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Birthplace of a **pg.18** Stillborn Revolution

Though it's one of the last countries on earth where the hammer-and- sickle flag still flutters, Laos never gave the impression that it was terribly serious about communism.

UNTAMED UGANDA **pg.22**



You may need a bullshit detector to navigate your way through the country's political byways, war zones and refugee camps, but Uganda is still a great place to see a mountain gorilla or have a hooker vomit on your shoes, writes Dennis Duncan, from personal experience.

The *Pseudo-Science* of Photo Captions



pg.26

It's true. We are actually trying to be funny in those photo captions scattered randomly through the listings section and hopefully we've succeeded to some degree over the last 45 issues. We reckoned it was time we offered a generous sampling from our bursting archives, plus a little treatise on how it's done.

TOUR **pg.30** *de* LAOS

Boasting one of the least spoilt eco-systems in Asia and a landscape dominated by mountains, rivers and plateaus, Laos is just made for the long-distance cyclist seeking a trail far from the beaten track. Ben Hopkins puts his mettle on the pedals.

Where Angels Dare to Trundle



Even as a former ballet student, Alison Winward feels like a stumblebum as she learns some of the 4,300 graceful movements of Cambodia's apsara dance.

pg.36

CRIMINAL COPS

A new book by an NGO in Malaysia reveals how brutal and repressive the police force is, writes Wong Seow Fung.

pg.45



IRRESOLUTE RESOLUTIONS

With the advent of the New Year comes the inevitable resolutions to quit drinking and start working out, to quit slacking off and get a better job, to sever a relationship and learn how to be independent. Most are abandoned by mid-January and forgotten completely by Groundhog Day.

We here at *Untamed Travel* also have our resolutions for 2006 and since some of them tie in with the current issue, here's a list:

- 1) To keep delivering more stories that push the boundaries of travel writing while exploring the final frontiers of tourism, such as in "Untamed Uganda" by Dennis Duncan, where the political, satirical and psychosexual end up in an orgy of wordsmithing; and "Birthplace of a Stillborn Revolution" by Mat Oakley, which examines the history of communism in Laos through a trip to a new museum in Vientiane, and a journey into some remote caves where the leaders of the revolution lived for a decade to stonewall the American bombing campaign.
- 2) To continue revamping and updating the listings section. In recent issues we've brought you up to speed with what's been changing in Cambodia and Hua Hin. This time around it's Koh Samui, Koh Tao and new sections for shopping and daytripping in Bangkok.
- 3) To not get too medieval on your cerebrums with tortuous and ponderous stories that read like the Dead Sea Scrolls, hence the inclusion of the wackiest captions collection from our first four years.
- 4) To keep fine-tuning that balance of X and Y chromosomes by including more contributions by female writers. In this issue, we bring you two stories by our associate editor Erika Fry, about her double whammy of woes in Bangkok – first breaking her foot, then getting mugged. Wong Seow Fung files a book review about the horrifying abuses of authority committed by the police in Malaysia. And Suzan Crane writes in her second "I on India" column about how her adopted village in Goa heats up for the high 'n' dry season.
- 5) To stop including self-glorifying mug shots of ourselves on this page and throw in some of our long-suffering contributors' pics so people can laugh at them for a change. But for now, we'll take the guffaws and spitballs (and the free drinks), thank you very much.
- 6) To finally read all of *Moby Dick* and stop lying about it.
- 7) To remind Greg Lowe of Asia Books that he owes us at least two bottles of decent Italian wine. And none of that fruity mangosteen shit from Isaan either, man.
- 8) To never again let Mat Oakley use the adverb "osmotically" in one of his stories.
- 9) To continue opening up more distribution channels in Australia, Malaysia and beyond.
- 10) To make it to the end of 2006 without becoming Scientologists.

And most importantly, to play "I Got You Babe" on a continuous loop throughout Groundhog Day to remind ourselves to stick to these resolutions and not produce the exact same magazine month after month, so you'll keep buying it month after month.



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UNTAMED TRAVEL



SCALED DOWN

The fishermen of the northeast do not rely on hooks, lines, or sinkers, writes Stephen Evans.

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GOA pg.16 BEGINS PEAKING



In her second column, Suzan Crane writes about the awakening of her comatose village for the high and dry season.

Under Wraps

Karen Findlay, a.k.a, The Stalker, may play the temptress but she's not one to flirt with danger. The gates of Karen's innermost charms are jealously guarded and admit entry only to gentlemen who are appropriately attired.



pg.17

Costa Rica: Que Fantastico!

As if his tank were full of nitrous oxide instead of compressed air, Calvin Tang gets giddy while soaking up some splendid undersea terrain in what's sometimes called the "Switzerland of Central America."

pg.38

Bangkok Inside Out Outed

Local authors Daniel Ziv and Guy Sharett join Henry Miller, James Joyce, Wei Hui and D. H. Lawrence in sharing the dubious distinction of having their works banned. Cultural self-defence or media stitch-up? Daniel Cooper shoots his mouth off.

pg.41

HOBBLED

Erika Fry is cast into the obstacle course of Bangkok on a pair of crutches, with a broken foot marinating in sweat.

pg.42

foodie's / diary //

It's small wonder that Thai people spend all day stuffing themselves with their delicious cuisine, but how do they keep that svelte figure which makes the nation famous? Cameron Cooper pockets the antacid and goes in search of an answer.

pg.55

India: Get the Hump

Nothing can prepare you for the mad thronging of The Bikaner Camel Festival. Damn near every camel in the country gathers in this small town, exponentially expanding the population into a sea of humanity and camels. Raced, danced, paraded around in beautiful Rajastani textiles, and pitted in beauty pageants against each other, the camels get downright competitive. There are also tug-of-war contests and acrobatic displays, if you can believe that. Only in India.

Human performers come out at night to sing, dance, and show off Rajasthan's humpless talent.

Jan. 13-14, India. See www.rajasthantravelguide.com



Australia: Big Day Out

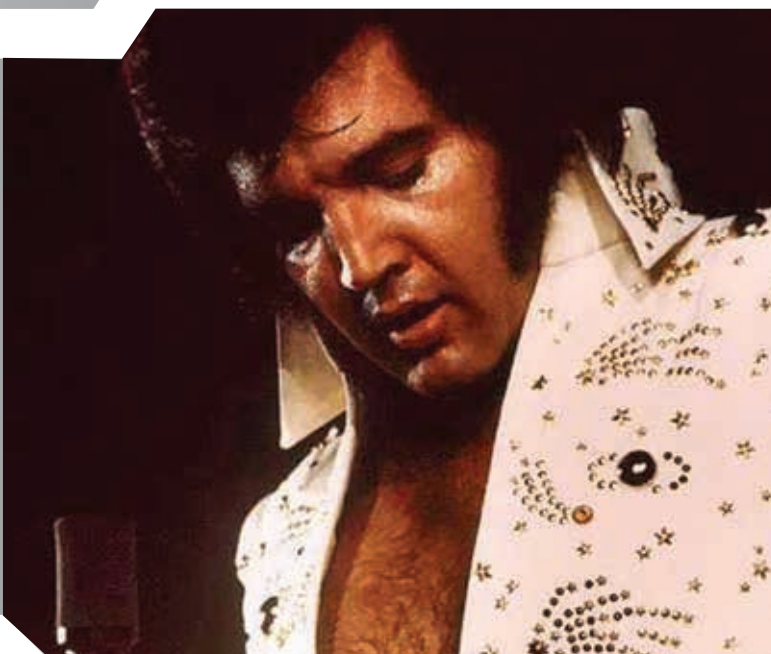
Hopefully marking a positive shift away from racially motivated rioting, The Big Day Out music festival gives Australians a fantastic opportunity to get all loved up and have five of them this coming month. Sunday, Jan. 22 marks the start of the star-studded day-long concert's tour with a show at the Gold Coast Parklands. Music fans can hit the road and follow favourite groups, including Franz Ferdinand, the White Stripes, Iggy Pop, Kings of Leon, and The Go! Team all over the continent.

22 January to 5 February at state capitals in Australia and Auckland, New Zealand. See www.bigdayout.com for detailed schedule and ticket information.

Memphis Tennessee: Returned to Sender

Had the King of Rock n Roll not become the fat, peanut butter-and-nanner-loving fella sausaged into a white jumpsuit who died a drug-dependent mess, trousers swaddling his ankles, on the bathroom floor of his Graceland mansion, he might have turned 71 this January 8. Elvis fanatics can celebrate the man from Memphis, all the same, with three days of festivities that promise a Pops concert, a Graceland scavenger hunt, and the company of more devoted music-lovin' good old boys and gals than you can shake a pelvis at.

The hunk of burning cake lights up on Jan 8 at Graceland



Belgium: Madman Punch-up

Tis the time of year in Belgium to dress like a “Bommel” and beat other Bommels silly. Or so the travel lit says of this annual festival in Ronse, a city that, in the middle ages, became a pilgrimage site for the mentally ill, and evidently still is. This historical claim to fame makes it seem slightly less strange that the Bommel Festival’s high point – when the people dress up in bizarre costumes and apparently become Bommels – is known as Crazy Monday, and that Crazy Monday is held on the first Saturday after the epiphany each year.

The Bommel Festival slugs it out from January 7-9 in Ronse, Belgium, See www.belgium-tourism.net.



Friends for Three Days

Four countries come together in the spirit of cross-cultural camaraderie, with the 8th Annual Mekong Friendship Festival.

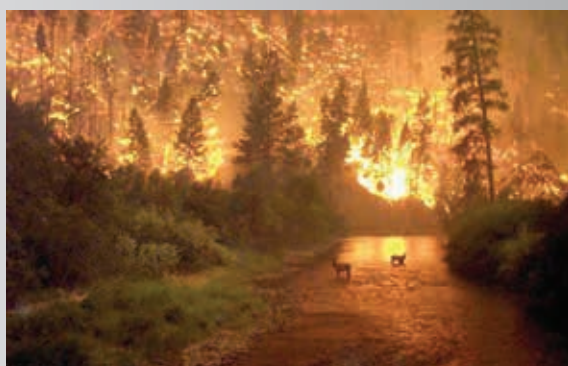
Meeting in the middle at Chiang Rai’s Muang district, the people of Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and China come together in a celebration of food, arts exhibitions, souvenir sales, and cultural performances, to discover to their surprise that they aren’t so different after all and really don’t have that many good reasons to hate each other.

Mekong Friendship Festival, gets to Lovin’ from Jan. 15-17

Singapore and Malaysia: Divine Mutilation

Thaisupam is a cleansing, offering and feasting ceremony in honour of the Son of Shiva, that peaks with a procession of devotees who performed self-mutilation that morning and have denied themselves alcohol, tobacco, and sex for the month previous. (And who wouldn’t mutilate themselves after that?) Through piercing and other seemingly excruciating body alterations, the devotees attach offerings to their bodies using spikes.

Thaipusam Batu Caves, Kuala Lumpur, and Little India in Singapore on Jan. 25



Japan: The Hills are Alight

The Japanese hills are alive with the sight of fire in this annual ritual Wakakusa Yamayaki. After purification rituals, fireworks, prayers for safety and monks blowing conch shells, the dead winter grass of 342 acres of Wakakusa Hill are set alight by priests dressed as warriors, while 100,000 people, somewhat understandably, watch. Legend has it that they’ve been doing this one for more than 800 years – long enough that nobody actually knows for sure why. But hey, they’re Japanese, and tradition is a good enough justification for just about everything.

The Wakakusa Yamayaki fest self-immolates in Nara, Japan on January 8th

CHINA

KILL YOURSELF IN CAMBODIA

In the last issue, our "Holidays in Cambodia" columnist Gordon Sharpless reported the scandal about an expat cafe owner with a pair of websites promoting the country as a great place to come and commit euthanasia. In September, one Englishwoman did so. On (www.euthanasiaincambodia.com) Roger Graham is soliciting donations to open such a clinic in Kampot. Realizing that "Kill Yourself in Cambodia" is not such a hot tourism slogan, local officials recently closed down his café.

RICHEST THAICOONS

With shares worth some Bt33.2 billion, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's family is the big winner this year in Thailand's stock market-cum-casino, according to a survey in *Money and Banking* magazine. The PM's daughter Pinthongta, 23, is the richest stakeholder in the nation with Bt19.2 billion worth of shares and his son Panthongtae is the fourth bigger player.

STEM CELL DILEMMA

Just as a clinic specializing in the controversial stem-cell treatment South Korea was closed down, Hawaii's most famous singer (at least among package-tour grandmothers), Don ("Tiny Bubbles") Ho arrived in Thailand to get the very same procedure at a Bangkok clinic. The treatment is controversial because cells taken from very young human embryos are considered the most effective. But Ho, 75, and suffering from a bad heart, had his own stem cells injected into his heart. This treatment, being developed by Theravita, costs around Bt1.3 million. So far, it is not available in the US.

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

After three decades of near-continuous conflict, Afghanistan had its first parliamentary session, with US Vice President Dick Cheney in attendance. Critics have condemned the new government because it contains former warlords and ex-Taliban hardliners. Meanwhile, insurgents still loyal to the Taliban have kept up a steady stream of hit-and-run attacks against the American-backed government, claiming some 1,500 lives in 2005.

AUSSIES ADRIFT

Two sailors, an Aussie and a Kiwi, were trying to sail to Australia when their yacht capsized in rough seas south of Hong Kong, and their survival gear was swept away by another wave. In a rubber life raft they survived for 11 days by licking rainwater off the raft and drinking their own urine before being rescued by Vietnamese fishermen.

FUMING MAORIS

New Zealand's indigenous folks fumed so much over a brand of Philip Morris cigarettes called Maori Mix that the tobacco giant took them off the shelves in Israel. A company spokesperson said that the smokes (featuring a Kiwi map and mock-Maori design) were only on offer for a short time, and not available anywhere else in the world.

LAO WOW

Nearly a million people turned out in Vientiane to commemorate the 85th birthday of the nation's founding father. Of the late Kaisone Phuviharn, whose rusting chest expander is on display at the bizarre Revolutionary Museum in the capital, a Voice of the Lao Nation radio broadcast said, "He founded the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic on December 2, 1975, and it was he who shouldered and inspired the national upheaval to liberate Laos from American imperialism and its lackeys." Laos remains one of the 10 poorest countries in the world.

REBIRTH OF THE BUDDHA?

Followers of a teenage boy in rural Nepal, who has apparently gone months without food or water, believe that he is the reincarnation of the Buddha. Up to 10,000 people per day have flocked to see Ram Bahadur Banjan, 15, as he sits meditating in the jungle near Bara, some 160km south of Kathmandu. Skeptics, however, have questioned why his minders keep the teenager out of sight at night.

STITCHED UPPER LIP

An Indian man, pissed off because his wife continued nagging him about his boozing, sewed her lips together. Then Savitiri Devi escaped to another village in the eastern state of Jarkhand. His wife said Savitiri's drinking had deprived their four children of food and that every time she complained about it, he'd threatened to sew her lips shut. And so he did. At least no one can call him a liar.

SANTA FAUX PAS

Forty staggeringly intoxicated men all dressed up as Santa Claus caused havoc in the Kiwi capital of Auckland. The *New Zealand Herald* reported that these anti-Clauses stole from shops and beat up security guards. Since all the men were dressed in the same outfits, police and witnesses remain baffled as to their identities.

TRUE SURVIVOR

A Kashmiri woman miraculously survived 63 frost-bitten days buried in a pile of rubble after an earthquake shook up Pakistan. Naqsha Bibi, 40, has been reduced to a skeleton. Though she cannot speak, she is expected to live.



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SEX FILES

India, Premarital Sex Scandal: One of south India's premier Tamil-language actresses has wound up in hot water over comments she made to a magazine about premarital sex being okay as long it's protected. The story is still making front-page news in India with everyone from Miss Universe to the Indian Formula One driver Narain Karthikeyan supporting the 35-year-old Khushboo, who has had sandals thrown at her and been arrested, though nobody knows what for. The actress is now out on US\$100 bail but is banned from giving anymore interviews.

Finland, Bummed Out Pedo: In the biggest pedophile case of all time, a Finnish man who made some 25 trips to Thailand between 1989 and 2004 to molest dozens of young boys, has been sentenced to 11 years in jail. The 43-year-old was found guilty of more than 160 sex crimes. No doubt the Finn is shitting his pants about the bum deal he's going to get in prison.

Malaysia, Lucifer's Lust Puppies: Is the Prince of Darkness really inspiring heavy metal-loving youth to carry out black masses and orgies in his honour? This is what callers told police in the southern state of Negeri Sembilan, who then raided and stopped a heavy metal gig before the dirty deeds could be done. The cops questioned more than 100 young people at the concert. One of the more probing questions was rumoured to be, "Who do you think God likes more? ABBA or Cannibal Corpse?"

Hong Kong, Lovers Leap: A teenaged couple, wearing their school uniforms and holding hands, leapt from the 22nd floor of a housing estate because the girl was pregnant. Suicide rates have gone through the roof in recent years with an average of three Hong Kongers taking their own lives every day. Mental health professionals are still unsure as to what effect the opening of Disneyland will have on this depressing phenomenon.

Japan, Sex Slaves: A wealthy and dashing young Japanese man, who demanded that police call him by his nickname of "Prince," has been accused of forcing four ladies into sexual slavery. One teenager, 18, claims that Yosuyoshi Kobayashi kept her chained up for months, wearing a dog collar and repeatedly raping and beating her. "Prince," er, Yosuyoshi, refutes the allegations, saying they were all just involved in role-playing games like "disciplining maids."



Thailand, Justice for All: A new rule prohibits police from holding press conferences to announce their catch of the day. Officials hope this will ensure fair trials as the suspects will have to be tried in court before their names and photos can be published in newspapers.

Cambodia, Ransom Backfired: A gang of Cambodians who took 29 kids of 14 different nationalities hostage, and were found guilty of killing a two-year-old Canadian boy, received lengthy jail sentences in Siem Reap. Two of them got life in a foiled bid to kidnap a Korean child for ransom. One of the masterminds, Chea Khom, 23, said he came up with the plan out of revenge; his former employer, a Korean restaurant owner, slapped him across the face for bringing the kids to school late. He also claimed that government security forces were responsible for killing the Canadian boy when they sprayed the hostage-takers with bullets.

Australia, Racial Violence: Some 3,000 white supremacists invaded Sydney's beaches to taunt and beat people of Middle Eastern appearance over the course of one weekend. Fears of more violence and Lebanese youth gangs retaliating have proven unfounded, as another 1,500 police were deployed the following weekend and many beaches were deserted.

CRIME FILES

DEATH SENTENCES

In spite of the many pleas for clemency – even from the Pope – a 25-year-old Vietnamese-Australian tripped the gallows in Singapore. Born in a refugee camp in Thailand, Nguyen Tuong Van's death-sentence for drug-trafficking, along with the 1,000th execution in America since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976, have brought the question of capital punishment back from the dead.

Here is some of the death toll in Asia from 2004:

China: At least 3,400, and maybe as many as 10,000, were shot in the back of the head or lethally injected.

Singapore: The hangman strung up eight people – the highest per capita rate in the world.

Vietnam: A firing squad gunned down 82 convicts.

Bangladesh: Four were hung; another 700 languish on death row.

Taiwan: One by firing squad.

South Korea: Unofficial embargo on capital punishment.

India: One

Sri Lanka: Last execution in 1976.

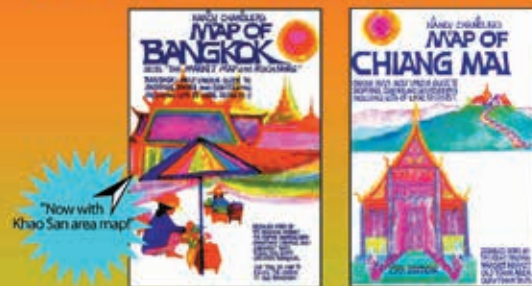
Laos: No known executions in the last 12 years.

Thailand: Switched over to lethal injection in 2003. No executions since.

North Korea: Denies it enforces the death penalty though footage of firing squads has been smuggled out and shown on CNN.



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The fishermen of the northeast do not rely on hooks, lines, or sinkers, writes Stephen Evans.

SCALED DOWN

One morning in June, towards the end of the *Bang Fai* (Rocket Festival), Uncle Mee took me fishing. We walked across the fields till we came to the edge of the woods. "Here it is!" he said, and we plunged in. The others shouted their greetings through the woods. There were 20 or so men, milling about the shore of a small lake. One or two were swimming. Many of the men were ones I did not know from the village, and I was introduced. "This is my best friend, Lam. He married a girl from Buri Ram."

Upon marriage, the unfortunate young man goes to live in his mother-in-law's house, often in a village far from home. Dependent. Dominated. In the company of strangers. Over the years, a man adjusts, acquiring a house, daughters and sons-in-law of his own, but he continues to miss his childhood friends and often returns during festivals like this one.

The opposite shore was lush with grass and reeds. A grass hut was visible in the distance. Near our shore was a large thicket of brush and branches, perfect for fish. A dugout canoe loaded with nets and piloted by a man I knew from the village, glided towards us, barely rippling the surface of the lake. As he nosed onto the shore, men leapt into the water and began sticking long poles into the lake bottom, around the thicket of dead branches. As the poles were placed, other men strung up a line of nets, standing precariously in the canoe to hang them from the poles. Some distance away, several men splashed about in the water like boys, scaring the fish down towards the thicket.

When the nets had been strung around the thicket, forming an enclosure, a most curious activity began. In water up to their necks, a group of men inside began pulling the branches out of the mud and passing them over a low point in the net to a group of men outside. Those outside took the branches some distance away and planted them again in the lake bottom. I joined the group outside the net and helped to haul the branches over the net. Realising that

something was amiss, the fish began jumping, now and then high enough to clear the net and escape. Often, fish would be entangled in the brush that we were transferring outside the net, stowaways to freedom.

Someone shouted: "Enough!", and scratched and tired, I followed the others to shore, thinking: Now the fishing begins.

Not yet! The men went back into the water, and carefully, so as not to open any gaps, they began repositioning the poles and the net, narrowing the enclosure. Then it was back into the water hauling out branches. The crew outside the net was more or less supervised by an old man, a strong and smiling grandpa, treading water, hauling branches and indicating where to place them. I asked, and he confirmed that we were creating a new thicket for next year's fishing expedition. Finally, the enclosure was cleared and fish traps (cylindrical bamboo cages) were sunk along the edge.

Jap plah could be translated as "grabbing fish" and that's just what some of the men did, diving under water to emerge with a wriggling specimen in each hand. The grandpa, after staying down for what seemed like a dangerously long time, emerged with a spotted featherback well over a foot long pressed to his chest.

At lunchtime, they stoked fires and roasted the fish on stakes, or dropped them into a kettle of boiling water to which somebody added a mess of red ant eggs. Others added wild herbs and spices. Freshwater shrimp were mixed with spices and herbs and eaten raw. They had not forgotten whiskey – *lao khao* – and beer.

After lunch we hauled up the traps and dumped the fish into sacks. Others cast nets into the enclosure, pulling in more fish. Finally the encircling net itself was hauled in, forcing the remaining fish to shore and into the sacks.

The catch was divided among us and it was time to go. Back to distant villages, to wives and children and mothers-in-law. The man with the canoe pushed it to the edge of the new thicket, and rocking the hull, flooded and sank it, so it would remain on the bottom of the lake until next time.



Dear Untamed Editors,

Re: December cover
Xmas Eve would be a lot less of a chore if all my elves were this strong and did the dirty work in spandex and sport bras. (It might get that lately complacent Missus C fired up too). Your cover model makes me positively jolly. Hook me up, friends!

Nick S. Claus

P.S, I like the glossy new cover so much I'm taking you off the naughty list.



WIN THIS T-SHIRT!!

Yes folks, this Dive Junkie T-shirt, containing the finest dew-droplets of Thai lady sweat (courtesy of the lovely Lek, who took time out from her position as Untamed Travel advertising executive to model this shirt) could be yours!!! Wear it with pride wherever hip divemasters congregate, or tuck it under your pillow – it's up to you.

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More Victims

Sir,

It is my opinion that your article on the plight of Tibetan women in *Untamed Travel* December 2005 is misleading. From the article it is obvious that Tibetan women are being treated terribly by the authorities and are suffering forced sterilisation, torture by police and denied opportunities in employment and education.

While I don't dispute that all this is happening the sad fact is that you could just about replace 'Tibetan women' with 'Chinese women'. Many of the abuses listed in the article are uniformly applied across the country. For instance, financial penalties levelled on women who have a third child are in line with the one-child policy both in Beijing and Lassa. Indeed, many third pregnancies are forcefully aborted among the Han majority all over China. Reports of abuse and torture of women by police are not isolated to Tibet either and prostitution among poor Chinese women is exploding across the country.

What the writer has missed in this story is one essential fact – that as a recognised minority group in China, Tibetans are not subject to the one-child policy. It is in fact this break with national policy that condemns the abuse of women in Tibet that should be the thrust of the story.

Regards,

Donald Court
Christchurch, New Zealand

Dear Editors,

I was pleased to see that you dropped your price to 99 baht from the ridiculous and greedy 120 baht, so I bought a copy for the first time since you raised the price, and I must say it is looking very slick and shiny and pretty funny in some parts. And at last, a woman on the cover, well done. A bit of alright, that – nice to see a female with a bit of muscle. More of that, if you please.

Regards,

Richard Cameron
Bangkok

Untamed Travel Replies:

Thanks Richard, glad to have you back between the covers. You'll be thrilled to see that we've decided to keep the 99 baht price this month and may keep it even longer than that. Regarding your adoration of muscular females, this month's cover should meet with your approval. Whatever turns your crank, man.

Dear Untamed Travel

Congratulations on producing a wonderful magazine. I enjoy reading your articles in my spare time and each issue has pride of place on my toilet tank. Not only entertaining, I find the magazine very useful, although the shiny paper sometimes causes problems.

Good Work,
Tony Bales,
Phuket

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GOA BEGINS PEAKING

*In her second column,
Suzan Crane writes
about the awakening of
her comatose village for
the high and dry season.*



Naked. The seaside community in northern Goa where I have planted tentative roots seems naked when I return from my Indian Summer up north. Like a tree stripped of its leaves, it resembles the simple fishing village it was before the hippies, spiritual seekers and party crowd discovered it.

It's mid-September, the prelude before the storm of tourists, and the rain is overstaying its welcome. The sea is inky, and the sand is grey. Driftwood litters the beach where fishermen tend to their rickety boats. The shacks that normally fringe the coconut groves are now just bundled palm fronds marking spots from where soon drinks will be slung and music will blare. A few foreigners – the hardy ones who remain through the monsoon – mingle with the locals who impatiently await a reprieve from The Big Drench. They need to rebuild, repair and prepare for the impending high season. Only a few local *dhabas* and places catering to Westerners are open and serve as meeting points for the shrunk community. There are no parties, few potential sex partners and the drugs are less visible. People interact in a way that is not possible during high season when the distractions are many.

Finally, the rain stops. Hammers and nails come out and the naked village begins to dress for the party. Overnight, it seems, structures sprout up, with concrete tending to replace bamboo as the building material of choice. Neon from newly erected signs competes with the natural sparkle of the night sky. The tourists, recently arrived to India or migrating from the North, trickle in. Slowly at first so that you still recognise faces, then in increasing numbers. By early December the small village is awash in dreadlocks, tattoos and piercings, Osho devotees, experienced India-heads and the random two-week holiday-maker.

Attire and verbiage distinguish long-termers from the "I'm Spending A Year In India" crowd. Garbed in fisherman pants and hippie gear, the newbies regularly insert "*acha*" – the first Hindi word most first-timers learn – into their conversations (which, admittedly, I still do too) while the others – Goa veterans wear Levis and surf shorts and almost never use the phrase. Every day, another repeat offender turns up, some with new mates or unexpectedly solo, some pregnant and others wielding newborns, the next India-obsessed generation. A distinct scent of anticipation permeates the air. "Where's the party?" is an oft-heard mantra.

The symphony of waves is now obscured by pulsating music, the whining of the cows drowned out by screaming Enfields. Posters for reiki, yoga, tai chi and other more obscure spiritual practices (do people make this stuff up?) blanket polls and walls. There are more potential sex partners and the drugs are flowing more freely. The days heat up and the nights get steamy as bare flesh and raging hormones provoke inevitably short-lived romances. The keen observer can easily detect the fresh trysts while keeping a surreptitious eye out for her own potential playmate.

There are tons of new restaurants – many foreign-run – and more huts along the shoreline. The road down to the beach is inundated by shops and makeshift stalls, most selling the same crap. I don't recall such an overwhelming commercial glut in the past, but I'm in no position to judge as I, too, have entered the entrepreneurial arena. I share a shop with friends and although we sell cool stuff I have become a *Westerner Doing Business in India*, one of the group I ridiculed when first arriving in Goa.

This is my third season here so I'm no longer considered a voyeur, tourist or passer-by. As we've barely turned the corner into December, who knows how the season will unfold. But so far, it's been good. I've just returned from Loekies where the music was fine and spirits were high. There's a party at the lake tonight, but I've opted to come home and write. Presumably, there will be many more parties to come, although officials are diligent in their efforts to thwart them. The guy who'd been sniffing around me for the past month lifted his leg and pissed on someone else, but that's cool because I'm sniffing around others as well. Perhaps I'll have marked my territory by next month's installment. Right now I've got friends squatting in my house and I wake up to the smell of male sweat, dirty laundry or, like this morning, three macho bikers washing floors and cleaning the kitchen.

As has happened in formerly unspoiled areas of Thailand, my personal paradise is succumbing to expansion, Westernisation, and the bastardisation of the formerly shanty vibe. I'm not thrilled by "The Disneyland Factor," but as they say in Hindi, *kyakarega*... what to do? Tomorrow night I'll be dancing, sniffing around and perhaps pissing at the Surf Club.

Please note that due to threats of bodily harm I am not at liberty to disclose the name of this village. But if one checks a map or clues into the India travellers' grapevine, it's easy to find.



I met him on a tropical island. He was tall, blonde and hot. He made all the right moves and said all the right things, until our second night together. On that fateful night, as we fell onto the floor of his bungalow and really started going for it, I reached for my purse (and the condoms within) when he grabbed me, pulled me back and went for it 'bareback'. Luckily, I do my kegel exercises religiously.

I do my kegels for a reason, boys, and it's not just so I can impress you with my strong inner muscle contractions. It also comes in very handy when one of you attempts penetration without a condom on. Unfortunately, I'm really getting good at this 'clamp it shut' move as I call it, largely due to the increasing frequency of attempts at unprotected sex by boys who think I'm a 'nice girl' and therefore it's okay.

I am a nice girl (regular readers, shut up) but I have indeed met a few 'nice boys' in my life who have proved to be otherwise. I've been lucky though. Nothing I've caught has been life-threatening or recurring. Not so for some friends of mine. One nice girl I know gave her virginity to a man she'd been dating for months, only to contract herpes. Another nice girl swears she got genital warts from a toilet seat (not possible) after her long-time boyfriend insisted he hadn't cheated. More recently, a nice young Thai woman I know just found out she is HIV-positive. All because some guy wanted his five minutes of extra pleasure.

Put these three women up on bar stools and my guess is you'd never pick any of them out as anything but 'nice girls'. My point: you never do know. And it is not like they are going to tell you. Especially if you're travelling and unlikely to ever see each other again, as was my case with the Canadian I did in Cairnes and the Welshman I did in southern Thailand.

As I've written before, your memories of travelling do not need to include the four-hour bus trip you spent scratching yourself in public or the fact you couldn't walk for a week after a particularly wild episode with a someone who admittedly did have a blister on his/her lip which you overlooked at the time. Nor do you really want to visit strange doctors in

strange villages all over the world. Most importantly, who knows who you will meet next week? Do you really want to tell Mr/Ms Delicious you can't go home with him/her because you might have picked up something in the last town? I didn't think so.

To be honest, for me, great sex means sex without inhibitions and that can only happen when I have the mental security I get from a man who is as *passionate* about condom use as I am. A strange choice of word? Believe me, there is a condom out there for you, one that you might actually enjoy using.

New at www.condomania.com (which will Fed Ex overseas as I know from one time when I ran out of extra large condoms right before a dirty weekend away) are the TheyFit™ condoms in 55 sizes. Simply download a form, fill it in, and find out which one was made for you. Alternatively, visit the website's Condom Wizard, which allows you to select by sensitivity,

size, texture, strength, and, especially for those who complain about the pause in proceedings when putting on a condom, the super thin Hot Rod with Speedstrip Applicator. ("Once you've mastered the applicator, the condom's on in 3 seconds or less.") The website also links to consumer reviews.

Want to experiment? Try getting Condomania's Pleasure Condom Sampler kit, packaged to prove that "shape and fit can dramatically enhance sensitivity and sensation". At only US\$ 12.95 for a dozen, it could make for a great excuse to lock yourself in a bungalow with someone for the weekend. I'd suggest getting the vibrating condom ring while you're online too. (It is one of their most popular products for a reason.) Another option might be the Erotic University Condom Home Study Kit (www.eroticuniversity.com) which includes 15 condoms and tips and tricks to try. (Do be forewarned about the Pleasure Plus condoms, however. With a larger head for a looser fit and more feeling, they also make a funny noise during sex. Then again, some people like to laugh during sex. Just pray it's not the neighbours laughing.)

Another thing to try: dabbing a little water-based lubricant on the head of your penis before putting on a condom. Gay men I know also recommend double-bagging it with lubricant inbetween. Each to their own.

For those who cannot imagine ever enjoying sex using a condom, I have only one recommendation: the Vaginal Substitute (www.vaginalsubstitute.com). "If the eyes are closed or the lights are out, it is very difficult to distinguish between a vagina and The Vaginal Substitute," they say. To be honest, if you're not going to use condoms and mutual masturbation doesn't do it for you, this should be your only option. The good news: this product comes in four sizes - Tight-Anal, The Virgin, Perfect Fit and The Magnum. And it's just as easy to pack in your backpack as a few boxes of condoms.

Under Wraps

Karen Findlay,
a.k.a, The Stalker,
may play the temptress but she's not one to flirt with danger. The gates of Karen's innermost charms are jealously guarded and admit entry only to gentlemen who are appropriately attired.

Birthplace of a Stillborn Revolution

The history of the world is full of revolutions that began in caves and ended in palaces – an interminable cycle of lean idealism stealing the keys to the candy store of power and rapidly mutating into decadent obesity. Somehow Laos always seemed a little different. The leaders who began their political lives in anonymity remained anonymous. They resisted cults of personality, the disease that destroyed many a People's Revolution. Communism didn't work any better in Laos than it did elsewhere, but, unlike the revolutionary leaders in Woody Allen's 'Bananas' they didn't mount the steps of the capitol and pass laws requiring citizens to wear their underwear over their trousers. That is, not until recently, writes Mat Oakley.



Like communism itself, the new Lao Revolutionary Museum promises much more than it delivers. For years the communist triumph in Laos was trumpeted in the modest surroundings of the old Lao Revolutionary Museum, a crumbling French mansion in the centre of the capital Vientiane, where dusty photographs and relics of the "Struggle," annotated with a certain loftiness, told a slightly biased tale of the Pathet Lao victory over French and American hegemony.

It was a bit unfair on the French, who were so out of it on opium they hardly had the energy to oppress the masses. The Americans, of course, deserved every verbal onslaught the old museum threw at them, but even then the onslaught was pretty feeble. Unlike Vietnam, where museums display downed American aircraft with unrestrained glee, Laos has virtually nothing to show for its victory and didn't seem keen to expend more than a token effort showing it.

But somewhere along the line, the Lao government had decided that this simply wasn't good enough and resolved belatedly to follow the example of communist governments around the world and build a pompous monument to its own imaginary success. Though it's one of the last countries on earth where the hammer-and-sickle flag still flutters, Laos never gave the impression that it was terribly serious about communism. Upon taking power, the revolutionary Pathet Lao army did all the customary things, like ban religion, persecute opponents and outlaw excessive enjoyment, but it was all a bit too much like hard work. Lao people are a modest, easy-going, fun-loving lot and self-imposed austerity never sat well with a people who already had enough austerity they didn't ask for.

The old museum fitted that theory well, looking as if it was thrown together to fulfil the obligations of their political model, but as if their hearts weren't really in it.

The new one, in contrast, is certainly imposing enough. A large, boastful structure of a strange amalgamated Buddhist-Soviet design, it lies four kilometres out of central Vientiane, incongruously grand on a stretch of road dominated by the ubiquitous modern Asian concrete shophouse.

A statue of Kaysone Phomvihane, father of Lao Communism, surveys the large plaza in front of the museum, hailing the tuk-tuks and Japanese motorbikes heading along Route 13 with an avuncular wave. Flanking him are two Soviet-style sculptures – huddled collections of peasant soldiers pointing their weapons upwards (always upwards in these sculptures, suggesting heroic inferiority) at their oppressors.

Inside the puffed chest of the museum's exterior, despite a broad staircase and another Kaysone statue, the contents are slightly less muscular. Though organised more recognisably along the lines of a modern museum, the exhibits are mostly the same ones transported from the old museum and put behind clean glass and gleaming synthetic surfaces, rather than fading wood. The scale of the building, most of which seems to be empty, simply makes them look even less impressive than they did before.

At the top of the staircase, it isn't immediately obvious which way to go. I instinctively went left, and was instinctively wrong. At the top was without question the strangest and worst museum display I have ever seen; a series of glass cabinets displaying artistically arranged collections of floor fans, PVC piping, boxes of pharmaceuticals, hard hats, domestic cleaning products and bottles of Pepsi and Coke. All the notes were in Lao, so I could only guess that it was supposed to represent Lao industrial dynamism. But I was pretty sure there was no other socialist revolutionary museum in the world that ever offered displays of American soft drinks.

Confused, I began to walk left and encountered a group of Lao people coming in the opposite direction. They were moving as slowly as people do in museums, but weren't bothering to look at much, as if they didn't really want to be there, but were afraid that if they went down too soon the guards would know they hadn't been paying enough attention and send them back up to start again. The place has been designed so that, presuming you start your tour at the beginning instead of the end, you follow a chronological history of the revolution from the 1950s to the present day. Most of the items on display, however, seem less about history and more about idolatry. Communism, in proscribing traditional religion, created for itself a substitute mythology, and merely ended up mimicking religion in its veneration of relics and icons. The museums I had seen in Vietnam and the former Soviet Union were the same.

Revolutionary paraphernalia – a leader's pens, spectacles, boots or guns – are a direct replacement for pieces of the crucifix or the Holy Grail.

It was strangely disappointing. The Lao government had always seemed, despite its many failings (and, as the Pepsi exhibit demonstrated, its flair for the absurd), one of the least dogmatic and poisonous of the world's communist experiments.

These people had their political beginnings in rural hideaways, just like other communist armies, but unlike the Maos and Stalins, who became the emperors and tsars they once denounced, the Lao revolutionaries seemed to have retained a certain humility, which in a sense was surprising, given that their own rural hideaway in Vieng Xai, way to the northeast, was just about the grandest any communist army ever boasted.

REVOLUTIONARY CAVES

In a country whose remote tracks are rapidly being beaten by backpackers searching for the Place No One Else Goes, the province of Hua Phan is geographically blessed. It takes some effort to get there – an arduous trip along mountain roads that barely maintain a straight line for more than 50 metres – and once you do get there, you've reached

a dead end and have to turn back and do it all again. The road through to Vietnam is still closed to foreigners and the road back south is, despite a few years of peace, not entirely free of armed bandits. But once the road opens, it will offer a quick route through to Hanoi, and Hua Phan will almost overnight become another major stop on the trail. Most of Laos was like a laundry mat when I was there. The south of the country shimmered and steamed in the hot-season air and even the higher altitude up north was baking, wrapped in the haze of slash-and-burn fires. Rising up toward Xam Neua, the provincial capital of Hua Phan, it cooled suddenly, like a blast of department store air-con on a summer street, and thick clouds seeped and swirled through the branches of the unbroken forest. It felt like the approach road to a ski resort. Seng, the Lao lothario who was driving me around, said he used to drive trucks up here in the late 1970s, during the early years of the communist

government. The trip from the capital of Vientiane that now takes two leisurely days along an adequate sealed road used to take a week. Xam Neua in early evening was surprisingly and joyously brisk. Men in olive Vietnamese army jackets wrapped themselves against the cold, nursing cigarettes in cupped hands. I immediately sensed the difference. It was not like anywhere else in Laos. Thai television, ever-present elsewhere, didn't reach up here. No one bothered staring at me, either out of disinterest or contempt.

Hua Phan, the only Lao province that lies on the eastern side of the Annamite mountain chain that marks most of the country's border with Vietnam, has a long history of association with its big brother next door, and I guessed that revolutionary pride, coupled with a disdainfulness osmotically absorbed from the North Vietnamese, had made people up here quite different from their typically curious Lao compatriots. That evening there was an open-air cultural performance in town to commemorate something. One person told me it was victory over the Americans. Someone else said it was independence from the French. Whatever it was, it looked like the kind of regimented celebration-by-committee that belonged to another, disappearing, era of ideological assertion against an unseen enemy. The older members of the crowd – those with vivid memories of war and the terrors of bombing – seemed to be enjoying themselves wistfully, while teenagers

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came and went on their Japanese scooters. There were parades of girls in different ethnic costumes, all singing of the pride of Lao nationhood to the curiously tinny music that seems to characterise communist festivities. Seng had his eye on a young girl in her early twenties and I guessed that Xam Neua must have been one of the few towns we'd been to where he didn't have a shag waiting for him. If Xam Neua had frustrated him, he was certainly more cheerful the next day once we got to the Vieng Xai caves where, in a lakeside restaurant, a group of very drunk and rich Lao men were entertaining a few heavily made up girls, who looked like they wanted to be elsewhere. Seng looked like he had a few alternative destinations in mind for them. The fact that Vieng Xai was the nerve centre of his country's revolution, where his glorious proletarian leaders had hidden in caves for nearly 10 years, endured the American bombs and emerged victorious to liberate the country from bourgeois imperialist aggressors, apparently carried a lot less weight than the breasts on Table 3.

If Vieng Xai were in Vietnam or China, it would be overrun with people. Its physical beauty alone would be enough to guarantee a sprinkling of development. A prodigious network of caves and grottoes set in a fairytale little valley of lush meadows ringed with limestone cliffs and pinnacles, it's the kind of place where resorts call themselves retreats and people with urban lives come to drink in the greenery and fantasise about a rural existence.

