Small is Beautiful? A Perspective of Beach Tourism at Ta Wan Beach on Koh Larn, Thailand

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Abstract: Tourism authorities that understand issues that influence visitor experiences of island destinations can propose effective strategies that maximize visitor satisfaction. A case study was carried out in December 2011, aimed at ascertaining the opinion of international tourists about beach landscape, their beach experiences, views on setting, facilities and activities on Thailand’s Koh Larn beach. The island mainly attracts short-stay visitors from Europe, China and Russia as well as domestic visitors. Results based on observation and analyses of interviews of tourists reveal that recent visitors were satisfied with their visit to Koh Larn. Most of the visitors’ beach satisfaction that involved the sun, sand and sea are consistent with those identified in other beach studies, except for the presence of a large number of people on the beach, being seen as positive for females but negative for males. As a result of this study, the researcher suggests that the local authorities keep vigil against uncontrolled tourism activity which will damage the quality of visitors’ experiences along with the island’s natural environment.

Keywords: Beach, international tourists, island tourism, sustainable tourism


Introduction

Islands have always attracted tourists who want to visit special places. Some islands, being away from the mainland, present as having a different lifestyle, a mysterious culture and rich coastal resources. To cater to the incoming tourists, tourism authorities have developed infrastructure on the island, improved accessibility between the island and the mainland, encouraged setting up of restaurants and accommodation facilities, island manufactured souvenirs, and water sports rental equipment.

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‘Remoteness, perceived ‘difference’, smaller size, slower pace of life, distinct culture and pristine environment’ are some of the basic elements of islands (Baum, 1997; Lockhart, 1997) cited in Baum, McLellan & Kokkranikal (2003). However, many island destinations experience considerable environmental stress and social evils (Conlin & Baum, 1995; Davies, 1996; Filho, 1996; Guthunz & Krosigk, 1996).

Lawson & Baud-Bovy (1977), cited in Falco-Mammone (2007), described that beaches are often considered as a geographical location, consisting of different water and land components. Page, Brunt, Busby & Connel (2006) suggest that beaches offer natural, historical, psychological, and economic benefits that attract tourists. Fisk (1989), cited in Falco-Mammone (2007), explained the beach in terms of nature and culture suggesting that symbolically, the land and sea characteristics of the beach, representing the physical, can be overlapped with the natural-cultural characteristics of the beach, representing the social. Thus, the beach is defined by zones of nature and culture.

Lofgren (1999), cited in Falco-Mammone (2007), argues that nowadays beach destination development tends to reflect the extremes of globalization and multiculturalism. Once the beach is developed, mass tourism is packaged and promoted for the 4 ‘Ss’ of sun, sand, sea and sex. However, present day beach tourists are diversifying their interests and becoming more sophisticated. Consequently, beach tourism destinations are now required to change and develop in response to the evolving needs of the tourist.

European consumers have new habits and new demand for classical sun and sand destinations such as a search for independence, greater travel experience, consumer sophistication, a new emphasis on quality and active participation, an increased environmental awareness and a greater desire to get back to nature (Moutinho, 2000; cited in Alegre & Cladera, (2006). In light of these socio-cultural changes, it is important to know whether the basic components of a ‘sun and sand’ product, such as the climate, scenery, beaches, setting and availability of beach activities, still play a key role in satisfaction of the tourists. At the same time, a bad experience considerably reduces the probability of a further visit by a visitor and bad word-of-mouth further discourages potential visitors, despite continuous marketing efforts by the NTOs and travel intermediaries. Therefore, a bottom-up perspective that considers beach users, could unfold vital beach management strategies.

Thailand’s beaches are the major attraction for millions of visitors every year. Thailand’s unique climate and geography, shaped by the long coastlines of both the Gulf of Thailand Sea and the Andaman Sea, attract tourists who look for adventure and exciting water-based activities. Therefore, this study examines international tourists’ perceptions of atmosphere, social ambience, amenities, activities and environmental conditions of Koh Larn beach.
Literature Review

Island tourism is a fascinating area worthy of investigation, especially with regard to social and economic development and the resulting impact on the islands (Conlin & Baum, 1995; Lockhart, 1995; Russell, 2006). According to Edgell (1995), cited in Conlin & Baum (1995), many islands share an abundance of natural resources: sandy beaches, warm climates, fresh seafood, fishing, natural harbours and coastal scenery. The industries and commodities that many islands have in common are tourism, boat building, agriculture, fishing, salt, sugar, rum, coffee and real estate. Some of the obvious differences among the islands are different languages, religions, cultures, political systems and social and economic development.

