

Duane Lennie wrote and edited the book titled “Ko Lanta Magazine” which was targeted at first time visitors to the island and distributed at travel trade shows throughout the world. This is a sample of the stories Duane wrote for the publication.

SABAI SABAI ON KO LANTA

“Sabai sabai” is a popular Thai saying that typifies life on the magical island of Ko Lanta.

More than just a phrase, it’s a mind-set that loosely means: I’m relaxed, take it easy, everything is all right (and so much more). Just ask a local in Ko Lanta what day it is and you’ll find, like so many other western nuances, it simply doesn’t matter.

Ideally situated in the southern Thai province of Krabi, Ko Lanta has converted from an 80’s and 90’s backpacker haunt into one of the hot spots in Southeast Asia.

While budget travelers still find space to cool their heels, Lanta has changed in the last five years to cater for the new crowd of families and in-the-know visitors from all corners of the globe.

The word is out: Ko Lanta has great beaches, amazing sunsets, low prices, fantastic diving and snorkeling, amazing Thai food and friendly people not yet jaded by mass tourism. All set in a stunning natural setting against verdant green rain forest and jungle.

If you’re looking for discos, MacDonald’s, KFC and flashy nightlife, Ko Lanta is not for you. Instead you’ll find intimate beachside bars and restaurants and a small selection of funky and trendy nightclubs. Even during Christmas peak when the island is at its fullest, a private spot without bothersome beach sellers is easily found on any of the island’s beaches.

Ko Lanta’s proximity to Phi Phi Island, Phuket, Krabi and even Bangkok (just three hours from Bangkok airport to your favorite Ko Lanta beach), makes it a great holiday alternative to other crowded and commercial tropical island destinations.

With development comes change, but locals are adamant that “progress” does not jeopardize the magic of the island. Residents and business owners take their lead from Prasit Phuchatvanitkul, Ko Lanta District Chief Officer, who is serious about preserving the island’s natural resources.

Strict local laws about development and building codes and noise restrictions now address locals’ concerns about their environment. Luckily most of the island is under the control of the Ko Lanta National Marine Park which protects the jungle and forest areas. Tree cutting is severely restricted.

Local government, police, businesses and residents have also joined forces to ensure the island’s development does not come at the cost of sex tourism, especially that involving children.

Earlier this year the KO LANTA SAYS NO campaign was developed with ECPAT International, a worldwide network of organizations and individuals working together for the elimination of child prostitution, child pornography and trafficking of children for sexual purposes. The local steering committee condemned child sex tourism on the island by signing the ECPAT “Code of Conduct” for the Protection for Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism.

Ko Lanta has a diverse cultural mix worth preserving. Thai-Muslim, Thai-Chinese and the original sea gypsies have lived on the island in harmony for more than a century. All welcome outsiders and greet strangers with a smile.

Much of the island is occupied by 'Sea Gypsies', a tribal culture dating back more than a thousand years. These seafaring 'Chao Ley' retain their language and many ancient customs and ceremonies. They are natural fishermen and keep the island supplied with fresh eating fish and seafood including shrimp, crayfish, oysters and more.

The twenty thousand residents substantially outnumber tourists at all times. The traditional economy of fishing, coconut and rubber plantations, rice paddies, prawn farming and fruit continue, now supplemented by growing tourism. The island residents have maintained their

grace and charm, and the island does not have the strongly business 'feel' that is prevalent on some of the more developed islands and beaches.

Historically Ko Lanta played a major role as a safe-haven port for traders from Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. Originally, Si Raya (commonly known as Lanta Old Town) acted as the port and commercial center for the island and provided safe harbor for Arabic and Chinese trading vessels sailing between the larger ports of Phuket, Penang and Singapore.

Today Old Town is a sleepy town with 100 year-old wooden shacks and shop houses built on stilts over the water. Today Ban Saladan, on the north end of the island is the business center and arrival point for most visitors.

Ko Lanta is actually two islands: Ko Lanta Noi and Ko Lanta Yai. Ko Lanta Noi is the smaller of the two islands and doesn't have tourist facilities. Visitors traveling by road pass through the smaller island on the way to resorts on Ko Lanta Yai.

