

# Phuket Gazette

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‘WE STILL HAVE HOPE THAT WE WILL BE ABLE TO FIND HER’

## HAVE YOU SEEN V?

■ Officials search for a missing 23-year-old Russian tourist on Koh Tao

By Suchat Hankij

POLICE are searching for a Russian woman who has been missing from Koh Tao since February 16.

Valentina Novozhenova, 23, disappeared from a Koh Tao hotel, the day she was supposed to check out after a week-long stay.

Amid suspicions that she might have gotten in trouble while snorkeling off the island, police officers and divers on March 7 went to four possible spots that they believe she could have visited, where the water is about 20 meters deep.

Another team, comprising police, Kamnan, Phu Yai Baan and other officers, conducted a sweep of the island, searching beaches, hills and other viewpoints.

Two three-hour searches from 6am to 9am and 2pm to 5pm proved unsuccessful.

“We still have hope that we will be able to find her. We are also trying to locate any diving equipment that she may have taken with her, such as fins, water depth gauges, diving masks and so on. So far, we have come up empty handed,” said Lt Col Chokchai Suthimek of Koh Tao Police.

“Additionally, we shared pictures of her in public places, especially hotels, to ask if anyone has seen her. We will also check CCTV to track her movements, which might give us clues about where she was headed.”

Officials said that the initial investigation gives no indication of foul play.

“At the moment, we do not believe she was attacked or murdered,” said Surat Thani provincial police chief Apichart Boonsriroj. “Her latest communications via social media indicated that she wanted to free dive deeper than 22.3 meters without an assistant or equipment.”

Russian national Sergey Busagin, a relative of Ms Novozhenova, has contacted police. Officials described her as 1.7 meters tall and a passionate swimmer who often brought a purple towel or coat with



Ms Novozhenova, 23, disappeared from a Koh Tao hotel on February 16. Photo: Suchat Hankij

her on diving or snorkeling trips. She also has a tattoo of a ‘V’ on her left wrist.

In her room at the hotel, her belongings, including a passport, clothes, bags and cellphone, were found. Police said this suggests that she intended to return to her room, adding that there was no evidence of a struggle having taken place.

Her communications on VK, a social network platform popular among Russian users, showed that she left Moscow for Bangkok on February 7. Ms Novozhenova posted pictures of herself touring the city a day later as well as pictures of a hotel and beach in Koh Tao on February 10.

Her last posts on social media were on February 13. She said she loved free diving, which involves deep dives without a scuba air cylinder and added that she would dive deeper next time.

Police said Ms Novozhenova had previously admitted consulting a psychiatrist last month because she “feared something but could not indicate the cause”. The psychiatrist advised her to enroll in long-term therapy.

This month also marks the conclusion of a notorious 2014 case that made international news, in which two British backpackers, David Miller, 24, and Hannah Witheridge, 23, were murdered on Koh Tao. There was also evidence that Ms Witheridge had been raped.

The Criminal Court had initially ruled that there was sufficient evidence against two migrant workers, Zaw Lin on Koh Tao and Wai Phyo, convicting and sentencing them to death. However, the two defendants pleaded innocent and insisted that their initial confessions had been made under duress.

After reviewing the evidence, the Court of Appeal concluded earlier this month that the defendants were guilty beyond a doubt and consequently upheld the death penalty.

“All items of evidence offered by the plaintiffs are reasonably linked and solid. The ruling is not made on any single piece of evidence, but as a whole,” the court concluded.

*Additional reporting by The Nation.*

### Local woman scams two for millions in ‘investments’

TWO women filed a complaint against a third for allegedly scamming them out of millions of baht and lying about business investments. The suspect was recently arrested for a defamation case in Krabi.

*Full Story Page 3*

### BUSINESS



Larger number of Russians are expected to make a comeback to Phuket.

*Page 5*

### PROPERTY



Emerald Group comes under fire for allegedly undertaking illegal activities.

*Page 7*

### LIFE&STYLE



A critical assessment of the public education system in Thailand.

*Page 9*

LOCAL NEWS  
**Briefly**

## Two killed as sleepy driver crashes car

TWO members of a family were killed and three others injured after a car driver fell asleep at the wheel and crashed into an electric generator at the side of the road early morning on March 5.

“The accident occurred on Thepkrasattri Road, at a construction site near Phuket International Airport. At the scene, we found a black Honda Civic stuck to an electric generator,” Capt Kraisor Boonprasop of Thalang Police told the *Gazette*.

Two of the passengers, Pan Wannaro, 76, and Jariya Rachato, 39, were critically injured and rushed to Thalang Hospital, where they later succumbed to their injuries.

Somphot Wannaro, 46, was driving from Songkhla to Phuket with four members of his family. He told police that he had fallen asleep at the wheel and lost control of the vehicle. The other passengers were a 21-year-old woman and a three-year-old child.

All three were treated for

their injuries and have been released from hospital. The bodies of the deceased have been taken to their hometown for the funeral.

“We are going to charge Mr Somphot with reckless driving causing death and injury,” said Capt Kraisor.

– Winai Sarot

## Coin-guzzling turtle surgically saved by vets



Veterinarians at Chulalongkorn University on March 6 successfully operated on a 25-year-old female green turtle that had swallowed 915 coins. The reptile was rescued from Chon Buri's Sri Racha district and nicknamed Ormsin. Veterinarians removed the coins from its stomach. She will stay in intensive care for two weeks before being transferred to the Royal Thai Navy's Sea Turtle Conservation Center in Chon Buri to fully recover her health. The turtle will then be released into the sea. Photo: The Nation

The rest was made up of miscellaneous items such as shoes, cigarette lighters, clothes and even motorcycle helmets.

– Kongleaphy Keam

## Russian lost at sea found after ten hours

A RUSSIAN tourist, hell-bent on snorkeling despite warnings, was rescued and brought to shore on the morning of March 3 after being lost at sea for at least ten hours off Koh Racha Noi.

“Four Russian tourists, named by police as Artem Tarasenko, 45; Sergey Larichev, 40; Valeruu Iakunin, 40; and Dmitrii Somov, 48, rented a speed boat with Thai captain Rittiron Saleeka, 32, for snorkeling and fishing,” Lt Sakarin Saengjaroen of Chalong Police told the *Gazette*.