Garcia, Saura, Garcia & Gallarza (2004) asserted that coastal areas have precious beaches where the sun, sand and sea, together with a benign climate, attract tourists and add to the atmosphere with warm days and excellent marine and beach activities. Tourists not only spend long hours enjoying sunbathing, listening to the sound of waves, and walking along beautiful beaches, but also participate in marine activities such as surfing, diving, canoeing, kayaking and paragliding. Moreover, Jedrzejczak (2004) found that beach scenery, including boats and vessels, and large beach facilities, guide tourists’ perceptions and influence their behavioral patterns in such a way that ultimately result in either favorable or unfavorable experiences. In addition, Maria, Uyarra & Watkinson (2009) claim that environmental attributes, such as clear water and weather are the most significant factors in choosing a beach holiday destination and in perceiving great enjoyment from the holiday.

Sheldon (2005) insisted that remote and distant islands face more challenges in terms of accessibility and transportation because of isolation. The remote and large islands attract extended-stay tourists, while the easily accessible smaller islands, close to the mainland, also attract day visitors. Consequently, the logistics of supply and quality control of food is a problem for many large and remote islands. Other challenges facing remote islands are the frequent cyclones, earthquakes and tropical storms that often cause floods and physical damage. Low rainfall in some areas, deforestation, water pollution and shortage of electric power supplies only add to this list of challenges for island tourism.

Sheldon (2005) further stated that tourism to a certain extent is responsible for the degradation of the environment in small island states which are at the centre of fragile eco-systems rich in biodiversity. Tourism activities and pollution endanger and affect precious local biodiversity. Consequently, the tourist islands’ basic natural resources of beaches, sand dunes, and coral reefs, prone to being easily damaged by tourism consumption and waste, require careful treatment and patronage. Unfortunately, the shortage of land on the islands creates challenges for waste disposal, as well.
Remote islands face competitive challenges with a conventional destination. Poetschke (1995), cited in Conlin & Baum (1995), asserts that these challenges include accessibility, fragile ecosystems, and in offering a comprehensive range of products. Difficult air transportation access to the island implies that travelers must make an extra effort just to visit a particular destination. Furthermore, fragile ecosystems require island destinations to place constraints on visitor’s activities which may further impede the visitor’s enjoyment of the island. All of the foregoing challenges make remote island tourism industry development a daunting task. Papatheodorou (2001) underscored these competitive challenges when emphasising that an island area is considered well connected with the mainland and the regions of tourist origins, if it is relatively proximate to them and if the operated transport services are inexpensive, regular, direct, convenient and undertaken by a reliable and comfortable mode of transport. Thus remoteness increases the challenges of island tourism.

Location plays a decisive role in the development of small-island tourism and in the type of tourism development that can take place. The islands close to large tourist markets have a distinct advantage in transport costs over remote islands that are scattered and out of the way of principal shipping and airline routes. For example, the Caribbean islands which are located near their North American markets have an advantage over smaller remote islands in the South Pacific that do not have the same advantage. Because of their locations, islands in the South Pacific have found that the cost of transport acts as a barrier to the movement of tourists. However, the Thai island of Koh Larn is only a short distance from the mainland town of Pattaya. As a consequence, as Coccossis (2001) suggested, islands close to big urban centers are gradually integrated into the metropolitan system and zone of influence as areas for recreation and secondary housing.

Conlin & Baum (1995) confirmed that impacts of tourism on small island communities are usually more vigorous and dominant as compared to large mainland destinations. The mass exodus of tourists to a small island destination is likely to affect the cultural and social life, as well as the environmental cycles. The chances that local community members have closer contact with tourists are greater, compared to a mainland destination. This enhanced tourist-local contact is a common phenomenon whereby local community members begin to mimic the culture of the visitors, thereby diminishing the importance of the island culture and traditions. Obviously, the mimic can include both the positive and negative behaviors of the tourists.

Another challenge to the remote island industry is marketing. Wing (1995), cited in Conlin & Baum (1995), noted that most small island states do not market their tourist products in the main tourist-generating markets because of a lack of direct contact with the distant international markets. Instead, the small island states rely upon the closest mainland private sector links for promotion and tourism.
An additional challenge to island tourism is overcrowding. Leujak & Ormond (2007) observed that crowding at the destination is one of the factors that can lead to dissatisfaction among tourists. Swarbrooke (2002) explains that different tourists have different perceptions on the number of allowed tourists at a particular destination before the tourist’s own experience suffers. Hoover, King, & Matter (1985), cited in Leujak & Ormond (2007), suggested that the feeling of crowding depended on the expectation of the visitor; visitors with a greater expectation of an experience of nature are more sensitive to visitor density. In addition, tourist expectations are also affected by the perception of litter, behavior involving damage to plants, trees, or corals, and enjoyment. Individuals that have a lower expectation of nature experience a lower degree of environmental concern and appear more accepting of environmental impacts (Priskin, 2003).

The study by Sealeum, Chankaew, Inkapattanakul & Navanugraha (2007) investigated tourist perceptions of the environmental beach quality at Cha-am Beach in Thailand. The study utilised physical, social, pollutant and biological measurements. The physical factors constituted landscape characteristics of beach length, width and size. Social factors included tourists’ satisfaction towards safety, accessibility and facilities. Pollution factors included the water quality, litter and transportation impact on beach and marine attractions. The study found that scenery and landscape achieved high scores as perceived by the tourists. However, site overdevelopment and pollution were found to be serious problems causing harmful impacts on the beach area.