But it's not just a beautiful place. Vieng Xai is one of modern Laos' most significant sites, a once fully functioning cave city that sheltered Vietnamese independence fighters in the 1950s, and then the Pathet Lao leaders, who emerged in 1973 after the Americans stopped trying to blow them up and went home. If it had been Chairman Mao or Uncle Ho, rather than the anonymous Lao leaders who had sheltered here from the bludgeoning of American firepower, the communist iconography machine would have turned somersaults. But as the Revolutionary Museum in Vientiane makes painfully clear, the government has never been very adept at the grandiose tub-thumping of its powerful neighbours. It's hard to believe now that the American "domino theory" saw Laos as the most important domino of all – believing that the "fall" of Laos would precipitate communist takeovers in the rest of Southeast Asia. Of course they were, as American governments tend to be when they try to interpret the rest of the world, simplistic, stupidly brutal, and wrong. Lao communism was never anything more than a sideshow in the regional political circus, as Vieng Xai amply demonstrates.

The entrance gate to Vieng Xai is an archway of oil drums that leads into a museum piece 1960s town. There is no fanfare, no clamorous banners; it even takes some effort to locate the visitors' centre and once you do, there is a sense of pleasant surprise, of people getting up

I was pretty sure there was no other socialist revolutionary museum in the world that ever offered displays of American soft drinks.





suddenly and cups stopping halfway to mouths, when you walk inside. It's only in the past few years that the government opened up all the caves to foreigners. It would be nice if Vieng Xai's remoteness was the only explanation, but after the Communists took power in 1975 and abandoned plans to establish the capital city there, Vieng Xai was turned into a labour reform camp, where political enemies, including the Lao royal family, were sent on what often turned out to be their final journeys.

Maybe it was the four glasses of *lao lao* (rice spirit) the guide fed me in his house before we began our tour, but I was riveted by the place, and so enthusiastic that even the guide looked like he thought I was making fun of him. Vieng Xai is a truly fascinating place – all the more so for its peaceful isolation. War tourism is a mildly popular exercise in Laos, but many visitors never make it beyond Phonsavan, a few hundred kilometres to the west, where abundant war debris and the Plain of Jars make it a popular stopover. First the guide took me to the leaders' caves. Each leader had his own, drilled into the cliff face by the Vietnamese, displaying that awe-inspiring talent for seemingly impossible feats of mass labour that characterised the war efforts in their own country. There are offices, bedrooms for the families, clinics, safe rooms sealed by twin steel doors and fitted out with Soviet-made oxygen machines. The cave of the infamous "Red Prince" Souphanouvong, the turncoat aristocrat who abandoned the Lao royal family to join the communists, even has a garage. Each cave has multiple entranceways, cunningly constructed so that attackers would be at an almost hopeless disadvantage, and positioned so that aerial attacks, even by rocket, were nearly impossible. In fact the whole valley was chosen as a refuge because of its impenetrability. Its narrowness and high sides made it easy to defend, and bombers could be spotted well before they came into range.

Not that the Americans didn't try. Vieng Xai's beauty, like much of eastern Laos, masks a hidden nightmare in the form of unexploded ordinance, thousands of tons of it. Those that did go off still leave their mark. Outside the entrance to the Red Prince's cave, the crater of one 500lb bomb has been concreted in as a kind of memorial. It's difficult to imagine, now that colourful gardens have taken over, what life must have been like then for these troglodyte rebels, creeping out in the night, working in the fields under the light of lanterns, the frantic scurrying when a cliff-top look-out sounded the alarm. Perhaps the most fascinating of all is the large public cave, whose cavernous interior is an exquisite sculpture of water-worn limestone, all rounded surfaces, folded, drooping and fleshy, like Dr Seuss landscapes. At one end, a low, broad tunnel between the cliff faces was turned into a large theatre, but though there was time for entertainment, at most times, when explosions

would have created deafening echoes inside, it must have been hell.

It wasn't only people hiding out here either. I asked the guide why there were so many square pits in the floor of the cave. "Snakes," he said, happy at last to wipe the smile off my face. He took my frozen silence as an invitation to elaborate. "Hundreds of snakes would come in here to shelter as well, so they built these pits and these channels to guide the snakes into the same spot. They used to throw live animals and dead people into the pits to keep the snakes away from everyone else." I took a moment to absorb the information. He was poised, waiting for the question. "So... erm... are there.... many... you know.... snakes and things coming in here... like now?" I'd added the "...and things" to "snakes" in order to make it sound like a casual wildlife inquiry, as if corpse-eating snakes were no higher up on my ladder of concern than frogs, lizards and little scurrying marsupials. "Sometimes," he said. "Would you like a cigarette?" "Maybe outside. It's such a nice day."

Back in the restaurant, one of the American unexploded ordinance workers had arrived with his Lao girlfriend. He sat legs apart, cigarette drooping from lips, with his aviator sunglasses, cropped hair, sleeveless T-shirt and bulky khaki pants, looking like the product of an unimaginative casting director. He was trying to look inscrutable and threatening, so I made a point of saying hello. "Hey," he drawled flatly, barely inclining his head.

I decided it wasn't worth trying to force him into conversation, even for the fleeting satisfaction of irritating him.

I sat down with Seng and the guide and we ordered lunch. I asked Seng what he thought of the place.

"It's very beautiful," he said. "I think one of the most beautiful places in Laos."

"And the caves?"

"Yes," he said, as if the caves were an afterthought, "it's interesting."

"It must be a quite a proud place for Lao people," I said, with half an eye on the American posing away on his chair.

"Maybe," he shrugged.

Like most people in Laos, politics was not so much a subject he was scared to discuss as one he just wasn't much interested in.

"Have you been to the new museum in Vientiane, the Kaysone museum?"

"No, not yet. Maybe I'll go one day."

"It's better than the old one," I said, encouragingly. "It has Pepsi in it."

He looked at me.

"I never went to the old one either."

UNTAMED UGANDA

You may need a bullshit detector to navigate your way through the country's political byways, war zones and refugee camps, but Uganda is still a great place to see a mountain gorilla or have a hooker vomit on your shoes, writes Dennis Duncan, from personal experience.



I'm ripping down the only stretch of well-paved road in all East Africa – the Lugogo bypass in Kampala, Uganda. My Celica is pushing 100kph and the stereo speakers are being blown to smithereens by the bumping sounds of African bass beats. It's 4am, and I'm drunk as a monkey.

Sitting in the passenger seat, my wife leans forward and points at the driver's side window. A heavily dented pick-up truck has come up beside us. Four locals in the back are pointing AK-47 assault rifles at us and motioning for us to pull over. Shit, it's the cops!

"Forget them, just keep on going, baby," she says in the same way one would disregard a speech by President Bush.

"I'll catch most of the bullets, sweetheart. I'm pulling over," is my reply.

So there we are. Two white folks pulled over at 4am on the Lugogo bypass in an unregistered sports car. There's no insurance on the vehicle, and I've got no driver's license to boot. I don't even have an acceptable amount of bribe money. There ain't much more fucked that you can get.

The guy in charge, the biggest and fattest one with the sergeant stripes, comes up to my window and says: "You know you cut my police car off back there at the last corner." He looks pretty pissed off.



Another officer sticks his head in on the passenger's window and gives my wife a good once over. Not too many blondes in this part of the world.

I begin to think about what I can say to keep her and myself out of a Ugandan jail when suddenly she pipes up: "I just love Uganda," she chirps with a beaming smile and sparkling eyes to the sergeant. "I think the police are especially nice here, too!"

I'm thinking about how much my butt-hole is going to expand in jail as she continues: "My mother and father were just here to visit and they loved it here also!"

I come up with a plan, but as I begin to speak, the sergeant says, "I'll talk to you later," and looks back at my wife. "What were you saying about your parents my dear?"

And away she goes. She chats them up like an amped-up speed freak with a speech impediment, like Don Juan hitting on Naomi Campbell, like a faithful wife trying to keep her husband's arsehole from a twisted fate.

The cops listen to her ramble for another two minutes about how great everything is in this strange little country. Then they wish us a good night and send us on our way with one final warning to wear our seatbelts. Good Christ, it worked!

Then she turns to me and says: "The only way you can survive in this country is to be totally full of shit, baby."

And full of shit everybody seems to be.

A horrible civil war has been fought in the shadows of northern Uganda for the past 19 years. The war is horrible in its weirdness, horrible in its abject cruelty, and horrible in the fact that nobody in the country's south seems to give a shit. The cult-like Lord's Resistance Army is led by Joseph Kony, a despot described by the U.S. State Department as "erratic and vicious". His rebels are the remnants of a northern insurgency that began after southerner Yoweri Museveni took power after deposing the notorious Idi Amin in 1986. Kony has declared he wants to replace the present government with one guided by the Ten Commandments of *The Bible*. The rebels are well-known chiefly for their tactic of kidnapping children and forcing them to become child soldiers or sex slaves. Kony and his crew are believed to have abducted more than 30,000 children, and more than a million have fled in fear of being kidnapped.

Because of the insurgency there are some 1.4 million Ugandans in government-run refugee centres throughout the north of the country. The government keeps them there under threat of their own protection, even while daily news reports depict government forces as having the rebels beaten

"The rebels are well-known chiefly for their tactic of kidnapping children and forcing them to become child soldiers or sex slaves."





“A young hooker sashays up to me, blanks my wife and pukes on my shoes.”

and on the run. These internal refugees, who are generally poor and illiterate farmers, have no access to their fields so are reliant on handouts of maize and beans from the government. Feeding this many people is big business. A lot of people are making money from it. So much money in fact that it is widely speculated the northern insurgency is being fueled or exaggerated by local political interests to keep the camps going.

A recent news report stated that Kony's army is down to a rag-tag band of 500 troopers, many without shoes. How could 500 rebels keep 1.4 million people in camps spread over 85,000 square kilometers, especially when a modern army has them on the run? Somebody somewhere is totally full of shit.

HIV JUNGLE

Meanwhile, back on the Lugogo bypass, my wife and I decide we should celebrate our close call with the cops. We rev the Celica's engine, do a U-turn and head to Kampala's finest saloon: Al's Bar! One enters Al's Bar murmuring a safety mantra: wallet, keys, phone, wallet, keys, phone. Never forget the mantra or you will be separated from one or all of them. The place reeks from a fine-tuned mixture of Nile Lager, cigarettes and testosterone. Upstairs, downstairs and outdoor seating all lead to a dance floor where hookers are routinely stripped bare and groped. In the back there's a pool table where the safety mantra takes on extra seriousness. A fun place by anyone's standards.

A young hooker sashays up to me, blanks my wife, and pukes on my shoes. Not before offering me oral sex out behind the bar though. Just the thought of sex with bar girls in these parts peels years off your life, so don't even think about it.

Uganda has one of the lowest rates of HIV/AIDS infection in all sub-Saharan Africa: six percent. Ten years ago the rate was triple that until the government came out with a massive HIV/AIDS awareness campaign that promoted acceptance of those infected, as well as a condom distribution scheme that hammered the idea of safe sex home. Not anymore.

Last month, the U.N. special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, Stephen Lewis, declared that the Bush Administration's was undermining Uganda's



HIV/AIDS effort. President Bush's much-touted Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) is a five-year, US\$9 billion programme that supports AIDS treatment, care and prevention activities in 15 countries, including Uganda. Health professionals have been dismayed by the regulations governing disbursements. One-third of PEPFAR funds must be spent on "abstinence/be faithful" youth programmes and the cutting of federal funding for condoms.

Bush would like Uganda to look less at strapping on condoms and more at just saying no apparently. Tell that to one of the chicks working Al's Bar.

So it's back to the Celica for more high-speed fun back to the house. Looking out for the cops, we swerve around potholes, dogs and slum-dwellers. The stars are out in full force as only an African night can offer. Huge bats and nocturnal birds of prey swoop about. The smell of red earth and nature's decay makes us sleepy.

As we honk the horn to be let through the gate, our guard almost shoots himself in the foot with his AK-47. Ahh, Africa.



The Bwindi Impenetrable Forest lies at the convergence of a traditionally volatile area: the confluence of the Ugandan, Rwandan and Congo borders. The name says it all. This is seriously mountainous jungle covering 331sq km, where it rains like a bitch and there are no bars or cars. You are Tarzan. And the attraction is that it's the last place on earth you can find mountain gorillas. Some 320 of the world's known mountain gorillas live within the park's confines. Made famous by the conservationist Dian Fossey, and the bio-pic *Gorillas in the Mist*, catch them while you can. One never knows what fate will befall these gentle marvels as cash-strapped locals, rebel armies or other assholes seek to evict them once and for all. You know you are in Stanley Livingston's deepest darkest Africa when you come to the realisation that this is not a safari park



MOUNTAIN GORILLAS



The *Pseudo-Science* of Photo Captions

O kay, we'll admit it. We are actually trying to be funny in those photo captions scattered randomly through the listings section. Hopefully we've succeeded to some degree over the last 45 issues. We can't be certain because we are never there to witness the laughter, if any, but according to the ramblings of folks we meet in saloons, it is a favourite part of the magazine for some and often the starting point or before running the marathon of stories. We have been urged to keep at it, so we have, and though we don't wish to moan, it hasn't been easy. Being funny is the hardest thing to be.

First off, in keeping with the higgledy-piggledy seat-of-the-pants approach we have always taken to editorial, none of them are planned in advance. Photos are gathered for their sections by the photo editor, put in a folder for the designer, who chooses the ones he likes and places them amongst the text.

Then we proof the pages for mistakes, make corrections, put in the credits and contents and then the very last thing we do, often beginning at 2:30am on deadline night (and by this time half drunk), is all gather round the computer and go page by page, taking turns driving the bus, looking at each photo, throwing up concepts, continuing until someone laughs – often only the person with the idea.

Then he either gets booed off the stage or we work with it, kicking around other ideas and playing with the wording until it seems tight and hard-hitting. And then we argue about where exactly to put it on the photo so as to have the greatest comedic effect. After that, we decide if it is too dirty or tasteless or just not that funny and then start over and delete it. Fights erupt over how obvious or obscure to make them, leading to accusations of the other guy being a philistine for not getting the literary reference.

If it seems like a stinker, we won't use it for fear of disappointing our loyal caption readers. These sessions often go on until the sun is streaming through the window, and everyone is completely hammered. This is the truth.

Where do we get our ideas? Simple, from the same place all the great creative people through history got their ideas. We steal them – a process more euphemistically known as “taking inspiration,” twisting jokes you heard or comics you read until it is different enough not to get sued. So many thanks have to go out to Gary Larson, George Carlin, P.G. Wodehouse, Lenny Bruce, Andrea Martin from SCTV, Monty Python, Billy Connelly, Diane Keaton, Laurel and Hardy and just about everyone else who ever made us laugh.

Nevertheless, it isn't easy to keep coming up with a fresh joke for yet another photo of inebriated Germans roasting on a beach. Everything and everyone becomes cannon fodder – nationalities, fat people, animals, sex, farting and other lowest common denominator subjects. And when this starts running dry, we bring in a funny friend and pay them a nugatory sum to get those creative juices flowing again.

Forty-five issues and about 900 photo captions on, we've tried everything at some point – based on the hope that there'd be at least one in there for everyone, believing that if a reader got one good laugh for their money that they'd buy the magazine again.

So we present to you not so much a “best of” as a random sampling of our attempts to get our beloved readers to choke to death on their fried rice.





Reincarnated tout



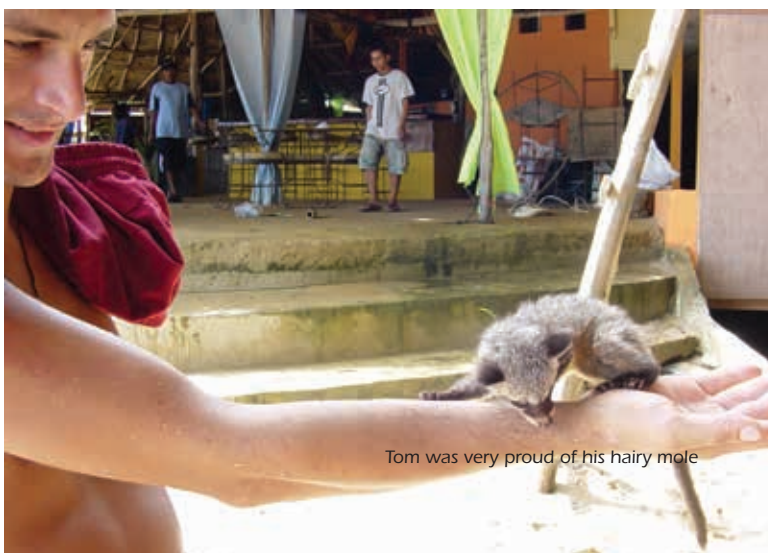
The Clean-up Koh Lanta team collected 72 bags of Coke bottles, 22 discarded sun-visours and four Americans



Patpong driver, and don't stop for any red lights



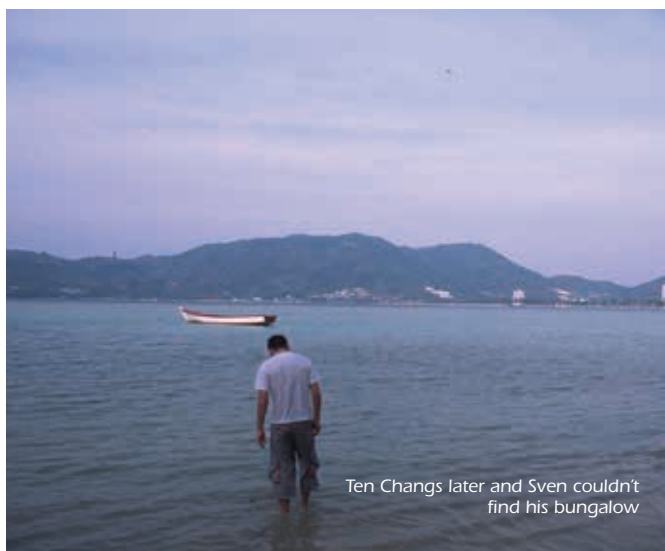
A rare sighting of the Gluteus Aquaticus Germania



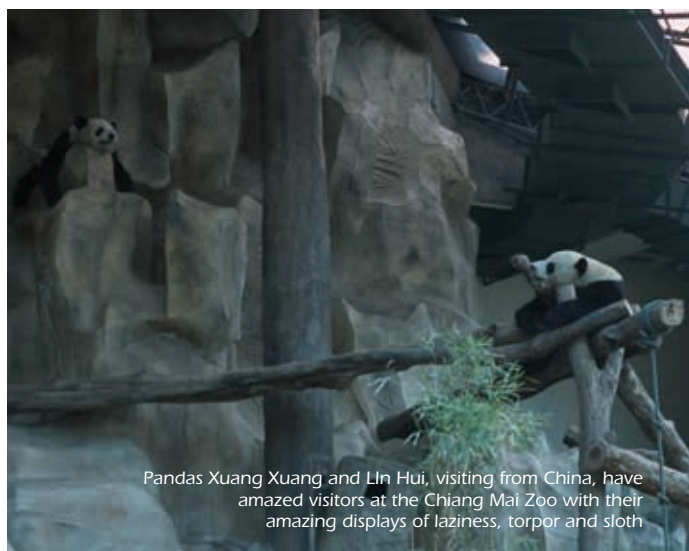
Tom was very proud of his hairy mole



Lisette thought the sun shone out of her vagina



Ten Changs later and Sven couldn't find his bungalow



Pandas Xuang Xuang and Lin Hui, visiting from China, have amazed visitors at the Chiang Mai Zoo with their amazing displays of laziness, torpor and sloth



Fetch this you noisy little fuckers



Hello, my name is Rolf, and this is my crotch



Mom, you've got mail



I'm telling you, it abducted me last night



Unfortunately for Eric, the elephant in front of him had beans for lunch



Budget cuts forced the Thai National Team to use innovative training methods



On Friday nights, Roscoe is the designated driver



Sharon was never the same after the tuk-tuk accident



One Tambon One Product

TOUR *de* LAOS

Boasting one of the least spoilt eco-systems in Asia and a landscape dominated by mountains, rivers and plateaus, Laos is made for the long-distance cyclist seeking a trail far from the beaten track. Ben Hopkins puts his mettle on the pedals.





In the northwestern town of Huay Xai, bordering Thailand, I rope my bike onto the roof of a long-tail boat and settle back for a seven-hour cruise down the famous Mekong River. Steep-sided valleys rise up from white sand beaches that melt in the mid-April heat while fishermen pull in their nets and count their losses when they see our carnival approaching.

Laos only opened its borders to tourists in 1989 and though it's still the least traveled country in SE Asia, tourists are now arriving in increasing numbers. On this boat alone there are at least 50 other backpackers. One traveler from London whacks up the volume on his stereo and shouts across the boat at me: "Where ya goin' with that bike, dude?"

"Right the way from north to south Laos. Where ya' goin' with that stereo?"

"Home," shrieks his girlfriend as she shakes out a Marlborough. "Sick of this place. No nightlife, no decent shops and no electricity. D'ya wanna fag?"

Outside of the main towns she's got a point. The amenities are scarce, electricity is intermittent and the nights are quiet. But the landscape is spectacular and the villages unspoiled, making Laos an ideal destination for anyone seeking an untamed travel experience.

After several hours of struggling to be heard above Coldplay's latest offering our boat stops for the night in a village called Pat Beng, which appears to exist solely for the purpose of servicing travellers on their cruise down the Mekong. Restaurants aglow with fairy lights are full of Western comfort foods like banana pancakes to ensure intrepid travellers like us don't get too homesick. This is fine, but when a young "flash-packer" complains about the price of a beer I surreptitiously flip a bogey into his dinner and slope off to bed.

At sunrise I'm following a track that undulates through a *Jurassic Park* landscape of fast-flowing rivers and precipitous valleys. In six hours of cycling I see no more than four or five vehicles. When a lizard the size of a small crocodile scuttles across my path, only a couple of metres from my front wheel I begin to wonder if this could be the land that time forgot.

Temperatures touching 40 degrees make the going tough during the day while at night I put up in wood-hut villages where the lights go off by 10pm. The local cuisine ranges from noodle soup to lizards and squirrels roasted on an open fire that I approach with caution. A couple of shots of Lao moonshine brings out the tough guy in me as I attack the reptilian flesh like a lion at its prey. When I begin to choke on a piece of its leathery tail I soon snap out of my fantasy and sheepishly ask an old lady if she's got some plain noodle soup. This is great entertainment for the locals who refill my glass, shake hands and assure me I'm very welcome.

At a hole-in-the-wall restaurant in a concrete block of a town called Udom Xai I meet a local engineer named Litu. At 30, he's one of the lucky few to graduate to a government job in a country listed by the UN as the 10th poorest in the world – "lucky" being a relative term. With 10 years experience in designing and building bridges he receives a government wage of US\$30 a month and never complains about the price of beer.

When I drunkenly mention to him how much a skilled engineer could expect to be paid in England he thumps the table in a demonstrative fashion uncharacteristic of the quiet people of Laos and laughs out loud: "Oh my friend, take me to your country, please, take me to your country. Here I make \$30 dollars a month, and nothing works. I buy a lighter for my cigarette, it doesn't work. At night the electricity stops. The only thing that works in Laos is alcohol. Drink a little and you are a little drunk. Drink a lot and you are very drunk. That is the only certainty in Laos."

As if to confirm this assertion we down three bottles of French red wine to end the night, slurring our words and dribbling into the gutter.

Touching speeds of up to 90km per hour my tires grip the hot tarmac as I sweep around hairpin bends into the dips of valleys before climbing back up to heights of more than 2,000 metres.

ROCKET FESTIVAL

Often the best way to plan a cycling tour is to leave the planning to a minimum. Arrive in a region that you're interested in and work out the tour as you go along by talking to the locals and other travellers you meet en route. They know best about the condition of the road ahead and any unexpected dangers that may lay in wait.

What they don't tell me about on this occasion are the rocket festivals that occur across Laos in early May to herald the rainy season. Only 10 km from the Chinese border, outside of Muang Singh, I look up to see what appears to be a ground-to-air missile piercing the great blue yonder. Down below hundreds of villagers and farmers have descended upon an area of land to set up a country fair that wouldn't look out of place in the early part of the 20th century.

There's an ancient magic roundabout that has to be hand pushed by the ticket collectors, a number of try-your-luck gambling games where it's possible to win anything from a bowl of eggs to a tub of Chinese talcum powder, and kids playing, men drinking, women selling fried chicken feet, and a group of monks kicking a football about.

The atmosphere is festive but the festivities don't really blast off until the rockets are launched from a 10-metre high bamboo platform. Farmers-cum-rocket scientists stuff three-metre-long bamboo poles with nitrate and charcoal. A brave individual hauls one rocket after another to the top of the platform, lights the fuse, jumps off the platform and runs for his life. The explosion that follows wakes every slumbering creature in the valley. The rocket, trailing black smoke and fire across the sky, reminds the gods that now, at the end of the dry season, rain is sorely needed.

The farmer whose rocket flies the highest is hauled up onto the shoulders of the other villagers and hailed as the champion.

HILL-TRIBE HAVEN

After 10 days of cycling an anti-clockwise loop of northwest Laos I finally roll into the semi-remote village of Xieng Kok where the road ends at the Mekong River that separates Laos from Myanmar. Xieng Kok is a great spot from which to explore hill-tribe communities. For now, these villages can be accessed free from the grasp of so-called "adventure travel companies."

The only other traveler in town is a lean Glaswegian named Ronnie Ramsay who's been entertaining the locals with a pocketful of magic tricks. As I approach he springs up from the crowd like a Jack-in-the-box.

"Where ya from, man?"

"England."

"Ah no, no, keep away. Ah cannay be seen talking to an Englishman. Am a fuckin' Scotsman."

"What?"

"No man, am only kiddin' ya. D'ya drink beer?"

"Sure."

It turns out Ronnie's brother is the famous chef Gordon Ramsay and it quickly becomes apparent whatever drive and passion it took his brother to become a four-star Michelin chef Ronnie reserves for the road. Currently working as a tsunami-project volunteer in Khao Lak, he'd taken the boat up the Mekong to explore the hill-tribe communities and entertain the locals with his magic tricks.

For the next few days we take to the tribal paths and explore the villages. The hill-tribe communities of Laos comprise a rich tapestry of ethnicities

BARE NECESSITIES

- A strong mountain bike.
- Pannier bags on the front and back to distribute weight.
- A lightweight tool kit; spare tires; a puncture repair kit; six spare spokes; and two spare sets of brake blocks.
- One spare set of clothing, a flashlight, medical kit, and a waterproof bag.





Eventually, a couple of Hmong men, smoking fags and grinning nonchalantly in our direction stroll by with AK-47's slung over their shoulders.

from across the region and visiting them unannounced offers a glimpse into a way of life that is gradually disappearing. The semi-nomadic locals welcome us like honoured guests, offer their food and demonstrate a level of hospitality for strangers rarely seen in the modern world.

On the final day in the forests above Xieng Kok we're led to a clearing in the forest where three generations of the same family bed down every night in a five-by-three-metre bamboo hut that stands on stilts straddling a steep hillside. The father welcomes us in as we crouch down to enter. There's little inside this dark, windowless hut: a charcoaled kettle seeping steam over an open fire, a primitive crossbow for hunting wild animals and a fishing net hanging from the thatched roof. The mother pours us a cup of black tea while an old man snores in the corner and a young boy stares at us with eyes as wide as the sky.

Ronnie breaks the ice, wakes up the old man and has them all laughing out loud at his magic tricks while the father prepares some 'herbal' moonshine and freshwater fish for us. In a moment of Gallic wit *par excellence* French colonialists once coined this saying: "The Vietnamese plant rice, the Cambodians watch it grow and the Laos listen to it grow."

So it goes for the rest of the afternoon, as we lay curled up contentedly on the bamboo mats, just like the locals. The melting heat finally chills out and at nightfall we poke our heads through the narrow entrance of the hut. The entire landscape, draped in forest, beats and pulsates to the sounds of nature. A billion crickets screech beneath a dome of shimmering stars. Water rushes down the steep-sided slopes, and the occasional sound of night fishermen whistling directions to one another in the Mekong below fills me with the desire to blend in with it all like a spirit escaping the human condition for good.

"Jesus Christ! Whatever shit that old guy put in the drink did the trick for me," I blurt out to Ronnie as we stagger down the moonlit track to the Mekong below.

CAPITAL GAINS

The following day I sober up, bid farewell to Xieng Kok and board a speedboat down the Mekong to rejoin the banana pancake trail where I began the tour at Huay Xai, two weeks and 600 km ago. Three days later the boat finally stops in the former royal capital of Luang Prabang. The fact that it was listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 1995 has protected it from the encroachment of ugly, multi-story hotels and shopping centres.

Surrounded by mountains at an elevation of 700 metres Luang Prabang's charm lies in its peaceful ambience. Wander the streets and you'll happen upon gleaming roofed temples set amongst coconut palms, lanes of fading French architecture, and markets where the multi-ethnic population sell textiles and handicrafts to wide-eyed tourists. Thanks to its French colonial past there are also some great places to eat where the wine is smooth and the food is fine. So fine that it takes me several days to tear myself away to continue towards the present capital of Vientiane, 390 km to the south.

POTENTIAL THREATS

- Laos is probably one of the least threatening countries in the world you're ever likely to visit. The main threats and aggravations are posed by nature itself. Seek reliable medical advice on vaccinations before setting out. If you do get bitten or find yourself in need of serious medical attention make your way straight to Thailand as there isn't a decent hospital in the whole country.
- If you do decide to dabble in drugs remember they're illegal. Punishment is harsh and some cops are honest, meaning they won't take bribes.
- The descents are spectacular, thrilling and dangerous. Throw caution to the wind, let go of the brakes, live for the moment, and if you do go flying over the edge of a cliff you can blame it on *Untamed Travel*.



Before I leave the comforts of Luang Prabang I'm advised to check with local authorities on the safety of the route I'll be taking. The next 200 km will lead me over the high Annamitic mountain chain where little more than two years ago Hmong rebels attacked a busload of Laos and gunned down all the passengers on board. Two Swiss cyclists who happened to be passing by at the time were also picked out and shot dead by the Hmong insurgents.

From 1963 to 1974 the Hmong in western Laos were trained and backed by US military technicians to be used as pawns in their fight against the North Vietnamese-backed Pathet Laos to the east. The nine-year war that ensued was both illegal and secret. Illegal because under the Geneva accord of 1962, Laos was a neutral country in the Indochina War and secret because the Americans didn't want the rest of the world knowing about it.

In 1974, after nine years of relentlessly pounding one of the weakest countries in the world, America finally called a halt to their military campaign and in 1975 surrendered to the Vietcong. In Laos, the communist Pathet Laos took power leaving the Hmong hill-tribe as outcasts in their own country. Many of them took to the hills to continue their struggle as insurgents, and to this day, 30 years after the end of the war, isolated pockets of impoverished Hmong rebels remain.

Climbs stretching 25km lead me

over the tops of mountains offering panoramic views of a magnificent landscape. The descents are exhilarating. Touching speeds of up to 90km per hour my tires grip the hot tarmac as I sweep around hairpin bends into the dips of valleys before climbing back up to heights of more than 2,000 metres.

Many of the hill-tribe villages I pass through are Hmong and many of the men carry AK-47's slung over their shoulders. I've no idea whether these weapons are for protection against Lao army attacks or for hunting wild animals. So in an open-air restaurant in the mist-shrouded mountain town of Muang Phu Khoun, once a stronghold of the Hmong, I ask a couple of local communist officials about the purpose of these guns.

"No guns in Laos. Laos is at peace," is the mantra they begin to repeat. When I continue to insist that I'd seen at least a dozen men with guns they chuckle amongst themselves and tell me the only people in Laos with guns are the army.

"But these people were dressed in rags," I persist. "They were walking bare foot. They definitely weren't the army."

By now we're all getting a little tipsy on Lao moonshine but still 'the party' officials stick doggedly to their script: "No guns in Laos. Laos is at peace."

Eventually, a couple of Hmong men, smoking fags and grinning nonchalantly in our direction stroll

In a moment of Gallic wit par excellence French colonialists once coined this saying: "The Vietnamese plant rice, the Cambodians watch it grow and the Laos listen to it grow."





by with AK-47s slung over their shoulders. Quickly I point out to my communist comrades the irrefutable evidence before our eyes but again the reply is predictable and lame: "No guns in Laos. Laos is at peace."

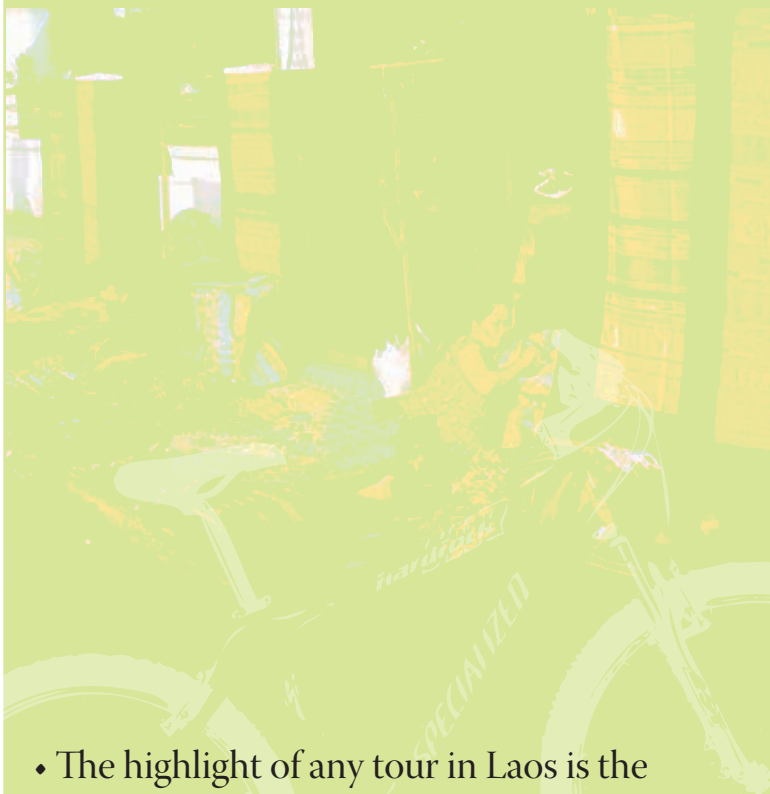
Finally I give up and propose a toast to my corpulent comrades on their hard-won victory over the Americans. Immediately, the conversation loosens up and the moonshine flows like piss from a buffalo. In Laos controversy is best avoided; fervent emotions are best kept in an icebox in your heart. This is in keeping with their religion, Theravada Buddhism, which emphasises a cooling of human passions. But it could also have something to do with its turbulent modern history and the fact that by the end of the secret war in Laos in 1974, it had earned (and has kept) the dubious distinction of becoming the

world's most heavily bombed nation, on a per capita basis, in the history of warfare. Half a ton of bombs were dropped for every man, woman and child living in Laos.

No one listened to the rice grow during those years. Today, with relative peace and stability, perhaps that's all that many of the older generation of Laos want to do. When I finally bid farewell to my new drinking buddies the stars are swimming in the sky and the moon is shining down upon us.

"Laos is a beautiful country," one of them observes as I rise to my feet. On this occasion, at least, I have to agree.

Two days later I rejoin the banana pancake trail in Vang Vieng before speeding into Vientiane where, for the first time in four weeks, I stop at a set of traffic lights.



- The highlight of any tour in Laos is the people. Serene, laidback and seemingly unaffected by the philosophy of greed.
- Draining the hours away with a few bottles of Beer Lao in the outdoor restaurants of Luang Prabang, one of the few traveler hotspots in SE Asia yet to be spoilt by tourism.
- Stopping over in remote hill tribe villages far from the beaten track.
- Eating the locals' wild cuisine and toasting their generosity with moonshine.
- Rising to the top of the northern mountains to look out across an impressive landscape draped in forest before hurtling down into the valleys below where the air cools in the thick vegetation.
- Watching local traditions like the rocket festivals, before joining the locals in a series of gambling games.

SIX TOUR HIGHLIGHTS



Where Angels Dare to Trundle

Even as a former ballet student, Alison Winward feels like a stumblebum as she learns some of the 4,500 graceful movements of Cambodia's apsara dance.

I'm standing in something like a high lunge, with my bottom sticking out so there's a twinge in the small of my back, my toes curled upwards so my feet are cramping, and the fingers of my right hand curved so far backwards my wrist is aching as I bring my hand in towards my face in time to the chant: "T'dak teen-teen-teen, t'dak teen teen."

It's 30-degrees plus, I'm sweating profusely and I'm wondering what on earth I am doing. What I am supposed to be doing is mimicking the *apsaras*, the "heavenly dancers" who grace the walls of the famed temples of Angkor

at Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Only I don't feel too heavenly, and "grace" is probably not the first word that springs into the mind of anyone watching me.

Having studied ballet since I was a child, I decided to see how it compared with Khmer classical dance – also known as "apsara dance" – so I signed up for five one-hour lessons at the Sovanna Phum Arts Association in Phnom Penh.

After almost a lifetime of practising pointe work (dancing on my toes)

and trying to achieve perfect turn-out – the ability to turn out the legs so that, with the ankles together, the feet lie in a straight line – I reasoned that swaying my arms and shuffling around to a *pien peat* orchestra of gongs, drums and xylophones would be easy.

But after about five minutes with my teacher Bell, a 20-year-old student at the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA), who looked disconcertingly like Jennifer Lopez, I realised I was wrong. The first thing Bell did was get me to bend back my fingers and hands in a way they had never been bent before. While perfect turn-out is the ideal in Western ballet, perfection for a Khmer classical dancer is the ability to arch the hand backwards from the wrist so far that the fingernails touch the outer forearm.

Bell put me through the exercises she has done since she was nine years old and started training to be a dancer: We knelt on the floor and, resting both hands on one knee, we used each hand in turn to bend the other as far back as it would go, which in my case was not very far.

Another exercise was to sit on the floor with our knees bent and, with the calf of our left leg resting on the bent knee of our right leg, use our left hand to bend our right hand round our left ankles – backwards. Then, still sitting on the floor, we extended our arms between our legs, so our elbows were level with our knees, then squeezed our knees together to force our elbows to bend outwards rather than inwards – another sign of beauty in a dancer.

Southeast Asian people seem to be genetically predisposed to be able to develop the “ideal” curved hand – ask an Asian person, male or female, to stretch out their hand, with the palm facing down and see how their fingers arch gracefully upwards and back in a way that just doesn’t happen for most Westerners/Europeans. Even so it takes years of training to attain “perfection.”

Bell – who can make her fingers touch her forearm – said her teacher had told her that, traditionally, dancers would wake at dawn and use dew from the trees to ‘lubricate’

their wrists as they exercised. I decided I would need major surgery and something considerably more potent than morning dew to perform this feat.

After completing our exercises, Bell set about teaching me as much as she could of *Cha Ban Jous Clae*, a basic warm-up dance she said incorporated many of the positions and movements of Khmer classical dance, and which she had studied for two years; dancers say it takes years of practice to perfect a dance.

Khmer classical dance is believed to have developed from Hindu dance, although by around 1000 AD it had evolved into its own

While perfect turn-out is the ideal in Western ballet, perfection for a Khmer classical dancer is the ability to arch the hand backwards from the wrist so far that the fingernails touch the outer forearm.



style. Khmers say theirs is one of the oldest dance forms in Southeast Asia, and has influenced classical dance in surrounding countries, most notably Thailand.

Many dances are based on stories in the *Reamker*, the Khmer version of the Hindu *Ramayana*, and have four main roles: *Neang* (woman), *Neayrong* (man), *Yeak* (giant) and *Sva* (monkey). The latter part is usually enacted by a man. And it is the most acrobatic of all the roles, involving leaps rather than the customary tiny steps that create the impression the dancer is gliding from one position to another.

Just as in Western classical ballet, hand movements have symbolic value. A palm facing up, for example, means “dead,” while if it’s facing down it means “alive,” and switching between the two represents the four stages of human life in Buddhist teaching: birth, life, sickness and death. Altogether, there are around 4,500 gestures.

Even moving slowly is no mean feat, given the heavy silk costumes that fit extremely close to the body – dancers are sometimes sewn into them for a tighter fit – and weighty metal headdresses.

Like most Khmers I told, Bell was excited that I was interested in learning about this aspect of her culture. However not all Cambodians have always been so proud of their dance. Classical dance was originally only to be performed for the Royal family – hence the alternative name of “court dance” – so it fell afoul of the Khmer Rouge, and around 90 percent of the dancers died between 1975 and 1979.

According to UNESCO, which in 2003 declared the Royal Ballet of Cambodia a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, the dance survived mainly because

of the small troupes set up by refugee dancers in Thailand, the US and Paris.

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, dancers started to perform again in the Cambodian countryside, and professional dancers, who’d gone into exile, returned to Phnom Penh at the invitation of the Ministry of Culture and RUFA to re-establish the Royal Ballet corps de ballet and a fine arts school.

Sovanna Phum’s head of publicity Srey Neat told me: “Interest in Khmer dance is growing as Cambodia becomes more stable. Most of the people who come to Sovanna Phum for lessons are foreigners. Cambodian people who really want to do it [go to] RUFA.”

Classical dance shows now feature regularly on the itineraries of high-end tours in Cambodia, but at the offices of RUFA, the paint is peeling off the walls, the floor tiles are cracked, the ceiling fans are creaky and there isn’t a computer in sight...

As for me, well, after five hours of tuition, I had pretty much mastered the first five minutes of *Cha Ban Jous Clae*. Or rather, I knew what I was supposed to do, even if I could not actually do it. Pass me my pointe shoes, someone...

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Web: www.jinja.apsara.org/sovannaphum
The website is out of date and does not mention classes or prices. A one-hour dance lesson costs US\$5, but I paid US\$20 for five one-hour lessons. The school also gives lessons in shadow puppetry.

Costa Rica:

Que Fantastico!

As if his tank were full of nitrous oxide instead of compressed air, Calvin Tang gets giddy while soaking up some splendid undersea terrain in what's sometimes called the "Switzerland of Central America."

A handful of fat, two-metre white-tip sharks lay dormant at the foot of the rock pinnacle, digesting their last meal, an unfortunate adolescent hawksbill turtle. Quietly approaching the biggest one, I thought of all the things I'd miss being able to do without my right arm, as I extended it out toward the shark's nose and prepared to shoot it. The shark turned its gaze upon me, as if daring me to pull my trigger finger. I did.