Capt Rittiron took the boat from Rawai Pier at about 9:30am on March 2 and arrived at a snorkeling spot near Koh Racha Noi.

“The captain told us that he repeatedly warned the tourists that the waves were too strong and that they should avoid snorkeling, but they insisted that they had done it before at the same spot and kept on arguing until he agreed to let them snorkel,” said Lt Sakarin.

The tourists jumped in the water without life jackets and instructed the captain to hold the boat at the tip of the island about 80 meters away.

“Mr Rittiron waited for 30 minutes, but the tourists didn't arrive. He then went back to the drop-off point where he found Mr Tarasenko. Some time later, a fishing boat arrived with both Mr Larichev and Mr Iakunin on board – they were picked up nearby,” he added.

Mr Somov, however, had disappeared. The Tourist Police, who were informed of the incident at about 2pm, notified the Navy and Marine Department for help. The search lasted until 7pm, but to no avail.

“At about 11pm, a fishing boat named *Sirinamchok 8* found him about 200 meters away from the snorkeling drop off point. They administered first-aid and dropped him off this morning, at about 8:30, at the Fish Marketing Organization pier in Rassada,” confirmed Lt Sakarin.

“He did not have any cuts or bruises, but was taken to Vachira Phuket Hospital for a checkup as he had spent several hours in the sea,” he added. “We will question him further when he recovers.”

– Kritsada Mueanhawong

## Trash clean-up totals more than one ton

THE Department of Marine and Coastal Resources (DMCR) conducted the second installment of its marine debris management campaign, collecting more than a ton of trash at Koh Racha Noi on March 4.

All coastal provinces in Thailand have been given a budget for marine debris management after Thailand was ranked as the sixth worst marine polluter in the world by the United Nations Environmental Program. The first clean-up activity was held last month at Laem Sai Beach in Phuket, where 382kg of marine trash was collected.

Fifty people joined the Koh Racha Noi clean-up, including officers from the DMCR, students from Prince of Songkla and Phuket Rajabhat universities, volunteer divers and others.

In total, the group collected 1,226kg of trash from the beach and in the sea, including 424kg of glass bottles, 265kg of plastic bottles, 244kg of fishing nets and related equipment, 62kg of plastic bags and 46kg of cans.

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# Phuket scammer arrested after two lodge complaints

By Winai Sarot

TWO women filed a complaint against another last week for allegedly scamming them out of millions of baht and lying about business investments.

Pitchayatida Piyodecha and Thaworn Srikanjana filed complaints of fraud at Wichit Police Station against the suspect, named only as 'Anny' by police.

"Ms Pitchayatida says she was introduced to Ms Anny through a mutual acquaintance. Ms Anny claimed to be the daughter of a former minister as well as a former officer in the court with 'connections in high places'," said Wichit Police Superintendent Nikorn Suksom.

"The suspect allegedly said that she could help Ms Pitchayatida to procure a loan of 60 million baht for her brother, who needed the money to build a condo. She said that she had made arrangements with a loan company who would offer her the money at a 2 per cent rate of interest, but that Ms Pitchayatida would have to put up 3mn baht as guarantee money. Ms Anny claimed that she would add 2mn baht of her own money to put down a total of 5mn baht as security against the loan," added Col Nikorn.

After transferring the guar-



The women filed complaints at Wichit Police Station. Photo: Thawit

antee money, Ms Pitchayatida waited for her loan to be approved, but after a two-month delay with no results, she asked for her 3mn baht to be returned.

"Ms Anny refused, saying she was entitled to the money as a 'consulting fee'. Eventually, after a long argument, Ms Anny paid back just 20,000 baht," said Col Nikorn.

Ms Pitchayatida later found out that the suspect's real name is also different and that she has allegedly scammed at least seven other people.

"In Ms Thaworn's case, she holds a chanote for 3 rai of land in Chalong, worth about 40mn baht. She had initially decided to hand over the chanote to a mort-

gage company for the price of 15mn baht. On Ms Anny's advice Ms Thaworn appointed her as an adviser to help develop the land instead," said Col Nikorn.

"Ms Thaworn later learned that Ms Anny, instead of proceeding with land development, had put the land up for another mortgage – after explicitly advising Ms Thaworn not to do so – for a price of 23mn baht. She gave the owner 1 million baht and claimed the rest as a processing fee," said Col Nikorn.

Police in their investigation have so far learned that Ms Anny was arrested by the Crime Suppression Division in Krabi for defamation in another case, the policeman said.

# Thieving AirAsia employee arrested



The man was arrested within two days. Photo: Kritsada Mueanhawong

AN AIRASIA baggage handler was arrested on March 3 for stealing jewelry worth 80,000 baht from a passenger's luggage at Phuket International Airport the day before.

Thasayu Boonsop, 26, confessed to theft following a complaint lodged at Sakoo Police Station by Amika Maha, a passenger on an AirAsia flight from Bangkok to Phuket on March 2.

"Ms Amika checked in with three bags, one of which contained a box with a gold and diamond bracelet worth about 65,000 baht and a ring worth about 15,000 baht. The next morning, she checked her bag

and found the box to be empty," said Sakoo Police Superintendent Jeerasak Siemsak.

Ms Amika asked officers to check CCTV footage at the airport.

"The video showed Mr Thasayu behaving in a suspicious manner while carrying the bag," said Lt Jeerasak.

Mr Thasayu agreed to return Ms Amika's jewelry and was charged with theft. He was taken to Sakoo Police Station for further legal processing.

He had worked for AirAsia for about a year and was fired from his job following his confession and subsequent arrest.

- Kritsada Mueanhawong

# American climber injured in Railay



She was admitted to Bangkok Hospital Phuket. Photo: Kritsada M

report at 10:30 am.

"We found her on the ground, screaming in pain at Railay cliff. She was badly injured and bleeding, so we administered first-aid, took her to Ao Nang by boat and then to Krabi Hospital," said Mr Saman.