Tourism Profile of Koh Larn

The Setting

Koh Larn is a small island (four square kilometers in area) offshore from the mainland community of Pattaya Beach in Thailand. It takes 45 minutes by ferry or 20 minutes by speed boat from Pattaya beach to reach Koh Larn (roughly eight kilometers distance). The presence of the neighboring mainland city of Pattaya, a major tourist destination, is strategically advantageous to Koh Larn in that tourism development in Pattaya invariably provides more exposure to Koh Larn. The sea water between Koh Larn and Pattaya is exploited for water sports such as water scooter, wind surfing, parasailing and paragliding activities. The island is a popular destination for day-trips from Pattaya. Apart from its relative tranquility and white and sandy beaches with multiple resorts and bungalows, the major tourist attractions on the island include viewing coral reefs from glass-bottom boats, snorkeling, wind surfing, parasailing and scuba diving. Many seafood restaurants are also available on the island (Manopimoke, 1992).
Ta Wan Beach is located at the North-end of the island, which has a long sweeping coastline, about 750 meters in length. Tien Beach is another beautiful beach, located on the Western side of the island with a length of about 500 meters. Tien Beach is smaller and quieter, suitable for tourists who want privacy. However, there is a noticeable presence of a large number of jet-skis and banana boats. Thais and Westerners can be seen enjoying sun-bathing and swimming on this beach. Bungalow or tent accommodation is also available. Samae Beach, in the South-West area of Koh Larn, is approximately 700 meters in length with rocks and a beautiful forest for relaxing and swimming. Nual Beach, located at the South of Koh Larn, is a small beach about 250 meters in length and is a private property.
Transportation

There are two easy ways to reach Koh Larn - ferry boat and speed boat. Most of the visitors prefer the ferry boat as the individual fare charged is quite cheap, around 30 baht. The boats are mostly overcrowded. While the boat operators do provide life jackets for the passengers, they do not enforce their usage by the passengers.
Traveling around the island by minibus (Songtaew) or the motorbike taxi services that are provided by the local tourist industry is very easy. But caution is necessary. Because of narrow road lanes and rash driving, accidents frequently occur.

**Rationale**

On average, 5,000 people, both Thai and foreign, visit Koh Larn every day. International visitors mainly comprise European, Russian and Chinese tourists. The revenue from the tourism industry comes mostly from the sale of products, including souvenirs, sea activity services, such as diving and boating, as well as sea food and beverage establishments and resorts. One of the main reasons for an increase in tourism activity in Koh Larn is its proximity to one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world, Pattaya.

Like Pattaya, the water and beaches of Koh Larn are intensively used for recreation and entertainment without effective land use controls and adequate infrastructure facilities. Without these land use controls and adequate infrastructure, the beaches of Koh Larn will be damaged by mass tourism and overdevelopment due to the cluster of infrastructure that leads to overcrowding and over-use of water-based activities in the concentrated areas of the island.

The growing popularity of Koh Larn among international tourists does not mean that tourism can be allowed to expand indefinitely. Sustainability of the tourism industry in the island necessitates finding the right balance between tourism expansion and control of tourism development. Without a proper balance, Koh Larn’s basic tourism resources will deteriorate, and will no longer be able to attract tourists. Koh Larn’s depletion of its natural resources will result in the loss of a viable tourism product.

Finally, the diverse origin of its tourists may have a huge influence on their preference for choosing Koh Larn as a preferred holiday destination. Therefore, it is important to know the perceptions of the international tourists of the island’s beach landscape, tourism facilities, environmental conditions and activities.

**Research Project**

Jedrzejczak (2004) noted that there has been extremely little published work regarding coastal perception. A noticeable small-scale development on Koh Larn needs to be better understood from the perspective of the international tourist. This research was undertaken with this aim in mind. The field work took place on Ta Wan beach, a beach frequented by international tourists to Koh Larn, in December 2011, over a period of three days. A significant amount of tourism activity was noticeable during this period. The research is exploratory as it seeks to investigate important tourism related issues.
Methods

In relation to the data collection methods, a questionnaire technique was thought to be less beneficial since researching on the issues pertaining to visitors’ perception of tourism development at Koh Larn over a long period of time deals with a sequence of inter-related events. Tourist roles, attitudes and behavior change as the environment changes. Therefore, a rich qualitative and factual data collection method is needed to explore the dynamic process of international tourists’ behaviors, views, preferences and feelings about Koh Larn.

The first stage of this research was secondary data collection accomplished from various sources, mainly tourism literature, to gain an insight into the features of island tourism destinations. The second stage involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with international tourists in order to gather multiple perspectives.

