

Tsunami – a first hand account



*In the first of two reports on the tsunami and its effects, to mark its first anniversary, young UK dentist **Bob Bhamra** describes first hand how and his wife Sukhi found themselves caught up in Thailand in the terrifying events of Boxing Day 2004.*

My wife Sukhi and I were on a round the world trip and had been travelling since February 2004. We had been through South and Central America, New Zealand, and Asia. Thailand was our last destination before returning home at the end of January 2005. We had planned to spend the last few weeks of our trip on the beaches, being on Ko Phi-Phi for Christmas. We arrived on Ko Phi-Phi Don on 23 December 2004 and were going to stay until 27 December before moving on to the east coast.

On the morning of the 26 December we had arranged to go snorkelling around the smaller uninhabited sister island of Ko Phi-Phi Leh. We met our guide at around 9.15 in the village centre and made our 15 minute ride to Phi-Phi Leh in a small longtail boat. It was as usual a beautiful warm sunny day with calm swaying water. Our first stop was Ao Maya, a stunning cove which was used for shooting scenes for the motion picture *The Beach*. Our boat was moored on one end of the cove and we decided to walk around it and back again before getting into the pristine water.

On walking back we noticed that the sea had eerily pulled back far away from the coast line and most of the other boats had been taken with it. Our boat was stuck suddenly in the sandy spot where it was anchored. Our pilot and guide were both trying to dislodge it. People started to walk out onto the sea bed where the water had been only minutes before. Somebody asked my wife to take a picture of them standing on the beach. It was then she noticed the boats in the distance beginning to move violently back

towards the beach carried by a rapidly advancing wave. We realised that something extraordinary was happening. We picked up our bag and hurried inland. By now the wave had overcome many of the people who had walked out. The boats were being tossed about just as indiscriminately as the people, both narrowly missing each other and the sheer cliff faces on either side of the cove. The wave kept on advancing and we continued inland as fast as we could, hearing only the unnaturally loud rush of water behind us, interrupted by the screams of those engulfed behind us.

WAVE OF TERRIFYING SPEED

By now the water, moving much faster than we possibly could, was up to our waists and was still rushing in. As a small disused wooden hut next to Sukhi was ripped up by the wave, narrowly missing her, I shouted for her to climb up the tree I had just scrambled up realising that the wave would take us too if we were on the ground. We watched the water keep pushing far inland to where it had never been, taking with it all manner of debris. The realisation that something terrible was happening was setting in.

Probably a minute later the wave sank back towards the sea leaving the ground littered dangerously with wood, glass, shells and fish. We met somebody who had heard that another wave may come so we scrambled up to the top of a sharp limestone cliff nearby which was the highest point we could access. Later we were joined by the remainder of the one hundred or so people on the island who waited on the

cliffside as there was only enough space for the three of us on the ledge at the top on which we stood. The captain of one of the boats who was waiting with us luckily had a radio and had learnt about how another wave was coming. He advised us to wait until the sea was calm enough for us to go down and for the boats to come back in towards the shore, since those that could had all headed to sea when the wave had pushed in. This is when we first heard that there had been an earthquake in Indonesia that had caused a tsunami. We were however completely unaware of the impact in other areas.

THE ALL CLEAR

We waited for an hour and a half before getting the all clear to come down. In that time the cove had become unrecognisable, with 'bites' of land taken out from the shore, plagued with debris strewn everywhere. Not knowing if our boat was alright we waited on the beach for a few minutes. Luckily it had escaped from being smashed against the rocks. The pilot had managed to clamber on board and take it out to sea, where he had found our guide, still alive, 200m or so from the beach from where he had been swept earlier.

Shaken and distressed the four of us headed back for Phi-Phi Don, over a very turbulent stretch of water, beginning to realise that we were so close to having been killed. The true horror unfolded as we approached our island. The sea was infested with floating debris which grew more dense the closer we got to the island. Tables, chairs, televisions, suitcases, bags, crates of food and drink, clothes, refrigerators, oil, overturned boats, glass, beds, shoes, trees, rubble. We could see now that this side of the village had been destroyed, along with the pier. The pilot negotiated the boat as close to the shore as he could where we jumped off and waded through chest high water onto the island.

THE VILLAGE FLATTENED

There was an eerie silence. We had walked into the flattened village, looking as though it had been heavily bombed. There was nobody around. Had everyone been swept out to sea? We walked a little further in, where amongst the debris and confusion were some locals who told us that another wave was coming and that we should head for high ground. We scrambled up a steep hillside through dense forest, barefoot. At the top were hundreds of people under the trees. Men, women and children, locals and tourists. Some with injuries. This is when we learnt of the devastation that had occurred in other areas. Of the few people who had mobile phones no one had reception to contact the outside world. During the afternoon we could hear aircraft passing overhead which was reassuring.

We waited for a frustrating few hours before deciding to go back down to find our cabana, if it was still standing. During this time we tended to some of the injured, administering some basic first aid. Some of the locals had managed to bring up water and biscuits which they distributed. Totally disorientated we headed back down on the opposite side to where we had come up. We walked into one side of the unrecognisable village to find our route blocked by 15 feet of rubble and debris. Some people were here, looking for belongings, tending to injuries, or just waiting. Unable to head for our hotel we could make our way up to viewpoint, the highest point on the island, at the foot of which was our cabana.

