

He won't say goodbye to his Italian beauty
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PHI PHI, Thailand

Luciano Butti walked across the sand, his eyes brimming with tears, as he looked at where his Ciao Bella once stood.

Gone were the tables, chairs and the pizza oven - only the wooden floor, a small part of a tiled wall, a scrap from a blue tablecloth and the restaurant' blue, yellow and red sign remained.

But Butti saw the sturdy condition of the floorboards - the lone sign of business on a beach overshadowed by mountains of rubble - as an omen: He has to rebuild Ciao Bella ("Hello, attractive" in Italian).

"It's still here," he exulted, his high hopes tinged with sadness.

Tourists used to play football on the sandy shores of Phi Phi's clear, turquoise waters. It was a popular destination for sunbathers and outdoors enthusiasts, with its forested hills, diving spots and coral reefs. It also had a thriving nightlife.

That paradise was shattered when the waves struck Dec. 26, sweeping people off the beaches and smashing through guesthouses, shops and restaurants.

"The sea rose like a monster," said Butti, a Florentine who has lived on Phi Phi for 14 years. "The bungalows popped like the corks from champagne bottles - boom, boom, boom."

As the water approached, he saw a mix of wood, boats, people - "everything was coming toward me like a terrible machine."

During an ebb between the first and second waves, he scribbled two contact numbers for his wife, who was out of the country, and "Viamo" ("I love you" in Italian) as a message for his family on his shorts in case he died. He wore the same shorts yesterday.

The shock of the disaster kept Butti up at his home on a hill for 13 days. His chef, a waiter and a friend stayed with him.

"The day after, everybody wanted to go away . . . but I started to cry because this is my paradise and I don't want to go," he said.

Chef Umberto Giovi, of Italy's Elba Island, recalled telling Butti: "The island is injured but not dead. We must restart."

Deciding to stay, they wrote "CIAO BELLA ALIVE" on a bedsheet and put it on the roof of the house.

Though the tsunami washed away most of his restaurant on Phi Phi island, Luciano Butti has vowed to rebuild. "It's still here," he said.