Both islands are part of the Ko Lanta National Park, an archipelago of over 15 islands in the Andaman Sea that protects 134 sq km of sea along the southern peninsula of Thailand in Krabi province. It was established as Thailand's 62nd national park in 1990, as a result of the combined efforts of Wildlife Fund Thailand, the Royal Forest Department, and the House of Representatives of Thailand's Parliament.

The tourist season in Ko Lanta runs from October through August with most visitors here December to March. An increasing number of people are visiting off season, and many resorts now stay open all year. During the rainy season from September to October heavy rainfall lasting a few hours is typical, although it occasionally rains for days.

Temperatures on the island don't vary much all year, with comfortable 32 - 34 degree C daytime temperature and 20 - 25 degree C nights year round. Sea temperature similarly stays at around 28 - 32 degrees C all year.

Ko Lanta has something for everyone -- families, backpackers and even travelers seeking 5 star accommodations can define their own vision of living the island life.

KO LANTA PEOPLE

A frightening situation first taught me about the wonderful people of Ko Lanta.

My personal disaster found me alone in the middle of a darkened, tropical jungle with an empty gas tank --- not a happy situation for a tourist with a fertile imagination on a strange island of people who don't speak my language.

I didn't have much time ponder my dilemma before a group of five teenagers, laughing amongst themselves approached through the darkness. Was this my worst horror-movie dream? Would they string me up and leave me hanging from a palm tree?

I braced myself as they surrounded my bike, my heart jumping like a fish.

"You," one of the youths spoke loudly, "have big problem." A lump formed in my throat as I watched the others as they poked and prodded my dead motorbike. Yes I thought, I have no gas or money and don't know where I am.

He looked at me and smiled, "You come with me".

Knowing no other option I followed them into the darkness up a steep path to a small, thatched lean-to surrounded by enormous banana leaf plants. A small light behind the cloth-covered door opened when the boys started shouting Thai words towards the dwelling. From behind the cloth came an old man dressed only in a sarong.

"Hello, welcome to my home," the old man said, "my name is Khem. Please come inside and meet my family".

What followed was my first lesson on why so many visitors fall in love with the people of Ko Lanta. After two hours of meeting everyone in the small village and explaining my life story, dinner was served on bamboo mats in the middle of the floor. Khem was the only villager who spoke English, but I managed to laugh and joke with everyone while they joined me in my first authentic Thai meal.

After dinner a truck arrived with my bike tied on the back. Khem told me the tank was now full but it was too dark for me to go back alone. The head of the village would drive me back to my resort with three new friends to keep me company. After a lengthy good bye session and a promise to return we left the village

I've since discovered that Ko Lanta is home to three very distinct cultural groups – the Chao Lay (Sea Gypsies), Thai-Muslim people and the Thai-Chinese. All share innate Thai warmth that's locally known as “the Ko Lanta charm”. They've lived together in peace and harmony for hundreds of years in mixed communities around the island. Today most tourists find it difficult telling the distinct groups apart.

The original name of Ko Lanta, according to old Arabic charts, was Janub Lanta, from janub, a Malay term meaning “south”. The first inhabitants who arrived more than 500 years ago are believed to have been the Chao Lay, nomadic seafaring tribes related to the Moken people who for centuries have taken seasonal refuge during monsoons in the many coves lining the Andaman Sea and Ao Phuket.

In 1975, Her Majesty the Queen gave the Chao Lay national identity with the formal title “Thai Mai”, or New Thai. The seafarings Chao Lay still retain their language and many ancient customs and ceremonies still practiced on the island.

The Chao Lay preceded Malay migrants who had been converted to Islam from ancient animistic beliefs, adapting the new religion into their traditional culture. These settlers, many of whom came from Sai Buri and Nakorn Si Thammarat, referred to themselves as Orang Lonta. Orang is a Malay term meaning “people” and, on old Malay maps, the island is named Pulau Lonta. Today the local Thai-Muslims on the island practice a moderate version of Islam.

Chinese merchants arrived on the island more than 100 years ago during the revolution when communist ruler President Mao Cher Tung took power. They fled to trading ports throughout Southeast Asia (including Ko Lanta) from Kwang Tung, Hai Lham Island and Sua Thaw in China. Today they continue on the island today as business owners, agricultural farmers and fishermen.

Tourist development came suddenly to Lanta Island just a few years ago. Most of the staff and business owners you'll deal with were enjoying relaxed lives fishing, harvesting coconut or rubber, or in similar occupations less than 10 years ago, before electricity became available and widespread television introduced them to the outside world...