"She was later transferred to Bangkok Hospital Phuket, where she is recovering from her injuries," he added.

Ms Samara was staying in Ao Tonsai and went climbing with three friends. She was using her own equipment at the time.

"Her friends told us that part of her gear malfunctioned, causing her to fall. It is always safer to climb with an approved club, as they recheck your equipment beforehand," said Mr Saman.

- Kritsada Mueanhawong

AN AMERICAN tourist is in hospital in Phuket after she fell while attempting to scale a six-meter-high cliff in Krabi on March 5.

Samara Landers, 38, broke her leg and sustained several bruises to her body.

Saman Vajidee of Hat Noppharat Thara – Mu Koh Phi Phi National Park received the



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## Mob embeds screwdriver in student's head

POLICE in Cha-Am say that justice will be served as they investigate the murder of Silapakorn University student Theerapong Thitithan, 24.

Mr Theerapong died after having a screwdriver embedded in his skull in an attack by youths at his lodgings in Cha-Am. The victim's mother has threatened to parade her son's corpse in Petchburi if justice is not done.

Investigation chief Pakhin Siwmethakun of Cha-Am police said that the tragedy of the case is that the mob were after another person and that the victim was entirely innocent. He said: "No matter if those involved are the children of influential people, politicians or people in uniform - they will all be prosecuted and brought to justice".

The case is being closely monitored by provincial police chief Surapong Chaijan.

## Malaysia-North Korea relations turn sour

NORTH Korea's ambassador was told to leave Malaysia by March 6 after airport murder and attacks on murder probe.

The ambassador was given 48 hours to leave the country in a major break in diplomatic relations over the airport assassination of the half-brother of Pyongyang's leader.

Kim Jong-Nam was poisoned February 13 with deadly nerve agent VX. North Korea has not acknowledged the dead man's identity but has repeatedly disparaged the murder investigation and accused Malaysia of conniving with its enemies.

Meanwhile, there has been intense media speculation that two of the suspects may be hiding inside the embassy.

On March 4 police issued an arrest warrant for one of the men believed holed up in the embassy, a North Korean airline employee.

## 'Benz' gives himself up

MOTORBIKE and car racing star Akarakit 'Benz Racing' Worarojcharoendet on March 6 surrendered to police at the Narcotics Suppression Bureau in Bangkok to answer the sum-



mons issued against him.

Mr Akarakit has been charged with conspiracy and money laundering.

He is accused of buying a Lamborghini sports car with drug money from a drug-trafficking network led by alleged Laotian drug dealer Xaysana Keopimpa.

Mr Akarakit reportedly refrained from testifying any further to police, saying he would only testify in court.

A money laundering offence is punishable by up to 10 years in jail term and/or a fine of up to 200,000 baht.

## Police to probe student's death in custody

TWO POLICE teams were set up on March 6 to probe the death in custody of a university student who had been arrested for drunk driving on March 4 in Bangkok.

Sithsawat Eiumlapa, 21, was arrested at a checkpoint on the outbound lane of Bang Na-Trat Road after recording a blood alcohol level of 0.170. The student reportedly passed out and was detained at Bang Na Police Station, where he died.

Deputy city police chief Maj General Ampol Buarapporn joined a meeting on March 6 to discuss the case with Metropolitan Police Area 5 chief Maj General Mongkol Warunno and related officers, including seven policemen involved in the student's arrest.

Gen Ampol offered his condolences to the student's family and assured them that investigators would ensure justice for



both the family and the officers.

He said the two teams had seven days to probe what happened. City police chief Lt General Sanit Mahathaworn said he felt uneasy about the case and he would ensure justice was served.

He said the autopsy would reveal if the student was assaulted although a heart attack was initially identified as the cause of death.

## Four homes Mahakan Fort demolished

BANGKOK Governor Aswin Kwanmuang led city officials and workers to carry out the demolition of four houses in the Mahakan Fort community on the morning of March 6.

There was no resistance from the residents, although some wept as they gathered and observed the work.

Gov Aswin said the operation to demolish four homes - numbers 61, 95, 107/1-3, and a shop selling fireworks - March 6 stemmed from the city's discussions with community leaders on March 4. He said more talks would be held soon to make way for the demolition of the rest of houses.

Deputy governor Jakkapan Phiwnngam thanked community residents for their cooperation

and understanding.

He also said that city officials would soon discuss the points of concern with community members, with national security agency representatives in attendance.

Guarded by soldiers and officials, workers arrived at the community at 7am with heavy tools and were expected to complete the demolitions by the end of the day.

Officials made lists of items removed from the houses and sent the belongings on 10 trucks to the home occupants' preferred destinations.

The four razed houses were among 10 homes at the community earmarked for demolition despite claims that some of the properties are valuable antique wooden houses.

## Support for long-term strategy urged

FORMER secretary-general of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Supachai Panitchpakdi said on March 6 that the government has been doing the right thing in laying out the country's long-term national strategy and integrating it into social and economic development and regional plans.

Mr Supachai was invited to sit on the government initiated committee on reform, reconciliation, and national strategy or Por Yor Por along with other 38 noted experts in all fields.

Mr Supachai believes that the country must have a strategy such as this one as it is

significant to the Thailand's growth and development.

He strongly urged all parties to lend support to the government, whether they agree with it or not.

Asked if the government would be successful in pushing ahead with this strategy, he said it could as nothing is impossible.

## HM King strips rank of Phra Dhammachayo

HIS Majesty the King has signed a royal command to strip Phra Dhammachayo of a senior monk rank, equivalent to a patriarch.

The royal command, which was signed on March 4, was published in the *Royal Gazette* the next day.

The command stripped Phra Dhammachayo of the rank of Thep Yarn Mahamunee or a patriarch rank on ground that he is wanted on a court warrant for allegedly laundering money and embezzlement.

The Royal command said Phra Dhammachayo also faced several charges, but he refused to surrender. As a result, the government proposed to the King to remove the former Dhammakaya abbot of the senior monk rank.

## Media chiefs barred from council

HEADS of professional media organizations will be prohibited from sitting on a controversial council to be set up under a new law aimed at regulating the mass media.