Patton (2002), cited in Mak, Wong & Chang (2010), noted that ‘there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. ‘The sample size of qualitative inquiry is determined not by the number of interviewees but by data saturation, when no new information on the study is discovered’. Keeping that in mind, and given the fact that visitors are on vacation and spending leisure time away from the workplace, it is practically impossible to discuss issues in a group setting. Therefore, in-depth individual interview is considered a more appropriate method to obtain primary data in this situation. The researcher conducted non-participant observation and in-depth interviews during fieldwork to gain an in-depth understanding of the perception of the quality of the international tourists’ experiences of Koh Larn, including the amenities and services available. Information gained through the field method is complementary to the data collected in questionnaires or interviews. Sometimes, researchers may not obtain an accurate impression of tourists who may not wish to reveal real travel impressions or intentions. Therefore, instead of relying solely on the interview method, this research included field experiences.

The ten informants were approached using purposive sampling. International visitors were approached either as they had their meals or when they completed their visit and waited to board a ferry to leave the island. This waiting time for the visitors was a welcome distraction for the interviewees. The set of interviews, however, did not differentiate clearly between the small-sized speed boat visitors’ arrivals and movements as compared to the medium-sized ferry boat group visitors. This lack of differentiation necessitated the introduction of an observational method in order to complement the study. The researcher wrote down his observations and impressions in the field.

All informants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Only informants older than 18 years of age were asked to participate, and only one person was allowed...
to participate in situations where contact with a group was established. Each of the
interviews lasted, on average, 20 minutes. The interviews were not recorded, as initially
planned, following uneasiness as reported by the potential informants at the sight of
recording equipment. Respondents were selected in a way that maximised the views
of people within a wide range of origin, gender and age. Ten in-depth individual
interviews were conducted with English speaking international visitors (n = 10, male
= 7, female = 3). Table 1 summarises the profile of the interviewees.

A total of 25 pages of transcribed data was obtained. The researcher was
accompanied by a tourism graduate student of Chinese origin and a tour operator to
converse in the Thai or Chinese language, whenever required. When the researcher
noticed that an adequate amount of information had been collected, recruiting
additional participants ceased.

In-depth, key informant interviews were used to explore ideas, questions and
specific issues. The following was asked of the individual tourist:

- General impression of Koh Larn as an upcoming beach destination (choice
  of Koh Larn, support facilities and amenities available, eating places, shopping
  and entertainment facilities, environment, pollution, attraction, use, value for
  money, safety, crowding, noise levels and overall appreciation)

A Case Study Approach to Data Analysis

Koh Larn has six beaches. The researcher chose Ta wan beach as the case study site
because it is representative of the beaches on the island, is well known, more oriented
towards international tourists and has an extensive white sandy beach with tourist
amenities, typical of other beaches on the island. Most of the tour boats arriving
from Pattaya usually anchor here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Tour_1</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tour_2</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tour_3</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tour_4</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Tour_5</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tour_6</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Tour_7</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Tour_8</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Tour_9</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Tour_10</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviews were transcribed and used for analysis. As the study tried to gain an insight into the perceptions of the international tourists to the island’s beach landscape, tourism facilities and activities, this approach included assigning ‘natural meaning units’, as expressed by the subjects and determined by the researcher. This allowed the interview text to be organised into themes from which the researcher was able to establish a meaningful understanding of the informants’ experiences, while also keeping the relevant text in its original form to allow for a representative and descriptive manner of quotations (Kvale, 1996, p.192).

The study also used thematic analysis to carry out analyses using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach. This allowed use of broad categories of perceptions for an open-ended question (What is your general impression of Koh Larn as an upcoming beach destination?) From the transcript, four themes were identified: beach experience, safety, crowding and noise, most/least enjoyed.

**Findings**

**Observation**

This study employed the non-participant observational method with the researcher’s visit to Koh Larn. On all three days of the interview process, the researcher drove early from Bangkok covering less than two hours journey to arrive in Pattaya by 9.30 a.m. Pattaya beach in the morning was almost empty, with just a few non-Asian visitors. Thai locals were seen preparing beach umbrellas and chairs, getting ready for the beach lovers. After swimming, the tourists relax and use the beach facilities, such as having a massage. Snack vendors provide locals an opportunity to earn an income. In one section, fresh coconut stalls were set up by elderly locals for sale to tourists on the beach. On sunny days, the Pattaya beach front area is full of water sports activities.

*Figure 4. Ta Wan Beach and speed boat on its way to the island*
such as banana boats, jet skiing, water scooters and paragliding. The courtesy speed boat was made available to a group of tourists by an accompanying Chinese tour operator. The researcher was provided a life jacket as a precautionary measure. The researcher recalls his thrilling speed boat journey to and from the island. The researcher did not stay at Pattaya or spend any night on the island.

