

(NON)TOURISTIC PLACES ON KOH TAO / THAILAND

by

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Introduction

The paper will deal with Koh Tao, an island situated in the Gulf of Thailand, which covers an area of about 21km². In recent years Koh Tao has become a major tourist attraction. Koh Tao transformed itself within 50 years from a prison island into a popular tourist destination for scuba divers from around the world. Due to this development the population structure on Koh Tao changed dramatically.

Within this framework the paper clarifies the impact of tourism on the local population and the emergence of “insideness” and “outsideness”. With the influx of “outsiders” on the island geographical and social boundaries changed. The paper will show that although small, Koh Tao has a diverse population structure.

Thus one can not only distinguish tourists from locals but has to account for other groups as well, e.g. seasonal workers. Due to this diversity there are a large number of different social and geographical spaces and places. Nevertheless the boundaries between “insiders” and “outsiders” are not static, and can change depending on different variables. E.g. different types and forms of tourists prefer different places, while some tourist types tend to invade more local space others stay in their “designated” spaces. The paper traces these boundaries and shows that they can blur, be partially lifted or can harden. While tourists, as a rule, prefer spaces and places that are closer to the beach, locals spend their free time in more secluded places with a more private character. By means of analysing places on Koh Tao the authors will show that boundaries between locals and non-locals are always dynamic and are restructured constantly. Utilizing the method developed by Project for Public Spaces we describe two distinct places on Koh Tao, Sairee and Mae Haad. By looking at various parts of these villages we try to discern touristic and non-touristic places and point out how “insideness” and “outsideness” change according to time and place.

To show how the borders between “insiders” and “outsiders” and touristic and non-touristic places blur we need to answer some basic questions. First of all it is indispensable to categorise the diverse social groups on Koh Tao. In this regard we will show who we consider to be “insider” and “outsider” and where the borders are. The different types of tourism have an important influence on the way the respective interactions take place. In this context we will illustrate who claims which place and what kind of impact tourism has.

This analysis is based on field research conducted by Cornelia Korn in 2009 on Koh Tao. The field research was focused on qualitative methods, especially semi structured interviews, participant observation and informal conversation with locals and tourists. To complement this data we researched and analysed current literature.

Koh Tao – Introduction

Koh Tao is an island of 21km², situated in the Gulf of Thailand approximately 70km east of the Coast between Suratthani and Chumporn.

The name Koh Tao means “turtle island” in Thai. There are two explanations for the name of the island. On one hand the name can be traced to the formerly rife amount of sea turtles in the region (Koh Tao Info 2009: 7), on the other hand the island appears to have the shape of a turtle, when seen from Koh Phangan (Save Koh Tao 2009).

Depending on the season about 2,000 people live on the hilly island. The size of the population can only be vaguely estimated as many people residing on the island are not officially registered. (Vorlaufer 2005: 37)

Koh Tao is easily reached by ferry from Koh Samui, Koh Phangan and the mainland. (Koh Tao Info 2009: 7) Ferries go several times per day to and from Koh Tao which attracts Day Trippers. (Sabai Jai 2009: 88)

The island Tao was for the most part uninhabited until 1933 when it was turned into a prison for political offenders. Until then the island was only visited occasionally by fishermen from the neighbouring islands. (Koh Tao Info 2009: 7) The prisoners were amnestied in 1947 but the island only stayed uninhabited for a short time. The first settlers arrived in the same year and started to cultivate the land. The islanders started to plant coconuts and vegetables and fished along the coast, therefore trade relations with Koh Phangan flourished. (Koh Tao Info 2009: 7f)

The first tourists visited Koh Tao in the 1980s. At that time there was neither touristic infrastructure on the island nor ferries. The tourists took the boats transporting coconuts from and to the island. The long duration of the boat ride forced the tourists to spend at least one night on Koh Tao. Thus the first accommodations were built in Mae Haad und Sairee. The

simple wooden huts without electricity were the beginning of the developing tourism. (Interview with James 2009)

The big boom of tourism followed in 1996/97. In the beginning of 1996 one could already find six diving schools on the island, until 2000 this number increased to about 20 and 2009 there are more than 48 diving schools on the island. (Interview with Adam 2009)

Koh Tao is a popular destination for divers and other tourists around the world. One can find about 30 different diving spots (Koh Tao Community 2009) around the island. Because tourism is the main source of income for the population, in 2009 tourists could choose between 123 different accommodations. Besides that there are 123 catering businesses, 75 shops, 67 travel agencies in combination with internet cafés, 48 diving schools, 26 wellness- and massage studios and 55 other service facilities, e.g. tattoo studios and hairdressers. (Koh Tao Info 2009: 93ff)

