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INSIDE



The Surf Keeper

Phuket expat and avid surfer Steven Martin conducts a three-year study on beach safety in Phuket.

Pages 4 - 5

Surf's up, drownings down

Phuket water safety expert uncovers the island's unsung lifesaving heroes.

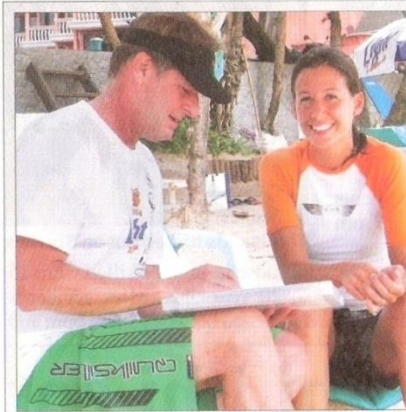
IN RECENT years Phuket beaches have been plagued by drownings, which remain a leading cause of death among tourists, especially those from abroad.

Lifeguard services have been precarious in recent years. Simply put, sometimes there are lifeguards, sometimes not. Throughout the current high season which began last November and which is now drawing to a close, there have been no lifeguards on the island's beaches, although the Phuket Provincial Administration Organization is expected to announce a new service provider by the time this issue is published.

But even with new lifeguards patrolling beaches, it seems inevitable that the death toll will continue to rise until something is done to address the dangerous combination of factors that lead so many foreign tourists into treacherous surf with fatal results.

One man's study

In a recent study conducted by Phuket resident Steven Martin, he



Man on a mission

STEVEN Martin has 30 years of water safety experience, including five years service as County Water Safety Officer in his native Hawaii and 10 years volunteer service with the American Red Cross. Currently in his third year as an instructor at Prince of Songkla University's Phuket campus, the 50-year-old is an avid surfer.

cites unfamiliarity with local beaches, poor swimming skills, language barriers and the disorientation of being in a foreign environment as part of the deadly equation – one made even worse when tourists enter the surf after consuming alcohol.

Several physical factors make Phuket's west coast beaches more dangerous than they may appear to the layman during the monsoon season that runs from May to October, said Mr Martin.

Monsoon season surf in Phuket is characterized by a wave phenomenon known as "short-period swell", which means that waves arrive relatively close together and propagate proportionately strong currents – including rip tides – even if the waves themselves don't appear particularly large or dangerous.

Short-period swells allow swimmers and surfers very little time to recover between waves. For example, a swell period of six



seconds implies that a wave will crash on the shoreline – or on surfers and swimmers in the surf zone – every six seconds on average. The effect on a swimmer in trouble is akin to that of a boxer who goes down not from a single knockout punch, but from a relentless barrage of steady blows.

Adding further to the danger are strong prevailing winds during the monsoon season that can produce “choppy” conditions at the surface that inhibit visibility and disorientate swimmers who might already be panicking.

Few people on the island have more first-hand knowledge of the dangers than veteran Phuket lifeguard Somkhit Kuer-nun, who has worked for years as a member of the provincial lifeguard service. Lifeguard services put in place after the tsunami have cut down the number of drowning deaths, but only by about one quarter annually, he estimates.

“Before the tsunami, there were an average of 12-16 surf-related drownings per year, but for the last five years, with intermittent periods of having lifeguards on beaches, the average was 9-12 per year [prior to 2009 low season]. Most drownings during the surf season are surf-related, while drownings in the high season are usually alcohol related,” he said.

Interviews with surfers

After rescuing several swimmers in need of help, Mr Martin decided to study how widespread the phenomenon was by asking fellow surfers if they had ever aided swimmers in distress.

He conducted 167 interviews with surfers in Phuket from May 2007 to January 2010. These included 48 local residents, both Thai and foreign, who surf regularly during the Andaman surfing season and had at least one personal experience in an ocean rescue situation.

He also interviewed 119 surf tourists from countries including Australia, the US, Singapore, Japan and South Africa. Most of these were interviewed randomly and spontaneously, while surfing.

These interviews revealed that surfers in both groups reported having rescued swimmers, both Thais and foreigners, with the resident surfers reporting a higher numbers of such incidents.

“The vast majority of surfers who responded to calls for help were already in the water when they saw or heard the person in trouble in the surf line. Nearly all the surfers were able to describe the chain of events surrounding each rescue in some detail and were therefore

included in the study,” he wrote.

Of the 48 Thai and foreign resident surfers interviewed, 23 reported making at least two rescues per year over the three-year period from 2007 to 2009.

“This more or less coincides with my personal experience of eight rescues during the three-year study period. Therefore, with 23 surfers having rescued an average of two people per year, the study identifies an average of 46 rescues per year. Multiplied by three, this amounts to 138 rescues during the study period.”

Helping the cause

Mr Martin also recorded second-hand reports by other surfers of 53 additional rescues made by Thai and foreign resident surfers over the same period along Thailand’s Andaman coastline.