The observational process lasted about two hours on the island. The researcher stayed close to the main Ta Wan Beach and watched arriving and passing visitors on the island to gather additional insights into the visitors’ first reaction on making first contact with the island. As such, being stationary at a single point on the beach is a limitation of the study.

The arriving ferry boats disembarked passengers away from the island because of the size and weight of the boat. The tourists were shifted to smaller boats and ferried to the island. The boat driver and tour escorts were seen giving a helping hand to the arriving visitors, mainly the ladies, elderly and minors. On the other hand, visitors arriving by speed boat could get close to the island because of the boat’s compact size and limited weight. The speed boat riders were mostly local Thai couples and younger international tourists; however this observation can hardly be generalised.

It was easy to recognise the composition of the travel parties. The ferry boats were usually accompanied by a local Thai tour escort or guide to assist and brief the tourists on the island. The average size of the touring group using the ferry boat ranged from 20 to 30 people. Non-Asian international tourists exceeded the number of Asians and local passengers. Upon disembarking, the group visitors immediately followed their Thai escort for a short briefing. Clear signages directing visitors upon arrival to the island were not evident. Visitors to the island had to rely upon private tour escorts or local guides for all destinations, facilities, and interpretive information regarding the attractions available on island. The group visitors were seen being advised, in advance, of the time to return and the departure point before being disbursed. It was interesting to observe that a few arriving visitors were wearing life jackets. Public measures to control the number of tourists arriving on the island were absent.

Many group tourists were seen carrying maps and continuously communicating with each other. The incoming tourists, especially those accompanied by children or friends, appeared quite jubilant and excited upon their arrival on the island. Almost all of the group tourists were prepared with appropriate beach clothing, such as hats, slippers, bikinis and short pants. Within moments of arriving on the island, group visitors were seen actively clicking their latest electronic gadgets to capture the best shot of the day. The visitors lost no time in engaging in their favorite beach activities such as shopping, sightseeing and exploring the island coast for coral reef viewing and snorkeling. The researcher did not observe individual visitor’s movements.
Personal observation/on-site inspection was made of the tourist facilities. The researcher noticed that although toilet facilities were available at some restaurants, they were not clean. Water stored in some containers was visible giving a feeling that there was a shortage of water. The beach front area seemed noisy and crowded. Noise of engines could be heard even from a distance. Probably the data collection period coincided with the peak periods of demand in the countries from which the tourists come and the holiday season in Thailand. Children were seen swimming and playing in the water park situated on the beach front area. Women were seen either taking walks on the beach or showing keen interest in the souvenirs being sold. Clear messages (other than in the Thai Language), or public advising on the “do’s and don’ts” around the island were not evident.

During the late afternoon return, the visitors appeared fatigued and were seen waiting in small groups while waiting for others’ to arrive before their return boat journey. The tour escort looked proactive marking a list of boat passengers so as to ensure assembly of the entire group.

Interview

Choice of Koh Larn. When international tourists were asked why they chose to visit Koh Larn, a wide variety of responses was received. The reasons are stated without any order as follows: proximity (Koh Larn is close to Pattaya), tranquility (the beach is quiet as compared to Pattaya beach), picnicking (time spent with friends and family), quality of the beach (clear water, sandy beach), and landscape (attractive landscape) (Table 2).

General impression of Koh Larn as a beach destination. Visitors to Koh Larn were normally excited and elated as they spent their holiday time. The visitors appreciated the physical features, as well as the facilities and services available (bar and restaurant facilities). The visitors seemed divided on their outlook of beach facilities. Even though Koh Larn has limited tourism support facilities, compared to Pattaya,

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Popular Beach Activities on the Island</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Children playing in the water park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Picture taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sun tanning, relaxing in chairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Eating seafood and drinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Look around, walking and chatting along the beach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Shopping</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Personal observation
people still have reservations when it comes to visiting Pattaya with family members. Pattaya’s notorious popularity for nightlife entertainment may not be deemed suitable for all age groups and cultures. On the other hand, the visit to Koh Larn is seen to be appropriate for all kinds of people.

I think Koh Larn is a nice place to visit. I am happy to have chosen to spend my day here. The temperature of the water was inviting and quite relaxing. The view of incoming waves is thrilling. Though the beach is not long, the presence of cliffs around the beach gave an excellent view. My family is enjoying every moment. Unlike Pattaya, this place is suitable for the family. (tour_5, Russia, male, 29)

Often, when international tourists arrive in Bangkok, Thailand, they are already familiar with Pattaya as a tourist destination as it is quite established and popular. Pattaya has many activities for tourists that keep them so busy that the tourist may not feel a need to visit Koh Larn. But water sports enthusiasts and beach lovers are drawn to Koh Larn. However, as Swarbrooke (2002) suggested, people who are frightened of flying and/or sea travel, may not be willing to visit the island.