The shot came out blurry because I was too much of a pussy to use the flash, and also because I might've been shaking a little.

This was a typical dive around the submerged column at Virador off the coast of Playa Del Coco, with a fantastic mixture of fish species from the Caribbean and plant and crustacean life from the Pacific Northwest. Compared to the coral reefs found in the tropics, the colours were more muted and the surroundings more rocky. On most dives, the visibility ranged from seven to 12 metres.

But the marine life was astounding, flush with large pelagics and huge schools of fish, dozens of southern stingrays with wingspans up to three metres, guitar fish, tiger-snake eels, giant lobster and the most porcupine pufferfish I've ever seen in one place.

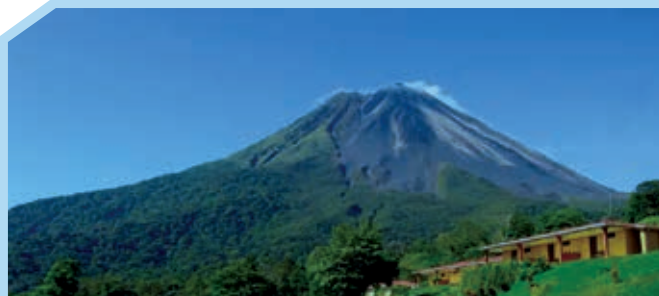
One of the reasons Costa Rican waters are home to such rich biodiversity is because the country's Pacific coast is located at the convergence point between the warm Hawaiian waters and the frigid waters from the North. Drastic thermoclines are the result of this union of currents, and a typical dive can involve temperature changes of up to 12 degrees Fahrenheit. For this reason I brought along my Pinnacle Fusion 5/4mm wetsuit, which kept me nice and toasty.

The animals were not just large, but full of life and movement. Jeweled moray eels, usually found hidden in burrows, slithered around. Thousands of reef fish like graybar grunts and cornetfish darted back and forth. But my favourite sightings were a dozen spotted eagle rays gliding in formation and a pair of harlequin clown shrimp doing a mating dance on a seastar.

For many more diving stories and images see www.calvintang.com

PRICE LIST

Prices were reasonable, running about \$40 for a two-tank boat dive, and \$265 for an Open Water course that included all equipment from Deep Blue Diving Adventures. Ask for the owners Terry and Billy, friendly, down-to-earth, former US Navy sailors. \$384 for got six nights in a double room that included taxes and breakfast.



ABOVE THE SURFACE

There is plenty to do topside in Guanacaste like renting a Jeep to explore the Monte Verde Reserve's rainforest. Bear in mind that the road is the rockiest and most grueling I've ever seen, so get the insurance on your rental. In the rainforest, you can do zipline jungle canopy tours, walk suspension bridges and drink in clean mountain air.

From there, we bumped and grinded the gears down the deformed roads to the beautiful Lake Arenal and drove around its shores to the splendid Hotel Los Lagos at the foot of the Arenal Volcano. There we soaked up the hot springs, basked in luxury for a few days and took a daytrip to the fascinating little town of La Fortuna.

The Republic of Costa Rica was much less developed than I had expected, and very safe for travellers. Bordered by Nicaragua and Panama, this little country has a lot to offer in terms of exotic travel and adventure in its vibrant jungles. The mountains come right up to the beaches and the forests are filled with spectacular greenery and wildlife.



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PATTAYA

Reputed to be the two best dive destinations in the area are a pair of shipwrecks: the Hardeep and the Bremen. But the Hardeep is numero uno. It sunk in 1942. This 40-metre-long freighter from Indonesia now rusts in peace some 25 metres below the surface, between the isles of Samaesan and Chuang. For divers who enjoy a heady dose of fear along with adrenaline, you can go explore inside the hulk. Best of all, wrecks attract an abundance of fish and coral. The two aforementioned islands are also wealthy in hard and soft corals. For beginners, Koh Kruk is the prime spot, and for middleweights it's Koh Rin, replete with boulder-strewn swim-throughs.

THE SIMILANS

The reputation of these nine islands has made international waves, as they are one of the earth's greatest living treasures for the amphibiously inclined. Situated around 100km northwest of Phuket, you'll most likely have to book a liveaboard to navigate these pristine waters. Some of the more legendary sites here are Elephant Head, off Island #8, which is renowned for its scenic swim-throughs and plethora of lionfish, coral trout, yellow goatfish, and on occasion, the hawksbill or Ridley's Turtle. Off the same island is Fantasy Reef, home to an array of clown and trigger fish and great swooping rays. But these sites are just rippling the surface – another 15-plus are waiting for you – varying in difficulty from intermediate to advanced.

PHI PHI ISLANDS

There's a sea of possibilities for aquanauts in this area of towering limestone crags. Koh Bida Nok, a sliver of an island, sees an awful lot of divers, enraptured by her plethora of staghorn corals and anemone fish, green moray eels and octopi. Also scoring high-water marks for marine diversity is Laem Tong, or Golden Point, near Koh Yoong. Trips here may include a plunge down to explore the pinnacle of Hin Jom – home to innocuous leopard sharks and stingrays. Schools of fusiliers, barracuda and jacks are repeat visitors, too.

KOH TAO

Within 45 minutes of Turtle Island are about 20 decent dive sites, ranging from sandy-bottomed beaches, to swim-throughs, soft coral gardens, and deep-water pinnacles. Sightings of pelagics, like whale sharks (the world's biggest fish), are a common marvel. Many of the boats from Samui and Pangan visit the same places. Thanks to the ease of diving these reefs, washed by gentle currents, this is the premiere place in SE Asia for neophytes to get their fins wet.

PHUKET

If you're coming down here to dive, chances are you'll end up water-logging some time at the two most popular sites for daytripping divers: Shark Point and Anemone Reef. The former reef earned the moniker for its largesse of leopard sharks. Only two-metres long, they laze around on the sand, and are used to divers approaching them; but you should resist the urge to pet them, for fear they might be injured or infected. Also sure to spellbind is the slew of soft corals in pink and purple. Nearby is Anemone Reef, which teems with marine life. Alas, neither of these sites should be attempted by rookies: the currents can be swift and unpredictable, and visibility is often not that good.

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While most hip hop DJs were growing up in the ghetto, dodging bullets and pimping ho's, young Duncan Beiny was growing up with his Jewish family in London and listening to Kylie Minogue. With both parents working the music industry, Duncan, now known as DJ Yoda, was exposed to a rich musical environment, "Dad can pick up any instrument and play it badly."

Pop wasn't enough for young Yoda though, "The first music that I listened to that wasn't pop was Ice-T and Salt 'n' Pepper and Big Daddy K and all that kind of stuff, so it was hip hop, and I was exposed to a lot of scratching." Inspired, the young lad took the first steps that so many DJs have taken before and since – he broke the family record player trying to scratch.

What started as a joke became a hobby, and soon Yoda was spinning at gigs at the University of Warrick, where he was studying. Fame came in the form of mix-tapes. "I made five copies for friends, then I made 10 copies then 50 copies. As each tape went on I was making more, 2,000, 3,000 copies I was copying off. These tapes were getting around and getting a nice buzz to them." Soon the mix-tape kid was approached to emerge from the underground and produce a legal album for release. This became *How to Cut & Paste Volume 1*.

The success of his tapes can be attributed to his adopting of familiar but unconventional sounds and music. "The glue that held it all together was hip hop music and between that movie samples, TV themes. Anything that I found funny, like me brushing my teeth, just stupid stuff really."

Yoda's style is unusual in a scene that is dominated by aggressive Afro-Americans or effeminate Europeans, who all take their music very seriously. Yoda draws from 80s pop, country and western, funk and plenty of samples and cuts them on a foundation of hip hop, similar to the Avalanches or Kid Koala. The result is a hilarious mix of bad taste and nostalgia. "Maybe a more immature Kid Koala," says Yoda.

This style is not without its detractors. "A lot of the time it doesn't go down well with other DJs. But to me I just kind of find it weird when I meet a DJ and say 'what sort of music do you play,' and they say 'dark drum and bass' or they say 'uplifting trance'. I mean, surely you must like other types of music? It seems obvious to me to play any music you like. A lot of hip hop DJs in the UK will tell you that at the age of 10 they were listening to Run DMC and Sugarhill Gang and they weren't. They were listening to Rick Astley and Kylie Minogue. I'm just being honest about what I listened to as a kid."

With such a wide and retrospective range of music to choose from, there is always the risk of being kitsch. "Sometimes I push it too far. Definitely. And I get told when I do. I play a lot of cheesy music and cheesy pop, beat scratching it or blending it with hip hop or something. But to me it's funny, that's my sense of humour. I do draw the line somewhere though."

The moniker DJ Yoda stemmed from a Yoda doll that Duncan had near his decks while gigging, like many DJ names, it was chosen for him and stuck. "Truth be known, I hate the name DJ Yoda, I always have done but it's too late now. I was a *Star Wars* fan but never a *Star Wars* geek. I was never like crazy, I could never tell you the length of spaceships and the names of planets. I just kind of grew up with the movies as a lot of people our age did. I got to DJ at the premiere of the last *Star Wars* film in Monte Carlo. I got to meet George Lucas, which was pretty crazy for me. I had to not mention my DJ name, I was like 'Hi I'm DJ... I'm Duncan.'"

With the new movies, interest in Yoda and all things *Star Wars* has spiked again. However, Duncan is clear on which Yoda is better "There's advantages of both. You know the old Yoda's nice for nostalgic reasons and also because it was more, like, a Muppet. But the new one has some cooler stuff going on. I used to sample all that stuff for my mix tapes. When the new movies came out I was like 'yeah, now I can get to sampling all their stuff', but actually he doesn't say anything that cool in the new ones."

Tape War

Think Hip Hop is all too serious? So does Daniel Cooper, who met with DJ Yoda, who spun up a storm in Bangkok's Q Bar last month, and isn't afraid to play Rick Astley and make you love it. Photo by Dan as well.

Bangkok Inside Out Outed

Politics got exciting at the end of last year when media baron Sondhi Limthongkul went head-to-head with Prime Minister Thaksin in a confrontation over press freedom. Thaksin levelled three massive defamation lawsuits against Sondhi and banned his weekly TV chat show. Sondhi responded by holding live shows, drawing crowds in the tens of thousands. Against this charged background the banning of an English-language book is illustrative of the state of freedom of speech.

Bangkok Inside Out (Equinox Publishing, 2005) hit the shelves ahead of two similar books, Phillip Cornwel-Smith's *Very Thai* and Jerry Hopkins' *Thailand Confidential*. *Bangkok Inside Out* takes a look at the best, worst and bizarre things that make Bangkok such an interesting and engaging metropolis. When it was published, the book received favourable reviews (including in the January 2005 edition of this periodical) and praise for its superlative photographs and cheeky but affectionate insights into Thai pop culture.

The authors are Daniel Ziv, who founded *Djakarta! – The City Life Magazine* and resident and fluent Thai speaker Guy Sharett who teamed up to produce the book. Both men are journalists and hold degrees in Asian studies.

After the book had been selling well for 10 months, they received front-page coverage in the Thai-language newspaper *Khom Chat Luek*. "Farang Book Ruins Thailand's Face" ran the headline, and the article claimed the book covers "negative subjects such as fake goods, gambling, gay performances, touts, scams, places such as Patpong, Nana and Khaosan Road."

Feeling the pang of civic duty, the editors of *Khom Chat Luek* sent the book to Ladda Tangsuphachai, director of the monitoring department at the Culture Ministry who was quoted as saying, "They

Local authors Daniel Ziv and Guy Sharett join Henry Miller, James Joyce, Wei Hui and D. H. Lawrence in sharing the dubious distinction of having their works banned. Cultural self-defence or media stitch-up?

Daniel Cooper shoots his mouth off.

write about Thailand but condemn Thai people, which is like biting the hand that feeds you. This is not right". She added, "There are a great deal of books written by foreign authors that insult Thai people... we cannot control the publishers or prohibit them from printing this and that because, according to the Constitution, the press has freedom to publish. So all we can do is take the problematic books off the shelves," seemingly unaware of the contradiction.

They say there's no such thing as bad publicity, but as the book disappeared from Thai shops, Daniel and Guy may have thought differently.

Tangsuphachai has previously been in the news for condemning the song "Sexy, Naughty, Bitchy" by local singer Tata Young, the Thai franchise of *Big Brother* and spaghetti-strap tops on women during Songkran, and wanting to set up floodlights outside love hotels on Valentine's Day to discourage young couples from getting carried away with the spirit of the occasion and having their first shag. It would appear that she's a bit conservative.

The book does deal to some degree with Bangkok's underside in chapters on counterfeit goods, ladyboys (transsexuals), Khlong Toey (Bangkok's infamous slum), *Yaa Baa* (a poor man's speed) and Patpong (no introduction required). However, this is nicely balanced out by the chapters on Thai traditional music, worship, traditional massage and food, which the Thailand Tourism Authority spends millions promoting every year. Indeed, the Patpong chapter begins, "It's with great hesitation that we include Patpong in here, because this so-called red light district is hardly the 'Must See' attraction of guidebook hype, and is in any case covered ad nauseam in nearly every piece of literature on the city."

And this is what's mysterious about the book's banning. For 50 years foreigners have been writing about Bangkok's naughty side and there's enough sleaze-fiction, dirty phrasebooks and whoring travel guides to pave Pattaya's walking street, yet none of them have gotten on the Culture Department's shitlist.

Bangkok Inside Out probably cops it because it has large glossy photographs, perfect for a stitch-up on the front page of a tabloid. But it would seem that the newspaper's editors or Culture Ministry staff won't or can't read closely because the text is often complimentary to the city that the authors obviously love.

Dan and Guy's great sin is that the book is accurate. Everybody knows that Thailand has a prostitution, drug, gambling and counterfeiting problem, but the only people prosecuted are the ones who point this out. Crying out that 'the emperor has no clothes', gets you a gag order and a lawsuit.

To be fair, nobody likes being told their shit stinks and Tangsuphachai seems to agree, "If the writers wanted to [provide] in-depth information on a city, they should have done it in their country because they would be the ones who know best about it. Just don't do it with our country."

Bangkok Inside Out has been heroically restored to the shelves of Bookazine but may be tough to find elsewhere.


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HOBBLED

Erika Fry is cast into the obstacle course of Bangkok on a pair of crutches, with a broken foot marinating in sweat.

Two weeks after I moved to Bangkok, I learned I had broken my foot three weeks earlier. It was a small bone – a seemingly insignificant injury of irritating, but localised pain that did not seem worth the time, attention, or possible consequences to actually pay attention to. I thought I had jammed my toe, maybe sprained something, or pulled a muscle.

And so I went about my business, slapping the uneven Bangkok streets in flat-footed flip-flops, and stubbornly watching the foot swell to a size that no longer fit under the loose band of a sandal, let alone into the shape of a shoe.

Two days after this point, I caved in and visited a doctor. I went to one of the hospitals here that serves green tea in the waiting room, and aside from the disproportionate number of people padding around on the soft-tread of orthopedic shoes, is otherwise indistinguishable from a five-star hotel.

I was getting a kick out of the scene up until the doctor gave my X-ray an authoritative shake and pronounced my foot broken. He pointed to the evidence.

I nodded, not anticipating anything worse than getting a guaze wrap and instruction to put ice on it, elevate, and take it easy.

“So, no operate,” my doctor smiled. “Just cast.” The smile got wider. Apparently this was a gift. I gave him a look meant to call into question all umpteen years of his medical training. I never dreamt a tiny break could justify anything of the sort. He was unfazed and had me ushered to the casting room. They gave me the hard plaster deal, up to my mid-calf and told me not to shower.

Having once been a grade-school dream of mine – that chance to be special and have your leg signed by everyone in class – the fantasy aspect was lost on me now as I thought about how I did not yet have friends in Bangkok, and would have an even harder time finding them without showering in a city that demands showering at least twice a day.

“Not even with a plastic bag?” I asked incredulously.

“No, no bag. No shower.” The doctor gave an assured grin. I of course had already decided I’d shower and would use a plastic bag and a rubber band.

He sent me home with orders to return next week and a prescription for Tylenol and several other mild painkillers.

Week one was a struggle. When it would start to rain, people would start to dash, streets would start to flood, and cabs would start to spray water on anyone foolish enough to be out. Unable to run and poised on rubber-tipped sticks that slide on rain-slicked surfaces, I was often one of the foolish.

Even on dry days, the sidewalks are jammed with food carts and vendors and people that pass between them, gawking and walking in the slowest and least linear of fashions. There are motorbikes that come careening through, limbless beggars, and even elephants.

There are footbridges to clamber up; public transport is above ground or below it; motorbikes are an impossibility, tuk-tuks a risk, and so taxis are the only way to go.

This speaks nothing of the cast: several layers of woolly gauze and hard plaster wrapped around your leg in a hot, moist, polluted city. So your leg sweats and itches, but can’t be scratched.

By the end of week one, after considerable exposure to showers and street floods, my foot felt damp, itchy, and uncomfortable all the time. The doctor glanced at it with alarm and chastised me for showering. I was again ushered into the casting room and put under the sharp and spinning blade of the cast cutter. My foot was not unlike one that had sat in bathwater for a week – the most extreme and translucent of raisins that had become rashy in patches.

I left the doctor with a fresh cast, orders to return in two weeks, and the same determination, despite doctor’s orders, to shower with a plastic bag and a rubber band.

I got more skilled at doing this, rainy season ended, and I adjusted. The intervening weeks were not painless, but certainly not as painful as the first.

I can now walk again, free and easy, without the constant armpit chafe of crutches.

Incidentally, the cast never did get signed. Despite their enthusiasm to put the pen to my plaster, I resisted the particular appeals of my friends at *Untamed Travel* to write the word “cunt” on it. We are a happy, healthy family of Farangs here.



...and Humbled: Bad Karma in BKK

*Six weeks after moving
to Bangkok, and just one
after getting off crutches,
Erika Fry got mugged near
Sukhumvit Road.*



Stop Press

On the way home from the second last night of deadline, Erika's spate of mishaps continued, as her taxi smashed into another one and did a careening 360 before sliding to a halt across the road. This time, Erika escaped with only a bump on the head, but still used it as an excuse to take the day off work. In the hope that the gods will start treating her a little better, the Thai staff of Untamed Travel has officially assigned her the nickname 'Lucky.'

I was finally walking free and easy again. Free and easy with my handbag hanging off my right shoulder, and a plastic 7-11 bag swinging from the left. It was the wee hour of the morning and we were walking down busy and broad Sukhumvit Road after having drinks at the Witch's Tavern (an unsurprising site of sinister beginnings). I was particularly interested in the chicken-flavoured snack sticks I had just purchased and was engrossed in some particularly ridiculous conversation about the subtleties involved in such snack food flavouring with my friend Serin.

I think I was talking about the virtues of barbeque-chicken seasoning when I heard Serin scream, a man grunt, and my face hit the pavement. I thought I had been run over by a motorbike, some drunk bastard riding the sidewalk because he was too lazy to go to the other side of Sukhumvit. But no, I'd been tackled by a man, some selfish and inhumane bastard who had run off with my bag (the one containing the wallet and not the chicken sticks of course.)

Without fully realising what was going on, I leapt up from the ground and went running after him, looking ridiculous in heels with a golden gleam and the limp of someone recovering from a broken foot. He had parked his motorbike about 50 metres up the road, hopped on and sped away. Full of fury, or futility, or maybe just the mad panic that comes without processing what is going on, I kept running and made it surprisingly far before realising the ridiculousness of myself and the hopelessness of my pursuit.

As if a car chase were any more promising, Serin and I tried to flag down cabs, motorbikes, and passing cars. All of them were full or wouldn't stop. Alternating distressed glances from the passing motorist to the red taillight of the mugger's motorbike trailing off in the distance down Sukhumvit, I was angry, near tears, and figured the bag was gone for good.

Walking back to the home for which I no longer had keys, I added up all of the things I had stupidly stored in the same bag. There was my wallet, money, credit cards, phone, passport, any and every form of personal identification, and other stuff I'm too disorganised to recall.

Having always disdained fanny packs, money belts, small zippable pouches intended to be hidden in a traveller's underwear, and all the other items in the line of alarmist tourist products, as well as the idea that I might be a stupid tourist with a need for one, I actively disregarded the foremost rule in tourist lit and opted for the complete opposite.

Of course I am the proud sort who, after six weeks of living here, resists the title of "tourist" and any guidance, however sensible and universal, which applies to them. Less a stupid tourist than just stupid.

It could also, in these Buddhist parts, be chalked up to bad karma.

No doubt my friends at *Untamed Travel* would certainly support the theory that being an American is more than enough cause for broken bones and stolen wallets.

DIScomfort WOMEN

*Sixty years after World War II,
women who were sexually
enslaved by the Japanese military
are still waiting for justice and
compensation, writes Richard S.
Ehrlich.*



Lee Yung Soo in Bangkok

A kamikaze suicide pilot fell in love with imprisoned “comfort woman” Lee Yong Soo, but that did nothing to prevent her from being raped by hundreds of Japanese soldiers during World War II. Up to 200,000 females – mostly teenagers – were enslaved for sexual purposes by Japan’s military in China, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, according to London-based Amnesty International.

The human rights organisation recently brought Ms. Lee and another so-called “comfort woman” to Bangkok to emphasise the launch of Amnesty International’s new report entitled, “Still Waiting After 60 Years: Justice for Survivors of Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery System.”

“I was 15, in my home in southern Korea, when a Japanese man came behind me at night, put his hand over my mouth and kidnapped me,” said Ms. Lee, now a 70-year-old South Korean, recalling her ordeal.

In the autumn of 1944, the innocent girl was taken to Pyongyang, now in North Korea, and put on a ship where she was tortured, threatened and forced to submit.

“There were five of us girls, with 300 soldiers, on the ship and we were repeatedly raped on the journey which took maybe two months from North Korea to Taiwan,” she said, speaking in Korean. “There was a ‘comfort station’ in Taiwan where I then received pilots who belonged to the kamikaze, a special suicide brigade.”

One of the Japanese kamikaze pilots, who repeatedly raped her in Taiwan, told Ms. Lee that she was his first love. “That Japanese soldier gave me a Japanese nickname, ‘Toshiko’. And the kamikaze pilot taught me a song he made up because he was afraid he would die when he finally had to fly. It’s in Japanese,” Ms. Lee said, and then she softly sang the lilting tune, translating the lyrics into Korean, which were then rendered into English:

“The fighting planes are taking off/Taiwan is disappearing far

below/Clouds appear/Nobody is saying goodbye to me/One person who can cry for me is Toshiko/We will fight in Okinawa/If I die, I will guide you to your mother/So please don’t cry, because you will go back to your mother.”

That shred of hope, amid their mutual doom and suffering, at least allowed Ms. Lee to believe she might survive.

“I think he is my saviour. I still thank him,” she said, clarifying that she had no romantic feelings for him, though he came to see her many times.

Occasionally weeping while telling her tale, Ms. Lee said the kamikaze pilot “gave me all his soap, and other things for taking care of myself, because he said he was leaving tomorrow to die.”

Ms. Lee returned home to Korea in May 1946, after more than one-and-a-half years of sexual abuse. She never married.

Today, she continues to demand justice from Tokyo, despite Japan’s official dismissal of any current legal responsibility for its military abusing “comfort women” during the war.

Ms. Lee and other victims of sexual slavery under the Japanese during World War II are demanding “a full package of reparations that requires rehabilitation, compensation for the victims, restoration of lost homes, property and livelihood and guarantee of non-repetition,” said Dr. Purna Sen, Amnesty International’s director for the Asia-Pacific Program.

“Before and during World War II, up to 200,000 women were sexually

*“Some were shackled together for long
periods of time. They were forced to have
sex with 40 to 50 men a day.”*

enslaved by the Japanese Imperial army, [some] as young as 12. They were held by the army in so-called ‘comfort stations’ for months, and some for many years,” said Dr. Sen, who accompanied Ms. Lee to Bangkok.

“Some were shackled together for long periods of time. They were forced to have sex with 40 to 50 men a day. The women and girls came from China, Taiwan, Korea, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Holland, East Timor and Japan.

“For 60 years, these women have waited for justice,” Dr. Sen said.

Richard S. Ehrlich, a freelance journalist who has reported news from Asia for the past 27 years, is co-author of the non-fiction book, Hello My Big Big Honey! – Love Letters to Bangkok Bar Girls and Their Revealing Interviews. His web page is at www.geocities.com/asia_correspondent/

CRIMINAL COPS



*A new book by an
NGO in Malaysia
reveals how brutal
and repressive
the police force
is, writes Wong
Seow Fung.*

The recent spate of stories about video footage of a naked Malaysian woman (at first mistaken as a Chinese national), performing squats in front of a female police officer in Malaysia, supposedly to see if she had any drugs stashed in her privates, made headlines across Asia. But according to a recent book called *Policing the Malaysia Police*, this kind of abuse is hardly rare.

Published by the country's leading human rights organisation, Suaram, this book tells horrifying stories of torture, corruption, discrimination, and abuse of power by the police force – skeletons which the mainstream media in Malaysia prefers to keep in the closet.

The book contains a series of memorandums submitted by various NGOs to the Royal Commission on the Malaysian Police. And the Foreword was written by Dato' K.C Vohrah, the commissioner of SUHAKAM (Human Rights Commission), calling on the Malaysian government to ratify the Convention against Torture, which has been signed by 125 countries.

Kua Kia Soong, the editor of this book as well as the director of Suaram, questions why the Royal Commission on the Malaysian Police is restricted to overseeing their management and operation, not about holding them accountable for cases of criminal conduct and abuses of authority.

He cites statistics saying there were 588 rape cases and 250 murder cases in the first five months of 2005 (the highest crime rate in recent years), which indicate that the Malaysian police failed to fulfill the five functions of the police, namely, crime prevention, arrests, security, detection, and maintaining public order, as stated in the Police Act 1987.

The book highlights one of the latest police shootings, which caused the death of 22-year-old Nagandren A/L Bhoopalan, leaving behind a 20-year-old widow (who was four months pregnant when the incident took place) and a six-month-old daughter. The shooting took place when the driver of a lorry refused to halt when ordered to do so. Nagandren, a passenger in the lorry, was shot dead. Or so goes the police version.

But according to the report, there are horrifying pictures showing how all his fingernails were torn out and there were wounds on his body and

forehead. The victim's widow then made a police report, saying that her husband was captured alive and tortured before he was shot dead.

In another memorandum, the NGOs questioned why ethnic Malay-Indians account for 60 percent of the deaths in police shootings or in custody, when they only represent a 10 percent swathe of the country's patchwork of ethnicities.

Of course the most infamous case in the book deals with Anwar Ibrahim, our former deputy prime minister. Detained under the Internal Security Act in 1998, he was held incommunicado for nine days and then brought to court with bruises and a black eye.

At the same time, Dr. Munawar Ahmad Anees and Sukma Dermawan were charged and convicted under the Penal Code for "unnatural sexual acts." They both pleaded guilty after being extensively tortured. According to Dr. Munawar, he was stripped and forced to reenact homosexual acts in front of police officers.

In the same year, 1998, the world witnessed 50,000 Malaysians marching in the streets to protest against the government. But the peaceful assembly turned into a riot when the Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) of the police corps arrived; they attempted to disperse the demonstrators with teargas, water cannons laced with chemicals and batons. It was the biggest uprising that has ever taken place in the country's history. This show of police force violated Article 10 of the Federal Constitution which reads: "Freedom of Speech, assembly and association Clause (1) (a) Every citizen has the right to freedom of speech and expression (b) All citizens have the right to assemble peacefully and without arms (c) All citizens have the right to form association."

Policing the Malaysian Police is an academic work that makes a great reference source. It also puts forth a persuasive argument that state-sanctioned violence will never inspire peace and obedience.

For more information on this book, see the NGO/publisher's website at www.suaram.net



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"We're coming to Samui. Do you know somewhere good to stay? No bedbugs," asked the parents of a friend of mine last year. I guess Koh Samui still carries the perception of a backpacker island, full of smelly hippies and other assorted cheapskates.

There are still plenty of backpackers hitting Samui's shores, but they don't own the place any more. That said, the island retains a wide range of accommodation, from Bt200 bungalows up to Bt20,000 boutique resorts. While Chaweng, Samui's tourism ground zero, has plenty on offer, the most luxurious place to stay is nestled on its northern end and takes its name from the beach it fronts – Baan Haad Ngam.

The resort has 40 rooms that run down the hillside to the restaurant, as well as an infinity pool and the beach. Inside, the rooms are tastefully furnished in soft yellows and browns. A massive bed, set under a suspended canopy of mosquito netting serves as the room's utilitarian (albeit a cosy one) centrepiece.

A Jacuzzi big enough for two, a set of his and her sinks, and a toilet stall outfitted with a phone jack await the customer that wants to never leave his or her bathroom.

It'd be a shame though, as the hotel features an internal waterfall and a stream that passes through the complex to the lush gardens outside.

Olivio, Baan Haad Ngam's restaurant, is by the beach and renowned on Samui for its fine Italian food. Like most tropical resorts these days, this one offers an onsite spa with massage services, steam baths and wraps. Blokes can also get their kicks surfing the Net on wi-fi.

With rates starting at around Bt5,000 a night, this isn't the cheapest place on Samui. All the same, manager Michael Howard says January's bookings have been brisk. Best to book in advance then, unless you prefer bedbugs and hippies.

Chaweng Oasis

Weekday and weekend rates can be found on the Baan Haad Ngam website, www.baanhaadngam.com where you can book as well. Baan Haad Ngam Resort & Spa are at 154 Moo 2 Chaweng Beach. Phone: 077- 231 500, Fax: 077-231 520

Hanging Your Hat: Places to sleep in Bangkok

There are hotels everywhere in Bangkok, but the main traveller hubs, especially for independent travel, are the Sukhumvit and Silom areas (the closest thing Bangkok has to a 'downtown', featuring much of the city's entertainment and shopping for foreigners and locals), and the famous (or infamous) Khaosan Road. Khaosan, known as the 'backpacker ghetto,' does still offer some very cheap accommodation, but has gone far more upscale in recent years, with rooms that are up there with the city's nicer hotels. If you're a planning sort of person, note that many of these places will give you a cheaper rate than listed if you book in advance online or by phone.

Top End: Bangkok has heaps of five-star hotels and resorts, including the world-famous Oriental Hotel, Shangrila, Peninsula, Conrad, Sheraton Grande, Amari, Novotel, and the rest. You can walk in if you like, but the rate will be a lot higher than if you book in advance, as those who stay in these hotels generally do – except for British royalty, who can drive their Aston Martin through the front window of the Ritz at 3am and still get a discount room – if not a freebie. So if you're a commoner, go to your travel agent, book online, or if you don't give a damn about money, walk in the door. The listings below cover a handful of mid-range rooms down to the cheapest accommodation available in Bangkok, that are off-the-beaten track and a little harder to find.

Pratunam/Siam Square Area

Holiday Mansion Hotel
Bt2,000 (including breakfast), 53 Withayu (Wireless) Rd, Ploenchit Skytrain, Tel: 02-255-0099. Good-sized rooms, clean, decent mid-range value, full range of room amenities.

Pathumwan House
Bt1,000-1,400, 22 Soi Kasem San 1, Rama I Road; National Stadium Skytrain, Tel: 02-612-3580. Big rooms with TV and

bar and all that. Caged birds form the cornerstone of the décor.

Silom Area

Anna's Café & Bed
Bt950 (large room), 44/16 Convent Road, Sala Daeng Skytrain, 02-632-1323. A bargain for this part of town. Not particularly fancy, but does the job well enough.

Bangkok Christian Guest House
Bt1,100-1,500, 123 Sala Daeng Soi 2, Convent Road, Sala Daeng Skytrain, 02-233-6303, www.bcggh.org. An old-style boarding house with some Christian principles still intact. Not the best choice for heavy drinking party animals. Fine for gentler folk.

La Résidence Hotel
Bt1,000-2,700, 173/8-9 Surawong Road, Chong Nonsi Skytrain, 02-233-3301. A cool boutique hotel, every room is different. The suites are very full-on with the décor.

Intown Residence
Bt600-700, 1086/6 Charoen Krung Road, near Si Phraya pier, 02-639-0960. Set in the winding sois of an Indian neighbourhood – a different Bangkok experience. Friendly staff, okay rooms

Niagara Hotel
Bt680, 26 Soi 9/Suksavithaya, Silom Road, Chong Nonsi Skytrain, 02-233-5783. Clean rooms, TV, a real bargain for this area.

Soi Ngam Duphli

Malaysia Hotel
Bt700-800, 54 Soi Ngam Duphli, Rama IV Road, Lumpini Subway, 02-286-3582. This somewhat tacky area has alleyways full of cheap accommodation if you wander around, (it predated Khaosan Road as the independent traveller base). The Malaysia Hotel is the legendary grandpappy of them all. Decent rooms for the price, though the scene is on the seedy side.

Sukhumvit

The Atlanta
Bt485-665, 78 Sukhumvit Soi 2, Ploenchit Skytrain, 02-252-1650. This throwback hotel with the classic décor has been open for several decades. Some love it, some hate it (read the rule book), but there's nowhere else like it.

Suk 11
Bt250-500, Sukhumvit soi 11, Nana Skytrain, 02-253-5927, www.suk11.com. Budget accommodation on Sukhumvit even has dorms. A pleasant place to hang out.

Federal Hotel
Bt900 and up, 27 Sukhumvit Soi 11, Nana Skytrain, 02-253-0175, federalhotel@hotmail.com. A former GI hangout from the Vietnam days, 'Club Fed' has been upgraded now, but is still classic enough. Comfortable rooms.

Manhattan
Bt1,400/1600 (with breakfast), 13 Sukhumvit Soi 15, Asoke Skytrain, 02-255-0166, www.hotelmanhattan.com. A standard-issue hotel in the heart of Sukhumvit. Nothing special, but okay value.

Sam's Lodge
Bt700-900, 28-28/1 Sukhumvit Soi 19, Asoke Skytrain, 02-253-2993. A new-ish guesthouse with shared baths. Make sure your room has a window before checking in.

Banglamphu

There are guesthouses everywhere in this area, so just start at Khaosan and wander around. They are often full, so you may have to hoof around if you want a bargain. Here are a few of the more upmarket places.

Sawasdee Group has several places dotted around the Banglamphu area (and expanding throughout the country). All of them have cool Thai-style hangout areas and clean rooms. See www.sawasdee-hotels.com

Prices range from Bt140-800. Some of the group include: Sawasdee Bangkok Inn 02-280-1251, Sawasdee Krungthep Inn 02-629-0079, Welcome Sawasdee Inn 02-629-2321, Sawasdee Smile Inn 02-629-2340-1, Sawasdee Khaosan Inn 02-629-4798-9.

Buddy Lodge
Bt1,800-2,200, 265 Khaosan Road, Phra Athit boat pier, 02-629-4477, www.buddylodge.com. Looks like the Khaosan town hall from the outside, with very nice upscale modern Thai-style rooms.

Nana Plaza Inn
Bt400-600, 202 Khaosan Road, 02-281-6402. A hotel-style high-rise more civilised and comfortable than the usual backpacker haunt

D&D Inn
Bt450-900, 68-70 Khaosan Road, 02-629-0526-8. Another hotel-style place with TV and fridge and all the proper stuff. Good value.

Thai Cozy House
Bt650-1,000 (including breakfast), 111/1-3 Taneer Road Khaosan Road, 02-629-5870-4. Boutique sort of place that is in fact cozy and away from the big noise of Khaosan.



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Malls & Markets

Every month in Bangkok a new mall or Tesco Lotus goes up, full of Farang fast-food franchises, a Cineplex and designer-brand shops. For the mall-weary expat or vacationer, however, the city still has a wealth of shambolic markets from Chinatown to the sprawling Chatuchak. Usually the best deals are done by benevolent haggling in these jam-packed mazes, and buying knock-off goods, whereas the worst deals (with the most convenience) come at any number of air-con malls where you can buy the same Prada bag that is quite accurately reproduced and being sold for 1/4000th of its price right outside its doors. In some areas, however, there is some consistency to the chaos, like the streets of shops devoted to firearms, cameras and caskets, in Chinatown.

MARKETS

Chatuchak Weekend Market (or JJ in local parlance): An exhausting stopover at BTS Mo Chit, this is Bangkok's best option for anyone wanting to get athlete's foot and buy a hissing cockroach from Madagascar. There are around 15,000 vendors here – some specialise in very fine Thai handicrafts, others in real cheap shit like old school YMCA T-shirts circa 1990. There is also an extensive pet market that PETA would shut down in a heartbeat. Chances are you'll find many bargains here, but with 300,000 weekly visitors it just may take a while. Use your Nancy Chandler Map for a consumer's compass.

Suan Lumpini Night Bazaar: A comprehensive night market offering a good selection of CDs, souvenirs, clothing, and handicrafts, conveniently centred around a beer garden with a kitsch Thai pop cabaret show and some decent food. Across from Lumpini Park at the Lumpini MRT.

Pahurat Indian Market: Selling Indian, Malaysian, and Thai textiles, this market is known for fancy and sequined fabrics, bows, tiaras, and the other makings of a Bollywood beauty queen.

Nakhon Kasem: Once known by a much cooler name (Thieves Market), this Chinatown area is rich in odd things, mostly second-hand stuff and antiques. The nearby and once dodgy Sampeng Lane (aka Soi Wanit) offers some good historic

costume items. Prostitutes, murders, and opium addicts of its previous days not included.

Pok Klong Talat (Flower Market): See Bangkok's best known orgy of botany in fullest bloom at 3am, down in Chinatown.

Khaosan Road: Though Thais used to call the place a "slum" up until five years ago, the biggest backpacker boulevard in the world has gone way upscale in recent years with proper hotels, two Boots pharmacies, and a Burger King. But there are still plenty of stalls boasting fashions fit for the colour-blind hippie, bootleg CDs, and a great assortment of cut-rate, or just cutthroat, travel agents. The street is also trendy with young Thais aspiring to "go inter," meaning international and has become something of a meet market for Farang guys and Thai gals.

Pratunam Market: An extensive street and indoor market best known for cheap shoes, clothes, and fabrics, it's located around the corner of Petchaburi and Ratchaprarop Roads, where it almost interfaces with the microchip mania of Panthip Plaza.

Patpong Night Market: For the tourist wanting cheap DVDs, a fake Rolex, or Same Same T-shirts, assembly-line Buddhas and some sneak peeks into go-go bars. BTS Saladaeng.

MALLS

Emporium: Open, airy, and air-conditioned, this mid-Sukhumvit

mall (Skytrain Phrom Phong) is full of designer shops and the hi-so types that fill them. It's also got a couple of great English bookstores, an impressive food market, and is generally a good place to be rich.

Siam Paragon: Known to its spin doctors as "the pride of Bangkok," this 32-acre shopping and 'lifestyle' complex has brought debilitating traffic to the already busy Skytrain Siam Station. It is SE Asia's largest mall, though, with all sorts of upscale extravagance and reasons to get gluttonous (like the gourmet food court), greedy, and guilty of whichever one of the seven sins would lead a person to spend Bt450 to get into its enormous Siam Ocean World aquarium.

MBK (Mah Boon Khrong): This rat-maze of a mall around Siam Square is especially popular with Thai teens. It's good for getting cell phones, business cards, knock-off goods, and forming a genuine dislike for shopping and people.

Pantip Plaza: The place for IT

geeks and computer nerds, the six-storey centre has the whole range of computer hardware, software, cheap games, digital cameras and other boy toys.

Gayson: Another fancy-pants place in the city's kidneys (Skytrain Chitlom) that has brand-named stuff at brand-name prices.

Central World Plaza: Just across the street from Gayson, it's open but undergoing extensive renovations at the moment to keep up with its more opulent cousins in the neighbourhood. Until the end of January, the plaza has the three biggest beer gardens in the city out in front. The Major Cineplex is on the 6th floor. Check out the show times and ride the elevator straight up there at the north entrance.

Siam Discovery Center: Less a discovery center, than a well-rounded mall, this complex in Siam Square is the poor sister to the new Siam Paragon, and also has a Cineplex up on the top floor.



RATTANAKOSIN

Within spitting distance of Khaosan Road – hint, hint – this is the city's most regal, historic and heavily touristed area with the scintillating Grand Palace and Temple of the Emerald Buddha. For some real insights into Buddhism, however, visit the nearby Vispassana Meditation Center (Wat Mahadatu, Na Phra Lan Rd.) for one of the free, daily monk-instructed meditation sessions. Get a glimpse of the Giant Reclining Buddha or a rubdown at the massage school at Wat Pho (Thai Wang and Sanchai Road). Templated out already? Then take some cultural lessons at **The National Museum** (west side of Sanam Luang, open Wed-Sun). Or stroll over to the legendarily hellacious Mahachai Prison, now housing a park and the Corrections Museum (Mahachai Road), which has a collection of historical torture devices and waxworks of execution scenes by machine-gun and sword. It's right near the Golden Mount where you can walk up the winding stairs for commanding views of the area. Across Ratchadamnoen is the **Queen Sirikit Art Gallery** (10am-7pm, daily except Wed), and just up the boulevard is the

Ratchadamnoen Boxing Stadium where the fists and kicks begin flying on Mon, Wed, Thurs in the early evening.

THONBURI

The original city across the banks from the new one has been steeped in waterborne history, like the ornate 700-year-old barges ridden by Thai Kings and kept at the

Shed of the Royal Barges (Khlong Bangkok Noi, near Pinklao Bridge). Meanwhile, the **Forensic Medicine Museum** (Siriraj Hospital, Mon-Fri), fascinates morbid souls with exhibits of famous murder weapons, crime-scene photos, serial killer corpses and abominations preserved in formaldehyde. Equally eccentric museum displays can be viewed at the nearby facilities for parasitology, anatomy, medical history and anthropology. To pick up your spirits, head for the riverside Wat Arun (an earthly manifestation of the Hindu heavens) or Wat Prayoon on Prachatipok Road.

DUSIT

The former grounds of King Rama V, **Dusit Park** (Ratchawithi Road) houses the stunning, golden teak **Vimanmek Mansion** as well as museums containing historic photographs, handicrafts, homages to sacred white elephants and Royal carriages. Nearby is the **Dusit Zoo** with a menagerie of exotic wildlife. A popular picnicking spot for Thai families on weekends, the zoo also has paddle boats, an especially creepy reptile house, a World War II bomb shelter and "The Wild Wild World Show."

