surfers traveling to stay at surf camps where lessons, coaching, and access to equipment and other adventures may be found; or beginner surfers looking to get lessons in a safe, small wave environment where crowds are minimal and instructors cater to the novice.

Although occasional surfers from overseas visit Thailand, one can hardly talk of surf tourism as a local industry. Nonetheless, Thailand is an emerging destination choice among surfers visiting the Andaman island of Phuket (Kata Beach in particular) during the southwest monsoon season, which occurs annually from May through October. Anecdotal evidence shows Thailand as potential surf tourism destination and prompted this research. This paper is part of a broader project concerning the full understanding of surf tourism in Thailand, including the survey of coastal and natural resource, surf tourism behavior, and new service and product development. However, this paper discusses the first stage of the project, and has the following objectives: survey and assess of the coastal resources and amenities to determine the plausibility and practicability for surf tourism in Thailand; Interpret surf tourist characteristics in Phuket (Kata Beach), Thailand, and answer the question: "What future for surf tourism in Thailand?" by providing broad guidelines for the future development of the industry.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: part two provides the rationale to the study and a brief literature review; part three presents the methodology; part four discusses the exploratory research; part five looks at surf tourists' comments and suggestions; and part six discusses results and concludes the paper.

## **RATIONALE TO THE STUDY**

The theoretical framework of surf tourism may well begin with the wider study of adventure tourism, marine tourism, or other niche tourism, including all sorts of sport, recreation, and education. Investigations include tourist behavioral patterns, destination choices, experience, and the availability of essential resources or natural amenities. Given the relative newness of academic research on surf tourism, academic sources giving mention are quite limited. However, there are brief mentions as to the existence of surf tourism in published marine tourism and water-based tourism literature (Orams 1999; Jennings 2007). There are still a limited number of academic papers focused clearly on surf tourism. The majority of these papers focus on

Indonesia, in particular on the Mentawai Islands, as a destination for research (Buckley 2002a,b; Ponting 2001, 2006; Pearson 2003; Fluker 2006), and none of them mentions Thailand.

To compensate for the relatively limited number of academic research in the area, there are many related and relevant printed materials connected to surfing and its relation to the tourism industry, including the internationally read *Surfer* and *Surfing* magazines, and countless national and regionally produced magazines. For example, *The Surfer's Journal* offers articles about surfer's travel experiences from which we can gain insight on surf tourism. In addition, internet sites providing access to new studies, as well as organizational and governmental newsletters, constitute an important source of data. For example, organizations with government support in Australia, England, and Papua New Guinea regularly publish their newsletters online.

Surf tourism, per se, is a relatively recent academic term used for an emerging market segment of in niche tourism. The definition of surf tourism as suggested by Fluker (2003) is as follows:

“Surf tourism involves people travelling to either domestic locations for a period of time not exceeding six months, or international locations for a period of time not exceeding twelve months, who stay at least one night, and where the active participation in the sport of surfing, where the surfer relies on the power of the wave for forward momentum, is the primary motivation for destination selection.”

This definition needs modification to better reflect the demography of surf tourism in Thailand. In a wide context, surf tourism encompasses people who travel for the sake of surfing new places, and for the case of Thailand, subjective evidence indicates a need to identify and delineate different types of surf tourists.

Appraising the potential for surf tourism in Thailand begins with the familiarization of the region's seasonality and is two-fold: during the southwest monsoon, May through October, there is surf on the Andaman Coast; and during the northeast monsoon, November through February, there is surf in the Gulf of Thailand. Kata Beach in Phuket has been identified as the obvious focal point of surf tourism activity in Thailand given the number of surfboard rental stands, the availability of surf lessons, and given that nearly all relevant internet sites mention Kata Beach as the place to go for surfing in Thailand.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper explores Thailand as a surf tourism destination in two principal topics: firstly, by surveying the coastlines to identify potential surfing areas and rate their potentials for surf tourism (such as surf lessons, surf camps, private surf guiding, and those locations suitable for various skill levels); and secondly, by gathering information on Thailand surf tourist's impressions, opinions, and travel behavior in order to identify the characteristics and patterns of the country's surf tourists. To these aims, exploratory research was employed in a geographic context, unstructured interviews were carried out with industry practitioners, and semi-structured interviews with surf tourists.