I had heard a lot of Pattaya but never knew Koh Larn. I was interested to look around Pattaya and also wanted to see Pattaya from a distance. I find more freedom here than at Pattaya. (tour_3, China, male, 33)

Some (western) female informants of the study who stayed at an inexpensive hotel in Pattaya city, decided to visit Koh Larn to sunbathe, and spend their day under a beach umbrella. They seem to have been prepared well in advance for their expedition to Koh Larn by bringing a hat, sunglasses, a few novels, body lotion and slippers. Moreover, Lencek & Bosker (1999), cited in Falco-Mammone (2007) earlier, concluded that the sun and sun tanning are strong elements in Western beach images, representing the exotic and the romantic. As reflected by a participant:

I feel at home in this destination. I will stay till late afternoon to get a tan. There is plenty of sunshine. Well, I bought my sun lotion and novel…….I am truly a beach lover. I am here for sun and looking for opportunity to bathe in the ocean. I would prefer feeding fish but unfortunately I do not want to be away from heaven. My hobby is to collect shells on the beach. Let me see if I can find something amazing here. The view of big cargo ships navigating close by is breath-taking. (tour_2, UK, female, 27)

Men(Asian) appeared relaxed, interested in the availability of food, and/or accompanied children in the water. A strong interest in the local culture (food) was reflected by a participant. At the same time, negative feelings were expressed by the same participant about the nuisance created by other tourists. The behavior of tourist(s) can disturb the tourism experience of others. It is important that the tourist perception and reaction to overcrowding and the behavior of other tourists is recognised. In this
case, signs or regulatory measures crucial to raise awareness among visitors concerning proper beach behavior and reminding tourists to be responsible were absent. The following comments were made by a participant:

...I was unsure about getting freshly cooked seafood away from Pattaya where we are staying. I personally think that availability of seafood is the most popular activity on this island. I could smell the aroma of the food while it is being cooked. But I had to wait for more than 15 minutes to be served. While waiting, it was very noisy especially with the presence and laughter by XXXX tourists. It was a big family. Their children were busy taking snaps while gents were drinking beer, and eating seafood along with watermelon. (tour_1, Russia, male, 30)

The following quote illustrates that one of the participants was not happy with the presence of so many tourists on the beach and the beach area being occupied by stalls/booths as well as deckchairs/sunshades. Moreover, the availability of comprehensive information on Koh Larn seemed to be lacking for the prospective tourists to properly plan and enjoy their trip to the island, especially about available accommodation to spend the night on the island.

...If there are more activities available at the destination, I can extend the length of stay. There is a limited range of shops, and similar products are being sold. There is not much urbanisation but the beach is crowded with hordes of people. I heard that the late evening water level will rise on the island. I would rather return to Pattaya. (tour_7, France, male, 40)

A middle aged tourist was simply interested in going a little, off the beaten track:

...I arrived two days back at Pattaya after visiting local attractions including colorful evenings. After two days, the next morning over breakfast, I happened to think seriously of visiting the island facing Pattaya. In fact I simply wanted to be away from the urban seaside destination of Pattaya to experience natural features. The smell of the water is tolerable. I am pleased. I am not disappointed. (tour_4, USA, female, 42)

**Beach Experience.** The variety of beach impressions is the outcome of the diversity of the groups of people, values, and behaviors. Fisk (1989), as cited in Falco-Mammone (2007), stated that there is symbolic meaning of the beach from merely being a geographical location consisting of water and land components to a unique interaction between humans and the physical environment. Visitors to Koh Larn appeared to be more inclined towards personal pampering and climate. It is difficult to present a common impression about whether wilderness of the beach was more important than the facilities available on the beach.
…I bought snacks and drinks right on the beach that saved my time finding food elsewhere.  
(tour_6, China, male, 50)

Many visitors travelled all around the island and enjoyed sightseeing instead of spending the day under a beach umbrella at a preferred location. As Swarbrooke (2002) highlighted, in some cases the concentration of tourists in some popular beaches can be beneficial in that it may protect other areas from congestion and lead to a situation where the rest of the island becomes seen simply as a series of attractions for day trips. For example, the following informant enjoyed the scenery.

…the beach presents spectacular scenery.  (tour_8, China, male, 30)

Prebensen & Hansen (2007) pointed out that sun and warmth related motivations were associated with the visitor’s need for climatic change. Visits to Thailand in the month of December coincide with the holiday season and winter in many parts of Europe and North America. Europeans appreciate the warm climate conditions in Thailand, a change from the cold wintery conditions back home.

…I is quite pleasant, sunny and warm. (tour_2, UK, female, 27)

Sand is also important to tourists. As Burton (1995, p.21), cited in Falco-Mammone (2007), identified, a sandy beach is an attractive beach. In the same line of reasoning, a study by Kozak & Rimmington (2000), cited in Prebensen & Hansen (2007), found that German tourists on their visit to Turkey were more motivated by physical features of the destination while British tourists visiting Turkey were motivated by pleasure seeking and fantasy.