SUKHUMVIT

Best known as a spot for eating,

drinking, shopping and seeing expats in what almost seems like their natural habitat, the longest road in the *Guinness Book of Records* begins not far from the city's Snake Farm (Rama IV Road, near Henri Dunant Road). Visitors can see the poisonous reptiles fed and milked at this anti-venom-producing Red Cross Institute. The **Jim Thompson House** (Soi Kasemsan 2, opposite National Stadium) houses the authentic collection of Thai silks, furnishings, and handicrafts accumulated by the American CIA agent-turned silk magnate-turned man that went mysteriously-missing-in-Malaysian-jungle. Near the Phra Khanong BTS is **Wat Mahabut** (Sukhumvit 77, Soi 7) with its shrine to the spirit of the country's most famous ghost, Nang Nak, drawing hundreds of people praying for luck, wealth or romantic bliss each day.

LUMPINI

An island of green in an ocean of grey, **Lumpini Park** (Rama IV Road) is Bangkokians' favourite place to run, walk, do aerobics, relax by the lake or get buff on the public exercise machines. Early morning or early evening is best for working out. Muay Thai fans can get punch drunk at the **Lumpini Boxing Stadium** on Tues, Fri, and Sat evenings. But in Thailand you're never too far away from the occult, so lurking nearby is the **Erawan Hotel Fertility Shrine** (2 Wireless Road) devoted to the Fertility Goddess Tubtim. The outdoor shrine, behind the hotel, is studded with wooden phalluses and other offerings made by the limp, the lovelorn, and mothers-in-waiting.

SAMUT PRAKAN

Some 320 acres of monuments, traditional Thai houses, replicas of famous temples, Royal barges and

other cultural incarnations, the **Ancient City** or **Muang Boran** (Kilometre 33, Sukhumvit Highway) only costs Bt50 to enter and slightly more to rent a bicycle. Sun bears, Indian peafowl, and men wrestling reptiles are some of the attractions at **The Crocodile Farm** only a few km closer to Bangkok, on the same road. Near the reptile repository, the **Erawan Museum** is built into the world's largest elephant statue. You can walk up through Erawan's leg to see a Buddhist version of heaven, or check out all the priceless antiques in the pedestal beneath the three-headed elephant god.





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TAXIS

Meter taxis are safe, cool, plentiful and cheap. They are required by law to turn their meters on, so if the driver refuses, find another one. A tip is nice though – these guys don't earn much.

BUSES

Buses vary in price and comfort: blue aircon buses cost from Bt8-20, depending on distance. The big red and blue buses go all over town for Bt4 and Bt5, respectively. Bus maps are available at all bookshops – the Nelles Bangkok map is the best of the lot.

TUK-TUKS

Kind of dangerous, but has to be done once anyway. All Bt10 tuk-tuk rides are scams. Unless you know the language and the city, a meter taxi is usually cheaper and cooler.

MOTORCYCLE TAXIS

Motorcycle taxis are the only way to get anywhere quickly during the day. Most drivers are fairly sensible, but the bikes are dangerous – keep your knees in. Fares are about the same as meter taxis.

SKYTRAIN

The Skytrain is comfortable and fast and great for getting you around the centre of town, but needs to cover a much bigger area to be truly effective.

SUBWAY

At long last the metro, or MRTA, is open. There are interchange stations with the Skytrain at Mo Chit, Asok and Saladaeng. It's a commuter system, so tourists tend to find the Skytrain more useful.

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BANGKOK SOUL

If you happened to miss one of the most brilliant exhibitions in the city this year, *Spirit House – Soul Building: Architectural Animism* by the English expat, Martin Collins, now is your chance to repent. Most of these Photoshopped “artographs” are available on-line through the Thavibu Gallery website at www.thavibu.com/special/martin_collins/mc.htm.

Truly some original, frequently soulful, sometimes sexy, visions of Bangkok's skyline.

Places to Eat: Around Bangkok

Any visitors to Bangkok are happy to shovel discount pad thai into their gullets and adventurous types may even order the amusingly named khao pat, all the while praising the subtle interplay of flavours that can only be achieved by skillfully heaping your plate with chilli, sugar and fish-sauce. But Bangkok offers delights to even the most jaded palate, whether your thing is river dining, scrounging the lanes of Chinatown for the perfect shark-fin soup, or even just a quiet place to take Miss or Mr Perfect.



SILOM AREA

SOI CONVENT (EVENINGS)

Silom area (Saladaeng Skytrain)
Don't be put off by the name, this is an ideal place to fill the belly before a night out in Silom. A number of good quality street stalls dish up a variety of staples like khao man gai (chicken with rice) and steaming noodle soups to slurp on whilst watching the street life. If Northeastern style Thai food's your bag it's well worth trying the jim jum, Northeastern-style hot pot for communal tugging between friends, or Hai restaurant for som tam (spicy green papaya salad). For an international touch La Boulange has excellent French breads and pastries and there's a number of good restaurants like Café Swiss (Swiss), Zen (Japanese) and Khao Gub Kaeng (Thai) to choose from.

BLUE ELEPHANT

(CLASSIC AND FRESH, FUNKY THAI)

233 Sathorn Rd., (Skytrain Surasak), Tel: 02-673 9353, 11:30am-2:30pm, 6:30pm-midnight, www.blueelephant.com, visa, amex & diners cards Set in a restored old colonial-style house and part of the internationally renowned chain of Thai restaurants, this outlet serves as both cooking school and restaurant. The relaxed atmosphere and wooden interior make for a more informal alternative to hotel restaurants and it's one of the few eateries in town to successfully create new, inventive Thai dishes without sacrificing real Thai tastes. Animal haters should try the shameful foie gras with tamarind sauce (Bt580). Bt800-1,200 per head will ensure a full trough not including booze.

SIROCCO

(CONTEMPORARY MEDITERRANEAN)

63rd Floor, State Tower, Silom Rd (Skytrain Saphan Taksin), 6pm-11pm, Tel: 02-624 9555, www.thedome.com, major cards. The only place in Bangkok equally suitable for a romantic dinner and a suicide attempt. Open air and located on the 63th floor, Sirocco is the highest outdoor restaurant in the world and offers fantastic views across Bangkok (it looks much nicer from up there, believe us), live jazz and contemporary Mediterranean cuisine. Starters will set you back around Bt200-600, whilst mains go for Bt500-2,400. Very busy at present, so reservations are recommended.

LITTLE INDIA (NORTH INDIAN)

64/38-39 Soi Wat Suan Phlu (Opp Shangri-La Hotel, main wing), off Charoen Krung Rd, 11am-11pm daily, Tel: 02-630-7906-7, major cards In a city of largely poor quality Indian restaurants, Little India stands out as a rare gem. Tucked away at the end of the soi leading up to the main entrance for the Shangri-La Hotel, this place is a quiet and congenial eatery serving superb North Indian cuisine. The management pride themselves on providing extremely tasty but

non-oily dishes with an authentic Indian taste. Suitable for veggies and carnivores, it also has a Thai menu, and live cricket and football on TV.

JESTERS (PACIFIC RIM)

Peninsula Hotel, Charoen Nakorn Rd, Klongsan, Tel: 02-861 2888, 6:30pm-10:30pm snack food after 10:30pm, major cards Very cool, very stylish restaurant with real attention to detail. Jesters has river views, impeccable service and soulful, chilled-out music to accompany the culinary delights. Highly recommended is the degustation menu for Bt1,400 per head- a great way to sample 'n stuff. Live contemporary jazz accompanies a chocolate buffet every Friday and Saturday 7-11pm.

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Nakorn Rd. (on the Chaophraya), Tel: 02-476 0022 ext1416, major cards
Although a worldwide chain, it's one that's succeeded in giving each outlet it's own character. The Bangkok branch at the Marriot Resort and Spa has established itself as a dead cert for great food and a great dining experience in Bangkok. The immensely civilized riverside setting with outdoor terrace is a great place to enjoy the much talked about Sunday jazz brunch
TONGUE THAI (THAI)
18-20 Charoen Krung Rd (same Soi as Oriental Hotel), 10:30am-2pm, 5pm-11pm, Tel: 02-630 9918-9, major cards except Diners, JCB Intimate and tastefully decorated eatery tucked away amongst the antique galleries of Charoen Krung road, and a good place to fill empty bellies after a day spending your life savings on fake Buddha sculpture and Chinese furniture. Traditional Thai fare like soft shell crab curry, mussels in a clay pot, and crispy morning glory go for around Bt100-400.
PATARA (THAI)
2 Sathorn 11, South Sathorn Rd, 11.30am-2.30pm, 6pm-10.30pm, Tel: 02-212 6420-1, www.patarathailand.com, major cards
Elegant Thai restaurant on Sathorn with some excellent Thai adaptations like raw tuna in a lime and lemongrass vinaigrette, and lemongrass marinated New Zealand rack of lamb with a spicy chilli sauce, green papaya and sweet rice rolls (Bt160-380 a dish). A good place for parties as they have ongoing group discounts and promotions.
O'REILLY'S (IRISH/CONTINENTAL)
Silom Road, corner Soi Thaniya, (Skytrain Saladaeng), 11am - 2am, 02-632 7515, major cards

A busy Irish pub attracting a mix of expats, locals and tourists and well placed for hitting the bars/clubs of Soi 4 or Patpong after a few pints. Traditional Irish pub grub (Bt250-300), continental dishes and steaks, and a Thai menu. Good value all-you-can-eat BBQ for Bt520 and set lunch for Bt195. They also have a wide selection of Belgian beers (around Bt250) - drink at your peril, these make beer Chang look like orange juice. Live music every night except Friday. Happy-hour from 4-7pm.
HU'U IN BANGKOK (INTERNATIONAL)
The Ascott Sathorn, Levels 1 & 2, 187 South Sathorn Rd, (Skytrain Chong Nonsi), 6-10am, 11am-2pm, 5pm-1am daily, Tel: 02-676 6673/77, major cards
Named after a small atoll in Indonesia and with successful outlets in Singapore and Bali, Hu'u is now in Bangkok at The Ascott on Sathorn. Aimed at attracting Bangkok's brightest, most buzzing crowd of high rollers, Hu'u Bar downstairs is for lounging, tapas munching and cocktail quaffing. Upstairs is for a more refined dining experience- Hu'u Epicure is a swish, antique and art-strewn mezzanine restaurant serving innovative Pacific Rim cuisine. Previously of the Savoy in London, Chef Thomas Smith is responsible for the culinary creations.
MEZZALUNA (ITALIAN)
65th Fl, The Dome, State Tower, Silom Rd. Tel. 02-624 9555, 12-2.30pm and 6pm-11pm, major cards.
Housed inside the dome crowning State Tower, Mezzaluna is the refined interior to Sirocco's exuberant outdoors. The chandeliers, polished wood and comfy seating add to the feeling of all-out, classical,

Italian opulence and as you'd expect there's superb views of the city from the window seating. Cuisine comes from all over Italy and the management stress the use of only the freshest imported ingredients. Appetizers from Bt310-Bt910 and mains from Bt850 up.
THE BARBICAN
9/4-5 Soi Thaniya, Silom Rd, (Skytrain Sala Daeng), 11:30am-1am, major cards, www.greatbritishpub.com, Tel: 02-234 3590
A split-level contemporary drinker that is smack in the middle of the Japanese Patpong. This is a great place to hang out with a few mates, sink beers and solve the problems of the world. Upstairs has big windows that affords a view of the comings and goings of Japanese gentlemen and their new friends. Happy hour is 3-7pm. Finally, The Barbican keeps the punters coming back with its pub-grub and a few other more nouveau items that has kept many an expat on his hardship posting fat and happy.
ANGELINI (ITALIAN)
Shangrila Hotel, New Road, 11:30am-2:30pm-6pm (light dining), dinner 6pm-10:45pm, Tel: 02-236 7777
Super-chic restaurant and bar with a beautiful setting overlooking the Chao Phraya River, this is a perfect place to impress a date. The open kitchen enables diners to watch the chefs at work, cooking up some fabulous Italian dishes. Regularly changing promotions and menu. Other eateries on site include Salathip (Thai), Shang Palace (Chinese) and Edogin (Japanese)

SUKHUMVIT CREPES & CO (FRENCH/MEDITERRANEAN)
18/1 Sukhumvit Soi 12 (Skytrain Asoke), Tel: 02-653 3990-4, 02-251 2895, www.crepes.co.th, 9am-midnight, major cards
One of Untamed Travel's favourites, tucked away from the Sukhumvit traffic at the end of Soi 12, C&Co. is now somewhat of a Bangkok institution after eight years of feeding the hungry a superb range of crepes and Mediterranean dishes. Sweet and savoury crepes come brimming with traditional fillings like the Chasseur (Bt160) or supreme as well as more inventive options like Casablanca (Bt200). There's also great appetisers, salads, pasta and other mains and ever changing promotions.
THE COURTYARD RESTAURANT (CAJUN CREOLE, INTERNATIONAL AND THAI)
Somerset Building, 9 Soi Tonson, Ploenchit Rd, 6am-11pm, Tel. 02-658 5678, major cards
A finer-dining US-style eatery from the same owner as Bourbon Street. Chef David whips a varied menu of his own Cajun/Creole inspired dishes together with the more traditional staples such as crawfish bisque, gumbo and jambalaya. A variety of US-certified steaks, salads and seafood such as fresh New Zealand oysters and Pecan crusted grouper with gumbo. Special brunch buffet on Sundays, happy hour from 2pm-7pm daily.
CHESA (SWISS)
5 Sukhumvit soi 20 (skytrain Asoke), 11am-11pm, Tel. 02-261 6650, major cards
No snow or silly woollen hats in sight. A laid-back Swiss restaurant serving the usual fondue fare plus some more interesting dishes in a comfy, off-piste environment. Around Bt1,000 a head for a full skier's fill

up. The management pride themselves on disproving the belief that Swiss food is always heavy and stodgy.
BOURBON ST BAR & RESTAURANT
29/4-6 Sukhumvit Rd Soi 22 (Skytrain Phrom Phong), 7am-1am, Tel: 02-259 0328-9, www.bourbonstbkk.com, major cards
Popular US-style muncher and tavern a stone's throw from the Emporium shopping center. A great place to stuff yourself senseless on the likes of jambalaya, blackened redfish and BBQ ribs (Bt200-400 per head). If you're skint and hungry don't miss the all you can eat Mexican buffet every Tuesday night (Bt250 ++).
IKKYU-AN (JAPANESE)
635-637 Sukhumvit Rd. (opp. Emporium), Mon-Fri 11am-2pm, 5pm-8:30pm, Sat-Sun 11.30am-8:30pm, Tel: 02-260 3332, major cards
The heavy shopper's Japanese restaurant, Ikkyu-An succeeds in dishing up reasonably priced, authentic Japanese grub in a decidedly 'un-stiff' atmosphere. Sushi counter downstairs and tatami seating upstairs.
DA GIOVANNI (ITALIAN)
71/1 Sukhumvit, Soi 3 (behind Bamboo Pub) Tel. 02-253 2462. Tucked away in an unlikely location behind the Bamboo Pub and Restaurant, this cosy Italian trattoria is a surprisingly pleasant place to dine. Reliable pasta favourites such as lasagna with beef, and vongole for (Bt180-290), and a selection of pizzas for Bt200-280. Grilled mains like Pollo al limone (chicken in lemon sauce, Bt250) and traditional starters like mozzarella with fresh tomatoes and basil (Bt90). Thai menu also available.
THE BULL'S HEAD
Sukhumvit Soi 33/1, (Skytrain Phrom Phong) 11:30am-1am, www.greatbritishpub.com, Tel. 02-259 4444, major cards
This is a British pub full of mostly expat Brits looking for a little taste of home. Comfort food for the needy. Thursday nights are Accumulator - win up to Bt18,000, Saturday and Sunday feature First Half Happy Hour, half price pints for the first half of every football game and Sunday nights are Toss the Boss until 7pm.
ABYSSINIA CAFE (ETHIOPIAN)
Sukhumvit soi 3 (near Grace Hotel), daily 11am-11pm
Well worth seeking out for those looking to get off the well-eaten culinary path. A small cafe-like establishment with very limited seating, the magnificent smell of freshly roasting coffee (literally roasted in the restaurant area when we visited!) and good food. Small dishes sit upon a blanket of the sour Ethiopian bread injera, and are eaten together using the hands. Unusual (to most of us) but very tasty.
SAN REMO (ITALIAN PIZZERIA)
253/2 Sukhumvit Soi 31 (Skytrain Phrom Pong) Mon-Fri, 6pm-11pm, Sat-Sun, midday-11pm, www.dininginthaailand.com/sanremo.asp, Tel: 02-258 6919, major cards
San Remo has a curious Mediterranean al fresco feel without actually being al fresco. Around 40 different pizza toppings (Bt235-285) such as good old heart-stopper, Four Seasons, and Gioiosa (mozzarella, small prawns, green peas, smoked salmon and Italian parsley) and a wide selection of pastas (Bt175-195) like Penne Treviso (penne pasta in cream sauce, Speck, radicchio salad, parmesan cheese). Also worth trying is the anti-pasti selection which includes some delicious roast vegetables and prosciutto.

Pick 'n' mix and sharing between mates is the best option.

NOVOTEL SIAM SQUARE

Siam Square Soi 6 (Skytrain Siam), 6am-10am, 11:30am-3pm, 6:30pm-10:30pm, major cards, www.novotelbkk.com, Tel: 02-209 8888 Right in the heart of Thai teenybopper land and housing three restaurants under one roof – Lok Hin Wah (Chinese), Focaccia (Italian) and The Square (international). The latter is the perfect place to stuff your face at the lunch-time buffets, only Bt690++, Mon-Sat. Or get Dim Sum-ed at Lok Hin Wah's all you can eat lunch for Bt420 until 2:30pm.

ANTONIO'S TRATTORIA (TRADITIONAL ITALIAN)

59/1 Soi Sawasdee, Sukhumvit 31 Rd, Tel: 02-258 4247, 02-258 4108 A bastion of truly authentic Italian food, Antonio's stands out amongst the zillion internationalised Italian eateries around town. Contemporary decor complements a cozy, trattoria-style ambience and provides an ideal for setting some real mama-style cooking. An ample a la carte selection covering all bases from antipasti to grill. Well worth going the full monty rather than playing pasta-and-pizza.

NABE YA (JAPANESE)

2nd Fl., Pathumwan Princess Hotel, 444 Phayathai Rd, 11am-10:30pm, Sat-Sun buffet 11:30am-2:30pm, Tel:02-216 3700 ext. 20226, www.pprincess.com, major cards Well placed for a Nipponese nosh up after braving the hordes of teenage girls at MBK, and realizing you've bought armfuls of crap you don't really want. All the usual Japanese fare such as sushi, sashimi and tempura dishes as well as their speciality, hotpots, so it's a good idea to come with friends. Decent buffets available here and at neighbouring Korean restaurant Kongju.

RANG MAHAL (INDIAN)

The Rembrandt hotel, Sukhumvit soi 18, 11:30am-2:30pm, 6:30am-10:30pm, Tel:02-261 7100 ext.7532, major cards

A true Maharaja's eatery, Rang Mahal's sumptuously appointed with skyline views of Bangkok and fantastic Indian food. Live Indian music to accompany dishes such as Punjabi Samosa (Bt150) and Rogan Josh Kashmiri (Bt375).

TAMARIND CAFÉ (VEGETARIAN FUSION)

27 Sukhumvit Soi 20, Tel. 02-66 7421, Fax. 02-663 4261 One of the few decent veggie restaurants in this town of carnivorous beasts. Some extremely tasty and innovative vegetarian dishes with a fusion of international flavours and foodstuffs.

They're also known for their variety of fruit shakes, smoothies and wide selection of teas. Rooftop dining area for romantics and photographic gallery, F-Stop, on site.

HIMALI CHA CHA

(INDIAN VEGETARIAN)

Three outlets: Silom Soi Convent (Skytrain Sala Daeng); New Road, Bang Rak; and Sukhumvit 35 (Skytrain Phrom Phong), 11am-3:30pm 6pm-10:30pm, major cards First established in 1979 by Cha Cha, chef to the rich and famous. Now in the hands of his son Kovit, who has another outlet in Silom. Specialising in North Indian, Mughlai Muslim and vegetarian food. Try the specials from the tandoor, at Bt140 for half a chicken you'll still have cash to knock a few back in one of the nearby pubs.

WITCH'S OYSTER BAR &

RESTAURANT (OYSTER BAR, SEAFOOD & GRILL)

20/20-21 Ruamrudee

Village, Ploenchit

Road (Skytrain

Ploenchit), 11am-

2pm 5pm-10pm,

www.witch-tavern.com, Tel.02-255

5354, major cards

(except Diner's)

If you want to get

your date in the

mood without the

use of Rohipnol,

this is the place.

The only oyster bar

we're aware of in

Bangkok, it has an

international range

of the slippery

aphrodisiacs

imported from

Australia and other

Euro-style seafood.

They also serve up

some delicious British

dishes such as roast

rib of beef, stilton

soup and lobster

with orange and

port sauce. Plenty

of wines and malt

whiskies for quality

quaffing. Happy

hour 5pm-8pm

NIGHT FOOD MARKET

(THAI/CHINESE)

Soi 38 (Skytrain Thonglor)

Thais come from far

and wide to eat at

this collection of

gourmet street

vendors. A cut

above the usual but

still dirt cheap,

you can pick up

dishes from different

stalls and sit

wherever you want.

Must tries are the

ba mii keow naam

(wheat noodle soup

with red, marinated

pork and wontons),

the super-tender

braised pork leg

(khao ka moo), and

chicken satay. Stuff

yourself senseless

for under Bt100

before moving on

to one of the nearby

bars or clubs.

LARRY'S DIVE

(AMERICAN/MEXICAN)

8 Sukhumvit Soi 22

(Skytrain Phrom

Phong), 10am-1am,

www.larrysdive.com,

Tel. 02-663

4563, Visa, Master

cards

A beach-styled bar

and restaurant

complete with

tropical fish murals

and even a dive

shop on premises.

Popular with expats,

Larry's is a great

place for beer

drinking, pool



in Bangkok, with a real Greek chef to boot. Mediterranean decor, real olive oil, Greek wine and plate smashing on Friday and Saturday nights. Plenty of parking space on site.

BANGLAMPHU

SHOSHANA

86 Chakraphong Road, next to the petrol station, 10am-midnight, Tel. 02-282 9948, no cards The best in Banglamphu for cheap Israeli/Middle-Eastern food. Generous portions of humous, falafel, red rice, hazilim, cucumber and tomato salad, schnitzel, pita, and lovely chips for Bt35-60. Aircon, and friendly. Great for vegetarians.

TAKETEI

Nana Plaza Inn, about 10 metres off Khaosan, 11:30am-1am, major credit cards. With a Thai chef who has more than 30 years experience in preparing Japanese cuisine, fresh seafood brought in every afternoon, and a special section in the back with tatami mats, Taketei offers an authentic taste of Japan at a fraction of the usual price. Especially popular is the "Sushi Set" (Bt160), which comes with seven different kinds of sushi and three cucumber rolls. They have also created their own version of vegetarian rolls, serve up juicy steaks, green tea ice cream, and have 12 set menus on offer all day.

JOK POCHANA RESTAURANT

Samsen Soi 2, 6pm-4am (and beyond), Tel. 02-282 9396, no cards This Thai-style seafood place has been feeding the faithful excellent food and late-night beers for well over a decade. Jok Pochana offers big prawns, crab sausage, steamed mussels, and decent prices — try the Bt60 tom yum kung, nature's tastiest hangover cure. More importantly for some, once the doors have closed on the bars of Khaosan, you can still sit on the street here eating and drinking until the wee, wee hours of the morning. A large Heineken is only Bt70 — only a couple of baht more than the shop.

HEMLOCK

56 Phra Athit Road, near Peachy guesthouse, 4pm to midnight, closed Sunday, Tel. 02-282 7507, no cards Hemlock was the first of the "arts cafes" on Phra Athit Road and is still the most

successful, because the food is excellent and cheap — in spite of its swanky appearance when you peer in longingly from outside. An unusual feature of the extensive menu is a selection of "Ancient" dishes like the "Grand Lotus Rice" (Bt80), with spiced rice cooked with prawn, pork, egg and Chinese sausage wrapped in a lotus leaf and served with a sweetish mint sauce. Lovely stuff. They have some pretty inexpensive wines as well.

NA PHRA LAN

18 Na Phra Lan Road, 10am-10pm, closed on Sundays "It's An Art Cafe" read the name cards for this restaurant, which is across the street from the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. Housed in a beautiful old wooden building, the restaurant serves up plenty of dishes in the range of Bt40-60, such as "Rice with fried fish, garlic and pepper", and "Spicy, fluffy catfish salad." They also host regular exhibitions by apprenticing artists of nearby Silapakorn University, who tend to hang out upstairs in the smoking section. If you just want to stop in for a jolt of caffeine, they've got Brazilian coffee for Bt45.

LA CASA RISTORANTE(ITALIAN)

210 Khaosan Road, noon-midnight, Tel. 02-629 1627-8, major cards. La Casa's success is proof that Khaosan has gone upscale. Fastidiously decorated, it's a great place for backpacker couples on their anniversary. A bargain for the quality — a plate of pasta runs about Bt125. Menu includes pizza, pasta, calzone, steaks, a wine list and desserts. All the waiters are named Luigi.

RICKY'S COFFEE SHOP

22 Phra Arthit Road, 8am-Midnight daily, no cards Probably the best baguettes in Banglamphu, for around Bt80 they include olives, salad, and olive oil. Even better for the cheese lovers among you with a choice of Danish blue, Dutch edam and regular cheddar cheeses plus ham, pastrami, salami, and more. A range of all-day breakfasts, good coffee, Thai and vegetarian dishes, too. To complete the picture, there's a rustic wooden interior with atmospheric photos of Peking from the '20s.

It's small wonder that Thai people spend all day stuffing themselves with their delicious cuisine, but how do they keep that svelte figure which makes the nation famous?

Cameron Cooper pockets the antacid and goes in search of an answer.

Compared to Westerners, Thais have a strange relationship with food. Before coming to Thailand, I'm embarrassed to admit, I half-expected that because there was supposed to be so much poverty, (like on the sponsor-a-child commercials back home,) that food shortages would manifest themselves in some way that would excite great guilt and pity. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that the city of Bangkok was basically the world's biggest restaurant – pedestrian thoroughfares here are of secondary importance to a good feed.

Then during an apprenticeship as a copy editor at the Thailand Times newspaper, I noticed that my Thai co-workers were pretty much constantly eating, shoveling all manner of bitter, fatty, fishy, spicy, sour, sweet and fragrant tidbits into their mouths and under my nose, urging me to join in the great fun of constantly feeding one's face.

To return the favour, I tried buying food off the street and offering it around. Few of the Thais ever accepted it, even openly turning up their noses at something that sent them into ecstatic murmurs just the day before. I wondered if they suspected I was spitting in it. Clearly there was something I was missing. These people ate non-stop, yet seemed to be picky eaters. On top of this they weren't fat, and had glowing healthy skin and teeth – unlike the pallid caries-ridden fatties that seemed to comprise the bulk of my home country's inhabitants. It didn't add up.

Through trial and error, close observation, marrying a Thai, losing 20 kilos by adopting the local eating habits, and studying a few websites, the secrets slowly unravelled. As it works out, Thai food is very healthy stuff – even medicinal, as researchers are swiftly discovering.

Traditional Thai medicines are based on natural indigenous herbs prescribed by professional healers. Consider that rainforests still provide international pharmaceutical companies with the foundations of the majority of their new medicines, and it's obvious that the researchers are only rediscovering, refining and marketing products that have been known for centuries.

It makes sense that because the herbs that fill the jungle can taste nice (often an acquired taste, mind you), many of them found their way into the cuisine itself, to the point where, for Asian people, there is a fine line between food and medicine. Food is essential to health and feeling good (after all, if you don't eat, you get sick), so is very important aspect of a Thai person's day. One of the first things a Thai will often say when you meet up is: "Have you eaten yet?"



I've developed a few unsubstantiated theories of my own to answer the questions that first popped into my mind about Thais and their strange obsession with food.

First off, they suffer far less obesity than Westerners because unlike most Occidentals, Thais tend to nibble away at different things throughout the day, rather than sitting down to massive bloating meals of chimichangas with sour cream or roast beef and mash with two veg. This way, you digest more effectively and don't overeat until you're stuffed.

Thais will pick at something like a bag of papaya and pineapple in the mid-morning, a mid-sized plate of rice with curry at lunch, a few sugar-coated sour tamarind balls in the mid-afternoon, maybe some gummy bears an hour after that. Then maybe a group from the office will decide to eat together at a restaurant and spend the whole hour en route deciding the several varied communal dishes they'll order. And then each person will pick and choose from the ones that most appeal to them – unlike at my childhood dinner table where "You'll eat what's on your plate and like it, young man," was one of the most common phrases.

It's logical that by eating this way, you'd develop a very keen awareness of how what you're eating makes you feel. The reason my co-workers refused the food I assumed they liked was that they didn't want it at that particular time. Their pickiness was an expression of a natural instinct for what their bodies required. Most Westerners have long since stopped listening to our cells screaming: "No! No! Stop punishing me, you bastard!" as we stuff down yet another empty-caloried fast food burger.

Variety and moderation is the key here. And if you peer between the clusters of noodle wagons and fruit vendors purveying their tasty edible medicines, you'll even spot the occasional fast food restaurant – after all, sometimes your body craves a little pure fat.

And that's another good reason to be in Southeast Asia.

Drinks List

Bangkok is rightly famous for its nightlife, offering all types and flavours of establishment, from old men selling beer from a wheelbarrow to mega-clubs, to the infamous sex shows down at the 'Pong, and everything in between. Things are changing though, many punters are shocked by the 1-2am closing time (and that's if you're lucky). That's right and the only after-hours place is the street, but we like it down there. Also shocking is the no-ID no-entry policy, even if you're 80, so remember that PADI certificate or library card.

SUKHUMVIT & AROUND

TSUKIYO

Soi Ekamai 28, Sukhumvit 63 (100m from Phetburi Rd), Tel. 06-527 0099, 01-511 4755, no cards, www.tsukiyobkk.com, closed Mondays Tucked away in the depths of Soi Ekamai this summerhouse-turned-bar opened last March and has seen continued popularity under the watchful eye of Octo, divemaster-turned-DJ. Downstairs is an open sprawl of cushions and platforms in what looks like the world's most tasteful carport. Upstairs is aircon-cooled funk. Not a place for raving, more of a lounging place to sink beers and eat yummy food. Kitchen closes at midnight.

SIN BAR

Rooftop above Ball in Hand, 18 Sukhumvit Soi 4, Tel. 02-265 64840, major cards, www.sin-bangkok.com

Slick and cool rooftop bar just down the soi from Nana plaza. The operators of Sin have raised the bar on soi 4 nightlife, steering clear of the beer-bar/go-go bar, flesh-for-sale concept, by opening a stylish modern bar. Great view of the neighbourhood and a decent menu to boot. The club downstairs is sometimes closed but worth a check when it is open as the owner employs top-line DJs.

87 PLUS

Conrad Bangkok, All Seasons Place, 87 Wireless Road, Tel: 02 690 9999, www.conradhotels.com, major cards 87 has re-launched as 87-Plus. Live music is the new plus, with a resident band, plus regular DJ sets. Slick and sumptuous club/

bar/restaurant with a 'World Food/Global grooves' theme.

TOKYO JOE'S

9-11 Sivaporn Plaza, Sukhumvit Soi 24 Opposite Ariston Hotel, Open 17.30 - 01.30 Tel: 02-661 0359, www.tokyoesbkk.com, visa, master cards

Live music seven nights a week with the top blues, groove and soul bands in BKK on a rotating schedule. These include The Soi Dog Blues Band, Cannonball, Savannah on the weekends, Adam on Acoustic Blues every Monday, and TAB with traditional blues on Tues & Thurs. Small beers are Bt90, Bt150 for large beers. Mixed drinks go from Bt100-150. Happy hour is 6-9pm with Bt80 beers and jugs of Asahi for Bt300. Tuesday is two for one beers after 9pm, with Georgia singing.

GULLIVER'S TRAVELER'S TAVERN Sukhumvit Soi 5, by Foodland, (Skytrain Nana) The upmarket sister to the pub we all know from Khaosan. And she's a bloody big sister at that. There's a big bar, a big screen, a big car rotating overhead and loads of pool tables. You're looking at a more American theme here rather than Banglamphu's faux-London drinker and the place is more popular with middle-aged expats and teachers rather than young hipsters, but reasonably priced drinks and free Internet makes it worth a stop.

CONCEPT CM2

Basement, Novotel Siam Square (Skytrain Siam), Tel. 02-255 6888, www.cm2bkk.com, major cards Popular and notorious disco in the basement of the Novotel Hotel, CM2



attracts an international crowd from the rooms above and the streets outside who cluster around whiskey bottles and ogle the beautiful people. The main room showcases the resident All Stars Band, playing from Friday to Wednesday. For the more aurally aggressive there's the Boom Room playing Hip-Hop or Sensations Karaoke for those who like the sound of their own crooning. Mondays are Lady's night (free entry and drink for chicks), Thursday's belong to DJ Lek & Kid spinning Hip-Hop.

Q BAR

34 Sukhumvit Soi 11. Take quick left at end of the soi. (Skytrain Nana) major cards, Tel. 02-252 3274, www.qbarbangkok.com, major cards except DinersA stylish venue with black, padded walls reminiscent of a nuthouse for vampires. Consistently plays quality, butt-wiggling music and regularly features international DJs. Vodka lovers will enjoy the wide selection of brands, all kept chilled to perfect quaffing temperature or served at Bt100 in jelly form. Downstairs is for mingling while the upstairs lounge is for romancing, and loners can sulk on the open-air terrace. Bt500 cover after 10pm with two drinks. There's Massive Mondays (Bhangra & Dancehall), Globalism Tuesday (afro, latin, percussive house, Wednesday is Ghetto Fabulous, uniting Hip Hop and House, Liquid Thursday (house), Frisky Friday (Freestyle), Saturday Night Fever (Funky House) and finally, Beat Therapy Sunday (Hip Hop).

WITCH'S TAVERN

306/1 Sukhumvit 55, Soi Thonglor (between Soi 8 & 9), 11am-2.00am, Tel. 02-391 9791, visa, amex, www.witchstavern.com Equally good for lounging or partying, the Tavern is pub style with matching menu (Bt85-700) items such as fish and chips, pies and steaks as well as Thai dishes. Regular and varied live bands playing everything from jazz to hip hop. Ladies night on Wednesday with free girl's drinks from 6pm to 10pm and bingo with cash prizes. Happy hour from 5-9pm. RCA

Royal City Avenue (RCA), just off New Petchburi Road. The place to be if you are young, Thai and out on the pull. RCA is a strip of clubs, pubs and bars. For many years this was teenie-pop central but a number of new places have raised the bar music and class-wise. Most places have outside seating and indoor dancing such as the massive and massively popular Route 66. Up and coming Code is worth checking and cool, arty cinema House offers welcome respite from Hollywood trash. Nearby discos Hollywood and Dance Fever (off Rachadapisek Rd) are gargantuan, whisky-soaked dance halls. Worth a look for those seeking a cultural experience.

NARCISSUS

Sukhumvit Soi 23, (Skytrain Asoke) just behind Pegasus Club, Tel. 02-258 4805, major cards Gaudy and glitzy to the point of being ostentatious. Monster mirror balls and chandeliers have you thinking Dirk Diggler and his crew will enter the massive, rhythmically pumping dance floor at any time. The relentless trance techno vibes will send you panting upstairs to one of the best chill-out lounges in Bangkok. Mega amounts of beautiful people on patrol. Bt500 cover gets you three drinks.

TAWANDANG

462/61 Rama 3 Rd, Tel:02-678 1114-6, www.tawandang1999.com, major cards

Microbrewery and mega beer-hall, Tawandang was one of Bangkok's first pubs to brew their booze on-site. And what lovely booze it is. One can choose from weizen, lager, or dunken beers, all brewed to strict German purity standards by a real German brewmaster who pumps out up to 700,000 litres a year, by the half-litre for Bt100. The vast hall is also home to performers, ranging from Thai classical music, to popular indie bands and the good-old "sexy girl singing to a backing track" gig. To round it off, their menu of Thai food is delicious and reasonably priced. Not an easy place to get music from some fine musicians. The late nightly jazz session, beginning at around 11.00pm is worth going out of your way for.

GROOVE KITCHEN

(back of Ana garden restaurant), 67 Thonglor 3, Sukhumvit 55, Tel: 02-391 1762 After dinner club at the back of Ana garden restaurant in cool Thonglor. Al fresco Ibiza-style vibe with glass roof, tree on the dance floor and possibly the best door in Bangkok (for connoisseurs of such things). Equally suited for digesting, dancing or downing drinks.

HUNTSMAN PUB

Landmark Hotel Basement (Skytrain Nana), Tel 02-254 0404, major cards Hunting may no longer be PC, but this pub in the basement of the Landmark Hotel is always correct. House bands are always a tight unit who perform well-arranged covers of contemporary music with great harmonies and, although, it's all a bit Radio 2, it goes well with the surroundings. When the band isn't playing, the central bar makes a good focal point and if you're a bit peckish you'll find a good menu of mostly pub grub. The Sunday brunch, featuring all the pub favorites is popular with residents and visitors alike. Happy hour 3-8pm.

SAXOPHONE

3/8 Victory Monument on Phayathai Road (Skytrain Victory Monument), Tel 02-246 5472, major cards, www.saxophonepub.com Live blues, R&B, jazz, Rock, Reggae and even Ska house bands enclosed in a woody, cozy wrapper seven nights a week, from around 8 or 9pm. Mostly a friendly Thai crowd with a few Farangs thrown in, it has long been a hang out for American Peace Corps volunteers when they take time out from saving the world to come to the big city. Arguably the best live music in town. Small beer for Bt120, no cover. Good Thai food

BED SUPPERCLUB
End of Sukhumvit Soi 11 (Skytrain Nana), Tel 02-6513537, majorcards, www.bedsupperclub.com
Classy, all-white nightclub that looks somewhat like a spaceship. At Bt500 (Tue, Fri, Sat) and Bt400 other days, it's not the cheapest place in town, but that gets you two drinks and keeps the riff-raff out. Opposite the dancing bit is the eating bit (hence the 'supper' in Supperclub) with set meals served at 8pm sharp. There's a full schedule of music, with Mondays being Funky House and Breakbeat. Hip Hop is spun on Tuesday with Model's Night on Wednesday, dancing to Percussive Latin House. There is Hip Hop, Dancehall and old-skool on Thursday. The weekend starts with Heavy Pumping Vocals on Friday, Hard and Funky Tech-House for Saturday. The week ends with Think Pink, Bed Bar's gay Sunday night.

ANA GARDEN (THAI)

67 Thonglor 3, Sukhumvit 55, Tel: 02-

Q BAR BANGKOK

EVENTS IN **January 2006**

Monday 9th DJ Katsufi
MASSIVE MONDAYS - SPECIAL GUESTS

Tuesday 10th Trinity Karlos
SOME OF LONDON'S LONGEST RUNNING CLUB PROMOTIONS COME TOGETHER IN BANGKOK WITH THEIR DISTINCTIVE GLAMOUROUS FUNKY HOUSE FLAVOUR FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY! FEATURING DJS TRISTAN INGRAM FROM SPACE BIRD, IMMACULATE BOYS FROM PACHA LONDON + MANY MORE

Thursday 19th DJ Rune
LIQUID THURSDAYS AND RETOX ARE PROUD TO PRESENT DJ RUNE (DTH) DJ MAGAZINE'S TOP 10 TRAX OF THE YEAR HONORS TWICE! FOR RUNE'S IBIZA SMASH "CALABRIA" AND ARTIFICIAL FUNK'S "EVERYBODY" DON'T MISS THIS INTERNATIONAL STAR ON THE RISE!

Saturday 21st DJ Rowan Blades
Q BAR AND BLEND RECORDINGS IS PROUD TO PRESENT THE RETURN OF DJ ROWAN BLADES (UK) TO THE DECKS. WITH HIS FUNKY, PROGRESSIVE HOUSE STYLE? A TRUE RISING STAR, HE RECORDS FOR HIS OWN RHYTHM SYNDICATE LABEL AND OTHERS, AND HAS WORKED WITH THE LIKES OF ORBITAL, SASHA AND DIGWEED, AND PACE DIVISION.

Tuesday 24th Dirty Retro
DIRTY RETRO FEATURING DJ WILL BURNS AND FRIENDS. LONDON, NEW YORK, MIAMI, AND... BANGKOK?!? HAVING SECURED RESIDENCIES IN THESE CITIES, DIRTY RETRO BRINGS ITS ROARING ELECTRO HOUSE OLD SKOOL HIP HOP PARTY TO BANGKOK FOR ONE SMASHING NIGHT AT Q BAR!

Tuesday 31st DJ Ranny Slama
GLOBALISM TUESDAYS - SPECIAL GUESTS

Every Week

Beat Therapy Sundays
HIP HOP, NEW R&B & UNDERGROUND HIP-HOP
FEATURING: DJS TUL & BUDDA Q

Massive Mondays
REGGAE/TON/BHANGRA & DANCEHALL
FEATURING: DJS TUL & CAVO

Globalism Tuesdays
AFRO, LATIN AND PERCUSSIVE HOUSE
FEATURING: DJS JOEKI & CAVO

Ghetto Fabulous Wednesdays
HIP-HOP CLASSICS
FEATURING: DJS CAVO & OFRY I

Liquid Thursdays
FUNKY HOUSE: FEATURING: DJS JOEKI & BILLY V

Frisky Friday
FREESTYLE, FEATURING: DJ JOEKI & GUESTS

Saturday Night Fever
FUNKY HOUSE, FEATURING: DJ BILLY V & GUESTS

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3911762, www.anagarden.com

A fantastic restaurant oasis for escaping the Bangkok mayhem and recharging the soul on Thai food and funky music. As the name suggests, set in a luscious tropical garden this is a restaurant that succeeds in keeping up the hip quotient without a dull atmosphere or minimalist decor. Plenty of grilled fodder, cool tunes and liquor to complement the outdoor setting. No need to head off to a club after eating either as there's a perfect after dinner groove den out back with plenty of space for dancing off that barbecued pork or slouching on the sofa. Every Thursday is City of Angels party.