There are three villages on the island. Koh Tao can be divided in several different parts, which relate to the respective beaches. The boats coming from Koh Samui, Koh Phangan and the mainland land in Mae Haad. (Sabai Jai 2009: 88)



Fig. 1: Thipwimarn Koh Tao Map Pictures 2011

Defining Social Groups on Koh Tao

As a result of the historic development on Koh Tao one can identify different social groups. Looking at the population structure, we established five distinct groups:

1. “islanders”
2. “new settlers”
3. “seasonal workers”
4. “western workers”
5. “tourists”



Fig. 2: Social Groups on Koh Tao. Korn, Pirker 2011

Before the island was used as a prison between 1933 and 1947 it was uninhabited. In the intervening years a small community settled on the island as farmers. (Koh Tao Info 2009: 7) It was only in the 1980s that tourism started to emerge. Thus one can distinguish the first social group which we will call the islanders. Due to the expansion of tourism the island became a popular destination for working migrants who started to settle on Koh Tao, for our purposes we will call them the new settlers. A third group are the seasonal workers who come from different parts of Asia including mainland Thailand. Today nearly 50% of the Thai living on the island are seasonal workers. The other 50% are the islanders, who live permanently on the island and most of them grew up here. (Interview with Chris 2009) Most of the seasonal workers are Burmese. James guesses that about 50% of all hotel, bar and restaurant worker are mostly foreign seasonal workers. (Interview with James 2009) Most of them are not officially registered.

The same is true for western workers. Due to the thriving diving business a lot of westerners come to the island. We divide them into two separate groups: the western workers who live on the island for a certain period of time and the tourists who are short time visitors. The western workers work mostly as diving instructors or dive masters and only live there for a certain period of time. Thus one can conclude: „*During the past few years the island has become greatly multi-cultural.*“ (Koh Tao Community 2009)

Types of tourists

Looking at the different social groups on Koh Tao one can probably say that the tourists are the most visible group on the island. It therefore seems necessary to differentiate between different types of tourists, following Valene L. Smith and her typology in “Host and Guest. The Anthropology of Tourism.”, we identified several types of tourists visiting Koh Tao.¹

- 1. Off-beat tourists:** Valene L. Smith describes the off-beat tourist as someone who travels beyond the mass tourism and tries to adapt to local customs. (Smith 1989: 12)
- 2. Unusual tourists:** are those who are also interested in local culture and customs but favour western amenities. They prefer to travel in small groups chartering their own small planes or boats. (Smith 1989: 12f) Adapted to Koh Tao the last is not relevant because there are just public ferries.
- 3. Incipient Mass tourism:** Although the number of incipient mass tourists increases they prefer to travel in small groups. This type of tourist expects western standards and usually doesn't want to adapt to local circumstances. (Smith 1989: 13)

It is necessary to complement Valene L. Smith's typology by adding four other types of tourists who visit Koh Tao:

- 1. Party tourists:** These tourists come to the island just for one reason, to party. In the evenings you will find them in Sairee, one of the two villages on the western coast where one finds plenty of pubs and clubs. This kind of tourist is not really interested in local traditions or getting to know locals. For the most part they spend their days on the beaches and the evenings partying. Many of them also visit the full-moon-parties on Koh Phangan the neighbouring island of Koh Tao.
- 2. Diving tourists:** Koh Tao became famous for the beautiful dive sites around the island. Because of this, a large number of divers come to the island solely for this purpose. A lot of them attend courses at local diving schools. In this regard they spend a few days on a diving boat and thus at least get to know the diving instructors and the boating crew. The diving instructors are mostly western workers. Conclusively they have some interest in locals but only in connection to diving. Other contacts are rare.
- 3. “Alternative” tourists:** For our purpose we define alternative tourism in contrast to mass tourism although it can show similar characteristics e.g. large numbers converging in one

¹ Valene L. Smith mentions in her book „Hosts and Guest. The Anthropology of Tourism.” seven different types of tourists. For our purposes we only adopt three of them.

place. Alternative tourists seek contacts with locals and are interested in local culture and traditions. Due to their large number on Koh Tao contact with locals is limited.

- 4. Day trippers:** Because of the vicinity to Koh Phangan and Koh Samui numerous tourists visit Koh Tao on a day trip. During their stay they usually don't have time to meet the residents of the island. They spend their day on the beach or snorkelling and diving.

In addition to these types one can also distinguish between single travellers and families with children. The age of the tourists is important as well. Generally speaking one can classify four age groups.