…To me sand is soft and clean. Children can run, chase each other, play…..and be happy.  
(tour_5, Russia, male, 29)

Safety. Based on personal observation, both the presence of life guards and safety instructions were lacking. No surveillance gadgets were available to monitor visitors’ activities. Tourists received only basic levels of instruction, assistance and safety from accompanying tour guides and tour escorts. A comparison of personal safety between Ta Wan beach and beaches on the American coast was made by the following visitor.

…People [Thai] around here are nice compared to home, it is safe here. People are friendly  
(tour_4, USA, female, 42).

This following quote reveals this participant’s awareness of the site-related risks.

…I do not see any danger from animals both in the sea and on the island (tour_7, France, female, 40).
A safety risk was pointed out by one participant leading to the conclusion that it is very important that the boat/ferry journey to and from Koh Larn needs to be safe, especially when tourists are accompanied by travel companions and are away from home.

...Journey by speed boat was thrilling but strong jerks were felt when the speeding boat pierced through high water waves (tour_9, India, male, 25).

This quote raises serious safety issues for frail bodied people, people with health problems and young children. Severe backbone injuries might result if proper safety instructions are not given by tour guides and boat operators to first time tourists heading out on the boat ride.

**Crowding and Noise.** A tourist destination where environment is a prominent factor might lose its charm if there is crowding as observed by Leujak & Ormond (2007). But unlike many previous studies, increasing numbers of tourists lead to the reduction of other visitors’ enjoyment of locations. Female (Western) informants in this study appear more tolerant than their male (Asian) counterparts. Probably, the female informants related the crowded beaches to the safety aspect. The larger the presence of people on the beach, the safer they felt. The following comment gives the impression that a lonely beach and perhaps a less safe beach may be less appealing.

...The presence of people does not bother me. Rather I feel at home. I appreciate the movement of people around sea beaches. (tour_2, UK, female, 27)

On being asked how the participant feels about the crowd and noise on the beach, as explained earlier, the perception of a crowd is linked to the tourist’s expectation. The following informant seemed to have assured herself that she expects to find others, like when going to a movie theater one is bound to find others.

...In a way, sometimes, but it is normal and I like it. (tour_7, France, female, 40)

**Enjoy the Most.** Similar to a previous study on the beach by Scheyvens (2006), the majority of tourists interviewed were positive about beach tourism. In this case, it was clear from their comments that the beach opportunities providing a taste of Samoan culture/people was central to their experience. Comments such as the *Thai way of living, people, food...the location......arrangement, cheap..., landscape is impressive...* confirm that international visitors did admire their visit to the island.

Younger visitors also enjoy their visits by posting their beach pictures and comments on popular social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. A little bit of self-promotion and exposure apparently adds to the enjoyment.

...I just posted my pictures on the beach on Facebook and my friends back home admire that. (tour_9, India, male, 25)
Enjoy the least. Kleiven (2005), cited in Prebensen & Hansen (2007), maintains that there is a relationship between relaxation and the search for peace/quiet. One of the visitors to Koh Larn appeared annoyed for not finding enough room for meditation and, perhaps, concentration to perform yoga.

…It is not peaceful. In fact …forget about meditation… (tour_10, India, male, 41)

Findings and Discussion

Diverse international tourist impressions of Koh Larn (a family destination, availability of seafood and water sports, sunbathing and commercialisation) following their visits to the beach are useful in shaping local authorities’ development of coastal attractions and available beach recreational activities. The experience on the beach was stated as satisfactory where the subjects appreciated a friendly ambience and a sunny and scenic location. Roca, Villares & Ortego (2009) noted that different environmental values or attitudes might influence people’s choice of beach recreation. Further, Wolch & Zhang (2004) observed that people with an anthropocentric attitude might favor consumptive recreation (deckchairs, restaurants, etc) and prefer well-equipped beaches, whereas people with an ecocentric attitude might prefer other activities (biodiversity observation, snorkeling, walking, etc.) and prefer unspoiled beaches. In terms of nationality, Russians and Chinese are inclined to an anthropocentric view; conversely, UK tourists are nature oriented and can be classified as ecocentric. Between these two groups are French, American and Indian visitors who combine both views. In the interview process, both Asian and Western tourists stated a preference for beaches with commercial facilities, associating their general impression of Koh Larn as a beach destination.