THE DUBLINER IRISH PUB

440 Sukhumvit Road, between Soi 22 and 24, (Skytrain Phrom Pong), Tel. 02-204 1841, major cards, www.dublinerasia.com

A handsome, three-story structure with a regular pub on the ground floor and a lounge on the second floor, while upstairs are pool tables and a dart board. Always a crowd here, so the vibe is great. Standard draught beer is around Bt110 a pint. Excellent pub food with big portions. Women eat and drink for half price on Wednesdays.

CHEAP CHARLIE'S

Sukhumvit Soi 11, first soi on your left. (Skytrain Nana), no cards Less a bar than a ramshackle lean-to surrounded by stools and a couple of outdoor tables. The place is a booze bonanza for budget drinkers. Buffalo skulls, phallic fetishes, fish mobiles, '60s hits and white fairy lights complete the decor.

SILOM

As home to the infamous Patpong and gay central Soi 4, one could say that Bangkok's CBD is a pretty sexy place. Fear not, however, there's plenty of room for normal people too and plenty of bars worth checking out.

BROWN SUGAR

Soi Sarasin, Lumpini, Tel. 02-250-1826, major cards A fabled jazz gig that's known around the world in the music business. In need of a little care and attention but serves up excellent jazz music from some fine musicians. The late nightly jazz session, beginning around 11pm, is worth going out of your way for. Small and intimate, it has hosted a number of international artists. Food and service, however, can be slow, so a dinner of local specialties at Ma Mout Ma Mao, two shops down, is in order. Happy hour 5-9:30pm.

RADIO CITY

Patpong Soi 1 Downstairs from Lucifer's, Radio City offers live music with plenty of seating and plenty of cold beer. But what people really come to see is Thai Elvis or Thai Tom Jones. If you're bummed out by all the touts inviting you to play ping-pong, this place is a welcome respite.

IRISH EXCHANGE

1/5-6 Covent Road, just off of Silom (Skytrain Sala Daeng), Tel. 02-266 7160-11, major cards Irish Pub, sports bar and restaurant catering to mixed crowd of expats, tourists and locals who've developed a taste for publife. For the keeneow (stingy), alcoholic, footie fans or all of the above, Saturday is the official Tiger beer Premier League day with pitchers of Tiger Bt100 from 2pm-2am! Live music on Mondays and Thursdays with Lee

Shamrock, and Friday night is party night with Celtic Colours. Good Sunday sessions can be had with live jazz and traditional roasts and the daily happy hour runs from 4-7pm.

MUZZIK CAFÉ

Patpong Soi 1 The crossroads of Patpong 1 and Patpong 2 is a great place to sit, swill and people/freak watch. It's been there forever and is a top spot for starting off the evening or finishing yourself off.

LUCIFERS

Patpong Soi 1, Tel 02-2346902 Fight your way past "You see fucking show!" and "Hello, t-shirt!" and up the stairs to where the prince of darkness shakes his booty. This club is a stayer on the Bangkok carousel and has kept people dancing to House and Trance and everything in between for years. It has a post-grunge feel and Bt150 drinks sets it apart from the slick sterility offered by most Bangkok clubs.

NORIEGA'S

Silom Soi 4 (Saladeng skytrain), Tel 02-233 2813, major cards Small, modern two-level bar run by Frank, aka 'Frank Superstar' from his long-time involvement with the Superstar a-gogo in Patpong many moons ago. The small food menu is headed 'nufood menu' which just about sums up the mix of Thai, tex mex and international favourites. Downstairs the bar features prominently in this clean white space. Live music is currently provided seven days a week and this venue is one of the few in Bangkok to feature live blues every weekend from the city's premier blues outfits. Other nights feature jazz, latin and a range of bands catering to every taste.

DIPLOMAT BAR

Conrad Hotel Lobby, All Seasons Place, 87 Wireless Rd (Skytrain Phoenchit), Tel: 02-690 9999, www.conradhotels.com, major cards While hotel lobby bars are rarely the chosen haunt of hipsters, the Conrad's Diplomat Bar bucks the trend, packing out on weekends with the monied and beautiful. Perhaps the attraction is the regular jazz band, usually a super-sexy diva out front, or maybe it's just one of those things. Being a 5-star hotel, drinks aren't cheap but it's worth popping in before 6pm for two-for-one drinks.

AD MAKERS

51/1 Soi Lang Suan (Skytrain Chitlom + short walk), 5pm-1am, 02-652 1069

This is a very popular locals' hang out that also attracts a good following of expats. The outside suggests a more elegant venue than the beer hall-style operation within. There is a good bar, but that seems to be ignored in favor of the many bare wooden tables around the various areas. The food comes from an extensive menu which is predominantly Thai, although there are a few Farang dishes, including a pig hock, on offer. Ad Makers is clearly a place to chill-out and there are plenty of private bottles of JW Black behind the bar as testament to the regulars' preferences. The music is normally provided by one of the better Bangkok bands playing good covers with a strong rock bias.

TAPAS

Silom Soi 4 (Saladeng skytrain), Tel. 02-632 7883, tapasroom@hotmail.com, major cards As a longtime leader in Soi 4, Tapas Room Club continue to be popular. Spinning soulful house and funk, DJs Neng, Wut and Oud & Tee keep bodies dancing with live percussion on Wednesdays (Bt200 entry) and weekends (Bt100). Currently, Tapas are



promoting their rooftop as a private party venue.

THE BALCONY

Silom Soi 4 (Saladeng skytrain), Tel. 02-235 5891, www.balconypub.com, major cards The best Happy Hour in Soi 4 offers cut-rate specials (Bt49) on cocktails and brewskies from 7pm-9pm. Sister bar of Telephone, the gay club across the road—with a phone on each table so you can court the girl or boy of your choice. This is also a good place to be served by boys in shorts or make new friends. Happy hour 6-8pm, house drinks Bt59. TELEPHONE PUB & RESTAURANT Silom Soi 4 (Saladeng skytrain), Tel. 02-234 3279, www.telephonepub.com Gay as Christmas, camp as a row of tents. Telephone has been a gay icon since 1987 and set the character for Soi 4 for the following decade. These days most of the soi has lost its pinkness, but Telephone remains fiercely homosexual. The pub also has food which can be consumed at tables out the front—perfect for watching people of the night flit from club to club.

SPHINX

Silom Soi 4 (Saladeng skytrain), Tel. 02-234 7249, www.sphinxthai.com, major cards Hidden at the shadowy end of Soi 4, this is the place to refuel. The menu maximizes on excellent Thai and Farang food. Broad cocktail menu along with ancient Egypt-cum-Godfather ambience is good for wining, dining and 69ing.

DISTIL

64th Fl., The Dome, State Tower, Silom Rd.

Tel. 02 624 9555, 12pm-1.00am, major cards Claiming to be Bangkok's only specialty bar, Distil encompasses an authentic malt whiskey bar, oyster bar, wine bar, cigar bar and outdoor terrace. Truly a bar to wallow in luxurious excess, one can stuff oneself on fine de claire oysters from France and beluga caviar from Iran, washed down by 42 Below vodka or one of a huge selection of single malt whiskeys, then finish off with a Cuban cigar on the outdoor terrace.

BANGLAMPHU

SILK BAR

Opposite Krung Thai Bank, Khaosan Rd, Tel. 02-629 4447, www.silkbars.com, major cards Khaosan Is definitely going upscale—any fool can see that—and the Silk Bar isn't even the newest trendy bar on the street. That said, the design gives a nod to the traditional style of bar featuring a large street-front drinkery for watching the parade of nations walking up and down the road. Beers aren't cheap, but you're definitely with a better class of people.

DONG DEA MOON

54/1 Rambutri Rd (behind the Wat) Otherwise know as "The Korean Bar" this place is popular with teachers and other expats on Fridays and Saturdays. Remarkable because it has stayed the same when so much around it has changed. The upstairs bar features free pool and an open-air balcony offering a view of the road and temple below. Excellent Korean food, grilled seafood and cool beers.

Café DEMOC

Corner of Ratchadamnoen Road beside Democracy Monumen, Tel. 02-622 2571, no cards. Everything from Trance to Hip-Hop to the latest dance beats are on the musical menu, plus requests, in this good-looking, Euro-style venue. Menu has Thai dishes and small Thai beers for Bt80.

PRANAKORN

Just off Ratchadamnoen Klang Road, first Soi west of Thanon Tanao, 58/2 Soi Damnoen Klang Tai, Tel. 02-522 0282, no cards This bar is like four different venues in one: on the ground floor, replete with posters for old Marlon Brando and Elvis movies, the DJ plays retro rock and jazz and there's often live Thai acoustic music. The second floor is an art and photography gallery that sometimes features live music and even theatre. On the third floor, there's more dance and alternative tunes, along with a pool table and couches. Up top is the roof, with a great view of the illuminated Golden Mount, lots of tables, chilled-out tunes and classic tracks. One of the best things about this venue is the big menu of splendid and affordable Thai dishes. Booze is also cheap. Considering the bar is close to Khaosan and Café Democ, it attracts a surprisingly low quota of white backpacking trash. The majority of the clientele are Thai Bohemians. GULLIVER'S TRAVELLER'S TAVERN

Across from police station, Tel. 02-629 1988-9, major cards, www.gulliverbangkok.com The pub with the tuk-tuk over the door on the corner of Khaosan. If you're aching for English football, Farang food or a shot of pool, this is your place. Generous happy-hours mean this place is usually packed with punters. The place has become popular with young Thais looking for close encounters, (careful, some of the women are men) but whatever your fancy, this place has the best air-con in Banglamphu. Now open upstairs as well with several tables for the serious pool player. Happy hour 3-9pm.

AD HERE THE 13TH

13 Samsen Road. Walk up Chakrapong Road from the Police Station end of Khaosan about 400 metres, cross the bridge over the canal and it's on your left. Can't miss it. The great little blues bar with the strange name. The band, led by guitarist Pong and husky-voiced belting singer Georgia is better than ever, special guests join in regularly (ask Pong if you want to sit in), and a sizzling jazz band on Mondays. The people are friendly and mostly intelligent, and beers are Bt60-80.

LAVA CLUB

Downstairs at the Bayon building at the Buddy Lodge end of Khaosan Road, Tel.02-281 6565, no cards Every night 8pm until 2am. Just the place for the lounge too lazy or frightened to explore greater Bangkok. This comfy black and red replication of Hades plays mostly hip hop

through an excellent state-of-the-art sound system to a crowd of Thai and International boogyers.

SUNSET STREET

Bang in the middle of Khaosan Rd The stylish looking Sunset Street is unmissable under its big neon sign, with the front bar being set over two levels for maximum street gawking. Stroll inside though, and you'll find this place goes on, and on, and on. Past the shiny white lounging area in the front you'll find a nightclub, restaurant, another bar and a fountain, set in front of a beautifully restored, century-old building housing a Starbucks and an art gallery. In all, the design is stylish, the prices are decent and it's a nice place to hang out. No wonder the place has its own street sign.

IMMORTAL BAR

First floor in Bayon Building on Khaosan, no cards The Immortal's fortunes have waxed and waned over the years but is currently in favour as a Hip-Hop club. The DJ tends to play similar sets each night but look out for visiting performers. Despite its underground vibe, the place is packed out every night with backpackers and Khaosan's crazier denizens, bumping and pitching in a seething, sweaty mass.

THE CLUB

Under the huge neon sign, about halfway up Khaosan on the north side, Tel.02-629 1010, visa cards This cavernous, Euro-style architectural wonder is a hit with the young Thais who populate Khaosan at night – especially on weekends. Few Farangs in sight here. Features an extensive Thai and Western menu, including hefty steaks at relatively reasonable prices. Live bands from 9pm.

SUZIE PUB

108/5-9 Khaosan Road. Down the Soi from Nat Guesthouse, Tel.02-282 4459, no cards. Once a rock and dance club shared by tourists and Thais alike, today you'll be lucky to squeeze through the crush of Thai students, clustering around whiskey bottles and wriggling to Hip-Hop. The bar out the front is a fine place to drink a beer and ogle the queue.

THE BANGKOK BAR

149 Soi Rambutree, just off Chakrapong Road, Tel.02-629 4443, visa, master cards Cool juxtaposition between Thai wood carvings, murals, paintings and contemporary grooves, Hip-Hop and D&B. Come midnight on the weekends, the place is usually so full you'd almost need an electric cattle-prod to belly up to the bar. Ladies night on Tuesday from 5-10pm.

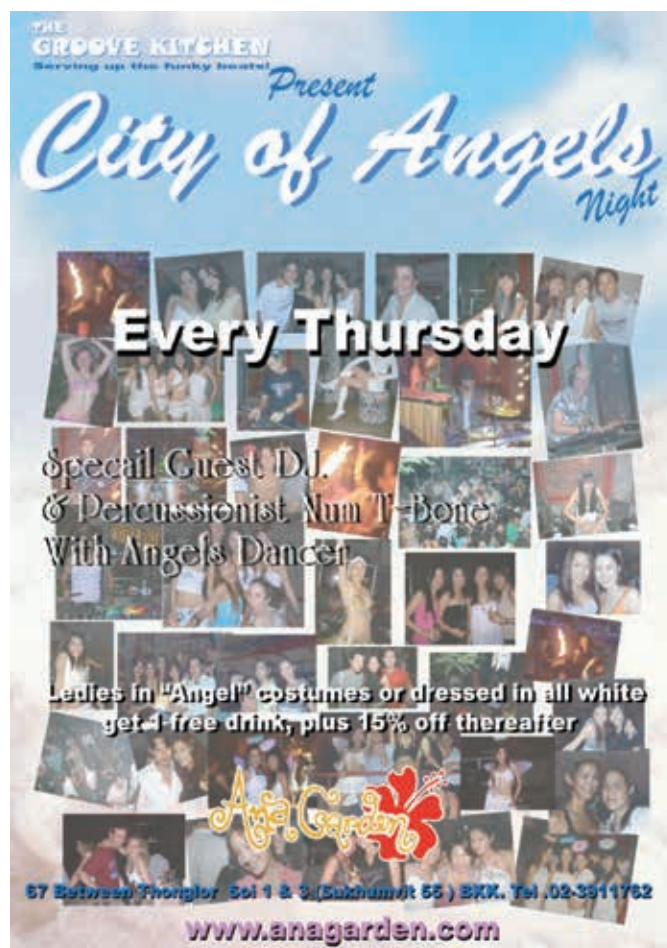
BAGHDAD CAFÉ

On Samsen Road next to Ad Here the 13th Great little sheesha bar. If you've never smoked sheesha (a traditional Arabic bong) before, you haven't really lived. The pipe is

loaded with fruit-flavoured tobacco and you and your mates take turns pulling smoke through the hose. Since it's small, the bar is always crowded and Roachie, the affable Australian host, is always on for a chat and has an encyclopaedic knowledge of all things Middle-Eastern. Bt120 buys you a charged and lit bong which will last you and your mates for an hour or more. But leave the wacky-weed at home, kids.

BRICK BAR

Back of Buddy Lodge on Khaosan Rd, Tel.02-629 4747, 02-629 4848, www.buddylodge.com, major cards except amex Huge bar hidden in the bowels of Buddy Lodge. The Brick Bar is notable as one of the few venues on Khaosan to feature live bands on a regular basis (Jazz, Blues, Ska from 8pm). Get a seat on the upstairs balcony to check out the crowd, below.



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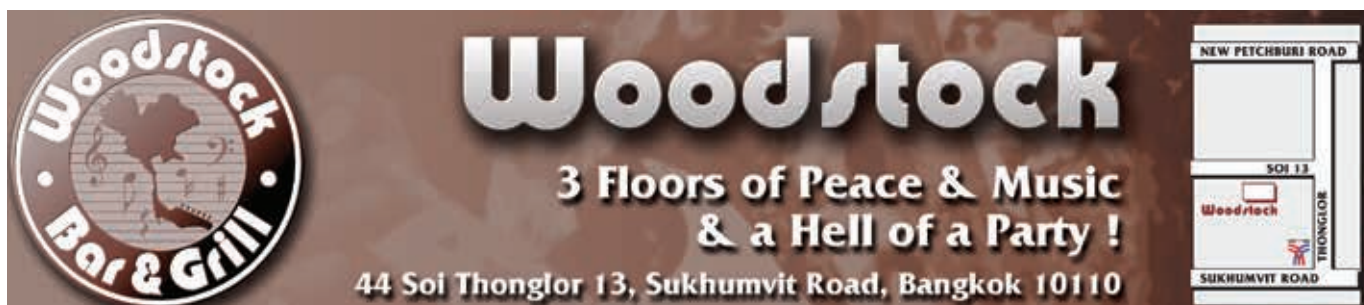
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Beer Factor

“The best laid plans of mice and men oft gang a-gley,” said the poet Robbie Burns, himself infamous for missing Sunday church services because on Saturday he had supped up a wee bit too much of the liquid muse. And so it was with Dan and Stu this month. Barred from entry, not quite recalling who drove whom home, and missing church for the 450th consecutive Sunday, in spite of sincere promises to their mothers back home, this month’s Bartripping team takes some unexpected twists and turns – mostly of the stomach.

7.05pm, Kraichitti Gallery, Sunset St Complex, Khaosan Road

Dan: Being cultured sorts, Stu and I began the evening on a high note by attending the opening of fellow barfly Mr. Toi’s exhibition. Art show openings are excellent places to scam free booze and canapés and chat up educated-yet-credulous art students. Kraichitti did not disappoint, with a record crowd and free flowing beer, wine and whiskey, with the added bonus of being a short stroll from *Untamed Travel* Global Headquarters. Can’t remember many of the pieces, but I’m pretty sure they were paintings of some kind.

Stu: Although I am a cultured man, or at least was raised to be, these kinds of events are usually at the bottom of my social schedule. However, one must occasionally attend in order to keep up appearances. For once Dan was on time – nothing like a whiff of free alcohol to get that sponge up off the seafloor. Feeling a little like a fish out of water myself, I attempted to blend in with the avant-garde of Bangkok by fingering canapés and quaffing the rough red as fast as it could be poured from the flagon.

8.50pm, Tsukiyo, Ekamai Soi 28

Stu: After repeated invitations and subsequent broken promises, bar owner and close friend Jamie (a.k.a. DJ Octo) was conspicuously absent upon our arrival. The only thing to do was have a few beers and poke fun at the menu. Tempted as I was to try the ‘taquila,’ I wasn’t so keen to investigate the Bt200 ‘cokkage’ charge and settled on a ‘Malibu Juice.’ Several phone calls later, Jamie arrived to set us straight with a round of Mojitos, the house favourite.

Dan: Situated in probably the nicest carport in Bangkok, Tsukiyo used to be a summerhouse attached to the estate next door. Jamie sealed and air-conditioned the upstairs and turned the downstairs into an open-air bar with Thai-style raised platforms, lending a house party feel. Indeed there was a birthday party underway upstairs and a steady stream of hipster chicks were making their way upstairs, helped on their way by Stu’s hungry eyeballs. The other highlight, to my mind, are the excellent lavatories, all decked out with decking and pebbles to keep you above the piss, as well as a handy shower cubicle in case you need to freshen up after a hard session. I guess it’s polite not to lock the door while showering so people can still use the toilet. Back in the bar, while asking Jamie where we should make our next stop one of the



hipster chicks walked past telling her friend “This place is cool but Esco is way cooler, darling.” Oddly enough this was the bar Jamie had recommended to us a few seconds before. Case closed.

11:25pm, Esco Bar, Ekami Soi 5

Dan: Two clubs on site, thumping bass audible in the car park with a crowd of hi-so types keenly queuing at the door, we stumbled on the first hurdle. Obviously a stranger to the more sophisticated drinking scene of the nation’s capital, Stu’s only photo ID was a picture of himself at his fifth birthday and the door-baboon was in no way amused.

Stu: Left out in the cold, even the company of a globe-trotting DJ and a respected journalist could not secure my entry. The only thing to do was to bring out the big guns – the threat of a poor review. So here it is: Esco is rubbish.

11:35pm, Glow Club, Sukhumvit 23

Stu: On to a venue more suited to my social standing, we followed Jamie’s lead and headed over to Glow club where a red carpet awaited our muddy heels. The place is tastefully decorated, split over two levels and has bathrooms bigger than my apartment. Making a beeline for the bar, I spied the familiar face of Rom, previously my favourite barman at Q Bar, now helmsman of the good ship Glow. Being familiar with pressmen and their special needs, he scrambled to fill the bar with drinks. A fine old-school barkeep, Rom plied us with food and liquor from the well-stocked bar and amused us with a bottle-spinning display worthy of Tom Cruise. Impressed, we asked if he was a mixologist, Rom replied “No, I’m the creator of the night,” mysterious stuff indeed. It was an evening of firsts, tom yum vodka, Parinya (the only cocktail in the world that makes Sang Som taste good) and more flavours of exotic rum than you could shake a swizzle stick at.

Dan: Formerly Faith Club, Glow has built on Faith’s foundation of cool décor and top-quality music, so obviously it is something less than bursting at the seams in this cloth-eared town. Nevertheless this was the highlight of the night, with DJ Tom mixing a fine concoction of beats including Oxygene, an old favourite of mine from the early 80s. Possibly the secret behind the quality of the music is Glow’s daring ‘No Hip Hop’ policy. To my delight, they stock a rare cache of absinthe, Hemingway’s favourite. I must have been channelling the great man that night because no amount of warnings or pleadings from my companions could stop me from sampling the stuff. Can’t say that it had any discernible effect, but boy did I feel rotten when I woke up naked and bruised on the kitchen floor the next morning.



KANCHANABURI RAILWAY TIES

Pretty much the last town before the Burmese border, Kanchanaburi boasts pristine, untouched jungle teeming with wildlife, and hosts the world's smallest mammal – the pug-nosed bat – as well as the world's largest cave column.

PLACES TO CRASH:

On arrival at the main bus station, negotiate for a samlor or motorcycle taxi to take you to the river area (Mae Nam Kai Road) for Bt30-50. Here you'll find the best in budget accommodation and amongst them is the **Apple Guesthouse** next to the intersection of Mae Nam Kwae and Nam Hip Oi Road. Built under a huge mango tree, this friendly guesthouse offers clean and airy single bungalows with fan and bath for Bt150 a night and doubles for Bt200. The guesthouse restaurant is excellent and offers cooking courses for those who can't get enough. Too bad it's usually full. A couple of hundred metres north along the same road is the larger and busier **Jolly Frog Guesthouse** at 28 Soi China. There are 50 rooms in this bamboo motel, along with a good tourist information service and a popular restaurant. Rooms range from singles with shared bath (Bt70) to doubles with A/C and bath Bt290. A hundred metres or so along the same road is the quieter and smaller **Sugar Cane One Guesthouse** (Soi Pakistan, Mae Nam Road). Raft rooms with private bath and veranda go for Bt200-400. A pleasant restaurant with friendly staff overlooks the river. Nearby and set off the road on the banks of the River Kwai is **The C & C River Kwai Guesthouse** (Soi Angrit). Here you'll find singles with shared bath for Bt60 and doubles with bath for Bt120. The grounds are green and spacious and it's a fine spot for taking a dip in the famous River Kwai. There are lots more choice places to stay along this strip, like **Sam's Guesthouse** – fan rooms have screen windows so they can be noisy; air-con bungalows on the river go for Bt350.

DAYTRIPPING:

Mountain biking, hilltribe treks, cookery courses, elephant camps, standing around scratching your balls, or war-casualty-memorialising, there should be something for every journey-man or woman from the Rhodes scholar to the lowbrow cretin. There are numerous daytrips (Bt400-900) to choose from and most guesthouses have their own tour operators. A typical daytrip includes a visit to the Death Railway and Hellfire Pass (80km's northwest) along with elephant rides, bamboo rafting and a dip beneath the Soi Yak Waterfall. Many tour operators, including **Apple** and **Jolly Frog**, now offer over-night treks that supposedly "penetrate the heart of the jungle to find refuge in a traditional Karen village," where, no doubt, all the tourists' needs will be catered for. Alternatively, hire a motorcycle or bicycle

for Bt150-250, pick up a map from the tourist information centre around the corner from the bus station on Saengchuto Street and make up your own tour.

A worthwhile afternoon trip is the **Tiger Temple**. Most tour operators can sort out a pick-up truck taxi (Bt150, leaves around 3pm) to take you 50km west to the temple, where tigers roam free under the watchful eye of the temple's abbot, who keeps them calm while a pack of tourists tentatively stroke and photograph the fearsome creatures. The tigers were born in captivity, abandoned or rescued by the monk as cubs. Though they may appear docile and friendly don't step on their tails or wear red. A sign at the entrance informs visitors that the authorities bear no responsibility for injury or death.

The **JEATH War Museum** on Pak Phraek Road contains replicas of the long bamboo huts used to house allied POW's during the occupation and within the bamboo huts are crude but effectively crafted life-size models of starved and emaciated POW's struggling to survive. Open from 8:30am till 6pm daily, the admission is Bt30.

Just south of the famous bridge on the river is the newer **WWII Museum** containing such relics as 106 skeletons unearthed from a mass grave of Asian labourers and placed in a glass cage.

A museum called the **Thailand Burma Railway Center** opened last year in Kanchanaburi, with elaborate displays telling the horrific story of how the railway was built. The centre, located on the western side of the war cemetery, is open from 9am till 5pm and admission is Bt60. For more information see www.tbronline.com

NIGHTRIPPING:

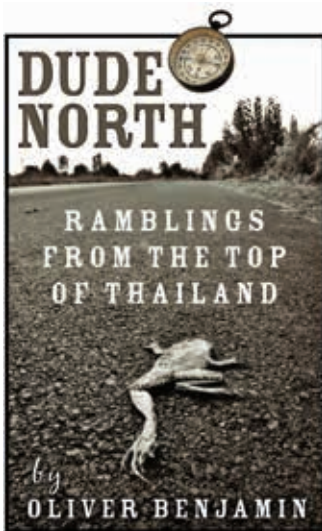
There are still floating discos and karaoke bars on the river, but they're now limited to weekends and have an 11pm curfew imposed upon them by locals who need to sleep. However, there are a number of new bars sprouting up in the spaces between the tour operators and guesthouses on Mae Nam Kwai Road. Amongst them is the **Pecko Bar** where the beer flows till the early hours. Another popular bar on this road is the **Snooker Bar** where you can watch Hollywood films while drinking and eating good-value food. The **Beer Barrel**, further up the road, is a beer garden with a rustic atmosphere and good prices. If you're looking for something flashier, along with a game of Connect Four and some bar-girls, go to **Pen Bar**.



WAY TO GO:

Public Bus: Bt79 from the southern bus terminal, leaving every 20 minutes.

Train: Trains leave the Thonburi Station. Bt24 in hard class; leaves at 7:35am and 1:45pm; takes about three hours.



2005 was a rough year for northern Thailand. The tsunami chased all the tourists away, Biblical floods washed away what little Sodom and Gomorrah we had left, and air pollution has become so bad in Chiang Mai that people are starting to compare it with Bangkok. This month, I suggest we all join together in the spirit of joy and goodwill and build shelters and boats before the next natural disaster strikes. The hippies were right after all. Mother Nature must be respected. Somebody should sacrifice some chickens, pronto. Oops, almost forgot to mention the bird flu. Cheers to 2006.

What's Up North?



The authorities finally closed down the legendary Rasta Café. It wasn't so long ago that "Rasta Alley" was just an abandoned parking lot, until a few Thai fellows decided to turn it into Chiang Mai's Trench Town, with reggae music, a bonfire and oba-obaserving the hippie chicks. Now, four years later, it's Dread Disneyland, with no fewer than six similar establishments and more rastatude than you can shake a Thai stick at. Sing another song of freedom, however – there's a credible rumour it's going to open again under the moniker, Cannabis Café. Hopefully the cops will just think that means "container of urine."

Now that the rains have finally finished, it's time for the annual Bo Sang Umbrella Festival! Yes, this is urban planning even more idiotic than the Chiang Mai Mardi Gras – which is not only held in December instead of February like everywhere else, but offers no degeneracy, naked people or floats. Logic aside, amateur photographers should be out in numbers to take postcard-pretty pics of pulchritudinous parasols from January 20-22, in Bo Sang village, just east of town in Sankhampaeng. Like at every other festival in these parts, there will be a beauty pageant, a parade and plenty of beverages – pour some on your new umbrella to see if it works. God sure won't.

Like the rest of Pai, BeBop's Master of the Stratocaster, Phi Chart, has gone upmarket with the opening of his new Grooveyard Café/Pub/Restaurant. Now well-heeled Bangkonians and avante-garde foreigners won't be forced to rub shoulders with the ragged youth that make up Pai's warp and woof – they can pretend they're in a French art museum, listen to sophisticated music and contemplate the quaint authenticity of Pai's poverty. Just kidding. It's not that posh. But it sure is a long way from the Pai of yesteryear. Thankfully, Pai boasts artists like Chart who can infuse progress with panache.

Northern Thailand is famous for its lovely cold temperatures in winter, though some would disagree as to their desirability, namely, the abject poor. For those who perish each cold season due to lack of blankets and medicine, Khun Piack has organised a free Charity Concert called Helping Hand for the Needy. My own band, Funkin' Donuts will play, with legendary Took from the Brasserie joining in on guitar. Also featured are local favourite Hajie and Friends, a few English DJs and several other good-hearted souls. Starts at 4pm at Tha Pae Gate on January 7th. Come and help create warmth by donating generously, and also by dancing like an idiot.

For those artists among you, a mysterious new gathering is afoot in Chiang

Mai. Simply called Thursday Nights Jam it enigmatically calls on all "performers, collaborators, thinkers and doers" to show up and do your thing. Non-thinkers and do-nothings can just drool catatonically in the audience. Promises to be either jam-tastic or marma-lame. Every second Thursday of the month at Matoom Studio. Call 01-531-3551 to find out what the hell all this is about.

Think you're an expert on local culture just because you saw *The Beach*, learned how to say *sawatdee*, and took a half-day cooking course? Well, big up that huge brain of yours some more by taking advantage of some free educational happenings this January. There's a Thai Religious Culture Exhibition until January 30th featuring seminars, workshops and more at the Bank of Thailand Textile Museum, Chotana Road, 053-391182, 053-931000). Also, until January 15th, a Lanna Temple Exhibition will teach you about temple history, featuring seminars, workshops, shows and more. This one's at the Chiang Mai City Arts and Culture Centre (053-217793). Afterwards you can go show off what you've learned to all the plebeians down at the bar, win their undying respect and a few punches in the head.

Suggestions? Slurs? Please visit www.dudenorth.co.nr. This column is info-powered by Citylife and City Now at www.city-now.com



CHIANG MAI

Chiang Mai is overlooked by far too many travellers. “Where is the beach?

I have mountains in my own country, you know. I want sun.” Fair enough,

but the secret to the place is that it is a large-ish city with all the urban trimmings, but feels like a small town.

It is surrounded by mountains and caves and hilltribe villages and all sorts of other stuff worth exploring, but it is a great place to just hang out and eat, go for a wander, take in a temple, have a few drinks and turn in reasonably early.

The weather is nice and cool right now. Rent a motorbike and fill your face with a brisk breeze as you wind to the top of a mountain, take in the view and tell yourself that you and God are the same guy.



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PLACES TO CRASH:

Offerings range from cheap dorms at Bt50 a night to plushly furnished aircon rooms for Bt1,000-2,000 – it's not an expensive town. Guesthouses are all over the place with most around Tha Phae Gate. Don't sign up for a trek until you shop around.

Inside the Old City

Cheap: The city's cheapest crash pads huddle along Moon Muang Soi 9, inside the northeast quadrant of the moat. Supreme GH, 44/1 Moon Muang Soi 9, has a loyal following - Bt150-250. Sois nearby yield bargains as well. Blue Diamond, 35/1 Moon Muang Soi 7, is exceptionally well run and has a good veg restaurant downstairs - Bt150. Other sois stacked with guesthouses include Moon Muang Soi 2 (Top North is popular, mainly for its tiny swimming pool - Bt400) and Ratchadamnoen Soi 5.

Comfort and Style: Head for Gap's House, 3 Soi 4, Ratchadamnoen Rd, a cluster of old Lanna-style houses, plus a more modern longhouse, furnished with local antiques, all aircon, Bt250-400 including breakfast. The nightly Bt80 Thai veg buffet is legendary. At the higher end, join the celebs who gather at the Tamarind Village, 50/1 Ratchadamnoen Rd, a quiet oasis in the heart of the old city, Bt6,000 and up. Rooms in the five-star hotels (and there are a bunch of them) range from Bt1,000 upwards.

Off Tha Phae Road

Daret's House, 4/5 Chaiyaphum Rd, is ordinary but fine. Service is efficient and it's big, a good bet when others are full - Bt100-140. Roong Ruang Hotel, perfectly positioned to take in festival parades at the end of Tha Phae Rd, has large rooms with verandas around a courtyard, Bt250-400B, some with air-con.

Near the Night Bazaar

Baan Kaew Guest House, on Charoen Prathet Rd next door to the Alliance Francaise, does just about everything right: fans and aircon in the same room, fresh mossie coils outside the door every night, and friendly front desk, Bt350-450.

DAYTRIPPING: TEMPLES:

Chiang Mai reputedly has 400 of these, mainly in the old city quadrangle. Most notable are Wat Chiang Man, the oldest in town, Wat Chedi Luang, with its 60 metre chedi, and Wat Phra Singh with murals of life in yе olde days.

MARKETS:

Near Chinatown, Warorot Market (kaat luang in local parlance, off Chang Moi [sic] Road) has hawked silks, housewares and foodstuffs since the 19th century. San Pa Khoi Market (off Charoen Muang Road on the way to the railway station) has food and cheap secondhand clothes; excellent for green curry after midnight. The Night Bazaar lines both sides of Chang Khlan Road every night selling baubles and trinkets for tourists. Head to Crazy Horse Butress, an eye-popping limestone cliff-and-cave complex east of town, and scale one of nearly 70 bolted routes. Or call Chiang Mai Rock Climbing Adventures (tel: 06-911 1470) for guided trips or instruction. The Chiang Mai Museum on the Superhighway displays lots

of religious artifacts from the area. Prep for your trek at the Tribal Museum in nearby Ratchamangkla park. In the modern western suburbs of Chiang Mai, Gongde Gallery off Nimanhem Rd hosts exhibitions of Thailand's top artists, as does Chiang Mai University's Art and Culture Museum at the corner of Nimanhem and Suthep roads. Everyone heads up Doi Suthep to Wat Phra Thai Doi Suthep. Sunset is the best time; the crowds are gone and the monks are out chanting. If you're curious about Buddhism, attend the meditation and dharma talk session with Western monks on Sunday afternoons at 3pm at Wat U Mong. Or travel further down the same road to Wat Ram Poeng, and spend 26 days practising meditation with an English-speaking teacher. Countless companies offer treks out of Chiang Mai, and most of them offer similar itineraries and prices. Treks booked at guesthouses tend to skimp on important things like blankets and food. One reliable standalone agency is Trekking Collective, Ratchawithi Road.

FEEDING TIME:

Ratana's Kitchen (tel: 06-320 322 Tha Phae Rd) does inexpensive Thai dishes geared to Farang palates, plus comfort foods like sandwiches, steaks and pancakes. Art Cafe (corner of Tha Phae & Kotchasan, opposite Tha Phae Gate) is the spot to camp, in air-conditioned comfort, when your group can't agree on what to nosh, as the menu covers Thai, American, Italian and Mexican.

The city's claim to noodle fame is khao soi, a bowl of squiggly egg noodles doused with a mild Shan-Yunnanese curry. Khao soi comes in many styles in Chiang Mai, but for the original head to Khao Soi Fuang Fah (Soi 1, Charoen Prathet Rd, near the Ban Haw Mosque); the khao mok kai (chicken biriyani) here is cheap and filling, too. For the fanciest version in the city, try the huge platter of khao soi and associated condiments served at Just Khao Soi, Charoen Prathet Rd. At Heuan Soonthari enjoy the atmospheric wooden house with a river view, decent Thai grub from the North and Northeast and live Northern Thai music by its greatest living proponent, owner Soonthari Wetchaynon. Carrot-heads can choose from 35 vegetarian restaurants. The best and also the cheapest is the Vegetarian Centre of Chiang Mai at 14 Mahidon Road, on the way to the airport, open Sun-Thurs, 6am-2pm. Veggie Thai doesn't come any better or any cheaper than this. We know you're missing spicy curries from the deep south (Thailand, that is), so give your tongue another thrashing at Khrua Phuket Laikhram (1/10 Suthep Rd, opposite the south side of CMU). Try the khao phat po taek, 'broken fishtrap fried rice,' made with mixed seafood and slivered kaffir lime leaves. Farang food is no problem at all – and much cheaper than Bangkok. Build your own sandwich or baguette at the Amazing Sandwich (252/3 Phra Pokklao Rd), a minute's walk from the THAI city office. Da Stefano (2/1-2 Chiang Moi Kao Rd), just 'round the corner from Tha Phae Gate, is a popular Italian restaurant, with rustic-chic ambience, efficient service, and deliciouso pastas and pizza. If you're on a strict budget, head for the much cheaper, Thai-owned Italian Lang Mo (the name means 'Italian Behind the University'), down a tiny alley on the south side of Suthep Rd. Skip the pizza

and go for some of the best pastas you'll find in Chiang Mai. Jerusalem Falafel (35/3 Moon Muang Rd) does Jewish mother-style home-cooked falafels, chicken-liver sandwiches, salads and home-made pastries.

NIGHTRIPPING:

While there's a clutch of seedy hostess bars bordering the east moat and especially along Loi Kroh Road, and a few gay bars around town, Chiang Mai's nightlife can't compete with Bangkok's for debauchery. Nevertheless, the city is lively after dark. Expect closing times to be 1am (or sometimes earlier these days) despite national entertainment laws allowing bars in 'tourist centres' to stay open 'till 2am. Chiang Mai police are notoriously corrupt. Tourists and Chiang Mai University students shimmy the night away to live Farang pop at Riverside Bar & Restaurant (9-11 Charoenrat Rd) where you can also dine on Western and Thai food on candlelit terraces by the water. In the same 'hood, local blues-rock guitar hero Took burns it up at Le Brasserie (37 Charoenrat Rd) from 11pm onwards, but the warm-up bands aren't bad either. UN Irish Pub (Ratwitahi Rd) is developing a reputation amongst the city's literati for their twice monthly open mic poetry readings, usually on the second and fourth Tuesdays of the month beginning at 8pm (all readers get a free beer). Contact spokenwordcm@hotmail.com for info. You don't have to sport dreads to enjoy open-air, fairy-lit Rasta Cafe (off Ratchaphakhinai Rd), where travellers trade yarns around the ever-burning campfire whilst cruising the musical hippie trail from Marley to Manu Chao. Across from the Rasta Cafe, long-term visitors drown their visa woes in buckets-of-joy Heaven Beach, which does live music on weekends. At the Drunken Flower (Mao

Dok Mai, Soi 1, Nimanhem Rd near Kad Suan Kaew) NGOers and young, socially mobile Thais mix at the tables outside, while regular drunks prop up the bar or lounge on tattered sofas inside. Owner Dai has a good CD archive of R&B and classic rock. Ask him to crank it up, it's never loud enough. The tiny Pinte Blues Pub (Moon Muang Rd) is one of the city's longest-standing watering holes, and an ideal spot for a chat over cheap drinks with a backdrop of possibly the best recorded blues collection anywhere in Thailand.



PAI

PLACES TO CRASH:

Pai River Lodge, Bt100 and Baan Tawan GH, Bt200-300, both on the river towards the east side of town are choice cheapies. Across the river towards the hot springs, Sun Hut scatters thatched huts around a garden, and adds a treehouse - Bt200-450. Mr Jan's Bungalows, Soi Wanchaloem 18, is favoured by the healing set for Jan's massage teachings and the herbal baths on heavily-foliaged grounds; Bt80-200. Rim Pai Cottage, Chaisongkhram Rd, offers more upmarket room and A-frame cottages, Bt500-800 including breakfast.

DAYTRIPPING:

The tie-dyed squad tends to sleep all day and play all night, but if you do manage to get up while the sun's out, you'll find mom-and-pop shops offering treks, elephant rides and river rafting at practically every corner. For massage aficionados, one of the best places to get pummelled in the kingdom is Pai Traditional Massage, Sukhapiban 1 Rd, Bt150/hr).

NIGHTRIPPING:

Everything centres around Bebop Cafe (Rangsiyanon Rd, opposite the Tourist Police), where Chart's house R&B band gets a buzz on nightly. Or rack out on the floor cushions at Edible Jazz, opposite Wat Pa Kham, sip tea and work your way through Kung's tasty jazz archives. When all the bars have closed, insomniacs head for Bamboo, a rickety open-air restaurant next to the Pai River where everyone does exactly what they would do in any bar, except the owners have a restaurant license so they can stay open all night.

FEEDING TIME:

Most of the restaurants in Pai are hard to get excited about. A reliable choice includes the ages-old Nong Beer

SHINE ON SUNSHINE

Last January was a bloody awful time to be on the beach. Half the nation's coast had been smashed up by the tsunami, and the white sand that one may have sunbathed on a week ago had become impromptu graveyards. The airport was crammed with people getting out and those that stayed headed for the gulf to fill every available room, bungalow, villa and tent. Some were even sleeping on the beach in Samui.

It's been a rough low season for Phuket but things are looking up with healthy numbers of tourists piling into the island. Koh Phi Phi is still rebuilding but there's enough rooms and banana pancakes to go around. Plus the place is still breathtakingly beautiful. Even Khao Lak, which suffered the most damage and death, has seen some of its top-end accommodation reopen doors, albeit at heavily discounted rates.

Meanwhile on the gulf coast, December started with 40 days and 40 nights of rain (well, a week anyway) causing heavy flooding to the islands. *Untamed Travel's* Samui correspondent was filing his reports waist-deep in water. The rain is unseasonal, however, and the sun should be out now.

January is peak season in Thailand so accommodation can be tight and rates will be high. BYO hammock.

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KOH PHI PHI

Possibly one of the world's most beautiful places, the area around Phi Phi was used in both *The Man with the Golden Gun* and backpacking odyssey *The Beach*. Phi Phi actually consists of two islands, both steep limestone formations with a small section of flat land between them, on which Phi Phi village was nestled before the wave hit. Some places were undamaged, dive operators and snorkellers go on daytrips and rebuilding is underway. At present things are changing too fast to give an accurate picture but it is certain that tourist operators will appreciate your custom.

