

Dave Lowe: 2004 Tsunami in Maldives

Here is an account Dave Lowe wrote after the 2004 tsunami event at Maldives

It was 11.00 am, a perfect Maldives day, 90 degrees, sunny, and no clouds. I was in my office, at the northern end of the island, which was 20 meters across... I was woken up that morning by a light earthquake, but it didn't seem strong enough to create a tsunami. suddenly, I heard a strange bump against the door, and people outside were screaming, 'the children! the children!!... I got outside, and saw that the ocean was now level with our island, and to my horror, a wall of water, boiling, frothing, angry as hell, was bearing straight down at us. there was a strange mist that looked like thick fog that blocked out the sun...I stopped breathing, and tried to decide where to run. but where could I run, when there were no double story buildings, and we were just 1 meter above sea level, and there was deep water on all sides??



I decided to get to reception, where there were pillars that could offer some place to hang onto. When I got there, I found guests and staff screaming and rooted to the spot as the first waves began to hit the island: the furniture was already being swept away, and three huge glass windows exploded, showering glass into the water where guests without shoes were trying to stand up...within seconds the water was up to my waist, and we couldn't tell if the island was sinking or the sea rising, the water was rising all around us so evenly it was hard to know that whatever was coming, what direction it was coming in. as I braced myself against the wall, I could feel it cracking, the wave slammed into the resort, crushing me against the walls of the executive offices...my cell phone, keys, resort ID, watch and sunglasses were ripped off, as I desperately inched my way to reception, with water churning so violently I could hardly stand up.

As the water rose, I grabbed hold of children who were being washed out to sea and whose parents were missing, and threw them up onto the reception counter, as I looked back to see if I could help anyone else, the full force of the tsunami hit, crushing palm trees and instantly destroying the executive offices whose windows smashed, and then the walls collapsed, sending staff trapped inside including my assistants) computers, TV's, filing cabinets, desks and broken glass and shattered wood straight out to sea. I grabbed hold of a pillar as the waves continued to strike, and the water was now up to my chest...

Most guests were clinging to anything they could find, and some had horrible injuries from the smashed glass that was everywhere (I was barefoot and so were most of the guests) I saved an 80 year old woman who washed by in front of me, just before she went out to sea, and as I could no longer hang on, I hauled myself up to the reception counter, where a security guard handed me his walkie-talkie and fled to the roof...a guest with a cut so deep on his leg, his bone was sticking out, was pointed out to me, and I quickly grabbed a towel that somehow was nearby, soaking wet, and bandaged a hasty tourniquet and elevated his leg as I was screaming for the doctor to help me, but he was catatonic, as were most of the staff, totally unable to function in the situation....I was covered in blood as we tried to stop the bleeding, which nearly killed him, his wife was so panicked and scared she grabbed my neck so tight I could hardly breathe, screaming at me in French, and just then man went into shock and passed out. as wave after wave smashed against the resort, it felt like the sea was on fast forward, the waves came so quickly and so fiercely. We watched as planking wood from the lagoon boardwalk and restaurant began to surge through reception, cracking pillars and the whole structure was groaning against the pressure,

ready to collapse like the buildings all around us...then the wall behind us collapsed into the jewelry store, and as the water passed over my head I blacked out from fear, which was so intense that I wasn't even thinking anymore if I was going to die, I knew I was going to die. I just didn't know when. Or how. What was it going to be like to drown? Was there going to be any debris that I would be able to cling to when I was swept away into the open ocean?

A receptionist colleague screamed at me WHAT IS HAPPENING??? WHAT IS HAPPENING??? As we desperately tried to pull ourselves together, we heard two gas canisters explode from the restaurant, blowing off part of the roof, and then the water sports center and doctors clinic were crushed by another wave, where staff were clinging to the roof as the palm thatch disintegrated. We were lucky that not all the water bungalows collapsed, because the debris would have crushed us to death. As the only staff member there with a uniform and nametag at that end of the island, I was thrown in charge, and now with the walkie-talkie I desperately tried to contact the other end of the island. There was no answer. Then, as quickly as the water came up, it was gone, leaving fish flopping on the floor of the lobby and seaweed draped everywhere. I shouted at staff GET AWAY FROM THE JETTY!!! DO NOT MOVE NEAR THE WATER!!!! as guests regrouped, I looked out to sea in the opposite direction, where my eyes popped out of their head: there was another wave coming right back at us, even bigger than the first, and even worse, full of air conditioners, refrigerators, water heaters, mattresses deck chairs, and even people... GET BACK!!! THE WATERS COMING BACK!!! I screamed as guests ran for things to grab hold of.

