

When Paradise Goes Bad

A New Yorker's Account of the Tsunamis...

By Jason Heller

I was at sea scuba diving in the uninhabited Similian Island chain, an 8 hour boat ride from the island of Phuket, when the first wave came through. What would follow are a series of events that changed the lives of so many people forever. As an up and coming underwater photographer, I had planned on spending the week taking pictures of the breathtaking beauty of the reefs and island scapes, however, I spent the last 2 days documenting the devastation, destruction and compassionate rescue efforts that not even images can properly portray. We have experienced the two extremes of paradise. The idyllic beauty and the sheer destructive power of the amazing planet that we inhabit.

We were diving at a remote site in the open ocean called Richlieu Rock, a pinnacle in about 120 feet of water, which at high tide is exposed by about 10 feet, and during low tide is totally submerged. There was an abnormally strong current, as I literally had to pull myself across the bottom of the ocean floor, hand over hand, to keep from being washed into the current (which I would later learn was the actual wave passing through our relatively safe position in the open ocean). By the time I surfaced 34 minutes later, the sea was exhibiting extremely abnormal tides.

The tide tables indicated high tide, yet Richlieu Rock was exposed by more than 15 feet. We checked again and it had disappeared under the sea.

A whirlpool started forming around us. Shouts in Thai rang out as our engines immediately roared and our mooring rope was cut to avoid being sucked into the whirlpool or hitting the rocks. Word came over the radio that some divers were missing at a nearby Surin Island and our crew set a course to go help. By the time we approached Surin Island 30 minutes later, we watched in horror as a huge cruise ship was battered against the rocks, unfortunately not able to maneuver fast enough to escape the waves. Through binoculars we watched the life rafts being deployed. More news began pouring in of swimmers being swept to sea from a 30 foot wave on Phuket, and that more waves were continuing north and heading right for us. Our boat crew conferred with other boats also stuck at sea, and it was decided that the safest course of action would be to head south (yes in the direction of the waves!) towards the Similians where we had what they thought was some level of protection. As we hopped from one island cove to another, we



observed the abnormally low tide everywhere we stopped. The reefs were exposed in many areas, and the exposed islands looked more vulnerable than ever. It was like looking at a ring around a dirty bathtub. We made it to Similian Island #4, the only island that possessed a cell phone relay tower. However, it was nearly impossible to get a signal. Even when you could get a signal, you couldn't sustain it long enough to hold a conversation. SMS text messaging was the only means of communication. It reminded me of the hours post 9/11, when communication was nearly impossible. As sunset approached, there was an eerie calm all around us. We eventually moored our boat as recommended in water that

was over 100 feet deep, but in my opinion, far too close to shore. At some point we even fell asleep. We woke to shouts of imminent demise, "get your life vests, it's coming in 10 minutes!". I expressed my frustration that we were too close to shore, but the crew did not do anything about it. So I spent over an hour watching our depth on sonar, as my rudimentary understanding of tidal waves told me that we would lose depth as the tsunami approaches. Every 10 or 20 minutes for the next 3 hours, we received frantic warnings of the imminent wave coming our way. Passengers were saying their last goodbyes, however prematurely it was. There was talk of Navy boats coming to rescue us, but it would



be hours before they arrived. Boats can not outrun a tsunami. Thankfully the second set of waves never made it in our direction. However, I have no doubt that if they did, we were too close to shore and would have been pounded against the rocks.

In the morning, we set a course back to Phuket, an 8 hour trip. During the entire trip we observed everything imaginable floating in the ocean. As we approached the island, the quantity of debris increased. Lounge chairs, luggage, a refrigerator, trees and dead animals all floated past us. After we docked is when we witnessed the true level of what had happened. I have never witnessed such levels of devastation. The tsunami destroyed in a matter of minutes, what a hurricane

destroys over the course of a week. As we walked around Patong and Kamala beaches, which were hardest hit by the waves, the smell of decomposing bodies was everywhere. Rescue crews were trying to cope with the task at hand, including the logistical impossibility of accomplishing the recovery of bodies without the proper equipment. In some instances cars and buses were crushed like accordions and sent into the first and second floors of what used to be 4 and 5 star beach resorts. Images of European children with missing parents were heart breaking. For every local, there were two tourists killed or missing. The only way to try and locate missing friends and relatives was to look at boards of photos taken of the



recovered dead bodies. It was eerily reticent of the streets of NYC after 9/11. Unfortunately the chances of finding your loved ones here at this point are just as grim.

The last estimate was almost 100,000 dead and missing. But the world moves on. Hopefully a humbler and more compassionate place. We watched some tourists even going swimming in the beach, although just an hour earlier we saw a dead body randomly washing up on shore. Words and images can not paint a grim enough picture of what happened here and throughout the rest of the region that fringes the Indian Ocean. My thoughts go out to all who died or lost loved ones during this incredible natural disaster. My view

of the world has changed forever. I have always appreciated the power of mother nature. “Mother” as in that which gives life, “Nature” as in the uncontrollable and unpredictable and unfortunately, what sometimes takes life. The images and feelings from the last 72 hours will never be erased from my memory.

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