In order to understand the broad physical environment, exploratory research was employed by way of survey and assessment of coastal resources and natural amenities in order to establish to what extent Thailand has waves suitable for surfing. All coastal surveys and assessment were conducted by the first of these two co-authors, who has 30 years experience spanning 40 countries as a surf tourist, and also operated a surf tourism company in Hawaii from 1998 to 2003. The research was conducted from May 2007 through March 2008 by using detailed maps (including Google earth software) and by locating potential surfing areas by vehicle, and through the act of surfing each area during periods of high surf in order to determine bottom conditions, currents, and potentialities for surf tourism. At the time of writing, five provinces and 80 surfing areas have been surveyed as follows: Phuket and Phang-Nga provinces on the Andaman Sea; and Surat Thani (Ko Samui), Nakhon Si Thammarat, and Songkla on the Gulf of Thailand (South China Sea). This field survey and assessment of the natural and physical environment include detailed descriptions geographic locations and the production of Thailand's first maps identifying surfing areas (detailed maps illustrating surfing locale are under construction). As location is paramount to identifying surfing locations, toponyms (place names) are identified whenever possible.

However, significant limitations to the current research include time and space. Thailand's continental coastline encompasses approximately 2,600 kilometers (the Andaman Coast is 739 kilometers in length and the Gulf of Thailand is 1839 kilometers). Additionally, there are countless islands, including Phuket and Ko Samui which are significant to this study. Furthermore, social and political unrest in Thailand's southern provinces pose additional limitations. It should also be mentioned that travel by boat to the islands of the Andaman region during the monsoon season (which is also the surfing season) is problematic, given not only the challenges posed by weather, but also some government restrictions imposed on travel during those months for safety and environmental reasons.

In-depth interviews with stakeholders were conducted with two main groups of stakeholders: through unstructured interviews with local Thai surfers and surf clubs; and through semi-structured interviews with foreign surf tourists. The interviews were undertaken to understand current events and the level of awareness and interest by hotels and other stakeholders; to identify surf tourists' behavior, 40 semi-structured interviews with surf tourists selected through convenience sampling were conducted at Kata Beach, Phuket in September 2007.

## **EXPLORATORY RESEARCH**

Contrary to popular belief there are a large number of areas suitable for surfing and surf tourism in Thailand, including those for advanced, intermediate, and beginner surfers. As coastal geography and weather patterns dictate the way waves break near beaches and reefs, waves may vary considerably at any given location and on any given day, as well as from one location to another. Whereas one area may be suited for beginners and surf lessons, another area may be better suited for experienced surfers, and all areas are dependent on the natural environment with conditions sensitive to variances in weather.

Seasonality is an important factor that can affect surf tourism in Thailand. Firstly, the surf season of the Andaman coast (southwest monsoon season) is the Phuket and Phang-Nga low tourism

season, when hotels experience low occupancy. Rough ocean conditions have been perceived as a threat to beach resorts; however, surf tourism turns weakness into opportunity by offering the prospect of selling rooms as well as surfing products and services, such as surf lessons and tours. Secondly, as this research has indicated, opportunities for surf tourism also exist along the Gulf of Thailand during that region's low season (offset with the Andaman coast's high season). This is to say that the two ocean's surf seasons are juxtaposed, offering year-round opportunities for surfing and surf tourism.

Based on this research, which encompassed one calendar year, waves of suitable size and quality exist in Thailand for a myriad of surfing experiences. However, given the close proximity of the ocean storms (and associated winds) which generate waves near Thailand, conditions pose considerable hazards, such as short period swells (waves are close together), rip currents, and strong on-shore winds (which can make surfing difficult). Furthermore, water clarity is generally reduced during periods of high surf making it somewhat unattractive for ocean recreation, especially in the Nakhon Si Thammarat and Songkla provinces in the Gulf of Thailand, and Phang-Nga province on the Andaman Coast.

