

## ■ Behind the Scenes

NGOs and volunteers who work to keep Phuket, Phang Nga and Krabi safe and beautiful.



Ladyboy thugs, gem scams and tuk-tuk drivers that take you for more than a ride – these might be some of the urban legends that make tourists afraid to venture far from their hotels. In fact, Thailand is one of the safest countries in which to travel, due to the general nature of the Thai people and the government's tourist police. This special force offers a presence in the main tourist areas that keeps troublemakers such as pushy touts at bay, and can tackle problems ranging from minor disputes over a bill to serious accidents that require arrangements for repatriation of a body.

Unfortunately, the tourist police are spread thin, with just 29 officers covering all of Phuket and Phang Nga. But under a new programme initiated by Police Major Bundit Khaosutham, Inspector of Tourist Police Station 2, Subdivision 5 Tourist Police Division, foreign volunteers have stepped in to support the efforts of the tourist police.

# On patrol in Phuket

By Chantana Jasper

Under a new programme initiated in early 2005, foreign volunteers have stepped in to support the efforts of Thailand's tourist police.



Police Major Bundit says the primary duties of the tourist police are firstly to assist tourists, and secondly to stop those who are trying to harm or take advantage of them. Tourist police are not just here to help foreign tourists, but also to help Thais visiting from other parts of the country.

“We receive approximately 80 phone calls a day,” he says. With just 29 commissioned officers on the force, volunteer officers play a key role in providing assistance to all the tourists of Phuket and Phang Nga. Both Thai and foreign volunteers are working with the tourist police, with the foreign volunteers receiving quite a lot of surprised – and happy – looks on the beach. “Sometimes when foreigners see

another foreigner, they find it easier to approach them and ask them questions,” says Police Major Bundit.

An additional benefit of having foreign volunteers is that the Thai police working with them can practice their foreign language skills.

There are currently several areas in which volunteers assist: on walking, cycling and driving patrols, at information booths, and as

search and rescue divers. Police Major Bundit says eventually he wants to have 100 volunteers, since there are so many beaches and other areas that tourists frequent.

Police Volunteer Coordinator James Madigan is a retired police officer from the US state of California, and has been living in

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**Can you be arrested by a German in Thailand? No, relax, these volunteers are here to help solve tourists' problems.**





จอห์น บัทเลอร์ (กลาง) นำทีมตำรวจท่องเที่ยวอาสาค้นหาและช่วยชีวิตผู้ประสบภัยทางทะเล (ภาพล่าง) ตำรวจท่องเที่ยวอาสาออกตรวจโดยรถจักรยาน (ล่าง) ประจําการที่ศูนย์บริการข้อมูลและออกเดินตรวจหรือขี่รถตรวจดูรอบๆ ร่วมกับตำรวจท่องเที่ยว

*John Butler (centre in photo) heads up the volunteer tourist police search and rescue dive team (above), trained to search for missing persons under water. Tourist police volunteers patrol by bicycle (below), as well as filling positions at information stations and accompanying the tourist police on walking or driving rounds.*

Phuket for eight years. He says the idea for the volunteer programme was conceived by Police Major Bundit after the 26 December 2004 tsunami – and the first two-day training seminar for volunteers was held in March 2005 with 127 attendees. Today, that group has been streamlined to approximately 30 volunteers who serve as the “eyes and the ears for the tourist police”.

Although he’s dressed in a smart uniform and has decades of law enforcement experience behind him, Madigan does not run around chasing criminals. “We’re here to help. We are not here to get involved in the elimination of criminal activity,” he says. “We leave that to the professional police officers.” Each volunteer works with a Thai commissioned officer from the tourist police. With volunteers from 11 different countries, the tourist police are able to assist speakers in a variety of languages. The patrols go into Phuket City, Karon, Kata, Bang Tao and Surin, as well as Patong. “We’re trying to get the volunteers in as many places and as visible as possible,” says Madigan.

Most of the volunteers have businesses in Phuket or are retirees. “You have to have a stable background and environment here to be considered,” Madigan says. “They do a background check with local provincial police



and the information is sent to Bangkok for approval, so not anybody can join.” There’s also a probationary period of two months, and after the probationary period volunteers are approved or rejected from the programme by a committee. “We try and make that as stringent as we can and get the right people in the programme that are going to do it for the right reasons,” he emphasizes. “We are not in this to run around in uniform; we are here to help the tourists and help Thailand.” Most of the current volunteers also have military or police level experience.

“Everything that we’re doing now is geared towards making the tourists have a better vacation and making them feel more comfortable and safer here in this environment,” says Madigan, who adds that the volunteer programme is a “benefit to the tourist police and a benefit to the tourists”. The volunteers not only donate their time and skills, but they provide their own uniforms as well. “We’ve gotten very positive feedback from the tourists,” Madigan says with a smile. “Thai police are very well trained, very professional

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and very approachable, but when tourists see a foreign face, it makes the process go easier.”

John Butler, Scuba Schools International (SSI) Instructor Certifier, directs the volunteer search and rescue team. “We have started a dive rescue team, and our purpose is to fill in the gaps where there is not a service right now.” The team can search for people who are missing in the water and suspected to have drowned. “Presently, there is a service in Chalong in case someone gets decompression sickness while diving, but there isn’t a service for search and recovery underwater,” he says. The dive team consists of six foreigners and one Thai diver, and Butler says he would like to have more Thai individuals on the team: “That way we can conduct the search and rescue more effectively and there are participants from the country of Thailand.”

All the divers have previous experience in scuba diving and have received further training after joining. “Basically we teach a complete programme of stress and rescue.

**The volunteers are not programmed to stop criminal activity, but to help bridge the gap between tourists and the Thai Tourist Police.**

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