

Thailand's Phi Phi Island—

Paradise Then and Now

January 2017



When I first came to Phi Phi (“Pee Pee”) to pen a travel article in 1983 I was gobsmacked by the beauty. I didn’t know splendour like this existed in the real world. Thailand’s south has a way of doing that to one I would learn again and again.



Then, it was deserted but for a few Thais who ran the coconut plantation. There were no huts, no nothing. I paid about 50 cents to rent a pup tent on the beach. And learned how uncomfortable it is to sleep on sand. I wanted The Dragon Lady to see it.



But now 2,000-3,000 residents swells to 10,000 in the high season. I can't bitch. As a travel writer, I'm partly responsible. I'm just grateful that I saw it before the crush. And that I got here one other time while doing a scuba dive story, also in the 1980s.



A bigger villain than me was 2000's *The Beach*, filmed at Phi Phi Leh, in the distance. Longtail boats filled with fans roar back and forth all day.



Once Maya Bay was an idyll.



Phang Nga Bay boomed the first time after scenes from the James Bond movie *The Man with the Golden Gun* were shot on an island north of here in 1974.



Phang Nga Bay is made up of hundreds of limestone karst formations, sheltered by large Phuket island on the left, Andaman Sea, side. Krabi (“Kra-BEE”) town is on the right, mainland, side and its name has become synonymous for the region. I know it quite well having had the pleasure of crewing in the Phang Nga Bay Regatta for some years, taking breaks from writing *The Manila Galleon* and *Opium Dream*. It’s on the short list of the most gorgeous areas in the world to sail. (Phi Phi is in the bottom right corner.)





Phuket and Krabi are in Thailand's deep south.