The media reform committee will instead place the media-group heads in a working committee, which will be responsible for nominating members of the council.

A revised clause in the bill stipulates that those on the working committee prior to establishment of the professional council shall not sit in the council. This was aimed at avoiding any conflict of interest, said ACM Kanit Suwannet, chairman of the media reform committee, which is part of the National Reform Steering Assembly (NRSA).

Kanit suggested that anyone who aspired to sit on the professional council should resign from their current post before the new law comes into effect, to avoid disqualification.

# Russians slated to return to Phuket

**Finance**  
By Don Freeman

THE economy of Phuket will pick up over the next couple of years because the Russian economy, ruble and stock market are finally recovering. Russia's energy and commodity driven economy was hit hard by low energy and commodity prices, along with President Obama's sanctions in response to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and other troubles in Eastern Ukraine.

The election of Donald Trump offers hope in thawing frosty US-Russia relations. However, it might be difficult to get Congress to significantly ease or eliminate the sanctions altogether.

Nevertheless, Russian business sentiment, consumer confidence and capital/investment inflows were already improving before President Trump was elected, as oil prices began to stabilize and modestly recover. This helped the ruble to bottom in early 2016 at just below the US\$1:Rub0.013 level and to subsequently rise to US\$1:Rub0.017 (as of last month).

Russian ETFs bottomed early last year, but are now recovering. The Market Vector Russia ETF Trust (NYS



Many Russians come to Phuket to escape the long, harsh winters in their own country. Photo: lisanetsm

EARCA: RSX) and the iShares MSCI Russia Capped ETF (NYSEARCA: ERUS) are now up by about 50 per cent since then, while the VanEck Vectors Russia Small-Cap ETF (NYSEARCA: RSXJ) has more than doubled and the Direxion Daily Russia Bull 3x Shares ETF (NYSEARCA: RUSL) has more than tripled. Any easing or lifting of sanctions will act as another bullish catalyst for the Russian economy and stock market.

Russian money and tourists are already flowing back into Thailand and increasingly shifting from Pattaya towards the Southern provinces. According to C9 Hotelworks' February 2017 Phuket Hotel Market Up-

date, Phuket passenger arrivals increased 18 per cent in 2016 versus 13 per cent in 2015 as Russian arrivals surged 51 per cent due to the strengthening of the ruble against the US dollar and Thai baht and due to political volatility in the Middle East that redirected Russian tourists to safer winter destinations.

Remember, Russia's intervention in Syria on behalf of its leader Bashar al-Assad has made Russian tourists a target, as the October 2015 downing of Metrojet Flight 9268 from the popular Egyptian resort town of Sharm El Sheikh to St Petersburg shows (Note: Russia later banned flights to Egypt which had been ranked number one on the list of the so-called

'winter sun' destinations for Russians). Frosty relations with Turkey and EU sanctions has meant middle class Russians who want to escape the Russian winter need to look elsewhere for suitable beach destinations.

Phuket already has a well-developed Russian-friendly tourism infrastructure with Russian speaking tourism professionals as well as hotels, restaurants and tour packages focused on the unique needs of such travellers who are often not fluent in English and unable to read Latin script. In addition, there are said to be as many as 30,000 Russian expats who are more or less living, permanently based or spending much of the year in Phuket. However, it's

difficult to come up with accurate figures, as many hospitality/tourism employees are working as 'freelancers' while others are just escaping the long winters by living in Phuket for several months of the year.

Before the ruble plunged and the Crimea/Ukraine crisis occurred, there had been a trend for Russians to buy a condo and rent it out to other Russians. When the sanctions began to bite, some owners struggled to meet their payments or were forced to sell or list on the market, even at a loss, to get hard currency.

With the Russian economy, ruble and stock market rebounding, I suspect more Russian tourists and second home buyers will descend on Phuket for some 'winter sun'.

From a technical perspective, I will likely be investing in the Thai and Russian stocks market in the months ahead as their major indexes continue to rise.

*Don Freeman, the President of Freeman Capital Management, is a fee-only Phuket-based registered investment adviser with the US Securities Exchange Commission (SEC), who has 20 years of experience providing personal financial planning and wealth management advice with an emphasis on investing in low-cost ETFs to both working and retired expatriates.*

## Alcohol prices to rise

THE Excise Department consumers are needlessly worried that a new excise bill will drive the prices of alcoholic beverages higher, the Excise Department says. The bill, soon to be published in the *Royal Gazette*, has caught public attention after many people came to wrongly believe that the new tax rates will double the retail prices of beer, wine and liquor.

"People were confused about tax ceilings stipulated in the new excise law," said Somchai Poolsavasdi, director-general of the Excise Department. The tax ceiling on beer, wine and liquor will be 30 per cent of retail prices, or 3,000 baht per liter of alcohol. The new tax ceiling on cigarettes is much higher, at 90 per cent of the retail price.

"The ceiling rates are set for the next 20 years, but the applied rate will be much lower initially, as we do not want to increase the tax burden," Mr

Somchai said.

Prapas Kong-Ied, deputy permanent secretary of the Finance Ministry, echoed Mr Somchai's remarks, saying that making tax rates too high would encourage smuggling, and then the cost of law enforcement would rise.

Nipon Poapongsakorn, an economist at the Thailand Development Research Institute, said he agreed with the new law that will change the way tax rates are calculated.

The new method will use retail prices (not producer prices) as a base for tax calculation. The new tax will create a level playing field for producers, since the current structure allows some producers to take advantage of others. Retail prices will be decided by market forces, and tax authorities will have to enforce the law accordingly.

- *The Nation*

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**Phuket Gazette**

# A little too late

THE decision to allow beach beds and umbrella sets back on island beaches was inevitable, but it is regrettable that it took so long for reason to prevail on the matter now that the bulk of the 2016-'17 high season for tourism is behind us.

Tourists need and expect certain amenities during visits to the island. As pointed out in this space the past, Phuket beach chair operators provide important services for reasonable fees, especially when compared to our infamous transport sector.

Many vendors develop loyal bases of repeat customers from abroad who return to them annually – or at least this was the case until these services were disrupted soon after May 2014.

