

## travel

An attractive Thailand vacation might have included the royal city of Bangkok with a short flight to Phuket for beach R & R. Activities could have included a Thai dinner served in a palm tree grove, golf and water sports, and elephant rides through river trails. But all of this has been slammed to a halt by the disaster. Basic family needs must come first; only then can the island's economy begin to recover.

Other regions of South Asia have yet to develop tourism — in particular, the west coast of Sumatra, which received a 30-foot wall of water that took untold lives. Many towns and villages suffered heavy damage, with gruesome stories reported by local townspeople. They felt the full collision of water crashing onto the land with little notice and no mercy. Locals recount the first few minutes — water sucked outward to the sea, followed by the devastating force of the water.

Some areas of Sri Lanka reported two miles of land penetration. Cars became floating battering rams, smashing aimlessly into property or people; items not held down were swept by rushing waters with reckless abandon.

The rich tapestry of Indonesian culture draws tourists from around the world — artistic Bali is replete with quality lodging and mystical dance. The full scope of the tsunami was not felt in this area of the Indonesian islands. Hesitant travelers need to know that Bali is up and running.

What is the aftermath for resort areas? If a village withstood the impact, cleanup can start only if employees are found and are able to report for work. Job responsibilities are less important than immediate family needs.

The loss of buildings and equipment cannot be overstated. Replacement items may not be locally available, and importing them presents its own dilemmas and delays. What good is a cab driver without his taxi? What appeal does a luxury hotel offer if its beach has been washed away? It may take a significant effort to locate the specialized sea pumps required to replenish beach sand.

I expect Thailand to recover quicker than most; they have a mature tourist industry and adequate resources. Indonesia and other parts of Southeast Asia might find recovery a formidable challenge.

Sri Lanka and India have suffered great loss of life, but both have shown in the past an amazing resiliency in times of trouble.

The little-known islands of the Maldives are nestled southwest of India and lack protective moun-



tain ranges or rolling hills. In fact, the sandy islands are void of any dirt. The tsunami rumbled more than a thousand miles from its epicenter, engulfing two-thirds of the helpless islands. Male, the capital, was half-submerged. The luxury Four Seasons, located on its own private island, received a pounding.

The Maldives prosper only when their hotels are active with tourists. Visitors have traditionally arrived during the winter. For now, the number of tourists will be limited until further notice.

It is as hard to predict recovery in the affected areas as it is to forecast the next tsunami. A tour planner cannot counsel travelers about the safety or timing of a future tsunami. Hurricanes are confined to specific seasons; tsunamis are not. It may take weeks or even months to restore proper drinking water, particularly to outlying villages.

We can hope that the outpouring of world relief donations will rebuild communities and restore family life. Only then will the world travel community return to these intriguing areas of the world. For the victims of the tsunami, the rebirth of tourism will bolster depleted funds and recharge sorrow-filled lives.

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photos by AP

At top, a tourist walks on a street near Patong Beach where the tsunami hit in southern Thailand.

Above, Luciano Butti, 54, left, from Florence, Italy, sits with what is left of his restaurant — the floor and sign of the Ciao Bella on the resort island of Phi Phi, Thailand.

At left, a foreign tourist takes advantage of last week's nearly empty Surin beach in Phuket, southern Thailand. Authorities of the affected nations hope the balm of tourist dollars will ease the sting of the tsunami's devastating impact, but much work remains before visitors can be welcomed back.