

**Stolen passports from Phuket another link to missing MH370**  
**Malaysian Insider**  
**9 March, 2014**

Passengers walk past an entrance with a logo of Malaysia Airlines at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, March 9, 2014.

Phuket is emerging as a focus in the search for the Malaysia Airlines flight that vanished over the South China Sea, after it was discovered that two passengers of the plane were travelling on passports reported stolen on the Thai resort island.

Phuket is a renowned international destination where hundreds of passports are "lost" each year, said the Phuket Wan Tourism news portal.

It reported that there is a possibility some of these documents have fallen into the hands of terrorists.

Investigation into the missing MAS flight MH370 revealed that the lost passports of Italian Luigi Maraldi and Austrian Christian Kozel, were used by two passengers onboard the missing plane.

The report said both men reported their passports lost or stolen on Phuket, one in August last year and the other some months earlier.

Envoys from Europe and Australia have often complained to the authorities in Phuket that passports should not be used as collateral for renting cars and motorcycles.

It is still common for passports to be left with rental dealers on Phuket despite the repeated warnings to officials and police on the island.

Maraldi reported that his passport was stolen from a Phuket car rental company on August 1 last year.

Media reports said the Italian honorary consul on Phuket, Francesco Pensato, confirmed 37-year-old Maraldi is currently in Phuket.

Italian authorities are checking whether the man on the plane may have been a different man with the same name and date of birth.

"We have spoken to Maraldi and he is alive and well," an Italian foreign ministry spokesperson tweeted.

With its underbelly of soft crimes that often seem of little consequence to local police, who are happier to report items "lost" rather than "stolen", Phuket makes a perfect place for an illicit trade in passports.

Former Australian honorary consul Larry Cunningham, who retired from his Phuket posting last September and has yet to be replaced, said today: "In my time as consul, passport thefts did occur. You could even say it was a regular occurrence.

"Some passports were certainly lost, falling out of pockets or being genuinely misplaced. But there were also substantial incidents of passports being stolen."

Cunningham said he recalled being told at a conference in Hanoi once that when thieves broke into rooms at resorts, "they will often take passports first because they can be sold on the black market."

The Italian embassy in Bangkok told one reporter that Luigi Maraldi is an Italian national living in Phuket who was recently given a new passport, but did not get on the flight.

On Facebook, Maraldi said: "Now I have learned that the plane disappeared in Malaysia, there was an Italian named Luigi Maraldi. In telling you that is not me, I want to express my closeness to my family."

Maraldi telephoned his parents in Italy to explain that he was not on board the missing aircraft.

Stolen and fake passports are in international demand for all kinds of reasons.

Six men from Syria were still being held at Phuket International Airport last week after being arrested for carrying fake Greek passports in Beijing.

The men were aiming to find sanctuary in Stockholm from the civil war but were detected when authorities checked their documents while in transit in Beijing.

The six, four Syrians and two Lebanese, were returned to Phuket, their point of embarkation, without the passports. They were being held in the "Hospitality" section at Phuket airport while the UN refugee arm - UNHCR - searched for another country prepared to take the men.

According to the report, when Phuketwan last spoke to the men on February 27, they had been held at the airport for 43 days.

One of the men, a 20-year-old university student, said that the group chose to try to flee to Stockholm via Phuket and Beijing because others before them had succeeded in reaching Sweden.

Levels of international crime on Phuket are believed to be almost too large to manage.

In September last year, a raid led by US authorities on a Phuket villa captured Joseph Hunter and his international gang of hit-men and drug dealers, in a story that officials say comes "straight from the pages of Tom Clancy".

The gang was extradited to the United States.

The MAS flight left the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang at 12.40 on Saturday and was scheduled to arrive in Beijing six hours later.

It went off radar an hour after take off, with the last known location off Kota Baru.

Search and rescue operations, with the assistance of neighbouring countries and the United States, are underway. - March 9, 2014.

to conduct simulator tests for pilots. - March 9, 2014.

Hakcipta © 2014 The Malaysian Insider

Source: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/stolen-passports-from-phuket-another-link-to-missing-mh370>