Phi Phi Island, Thailand

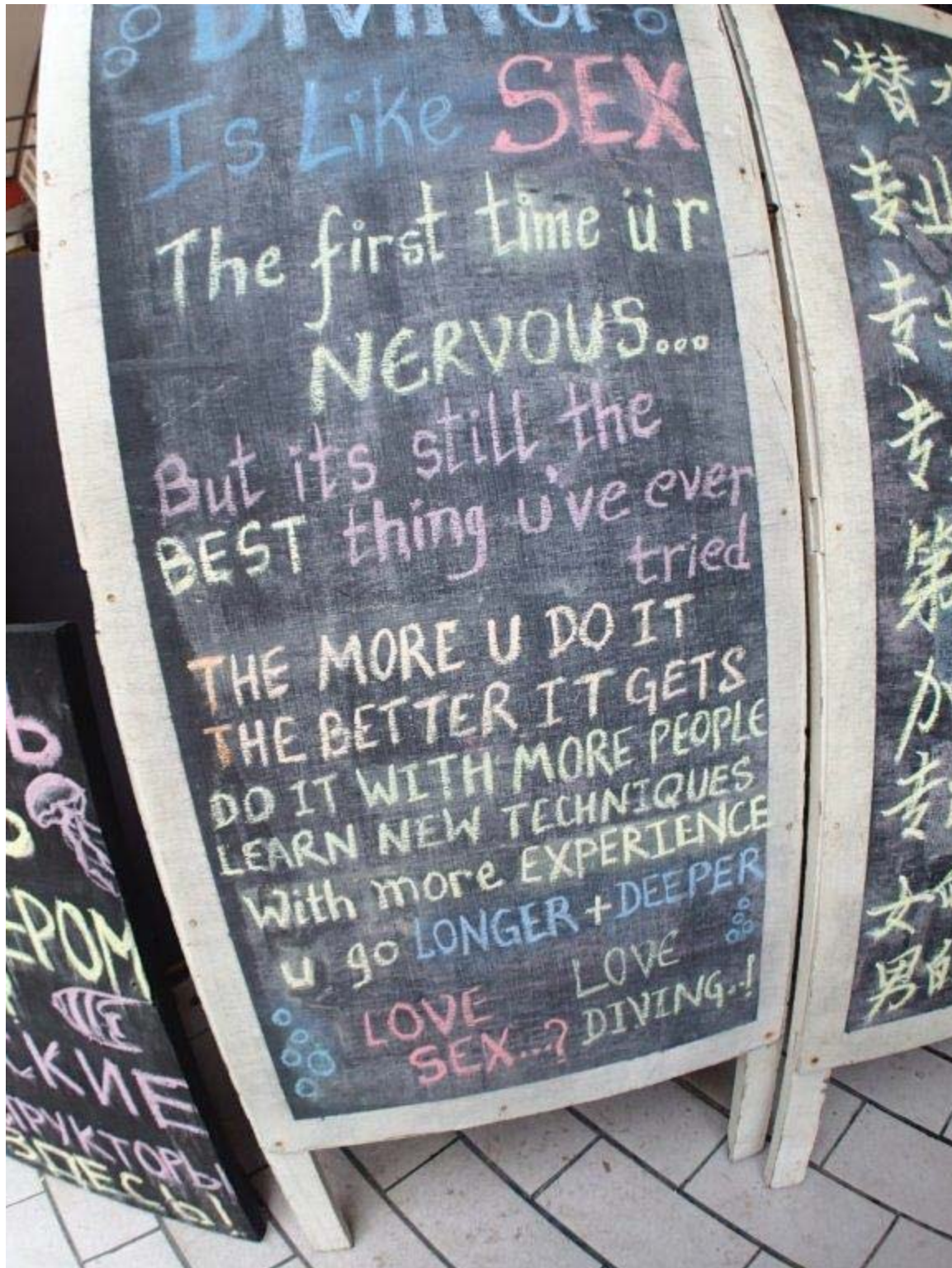


1,000 travellers daily pour in and out from Krabi town and Phuket (“Poo-KET” and not “Fuck-et” although that’s what we *farangs* sometimes jokingly call it). If you like expensive, crowded, commercial, international resorts, you’ll love Phuket.





There's a labyrinth of streets, packed with bars, restaurants, souvenir shops, tour companies, rock climbing outfits—and tourists and backpackers.



Diving here is okay, but not great. The Philippines still has the best diving I've done in the world, though divers with wider experience point to Indonesia as the crème-de-la-crème.



But Phi Phi is party central. Buckets of booze are the fad.





I never saw Su for three days.



She wanted to have tattooed in large block letters **JASON FOREVER** across her chest but I managed to talk her out of it.



My camera, which normally acts up when it gets near a beach, more or less behaved itself. Well, perhaps less than more....



I apologize. This was supposed to be a shot of a mosque.

I



Ah here it is. The south of Thailand is predominantly Muslim and 80% of Phi Phi's permanent population are terrorists, running most of the businesses. Well, I guess they're just suspected terrorists, since not all Muslims are terrorists though all terrorists are Muslim.



Damn camera. Supposed to be a sunset.



Loh Dalum Bay. It looks fabulous until you look more closely....



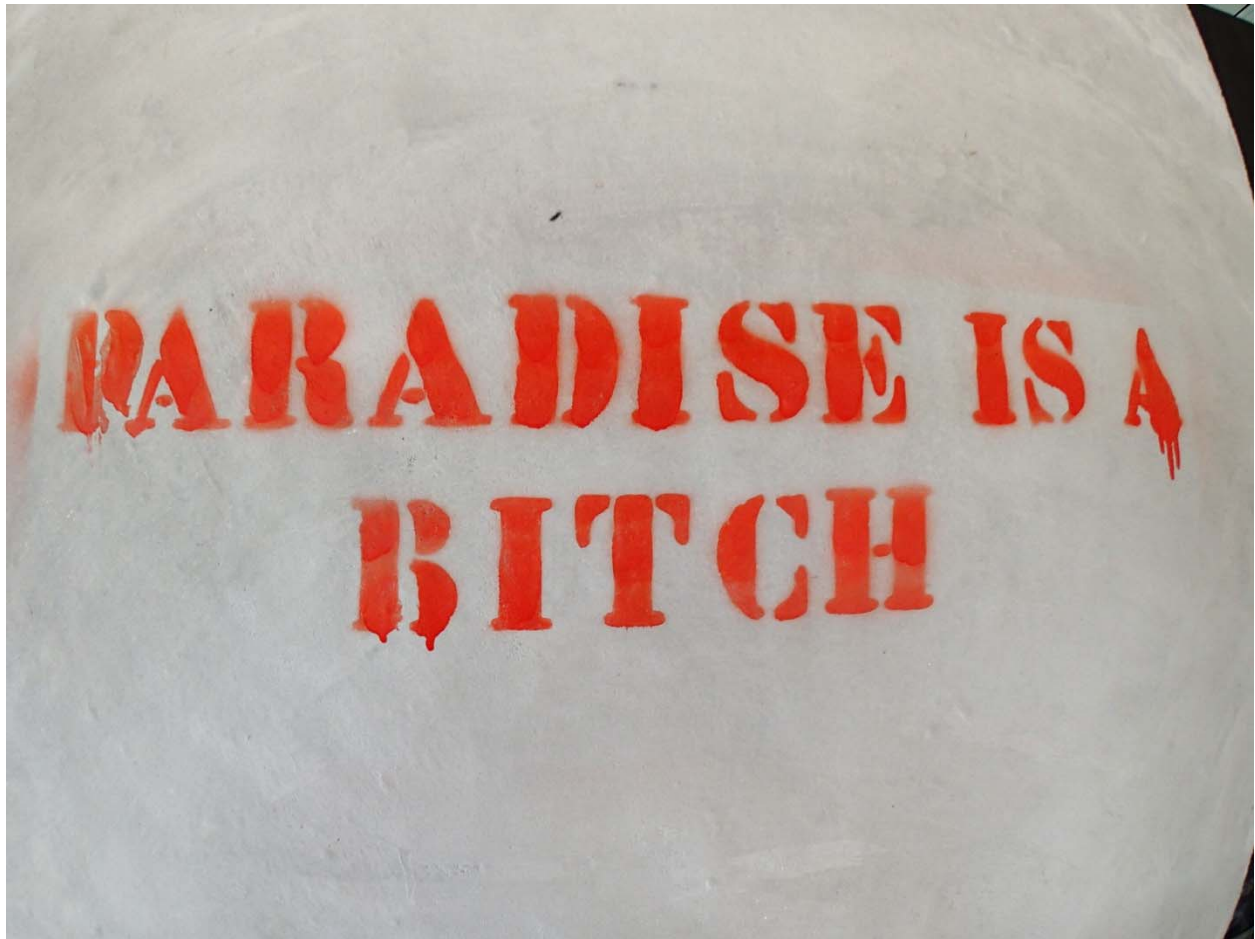
The Thais do so many things well—food, massages, their sense of fun, languid lifestyle and laissez-faire attitude—but they do so many other things pure stupid. Why would they build an idiotic concrete wall along the back of one of the most beautiful beaches in the world...?