When the 2nd wave hit, it was worse than the first, and we desperately tried to hang on as the dangerous debris smashed its way through the lobby again. This was followed by two more waves, which were slightly smaller, that came from opposite directions...and then there was silence. as I assembled guests together for a head count, a staff from the other end of the island ran in and said that there was a 50 foot wave coming, and we needed to get to the spa, where there was a bit more shelter. this set off the guests who wailed and screamed as they ran towards the new shelter, as I took up the rear, I heard a seaplane land, probably unaware of the danger. I ran like hell to the jetty, waving my arms to the pilots to tell them to go away....they did not see me, and landed.... as they tied up to the pontoon, I noticed an ominous wave heading straight for the plane, and like a horror movie, I actually saw the seaplane getting sucked under by the vortexes and eddies that were 20 feet across.... I screamed at the cabin crew who was on the dock, frantically trying to untie the rope, as the engines screaming, got closer and closer to the water... I got down on my hands and knees, covering my head with my hand to prevent injury, screaming into the walkie-talkie to see if anyone could contact the pilots....I was just waiting for the engines to smash into the water and see the plane flip over, when the crew cut the rope, jumped on board, and the plane bobbed up and took off...as I watched it take off, they dipped their wings to show us help was on the way...I looked behind me to see a 5th wave bearing straight down, and as I ran back to reception, I was too late, and I was lifted off my feet and carried by it straight into the lobby again.

When the wave subsided, I ran to the spa, passing the GM's house, where his son's nanny was nearly being washed away, I rescued her and his son, carried them to safety, where 60 terrified French, Italian and UK guests were huddled in total shock. Quickly I set up a triage unit to treat the broken bones and horrible cuts. half the guests there were missing family, and were threatening me with death if I didn't let them get to see where they were, but the island had been cut in half, a river of water was now bisecting it, both ends of the island had lost more than 50 meters of land (and had come within 10 meters of washing away reception) and coconut trees were being washed out to sea. for the next 6 hours, we rode out wave after wave as the sea gradually calmed down, but at least 5 warnings came to us via radio that a huge wave was still coming, 100 shelters for the 15 children without parents.

That evening, when we had got all guests together, we sandbagged what was left of the island restaurant and set up all night patrols to watch the sea in case other waves came, we had a full moon fortunately. no one slept that night, we were terrified of a wave hitting in darkness, and all night we just huddled together waiting for sunrise. someone found a functioning flashlight, and with the guests secure, we checked out our rooms, which has been totally demolished, everything washed out to sea....when the sun came up, there were champagne bottles, passports, silverware, dinner plates, business cards and hundreds of branches and tree trunks washed up

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on the beach. it looked like Titanic, Lost, Lord of the Flies and Survivor all rolled into one. We spent a slow day letting the shock sink in, and separating the guests and staff that were breaking down mentally... that was hard as people were just so panicked and in shock that we had to set up an area that was isolated.

Eventually we got the guests on two huge speedboats to take them to male...as the last guest left, all the staff took off our nametags, and just burst into tears. We didn't get off the island until 2 days later, and in the long, slow, hot hours that passed by extremely slowly, we tried to talk, smile laugh as best we could; we salvaged what we could of our belongings, some things washed up on the beach, some things wrapped around trees, and some things covered in mud. we showered in the sea and rationed the bottled water that we found on the beaches... we had three terrifying warnings come back about more waves...that sent the staff screaming and scrambling for trees...but no more waves came, only fluctuations in the sea that looked like it had been CGI'd. when we boarded the seaplanes that came as a convoy to evacuate us to get us back to male, we flew over the destroyed island, and with the full devastation clear, staff broke down on the planes as we flew over it: over 100 rooms demolished, no restaurants intact, and debris and trash was everywhere in the lagoon. As we flew the 30-minute flight, we saw tons of debris floating in the channel, and other islands on fire, people on the beaches waving, and sunken ships.

It wasn't until that evening that we heard the death toll and the devastation elsewhere had reached 20,000, which seemed horrific at the time but wasn't the eventually unbelievable death toll that there was, we had survived, but somehow didn't know how.



Map Source: <http://www.smarttravelasia.com/images/TsunamiMap4.jpg>