- **17 to 23 years:** Typically younger people tend to party more often and mostly spend their days on the various beaches.
- **24 to 33 years:** The next group does not party as excessively as the younger people but still tend to lead an active night life. Besides lying on the beach one can find them trekking, diving or snorkelling.
- **34 to 53 years:** In the evenings they tend to prefer a nice dinner and some drinks on the bar. After their more sedate nightly activities they tend to stay in better hotels.
- **54+ years:** There are not as many older people as younger on the island. One reason may be that larger islands like Koh Samui offer a better infrastructure. Those that do visit Koh Tao spend their days leisurely and also prefer better hotels to the simpler huts a lot of the younger people use.

The Tsunami of 26/12/2004 destroyed large parts of the infrastructure of Phuket and other islands on the West coast of Thailand. Many tourists changed their choice of destinations and now come to Koh Samui and the surrounding islands. (Vorlaufer 2005: 35)

Before this catastrophe it was mostly backpackers and some day-trippers who visited Koh Tao. Because of the destruction of the West coast infrastructure other types of tourists started to visit the island and the touristic structure changed. For the first time elderly people and families with small children started to come. This new demand led to the further development of the touristic infrastructure on the island, e.g. luxurious hotels. (Interview with James 2009)

In James opinion the immense change in the type of tourists who visit the island is not only due to the tsunami he states instead, that „[...] *with all tourism very often a new tourist destination starts with the backpackers. The backpackers are a little bit more adventurous; they go a little bit further; they do a little bit more exiting things. And then they tell up their*

friends and then more backpackers come and then ten years later they are not backpackers. They have got a good job and an income and have good money and they come back to the place they knew before. [...]" (Interview with James 2009)

Relationships

The relationship between hosts and guests is described by Jörn W. Mundt as complex and contradictory. (Mundt 2001: 209) The transactions between tourists and locals are not always based on mutual interests, instead economic aspects are also important. With an increasing influx of tourists the willingness of locals to interact with their guests on a more personal level decreases. (Mundt 2001: 210) *„Dies ist gleichbedeutend mit einer doppelten Entfremdung zwischen Gast und Gastgebern: Der Gastgeber wird zum erwerbsmäßigen Betreuer und entspricht in seinem Kontakt zu den Gästen einer genau umschriebenen beruflichen Fertigkeit; der Gast sieht in den Gastgebern eben diese Funktion und nimmt seine Person nur in eben diesem Ausschnitt war.“* (Mundt 2001: 210) If the relationship between hosts and guests degenerates to a solely professional level it can generate a sense of exchangeability. (Mundt 2001: 211)

Generally speaking it is nearly impossible for local people to overlook tourists even though tourism for the most part only takes place in predefined spaces and places. E.g. backrooms or personnel rooms of hotels and restaurants are usually restricted. Therefore the touristic relations occur in places and spaces specially set up for tourism. These can not only be considered as geographic places but also contain a temporary element. For example contacts between a waiter and a tourist after working hours are not common. (Mundt 2001: 212)

The relations between hosts and guests differ depending on the type of tourism. As mentioned above alternative tourists are trying to spend more time with locals than day trippers.

The principle of strangeness is central for touristic transactions. This implies that all interaction between hosts and tourists stay on a general and impersonal level. Thus tourists and hosts see each other more as objects than as persons. (Nash 1989: 44f) *„People who treat others as objects are less likely to be controlled by the constraints of personal involvement and will feel freer to act in terms of their own self-interest.“* (Nash 1989: 45)

These touristic relations are not only based on the principle of strangeness but cultural differences also affect this transaction. Another point is the fact that tourists can enjoy their free time while the service personnel – the hosts – have to work. This can lead to fractures between visitors and habitants of the island. (Nash 1989:45)

For the most part locals accept tourists even though they criticise the attitude of their guests. This does not mean that they appreciate them as individuals but they profit from tourism. (Adler 1980: 26)

In some cases the local population especially in poorer regions, see western tourists as excessively rich but at the same time dissatisfied. Even though they are on holiday tourists tend to be impatient and find fault although only small things go wrong because they see themselves first and foremost as paying customers. Such a situation leads to social tensions. Sometimes growing tourism can induce discomfort within the local population. Tourists tend to see only the duration of their stay and forget that the locals are constantly confronted with tourism. (Adler 1980: 23-32)

Koh Tao has seen a continuous growth of tourism in the last decades which transformed the formerly léger relationship between locals and tourists into a professional one. The islanders who previously earned their living as farmers became a part of the tourism industry. In addition to that many businesspeople from other areas of Thailand came to the island in the hope of profiting from tourism. For the former coconut farmers not only tourists are strangers but also the newly settled businesspeople.