If you can take your eyes off the lovely, you'll better see the row of round, concrete abutments at the back of the beach. For someone like me who strolled this beach in its pristine condition, it's half way between heartbreaking and maddening. Though I've lived here long enough to just shrug, shake my head and move on. TIT. This Is Thailand.



Though the beach does have this funky corner, kind of reminiscent of a 1950s *Gidget* surfing movie with Sandra Dee.



And sometimes it's a real bitch. It's hard to do a layout on Phi Phi without mentioning the tsunami.



It struck Boxing Day morning 2004 at 10:37a.m. It roared in from the left Ton Sai Bay at 3 metres—but from the right Loh Dalum Bay at 6.5 meters, slapping in the middle. As the isthmus is only 2 meters above sea level, it was caught in a liquid vice.





I'll spare you pictures of the field of body bags trussed up in white sheets like cocoons. 850 lives were snuffed within minutes, and another 1,200 are still unaccounted for. To the credit of backpackers, hundreds volunteered to stay to help with the cleanup. For a dramatic, first person account of a miraculous survival: <http://josiegirlblog.com/2012/06/11/tsunami-survivor/>



But all things must pass, and once again happy times have swept over Phi Phi.



This beauty flew an instant before my Asian snatched and ate it.



We found our happy area tucked into the most beautiful corner of Ton Sai beach, if not the entire island. It has one of the few private beaches.





We booked here for two weeks through www.true-beachfront.com which guarantees that the hotel you book anywhere in the world is right ON the beach (yes, many lie), and that's what we wanted. It feeds through the usual booking websites so it costs no more, and has negotiated a 25% discount at many hotels. Highly recommended. Bit of a goofy name for a hotel though. Hip?



How the hell can it be hip when it's also run by suspected terrorists? Nice, friendly suspected terrorists though. They did serve ham at the buffet breakfast, which was quite good and varied daily. And they even celebrate our infidel Christmas.



You don't get a helluva lot of room for over \$300Can a day on Phi Phi at its best beach. But the flat screen has news channels, and cock fighting. But forget about getting a reply to emails. Before we came, I asked how to get from Krabi to Phi Phi. I finally had to phone. They advised to take a cab to the dock and then a \$100US speedboat—but when we landed at Krabi we were easily able to buy a \$22 ticket which took us all the way! Laundry was listed as free, but we were charged. Not impressed. It's a 3.5-star with 5-star prices.



Balcony view.



It's hard to recommend, but it does have *the* location.



My daily coconut milk shake. Man, they're delicious.



Followed by a massage, while listening to the surf gently lap against the shore. While mentally picturing the -54 with wind chill back home. All of Canada, Europe and even the Balkans were being whacked. Even if this continues all year somehow I'm sure the UN's alarmist IGCC (Inter Governmental Panel on Climate Change) will jig their figures to make it appear like it's another "record hot year," despite most sensors being in the northern hemisphere.



So, Phi Phi Island is a paradise lost, like my beloved Ko Samet where I wrote much of *Thai Gold* in a dollar-a-day bamboo beach hut in the 1980s. Railay Beach—the world’s most beautiful—is still fabulous though and only 1.5 hours away. If you’re looking for paradise, go there. You can see that photo report in my blog under 2014. Phi Phi? Well, I’m glad Su saw it.