The real source of contention is not the beach vendors themselves, most of whom are just working hard and trying to get by, keeping our beaches clean and safe in the process. They have always been an undervalued component of a tourism industry that continues to enjoy a successful reputation for hospitality despite so much negative, sensationalist news to the contrary.

The real problem is local powers who illegally divvied up the shoreline sand in order to amass vast fortunes at their expense.

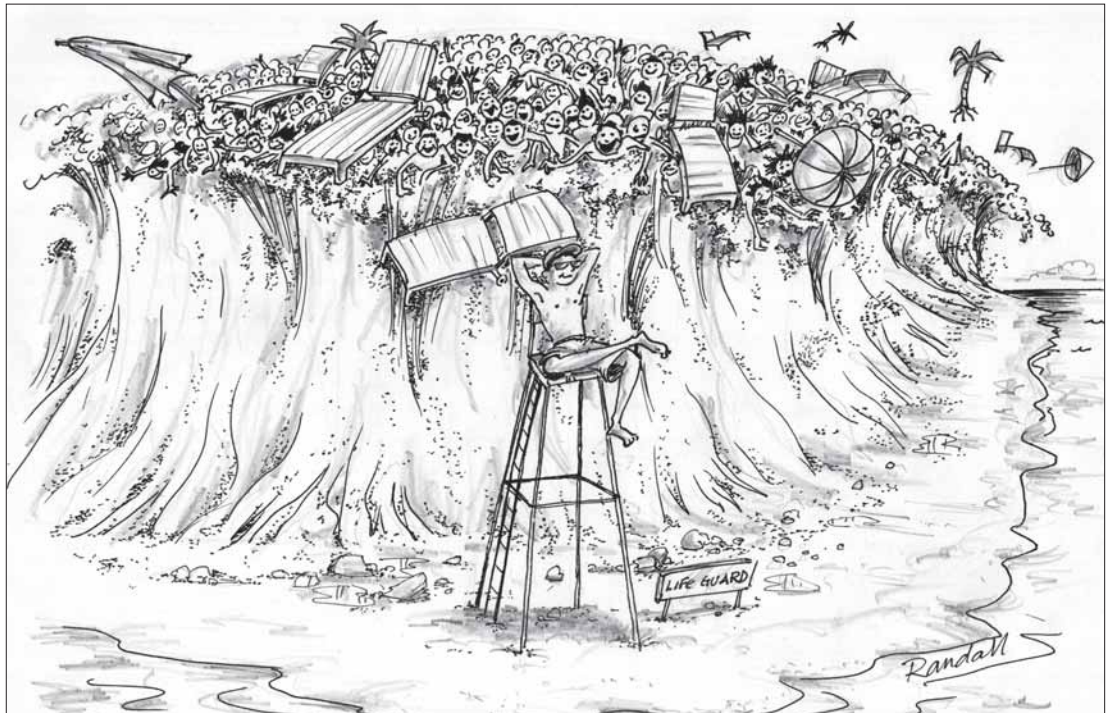
After the tsunami, when beach operations were literally wiped off the map, concession holders received financial compensation from the state. Some beach vendors were among the dead. Others, who had personal property such as motorcycles and important personal documents destroyed, got nothing.

Beach vendors offer the simplest commodity: shade. So-called 'sun worshippers', mostly from Europe, still make up a small but significant segment of the tourism pie, but the vast majority of beach tourists want to limit exposure – not only to avoid sunburn, but to minimize risk of skin cancer.

Many Asian visitors want to keep their complexion as light as possible for cosmetic or cultural reasons. While skin tone is the most ignorantly overrated aspect of human value, these mass misconceptions need to be factored into the overall economic equation.

Decades ago, protection from the sun was afforded by simply laying a mat in the shade of so many coconut and pine trees that naturally lined our beaches. Unfortunately, most naturally occurring beach fauna has been destroyed alongside most Phuket beaches.

The issue of beach fauna and healthy dune ecosystems is one that urgently needs to be recognized and addressed by authorities.



# Don't fight fire with fire

*Re: Emerald group accused of illegal activities in Phuket, Mar 3*

That's right, find out who is accusing you and just go ahead and accuse them right back, then drag them through court in a lengthy and expensive process until they quit.

That's the tactic, isn't it? Wealthy people can get away with anything using this little gambit.

Call me crazy, but I think one lawsuit should be enough. If the accused is found innocent, then they're awarded damages.

*CaptainJack  
Gazette forum*

## Letters to the Editor

*Do you have an opinion to voice?  
Email Editor@PhuketGazette.net*

than maybe for a short break.

One must also understand the lax laws of Power of Attorney and blind acceptance by the land offices used to fraudulently transfer property and you may begin to see the dangers are many and terminal for investors.

*Ian Rance  
Facebook*

as I did not trust their answers, I warned them not to go spearfishing – especially at the Racha Islands where they could get into conflict with the local authorities and dive operators.

Also, I told them to keep at least 2 skin divers together, to have one on the surface for safety as well to take care of strong currents and fast speed-boats around the islands.

By experience, I find that Russians not always willing to listen to others.

*Asterix  
Gazette forum*

## Best not to buy property at all

*Re: Property Watch: Keeping Phuket property dealings honest, Mar 2*

Truth is, Phuket is the capital of corruption in Thailand, full of mafia with clever lawyers and a complicit police force. Property fraud occurs in many firms and often involves money lenders who launder stolen property or provide a dangerous third party to prevent enforcement of contract or the law.

Coupled with a woefully expensive, drawn out justice system where foreigners have little chance of success makes any purchase of property, including condos, a treacherous prospect for foreigners in Phuket.

There is so much cheating, fraud and deception in Phuket, it is best avoided entirely other

## We've all heard this excuse before

*Re: Asian black bear's fall to death 'explained', Mar 1*

So, turbulence and a faulty hook are their excuse?

I've heard this one before – "not my fault", "the road was wet", "the breaks failed" and so on. Does the pilot even have his licence?