Because many new businesses were founded in a very short time, the competition between the inhabitants of Koh Tao rose immensely. This situation leads to a price war. (Interview with Adam 2009)

Due to this some conflicts arose within the local population. James, who has lived on the island for 10 years (except for a short time spent in Australia), states: „*When I first came here the Thai people were really friendly, really really really friendly, really nice, really happy and I think over the years I think these people have become greedy - become a little bit too money focused and they have problems with each other [...]*” (Interview with James 2009)

Of course the behaviour of the tourists also has a large impact on the relationships with the local population. Some tourists respect the Thai culture and conform to the rules of local society, but many don't. (Korn 2009) Walking on the beach one can see many half naked

tourists and tourists with shabby clothes. Such an appearance is not common for Thai. Because of the large amount of tourists most of the locals are used to their behaviour. During the authors stay on the island it was mostly the westerners who criticised their attitude. (Also see Interviews with Adam, James and Chris 2009)

Defining Places on Koh Tao

Analysing Public Places and Spaces

While we showed above that tourism in itself furthers the creation of boundaries between locals and visitors, it is also clear that these boundaries are not only affected by the social group but also change in different settings. Especially public places and spaces play an integral part in the formation of social boundaries. To this end we tried to connect to different theories of place and space. In the first step we look at a method to evaluate public places and spaces that was developed by Project for Public Spaces (PPS), the Place Diagram. In a second step we use Edward Relphs concept of modes of “insiderness” and “outsiderness” to show that there are different degrees of belonging to a place and that these modes affect not only the way we view a certain place but also the way we interact with other people in a specific setting.

The Place Diagram developed by Project for Public Spaces (PPS) identifies four key aspects that can be used to evaluate public spaces:

- **Uses and activities:** Generally speaking the amount of offered activities on a place gives a good indication of how much a place is visited.
- **Comfort and Image:** Comfort and Image play a large role in the success of a place. PPS assumes that among other things safety and cleanliness are important aspects.
- **Access and Linkages:** When evaluating a place it is important to consider the surrounding infrastructure but also the visual appearance.
- **Sociability:** The attachment to a place rises when people feel comfortable meeting friends and encounter strangers.

(Project for Public Spaces)



Fig. 3: Place Diagram. Project for Public Spaces

A further aspect that should be considered when evaluating public places is whether a place can be conducive to integration. Peer and Häberlin define integration in this context as the comprehension of different groups in one society. One important facet is whether people can use a place as they want and still move within social norms. (Peer, Häberlin 2007: 2) Peer and Häberlin see a public place conducive to integration when: *“Nutzungsansprüche weitgehend befriedigt werden können und wenn die verschiedenen Gruppen die Chance haben, Nähe und Distanz zu anderen Gruppen in gewissem Ausmaß selbst zu bestimmen und zu regulieren.”* (Peer, Häberlin 2007: 2)

Public places are potential meeting points. On one hand they are places where strangers can interact and foster integration. On the other hand they can be places of conflict. Such conflicts are also an important element of integration processes between social groups. Social groups, depending on their life style, have different demands on public places. (Peer, Häberlin 2007: 2f) Examples for places on Koh Tao that hinder integration, insofar that the people using them cannot decide for themselves completely the amount of interaction between other social groups, are for example hotel lobbies or restaurants on the beach sides. Here the interactions between tourists and locals are constricted, as in most cases locals work there and tourists spend their leisure time in these places. Thus locals are not completely free to interact with

tourists on a more personal level. The village centre on the other hand can in some cases be considered a place which is conducive to integration processes. As we show below, both local people and tourists spend their leisure time in the city centres, and especially cheaper eateries are frequented by quite a few locals. Here there is a possibility, at least theoretically, to meet on equal footing and go beyond the boundaries of hosts and guests.

Another theoretical concept which presents itself as useful for our analysis is Edward Relph's theory of place identity. Thereby Relph argues that notions of "insideness" and "outsideness" present a basic dualism fundamental in our experience of places. (Relph 1976 : 106) Through varying combinations and intensities of "outsideness" and "insideness", different places have different identities for different people. (Seamon 1996 : 6)

In this context Relph discusses several modes of "insideness" and "outsideness", from "existential insideness" to "existential outsideness". The boundaries between these different modes are fluid and the relationship people have with a place transforms itself continuously. (Relph 1976 : 106) When analysing touristic and non-touristic places on Koh Tao it is important to note that tourists are not automatically "outsiders" in any given place, and locals are not always "insiders".