KOH TAO

Tao is probably best known as a Mecca for divers. Generations of young and keen Cousteaus have ventured below the briny blue, pursuing their PADI Open Water certificate. There are some more challenging dive sites in Thailand, though not nearly so convenient – and because of gentle currents, a solid infrastructure, and reasonable prices, this is one of the best places in the region to get started. Most of the operators have formed a dive association that is now working with some success to preserve the sites and open a few new ones, halt coral damage and such. Tao is a great place for whale sharks and the island itself is beautiful, with great food and a surprisingly lively party scene.

KRABI

When people talk about Krabi (it's actually the name of the whole province) they're usually talking about one of three places. Firstly, there's Krabi Town, which is a charming seaport that serves as a ferry hub on the mainland and is famous for bargain accommodation and great food. There's Ao Nang, not far away, which is a tourist town centred on the beachfront road

with plenty of resorts, restaurants and tailor shops. Up the beach and accessible only by boat are Tonsai and world-famous Railay. Famous primarily among rock-climbers, that is, who scale the spectacular limestone edifices that encircle the beach.

KOH SAMUI

Once, years ago, Samui was a hippie traveller's playground. Back then there was only one bar on Chaweng, nobody shaved and the only thing anyone wanted was peace and love. Yup, 2001 was quite a year. But most of the backpackers have grown up, put on shorts, socks and sandals, had a few kids and are back on Samui – now looking for peace and quiet. You can find that, but you can also find pizza places, nightclubs, Starbucks, tailor shops and all the other trappings of modern life. Some may hanker for the old days, but the beaches are still great and if you're honest with yourself, air-con room beats bamboo shack every time.

KOH PANGAN

"Hand me another mushie shake before these pills kick in, would you? And stop Bogarting that joint. Is that Harry lying in a puddle of sick over there? Oh my god! I think my face is melting!" Yup, Koh Pangan sure is a wild, drug-crazed, hedonistic pleasure boat for hippies, slackers and other layabouts. Home of the Full Moon Party and all, and you've heard what happens there!

Well, if that's your bag, man, you may be headed for disappointment. Things sure aren't like they used to be, and for most people it's good riddance. Sure, you can drink and dance all night at Had Rin on the full moon, but if the local coppers catch a whiff of draw or you're a little too artificially loved up, you're looking at an extended tour of Thailand's legal system.

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The island boasts stunning beaches, good value rooms and a certain dreamy, isolated quality that has people staying for weeks at a time doing... absolutely nothing. Around full-moon time (check the Koh Pangan page for the date of the next party) the island fills up and rooms are hard to get. There are also plenty of supporting parties to the full moon that are often better than the main event.

CHA-AM

Like its big brother up the coast, Hua Hin, Cha-Am is most popular with Thai holiday makers who want to get out of Bangkok for a weekend. The difference between the two is that Hua Hin is somewhat Royal, has many five-star hotels and people walk around in polo-shirts. Cha-Am is more popular with students and young Thais who go there to swim, float around on inner-tubes and spend the night drinking and dancing, leaving the place deserted on weekdays. The township fronts onto the wide, white beach which is quite developed. No grass huts here. Certainly a cultural experience, just not the temple kind.

KOH LANTA

Although only 'discovered' by tourists relatively recently and often picks up the overspill when Phuket and Krabi are full, Koh Lanta is a large and lush island offering a variety of accommodation and activities. The tourist infrastructure starts in the north with luxury resorts and gets more and more rustic as one heads down the main north-south road. Since the island basically shuts down during low season, when storms batter the seaward coast, Lanta remains thankfully 'unsaturated' with tourist development.

KOH CHANG

The name in Thai means "Elephant" and contrary to popular myth, this island is not named after a popular alcoholic beverage. Koh Chang is a relative newcomer to mainstream tourism and the addition of an airport on the mainland opposite is bringing heaps of sun hedonists. That said, much of the island remains less developed than many other popular islands, and to be frank, it ain't party central – which many see as a good thing. Excellent white sand, and the little sea critters on the beaches can provide excellent nighttime entertainment. It's only a few hours by road from Bangkok so on a weekend accommodation becomes tight and prices go up.

HUA HIN

The first beach resort in Thailand, this is a more traditional-style resort town that is undergoing a bit of a renaissance these days. Only a few hours south of Bangkok, it is convenient, inexpensive (if you want it to be), surrounded by golf courses, and one of the few places in the country where you can ride horses on the beach. No beach bungalows here – you have to walk to the beach from the cheaper places, but accommodations cover the whole gamut from wooden cells to lavish five-star hotels.

KOH SAMET

Ah, Koh Samet! A beautiful sand island and national park just a short motor from Bangkok. Don't worry about those malaria and rabies warnings; as a visitor you're pretty unlikely to pick up anything more than a tan. As the closest beach to Bangkok worth going to, Samet is popular with weekenders Thais, so rooms can be a bit short Saturday night and whenever there's a public holiday. But if you go midweek, you can enjoy empty beaches and cheap prices without the hassle of an overnight bus trip down south. Not much jungle interior to explore – it's really just a strip of white sand with sun, bungalows and bars on it, so it's perfect for quaffing, stuffing your face and relaxing – and little else.

PHUKET

As Thailand's largest island with a long and prosperous history, Phuket can seem like its own world. Connected to the mainland by a causeway, the north-south oriented island has a jungle heart surrounded by white-sand beaches. The most popular area for tourism is Patong Beach, where you'll find bars, restaurants, hotels and shops all jammed together by what is actually a very nice beach. All the comforts of home are here, but if you're after something more rustic there's Phuket Town, an old Chinese-style town, and plenty of other more secluded spots inland.

PATTAYA

A couple of hours to the east of Bangkok, Pattaya is a lively town that caters to every whim. Notorious for its naughty nightlife, there is much more at this resort than its reputation would lead you to believe. Name a sporting activity or indulgent pastime (paintball, chopper riding, deep sea fishing, go-karting, drinking and eating sausages, to name a few) and they have it here. The beach is not spectacular in the town – you have to head to Jomtien for that, or out to sea, but it isn't the sort of place where you come to tan - unless your hotel has a pool.

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KOHLANTA PRIVATE SPACES

Until recently one of the last hippie holdouts along the Andaman coast, Lanta began going upscale with the arrival of a half dozen resorts for the wealthy two years ago. The 2004 tsunami took out four of them along the north western coast, but no doubt this was only a temporary setback. Ao Khlong Dao, the longest beach on the island is wide and flat, great for sunset walks. Next south, Ao Khlong Phrae ('Long Beach' to Farangs), is less expensive but even more crowded with resorts and businesses hawking massage, laundry and Internet (or all three services). Ao Khlong Nin and Hat Nui are smaller beaches with only a handful of places to stay. Ao Kantiang and Ao Khlong Jak occupy the southern tip of Lanta, and are the least spoiled, though large resorts soak up a lot of real estate here. The interior and east coast of the island still belongs to cashew and rubber plantations, and Muslim fishing villages.

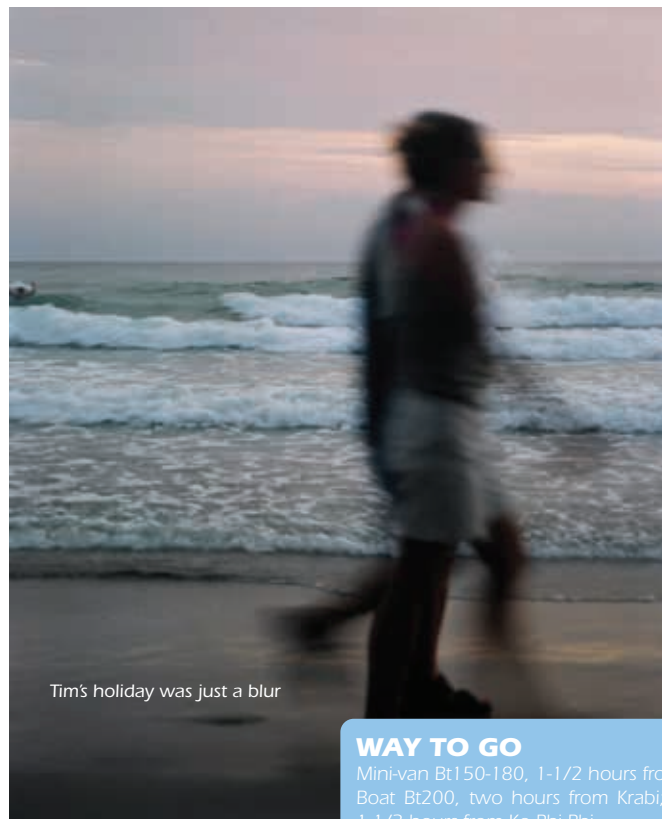
PLACES TO CRASH:

On Khlong Dao, head for Lanta Villa (from Bt400; 07-568 4129) or Golden Bay Cottages (Bt300-1,000; 07-568 4161) if you're on a budget, Southern Lanta Resort (from Bt1,600; 07-568 4174) or Lanta Sea House (Bt1,500-3,000; 07-568 4073) for more comfort. To stay close to the cluster of shops and restaurants in Hat Phrae Ae, pick from old-school The Sanctuary (Bt300-500; 01-891 3055) with its thatched huts and veggie fare, Relax Bay Resort (Bt800-1,300; 07-568 4194) or eco-friendly Lanta Marina Resort (Bt300-600; 07-568 4168). Join the Dream Team (Bt300-800; 01-228 4184) on tiny, secluded Hat Nui or go for the best-kept secret on the island, at pretty Ao Kantiang, Same Same But Different (Bt1,000), a kickback restaurant

with a few ingeniously designed bungalows. Luxury digs are available at sprawling Sri Lanta (from Bt6,000; 07-569 7288) on Hat Khlong Nin, and the exclusive Pimilai Resort & Spa (from Bt10,500; 02-551 9388) on Ao Kantiang. Nicely secluded Andalanta Resort (Bt2,000-3,000) has its own private bay, Ao Khlong Jak, and a waterfall within hiking distance.

DAY TRIPPING:

Ban Si Raya (aka Old Lanta) on the east coast offers a waterfront lined with busted-up old two-storey wooden shophouses dating to Lanta's glory days as a stop for trading ships moving goods along the Andaman coast from Moulmein to Singapore. Sniff bat guano and get lost inside the caverns at Khao



Tim's holiday was just a blur

WAY TO GO

Mini-van Bt150-180, 1-1/2 hours from Krabi
Boat Bt200, two hours from Krabi; Bt 200, 1-1/2 hours from Ko Phi Phi

Mai Kaew Cave, towards the centre of the island. Ko Lanta National Marine Park down south guards the last of the island rainforest, and a few scattered islets offshore. Diving is excellent at nearby Ko Rok Nok, Ko Ha and Ko Talabeng. Elephant treks (Bt800/two hours) can be arranged at Hat Phrae Ae and Hat Nui.

NIGHTTRIPPING & FEEDING TIME:

Ban Sala Dan, the little port village at the north end of Lanta, has a row of seafood restaurant along the water's edge; Rimnum is the best. Back from Ao Phrae, Thai Cuisine Restaurant & Bar does better Thai than most places on the island. Same Same But Different is the perfect stage for a seduction,

the bonus being incredible southern Thai cuisine (unsurprisingly, it's owned by the same Krabi native as Ruen Mai in Krabi). Most islanders and tourists alike are asleep by 10pm, but you'll find a string of cheap beach discos and Reggae House in Ao Phrae.

DIVING:

Contact Lanta Diver (www.lantadiver.com) or Ko Lanta Diving Center (www.kolantadivingcenter.com) to book trips to nearby islands or rent gear for local dives and snorkelling.

ROADTRIPPING:

Songthaews in Ban Sala Dan and in Ban Si Raya can be chartered to any point on the island for Bt200, less for shorter trips.

www.lantadiver.com

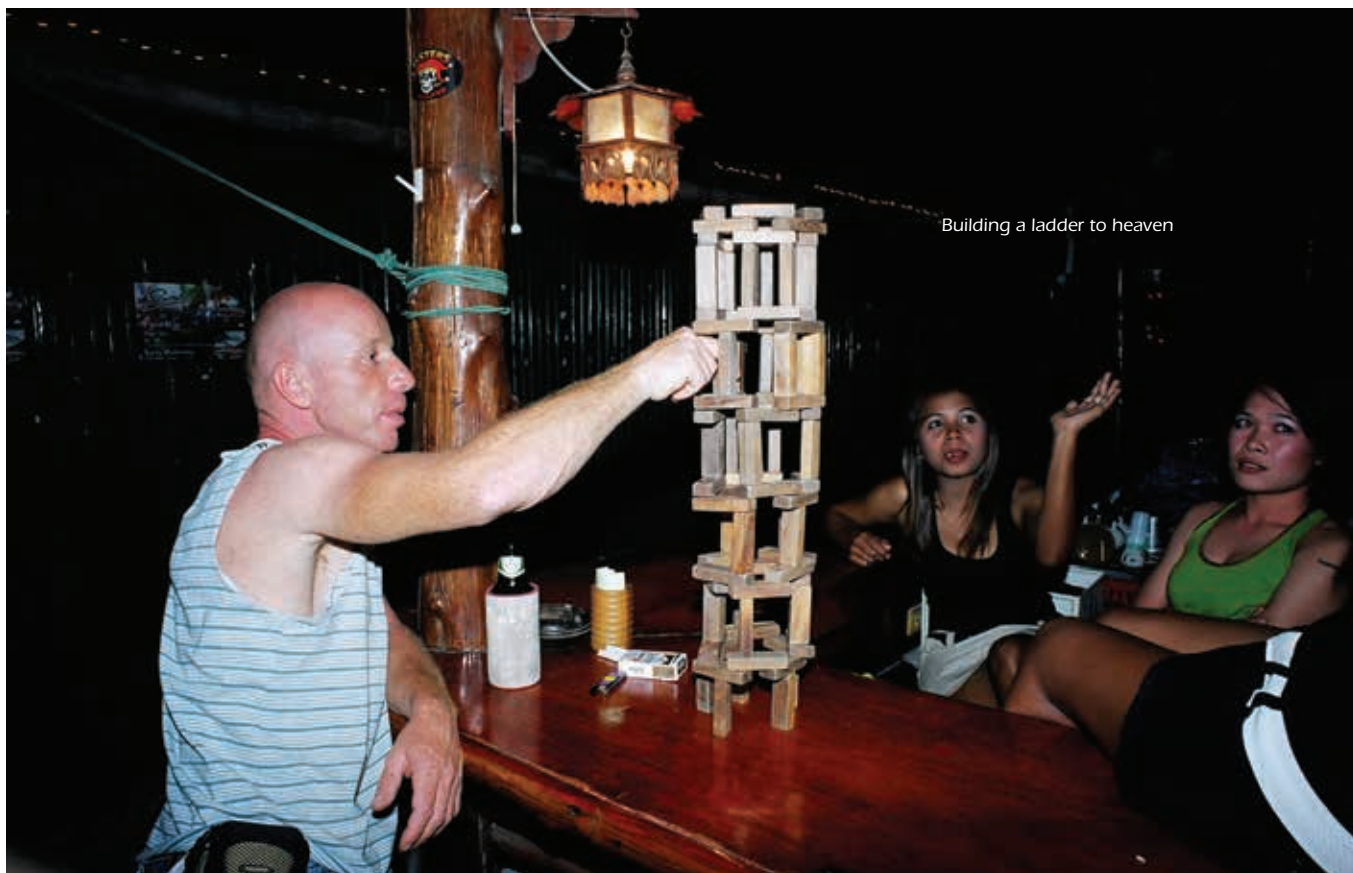
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KOHSAMUI SUNCAPITAL

It's official: Samui is the most expensive place to live in Thailand. And there are nearly as many cash machines as coconut trees.

But it's a big island with plenty of diversity: from five-star grandeur to beach-shack grunge, from Starbucks to street grub, and from family central to a party paragon.



Building a ladder to heaven

CHAWENG PLACES TO CRASH

Most of Chaweng's accommodation is beachside. A long-time favourite, Ark Bar (07-741 3798) has rooms from Bt2,000-2,500. Family Bungalows start at Bt1,000. At the cheaper end, Moby Dicks' rooms start at Bt500 (07-741 3107) and Charlie's Huts, (07-742 2343), have recently renovated and charge Bt700 for air-con bungalows. For five-star living, check out Baan Haad Ngam at Bt5,000+ (07-723 1500).

FEEDING TIME

Try The Deck for laidback eating with a huge menu. Blue Samui offers top notch seafood at decent prices. Zico's, a homage to Brasilia, has an all-you-can-eat flesh feast for Bt650, and the super-sexy queen samba dancers to make your hormones salsa. One of the best Italian eateries in town is Vecchia Napoli and Prego is also good and relaxing. Jeff Lord's Betelnut on Soi Calibri has some fantastic treats, like chilli ice cream. ESP, also on Soi Colibri, has gourmet food and classy beers with a dub

soundtrack. Newcomers Rice and Coco China House are just two of the upper-end nosheries with excellent world-class tucker.

NIGHTRIPPING

Right on the Chaweng Beach Road, there's a great filling station for booze, Cajun and Creole food, and live R&B (the real stuff, no Mariah Carey here, bitch) called the Coco Blues Company. They import some top-notch talent. Opposite McDonald's is Tropical Murphy's, with draught

Guinness and Kilkenny. The best bar in town for cool cocktails and air-con may be POD on Soi Colibri, or mince over to Christy's for their comedic lady-boy cabaret. The big clubs in Chaweng are still the Reggae Pub, for Euro-beat and drinking games, and the Green Mango, for hard house and classic party tunes. London-style Mint Bar has brought the island's nightlife up to par with cool tunes and celebrity DJs most months. Bar Solo plays US club sounds and half the club is outdoors.



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LAMAI

PLACES TO CRASH:

Rest your head at **Lamai Inn 99**, (07-742 4211) with fan rooms from Bt600-1,600. The bargain huts must be **No Name** (07-742 4666) from Bt300-800 with fan. Or try **Rose Garden** (07-745 8116) for comfort in heavenly floral surroundings at Bt400-950. **Spa Samui** (07-723 0855) has new rooms for Bt800, or Bt3,000 with a sea view and an upstairs private deck. Spa also has one of the finest restaurants on the island, with a huge menu which must be annoying to all the fasting crew that hang out there. **Wanta** (07-742 4550) has fantastically equipped bungalows for Bt1,200-2,000 with wide-screen TV's and triple-wide beds.

FEEDING TIME

The **Chaplin Restaurant** on the ring road boasts Bt70 breakfasts and Sunday roasts. The all-you-can-eat BBQ is a welcome weekly event at **El Dorado** every Friday. Meanwhile, the biggest fried breakfast award goes to **Harry's Bar**. The **Cliff** on the ring road sells Portuguese pipiriri chicken, and has fantastic views over the sea with a bar that will make you think you're in an old Duran Duran video. The **Red Fox** at Lamai beach just down a small street opposite McDonald's has Sunday dinners and pop quiz nights.

NIGHTTRIPPING:

Lamai also has a healthy club scene with **Supersub** boasting the only club to stay open past 2am. **Fushion bar** is a great place to start the night, then there's the mega-club **Bauhaus** for all your foam-party needs. Lamai also has female mud wrestling and plenty of go-go beer bars where you can cheat Cupid by mingling with ladies of the evening.

BIG BUDDHA AND BAN RAK PLACES TO CRASH

Known for its massive Buddha image at one end of the island, this is a tranquil area to get away from the nightlife and hooligans. **Shambala** offers rooms from Bt500 upwards and has a good menu of Thai and Western dishes. **Shabash** (07-724 5035) has beach huts from Bt700-1,800 depending how close you want to be to the sea. **Samui Mermaid** (07-7427547) offers great value for Bt500 with cable. If you want to spend a little more, the brand new **Saboei** (07-743 0450-8) resort will spoil you rotten with its luxury beach houses and so it should with bungalows from Bt3,000-7,000.

FEEDING TIME

For a great Western-style stuffing try the **Elephant and Castle** – one of the best Sunday roasts on the island – or **Aux Amis** for some refined French grub. Every Sunday, **Secret Garden Bungalows** has live music with a bar and BBQ, which attracts many expats.

BOPHUT VILLAGE PLACES TO CRASH

A peaceful oasis, this quaint old fishing village is the perfect middle ground between Chaweng and Maenam. The best deal is **Rasta Baby** for Bt250. **Papa Joes** has a dorm for Bt150, but if you want to splash out a little more try **Eden Bungalows** situated in a lush garden with a pool for Bt1,200 and up. In Bophut, most shops and cafes have now converted the rooms above to luxury apartment/rooms. One of the best bargains is the **Ayuthaya Garden Bar** offering aircon, fridge, cable and hot water with views: Bt1,000 and up. Also worth checking out is the **Red House**, which has balconies facing the beach to watch the boats come in. It also has a wonderful roof garden with 360-degree views for Bt1,800, with cable and air-con. **Baan Bohput** and **Le Hacienda** are both new and very nice small hotels on the quiet side of Bophut offering beachside rooms starting at Bt2,500. Further along, try the **Gecko**, home of the mellow house groove "Sunday session" which starts in the afternoon and goes until late; rooms start at Bt1,000.

FEEDING TIME:

This is the best place to eat on Samui and, apart from catching ferries to Koh Phangan, eating and relaxing is all you can do. The **Happy Elephant and Starfish and Coffee** boast the best in seafood, **La Baya** is the best Italian and makes wonderful pizzas, as does **Juza's**. **56**, situated in the centre of the village, offers high-end fusion food at reasonable prices is already proving popular with locals and tourists alike. Another must-try is **Two Tigers** for real home-cooked cakes, cookies, fresh juice, and a celebrity photo gallery. For something totally different, there's **Healthy and Fun**, which is part vegetarian restaurant, part yoga and healing centre that turns into a tapas bar in the evening. They also show art films on occasion. Hit the **Billabong Surf Club** if you want a taste of Down Under.

MAENAM

PLACES TO CRASH

Maenam is still pretty much unbothered by house music, go-go bars and high-rises. **Maenam Resort** (07-7425 116) has bungalows from Bt1,200-1,800; **Cleopatra's Palace** (07-7425 486) is Bt400 or Bt800 with aircon. The **Fah Hotel** is like a slice of the Florida Keys with a Thai twist and loads of charm. It has luxury rooms starting at Bt1,500, or for a real romantic treat and love inn, book yourself into the "Honeymoon Suite" for Bt2,000.

FEEDING TIME

At **About Cafe** you can watch the passers-by whilst enjoying a fresh juice or homemade yogurt. **Angela's Cafe** is an old favourite offering choice, quality and value. There's also an Italian restaurant called **La**

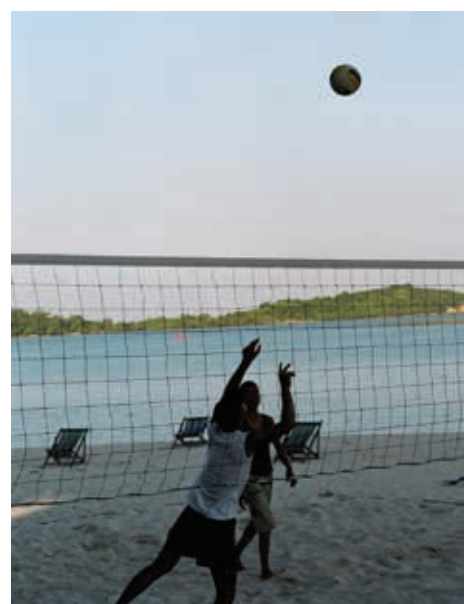
Trattoria that serves homemade ice cream and great lasagne.

DAYTRIPPING:

The latest craze is the **Canopy Adventure** (07-741 4150) where you slide along ropes to various tree houses above the coconut trees and a waterfall for Bt1,400 per head. They offer a free shuttle service to the site. For the less Tarzan-like, there's the **Butterfly Garden** (07-742 4020) at Ntien Beach. A great way to see the island is to take a **Samui Safari** (07-741 5123-5), with half- or whole-day trips. They take you snorkelling, elephant trekking, 4x4 off-roading, and even coconut milking. There is now a world-class golf course on the island, the **Santiburi Golf and Country Club** (07-741 8557), and **Samui Golf** (07-724 5384) can teach you how to swing and choose the right bat. For those who think golf is a great way to ruin a good walk, try **Yogi Bear Ha Ha** (01-787 9148). **Red Bicycles** (07-726 7202) can sell or rent you a mountain bike and take you on a tour through the jungle and more. A less strenuous way to see the island is from the sea. **Kia Ora** (07-745 2264) Catamaran will take you out to sea with a fully stocked bar. **Samui Quads and Paintball** (01-371 0744) has quads and paintball. If big-game fishing is a lure for you, then talk to **Mr Ung's** (07-723 0114). At **Samui Crocodile Farm**, located near the airport, you can watch a brave fool stick his head in the jaws of a prehistoric monster. Cold-blooded, reptilian capers and human derring-do are also on the cards at the **Samui Snake Farm** (07-741 8680-1). For the morbid soul, **Luang Pho Daeng** was a monk whose undecomposed body is in a glass case for viewing at the **Khunaram Temple** near the **Namuang Waterfall**. Most travel agents like **Sea Breeze** (07-742 5607) tours and **Aquademia** (01-091 0107) do daily trips to the lovely Koh Tao. Bring a copy of *Untamed Travel* to Aquademia and get 10% off.

ROADTRIPPING

The two main taxis are green and yellow aircon saloons and songthaews (shared pickups). For short trips expect to pay Bt150/200. They have metres but they don't work so don't bother, and bargain hard. Songthaews are Bt50-100 for the longer journeys and Bt30 for short trips, but more at night. Motorbike taxis are the cheapest and most thrilling form of travel. Renting a motorbike is Bt150 per day, but with four road deaths a month, it's Russian roulette. Renting a Jeep is a much safer option. Budget is insured so it's your best bet if you don't want to end your visit in tears.



WAY TO GO Ferry: Seatram boats to Samui from Don Sak and Surattani start at 7am, and the Raja ferry starts at 5am and goes every hour until 7pm. The boats to Koh Phangan leave from Big Buddha and Bo Phut. The **Lompraya catamaran** (Bt550) will pick you up from your bungalow and deliver you to Phangan, Tao or Bangkok via Chumpon with comforts like aircon and movies. Ferries to Surat Thani leave from Nathon.

Plane: Bangkok Airways still has the monopoly on flights from Bangkok for now, leaving almost every hour until 9pm, Bt3,500/6,500 OW/return. But sometimes there are flights for Bt2,000, usually the first and last of the day. Ring 02-265 555 for details. There are direct flights to Singapore, Phuket, Krabi, Hong Kong, and now Chiang Mai. Don't forget the Bt400 departure tax and merciless airport taxi drivers. **Train:** A sleeper ticket is Bt900 Surat Thani for an aircon, lower bunk, second-class berth and Bt1,339 for first class. Add Bt180 for bus and ferry transfers. Booking in advance is recommended as it is often fully booked.

Bus: Bt450 from Samui to Bangkok, or vice-versa, and takes 14 hours. Buses departing from Khao San are often uncomfortable and prone to theft.



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KOHPANGAN ROCKON

Koh Pangan starts to buzz in December as the place begins to fill up for the incoming high season. The rains usually stop in the first week and from there on after it gets busier by the day. One reason for this steady influx of thousands of island explorers is the monster party fest that is the Christmas/New Year's Eve season; though now there is nearly as large a proportion that comes here for nature and outdoor sports. Most folk find a place to plot up and stay until they can't extend their ticket home anymore, so if you are looking for a long term place, this is the time to get the best ones.



Nazi cyborg infiltrates party

CHOOSING YOUR BED:

Koh Pangan has a great variety of accommodation options ranging from budget beach huts to aircon palaces. Most of the old skool Bt80-100 huts have been replaced with Bt200-300 fan rooms and newer more luxurious Bt400-800 fan rooms with hot water and posh finishings; aircon rooms go for Bt550-4500 depending on how flash they are; a lot of gaffs now have swimming pools, saunas and spas.

Many resorts on KPN rely on you eating there once or twice a day to keep the room prices low. Try to respect this, or come to an arrangement before they kick you out for a better earner! Check out www.phangan.info for accommodation bookings.

PLACES TO CRASH:

HAD RIN:

There's an untold number of places to rest your weary head in the island's nightlife capital but it does get full a week before the party. The Had Rin Peninsula has two main accommodation areas, either on the busy east side (sunrise) or the quieter bohemian sunset side of Had Rin Nai. Best to book ahead if you can.

ON SUNRISE:

There are loads to choose from, though Paradise Bungalows and the Backpackers Lodge have a good variety of rooms and Sea Garden and Jonathan are classy joints. Drop Inn also has a new hotel with spa and penthouse rock star suites.

On sunset: Ya Ya's Guest House is a great find and Neptune's Villa, Phangan Buri and Vimarn Samut are well run with great aircon rooms. Further around the peninsula, there is classy Coco-Huts and some old skool bargains, Sari Kantang is an excellent find on Leela Beach.

BAN TAI:

Near the Full Moon Party – but out of hearing distance, Ban Kai and Ban Tai have some great resorts on never-ending white sand beaches.

Try Harmony on a secluded Ban Kai beach with aircon bungalows, swimming pool and sauna or Hansa Resort in Ban Tai Village for aircon beachfront rooms with minibars, baths and TVs. Milky Bay and Morning Star are great new places and Dewshore is another favourite.

WEST SIDE:

The west coast of Koh Pangan is a string of beautiful white sandy coves; it has the best coral reef, great sunset views, loads of decent beach bars and a giant freshwater lake.

Starting from Thong Sala, in Nai Wok Bay there's old favourite Tranquil next to Grand Sea Resort with posh Thai cottages and a great swimming pool.

In Sri Thanu Village, Chai Country is a top place where Chai takes guests on unique day trips. Had Chao Phao is home to high class Phangan Cabana, great value See Thanu and bohemian Sea Flower. The Village Green resort has a few great rooms and serves fantastic euro – Asian cuisine.

Had Son resort is a cracker, on its own beach with a full range of rooms and a fantastic swimming pool.

Had Yao is a lively beach with some great bars and beachside restaurants. Sandy Bay, and Had Yao are popular top end resorts while Over the Bay has peaceful hillside vistas and great seafood.

A little further round is Had Salad, a beautiful deserted beach with good value Salad Huts and luxurious Salad Beach Resort.

Near Ko Ma, Mae Had has variety of huts with the best diving and snorkelling; Island View Cabana and Wang Sai are good-uns.

CHALOKLUM:

Chaloklum has some well-established resorts, a few cool bars and like many villages around Koh Pangan, there some nice houses to rent.

Fanta has nice beach gaffs and Chaloklum Bay is well run, has some great aircon rooms and is clean. Had Khom and Coral Bay are on their own secluded beach.

NORTHEAST:

On the more remote side of the island there are three very popular beaches; Bottle Beach is Old Skool Pangan, Than Sadet is home to the island's biggest waterfall and Thong Nai Pan has all the trappings of Bohemian beach life. Further around, it becomes more rugged; here Hat Tien and Hat Yao East

provide real castaway dreams.

Bottle Beach is only accessible by boat from Chaloklum, there's; sometimes a waiting list for good rooms.

On Thong Nai Pan Noi, Panviman and Baan Puri are posh gaffs that take Visa cards and Thong Ta Pan and Star Huts are good value.

On Thong Nai Pan Yai, Dreamland and Nice Beach are popular.

Than Sadet has a variety of cheap rustic bungalows and some more luxurious resorts like Mai Pan Rai.

Had Yao East has just two resorts, and Had Tien is home to the Sanctuary, spa and health retreat with a real traveller vibe.

DAYTRIPPING:

Koh Pangan is full of things to keep you occupied and most of it can be done on a few Baht. Rich coral reefs run along the north west coast of the island, supporting a vibrant underwater world making it an excellent place to snorkel and one of the cheapest and least-crowded places to dive in Thailand. There are fishing trips, around-the-island boat trips and loads of water sports on offer including catamarans, kiteboarding, windsurfing and cayaks. There is also the Jungle Gym in Had Rin and Thong Sala, for fitness sessions and Thai Boxing tuition.

Koh Pangan has acres of undisturbed tropical rainforest and a wild jungle interior. There are overnight mountain treks to the top of Khao Ra and coastline walks making it possible to beach hop round the whole island. There are loads of temples to visit, elephant treks, an ATV track, spa and meditation retreats to sort yer head out and it's also a pretty good place to do bugger all.

ROADTRIPPING:

If you take a songthaew solo, you'll pay about Bt350 to go anywhere on the island. Normal prices from Thong Sala (the main port and town) are: Bt20 for Ban Tai and Woktum; Bt50 for Had Rin, Chaloklam, Had Yao, Had Chao Phao and Sri Thanu; Bt100 for Thong Nai Pan, Mae Had and Had Salad. Motorbike rentals start at Bt150 per day and dirtbikes start at Bt200 for a clapped out 125cc to Bt400 and up for a 250cc. Suzuki Jeeps cost around Bt1,000/day. Only experienced riders should attempt the hills – and do it sober!

Boat taxis are available from Thong Sala, Chaloklam, Ban Tai and Had Rin. Costs are similar to songthaew prices.

WAY TO GO:

Bus: about Bt450 including ferry. Buses leave Bangkok's tourist hives about 7pm and get you to Suratthani the next morning.

Train: first-class sleeper, Bt1,150 and second class sleeper Bt650. Leaves from Hualumpong station at 5 to 7pm and gets you to Suratthani the next morning. Busses then take you on a one hour ride to the ferry at Donzak unless you get the Sonserm ferry from Suratthani.

From Koh Samui (Mae Nam): take the Lompraha catamaran for the quickest and most comfortable crossing or the Had Rin Queen for the most frequent crossings and a reliable service.

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KOHTAOBOUYANCY

The New Year means a new season for Koh Tao. After unusually heavy monsoon rains the island is ready to welcome back ever increasing numbers of visitors. Blessed with abundant marine life Koh Tao is renowned as a world-class diving destination. If you prefer dry land, there are many beaches and bays to enjoy and a great nightlife scene to keep you entertained.

PLACES TO CRASH:

Accommodation caters for all tastes and budgets. Choices run from traditional Thai wooden huts to the more luxurious pads with the all mod cons and prices to match. Although many resorts have their own dive centres most are happy to cater for non-divers, except during the peak of high season. Don't despair, there are many places happy to house and feed you any time of the year, diver or not. A typical beach hut costs roughly Bt400 a night, double if you want aircon.

MAE HAAD

The main port of arrival for visitors has everything you would expect to find in a main town: shops, restaurants, travel agents, banks, health centres, post office and the much-needed veterinary clinic. There is a small range of budget and luxury accommodation to be found here. Sensi Paradise is a beautifully designed Thai-style beach resort set in a tropical garden. Beach Club and Blue Diamond are also good choices.

WEST COAST

Sairee is the most popular area of the island, with the largest beach, where a full range of accommodation can be found. Starting from King Rama V Rock moving north, Intouch Resort is a traditional Thai-style resort with established huts and a relaxed atmosphere. AC Resort offers a choice of fan or aircon bungalows and a swimming pool. SB Cabana and Sairee Huts have good value centrally located wooden bungalows. Silver Sands offers old and new wooden bungalows set in a tropical garden. Simple Life Villas, an island institution

with a loyal following, offer a choice of big concrete bungalows and smaller huts with a regular crowd and a great atmosphere. Sunset Buri Resort offers a Mediterranean feel and provides aircon or fan rooms and a swimming pool overlooking the beach. Blue Wind is a quiet haven with daily yoga classes. For classic old style beach huts try Mama O Chais slightly further north. If you want to be away from the beach and the oily tanners and still see the sea try OK View or Moonlight Bungalows inland from the beach on the mountain. Towards the north end of Sairee and the island there is a fair selection of rooms to be found. Sun Sea and Silver Cliff bungalows have basic cheap huts on the rocks. More upmarket is Thipwimarn resort with a choice of aircon or fan and outstanding views from its terrace restaurant. CFT Bungalows is a peaceful escape and offers meditation and massage.

THE EAST

The northeast coast is much quieter and more secluded with only a few places to stay. Worth checking out are Hing Wong Bungalows, Green Tree or View Rock resorts. Moving south, Tanote Bay has a small selection of rooms available. Tanote View resort and Poseidon Bungalows are good choices as is Blacktip Resort and Water Sports Centre. The southeast has small bays dotted along it. Try Ao Leuk Resort in Leuk Bay or Coral View Resort and New Heaven Huts in Sai Daeng. Transport to the more secluded places can be arranged from the pier by either taxi car or long tail boat.

THE SOUTH

The main area here is Chalok Baan Kao, quieter than Sairee, set between San Jao beach and Taa Toh Lagoon. Easily accessible by road with a choice of accommodation and all the amenities you would expect to find at the third largest beach. Sunshine Resort, Koh Tao Tropicana, Taa Toh Lagoon and Koh Tao Resort are recommended.

DAYTRIPPING:

As a major diving certification centre blessed with an abundance of marine life and easily accessible dive sites, many would-be Cousteaus choose to start there dive careers here. A full range of courses can be completed with either SSI or PADI being the major certification standards. Tech Diving courses are available for the less faint hearted. Most dive operations are members of the Koh Tao Dive Operators Club which is responsible for setting professional standards and monitoring and improving the marine ecology through ongoing projects aimed at promoting environmental awareness. With price competition all but levelled by the KT-DOC your choice of dive school depends on reputation, service and quality. Fair play we say. Snorkelling also provides a good opportunity to see the abundance of marine life here. There are many secluded bays and beaches where you can while away the days snorkelling and swimming. A good day out can be had by long-tail boat cruising round the island visiting the more secluded bays and beaches. Try Jansom Bay or Hing Wong. If you're still keen for some water-based activities check out MV Sports, Blacktip Water



Sports or Switch Water Sports. All offer wakeboarding and water skiing and more. For those who prefer terra firma there is plenty to keep you occupied. When the dive boats are out you can relax on peaceful beaches and sleep your hangover off in peace. If you're the active type, trekking trails are plentiful and the most arduous routes reward the survivors with secluded bays and crystal clear waters or mountain-top views and postcard photo opportunities. Alternatively, hire mountain bikes and cycle your way to fitness taking in the scenery. Zen Gecko, on the road to Tanote Bay, offers rock climbing and bouldering. You can now also try your hand at bowling with the opening of Koh Tao Bowling.

NIGHTTRIPPING:

With dozens if not hundreds of divers completing courses daily and a regular party crowd there is always an air of celebration and vibrant party scene on the rock. A regular mix of home-grown talent and visiting DJ's play a variety of musical styles with the freshest sounds guaranteed. Most venues are open nightly although the party night changes, keeping the atmosphere alive and the energy flowing non-stop. The party scene is one of late nights, great people and good spirits. Check out the many posters and fliers for special party nights and musical styles.

Drop by AC Bar's party nights on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays with resident DJ's Simon Solo and DJ Martin, serving up housey breaks and beats with bundles of booze. Intouch with its open-air design opens Wednesdays and Sundays with DJ Funky K and guests spinning the vinyl for a regular upbeat party crowd. Maya Bar takes Mondays and Fridays with DJ Saan and DJ Coconut playing a blend of progressive tech and house. Whitening in Mae Haad holds parties every Friday with DJ Pixy and DJ T keeping the music alive and spirits flowing.

For bar butterflies there are plenty of places to choose from. In Sairee forever popular Dry Bar, ideal for sunset, serves great drinks and music in a continuously creative beach lounge setting. A new addition to the beach bar scene is Pure, nestled between the rocks on Sairee beach, promising unadulterated tunes and unrivalled energy. Relax and chillout at Lotus Beach Bar with a regular crowd and varied music policy. In Mae Haad Dragon bar serves up Oriental mystique and seductive beats with an extensive cocktail list. Also new is Irish pub Dirty Nelly's, a welcome addition to the Mae Haad bar scene.

FEEDING TIME:

The choice of eateries on Koh Tao is impressive whether you're after tasty Thai tucker or your favourite Farang fodder. Puks Kitchen and Yang's on Mae Haad, offer a wide choice of cheap tasty Thai food as does Tongs in Sairee. In Mae Haad, Café Del Sol provides a good choice of world cuisine with a French touch. La Matta has a wide selection of authentic Italian cuisine using traditional recipes. Farango Pizzeria also offers a selection of classic Italian dishes. Try Whitening Restaurant between the piers for superb international and Thai cuisine. If you're after a monster breakfast to cure the hangover try Greasy Spoon breakfast bar and chip shop. For fiery curries, funky tunes, and expat prattle Tattoo Bar is the place to be. In Sairee, Suthep on the beach offers a top choice of quality Thai and Western food. Mash balls or massaman it's all good as is the wit of the humorous host. Papas Tapas restaurant near Sairee 7/11 has a hookah lounge and (Thailand's only?) absinthe bar! For funky Mexican, El Gringo's, Mae Haad and Sairee, has a reputation for wicked fajitas washed down with tots of tequila, excellent! Choppers Bar and Grill, now bigger and better with a second story extension and pool tables, serves an impressive choice

of Western and Thai-style home cooking, draught and imported beers, and all live sports events on a wide screen projector. Now with live music. Ripper mate! Check out Green Mango Bar and Restaurant, Sairee, popular with expats serving superb Sunday roasts. New Heaven Restaurant, Chalok Baan Kao, has beautiful views from its open-air restaurant serving fresh seafood.

WAY TO GO:

Trains leave Hualhumphong Station in Bangkok nightly, arriving in Chumphon at the ungodly hour of 4am. Slumber at the station for a while before you transfer to the pier for the ferry which arrives at around 10am. There are various travel companies offering joint bus-and-boat tickets leaving from Bangkok early in the morning transporting you to the island by mid-afternoon. Several ferries of various speeds leave from Koh Phangan and Koh Samui mainly in the morning. Times and boats change depending on demand and the weather. Check travel agents for latest times and prices

Tao-a-bunga

February 7th and 8th is the annual Koh Tao festival, two fun-packed days of activities including a dive shop beauty pageant, non-stop DJ party, photography competition, water sports and beach games, as well as an attempt to break the *Guinness Book of World Records* for the largest number of people diving simultaneously. The current record (722), was set last year and this years target is 800+. The island gets packed for this festival so book accommodation early and be a part of what is surely a unique and unrivalled event in Thailand.