*Nico Bellik  
Facebook*

## Tourists not always willing to listen

*Re: Russian tourist 'found' in Phuket after 10 hours at sea, Mar 3*

Looking at the pictures, it looks like they are the same guys who came to buy 10kg of lead at our dive center.

When I asked them what they were planning, they said snorkeling and skin diving, but

## Need to reverse the damage to tourism

*Re: Deputy PM visits Phuket to talk tourism, Mar 3*

They have finally figured out that Phuket has lost millions, or even billions of baht, with the anti-tourism campaign they have been running over the last three years.

Now, it needs to be done the right way.

Licence, control how many, and charge a fee to all suppliers and vendors. Use fees for upkeep, maintenance, and police patrols. Eliminate the 10% zones completely.

Allow beach side nightclubs and high season bars and attractions. Change closing times to 4am all across Phuket.

Advertise this new tourist friendly attitude worldwide during the upcoming low season. The tourists will return and make Phuket prosperous once again.

*Foot  
Gazette forum*

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# Emerald group under scrutiny

By Kritsada Mueanhawong

THREE projects by a major real estate developer in Phuket are under investigation and alleged to be illegal, both in terms of land documents and construction of buildings.

A group of 20 people from *Rak Chue Siang Phuket* (or 'Love Phuket Reputation' group) came to submit a letter of complaint against 'Emerald Development Group' on March 2 at the Damrongdharma Center at Phuket Provincial Hall.

The 'protesters' were led by Niran Wachawet, some of whom claimed to be victims of the company's allegedly illegal operations.

The details of each project were mentioned individually in the letter.

The first project is located at Kalim Beach, where Emerald Development Group is constructing a five-star hotel, villa, condominium building and beach club.

The letter states that the company has used *NorSor3Kor* #4606 to divide the land into five plots (*NorSor3Kor* #8101, 8102, 8403, 8104 and 4606) and *NorSor3Kor* #4607 to divide another piece of land into five plots (*NorSor3Kor* #8042, 8043, 8044, 8045 and 4607). The total area of these smaller plots is 30 rai, whereas the actual area of the land before



Member of 'Rak Chue Siang Phuket' submitted a letter of complaint against 'Emerald Development Group' at the Damrongdharma Center at Phuket Provincial Hall. Photo: Kritsada Mueanhawong

division into sub plots was only 10 rai.

The protesters also alleged that part of the company's land overlaps National Preserved Forest land and that the buildings breach the height limit in Phuket. They also say that the company has dug up and filled in land in the preserved forest area.

Many Thais and foreigners have reportedly invested in these projects, such as paying

booking fees for villas and condos. Some of them have filed separate complaints against the developer.

The second project cited in the letter was 'Emerald Patong', a two-phase condominium project with 173 units located in Patong.

According to the letter, there are many illegal aspects to this project. First, the model and plan for the condo building is

different from what they originally asked permission for. Secondly, they have allegedly used the rooftop area to build more rooms, which is illegal.

The last project referred to in the letter is the 'Emerald Central Project', a condo project located on Wichit Songkram road. The project has already started operating and includes a seven-storey and an eight-storey building.

The protesters allege that the group has constructed in a different way from what they had originally acquired permission for, and that the buildings are taller than the limit set out under Phuket's building laws.

"We would like Phuket Governor Chokchai Dejamornthan to investigate this matter. Such activities destroy the reputation of Phuket and Thailand, as both Thais and foreigners are involved in it," said Mr Niran.

Nanthasak Boonnak, director of the Damrongdharma Center, accepted the letter on behalf of the governor and said his team would inform him and look into this issue themselves as well.

Sawit Ketroj, Managing Director of Emerald Development Group, claimed that the company's operations were transparent and legal, and that they were prepared for any investigation into their activities.

"The letter they have submitted seems unreliable to begin with, as they have not named any victims or given details of the alleged injustices against them. Secondly, the details regarding each of these projects are not true," said Mr Sawit.

"Our company has been threatened several times in the past, but we are not scared. When we have more details of the complaints, we will file a counter complaint," he added.

## Hong Kong investors keen on Thai condominium market

HONG KONG investors have been sinking more money into Thailand's condominium market after enjoying returns on investment of more than 5 per cent a year, Theerapan Nunthapolpat, general manager of Siam Commercial Bank's Hong Kong branch, said in an interview with *The Nation* recently.

"Condominium units priced between 5-10 million baht are popular with Hong Kong investors in Thailand's property market," he said. He added that the popular locations included Bangkok's Sukhumvit area and tourist destinations such as Phuket and Pattaya.

In Hong Kong, condominiums cost between 10,000 and 40,000 Hong Kong dollars per square foot, which translates to about 450,000 to 1.8 million baht per square meter. In Thailand,



Condos in HK are more expensive than in Thailand. Photo: Exploringlife

prices in the mid-to-upper-range are 150-250K baht per square meter, with the highest-priced luxury condominium being 550K baht per square meter.

Mr Theerapan said lower interest rates in Hong Kong had also encouraged many investors there to look for ways to

generate higher returns. Investing in condominiums in Thailand is a good choice when the return on investment for a rental property averages 5-6 per cent a year, much better than interest rates of only 0.02 per cent in Hong Kong.

- *The Nation*

## Property companies see drop in revenue

THE top 10 property firms listed on the Stock Exchange of Thailand have reported combined revenue of 215.7 billion baht for 2016, down 2.83 per cent from the previous year, after sales in the final quarter of last year were lower than their estimates.

However, the financial results of the top 10 were better than those of the overall property market, for which revenue dropped by about 9 per cent, according to a survey by the Real Estate Information Center (REIC) of Government Housing Bank.

Five of the top 10 recorded growth in revenue and net profit in 2016.

They were Land and Houses, Supalai, Property Perfect, SC Asset Corporation, and Ananda Development. Four of them,

Pruksa Holding, Sansiri, Quality Houses and LPN Development, reported declines in revenue and net profit. AP (Thailand) reported lower revenue, but still managed higher net profit than in 2015.

Lower demand to buy homes in the final quarter of last year was the main factor hitting full-year revenue and profit, several property developers said.