International tourists of all ages, young and old, irrespective of gender, appreciate the beach attractions such as sandy beaches, sea food, sunbathing and Thai massage. Although international tourists only come for a short stay, they are satisfied with their experience which coincides with the findings of Roca et al. (2009) where users also appreciate the physical and morphological characteristics, as well as the facilities and services offered (stalls, bars and restaurants). Koh Larn, being situated a short distance from the established mainland tourist community of Pattaya, finds itself inundated with relatively low-spending day visitors. As observed by Swarbrooke (2002), most visitors to Malta stay on the mainland but are encouraged to make day trips to the much smaller islands of Gozo and Comino. As these day visitors do not use accommodation on these smaller islands, the expenditure is relatively low, so that the island gains relatively little from these visitors per head. However, the issue of spending by international tourists on Koh Larn was not explored in this research.
The common message from the international tourists was: Koh Larn beach possesses a tropical warm climate, wholesome fun, panoramic scenery and a promising beach destination to attract the attention of an increasing number of international tourists. International tourists were elated to see and mingle with locals on the island and were treated well. Earlier studies found that European tourists’ demands and expectations have never been higher in terms of quality. They have developed a broader vision of what a holiday setting entails (Tourism Intelligence International 2000a; 2000b) cited in Alegre & Cladera (2006). In a way, Koh Larn was termed as offering the 3Ss (sun, sand and sea) destination for family and friends to remember and revisit. It is rightly pointed out in the study of Alegre & Cladera (2006) that sun and sand destinations have evolved by offering a standardised product to mass groups of tourists.

The shortcomings of Koh Larn were the following: pockets of beach front area are absorbed by beach umbrellas, sea food and souvenir hawkers; toilets are neglected; lack of information and instruction to visitors regarding speed boat safety and the variety of services available on Koh Larn. Currently, crowding does not seem to be a serious issue for Koh Larn, with only a few participants expressing a preference for smaller numbers of people on the beach. In the same way, Roca et al. (2009) stressed that foreign visitors coming for a short stay are satisfied with all items and do not feel disturbed by overcrowding. The findings of the present study matches those obtained in a study by Roca et al. (2009) where perceptions vary by beach-user profiles which can be used to identify high-priority issues. However, the influence of crowding on satisfaction is not explored in this study. The findings of this study can help recognise or confirm shortcomings in order to enhance the natural values of the island destination.

As Inskeep (1994) cited in Coccosis (2001) recommended, fundamental planning should include the control of tourism flow, monitor the type, extent and intensity of tourism activities, as well as check the critical elements of the environment.

For a destination with a very limited territorial base, encouraging day visitors to spend more money while on the island in order to reduce the number of visitors should be the ultimate objective and the middle path for sustainable growth (Cantallops, 2004). Too much emphasis on water sports can obviously put pressure on the fragile marine environment causing a depletion of the beaches’ natural resources. There is an urgent need for sincere sustainable tourism planning and development in a way that is financially beneficial to Koh Larn island. It is a priority to protect the fragile island eco-systems and, at the same time, ensure that adverse effects on the social, economic, cultural and general quality of life of the people of Koh Larn are minimized.
Policy Implications

Roca et al. (2009) established that beach users’ opinions and requirements of recreational areas can be used to assess and guide beach management strategies. The findings of this study assist in recognizing or confirming shortcomings to beach planning, and zoning (e.g. maintaining physical settings conducive to a family visit with the availability of restaurants and stalls/booths, or discouraging the use of part of the island for water sports). Additionally, in order to promote environmental consciousness, information on beach users’ opinions can be utilised to develop awareness campaigns, to improve information policies, and to enhance the natural or cultural elements of the beach.

Managers are faced with enormous challenges to curtail the activities and behavior of visitors who have shown to be least interested in receiving environmental information and are less conscious of the environment. Possibly, the role of the tour escort, monitoring the activities of tour operators and other private-public participants can be vital for the successful implementation of an education campaign for the visitors.

Study Limitations

A longitudinal triangulation could not be observed as the same people or phenomenon was not observed at different points in time. In addition, only Ta Wan beach, out of the six island beaches, was studied due to limitations of time, scope and scale of the study. Different locations on the island might have been characterised by different landscapes, settings, beach facilities and crowd levels. Credibility could be enhanced had there been a prolonged engagement in the setting, as informants were interviewed only once over a short period of time. Even though an observation method was utilised, it was limited to beach usage rather than counting the number of beach users over time. Moreover, the subjects did not include long-stay tourists on the island. This study only covered basic sun and sand holiday destination issues which might not cover an individual’s complete satisfaction experience towards a destination, which even though subjective, depends on many factors. A further study could explore issues overlooked in this study such as details of affordability to the visitors, and assessment of carrying capacity over enjoyment level.

Contribution to Tourism Research

This paper fills a gap in the academic study of beach tourism in general, as well as Koh Larn and Thailand, in particular. Many previous studies have established the existence of a positive relationship between satisfaction and a desire to return. As the holiday experience is multidimensional, satisfaction with different aspects of a beach
destination (the climate, the scenery, beaches, settings and availability of beach activities) can explain the impression of tourists on the destination (Koh Larn) and a likely future visit.

To ensure the sustained availability of the sun and sand tourism product at Koh Larn, this study draws the attention of tourism marketers and developers to visitor management. Managing visitors requires giving accurate information on tourism facilities available on Koh Larn to the arriving visitors and proper guidance on do’s and don’ts. Security and safety issues pertaining to transportation to the island are also highlighted.

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