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PHUKET THE RESURGENCE

Most of the damage from last year's tsunami has been repaired except around Kamala Beach, which took the hardest pounding. The installation of an early warning system has also inspired more confidence among newcomers and repeat visitors. After the lowest low season in ages, Phuket is rising once again. Other than Pattaya, the country's biggest island has more to offer visitors than any other beachside destination in the Kingdom, with golf, paintball, diving, yachting, nightlifying, cooking courses, batik painting, jet-skiing, para-sailing and all of the seven deadly sins.



PATONG

What was once party beach got hit pretty hard by the big wave, but Patong remains Phuket's most popular beach with holiday makers and it's here that you'll find all your water activities and tailor shops. Businesses opposite the beach may be closed for some time yet but the town is doing fine.

PLACES TO CRASH:

Decent, well-maintained rooms under Bt1,000 are Sweet Apartment (Bt500; 07-634 1359), Le Vele (Bt600; 07-634 0336) and Smile Inn (Bt900; 07-634 0455). In the Bt1,000-2,000 range try Club Bamboo (Bt1,100; Tel: 07-634 5345) or Icon Phuket (Bt1,800; 07-629 6735). At the top end, few spots are more beautiful than The Avantika (Bt4,600; 07-629 2801).

FEEDING TIME:

Many Patong dining spots are disappointingly overpriced and bland, but there are a few bright stars. Try Pan Yaah, Lim's or Pum (which doubles as a Thai cooking school), or Sphinx Restaurant & Theatre, which also puts on Broadway-style shows in its intimate upstairs theatre.

NIGHTTRIPPING:

Bangla Rd is the most hectic zone with beer bars galore and the tawdry Soi Katoyei drawing in the curious and depraved. Managed by an American woman, Rock Hard A Go-Go is Patong's most notorious jiggly bar. Soi Paradise is a friendly, flamboyant area with gay bars and discos. Dragon, Star Club, Crocodile and Safari are the disco flavours of the month, while some refined places to lounge about in include La Diva and Corsicana. Wackier spots are the glitzy Phuket Simon Cabaret and the tiny Rasta Pub, incongruously tucked down the end of the pussy-show-zone, Soi Seadragon. Rousing live music at Scruffy Murphy's and 2 Black Sheep.

KATA-KARON

The second most popular beaches suffered only minor damage and continue to draw crowds. Although quieter than Patong these two beaches support an active bar-scene and have plenty of international nosh on offer. It's to here that surfers flock from June to November to ride the ocean swells.

PLACES TO CRASH:

Budget: In Kata, Lucky Guesthouse (Bt300-850; 07-633 0572), Kata Country House

(Bt-600-900; 07-633 3210) and Friendship Bungalow (Bt500; 07-633 0499). In Karon, Bazoom Hostel (Bt80-490, 07-639 6914) and On The Hill (Bt800; 07-628 6469) – recommended for its views. More upmarket spots: the fetching Kata Minta (Bt1,500; 07-633 3283) and Sawasdee Village, featuring a gorgeous tropical swimming pool (Bt2,800, 07-633 0979), both in Kata.

FEEDING TIME:

Every second shop in Kata-Karon is a restaurant, so you're not going to starve here. These ones have stood the test of time: Las Margaritas, Karon Cafe, Red Onion (Karon); Bluefin Tavern, Gung Cafe, and Coffee Pot (Kata).

NIGHTTRIPPING

There are few nightspots to recommend aside from the chill-out bars Dan Kwain and Café Del Mar, and the hard-rockin' Easyriders, along Taina Rd, Kata. For late-night adventure, get thee to Patong.

SOUTH**Chalong, Rawai, Nai Harn, Ao Sane**

Sailing, slacking off. The beaches of Chalong and Rawai are nothing to write home about but they're both fine places to relax, chat with sailors, catch an island-hopping trip and gorge on seafood. Nai Harn is a stunning white beach favoured by locals, while Ao Sane is a pleasant little cove with good snorkelling.

PLACES TO CRASH:

From cheap and cheerful to super-luxurious. Chalong: International Youth Hostel (Bt180-450; 07-6281 325), Shanti Lodge (from Bt350, 07-6280 233). Rawai: Friendship Beach (from Bt1,000, 07-6288 996). Nai Harn/Ao Sane: Baan Krating Jungle Beach Resort (Bt2,000; 07-628 8264), Sunny's Nai Harn Beach Resort (Bt950; 07-638 8058), The Mangosteen (Bt4,500; 07-628 9399).

FEEDING TIME:

Thai/seafood: Kan Eang 1&2, Chalong, plus many fresh seafood shops along the Rawai beachfront. Western: Bagels & Beyond, Sunshine Bakery and The Lighthouse in Chalong; Don's Cafe in Nai Harn.

NIGHTTRIPPING:

Yoonique Stone Music Café in Nai Harn is attracting a hip, young crowd with its Tuesday jam sessions, Friday Mexican food nights, and beach volleyball court. Other

favourite hangouts are the Freedom Bar, Nikita's and Islander Beer Garden in Rawai, and the Tamarind and Green Man Pub in Chalong.

NORTH**Kamala, Laem Singh, Surin, Bang Tao, Nai Thon, Nai Yang, Mai Khao**

Kamala and southern Bang Tao caught the brunt of the big wave, but they're back to normal. Nai Thon is the most beautiful beach of the bunch, with reasonably priced rooms.

PLACES TO CRASH:

Aside from Maikhaio Bungalows/Campground (01-895 1233) or Sirinath National Park bungalows/tents at Nai Yang, most accommodation is firmly in the mid-to-insanely-expensive range. Some of the better spots: Phuket Naithon Resort (from Bt3,500; 07-620 5233), Surin Beach Resort (from Bt1,850; 07-632 5000), Surin Bay Inn (Bt1,000; 07-627 1601).

FEEDING TIME & NIGHTTRIPPING

Some exceptional class-act restaurants/lounges in Bang Tao/ Surin with prices to match include Tatonka, Silk, JJ's Irish Pub and Supper Club – well worth splashing out for. More low-key are Pepper's Pub, Farang Paradise (Bt50 steaks!), Black Cat and Diver's Bar.

PHUKET CITY

It's official, the island's main centre is no longer a town, having been recently upgraded to city status. Plenty of funky shops/art galleries and historical Sino-Portuguese buildings to see on an afternoon stroll. Gluttons take note – the range and quality of restaurants in Phuket City far surpass any in the resort areas.

PLACES TO CRASH: Pengman (Bt120; 07-621 1186), Talang Guesthouse (Bt320-550; 07-621 4225), Imperial Hotel (Bt650; 07-621 2311), Royal Phuket City (Bt1900, 07-623 3333).

FEEDING TIME:

Just a sampling, Thai: Tung Kha Cafe, Phuket View, Thammachart, Lemongrass, Nai Yao, Ka Jok Sii, Kota Khao Mun Kai, (yellow noodle) shop near Metropole Hotel circle, vegetarian shops along Ranong Rd, shops along Phang Nga Rd. Italian: La Gaetana, Salvatore's. Indian: Khanasutra.

NIGHTTRIPPING:

Trendy spots: Seua Saming, XVI, Kor Tor Mor. Beer drinkin' spots: Timber Hut, O'Malley's, Michael's Bar, Dorn's Place.

ROADTRIPPING:

Phuket's transport situation is improving with an island-wide effort to convert freewheeling taxis to metered services, and the threat of meter-taxi drivers getting clubbed to death by tuk-tuk thugs is on the decline. Still no beach-hopping bus service though. Metered taxis, 07-625 0333, 07-627 0477 or 07-632 8274. Tuk-tuks: island-wide services, jaw-dropping prices. Songthaew buses run between the main beaches and Phuket City (Ranong Rd), daytime hours, Bt15-25. Aircon micro-bus service, around Phuket City, Bt10. Motorbike rental, Bt150/day. Car/Jeep rental, Bt900/day. Note that driving in Phuket is an extremely dangerous undertaking not recommended for the faint of heart.

DAYTRIPPING:

Some of the best things to see in Phuket are not in Phuket at all, including the smaller islands of Coral, Raya and Yao Noi; the forests of Khao Sok; and the cool karsts of Phang Nga Bay, best seen on a kayak tour (Sea Canoe Thailand, 07-621 2252; John Gray's Sea Canoe, 07-625 4505). Inland, there's ATV or bicycle tours, elephant trekking, bungy jumping, Bang Pae and Tonsai waterfalls, and the Gibbon Rehabilitation Centre in Khao Phra Thaew National Park, and Kathu waterfall. For wannabe or experienced sailors, the Ao Chalong Yacht Club welcomes anyone to join their regular Sunday sailing races (clubhouse near Chalong Pier, 01-892 4992).

WAY TO GO:

Plane: Bt2,730/5,460 ow/return (inc tax) from Bangkok with Thai Airways or Bt1,820/3,640 from Samui with Bangkok Airways
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KRABI BUT NOT GROUCHY

One of the country's most gorgeous provinces, Krabi has a wealth of natural distractions, and is best known for its most prevalent symbol: the limestone crag. The city itself makes for an easy-going stopover before taking a short drive to Ao Nang, with its long strip of sand, decent nightlife, and all the amenities. But most travellers - including a lot of families - make waves for the main main beaches on the Phra Nang Peninsula, namely the east and west sides of Railay, which are as enchanting as ever, and the prices for rooms plummet dramatically in the low season. Just around the headland is Tonsai Bay, a chill-out pad for younger travellers. And of course Railay has another high point for Spidermen and women: rock-climbing on the crags, which affords panoramic views of the breath-stealing beachscapes.



AO NANG

Putting Ao Nang on the global tourist map has by no means been a difficult task given its breathtaking beauty which commands one's attention instantly. With its rise to stardom being rapid and the dramatic increase in tourist arrivals looking more 'promising' each year, it's no wonder low season is longed for, particularly if you enjoy being engulfed in the torrid steaminess of the monsoon. You can be guaranteed beach vendors or katoys won't stalk you. Even at Ao Nang, still the most popular and developed of Krabi's beaches, you will be left alone to work on your tan. These are the reasons why the same faces can be seen back in the province year after year. Other benefits at this time are the cheap hotel rates on offer. Try Krabi Seaview Resort from Bt625, the beautifully situated Somkiet Buri Resort 300m from the beach for Bt1,200, or Wanna's Place, directly across from the beach from Bt900. Great for

those travelling on a tighter budget, as you don't have to dive so deep into the purse to get great accommodation.

NIGHTRIPPING:

The Irish Rover Bar & Grill is one of the few consistently busy bars in town with a friendly, laid-back atmosphere, draught beer and great fry-ups and roasts. Encore Cafe is the best place in town for live music. The old stayer, Full Moon Bar, smack bang in the middle of Ao Nang, is where you just can't miss a minute of the action. Nearby is the new JJ Sports Bar, a cosy cafe-style bar screening football day and night; and inside Ao Nang Centre is Pickles, an Australian pub, fully equipped with BBQ, swimming pool, pool table and Aussie beer for Bt60; some good parties are to be had here. The Last Fisherman Bar is by far the most ambient beach location for sunset drinks that tend to stretch on into the night and the other old stayer Luna Beach Bar, famous for their 'any excuse' parties with great cocktail deals. For independent travellers, Lost Pirate is the place for the latest low-down.

KRABI TOWN

This once slow-motion town has grown in fame due to its tranquillity, beauty and what some call 'real Thai-ness', the principal reason why it so entices. The capital of Krabi province is managing to preserve its small-town charm even though it's morphing into a busy hub. A flurry of new hotels now provide

alternatives for travellers who have had enough of dank guesthouse rooms but don't want to splash out. They're all pretty much the same 2-3 star standard providing average service, the most central being Green House Hotel, a stone's throw from the department store. Another is Krabi Loma Hotel on Chao Fah Rd with twin rooms at Bt650 with aircon, bath, satellite TV, mini-bar, Internet and pool. An oldie-but-goody is Grand Tower Hotel, conveniently located on the corner of Chao Fah Rd, near the favourite bars, from Bt250. If you don't want to dive into your purse so deeply then there's always the guesthouses of which Krabi has plenty. 'Old school' Cha Guesthouse offers the cheapest huts in town from Bt100. The charming Dukes Cottage has fan doubles for Bt280, a funky restaurant downstairs, a guitar for anyone wanting to strum a tune, and a jovial proprietor.

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FEEDING TIME:

When it comes to food in Krabi be assured to find anything your heart desires, if you look hard enough! For home-cooked meals Popeye's dishes up the heartiest grub, the chips are enough to write home about; here you'll find some savoury characters to chat to, or grab a traditional Danish hot dog at Cafe Europa. Popular with locals are the Korean Suki BBQs: simply seize a hut and eat all you can for Bt79, the one with the most ambience is near the Boonsiam Hotel. For a slice of pasta paradise visit Viva Pizzeria or Da Franco, the latter serving up the best tiramisu this side of Venice. For oyster lovers, the atmospheric Chow Seau has to be sampled, having a reputation for serving the freshest seafood in town; this place is teeming with locals at the weekend. The oysters are so big you may need to dig in with a knife and fork. Besides great value, Ruen Mai is the most enchanting Thai restaurant.

NIGHTRIPPING:

Krabi definitely avoids the excesses of Bangkok and is not exactly the liveliest city in Thailand but that's not to say it lacks buzz. Celebrated hideaways can be passed over if you're not in the know. One is the unassuming Asia Road on Chao Far Rd comprising a music collection not often found in this neck of the woods. Moreover, its claim to fame is its Bt90 frozen margaritas which are bound to stir the Latino in you. For those who can't get enough of Bangkok, there's the fashionable newcomer Crazy Pub on Maharaj Road. A big city contemporary-style bar in the middle of town clamouring with locals at weekends and for techno freaks Mixer Pub is the best on offer.

RAILAY

At the tip of Phra Nang peninsula are East Railay, West Railay and Phra Nang, the most popular stretch of Krabi's coastline described as one of the most beautiful capes in the world, and rightly so. The powder white beach that is Ao Phra Nang with the sacred Phra Nang cave at its mouth now attracts the wealthiest visitors where the only place to stay is the exclusive Rayavadee. But for those who don't perspire money the more middle-class crowd hangout is at West beach, sometimes referred to as Sunset Beach. Here big bungalow operations offer the same deals. Railay Bay Resort and Spa starts at Bt1200. Railay Sand and Sea from Bt900 with fan and breakfast and Railay Village Hotel at Bt500 are some options. The budget crowd tends to hug the mangrove-choked east beach, where the greatest concentration of less expensive bungalows, bars and restaurants are located. Seafood is the best restaurant and Ya Ya Bungalows have rooms from Bt150.

NIGHTRIPPING:

Why fix something if it isn't broken? This is the philosophy behind Railay nightlife. Sunset entertainment generally begins with drinks on west beach while admiring the more energetic volleyballers and witnessing the magnificent colours of sunset, while the drink-til-u-drop party scene shifts over to east beach where all night parties and fire shows draw crowds. Favourites are Gecko and The Cliff Bar.

TONSAI

Budget travellers or those with unconstrained spirits tend to gather at the small beach just a walk through the adjoining cave from Railay. There are several inexpensive bungalow operations starting from Bt150 with standard restaurant fare. The main attraction is the rave party that goes off every night at Freedom Bar with super huge parties around full moon when longtail boats operate around the clock.

KHLONG MUANG

The latest addition to this spectacular coastal region is Khlong Muang. This unspoiled beach is just a stone's throw from Ao Nang and yet the peace and serenity is a million miles from the tourist traps and big brash resorts just down the road. Places to stay in the area are located directly on the beach. Luxury rooms and bungalows look out over the waters of the Andaman Sea, giving you the perfect view of a spectacular sunset. By far the cheapest place to stay is Khlong Muang Inn with fan rooms from Bt300. Krabi Sands Resort from Bt1,400 incl. breakfast. All lay in an area of hectic five-star resorts including the Sheraton, Nakamanda, Pulay, and Taabkeak.

WAY TO GO:

Bus: Bt350 for a VIP Bus via Surat Thani or Bt650 for a government bus from the Southern Bus Terminal. Government buses cost more but are generally safer

Fly: Bt2,560/5,120 one-way/return. Expect to pay Bt200 to extortionate taxi drivers for a lift into town.



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HUAHIN GULF GOLF



On the road near the airport is a billboard that reads “Hua Hin Queen of Tranquility.” That’s a good introduction to this easy-going city which sits prettily on the sandy lap of the Gulf of Thailand. A hit with golfers and families, Thais and Farangs, Hua Hin is also becoming increasingly popular with expat retirees and trendy young Thais in search of a breather from noxious Bangkok. The biggest tourist-puller is the six golf courses, some of which are on a par with the best courses in SE Asia. On weekdays green fees range from Bt1,200 for the oldest course, the Royal Hua Hin (built in 1927) up to Bt2,500 for the Springfield Royal. Even when you add on another Bt600 for the cart and Bt200 for the caddy it’s still a sweet deal.

But if you prefer to play in a bigger sand trap, there’s always the beach that rims the city. Pony-riding, banana-boating, and lazing around getting a lobster tan are the three paramount pleasures here. It’s also swell for a breezy nightcap.

Khao Takiap, or “Chopstick Mountain,” is a dozen km’s or so south of town and boasts a hilltop temple and a hyperactive community of monkeys, along with a cluster of Buddha images sitting strangely beside models of dinosaurs. Great views of the sea and fishing vessels here remind one

that up until around 1992 Hua Hin was but a humble fishing hamlet and summerhouse for the Royal Family; and His Majesty the King still spends a lot of his time at the palace here. In homage to some of the special projects initiated at His Majesty’s behest, there’s a supermarket called Golden Place where Thais queue up to buy fruit and produce from these royal projects.

Hua Hin’s reputation as a health centre is bolstered by numerous spas (Chiva Som being the most legendary), in addition to a multitude of massage and reflexology centres scattered around town. Another good daylight option (not so good if you’ve got hemorrhoids) is the Elephant Village, scenically located near the Palau Waterfall and the Eitiuskato Temple.

Heading further out of town, the Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park (some 60 km’s south of Hua Hin) has some photogenic beaches, limestone hills, and caves. The park is also a roost for sea eagles, painted storks, and purple herons, and a lair for deer, serow and many different kinds of primates.

A two-hour drive and a 15-minute speedboat brings you to the island of Koh Thalu. The coral reefs around here, teeming with tropical fish, provide sunken pleasures for snorkellers.

When it comes to grub and Thai palates, Hua Hin is synonymous with seafood. Right along the beachfront’s Naresdamri Road are restaurants like Meekaruna, Ketsarin, and the Sea Side, specialising in

marine creatures. As in Bangkok, Italian fare is running second in the Farang food sweepstakes, with numerous options and Nino’s Pizzeria (out by the Weekend Market) getting good marks. The classy Hagi Japanese Restaurant serves up the raw delicacies that have given the Japanese the longest life-spans on earth. They also have a “live cooking station”. Close to that, and the Sofitel, is Papa John. Founded back in the mid-90s, it’s got a real mixed bag of a menu with Thai, international, ostrich meat, and even Finnish cuisine.

In terms of accommodation, the city is rich with luxury hotels and resorts. The Marriot, the Hilton, the Anantara, the Hyatt, and the historic Sofitel (built in 1923 and still resplendent of that era) all compete for the upscale visitor’s baht. But the mid-range vacationer will feel right at home in the Thipurai City Hotel, in the city centre, with rooms ranging from Bt1,800-2,800 in the high season.

Inexpensive lodgings also abound all over town (the Catwoman Guesthouse deserves a mention just for its name alone), so the skinflint backpacker can brag he’s just discovered the cheapest accommodation this side of a hollowed-out tree stump.

Once tepid, the nightlife thermometer has risen a few degrees in recent years. Casanovas in lust with beer bars and racy thrills should head down to Soi Binhaban, or the Hua Hin Night Bazaar up around the top of Soi Kanjanomai. To get your pugilistic kicks, behind the City Beach Hotel, there’s Thai boxing every Tuesday and Saturday night, with five bouts for Bt300, which includes a free drink. Down on Soi 72, the Night Market is a good spot for shopping, scoffing, and people-spotting.

With the 60th anniversary of HM the King’s ascension to the throne coming up in 2006, Hua Hin is undergoing extensive renovations to make sure it keeps up its reputation as the country’s monarch of beach resorts and queen of tranquility.

WAYS TO GO:

By Road: Buses leave regularly from the Southern Bus Terminal in Bangkok, take around three hours, and cost about Bt150. They also run every 45 minutes from Hua Hin to Bangkok, beginning at 3am. The last bus heading back to BKK departs at 9:30 pm.

By Rail: Trains leave the Hualamphong Station in Bangkok all day and cost around the same as the bus. The journey takes about an hour longer. But the real bonus is catching a glimpse of the most photo-worthy railway station in the country: a wooden masterwork of red and cream paint in Hua Hin.

PATTAYA DASISTGUT

If you pick up a tourist brochure, or look at a website, or even talk to one of the expatriates who live there, you'll keep stumbling on the phrase "paradise" used to describe Pattaya. On arrival, the casual observer may be a little mystified by this. The beach is rubbish, the whole town is concrete and there's sleaze on a truly dumbfounding scale. Koh Phi Phi this ain't. Yet the town has the highest concentration of expatriates outside Bangkok and sees two million visitors every year (second only to Phuket). So what draws people to this seaside resort town, just to the southeast of Bangkok?

Pattaya got its start during the Vietnam War when the US used an airbase there and designated the town as an approved R&R destination. Hotels and tourist operators quickly followed and the rest is history. Indeed, the Royal Thai Navy continues to operate the base and sailors can sometimes be seen around the town. Basically, it's the tourist infrastructure that pulls in the visitors and the centre of town abounds with hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, bars, phone or internet cafes, massage places and just about every other vacation convenience conceivable. Further down the coast there are many resorts for those who are on sun-and-seafood holidays, along with wildlife parks and dozens of other activities.

Pattaya is divided into two halves, covering two beaches. Pattaya beach is where the action is, the main night-district being Walking Street. Jomtien is further south and is a nicer beach with more accommodation, and it's popular with Thai weekenders.

So is Pattaya paradise? It's a party town for sure. No matter who you are there's something to occupy you, be it paintball, bungee jumping, kayaking or just loafing around getting drunk all day; Pattaya accepts all comers.



For the talent segment of the contest, Lek performed a convincing impersonation of a bitch.

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PLACES TO CRASH:

There are far too many places to list here. Pattaya's room prices start at about Bt300 and go up from there. There are the usual luxury hotels such as the Amari, the Ambassador or the Dusit. Odder exceptions are Hard Rock Hotel, featuring rock star-themed rooms and the Cabbages & Condoms Resort. The popular budget-traveller chain Sawasdee has five hotels in Pattaya town. Generally, the standards are high with even the cheapest rooms featuring TV, mini-bar and aircon, although some of the older buildings can be a little rundown. For a good night's sleep, avoid hotels next to one of the ubiquitous construction sites, or hotels that offer hourly rates.

WIND IN YOUR FACE:

You'll see songtaews all over town, offering short lifts for Bt10, depending on the distance and your gullibility. Motorcycle taxis are ubiquitous and about the same as Bangkok prices, around Bt20 for a couple of kilometers. You can hire scooters and

big bikes but unless you're an experienced rider the traffic will eat you alive. Hiring a car usually means a minimum of three days or more, and costs about Bt1,000 per day.

DAYTRIPPING:

During daylight hours activities can be divided into two types: on land and on the water. Life is better out where it's wetter and apart from the usual beachside fun of banana boats and paragliding there's plenty of people to take you diving or on a day-trip to the offshore islands. For the livelier there's water and cable-skiing, windsurfing or yachting.

Onland, you can take in the Sri Racha Tiger Zoo (actually around 30km out of town), Underwater World Pattaya (an aquarium in South Pattaya), the Snake Farm or the Orchid Farm (both actually in Chonburi), the local branch of Ripley's Believe it or Not Museum (in Royal Garden Plaza), or shopping, shopping, shopping. If you're the sporty type there's Thailand's biggest bungee jump, which is just near the go-cart

speedway (South Pattaya). Plus there's paintball, horseback riding, skydiving and shuffleboard. Needless to say, the landscape around Pattaya is littered with quality golf courses.

NIGHTTRIPPING:

The main nighttime activity in Pattaya City quickly becomes obvious on arrival. If you happen to be a white male in town, a quick stroll around dusk will illicit several invitations for a drink or other offers that may make you blush or tremble. Beer-bars sprout from every bit of available space and there seems to be another acre of them around every corner – plenty of go-go bars around the downtown as well. Two of the more famous clubs and hunting grounds for happy hookers, and the men who lust after them, are Walking Street's Marine Disco and the Bangkok-based Lucifer's. If that's your gig, then you're not alone: Pattaya seems to have the world's largest concentration of overweight middle-aged men and you may feel out of place not

sporting a mullet or moustache. There tend to be a lot of katoeys, or ladyboys, around town as well. Luckily they're not all picking pockets and you can go to Alcazar, Simon or Tiffany's cabaret shows for a gender-bending evening. In need of live music? Check out Blues Factory or Climax Bar, both on Walking Street. To stay away from the sleaze, hang out with a member of the opposite sex or try one of the better hotel bars.

FEEDING TIME:

If every second business in Pattaya is a bar then every third one is a restaurant. If you're aching for a taste of home, Pattaya provides some of the best Farang food far less than Bangkok prices. English-style pubs can be expected to provide excellent post-hangover fry-ups and there are several outstanding Japanese and Korean restaurants. For those Americans among us who long for Mexican food, the Blue Parrot on Soi 13/4 is a godsend – great tacos and margaritas, and generous portions of home-made salsa.

WAY TO GO:

Bus: Buses leave from Mor Chit and the Ekami Bus Terminal on Sukhumvit Soi 63 regularly. Fares range from Bt70-90.

Taxi: Impress your mates by hailing a cab and taking it to Pattaya, a bargain at Bt1,500 with beers and singsongs along the way. You can often bargain for Bt900 on the way back.



JOMTIEN HOLIDAY HOTEL

Jomtien Holiday Hotel is situated in a perfect location overlooking the beach. A choice of premier suites with panoramic seaviews and separate living area or deluxe rooms with aircon, Satellite TV, phone, and a sea view terrace are available.

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KOH CHANG ISLAND PARK

Koh Chang National Park, a jungle clad mountain range rising out of the sea, has long been admired for its natural beauty and easy pace. But new airport on the mainland and a government sponsored push for the tourist dollar has put Koh Chang on the fast track to overdevelopment. New hotels and luxury resorts are cropping up alongside hastily built shop units which now stretch virtually the length of the west coast. Meanwhile, over in the sleepy, scenic south-east of the island, locals continue to fish and work the land for a living in areas that are untouched by mass tourism and, ironically, well worth visiting.

WHITESANDS

If comfort, convenience and the company of hordes of holidaymakers make your holiday complete, then Whitesands is for you.

PLACES TO CRASH:

At the northern end of the beach you'll find Independent and Star Bungalows and a back-to-basics beach nomad vibe, while the long standing KC Grande Resort covers all the bases with Bt250 huts to Bt6,000 villas. Nearby, 15 Palms, is one of the few resorts here with aircon rooms for around Bt1,000. Proving the days of a Bt150 bed aren't dead is Island Lodge – the cheapest deal in the area. South, on Pearl Beach, a potpourri of budget and mid-range possibilities abound from the excellent boutique Keereeta Resort to Charmed Resort, where accommodation comes in the form of converted shipping containers.

KLONG PRAO

This long curving beach is tipped to become overcrowded package tourist heaven, fortunately that day still seems a few years away. Accommodation amongst the mangrove clad river estuaries provides a serene alternative to beach life.

PLACES TO CRASH:

At the northern end, Koh Chang Paradise is the best bet for suitcase lugging visitors, but not cheap at Bt2,500 or more. Genuine travellers will love Thalé Bungalows, as laid back and chilled as the Dalai Lama on ice. Nearby, on the estuary, Bt900 will get you an ensuite, aircon room at the charming Baan Rim Nam. For an additional US\$100, a room opposite at Aana Resort, the pick of the island's luxury hideaways, can be yours. South, KP Huts caters to guests on Bt500/night budgets.

KAI BAE

A wide variety of bars, restaurants and decent accommodation make this an ideal base for anyone who's evolved beyond 'drink till you puke' travelling.

PLACES TO CRASH:

Family friendly comfort and privacy can had for a price at Seaview Resort & Spa. For well kept, family run beachfront bungalows, head to KB Bungalows or Kai Bae Beach Bungalows where prices range from Bt500 - 2,000.

LONELY BEACH

The key to Lonely Beach's success lied in its name, but 'lonely' is one thing this mish-mash of wooden huts and banana pancake vendors certainly isn't.

PLACES TO CRASH:

The often packed Nature Beach's Bt400 digs are smack on the beach. Next door, Bhumiyama Resort offers 3-star comforts a stone's throw from the unwashed masses. On the rocky shore, Paradise Cottages's new huts go for Bt200 and up. Nearby, in sleepy Bailan, Bailan Family Bungalows and Bailan Hut provide homely, basic huts for Bt500 and Bt200 respectively.

BANGBAO

This once lazy fishing village is now home to more dive schools, seafood restaurants and tour operators than fishermen but still retains a certain charm.

PLACES TO CRASH:

Bang Bao Sea Hut, at Bt1,800+, is a must if you have the cash. Beautiful, but economical panoramic bay and mountain views can be had the remote, Bt150, Homestay Beach.

ELSEWHERE

Having been responsible for putting Lonely Beach on the backpackers map several years ago, the Treehouse has upped and moved to the extremely remote Long Beach in the far southeast of the island. Get there by boat from Lonely Beach.

NIGHTTRIPPING:

Koh Chang certainly ain't party central but Backsound, Lonely Beach, is cocktail-in-a-bucket heaven for the dance music loving Khaosan crowd. Experience modern Thai culture at Sky Bay Pub, Pearl Beach. On Whitesands, Oodies is an old fave for steaks and music and Sabay Bar is the still lithe granddaddy of beach bars. In Kai Bae, Porn's

and No-name are the best of the motley beach bar crew.

DAYTRIPPING:

A multitude of boat owners offer '4 island' snorkelling day trips for Bt450 – 900 whilst prices for scuba trips and PADI courses seldom differ between dive operators. However, BB Divers and Scubadive-Thailand, are both worth checking out. Make time to visit Baan Kwan Chang elephant camp, it's a must and call Lek for a trek into the interior, he can be found near the camp at Jungleway. Defuse the toxic time bomb masquerading as your bloodstream with a detox or fasting program at Natural High, Bailan.

WAY TO GO

By Air: Bt4,800 return on Bangkok Airways. Flights twice, sometimes thrice, daily.

By Bus: Bt232 7.30am & 9.30am aircon bus direct from Ekkamai to Centrepoint ferry pier.

By Minivan: A cramped, hair-raising way to spend Bt350.

Ferry: Bt110 one way, by car ferry or wooden passenger boat.



Sea View Resort & Spa Koh Chang

Amid the beautiful eastern sea, **Sea View Resort & Spa Koh Chang**, the resort for sea-lovers, harmoniously blends modernity and convenience among peaceful shady lines of coconut trees and several kinds of local plants, along the powdery white sand beach. Enjoy fresh seafood directly obtained from the sea, taste various kinds of famous fruit of Trat Province. Tour with pleasure, take rest on small and large islands of the Koh Chang National Park.

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E-mail : reservation@seaviewkohchang.com

KOH SAMET BEBY THE SEA

Samet is one multi-faceted diamond in the rough. For Bangkok-incarcerated Thais and expats, it's a very welcome, weekend parole. For family folks, it's got some luxurious resorts and wholesome fun. And for younger travelers the island has got it going on party-wise, and offers some decent, lower-range accommodation. In other ways, however, the beach experience in Koh Samet is getting more and more generic, what with all the same banana boats, jet-skis and sarong vendors.



HAT SAI KAEW

The aptly named White Sand Beach is located around the hatchet head of the axe-shaped island. It's got some of the glitz but none of the vices of Samui or Phuket. In general, it is pricier and more family-oriented than the other beaches. That said, the nightlife has been picking up a bit, thanks to venues like the Beach Bar and, right next door, the Reggae Pub where, as all you psychics have predicted by now, Bob Marley's Most Overplayed Hits are in eternal rotation. There's sand like an angel's dandruff on this beach, and in case you don't believe the diving is better than on Koh Tao then an outing with Ploy Diving should convince you.

AO HIN KHOK

For parties, food and affordable accommodation Naga reigns supreme on the next beach southward. But with bungalows for Bt200 it can get pretty full. Some of the best parties on Samet are in their elevated bar which has coconut palms (festooned with fairy lights) growing right through the floor. Good selection of dance tracks, a pool table, and a special "Flip a Coin" promotion on drinks every night from 10pm-midnight. Tok's and Jep's are two of the other mainstays for global nomads, and also serve up their own extremely edible food, with the cuisine at Jep's topping Samet's charts. But we should remind you of this ruby of wisdom from the eminent Australian gourmand John McDonald: "Like most beach resorts in Thailand, the seafood is magnificent, the Thai food is competent, and the Western food is crap – order with caution." Yes, words to dine by, except for the aforementioned Jep's, which does everything splendidly.

AO PHAI

At the north end of this beach is Ao Phai Huts where bungalows begin at Bt600. Next along is party central at Silversand. It's a sliver of Koh Pangan – without the Class A's or the blaring trance – and has mats on the beach, fire-juggling from 10pm, and it's open very late sometimes. They even teach fire-juggling here, and watching Farangs set their T-shirts aflame is a favourite pastime after midnight. Speaking of flames, check out Rayong's only sheesha

cafe at Sheesha Cafe. One of the signs you'll see all over Samet advertises a fishing and snorkeling tour; it includes stops at nearby islands, lunch, and turtle and shark farms. "All this and a smile for only Bt400," the sign says. The tours run from 11am-4pm daily. Silversand also rents kayaks for Bt100 per hour or Bt400 for the day. And if you're gagging for a Sheesha pipe, drop in to Sheesha Cafe at Seabreeze bungalows.

AO PUDSA

Sometimes known as Ao Phudsa, this stretch of blinding white sand has a sign hanging from a tree that says it's a "Rabies Free Zone." Yes, the sand dogs can be a nuisance when you're eating, but they're not Cujo by any means. The best thing about this small and popular beach is that it's faraway enough from Ao Phai to be quiet but close enough to walk and party there. For Bt500 the bungalows at Ao Phudsa are a touch dirty and dilapidated. A better deal is Tubtim, right beside it, which has fan-cooled bungalows for the same price, or air-con jobbies for Bt1,200. And their restaurant is one of the best on the island. Period.

AO NUAN

To really get away from it all – even your irksome doppelganger Ernie – make a beeline for this small, secluded beach. It's just around from the boulder-strewn headland at the end of Tubtim. There's only one bungalow operation here – Ao Nuan – which has nine charming old-fashioned bungalows in the Bt300-600 price range. Even if you don't stay over here, it's a great place for swimming and rarely gets crowded.

BEST OF THE REST

Ao Vongduean is the longest beach. It attracts a lot of Thais with money and families because of some outstanding mid-range digs like the Malibu Resort with aircon bungalows for Bt1,200. One of the island's better bars and restaurants, Bay Watch is conveniently located on Vongduean for your partying pleasure. In general, the further south you go, the more Thai and isolated the island becomes. If you're into camping and marine biology make footprints for Ao Kiu. Here you can rent tents and camp near the beach. On the other side of the island is Ao Prao, which boasts a very fancy resort and is otherwise a cool place to venture for a sunset.

WAY TO GO:

Public Bus: Departures every hour from Eastern Bus Terminal on Sukhumvit Soi 63, off the Ekkamai skytrain station. Tickets Bt125-150. Bear in mind that the last ferry (Bt50; takes 45 minutes) leaves Ban Phe at 6pm. In order to catch it you need to get the 2pm bus, because the journey takes around three-and-a-half hours. If you do miss the boat, then you can rent a speedboat for a minimum of Bt1,000 for four or five people.

Motorcycle Rentals: Bt350-400 per day. Drive easy, because the roads are both sandy and will leave you with a serious case of hemorrhoids.

Welcome to Scambodia

Gordon (*talesofasia.com*) Sharpless once more levels his heavily opinionated, though staggeringly accurate monthly intellectual crossbow at those targets he feels have a poison-tipped arrow coming to them.



Leaning tower of visas

VISA SECRETS

Cambodia's worst kept secret finally found its way to the ears of PM Hun Sen, and Samdech was not amused. The practice of overcharging for visas at embassies and consulates as well as for visas on arrival at land borders, which has been going on since they began offering visas on arrival at land borders (1998) came under the wrath of the PM who demanded that the practice cease for all the obvious reasons – welcoming tourists to your country by ripping them off doesn't help your image nor inspire repeat visitors. Not surprisingly, the consulates and border officials denied everything.

Nonetheless, determined to find someone to blame, the government launched an investigation which went something like this:

Government: Are you overcharging tourists for visas?

Consulates and border officials: No.

Government: So who is?

Consulates and border officials: Nobody here.

Government: So where are these reports coming from?

Consulates and border officials: Not us.

Government: So who do we blame?

Consulates and border officials: Tour operators.

Government: Thank you.

Consulates and border officials: You're welcome. Where do I send the check?

So the official report from the government stated that the tour operators are to blame for overcharging for visas and no one at either the consulates or borders inhaled.

As blame was placed squarely upon the backs and shoulders of tour operators, signs went up at all land crossings informing that tourist visas are indeed \$20 US and that no tour operator, agent, smiling person in a hat, will

be permitted to assist anyone in filling out a visa application or in any way offer aid in obtaining a visa on arrival as everything was their fault in the first place and a thorough investigation proved it.

The word from people who have crossed the border in the past few days is yes, you can get your visa for \$20, but if you want it faster you'll be encouraged to pay Bt1,000 as before. How long you'll wait seems dependent on how many people can be convinced to pay Bt1,000 and get their visa before you. But you can blame the tour operators.

HOLIDAYS

There was a national holiday in Cambodia this month, I only noticed because I went to the bank and it was closed. It was Human Rights Day. Cambodia celebrates a human rights day? Sort of like Saudi Arabia celebrating International Women's Day. Apparently, rather than bothering themselves with human rights year round, it was decided simply to observe a national holiday and human rights for one day and continue as normal for the rest of the year.

Actually, Cambodia takes a national holiday for just about everything: King's birthday, old King's birthday (that was the neat thing about the abdication of Sihanouk – Cambodia got another holiday out of it), Water Festival, Khmer New Year, Coronation Day, Constitution Day, Corporate Day, Corruption Day (this is celebrated rather frequently), National Day, International Day, Nationalism Day, Nationalists Day, Flag Day, Angkor Wat Day, Angkor Beer Day, Birthday of the third cousin of the seventh king of the fourth district of Battambang Day, Day of Reckoning, Day to Day Day, and after May Day someone got the idea for a June Day, a July Day, and an August Day, so September Day can't be far behind.

Cambodia has something like 30 national holidays, putting it somewhere in the top three or maybe five countries in the world's national holiday sweepstakes and it seems every year they add a new one. Next year we're hoping for a National Work Week. For one whole week there will be no holidays. Everyone is to report to work on time. Everyone will take only a one-hour lunch break and stagger their breaks so that the business doesn't have to shut down for three hours each day. Government employees, however, will be permitted to take a three-hour lunch break but with the stipulation that upon conclusion of their lunch break, they will return to their jobs.

JOKE OF THE DAY, OR WHY THAILAND HAS GOOD HIGHWAYS AND COMBODIA DOESN'T

Last year, the Ministers of Transport and Public Works for Thailand and Cambodia met in Bangkok. After their formal meeting, the Thai minister invited his Cambodian colleague back to his home. The Cambodian minister was impressed. "What a beautiful home you have here! How did you ever build such a manor?" The Thai minister takes his colleague to the window and says, "Ahh, it was nothing, please have a look outside." The Cambodian minister peers outside to see a modern eight-lane elevated superhighway, traffic whizzing by, everything in order. "See the highway," the Thai minister exclaims, "I take 10%!" The Cambodian minister was indeed impressed.

One year later, the two colleagues are again attending a meeting only this time it's in Phnom Penh. And again after the formalities are dispensed with, the Cambodian minister invites his Thai colleague back to his home. Upon arriving the Thai minister is dumbfounded as they approach the most enormous house he has ever seen. "My God, Your Excellency, How did you ever build such a palace?" "I will show you," he answers. Once inside, the Cambodian minister takes his colleague to the window, "Please have a look outside." The Thai minister peers outside to see nothing but a few motos and a beat up Camry taxi bouncing along a dirt track amongst rice paddies and palm trees. "Do you see the super highway?" asks the Cambodian Minister. "Umm, no, I don't see any highway at all," replies the Thai minister, slightly perplexed. "That's because I take 100%!"

PHNOMPENH BAGUETTEBURG

Not nearly as dangerous as it once was, the city can still be risky at night. Sure, it's not Bangkok or Singapore, but Phnom Penh has come a long way in the past five years. The city retains its faded French grandeur but has added a great drinking strip of bars by the river and an environment where getting hammered is still a 24-hour sport.

PLACES TO CRASH:

Budget: The young traveller ghettos are around Boeung Kak Lake (Street 93) and the noisy centre of town (Narin's, Capitol, TAT). Our personal recommendation is in neither location and is the Dara Reang Sey Hotel at the corner of streets 13 & 118. Rooms from \$8 fan, and from \$12 for aircon.

Mid-range: Along the river the California 2 and the recently opened Tonle Sap Guesthouse are recommended. In-town the Billabong (\$35-\$50) is a peaceful oasis amongst the chaos. Those visiting Phnom Penh seeking nightlife might want to check out Flamingo's. Just off Street 51 in the heart of it all.

Upper: Raffles Le Royal or the Intercontinental are the places to go. For more sane rates, try the Sunway.

DAYTRIPPING:

Khmer Rouge horrors are documented at the Tuol Sleng Museum in town and the Killing Fields Memorial at Choeung Ek. West of the airport, there are two shooting ranges where you can fire off 30 rounds from an AK for about \$20 – same price for a grenade. A grenade launcher will set you back \$200. No, you cannot shoot a cow, that's an urban legend. Back in town, the cultural attractions include Wat Phnom. According to legend, it's the site of the historic founding of the city in 1372. Near the river are the Silver Pagoda and Royal Palace. Make sure you pay the camera fee if you plan to take photos – they enforce it. Nearby, the National Museum has lots of carvings and stuff, much of it lifted from Angkor.