"Our revenue and net profit were lower than our estimate, after we were unable to conduct any marketing campaigns in the final quarter of last year. This had an impact on our overall financial results for 2016, as the last quarter is the high season for sales in residential projects," said Pruksa Holding's president for premium business, Prasert Taedullayasatit.

- *The Nation*

## A lunchtime reprieve with authentic Phuket cuisine

By Kongleaphy Keam

TYPICALLY, we all associate 'traditional Phuket cuisine' with Phuket Town. Now you can enjoy the authentic taste of local Phuket cuisine in Patong, with the new lunch menu launched by Bubbles Restaurant, Grand Mercure Phuket Patong Resort & Villas.

Titled 'Jewel of Phuket's Cuisine', the lunch set includes *yum hua plee* (banana blossom spicy salad), *goong thod* (fried shrimp), *mee hoon gaeng poo* (noodle with crab curry soup), *pla yang ka min* (grilled fish with turmeric), *moo hong* (local Phuket pork stew), *phad pak mieang* (local phuket fried vegetable), rice and a popular Phuket dessert, *O-Aew*.

"The unique aspect of this menu is that we have stayed true to the real taste of local Phuket food. In other restaurants, they usually adjust the taste for foreigners, but we are choosing not to. We want everyone to try the real taste, but they still have the option of adjusting the level of spice," says Chef Anurak Kannittharat,



The lunch menu is available from noon until night. Photo: Supplied

who has more than 20 years of experience with high-ranking hotels in Phuket and Bangkok.

"We also source our ingredients from Phuket fresh markets and seafood from the Andaman Sea," he added.

Customers can also experience Phuket culture through the ambience at the restaurant.

"We have even used local crockery to give it that added authenticity of Phuket," says Chef Anurak.

Priced at 1,200 baht net, the set lunch menu can be ordered everyday from noon until late at night. Reservations are recommended three hours in advance.

## Phuket student bags essay writing award



Phuket Gazette News Editor Kongleaphy Keam (left) with Tanchanok Pongthongmuang, 16, Southern region Merit Award winner of The 12th Junior Dublin Literary Awards for Thailand. Photo: Gazette file

SIXTEEN-year-old Tanchanok Pongthongmuang of the Benjamarachutit School is the Southern region Merit Award winner of 'The 12th Junior Dublin Literary Awards for Thailand'.

This English essay-writing contest for high school students in Thailand was sponsored by *The Nation* and judged by an esteemed panel, including His Excellency Brendan Rogers,

the Irish Ambassador to Thailand; Pana Janviroj, president of *The Nation*; and Dr Sirikorn Maneerin, former deputy minister of the Ministry of Education, among others.

This year's essay writing theme was 'A Journey'.

For her award-winning essay, Ms Tanchanok was also presented with a cash prize of 5,000 baht.

— *Phuket Gazette*

## Tour de Phuket returns

AFTER the success of their event last year, Tour de Phuket is coming back with a bang for its annual three-day race and gran fondo event scheduled to be held on March 17.

Participants from over 15 countries including Hong Kong, Indonesia, Korea and Singapore, are expected to register for this year's race. Last year, nearly 200 cyclists joined the event and a similar turnout is expected this year.

The first day of the tour will kick off with a 5km individual time trial from the Phuket Gateway.

Day 2 will have the longest race – 143km of scenic racing

heading up the beach road to Thai Mueang where it joins the main road to Khao Lak.

After 15 km, at Tung Maphrao, cyclists will turn right onto back roads. There will be a kickoff meeting after a short steep climb at the 68km mark. Following smaller deserted roads, a second climb will be at the 108km mark, followed by rolling hills.

The final day on March 19 will see a shorter stage rolling out of the Phuket Gateway and twice around Ban Bang Lam and Ban Khlung Kian. Participants will enjoy challenging hill-climbs on this day.

— *Phuket Gazette*

## Luxury yachtmaker comes to town

LUXURY Italian yachtmaker Sanlorenzo has recently launched their biggest yacht to date – an SL 52 Steel named *Seven Sins*.

The company has recently started focusing its efforts toward Phuket. On March 2, the Sanlorenzo team from Hong Kong and Italy came to Phuket to announce their new yacht.

"Being part of the highly exclusive '50m+ Club' underlines Sanlorenzo's position and is a significant marker in the ongoing development of the brand. *Seven Sins* will be on display – and no doubt turning a few heads – at the Monaco Yacht Show in September this year," said Mario Gernati, marketing and communication director at Sanlorenzo.

"The new SL 52Steel even boasts a swimming pool on the main deck that has a transparent bottom, allowing natural light to filter down to the beach club below. A Sanlorenzo is unlike any other yacht – even another Sanlorenzo," he added.

"As generally known, Sanlorenzos are custom made yachts, representing you and



The main deck of the Sanlorenzo 52 Steel. Photo: Supplied

your unique style. Our yachts are not fashion items – they succeed in being both 'classic' and bang-up-to-date at the same time," said Mr Gernati.

"They are full of innovative solutions involving acoustics, lighting and the utilization of space, while providing classical levels of comfort and luxury. Therefore, the price will be higher, but you will get a luxurious and exclu-

sive product.

"Our target customers are independently wealthy people who want to express their way of life, and we see that Phuket has got that potential. If you can design your own house, why can't you design your own boat," he added.

You can learn more about Sanlorenzo at [www.simpsonmarine.com](http://www.simpsonmarine.com).

— *Phuket Gazette*

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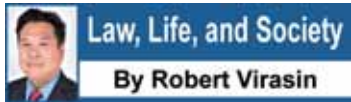
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# A closer look at the educational system



Law, Life, and Society

By Robert Virasin

THE Thai education system was recently featured in the *Economist*. The article, titled 'Poor schools are at the heart of Thailand's political malaise' was published on January 19, 2017 and discussed Thailand's international education rankings in the recently released 'Program for International Student Assessment' (PISA). Thailand's scores have plunged to an overall ranking of 54 out of 70 assessed countries. PISA has found that one-third of Thailand's 15-year-olds were "functionally illiterate".