“For example, there was a report of a group of four European tourists swept off the beach near Khao Lak who were rescued by foreign resident surfer Matt Blauer,” he wrote.

Mr Blauer, a fellow American from Oregon state, opened the first surf shop in Khao Lak and kept Mr Martin apprised of rescue reports from Phang Nga province.

“Totaling the aforementioned 138 rescues and the 53 random rescues for the same

period, and including the eight rescue-assists made by the author, this study documents 199 rescues performed [by resident surfers] from 2007-2009,” wrote Mr Martin.

Staggering results

In a second study group, 119 surf tourists were asked about their experiences in water safety while in Phuket. Of these, 22 said they had rescued a swimmer once during their vacation in Phuket. Another four reported having rescued at least two swimmers. One surfer said he had saved a family of three in a single incident.

“This shows that 27 of the 119 surf tourists interviewed, over 20 percent, made rescues, totaling 33 swimmers from 2007-2009,” he wrote.

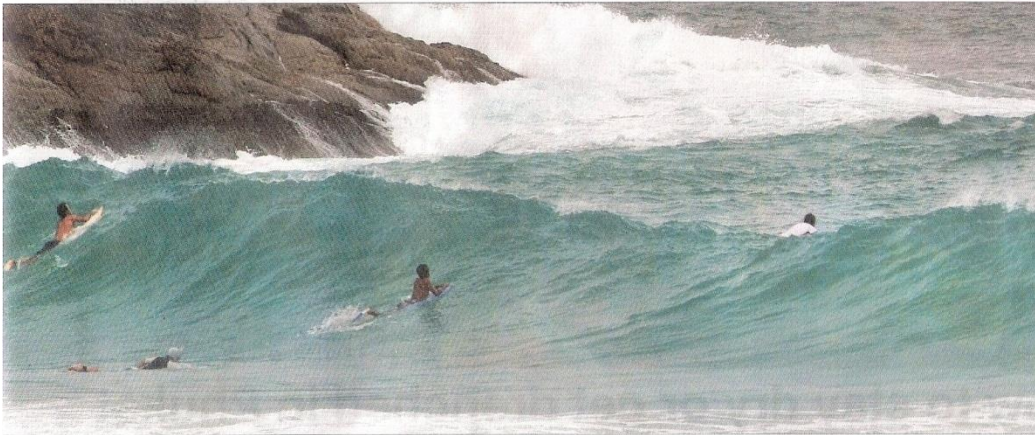
Most surfers did not ask the people they helped where they were from, but recalled they were often Europeans. This matched Mr Martin’s experience.

“Of the eight rescues I made, all were male tourists: four German, two Russian, one Swiss and one Japanese,” Mr Martin said.

“Surfers are inevitably surf lifesavers as they are in the surf line and are often the first to encounter tourists in dire need of assistance. My research documented 232 rescues by surfers over the past three years.”

as low season waves roll in

Gazette News Editor Stephen Fein reports.



Actual figures are likely far higher, he added.

Mr Martin recommended a number of ways to reduce the death toll. These included increasing salaries to attract more professional lifeguards and bringing in more trainers and mentors from places noted for a more serious approach to beach safety.

“The government will need to allocate an appropriate budget in order to train and pay

Emergency numbers	
Police: 191	Tourist Police:1155
Vachira Phuket Hospital: 076-361-234	Mission Hospital Phuket: 076-237-220/6