The contributions of this research are twofold: existing (known) sites have been surveyed systematically (namely the sites in Phuket and Samui); and in addition, new areas have been identified, such as those in Phang-Nga province on the Andaman Coast and those in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Songkla provinces on the Gulf of Thailand (see Appendix A). A systematic description of each beach and a number of new areas have been prepared (see a sample in Appendix B).

## **STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTION AND BEHAVIOR**

Currently there are small surfing communities in Phuket and Ko Samui, and anecdotal evidence indicates that surf tourism is gaining in both popularity and publicity, albeit limited to a small number of areas. This research was the first of its kind and was conducted to see to what extent surf tourism awareness exists. Preliminary interviews at hotels indicate that opportunities for surf tourism are not recognized, other than recent acknowledgement by the Kata-Karon Hotel Association which offered some monetary support for the recent 2007 Kata Beach Surf Contest (Nadon, 2007 interview). At the time of writing, there may be as many as two-hundred surfers in Thailand, including Thai nationals and foreign expatriates (*ibid.*), which has grown significantly from about twenty surfers in 2002 (Aiyarak, 2008 interview).

Based on the aforementioned semi-structured interviews with surf tourists at Kata Beach in September 2007, it was found that the majority of surf tourists were male (71% of all); most were professionals, self-employed or students. Japan and Canada were the two main countries of residence (11.9% each), followed by the United Kingdom and Australia. Only six out of forty-two (14.3 %) of respondents were on a package tour and 85.7 % were FIT (Free Independent Travelers). The lead time for travel was less than one month for 52.4 % of the respondents, whereas 45.3 % planned had their trip between three months and one year in advance.

When examining the purpose of visit in relation to surf tourism (Table 1), interviews indicated that 54.8 % of the surf tourists felt surfing was of special interest in their visit and 38.1 %

expressed that surfing was the main purpose of visit. 92.9 % of the surf tourists interviewed were on holiday, vacation, or leisure; whereas only 3 % were in Phuket for business. No respondents were visiting friends, family, or relatives. Regarding special interests in Phuket, 76.2 % of respondents felt that water sports were their special interest during the Phuket visit, and 73.8 % also felt that sun and beach were of special interest. To a lesser extent, culture and night life were also important. Although surf, sun, and beach were of primary interest, Phuket surf tourists were also looking for cultural experiences and night life.

Table 1  
Purpose of Visit

Purpose of visit		Percentage
<b>Overall purpose</b>	holiday/vacation/leisure	92.9
	business	7.1
	visiting friends/relatives	0
<b>Surfing as main purpose</b>		<b>38.1</b>
<b>Special interest (secondary purpose):</b>		
Water sports		76.2
Sun and Beach		73.8
<b>Surfing</b>		<b>54.8</b>
Culture		40.5
Night life		35.7
Adventure		28.6
Shopping		19
Spa		16.7
Others		2.4

When asked about the quality of their surfing experience, of the 42 interviewees 23 felt their overall holiday experience for surfing was good and another 16 said it was beyond their expectation. Therefore, 39 out of 42 informants expressed having had a positive experience. Male respondents were particularly optimistic (table 2).

Table 2

Overall Surf Vacation Experience

Gender	Rating for overall holiday		
	Satisfactory	Good	Beyond Expectation
Female	1	8	3
Male	2	15	13
Total	3	23	16

Past surf tourism experience, as indicted in Table 3, signifies that Thailand surf tourists had visited a number of other countries for surfing during the past 3 years prior to visiting Phuket. They had primarily visited Bali, Australia, France, Maldives, and the USA, all of which are renowned for excellent surfing. This may indicate that travel for the sake of surfing influences destination choice and may indicate that Thailand is being recognized by some global surf tourists as a worthy destination. Other countries and regions visited during the 3 years prior to

visiting Thailand for surfing include Sri Lanka, Portugal, Ireland, Finland, Brazil, El Salvador, Mexico, the Caribbean, Canada, Seychelles, Mozambique, and New Zealand.

