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SURF

THE SURFER -LIFESAVERS OF PHUKET

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In recent years, Phuket has been plagued with tourist drowning—and drowning is a leading cause of death among international travelers to Phuket. Let's consider that tourists are often unfamiliar with surf beaches along with other factors including poor swimming skills, language barriers, disorientation in a foreign vacation environment, and perhaps the consumption of alcohol. We can take into consideration that Phuket is a prolific tourism destination attracting individuals from around the world who may or may not have experience in the surf.

OCEAN CURRENTS IN PHUKET

From a perspective of ocean safety, weather conditions on the Andaman Coast produce identifiable hazards associated ocean conditions during the monsoon season (May to October) in a number of ways. In overview, there are at least two types of waves relevant to the discussion on Phuket ocean safety: short-period swell and long-period swell.



📷 *Interviewing Tourists
at Kata Beach in 2007*

SHORT-PERIOD SWELL

First, when waves arrive close together (called short-period swell or windswell), they can propagate a proportionately strong ocean current, even if the waves may not appear particularly large or dangerous. Secondly, short-period swells allow swimmers and surfers very little time to recover between waves. For example, a swell period of 7 seconds implies that a wave would crash on the shore (or on surfers and swimmers in the surf zone) every 7 seconds. Thirdly, short-period swell is often associated with stormy or 'choppy' water surface conditions, which can inhibit visibility and disorientate individuals.

LONG-PERIOD SWELL

Long-period swells (also called groundswells) travel to Phuket from the Indian Ocean—they are 'thicker,' travel through the ocean at a greater depth, and are more powerful than the short-period swell. Although long period swell may account for as much as half of the annual surf in the region, these swells are disturbed or 'mixed up' by the local short-period swell during the monsoon. Essentially, these thick and powerful waves are hidden in or 'masked' by the wind and the short-period waves.



📷 *Tourist Encounters Shore Break in Phuket*



📷 *Short-Period Swell on the Andaman Coast*

FLASH RIP CURRENTS

In point of fact, the mixture of short-period swell and long-period swell can be a lethal combination, creating spontaneous and dynamic ocean currents called 'flash rips'. Flash rip currents or 'flash rips' are inshore currents which appear instantaneously and then suddenly vanish. The reason for this phenomenon is because the long-period swells are masked in the windswell and there could be as much as 10 or 15 minutes between waves or 'sets' of these capacious waves. When these waves arrive and break near the shore, they are voluminous, have a high 'run-up' on the beach, and produce the unanticipated 'flash rip'. The flash rip is the **Phuket cocktail**, a deadly mixture of short-period and long-period wave activity unique to the region. This translates to what we see at our Phuket beaches: one minute the swimmer/tourist is standing in waist-deep water, marveling in the moment at the beauty of Phuket; the next minute they are swept off their feet and carried out to sea.

INTERVIEWS WITH INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

Director of Hawaii County Aquatics, Larry Davis, recently visited Phuket and examined ocean safety conditions: "The water safety aspect needs to be realized in Phuket, it is much more dangerous than it appears, especially for the lay person." With years of front-line experience, Thai waterman Khun Somkhit Kuernun identified: "Before the tsunami, there were an average of 12-16 surf-related drowning per year, but for the last 5 years, with intermittent

periods of having lifeguards on beaches; the average was 9-12 per year [prior to 2009 surf season]. Most of the drowning during the surf season is surf-related, while drowning in the high season is usually alcohol related." Thai surfer Satja Chayangkanon said: "The currents are bad in Phuket, and although I lived in Hawaii and have been surfing for 23 years, I almost drowned at Kata Beach... I lost my board and had to swim for a long time. Overall, Phuket has strong currents, even on a calm day at Kata when paddling a 'stand up paddleboard' (SUP) around the point to Kata Noi you can feel the pull."

INTERVIEWS WITH SURFERS

167 interviews were conducted from May 2007 to January 2010 with surfers in Phuket. They included 48 Thai and foreign resident surfers who surf regularly during the Andaman surfing season and had at least one personal experience in an ocean rescue situation. Secondly, interviews were carried out with 119 surf tourists from a variety of countries including Australia, America, Singapore, Japan, South Africa, and others. Most of the surf tourists were interviewed randomly and spontaneously while surfing. For example, while waiting for waves, I regularly asked individuals about their experiences and opinions regarding ocean safety in Phuket.

