

# After the Tsunami



*The devastating effects of Boxing Day's tragic tsunami have been extensively covered by the world's media and fundraising has been an overwhelming success with many millions raised. As the Indian Ocean countries begin the process of reconstruction, their governments are now calling not for donations or aid, but for visitors, a crucial part of the local economy. Here we highlight two areas whose economies rely on tourism.*

## SRI LANKA

*Susie Brand reports from a recent trip to Sri Lanka*

My four day trip took me from Colombo to Yala National Park along the coast before visiting some of the inland regions. The road and rail lines run very close to the ocean for much of the route and pass through numerous small villages which have been affected. In the areas close to Colombo including the popular beach destination of Bentota, the scale of the damage was very limited and all hotels are operating as normal. Just south of Bentota, the damage became more noticeable, where a house once stood, a tent has been erected in its place, often on the foundations. Around the Galle region, where much of the television coverage was from, things are severe. Thousands are now living in tents scattered along the roadside in camps managed by different aid agencies. The train which was forced off the tracks has been left as a memorial to those who were on board. The train track has been rebuilt close by, restoring this vital link.

Redevelopment has not yet begun in any of the affected areas. The government is keen that by law, all buildings should stand a minimum of 100 metres from the ocean. Local fishermen who have always lived on the beach are opposing this and no agreement has yet been reached.

At Yala National Park, the hotel I stayed in last time has been reduced to piles of rubble. In the park there is one area of noticeable damage - sand covers a large area up to about 400 metres from the ocean. Where there was grass before, uprooted trees and bushes lie in a tangled mess. The

animals all survived however, having sensed the danger and escaped to safer ground. The local jeep drivers and park rangers are suffering. As well as losing colleagues and family, they had almost no visitors in January. They rely upon tips from Western visitors to augment their low wages. Fortunately, overseas tourists are returning. The lodge I stayed in, which was unaffected by the tsunami, was about one third full and Sri Lankan visitors are starting to return to the park. It is an excellent time to visit because the park is quiet - both leopard and sloth bear have been recently sighted by visitors.

Although only the coastal regions were hit the effect has been felt all over the country. Hotel workers in the Cultural Triangle and Kandy have had to be laid off because of the huge decline in visitors. These areas are a three hour drive from the coast, perfectly safe and untouched, and are currently very quiet, making it an ideal time to visit.

Despite some of the coastal regions being badly affected I would definitely encourage people to travel to the rest of the island including Bentota. Wherever I went I was greeted with a friendly smile and an ayubowan - the traditional greeting literally translated as long life - which at this time seems more apt than ever.

For further information please call our Sri Lanka specialists on 01869 276 218. Maps and photographs of the region can be found at [www.audleytravel/backtosrilanka](http://www.audleytravel/backtosrilanka).

## THAILAND

The majority of areas visited by Audley clients are fully recovered or almost so. This includes Krabi, most parts of Phuket, Koh Yao and Koh Lanta. We are, however, no longer sending clients to Khao Lak, which was heavily affected and where resorts are closed until further notice. Kate Dicks, one of Audley's Thailand specialists, visited the region at the end of January and reported that damage was extremely localised, and there are many areas which are completely as normal.

It is more important than ever, therefore, to continue travelling to these regions. Income from tourism is vital and will help the reconstruction process much more than a simple donation. One operator in Phuket states "What we really need now is your business...Booking Phuket is simply the next stage of disaster relief - except you get to enjoy not only the beauty of Phuket and Phang Nga Bay, you get the satisfaction of knowing your trip helped prevent even more misery."

For further information please call our Thailand specialists on 01869 276 200. Maps and photographs of the region can be found at [www.audleytravel/backtothailand](http://www.audleytravel/backtothailand).