Modes of "insideness" and "outsideness":

- **Existential "insideness"**: A person experiences this form of "insideness" when he or she not only feels attached to a certain place but feels completely at home. The place is usually experienced without self-conscious reflection yet at the same time holds immense significance. (Relph 1976 : 106) Looking at Koh Tao islanders and new settlers fit in this category.
- **Existential "outsideness"**: In this situation the person feels completely out of place and separate from a place. The place is experienced as unpleasant or even oppressive. (Relph 1976 : 106) Examples for this kind of "outsideness" could be homesick tourists on Koh Tao.
- **Objective "outsideness"**: This mode of "outsideness" is experienced if a person deliberately separates himself or herself from a place and displays a dispassionate attitude towards this place. Place is a thing to be studied and manipulated as an object apart from the experiencer. This approach is often taken by planners, designers, and policy makers. (Relph 1976 : 106) For Koh Tao an immediate example does not spring to mind, although scientists sometimes deliberately put themselves outside of a place to study it in detail.

- **Incidental “outsideness”:** A situation in which place is the background or mere setting for activities. One usually only sees selected functions of a place – for example, the landscapes and places one drives through as he or she is on the way to somewhere else. (Relph 1976 : 106) Day trippers coming to Koh Tao for a specific activity can be taken as an example for incidental “outsiders”.
- **Behavioural “insideness”:** From the standpoint of behavioural “insideness” landscape or townscape constitute the primary aspect of a place. Behavioural “insider” try to deliberately get to know a place by figuring out what is where and how various aspects fit together to make one complete place. (Relph 1976 : 107) Seasonal workers, western workers and some of the tourists want to discover the islands and its landmarks so one can call them behavioural “insiders”.
- **Empathetic “insideness”:** Empathetic “insiders” try to be open to a place and understand it better. The expressions of the cultural values and those who create them are important aspects of a place. For empathetic “insiders” places are records and expressions of the cultural values of those who create and live in them. Empathetic “insideness” is an important aspect of approaching a place phenomenologically. (Relph 1976 : 107) This description fits alternative tourists and ethnographers who visit the island.
- **Mass identity:** The Mass identity of a place is removed from direct experiences and is provided by the mass media. It is usually superficial for it can be changed rather easily. Nevertheless it can have a large impact on the involvement with a place and can influence the perception, especially those of “outsiders”. (Relph 1976 : 107) The tourism industry is generally based on the mass identity of a given place. Before a tourist makes the choice to visit Koh Tao he or she reads travel literature or listens to experiences of friends. During the last years the image of Koh Tao was transformed from an “insider” destination to a famous diving spot.

Apart from existential “outsideness”, which replaces all others, these types are not mutually exclusive or unchanging. Thus we may experience a certain place as full of meaning on a personal level, yet at the same time be quite capable of also viewing it as a professional planner in the form of objective “outsideness” and also participate in its mass identity. It should be noted here, that the identity of a place is never simple or straightforward and can hardly be summarised with a few factual sentences. In addition to that, one might say that there is no real “insideness” and that an “outsider” can sometimes see a place more accurately than any “insider”. (Relph 1976 : 107) *“Identity is, in short neither an easily reducible, nor a*

separable quality of places – It is neither constant and absolute, nor is it constantly changing variable. The identity of place takes many forms, but it is always the very basis of our experience of THIS place as opposed to any other.” (Relph 1976 : 107)

The presented theoretical concepts and methods are of course only a small fragment of a larger theoretical discussion. For the purposes of this paper the presented theories cover the most vital parts of our argument. To show the place-bound interaction between the various social groups on Koh Tao the next part of the paper will analyse two villages on Koh Tao, Mae Haad and Sairee. Both are situated on the coast and can be described to have a more or less touristic character. As mentioned above Mae Haad is the main village of Koh Tao. It is located on the west coast, south of Sairee. As the map below shows one can find plenty of shops, cafés and restaurants in Mae Haad. In addition to that the ferries coming from the mainland and the surrounding islands dock here.



Fig. 4: Mae Haad Town Map. Koh Tao Guide 2008

Using the concept of Place Diagrams developed by the Project for Public Spaces (as described above) we will analyse both Mae Haad and Sairee. By looking at Mae Haad the central village and Sairee a village with an especially active nightlife we will show differences in the use of the places and the belonging to them. The two graphics below give an overview of the key aspects of these places.

