Tourism: Reading

Coconut Island is a beautiful, tropical island with, of course, coconut palms, golden beaches and clear blue sea. I'm sorry, I made a mistake there. Coconut Island *was* a beautiful island. There are still coconut palms, golden beaches and clear blue sea but not like before. So, what happened?

Well, the beach is full of people, sunbeds and umbrellas. The sea is full of speedboats, noisy jets skis and surfers. There are fewer palm trees because there are more and more buildings. Hotels, holiday resorts, guest houses, restaurants, swimming pools… you name it, Coconut Island has it. Paradise is no longer here, but the Paradise Hotel is.

Perhaps I'm the only one who has a problem with this? The tourists seem happy: the weather is wonderful, the food is tasty and cheap, and the sea is warm. The local people seem happy: there are many people selling things on the beach, there are lots more jobs and better roads. The developers are certainly happy, there is building work everywhere. So, why am I unhappy?

Well, I have a friend who was here five years ago. Her photo album is full of wonderful pictures of empty beaches. Also she has pictures of small, wooden bungalows on the beach. No need to book, she said, just turn up and you have the place to yourself – very basic, very cheap, very quiet and very peaceful.

Not anymore! The beach is never empty – it's packed all day! There is music blaring from the cafés, children are shouting and screaming, and the hotels are very expensive. Most of the hotels are full of holidaymakers who booked their trip months ago. I'm lucky to have a small room at the back of one hotel, and it's still expensive.

But perhaps this is progress? Not only are the roads better but there is also a new medical clinic. The local kids now speak English 'Mister, mister, you want t-shirt?' and there are many new businesses opening all the time.

Then I see an old woman trying to cross the road from her house to the shops. It's no longer a small, quiet road but a large and very busy one. She looks nervous and waits for someone to walk with her. The children no longer ride bicycles but race around the island on motorbikes. It's not so safe either – my friend stayed in a bungalow on the beach that had no lock. Now the hotel room says it's a good idea to put things in the safe box.

Is this progress?