

# Dawn of happiness for Thailand tourist

By PATRICK JOHNSTON

A drawback to traveling in Thailand these days is the fact that it seems just about everybody else is doing the same thing. Parts of Bangkok, Chiang Mai and the southern beaches are so saturated with tourists and travelers that there is not much of anything Thai left over.

With the crowds, however, has come an acute shortage of accommodation during peak season — one that invariably forces you to look beyond the popular spots when searching for a place to stay. I faced just such a situation when, on Christmas Eve, I found myself in the southern town of Krabi, 40 minutes away from a beautiful white sand beach but with no room in the inns, or the bungalows or whatever other accommodations were offered.

The only alternative, as it turned out, was the Dawn of Happiness.

Newly opened, the Dawn of Happiness bungalows sit on an empty beach about 20 minutes by boat out of Krabi. Well laid out and beautifully crafted, they are the creation of draft-dodger-cum-Canadian, Thom Henley — an environmentalist and supporter of indigenous peoples who roams the globe looking for trees to protect and cultures to preserve. With them he is attempting to break the cycle of overdevelopment and environmental destruction in Thailand by offering an alternative to the standard tourist fare.

"The Dawn of Happiness," Henley explains, "is an environmentally friendly operation that tries to get people out of their closed traveler's world and a little closer to the

people and nature around them." The name "Dawn of Happiness," although it sounds like something a Japanese chemical company might use for promotional material, is actually the English translation of Sukhothai, probably the earliest recorded Thai culture.

Not located on any of the most popular beaches of the Krabi area, Henley keeps his guests happy with a variety of unique activities, including visits to local rubber tappers and rice growers, day-long excursions to nearby islands, and three-day ocean safari trips that offer nights in island caves once popular with sea gypsies. He also has some of the locals come by and teach Thai cooking.

Says Henley, "You can do whatever you want but we offer alternatives. Too many people come down to Southeast Asia and spend so much time in tourist ghettos that they never get a chance to see the people as they really live. We want to give that experience."

Another experience the Dawn of Happiness hopes to provide is a more friendly traveler's atmosphere, one that encourages people to spend time together rather than cocoon in their bungalows or in front of a video. All bungalows lead out to centrally located pagodas where guests can easily congregate. To do otherwise would mean stepping over a small wall and treading on a well-manicured lawn — possible, but hardly in line with the spirit of the place.

In the evening Henley continues this theme by offering a buffet meal along with a lit-

tle taste of Thai culture.

"Thais have a lot of festivals throughout the year," he points out, "but most tourists can't see them because they are only around for a short time. We provide a different festival every night for a month and guests are invited to participate."

If your idea of a fun evening on a Thai beach is "Terminator 2" washed down with a Singha beer — be warned. When I was there all guests were invited to carry candles, mounted on lotus leaves, down to a newly built pond. There, as an offering, we pushed them out into the water simultaneously wishing for something bad to be removed from our bodies. The ceremony, known as Loi Krathong, dates back, appropriately, to the Sukhothai or "Dawn of Happiness" period.

On the environmental side of things, Henley has instituted a policy of providing free drinking water as well as a water bottle to all the guests. The idea here is to eliminate the enormous amounts of plastic garbage that invariably pile up in popular tourist spots as a result of empty wa-

ter bottles. A visit to nearby beaches in the Krabi area, despite their spectacular beauty, is testimony to just such a phenomenon.

The Dawn of Happiness also recycles all its organic garbage as well as putting a percentage of the bungalow fee into local conservation efforts and education.

Adds Henley, "You could call it a 'new age' tourist resort."

The local reaction to date however, has not been altogether encouraging. When news of the Dawn hit the local population some enterprising Thais decided that foreigners would soon be flooding this part of Krabi and proceeded to build a disco — complete with four prostitutes shipped in from Bangkok.

"I can't imagine anyone from here going up there," said Henley. "They won't be around for long."

*The Dawn of Happiness bungalows rent for about 200-400 baht (¥1,000 to ¥2,000) a night depending on the season. Krabi is a three-hour bus ride from Phuket airport and a two-hour boat ride from the town of Phuket. The address is: Dawn of Happiness Resort Co., Ltd., P.O. Box 35 Krabi 81000, Thailand. Fax 66-75-612251, tel. (075) 611944, 611955, ask for the Dawn of Happiness.*

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