Table 3  
Past Surfing Experience: Most Popular Destinations

Country Visited	Percentage of Respondents
Bali	13.5%
Australia	13.5%
Maldives	8.1%
USA	8.1%
France	10.8%

Surf tourist comments and recommendations were received through open questioning and were recorded and organized into the surf tourism comment table provided in Appendix C. Analysis shows that 33% of surf tourists suggest that surf lessons, surf schools, or surf education are needed; 28% suggest there should be better promotion or advertisement; 18% feel there should be more (or better) surf shops. Furthermore, 13% say there are safety issues, especially regarding the jet ski and boat traffic in the surfing area, and although some respondents felt the area was well developed for the sport, 15% felt there was not enough infrastructure at Kata Beach (however some of these respondents indicate that they like the fact that the area is not overcrowded).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As the first research of its kind in Thailand, this study makes a significant contribution to the wider study of tourism in Thailand. Although not purely an academic research, its findings (many of which are not presented in this paper due to space limitations) can help businesses and authorities to make an informed judgment regarding surf tourism, and to identify the potential types of surf tourists peculiar to Thailand. In summary, Thailand has surf, albeit small in size, and there is surf tourism demand, albeit small in numbers. There are three annual contests drawing surfers of various levels, some of them from overseas, including professionals and spectators alike (Nadon, 2007 interview).

Therefore, we propose to redefine surf tourism as it applies to the current work, the following definition appears to be more suitable, at least to the case of Thailand, than earlier definitions:

“Any traveller who deliberately engages in the sport of surfing, including first-time surfers, beginners, and highly skilled surfers.”

This definition removes the condition that surfing should be a primary motivation for the trip, and encompasses a much larger group of surfers, many of them beginners. Indeed, this puts surf tourism at par with other types of adventure tourism where the adventure activity occupies only part of the tourists' vacation.

With further concern of identifying the meaning of a Thailand surf tourist, we introduce three categories of surf tourism based on their motivation for travel and depth of experience:

1. Hard surf tourism
2. Soft surf tourism
3. Incidental surf tourism

A *hard surf tourist* is someone traveling to Thailand for the sole purpose of surfing, including those who come for a surf vacation or a competition. Such an individual would likely have high motivation and deep experience. A *soft surf tourist* is considered any surfer who comes to Thailand with surfing as an objective of, but not a primary motivation for, his or her travel. An *incidental surf tourist* is one who may have little or no prior knowledge of surfing in Thailand, but while at the beach on vacation sees others engaging in the activity and takes a spontaneous decision to participate.

In consideration for the future for surf tourism in Thailand, it was determined that there is potential for surf tourism growth; however, a number of points have been short-listed for deliberation: the need to address the issue of low awareness of the sport; encouraging wise and sustainable growth of surf tourism; promoting a hospitable surf culture; identification and involvement of all stakeholders; and addressing the need for ocean safety.

Regarding the low awareness of the sport in Thailand, promotions may target soft surf tourists and surf tourism as a value-added product alongside other available activities. The current low awareness may indicate a low awareness of safety issues among locals, tourists, and hotel management alike. In order to encourage wise and sustainable growth, hotels offering services need consider the conditions and associated hazards in their specific locations; carrying capacity of each area should also be considered alongside environmental impact. To promote a hospitable surf culture, surf contests and promotions need consider the feelings and opinions of the local Thai surfers along with identifying and involving other stakeholders, rather than risking their alienation. In this way, a brand of Thai hospitality surf tourism could benefit myriad stakeholders. Importantly, any surf tourism strategy need address the significant need for ocean safety. Water safety and ocean awareness should be promoted at beach parks and resort properties. It should be noted that these recommendations are not mutually exclusive nor jointly exhaustive, rather they need be considered in accord and synchronization.

Regarding promotion, products, and services, Phuket can serve as a base and warm-up grounds for hard surf tourists en route to other Southeast Asian surf destinations, such as Indonesia and the Nicobar and Andaman Islands. For soft surf tourists, there is room for surf lessons, rentals, and for surfing as a part of the wider Thai experience. For incidental surf tourists, surf lessons and water safety classes could offer a value added beach experience. Surfing has a global and mainstream appeal; the image of the sport can play a positive role for Thai tourism marketing, especially as a schema for the low season given its counter-seasonal effect. Surf tourism in Thailand is still underdeveloped and is starting from a low base affording an opportunity to benefit from the experience of other surf tourism destinations, such as Hawaii and Indonesia, avoiding their mistakes and learning from their success.



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