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

We ask that visitors to Ko Lanta respect the local culture and traditions.

Realize in your dealings with Ko Lanta's people that they have not been to hotel school and are not familiar with your culture or how you are used things being done.

Many locals not fluent in English or other languages but take the time to be friendly and you'll soon find ways to communicate and make friends.

If you insist on everything happening quickly as it does back home, you may be happier on a more developed island like Phuket, PhiPhi or Ko Samui.

But relax and be flexible, and the magic warmth of Lanta and its people will shine on you and provide happy memories to enjoy for many years.

UNDERSTANDING THAI CULTURE

When people speak of Thai culture they're speaking about a complex behavior that's rooted in the history of migration throughout Southeast Asia, with commonalities shared by the Lao, the Shan of northeastern Myanmar and numerous tribal Thais found in isolated pockets from Vietnam all the way to India.

Thais don't have a word that corresponds with the term "culture". Nevertheless there are certain aspects of their everyday life recognized as "Thai" cultural mainstays.

SANUK

The Thai word Sanuk means "fun" in Thai language. Everything takes a sense of playfulness in Thailand at either work or play. Watch a group of Thais doing hard work, and you'll hear an overlaying banter of flirtation, singing, cracking jokes and trading insults that keep it all fun.

The famous Thai smile is the ultimate approach for almost any situation.

FACE

Thai people believe strongly in the concept of 'saving face' - avoiding confrontation and trying not to embarrass themselves or other people (unless of course its sanuk to do so!). People do not bring up negative topics, and stress is avoided at all costs. Laughing at small accidents may seem callous to outsiders, but it's a way of making light of a situation that might otherwise be embarrassing. If you want to get cooperation, never raise your voice or try to get people to admit their mistake. Rather focus on what you would like to happen and approach the situation with a smile.

STATUS

Status is important in Thailand and controls all relationships. Higher status results from age, wealth, family status, behavior and power. Differences in status confer social obligations in Thailand. Lower status persons are expected to show a degree of obedience & respect, while higher status persons are expected to care for and sponsor lower status persons with whom they have frequent contact.

Not fulfilling these obligations will lead to loss of face. For example, when dining together, the person with the most status will automatically pick up the tab. This results from a belief that

the person who is financially successful is expected to share some of that wealth with those who have been less fortunate.

THAI BEHAVIOUR

Thai persons gain status by behaving according to the Thai ideals. These include discretion to the opposite sex, modest dress, a neat and clean appearance, and modes of expression and comportment that value the quiet, subtle and indirect rather than the loud, obvious and direct.

THE WAI

A physical manifestation of status and respect is the Thai greeting or Wai in which both hands are raised palm together. Although it is used less nowadays in tourist areas, it is still a nice way of saying thank you, greeting, or showing respect to someone of status. The general rule is that people of less status will Wai the person of higher status, who will then return the Wai. If you are wai'ed, wai back, except if you are wai'ed by children.

GESTURES

The feet are the lowest part of the body, both spiritually and physically - don't point them at people when sitting, don't prop them on tables or chairs, don't touch other people with your feet, and never step over someone - always squeeze around them or ask them to move. The head is sacred - don't touch Thai people or children on the head or muss their hair. If you do, apologize immediately. Similarly, don't sit on a pillow meant for sleeping.

SHOES: Shoes are not worn inside temples or people's homes, and also not in some shops and guesthouses. If you see a pile of shoes, remove yours before going further.

RELIGION: Correct behavior is important when visiting Buddhist temples. Remove your shoes, dress modestly and neatly when entering any building housing a Buddha image. Buddha images are sacred and should not be touched or photographed. Never point your feet at a Buddha image. Shorts or sleeveless tops are improper for visiting any temple. Monks may not touch or be touched by women. If a lady wants to hand something to a monk, correct procedure is to put it down within reach, not to hand it to them. Show respect for religious symbols and rituals. Don't touch.

TABOOS

Never insult Thai monarchy, religion or the country in any way.

Dress conservatively outside resort areas

Don't point your feet at someone or step over someone

Don't touch or pat people or children on the head

Don't sit on other people's sleeping cushions

Don't go nude (or topless except in selected resort areas)

Remove your shoes when entering a home

Ladies may never touch a monk

Always respect Thai people and culture