

**Orphan volunteer tourism in Thailand:
Understanding Motivations, experiences and interactions**

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates volunteer tourists' motivations and on-site experiences, alongside hosts' attitudes towards volunteer tourists at the Home and Life orphanage in Phang Nga province, Thailand. An interpretive paradigm utilising qualitative data collection methods (semi-structured interviews, a focus group, participant observation and diaries) was adopted. The informants included twenty-four volunteer tourists, on a working vacation at the Home and Life orphanage between 1st July and 30th September 2011, and twenty hosts from Thai Muang sub-district.

The findings of the research suggest that the volunteer tourists' motivations and on-site experiences are multidimensional. Five main themes of motivations have been identified: (i) to help the children who were affected by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami; (ii) to gain personal development and growth; (iii) to gain new experiences; (iv) to learn about/be immersed in local culture; and (v) to meet and

make friends. Amongst these, a desire to help the children was the most dominant motivational factor, which was strongly influenced the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. In terms of the volunteer tourists' on-site experiences, four experiential dimensions were found: (i) personal development and growth; (ii) social; (iii) cultural; and (iv) feeling. The study suggests that the children had played a significant role in making the volunteer tourists' experience a beneficial one because they were an important source for cultural learning and their lives had taught a number of things to the volunteer tourists.

This research also investigates hosts' attitudes towards the volunteer tourists. It was found that they had very positive attitudes towards the volunteer tourists, based upon two main factors: the volunteer tourists' conduct and performance; and the perceived benefits they gained from the work of these tourists. The opportunity for the children to study English with English native speakers was cited as the most significant benefit. However, the hosts also had concerns about some aspects of the volunteer tourists' behaviour and perceived under-performance, which were found to be mainly the result of cultural differences.

Additionally, interactions and relationships between volunteer tourists and hosts were also examined by using social exchange theory. The study suggests that the interactions were reciprocal, and that both the volunteer tourists and the hosts enjoyed satisfactory benefits from one another: the volunteer tourist had a desired experience, and the hosts gained benefits from the work of the volunteer tourists.