I recently took my family to a Thai school in the outer provinces. We went there to donate school supplies and money, and provide lunch for all the students at the school. We were expecting a couple of hundred children but only about half of the children were present. My wife asked the principal about the missing children, who replied that many children do not come to school because they cannot afford the 20 baht lunch and were embarrassed when they had to sit down at lunch and watch their friends eat.

I don't think that school children go hungry in some of the wealthier provinces where people are paid more, but it may be a problem where some families have to support themselves on a couple of hundred baht a day.

I decided to talk to my friend, Eric Guzman, who teaches at a school in Rayong, about what he believes is the cause of students scoring so low in international assessments. He talked to a few of his fellow teachers who gave some valuable input, but wished to remain anonymous.

"One Thai teacher says that he recognizes the benefits and drawbacks of the Thai educational system. However, he added that the annual policy changes instituted by successive Thai governments makes it difficult for teachers to develop a lesson plan. Teachers are uncertain whether a new government edict will remain or change. Another difficulty is when old policies remain in place when new policies are instituted creating more confusion," says Mr Guzman.

"A tangent to this issue is the proliferation of celebrations and holiday programs that take children out of the classroom. There



Students recognize and take advantage of the knowledge that regardless of their performance in the classroom, they will inevitably be promoted at the end of the school year. Photo: Pexels

are weekly events including sports week, scout's week, Western culture week, and programs commemorating Thai holidays," he adds.

Some foreign teachers question the frequency of these programs which occur multiple times a month. During these programs, many children are taken out of the classroom and classes are canceled. While the programs are fun, they interfere with students' academic progress.

Additional government programs reduce the amount of time available while increasing the teacher's workload. Many Thai teachers feel overburdened with paperwork, which reduces their ability to focus on their student's learning. This is compounded when they have to deal with students who make no attempt to learn.

A Thai teacher anonymously remarked that he thinks that the most common problem among Thai students was laziness. He said, "Many kids, especially boys, are only interested in playing games. They seem to get bored easily with discussion and are only attentive during the first few minutes in class."

Despite my limited teaching experience, I concur. Most students become idle when they lack the drive and motivation to study. It is the role of teachers to continually entertain and educate students. During the course of a year, I am required to continually develop new action plans to keep the students engaged in learning. This task is not easy and over time can be exhausting. I empathize with some teachers who have re-

verted to the old Thai teaching method of rote memorization. One large challenge to teach-

ers is Thailand's 'no-fail' policy. Even if the student does not show up in class, teachers have

to provide minimal scores to allow the student to pass. Many students recognize that regardless of their performance in the classroom, they will inevitably move on to the next level at the end of the school year.

I love my job and enjoy being with my students. However, changes should be made to the Thai education system to reduce government edicts and allow local schools more freedom. In a system where teachers feel overburdened with bureaucracy and where apathetic students still are allowed to pass, the passion in the hearts of many young teachers is quickly extinguished.

Robert R Virasin is a licenced US Attorney and managing director of Virasin & Partners. He can be reached at [www.virasin.com](http://www.virasin.com). Eric John de Guzman is a teacher at a public secondary school in Rayong, Thailand.

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# For the love of science and Phuket

By Sahar Aftab Paliwala

DR TANWA Apornthip is currently a faculty member at Prince of Songkla University (PSU), Phuket campus. He recently obtained his PhD from University of Virginia and joined the interdisciplinary graduate school of Earth System Science and Andaman Natural Disaster Management (ESSAND) at PSU.

Hailing from a scientific family, Dr Tanwa says he has always looked up to his dad, who pushed himself to study new skills, especially computer-related ones.

“Due to my tendency to disorganize my father’s books, I was forbidden to touch them. Nevertheless, I always managed to sneak in and voraciously read every single book. Eventually, my needs to learn outgrew my patience to wait for my parents to buy me new books. Bookstores were where I spent my middle-school weekends reading all that I could,” says Dr Tanwa.

“Science was the subject I liked the most. The methodical work ethic of scientists and the logical justification of each scientific theory immediately

struck me as one of the most beautiful concepts discovered by humankind.”

His love for science led him to become a scholar under the Development and Promotion of Science and Technology Talents Project (DPST) and Junior Science Talent Project (JSTP) programs during his highschool years, where he was constantly exposed to scientific methods and a coherent way of thinking. After high school, he won another scholarship that supported him through his bachelors, masters and doctorate in the US.

“I want to use my knowledge for the betterment of Phuket and Thailand by combining analytical skills with social and environmental problems to create long-lasting and effective solutions. I look at Phuket and feel disappointed that an island with so much potential has achieved so little,” he says.

At ESSAND, Dr Tanwa aims to solve environmental and disaster-related problems, especially for the Andaman region.

“My colleagues and I are studying a myriad of topics, all of which are fascinating to me. Some of our projects include seawater intrusion in Phuket,

greenhouse gas inventory in Phayao, and biodiversity of corals, planktons, and marine life in Phuket. Not only are we doing impactful research, we are also producing masters and PhD graduates who will be the basis for the next generation of scientists,” he says.

Dr Tanwa remembers his time in the US with fondness.

“University of Virginia, just as most universities in the US, is full of opportunities. It allowed me to explore and discover who I am. The entire faculty of the Physics department, while highly supportive, set a high bar for all of us,” he says.

Having a background in both physics and finance, Dr Tanwa wants to convince business owners to start adopting solar energy *en masse*.

“My research associates and I are making a complete financial analysis of the return on investment and competitiveness of solar energy in Phuket. Increased use of solar energy will help ease Phuket’s looming energy crisis and also improve the bottom-line of business owners. We are also trying to optimize tsunami evacuation routes, which will help reduce evacua-

tion time and save more lives if disaster strikes,” he says.

Besides his research work and academic undertakings, Dr Tanwa is an avid musician. He studied jazz during my also undergraduate and plays piano and guitar. “Late last year, I discovered the joy of playing the saxophone. Right now, I am trying to make sure my saxophone produces other sounds that don’t resemble whales’ mating calls,” he laughs.

His advice to his students, or anyone who wants to learn something, is simple.

“There is no substitute for hard work and perseverance. All the information and knowledge is already out there in the world, you just have to follow where you want to go,” he says.








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