Mae Haad is not only a touristic centre but also home to many islanders and other locals and thus it has a very diverse population. Looking at the category “Sociability” the first thing one notices, is the active day use. The reason for this is that there are many different shops and cafés. Supermarkets as well as boutiques can be found in many different guises. While the cafés on the main roads are mostly frequented by tourists, locals can be found in cheaper restaurants in the side roads. Due to the docks and the ferries arriving every day the place can get crowded. Although Mae Haad is used by both tourists and locals there is not much private interaction between the groups. Thus even though Mae Haad can be categorized as an inclusive place as defined by Peer and Häberlin, because it offers diverse activities for and provides the possibility for the people to decide for themselves in how far they want to have contact with others, (Peer, Häberlin 2007: 2) the actual effect of integration between tourists and locals seems minimal.

Mae Haad is actively used and offers many diverse opportunities to spent time there. The colourful shops invite tourists to buy locally made souvenirs, cloths and bric-a-brac. Due to the high tourist frequency (many day trippers spent there day in Mae Haad) retail prices are higher than in other areas on the island. Beside the shops and the cafés Mae Haad also offers many homes for the inhabitants of Koh Tao.

The accessibility of a place is an important feature to consider when analysing public places. Mae Haad does not only have docks but is also a traffic junction for the motorised vehicles of the island. This fact contributes to the noise level and the air pollution which affect the image and the comfort of the place. Even though cars and mopeds dominate the traffic pedestrians are also a large part of the street life of Mae Haad.

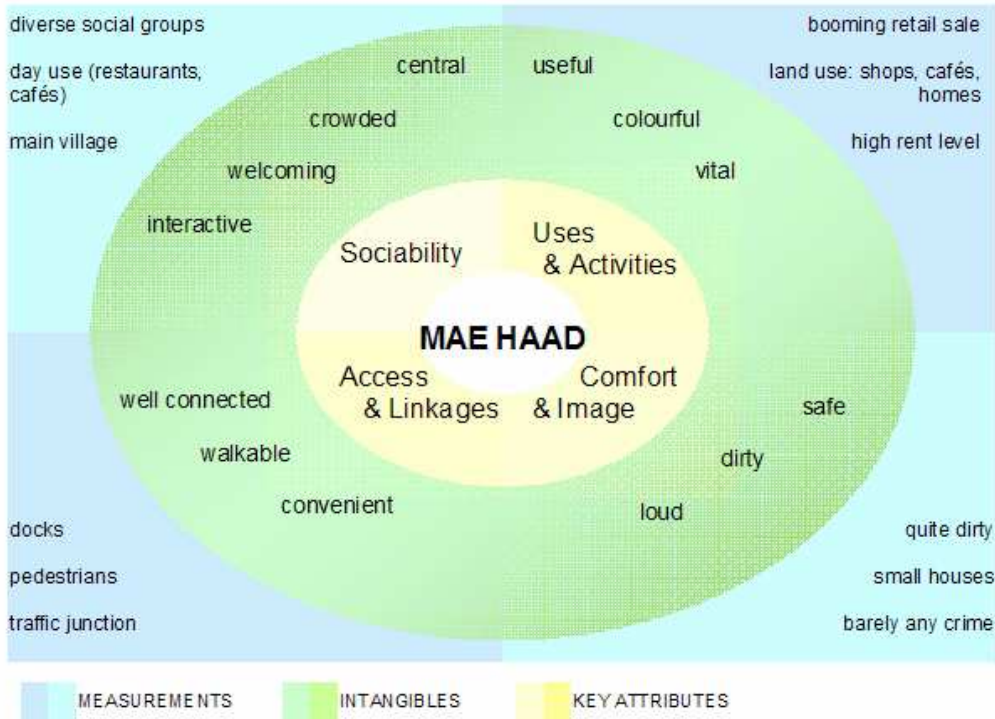


Fig. 5: Mae Haad Diagram. based on graphic by Project for Public Spaces

The second village we analysed is Sairee. Also located on the west coast it is smaller than Mae Haad as the graphic below shows. Sairee is popular with party tourists and young backpackers. There are not as many locals living there as in Mae Haad and the nightlife is more active.



Fig. 6: Sairee Town Map. Koh Tao Guide 2008

The sociability is higher in Sairee than in Mae Haad because of the flourishing street life which makes interacting between people easier. Many tourists meet in the diverse bars, pubs, restaurants and cafés. Compared to Mae Haad there is a higher density of bars and it is a lot busier during the night. Because of the booming night life pedestrians dominate the traffic and there are less motorised vehicles. Although many locals work in these bars and pubs they do not spend their free time there. Due to the bad sanitary infrastructure Sairee is quite dirty and because of the crowds also noisy.