INJURIES ASSESSED BUT NO SUPPLIES

Hundreds more people were scattered at varying points up the hillside. We went to the top which we assumed to be the safest spot, as many others had done. Some were calling out the names of people for whom they were looking, some showing pictures of their lost loved ones asking "have you seen my partner/child/friend?" There were only a couple of hours of sunlight left and we knew that we would have to spend the night here, not knowing when we would be rescued. We, like most others had not eaten since the morning, and had had very little water. I told my wife to wait while I went to look for food and water. In amongst the people was a man, calling for medical supplies. His name was Mark Perry. I went to him and said that I had supplies which unfortunately were in my room, but I could otherwise help. He pointed to where his son, daughter and friends were helping some of the injured. I went to them and asked if there was anybody with any medical training, but the answer was no. I asked to collate all the supplies we had.

There we helped as many as we could of the injured who came to us. I suggested that some of them waited, that we split our supplies and that I go with a couple of them in amongst the many people to look for and treat any other injured people. I write of supplies. In reality, we had a little iodine spray and vodka, duck tape, sanitary towels and toilet paper for dressings, with some antibiotics. The Perry family that I was with showed great courage when confronted with the horrific injuries; people with severe lacerations, head injuries, broken bones and shock. They displayed a great sense of responsibility, maturity and focus in a time of great confusion and chaos. We did what we could in the circumstances by dressing, providing reassurance, and monitoring them. These were the lucky ones.

We worked into the darkness until we were sure that we had reached as many as we could have. That night a

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rescue team on the island came up. We learnt that the helicopters we had heard that afternoon airlifted around 40 of the most seriously injured that they could get to, and that they would return the following day for more. They could not, however, tell us when the rest of us would be evacuated. Maybe tomorrow, maybe within a few days. We 'slept' that night on the top of the hill.

MORNING DAWNS

In the morning, most were up before first light. As soon as we were able, Sukhi and I went down to our hotel. We had heard that all except two of the hotels in the village had been completely destroyed, however some of the rooms had been looted, maybe for medical supplies, maybe not. Ours was miraculously saved. I gathered my medical kit and went back up to viewpoint, again helping who I could along the way. Most people had lost everything, passports, clothes, money, homes, partners, children, parents, livelihoods. Sukhi distributed what clothes she could.

We were advised to go to the surviving pier later that morning to be evacuated. Our walk took us over the beach which was strewn with all manner of debris from the day before. Some which had been taken out by the wave had now been brought back in with the returning tide. Dead fish, snakes, monkeys, humans.

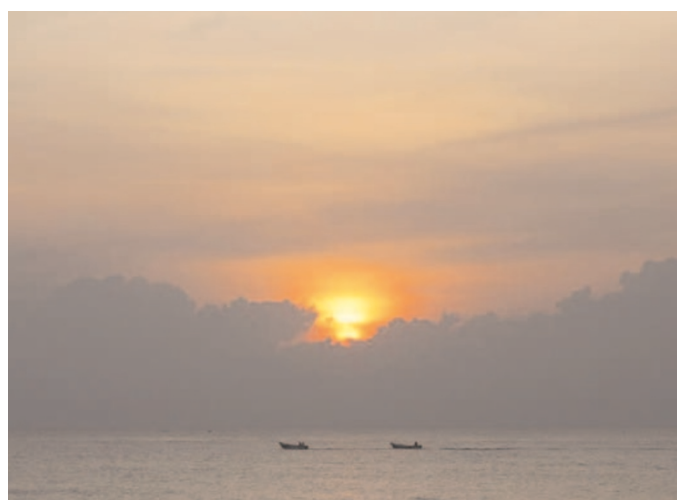
On the surviving pier we stood alongside hundreds of others and stacks of bodies wrapped in cloth, all waiting to leave the island. It was on the boat to Krabi on the mainland where we were able to contact our families for the first time as we now had limited reception on our mobile phones. Part of them had assumed the worst as it had been a traumatic 30 hours or so between their learning of the disaster and us being able to contact them.

REALISATION DAWNS

At the port in Krabi hundreds of locals were waiting, tearful, watching each boat as it emptied for any family and friends they had on Phi-Phi, not knowing if they were alive. Despite this, many were handing out food and water to all those coming off the boats. Ambulances took the injured to hospital. A courtesy taxi took us to the centre of town where we got a room for the night. I suppose it was at this point that the horror of what we had gone through was just beginning to set in.

We cut our trip short and returned home a few weeks earlier than we had planned, thankful to have each other. We spent a lot of time after the event trying to come to terms with what had happened. It was one of those things that you see in the news, one of those things that you never expect to be involved in.

Our thoughts will always be for those who did not have homes and families to return to, and those who did not return.



In the next issue we have an article from Nidhi Bhalla, a UK dentist who visited Sri Lanka after the tsunami and who tells of the oral health challenges still being faced by the population there