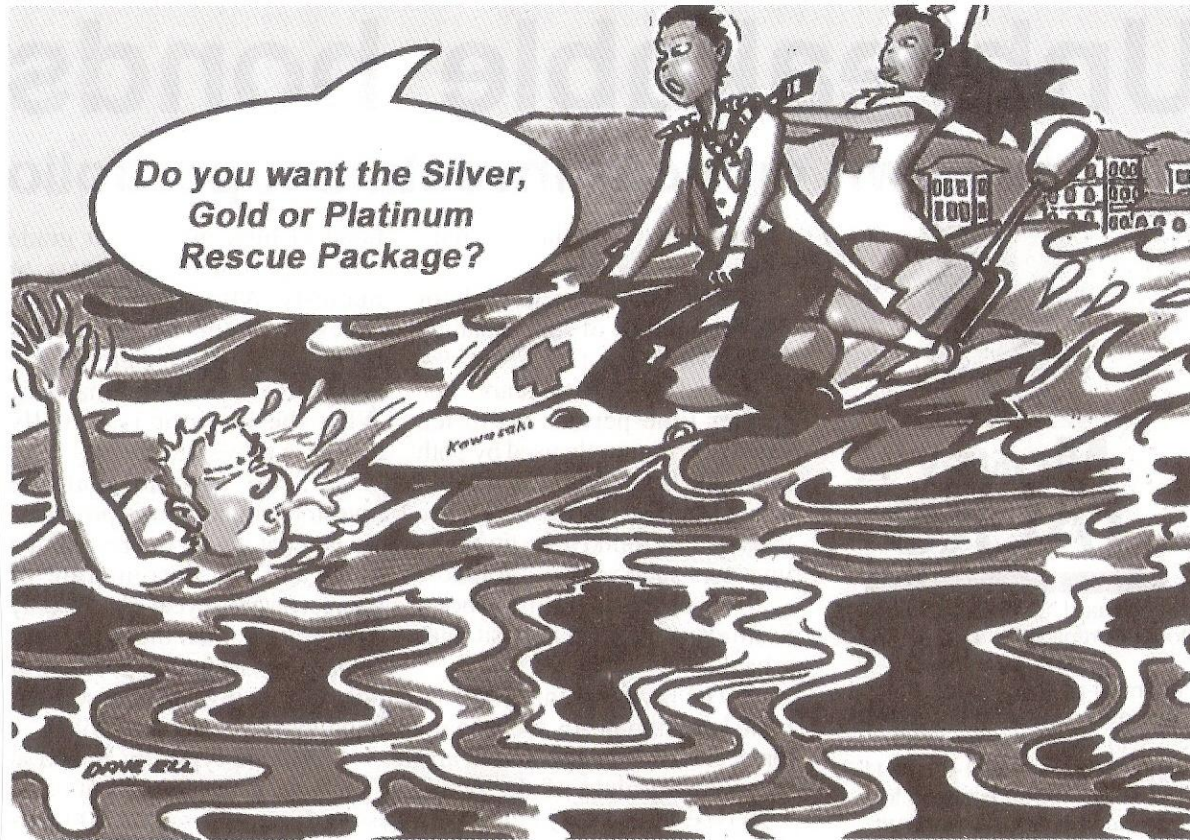
lifeguards at a professional level. If we want specialist behavior it will come at a specialized price... Once professional lifeguards are in place, statistics need to be kept regarding ‘who, how, what, where, when and why’ rescues take place, alongside related wind, wave, and weather data. This is already standard operating procedure in California, Hawaii, and Australia,” he said.

Local authorities should also provide videos for passengers aboard inbound flights during the monsoon season warning them of the risks. A similar strategy already in place for Hawaii is a proven success, he said.

Mr Martin called for further mobilization of Phuket’s growing number of resident surfers to assist in the beach safety effort. The number of surfers has increased to about 250 from just 30 a decade ago, he said.

What needs to be done

In his conclusion he asks rhetorically: “As the tourism industry pushes to annualize the tourist season – and draw tourists during the monsoon season – the issue of drowning and water safety will inflate. By offering the Thai surfers a chance for a good salary and meaningful profession, and by bringing in globally recognized professionals to train and inspire them, the current negative image can be wholly reversed and confidence to promote tourism in monsoon season restored. In a global context, waves and surfing are a powerfully positive image. Why not turn the negative into a positive by rebranding the ‘monsoon season’ as ‘surf season’, with Phuket beaches guarded by a new class of Thai water safety men and women?”



Catching the safety wave

A key reason for Phuket's success as a tourist destination is the wide variety of leisure activities available: sailing, golf, bowling, cricket, volleyball, windsurfing, jet-skiing, parasailing, shooting pool, throwing darts – name a pastime and you're likely to be able to enjoy it here.

This week's *Gazette* news feature (*see pages 4-5*) sheds some light on a newer recreational activity gaining in popularity in Phuket: surfing.

There are now an estimated 250 regular surfers on the island, up almost tenfold from a decade ago. The sport has grown to the point that Phuket now plays host to annual surf competitions with international sponsorship and has a well-established association, the Phuket Boardriders Club, to promote surfing in Thailand.

While rival destinations like Bali, Hawaii and Australia's Gold Coast will no doubt continue to attract the bulk of hardcore "surf tourists", Phuket's west coast beaches offer good enough waves and amenities to keep the island on the map as a surf destination, especially given the low cost of accommodation during the monsoon season.

The fortuitous presence of surfers along Phuket's west coast beaches goes well beyond tourism revenue generation, however. As pointed out in this week's feature, surfers have played a key role in beach safety by helping swimmers in distress back to the safety of the shore. In at least one case, an entire family swept out to sea was saved this way.

A study by Phuket-based American researcher Steven A Martin documents 232 rescues of swimmers by surfers over the three-year period from 2007 to 2009. The actual figure is, of course, probably far higher.

This comes as a rare dose of good news for beach safety in monsoon-season Phuket, where scores of overconfident swimmers – mostly foreign tourists from Europe – have perished in recent years.

Apart from mobilizing surfers, another good suggestion made by Mr Martin is to inform inbound tourists of the dangers they face if they ignore the red warning flags and enter the surf.

In Hawaii this has been successfully accomplished by playing warning videos on all inbound flights. Such an approach, suggested several times in this space in the past, makes a great deal of sense; airplane passengers comprise not only a 'captive audience,' but one that tends to be highly receptive to safety-related announcements.

The Civilian Aviation Department and provincial government should take immediate steps to put such a system in place before the monsoon season begins – and the death toll resumes its climb.

– *The Editor*