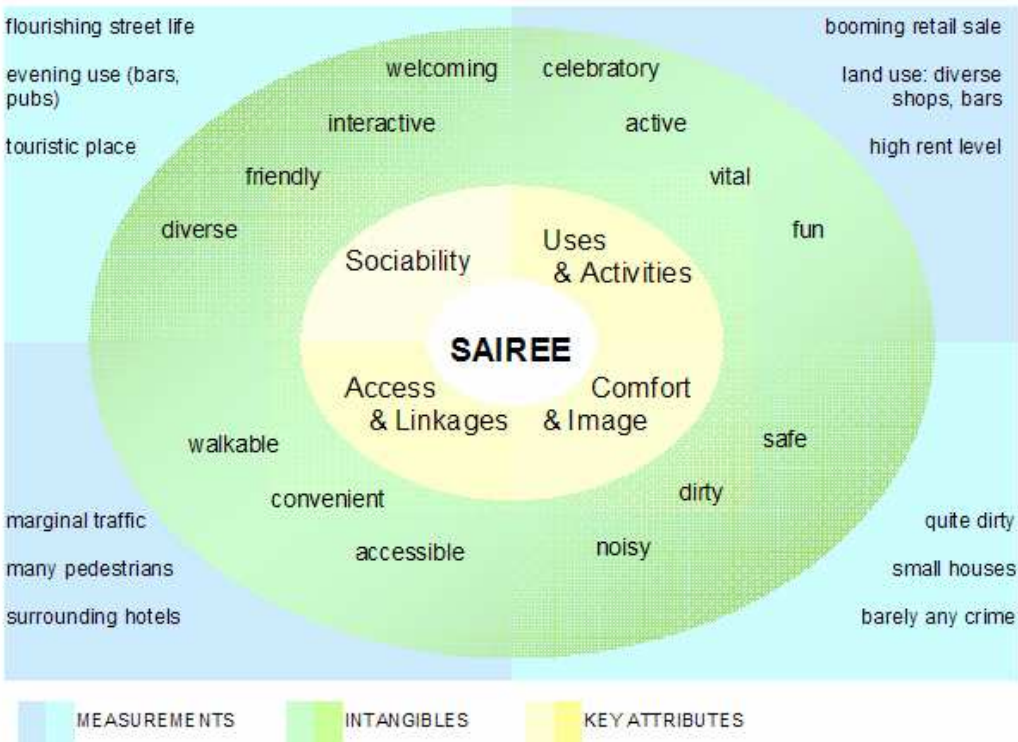


Fig. 7: Sairee Diagram. based on graphic by Project for Public Spaces

Mae Haad and Sairee are the main places of Koh Tao. Most of the people live and stay in this area. For this reason we will take a closer look at different geographical sections and determine which social groups one can find in the specific sections. In the graphics below we show who spends his or her time when at what place. For better illustration we put the groups in scale to the amount of time spent in a certain place. The bigger the font the longer they remain there.

VILLAGES

BEACH SIDES		VILLAGE CENTRES		VILLAGE OUTSKIRTS	
work time	leisure time	work time	leisure time	work time	leisure time
islanders	tourists	islanders	islanders	islanders	islanders
new settlers		new settlers	new settlers	new settlers	new settlers
seasonal workers		seasonal workers	seasonal workers		seasonal workers
western workers		western workers	western workers		
			tourists		

Fig. 8: Village Analysis. Korn, Pirker 2011

We define beach sides as the place between the village and the seafront. There are mostly diving schools, smaller resorts and little shops where one can buy cold drinks, snacks and beach accessories. During the working hours all of the identified social groups can be found in the area. But not everybody spends their free time on the beach sides, it is mostly tourists who frequent the small shops or stay in the resorts. In the village centres where one can find shops, restaurants, bars and cafés all social groups except for the tourists run some businesses or are employed there. However it is mostly tourists and western workers who spend their leisure time in the centres. In the evenings though, one can also find islanders, new settlers and sometimes also seasonal workers in the bars and restaurants. The village outskirts are the main living area for islanders, new settlers and seasonal workers. A lot of their free time is spent in these quieter parts of town and some also run small businesses.

BEACH AREAS

SEAFRONTS		BEACHES		SEA	
work time	leisure time	work time	leisure time	work time	leisure time
islanders	islanders		islanders	islanders	western workers
new settlers	new settlers		new settlers	western workers	tourists
seasonal workers	western workers		seasonal workers	western workers	
western workers	tourists		western workers		
			tourists		

Fig. 9: Beach Area Analysis. Korn, Pirker 2011

A lot of restaurants, bars, hotels and diving schools are located on the seafront. Islanders, new settlers, seasonal workers and western workers are employed there or run businesses. Apart from tourists it is mostly western workers who enjoy the facilities and activities offered on the seafront. Close to the docks on Mae Haad are some bars frequented nearly exclusively by locals. In the evenings many local men visit these fishermen bars. The beaches are mostly populated by tourists, but one can find some local families with children and western workers there too.