Among surfers, several scenarios were identified regarding surf-related rescues. Foremost, Thai and foreign resident surfers rescue tourists and Thai swimmers; and to a lesser extent, surf tourists rescue other tourists and Thai swimmers.



The vast majority of surfers who responded to the rescues were already in the water when they saw or heard the person in the surf line and in trouble. 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.

Of the 48 Thai and foreign resident surfers interviewed (all of whom reside in Phuket or Phang-nga) and surf regularly during the Andaman surfing season, 23 reported that they had each made at least **two rescues per year** over the previous three year period (2007-2009). This more or less coincides with my personal experience of 8 rescues during the three year study period. Therefore, with 23 surfers having rescued an average of 2 people per year, the study identifies an average of 46 rescues per year. Multiplied by 3 (3years), this amounts to 138 rescues.

Additionally, my research recorded 53 rescues of various sorts by Thai and foreign resident surfers in the same period (2007-2009). For example, there was a report of a group of four European tourists swept off the beach near Khao Lak and were rescued by foreign resident surfer Matt Blauer.

Totalling the aforementioned 138 rescues and the 53 random rescues for the same period, and including the 8 rescues made by the researcher, this study **documented 199 rescues** performed from 2007-2009.

In a second study group, 119 surf tourists were asked about their experiences in water safety while in Phuket. 22 surf tourists described that they had rescued a tourist swimmer one time during their surfing vacation in Phuket, while 4 surf tourists reported that they rescued at least 2 tourist swimmers during their surfing experience in Phuket and one described assisting a family of 3.

This indicates that of the 119 surf tourists interviewed from 2007-2009, 27 (over 20 percent) had made rescues totaling 33 swimmers.

This study was unable to identify the place of origin for individuals who were rescued due to the fact that most of the surfers who performed rescues did not think at the time to ask individuals where they were from. However, upon being interviewed, many surfers recalled that their victims were likely to have been European. Regarding the 8 victims I encountered, all were male tourists of the following nationalities: 4 German; 2 Russian; 1 Swiss; and 1 Japanese.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Surfers are inevitably surf lifesavers as they are in the surf line and are among the first to encounter tourists in dire need of assistance. My research **documented 232 rescues** by surfers over the past 3 years—the actual number is likely to be considerably higher since this statistic only reflects those surfers that I had the opportunity to interview.

The question remains: how to turn around this mounting issue and prevent the loss of life—and to reverse the unpleasant image that Phuket is receiving from all this? I would like to put forward several unpretentious insights for further discussion:

- It takes time and personal experience to recognize ocean safety issues such as flash-rips, and this type of intuitive knowledge requires familiarity with surf-lifesaving and in local waters. It would be fantastic to see Phuket ocean safety courses offered on the island—and perhaps bring in some industry professionals from Hawaii, California or Australia as trainers and mentors for citizens, surfers, and lifeguards alike.

- Mobilize our Phuket surfers—they are unconsciously and instinctively filling the gap in Phuket ocean safety.

- Provide videos on arriving flights throughout the monsoon season which discuss the nature of the surf conditions and associated currents. This has been done with marked success for many years in Hawaii.

- Statistics can be gathered regarding 'who, how, what, where, when and why' the drowning and rescues are occurring, alongside related wind, wave, and weather data (this is standard operating procedure in California, Hawaii, and Australia).

As the tourism industry pushes to annualize visitation to the island—and draw tourists to our beaches during the monsoon season—the issue of drowning and Phuket ocean safety will indubitably increase. In actuality, we must recognize.

HAVE YOU EVER ASSISTED OR RESCUED SOMEONE AT A SURF BEACH IN PHUKET?

PLEASE SEND US YOUR STORY! DROP US AN EMAIL WITH YOUR DETAILS OF YOUR EXPERIENCE. INCLUDE THE DATE/TIME/TIDE AND WAVE INFO WHEN IT HAPPENED.