NIGHTRIPPING:

Though not Bangkok or Singapore, Phnom Penh has come a long way in the past few years. Still, if you go out in search of revelry after dark, take a taxi or a moto – don't walk. Although not nearly as dangerous as it once was, the city can still be risky at night. That said, the city retains its faded French grandeur but has added a great drinking strip of bars by the river and an environment where getting hammered is still a 24-hour sport. Along the river there are notable holes-in-the wall such as the Cantina and the Jungle Bar, as well as larger corner establishments like the Foreign Correspondent's Club (FCC) and Riverside. A whole line-up of bars on Street 51 between streets 136 and 178 include the Walkabout (open 24 hours), Howie's (a very



late-night joint), and Shanghai Bar (a single guy's kind of place). Forget about the Heart of Darkness and what you heard about this being "the" place to be. It ain't the place to be unless you're looking to have a gun stuck in your face. And right now it's closed because someone was recently shot dead inside. Elsewhere around town is Sharky Bar (street 130) which is a big bar with lots of pool tables and girls. Further up the river is the Green Vespa. And attached to the Tonle Sap Guesthouse is the Pickled Parrot. Sports fans will want to seek out the Gym Bar. For a touch of Irish, visit Rory's.

FEEDING TIME:

Along Sisowath Quay by the river is a plethora of restaurants with a wide array of international cuisines, including the famous FCC, Happy Herb's Pizza, Frizz, and around the corner on street 178 is the Rising Sun. Almost any street corner offers a noodle stall or a Khmer-style hole-in-the-wall rice and

noodle shop. There are a few local fast-food joints (but no McDonald's yet) and the Pizza Company just opened a branch in the Suraya Shopping Mall. Street 240 offers a number of eating options, though many of these cater more to the NGO crowd.

WAY TO GO:

From Thailand:
Plane: Bt5,400/10,800 one-way/return from Bangkok (Cambodia departure taxes are \$25 international, \$6 domestic).
Road: Most direct way is to use the Poipet border crossing. There are early morning buses from Poipet (you'll have to spend the night in Poipet to get one), and taxis run all day for around \$60 for the whole car or shared.

Boat: From Koh Kong to Sihanoukville, morning departure, \$15.

From Siem Reap:

Plane: Siem Reap Airways and \$55-70 one-way, several flights a day.

Road: Road is excellent. Bus \$4-6, five-six hours. Taxi \$40, four hours.

Boat: \$20-25, five to seven hours, daily am departure. Now that the road is good, this option is an overpriced tourist rip-off best avoided. Take the bus.

VISAS & BORDER CROSSINGS:

To/from Thailand: Use Poipet if heading to Siem Reap from Bangkok. Use any crossing if heading to Phnom Penh. If coming from the north (Isaan, Vientiane) use Anlong Veng or O'Smach. Visa-on-arrival costs Bt1,000 but beware of scams.

To/from Laos: The border above Stung Treng is open. Lao and Cambodia visas aren't available here. Expect a \$3 'stamp fee'. A boat from Stung Treng to the border should be about \$25 for a boat or \$5 a person.

SIEMREAP RELIQUARY

This former French colonial outpost is growing rapidly with a bigger range of international restaurants and nightlife, and a much wider demographic of travelers, from five-star tourists to younger visitors, happy to stay in cheap grottos. The main attraction (hardly a quiz-show mind-boggler) is the ruins, with Angkor Wat (the most enormous Hindu temple on earth) and the Bayon, holding court for the greatest number of visitors. Further away, on roads too rife with banditry to travel 10 years ago, is the small but exquisitely preserved Temple of Women. It's well worth getting up at the first cock's crow (they're nature's alarm clock in this town) to watch the sun rise above the ruins, or sticking around until twilight to be awestruck by a Technicolour sunset.

PLACES TO CRASH:

\$10 or less: we recommend either the Ivy 2 Guesthouse not far from the Old Market, Jasmine Lodge on Highway 6 near the Caltex, or Garden Village tucked down a narrow sidestreet.

\$10-\$20: Two Dragons in the quiet Wat Bo Village area or the Ivy Guesthouse in the Old Market area.

\$20-\$50: Many good choices. Old Market area try Molly Malone's. Along the river go for the Bopha Angkor or La Villa Loti. Want a quiet side street locale? Try Peace of Angkor or Mystere's d'Angkor.

\$50+: Go all the way and try the Amansara (\$775/night). Other four and five star offerings include the Sofitel, Victoria Angkor, FCC, Angkor Village, Le Meridien, Hotel de la Paix and the Grand Hotel.

DAYTRIPPING:

At \$20 for a day, \$40 for three and \$60 for the week, the temples may seem a bit like a trip to Disneyland, but they're well worth it. You can hire a motorcycle-drawn rickshaw (locally but erroneously referred to as a tuk-tuk) for about \$10/day. An aircon car and driver will set you back \$20. Guides can set you back another \$20-25 a day. They can be arranged through a tour agency, your guesthouse, or stop by the Angkor Tour Guide Association opposite the Grand Hotel.

DAYTRIPPING BEYOND THE TEMPLES:

Go see the river carvings and take a jungle walk at Kbal Spean. Deep in the jungle visit Beng Mealea temple or really take a journey and see Koh Ker, too. Phnom Kulen is not worth the \$20 admission so give it a miss. The floating village of Chong Khneas is also poor value, instead if you want to see the lake (and we think you should), spend a few extra dollars and get yourself to Kompong Phluk. You won't regret it, it's gorgeous. Also worth an hour or two of your time is the Landmine Museum. All the moto drivers know it.

NIGHTTRIPPING:

Most folks head to "Bar Street" which includes the Angkor What? Bar, Temple Bar, Red Piano, and a host of other new establishments. In the same neighborhood is the Ivy (good food and music), the Laundry Music Bar (late nights), Molly Malone's (Irish bar), and the Linga Bar (a gay bar). A few blocks away on Sivatha, across from the E-cafe is the Dead Fish Tower, a large rather bizarre place. All the upper range hotels have relaxing lounges.

FEEDING TIME:

The bulk of proper restaurants are clustered in the Psah Chas (Old Market) area. Options include Soup Dragon (Vietnamese-Asian), Easy Speaking (Asian, Western), Taj Mahal

(Indian), Pizza Italiano (err, Italian) and Blue Pumpkin (breakfast/lunch/bakery). Along Sivatha Street are scores of restaurants including the Dead Fish Tower (Thai) and Tell Restaurant (Western, Asian). In Wat Bo Village try the Two Dragons (Thai and Khmer). If you want to go "authentic, man" try the street stalls along Sivatha Street. There are also numerous hole-in-the-wall Khmer rice and noodle shops all over town. Hygiene can be an issue with many of these places. Fine dining can be found at any of the four and five-star hotels.

WAY TO GO:

Air: Bangkok Airways: Internet fares from Bt4300/8600 one-way/return, to much much more from travel agents.

Road: Take Thai government bus to Aranyaprathet, cross border, take taxi to Siem Reap. Expect to pay \$35-40 for a whole car, \$10 for a seat shared. Road is wretched. Plan on five hours of dancing in your seat.

UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES SHOULD YOU PURCHASE A BUS TICKET TO SIEM REAP FROM ANY TRAVEL AGENT ANYWHERE!



Enter the Two Dragons

Long time Untamed Travel Magazine correspondent Gordon Sharpless has in a short period of time managed to get married, become a father, and fulfil his life's dream of opening his own guesthouse in his adopted home of Siem Reap. The Two Dragons Guesthouse in Wat Bo Village has raised the bar of the crowded Siem Reap budget accommodation scene with the nicest rooms at the best prices, along with cable-TV, free tea and coffee, curtains, beds, even pillows! The real gold is in photographer Gordon's encyclopaedic knowledge of the area, advice on avoiding scams, and a home-spun menu, the brain child of his Thai wife (who might even cook the meal for you...). There's even a pickup service from the Poipet border (a shithole, somewhere you'll want to leave right away) so call ahead on +855-63-965-107 or 063-965-107 inside Cambodia or twodragons@talesofasia.com from cyberspace. Prices start at \$7 and end at \$20 for the aircon presidential suite, but Gordon says he'll give a 10% discount to folks toting this copy of FARANG Untamed Travel.

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SINGAPORE TROPOLIS

For some travelers in Asia, part of the appeal is feeling richer than the local population. Well, in Singapore forget it. It's a wealthy place and has the prices to match. It is clean, modern, organised, and efficient. It is, in other words, a comfort zone where there is almost zero chance of getting food poisoning, pickpocketed, or even bitten by a mosquito. And yet it retains the variety and flavour of Asia, from its ethnic neighbourhoods to its funky food stalls, temples, markets and colonial architecture. It's also easy to get around, thanks to a three-line rapid transit system (called the MRT, it closes at 1am), and an efficient bus network. Taxis are cheap, with most journeys costing only a few dollars, and a ride from the airport to downtown is just over \$10. (Note: All prices are in Singapore dollars. Where two prices are shown, the second one is for children.) So be prepared to spend some money here, and to sample much of Asia's best minus the worst.



In Singapore they even hang the fish

DAYTRIPPING: RAFFLES HOTEL

Way to go: City Hall MRT

One of the most hyped hotels in the world, Raffles is officially classified as part of Singapore's heritage. Opened in 1887, Joseph Conrad, Somerset Maugham and Rudyard Kipling stayed and wrote here. The Singapore Sling was invented here in 1915, and even at \$14 a pop, stopping by the Long Bar to sample this gin/cherry-brandy/fruit-juice cocktail is a must for many visitors.

ORCHARD ROAD

Way to Go: Orchard MRT

A shopper's paradise lined with mega-malls and five-star hotels. On Sundays the strip teems with crowds of Filipino maids come to socialise on their day off.

ZOO & NIGHT SAFARI

Way to Go: Ang Mo Kio MRT, then bus 138

When: Zoo, daily, 8:30am-6pm

Night Safari; 7:30pm-midnight

Cost: Zoo, \$12.25, \$5.10. Night Safari, \$15.75, \$10.50

More than 3,600 mammals, birds and reptiles make their home at the Singapore Zoological Gardens. You can even have tea with an orangutan. On the Night Safari, more than 1,200 animals lurk in a moonlit forest.

FORT CANNING PARK

Way to Go: Dhoby Ghaut MRT

When: Daily; 10am-6pm

Cost: \$8, \$5.

A green oasis in the city centre, with a Malay shrine atop the hill, and underneath, the Battle Box museum, where life-sized models reenact the British military's decision to surrender to the Japanese in 1942.

JURONG BIRD PARK

Way to Go: Boon Lay MRT

When: Daily, 9am-5pm

Cost: \$12.25, \$5.10

More than 8,000 birds including a flamingo-filled lake.

SENTOSA ISLAND

Way to Go: Harbour Front MRT

A theme park-like island off the southern tip of Singapore, full of attractions from the absurd to the marvelous. The Musical Fountain projects love messages onto a water screen. Other attractions/activities include a beach, nature walk, horseback riding, golf, kayaking.

MT. FABER

Way to Go: Harbour Front MRT

When: Cable car operates daily, 8:30am-9pm

Cost: \$8.50, \$3.90

Across from Sentosa, Mt Faber offers one of the best views in Singapore. Take the cable to the peak to glimpse old colonial houses, the bustling port and skyscrapers.

BUKIT TIMAH NATURE RESERVE

Way to Go: Bus No. 171 or 182 from Orchard Rd

When: 8:30am-6pm

Eighty-one hectares of forests. More plant species than all of North America. Trails for walkers and mountain bikers.

SINGAPORE RIVER

Way to Go: Raffles Place /Clarke Quay MRT

Formerly the heart of Singapore, now a district of restaurants, bars, and renovated warehouses. Singapore's symbol of tourism, the Merlion, a half-lion, half-fish, water-spouting statue, is at the mouth of the river. Along the south bank is Boat Quay, a lively strip of restaurants and bars. On the other side and upriver is Clarke Quay, a more laid-back area. Market on Read Bridge on Sunday afternoons.

LITTLE INDIA

Way to Go: Little India MRT

All the sights, sounds and smells of big India clustered in one neighbourhood along Serangoon Road. Visit Sunday evening (or don't) when 10,000 Indian men celebrate their day off.

CHINATOWN

Way to Go: Outram Park MRT

Historic home of the Chinese. Many traditional shophouses restored to their original specs. Souvenirs, knick knacks, antiques along Pagoda and Trengganu Streets.

ARAB STREET

Way to Go: Bugis MRT

The centre of Muslim culture. Good deals on textiles, batik, silk and more. Home of Sultan Mosque.

GEYLAND SERAI

Way to Go: Paya Lebar MRT

Traditional district of indigenous Malays. Market bubbles with cuisine, costumes and crafts.

ARTY STUFF: ASIAN CIVILIZATIONS MUSEUM

Way to Go: Raffles Place MRT

When: Mon 12-6pm, Tues-Sun 9am-6pm, Fri 9am-9pm

Cost: \$8.50, \$3.90

One of Singapore's best museums. Five galleries explore connections between Asian cultures.

ESPLANADE

Way to Go: City Hall MRT

Looks like a gigantic pair of fly's eyes and sometimes called the "durian buildings." A 1,600-seat concert hall and 2,000-seat theatre, along with smaller studios, galleries, performance spaces, restaurants, bars and boutiques.

SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM

Way to Go: City Hall/Dhoby Ghaut MRT

When: Mon-Sun 10am-7pm, Fri 10am-9pm
Cost: \$3, \$1.50

Housed in a classical baroque building. Focuses on Singaporean and regional artists, with a strong emphasis on electronic arts.

NIGHTTRIPPING:

Drinking is not cheap in Singapore. To keep it cheap, have your beers at the open-air food centres and stalls you find everywhere. Most young Singaporeans do not drink much, so many places cater to the large community of highly paid expats working in the financial sector. (You remember the Barings Bank-buster Nick Leeson, right?). Irish pubs charge around \$13-\$14 a pint.

ALLEY BAR

2 Emerald Hill Rd. Sun-Thu 5pm-2am, Fri-Sat 5pm-3am

High-ceilinged, L-shaped bar opens into an alley. Dim-sum snacks.

BALACLAVA

#01-01B Suntec City, 1 Raffles Blvd. Mon-Thu 3pm-1am, Fri-Sat 3pm-2am.

Elegant atmosphere, designer armchairs and sofas. Live jazz. TVs at individual tables.

BAR NONE

Marriot Hotel, 320 Orchard Rd. Mon 7-2, Tues-Sun 7-3.

Adult contemporary music with a rock edge provided by house band.

BREWERKZ

#01-05 Riverside Point, 30 Merchant Rd. Mon-Thu noon-midnight, Fri-Sat noon-1am. Sunday 11am-midnight.

Popular riverside microbrewery with California menu.

THE DUBLINER

165 Perang Road #01-00 Winsland House II, 11:30am-1am (Sun-Thu), 1:30pm-2am (Fri-Sat), Somerset MRT.

Rustic Irish pub with authentic Irish fare. Leather sofas, oak furniture, brick walls.

HARRY'S BAR

28 Boat Quay, Sun-Thu 11am-1 am, Fri-Sat 11am-4am High-volume house band downstairs, laidback retreat upstairs. Nick Leeson's favourite.

JAZZ@SOUTH BRIDGE

82B Boat Quay, Sun-Thu, 5:30 pm-1 am, Fri-Sat 5:30pm-2am.

Cozy mainstream jazz. Comfy sofas.

NO. 5 EMERALD

HILL COCKTAIL BAR

5 Emerald Hill, Mon-Thu noon-2am, Fri-Sat noon-3am, Sun 5pm-2am

Traditional shophouse-turned-European-style pub. Pool room upstairs.

ORCHARD TOWERS

400 Orchard Rd, open 24 hours

Nicknamed "Four Floors of Whores," this is a four-story complex that conjures the image of a tamer version of Bangkok's Nana Plaza. Neon-lit bars, thumping music, transvestites

and Western men prowling for Asian women.

CLUBS

Singapore's hottest dance clubs are concentrated along Mohamed Sultan Road off River Valley Road. Most have cover charges and dress codes. Don't show up in shorts or flip-flops. A lot of the clubs are open late, and there are other after-hours venues, too.

THE LIQUID ROOM

#01-05 the Gallery Hotel, 76 Robertson Quay, Wed-Sat 10pm-3am Classy atmosphere, beautiful people, huge dance floor.

ZOUK

17 Jiak Kim St. Wed-Sat 7:30pm-3am Pay to gain entry to one disco and get three. Can cost as much as \$35 when big DJs play, but you get two drinks included. The music is cutting edge and the club is pretty damn good. They kept Zouk open until 10am Sunday morning when a big US DJ span here once. Regularly have very big name DJs.

FEEDING TIME:

The variety of places to chow down is one of the best things about Singapore, from yummy inexpensive street food, to fine international cuisine. Singaporeans munch gleefully away at all hours of the day or night in locations all over the city. For budget travelers, hawker stalls and food centres offer great grub, a relaxed atmosphere and clean surroundings for a few dollars a plate. But don't eat all your meals there, since there are so many superb restaurants and eateries to try. Simply choose a district and stroll through until you find something that strikes your fancy. Not surprisingly, you will find great Chinese food in Chinatown, and great Indian food in Little India, and many other locations around the city. Stroll along Boat Quay, and touts will jump out at you from every restaurant to show you a menu. It's rather touristy and

not cheap, but the riverside atmosphere should be experienced. Holland Village at the other end of the city is a gathering place for Westerners and has good Italian and Lebanese food. Near Raffles Hotel, Chijmes is a collection of Western and non-Western restaurants in a former convent. For a more authentic local experience, try Lau Pa Sat, a sprawling open-air food centre in the stomach of the business district.

PLACES TO CRASH:

The main strip of budget hotels is along Bencoolen St, near the city centre, though some have closed in recent years as the area gentrifies with larger hotels and offices. Still, there are a dozen or so cheap hotels and guesthouses with prices around \$15-\$50, and backpackers walk up and down the street at all hours. The area is easy walking distance of Little India and Orchard Road. Some favorite haunts include: The Hawaii Hostel, 171-B Bencoolen St., 6338-4187; Green Curtains, 131-A Bencoolen St. 6334-8697; Waterloo Hostel, 55 Waterloo St, Catholic Centre Bldg, 4th Fl, 6336-6555. For more culture and character, try Chinatown or Little India; both offer good, small hotels. In Chinatown, those in the \$100-\$150 range include: Damenlou Hotel, 12 Ann Siang Rd, 6221-1900; Dragon Inn Chinatown, 18 Mosque St, 6222-7227; Royal Peacock 55 Keong Saik Rd, 6223-3522; The Inn on Temple St. 36 Temple St, 6221-5333. In Little India, decent, boutique-style hotels are found for under \$100, including: Perak Lodge, 12 Perak Rd, 6299-7733; Mayo Inn 9A Jalan Besar, 6295-6631; Broadway Hotel, 195 Serangoon Rd, 6292-4661; Dickson Court Hotel, 3 Dickson Rd. 6297-7811; Fortuna Hotel, 2 Owen Rd., 6295-3577; Tai Hoe Hotel, 163 Kitchener Rd. 6293-9122. If you're hankering for your own kind, crash at the Prince of Wales Backpacker Pub at 101 Dunlop St, \$12 a night in a four bed dorm and a free beer every night.

HOKKIEN DELICACIES

Words and photo by Larry Sebring

For a cheap and tasty sample of local Hokkien-Chinese fare in Singapore, bring your tastebuds and wallet to the Hing Wah Eating Place. This establishment is not one of the main conductors on the tourist circuit board, it's only for the switched on. My Singaporean colleagues are always astonished that I found this place. Paradoxically, it is centrally located and easy to find, it just isn't a place most foreigners would discover on their own.

Try a huge pile of delicious Hing Wa-style fried rice for \$7 Sing (Bt170); fried and sliced fish done sweet and sour for \$10, or Chinese broccoli with mushrooms for a little less. Figure on about US\$15 to feed three big Westerners.

The menus have English which is helpful as the staff only speak Chinese. There is indoor/outdoor seating. Arrive early as the place gets packed with locals at dinner and around lunch time.

Hing Wah Eating Place is located at 367 Beach Road in Singapore. It's right across from the Concourse Building and a 10-minute walk from the Raffles Hotel on Beach Road. Open from 11am-3pm and 6pm to 10:30pm.

HONGKONG SPECIALPARTYREGION

Everyone knows about Hong Kong's skyscrapers but you want to get a proper look at them in context. Set against hillsides and islands and a bustling harbour, HK is a visual treat. It has everything that busy cities do but most of the territory is actually rural, and there are plenty of other views and options available. The famous get-up-and-go (read: ravenous avarice) attitude of HK makes it a place where pretty much anything gets up and goes. It's a money town and wealth is the main topic of small talk. If you're not already wealthy, it's perfectly acceptable – and even a good idea – to pretend you are. The territory breaks down roughly along old treaty lines into HK island (business district, upper residential and nightlife); Kowloon on the mainland (much more populous and diverse); merging into the New Territories (NT) (largely countryside leading to the border with the People's Republic).



The story about the gwailo and the fishmonger's daughter always brought the house down

GETTING AROUND:

It's all about the MTR, Hong Kong's underground, which services most of the major districts on the mainland and Hong Kong Island. Then there are the ferries that zip you back and forth across the beautiful bay and beyond for a pittance, and finally, an extensive and comfortable bus network servicing the rest of the territory. There's a tram on the island but it's kind of slow – good for a laugh, though. The Kowloon-Canton Railway (KCR) runs between Tsim Sha Tsi and Lo Yw on the border with Shenzhen with about a dozen stops in between.

**DAYTRIPPING:
THE PEAK**

Peak Tram from Garden Rd, Admiralty MTR / Bus 15 from Central / 15C from Star Ferry

The hill where the first colonials repaired from the heat now offers spectacular city night views obligatory for all visitors. There are pricey shops and restaurants there, but a picnic and a camera is all you need. Take the Peak Tram up and aim to get there for sunset on a clear day. The walk down through the gardens is pleasant but best done during the day, take the bus at night.

MUSEUMS HK

Art Museum, Museum of Science & Technology and the Cultural Centre are all at Star Ferry Terminal Tsim Sha Tsi. There is a large open waterfront area outside with occasional outdoor entertainment at weekends. The more recently opened Heritage Museum (ShaTin KCR) gives a great insight into HK and the HK History Museum is at Hung Hom KCR.

CITY PARKS

Great for escaping the crush, but teeming with Filipino maids on Sundays, HK Park (Admiralty MTR) is landscaped and small. Catch earnest newlyweds posing in front of flower beds or check out the aviary or Tai Chi Garden. The HK Zoological & Botanical Gardens are just over the road. Victoria Park (Causeway Bay MTR) and Kowloon Park (Tsim Sha Tsi MTR) are both bigger and better for watching people and the world go by.

COUNTRY PARKS

There are 23 country parks with walks and nature trails to suit all tastes and energies. Since only about a quarter of HK is actually built up, you may be surprised by the diversity

of wildlife, vegetation and scenery. Ask at your hotel or hostel for recommendations but you don't really need a tour.

BEACHES / OUTLYING ISLANDS

The beaches are unlikely to impress you if you just flew in from other Asian sands but HK does have them, particularly at Sai Kung (minibuses from Choi Hung MTR) or on the outlying islands (ferries from Outlying Island ferry piers, Central). Shek O (bus 6 from Shau Kei Wan MTR) is the last remaining village on HK island, with a good beach popular with surfers who also frequent the nearby Big Wave Bay, but don't expect too much in the way of water sports.

Lantau island (ferry from Star Ferry Pier 5) is also worth a look for its Big Buddha and the views from the Lantau Peak (a do-able 1,000ft climb). Lamma island (Pier 4) is smaller and more chilled, with a sizeable expat community.

MACAU

An hour's ferry away (from Shun Tak Centre, Sheung Wan MTR), Macau is well worth a day or an overnigher. HK-ers go for the gambling, shopping and whoring, but it's nice just to go for the colonial architecture, relaxed pace and the spectacle of Chinese people speaking Portuguese.

BUYING STUFF

HK revels in its self-proclaimed status as a Shopping Paradise, so whatever you're looking for, you can assume it will be available somewhere. Even if you're not hunting down souvenirs or consumer durables, it is worth taking a look as this is a big part of local culture.

ELECTRONICS AND GIZMOS

Sure, HK is still a duty-free port, but that doesn't mean much these days. Still, it is one of the best shopping hubs in East Asia. In Chinese style, each product has its own street, one for consumer electronics, one for cameras and one for ripping off tourists (Nathan Road – never buy anything from a flashy shop there). There's also the Temple Street night market, the Ladies' Market and the Flower Market, plus numerous fresh markets. Most maps have these well marked.

FEEDING TIME:

There is a Chinese saying: "We eat anything with four legs except the table and anything

with wings except the aeroplane," and the Cantonese eat things that even other Chinese won't touch. You can get your fill of guts and off on just about any street. That said, other regions of China are well represented (in particular Shanghai, Sichuan and various Peking specialties). Don't let Chinese menus in the window deter you, as there will be an English version inside and/or staff who are more than happy to talk you through what's on offer. Hong Kong is rightly proud of its eating scene, and you can find cuisines from all over Asia and beyond, but if you're on a budget, McDonald's is the cheapest – shoe-stringing tourists often survive on little else. The seafood is great and best found by the sea. Favourite locations are Sai Kung and Sok Kwu Wan (Outlying Island Ferry Pier 4 to Sok Kwu Wan). Talk to the staff about quantities and prices of fresh seafood rather than relying on the menu. Food stalls selling dim sum and snacks are ubiquitous, though more common in the side streets of Kowloon than the shopping/business districts of Central. Bakeries are everywhere, selling cheap breads and pastries. In most areas, sandwich bars and coffee shops are easy to find though you'll pay more for this kind of home comfort.

NIGHTTRIPPING:

Accept the fact early on that you'll never get used to the price of drinks while you're here, and if you do, it's too late since you're already broke. However, happy hours are absolutely standard and varied, running as late as 10pm, while some places offer a second late happy hour around midnight or after. So with a little planning, a night out needn't be too financially punishing. Ask around for all-you-can-drink deals. More good news is that there are effectively no licensing restrictions (time-wise that is) and any bar will serve you as long as they are reasonably busy. Areas to head for are: Lan Kwai Fong (Central MTR) – a small pedestrianised block or two traditionally favoured by expats; nowadays it's more of a mixed crowd with a wine bar feel to it. Named after Tiannemen, Club 64 is a bit different. Le Jardin next door is similarly down to earth and there's a popular outdoor eating area here serving various Asian food. A small hike up the hill towards Hollywood Road brings you to Soho. Here you'll find brasseries, eateries and night clubs, and a generally more "beautiful class" of people. Prices have hiked up the hill with you too, but you can also catch some of HK's best jazz musicians in intimate surroundings.

Check out the Blue Door, The Gecko, and The Bohemian Lounge. For dancing try Nu, Home Base, Amnesia, among other more exclusive options. Wanchai (MTR) enjoys a more down-at-heel reputation. Here there are Irish bars and sports bars and girlie bars, as well as straight-up bars vying for your attention. There's also live music at The Wanch and Carnegies and dancing on the tables at the Groovy Mule. This is where to head for late nights – try Dusk Till Dawn, Neptunes 2 or The Dock. If you're based in Tsim Sha Tsi you'll still find pubs and bars, though they're more dispersed. There's live music most nights at 48th St Chicago Blues and trad-jazz at Ned Kelly's. Between Nelson Road and Hung Hom station is the old opium district which is now peppered with Chinese bars, which means Karaoke, Bluff-Dice (a drinking game and well worth learning) and football on TV. If you can find it, Nutbush Terrace is a strip of pricey but nice bars with the obligatory Filipino cover bands. As for clubbing, pack your credit card in a fireproof cover and develop a taste for Canto-pop.

ACCOMMODATION:

It ain't cheap. Most tourists stay on 'The Golden Mile' of Nathan Road, in Tsim Sha Tsi (around the corner from The Peninsula). There you find a Holiday Inn and the horrible Chungking Mansions – a wretched tower of tiny guesthouses overflowing with semi-legal immigrants, but good Indian restaurants. Chungking is the cheapest, as long as you don't mind risking hepatitis or casual assault. Far better to head to Mirador Mansions a block down, which is the same deal but far cleaner. The Garden Hostel on the third floor is the best bet and is favoured by long-termers. Everywhere costs around HK\$50 for a dorm bed and HK\$100 for a shoebox crash-pad. Either way, you'll be touted as soon as you step off the bus. For the big-budgeted or expense-accounted Hong Kong's hotels are a delight. Many of the mid-range luxury places are in Wanchai, which is also the expat red-light district, but kind of tame by Thai standards.

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VIENTIANE COCONUTREPUBLIC

More of a big town than a small city, Vientiane follows the tradition of amalgamating a lot of small villages together, much like London, except that's where they stopped. The view from the top of the Victory Monument is one of palm trees swaying, crumbling French colonial buildings, golden temples and lots of wooden houses. There isn't a great deal to do in this town other than drink the excellent and cheap beer and gaze across the Mekong – not that there's anything wrong with that. In the morning there's croissants and other pastries with coffee and in the evening, sumptuous French cuisine for a handful of dollars.



PLACES TO CRASH:

There actually are luxury hotels in Laos; the **Lao Plaza** claims to be five-star and rooms start at US\$100, and the **Novotel**, near the airport has rooms for around US\$70. For the more budget-minded, pretty much all your accommodation needs are concentrated in the area of Samsenthai, Setthathirath and Thanon Fa Ngum – and all roads in between. Down on the river road, the **Phet Phim Guest House** is the best budget crash in town charging US\$3-5. If you're willing to spend a bit more, the runaway winner is the fairly new **Dragon Lodge** on Samsenthai, which has sparkling rooms for US\$12-15. **Orchid Guest House** on Fa Ngum Road is US\$12, and the rooftop lounge has stirring views over the Mekong. The cheapest rooms in town are at the **Mixac Guest House** on Setthathirath Road, where skanky dorm beds cost less than US\$2 and hideous rooms go for US\$3-5. Around the corner from the

Santisouk, on the road behind Samsenthai, the **Thawee Guest House** is a lot newer and better value at US\$6-12.

DAYTRIPPING:

Get your mitts on a bicycle (\$1/day) or motorbike (\$8/day), or even ride around in the slowest tuk-tuks on earth. There are about two day's worth of attractions worth visiting and that's allowing for hangover recovery time.

At the end of That Luang Road is Pha That Luang, the nation's spiritual centre with a 400-year-old stupa allegedly containing Buddha relics. Heading back to the centre of town is the country's tallest building, the Victory Monument. This Asian Arc de Triomphe was built in 1969 by the Imperial Government using US-supplied cement intended for a runway to better facilitate America's secret war in the north. Carrying on south, there's Talaat Sao (Morning

Market), the town's main shopping centre, selling everything, including some of the best hand-woven fabrics in Southeast Asia. Formerly on Samsenthai Road, the **Lao Revolutionary Museum** has been moved some four km out of town. It's much bigger and even more absurd than before and it's great for a few discreet laughs at the ruling party's expense. The museum is devoted to commemorating the glorious people's struggle to rise out of poverty, imperialism and oppression to achieve liberation, poverty and oppression instead. For a spiritual upper, head down to Setthathirath Road, past the President's Palace to Wat Si Saket, which was built in 1818 and is the oldest temple in Vientiane. When Siam was raping and pillaging the city in 1828 (before taking the population as slaves), they spared this Siamese-style one. Finish off at Wat Sok Pa Luang, with a herbal sauna and massage for about \$3. The tuk-tuk drivers know the place.

FEEDING TIME:

You're a fool if you don't try a Lao baguette (you might still be a fool if you do, of course). Stuffed with veggies and a suspiciously spiced pate and washed down with the supremely strong Lao coffee, they'll keep you going for hours. For a nice sit-down coffee and pastry or croissant, the **Liang Xiang Bakery House** and **Sweet Home Bakery**, both on Chao Anou are not bad.

There are a quite ridiculous number of French restaurants in Vientiane – and

they're all good. Check out the **Le Nadao** near Victory Monument next to **Le Parasol Blanc Hotel**, **Le Provençal** at the fountain for southern French food, **Le Cote d'Azur** on Fa Ngum for hearty rustic fare or **La Terrasse** on Nokeo Khumman, which serves up a bargain three-course lunch on Fridays for US\$4. A few of those groovy cafes where people like to use the word 'eclectic' have sprung up in Vientiane in recent years. The pick of the litter is **Sticky Fingers** on Francois Ngin.

NIGHTTRIPPING:

All nightspots start closing around the official 10:30pm and it's lights out by 11:30pm. The main focus for expats and tourists is the **Kop Chai Deu Food Garden**, a lovingly restored French colonial house near the fountain. The **Chess Cafe** is a, frankly, hilarious vista of expat drunks and taxi-girls, dancing to Lao-accented Beatles' covers. It's open sometimes, closed sometimes. For lovers of raucous nightclubs, there's **D'Tech**, at the back of the **Novotel** and the **Future Bar** next door. **Deja Vu**, on the Nam Phu circle, is a snazzy spot that seems more Vienna than Vientiane. There are a couple of places in Vientiane that cater to the non-narcoleptic after closing time. **Samlor Pub**, a few minutes up the road from **Kop Chai Deu**, is usually kicking past the witching hour. But if you're up for a round of beer and 10-pins, hit the **Lao Bowling Center** near the **National Stadium**, open all night.

VANG VIENG

The Khaosan Road of Laos it may be, but at least it's surrounded by some of the most wonderful countryside you're likely to see. And like Khaosan it's going increasingly upscale with loads of snazzy accommodation along the riverside for US\$35. But on the main drag you can't spit without hitting either a backpacker restaurant or a guesthouse. They're all pretty similar, really, but some notably good ones are **Malany Guest House**, where you'll get a large room with polished wooden floors for US\$5 and **Thavisouk**, run by a group of happy women, rooms for US\$4, and they'll sort you out with good seats for the bus trip to Luang Prabang. The **Ngeunpanith** is a bit pricier at US\$8. If you're after a more rural experience, try working for a week at the **Suanmone Phoudindaeng Organic Farm** north of town. You can work there, sleep in a dorm and get fed for US\$1.50 a day, after the first three days of training. The owner likes you to stay for at least a week.

CAPITOL GAINS LUANG PRABANG

This town, at the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan Rivers, is usually a few day's stop for travellers going south. The town has World Heritage status since it's loaded with history. Ancient Buddha-bedecked caves and colonial shopfronts, all dropped in the middle of beautiful, dirt-poor hills give the place a gallery-like feel. High marks go to the waterfall, the coffee and the abundance of good and cheap French and Lao food.

PLACES TO CRASH

In Ban Wat That area, the best guest house is Vanvisa, a family-run house with a traditional Lao-style building out the back for US\$6-10. Not far behind is the Hoxieng, which is the same price. Nearby, the Tanoy is run by a nice lady and her eccentric, rather flirtatious daughter. Rooms for US\$4-7. Along the Mekong there are a clutch of guesthouses north of the palace, Chaliny on Souvannabanglang Rd has shiny wooden floors and views over the river for US\$5-8. Along Khem Khong Rd, the View Khem Khong (US\$6), Bounngasouk (US\$8) and Bounthieng (US\$4-8) are all worth a look, as is the Mekong GH. To find the Phonethavy GH, turn right just after Phousy Hotel and the school and walk 100m, excellent budget rooms, and it's followed by Kounsavan GH, with small but clean rooms. Further on the right is Chaleunsouk GH, where they speak French. On Wisunalat Rd is the best guest house in all Luang Prabang - the Mano, with three-star rooms for less than US\$10. A bit of a walk from town, but worth it for the luxury.



Enlightenment is only a Sony Trinitron away

NIGHTRIPPING:

The New York-style Maylek Pub is a funky retro-esque nightclub where Luang Prabang's hip and happening – cashed-up relief workers and general posers – come to swill. Music is great considering there is nowhere to hear jazzy blues or hip-hop and funk within 500 kilometres of the place. Drinks are about 20% more expensive than elsewhere in the town, which still calculates to cheap. A competitor called the Hive Bar has also opened up on the quiet side of Phou Si Hill. The music is just as good and the drinks a little cheaper. For a more traditional night on the town, the Muang Khua Hotel on Thanon Phu Wao has the best Lao-style disco, with excellent Lao pop (there is such a thing, really!) and the rest.

FEEDING TIME:

Xiang Thong Road is one of the town's great food streets and Khao Biak Sen is one of the best noodle shops in town. Round rice noodles cooked over an open fire outside a decaying French house – very tasty. The night market in front of the palace is the best spot in town to pick up cheap Luang Prabang specialities. The Luang Prabang Bakery is run by a Hmong woman who studied pastry in Bangkok and makes excellent sandwiches. The Scandinavian Bakery serves wholesome breakfast fare in an air-con setting. The Cafe de Arts is an exceptional eatery with a great mix of French and Lao dishes at very reasonable prices. Nearby is the Yonkhoun, where you can slice into a deer steak that is as tender as an angel's bum. Also good is Le Potiron, a cheap French/Euro joint with decent pizza and exceptional desserts – the best place in town for a budget binge of non-Lao grub. Villa Santi is in Luang Prabang's classiest hotel. The restaurant is excellent but not prohibitively expensive. Lao food is the best choice. Duang Champa, on Kingkitsalat Rd, has Lao and French cuisine in stylish surroundings. Colonial splendour with a generous bar, Han Sontam Khaem Khong is around Wat Nong on Manthatoulad Rd. Look for the green doors. It serves LP's most deadly spicy papaya salad. Nazim's Indian/Halal restaurant, a long-time hit in Vientiane, now has a branch in Luang Prabang.

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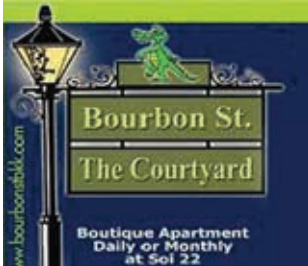
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have been known to spike their clients' drinks and denude them of their valuables. Lifeline: 999; all operators speak Cantonese and English.

Singapore: The country's strict laws make street crimes a no-no. They also mean that travelers should stay away from recreational drugs. This year, the police have thrown an enormous anti-narcotics dragnet over the city-state, snaring many drug-takers in clubs, and quite a few of the big-fish dealers.

Lifeline: 999; English and Cantonese operators.

Cambodia: Poi Pet and Phnom Penh are the two most dangerous places for muggings at gunpoint. Just fork over your money and avoid wearing a shirt air-conditioned by bullet holes.

Lifeline: The Tourist Police are under the Ministry of Interior at #275 Norodom Blvd., Phnom Penh. Call (855) 023-721-905, 023-726-052 and 023-721-190.

Laos: Bandits on the road from Vientiane to Luang Prabang are no longer a threat, but traveling on your own in remote areas (especially for women) can be risky.

Lifeline: Ha ha ha.

Thailand: Most of the prime tourist spots in Thailand are perfectly safe except for some slash-and-grab robberies, gem scams, and the occasional drugging and mugging by ladies of the evening. Lifeline: 1155 is the 24-hour hotline for the Thai Tourist Police. Their office is located in the Civic Tower, 209/1 Sukhumvit Soi 21, Civic Tower. Open 8am-5pm. Tel: 02-668-7173.

Hong Kong: Not known as a particularly dangerous place for street crime, save for pickpockets and bag-slashers. The most common are being overcharged for goods. And the streetwalkers along Nathan Road in Tsim Sha Tsui

LOST CREDIT CARDS

If your credit cards get stolen, it's best to call their head offices in America. Remember to add 001 for an international call and then the country code 1 for the US. Phone Net is the most inexpensive card at Bt4 per minute, while some travel agencies in Thailand charge Bt15 per minute. The following numbers are not toll-free outside of the US.

Visa's U.S. emergency number is 800/847-2911 or 410/581-9994. American Express cardholders and those with traveler's check call 800/221-7282. MasterCard holders can ring 800/307-7309 or 636/722-7111.

For other credit cards, call the toll-free number directory at 800/555-1212.

Credit Card Hotlines in Thailand:

Visa: 02-263-2091-2

Mastercard: 02-670-4088-99

Amex: 02-273-0022

Diners: 02-232-4100



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hospitals

THAILAND

Hospitals in Thailand are cheap by Western standards, but can still eat a lot of money. They may require proof that you can pay before treating you. Government hospitals are cheaper and generally very good, but you may have to wait awhile. Most hospitals (unlike many small clinics) have a high standard of health care.

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430 Pitsanulok Rd, Dusit Bangkok 10300
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Hotline: 1719

Bumrungrad Hospital (Private)
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Tel: 02-6671000

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LAOS

Heaven help you if you have any serious ailments while in Laos. There are few qualified doctors and they just don't have the facilities. Get to Thailand. From Vientiane, there are one or two okay hospitals just over the bridge in Nong Khai. Otherwise, it's back to Bangkok. Clinique Internationale, Luang Prabang (856) 214-022 Centre de Traumatologie et d'Orthopedie de Vientiane (Private) On the Road to Tha Ngon, north of Vientiane. Tel: (856) 413-663, 413-306 (Call for ambulance service) Nong Khai Wattana Hospital (Private) 1159/4 Prachak Road, Nong Khai, Thailand - near Vientiane Tel: 042-465-201

bangkok embassies

If you are having a serious problem, your embassy is your "last chance saloon". Good luck. However, they are very good at issuing visas for visitors. Here are the major embassies in Bangkok:

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02-344-6400
Austria
Tel: 02-303-6057-9
Cambodia
Tel: 02-254-6630
02-256-0196
Canada
Tel: 02-636-0540-9
China
Tel: 02-245-7032-3
France
Tel: 02-627-2105
Germany
Tel: 02-287-9000
02-287-1224
India
Tel: 02-258-0300
Indonesia
Tel: 02-252-3135-40
Israel
Tel: 02-204-9200
02-260-4856
Japan
Tel: 02-252-6151-9
South Korea
Tel: 02-247-7535-41
Laos
Tel: 02-539-6679
02-539-6668
Malaysia
Tel: 02-679-2190-9
Nepal
Tel: 02-391-7240
02-390-2280
Netherlands
Tel: 02-02-254-7701-5
Philippines
Tel: 02-259-0139-40
02-258-5401
Singapore
Tel: 02-286-2111
02-286-1434
South Africa
Tel: 02-253-8473-6
Sri Lanka
Tel: 02-261-1934
02-261-1938
Sweden
Tel: 02-263-7200
Taiwan
Tel: 02-670-0200-9
UK
Tel: 02-305-8333
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Vietnam
Tel: 02-251-5836-7

THAILAND EMERGENCY NUMBERS

THAILAND EMERGENCY NUMBERS:
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