Due to the many diving schools on the island there are daily boating trips for the tourists. The boats used for the trips are steered mostly by islanders and western workers function as dive instructors. Beside the diving boats fishing vessels are put out.

Following our classifications and their interpretation one can see that tourists dominate large parts of Mae Haad and Sairee. They use the beaches, the sea, the village centres, etc. and claim these places for their own. There the tourists are the majority and therefore the locals try to spend their free time somewhere else. This is the reason the tourists assert themselves in these places and become, at least part of the time “insiders”. The lack of private interaction hardens the social boundaries between groups, especially between shorter term visitors and the long term inhabitants of the island. On the village outskirts where the locals spend most of their leisure time the tourists stay “outsiders”. Most of the locals work in the areas where the tourists are the “insiders”. The fact that the tourists are “insiders” and the circumstance that the relationship between hosts and guests is for the most part solely professional furthers social boundaries. Therefore the locals try to find places where they can be undisturbed by tourists. MacCannell says in this context (referring to Goffman): *“The front is the meeting place of hosts and guests or customers and service persons, and the back is the place where members of the home team retire between performances to relax and to prepare. Examples of back regions are kitchens, boiler rooms, executive washrooms, and examples of front regions are reception offices and parlors. Although architectural arrangements are mobilized to support this division, it is primarily a social one, based on the type of social performance that is staged in a place, and on the social roles found there.”* (MacCannell 1999: 92)

These concepts seem, at first glance, static but appearances are deceiving. Places always have a temporal element. For example: The docks in Mae Haad are frequented by all kind of social groups during the day. Tourists, locals and others are waiting for the ferries or are arriving from surrounding islands or the mainland. Some seasonal workers are waiting for the arriving tourists to offer them a hotel room or to sell them a ride to their resorts. So the docks are a

place where hardly any “insiderness” and “outsiderness” exist. But in the evenings when barely a ferry docks it is conspicuous that mainly local men linger in this area. There are some bars where solely local fishermen and other Thai men spend their time. They become “insider” in the evenings as they appropriate the place. This example shows that this “insiderness” of the fishermen is temporarily and flexible.

“Insiderness” and “outsiderness” not only have spatial and temporal components but also a social one. Depending on the type of tourist the relationship between hosts and guests takes on different dimensions. Some tourists try to establish friendships with locals and try to overcome the social boundaries. Other tourists are not interested in social contacts and this behaviour hardens them. Furthermore the factor time plays a role. Tourists who just spend few days on the island are normally less interested in private interactions with locals than tourists who stay longer.

Conclusion

The closer look on Koh Tao with the analyses of two villages shows not only how complex the population structure on the small island is but how the growing tourism industry changes the relationship between social groups. The interaction between hosts and guest is based on a complex pattern of both economic and personal relations. As we demonstrated using various examples these relations are not static. They change depending on place, and the type of tourism.

To this end we categorized the different types of tourists on Koh Tao. It seems notable that the type of tourist is an important factor when considering interactions between locals and guests. Party tourists and day trippers are less likely to form personal relationships with the locals than alternative tourists.

As we established above by means of analysing Sairee and Mae Haad, unlike the common assumption tourists are not always the “outsiders” and locals not always the “insiders”. The notions of “insiderness” and “outsiderness” are variable. The example of Koh Tao shows that in some touristic villages e.g. Sairee tourists dominate the public places. Although locals work there they hardly spend any of their free time in these areas.

As described in the first part of this paper there is not only the dualism between hosts and guests to consider but also the diverse social structure of the island inhabitants. Western

workers have different relations with tourists than locals. This is because for one they usually speak better English and mostly are considered to be strangers themselves by the islanders. Seasonal workers have the most difficult social position. They are seen as “outsiders” by both tourists and locals. Seasonal workers usually have low paying jobs and this leads to the fact that they are not able to participate in the touristic activities e.g. going to touristy bars, or diving etc. They are less esteemed by locals because they usually carry out more menial tasks.

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Interviews²

Adam. 2009. Interviewer: Cornelia Korn 06.May.2009, Mae Haad (Koh Tao / Thailand)

Chris. 2009. Interviewer: Cornelia Korn 03.May.2009, Chalok Baan Kao (Koh Tao / Thailand)

James. 2009. Interviewer: Cornelia Korn 04.May.2009, Sairee Beach (Koh Tao / Thailand)

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² The names of the interviewees were made anonymous.