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features:>>



TRAUMA WARD

In this excerpt from the new book *Restless Souls: Rebels, Refugees, Medics and Misfits on the Thai-Burma Border* (Asia Books Publishing, 2006), author Phil Thornton interviews Dr. Cynthia, the recipient of many humanitarian awards for the work she has done at her clinic in Mae Sot. Also culled from the book are a number of incidents involving a drive-by shooting, prostitution and cannibalism.

p:18

KILLERART

The Khmer martial art of Bokator is as old as Angkor Wat. Antonio Graceffo takes some hard knocks from a grandmaster in Cambodia who shows him how fighters are trained to kill.

p:28



Roving reporter Dawn DelVecchio heads to southern Thailand to watch her pregnant friend "do the right thing" in a series of sometimes uncomfortable rituals.

p:30

The Ultimate Chill

Antarctic cruises may be getting cooler with travellers, but they're still notoriously expensive, unless you buy one on the spot like David Hall did. Freeze frames by Cate Bryant.

p:32

strange stories from an atomic isle

p:38

chateau du cobra

In a small Vietnamese village Bruce Cutler is wined and dined on some serpentine aphrodisiacs.

p:42

THE TRAVAILS OF TRAVEL

Managing Editor : Daniel Cooper

If you trace the etymology of the word 'travel', it comes from the Middle English word travail (or hardship), based on the French verb to work (*travailler*), which harkens all the way back to ancient Latin: *trepalium* (an instrument of torture).

Now you know what our ancient forefathers thought about the rigours of travel and why they'd think most of today's voyageurs are a pack of pussies. Imagine traveling through medieval Europe with highwaymen waiting in the forest to rob and kill any passersby, or venturing through America's Wild West in a stagecoach under siege by Indians hunting for scalps with tomahawks, or outlaws armed with six-shooters.

Come to think of it, Phil Thornton suffered some similarly wicked travails during the five years he spent working on his new book *Restless Souls: Rebels, Refugees, Medics and Misfits on the Thai-Burma Border*. Crossing in and out of Burma to meet freedom-fighters, sex serfs and foreign mercenaries, Phil also interviewed one of the country's most famous dissidents and philanthropists, Dr. Cynthia, at her clinic in Mae Sot. This cover story, excerpted from his book, is on Page 18.

Speaking of hard adventures, David Hall heads to Antarctica on a budget cruise, recalling an ad posted in 1915 by the famous Arctic explorer of Irish descent, David Shackleton: "Men wanted for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful." Unlike Shackleton's boat, which got stuck in the ice for a year, David's cruise (Page 32) runs a little more smoothly, with trips in rubber dinghies to look at towering icebergs and lessons in penguin etiquette.



Executive Editor : Cameron Cooper



Chief Editor : Jim Algie

In Cambodia, Antonio Graceffo, a martial arts student for 25 years, signs up for a real school of hard knocks: the Khmer art of Bokator. It's not a ring sport, as Antonio's teacher says on Page 28, but a means to murder an adversary in ways even Bruce Lee would've found cruel.

But there are many hard roads to travel that lead to psychological, as opposed to physical, duress. And that's what happens to Dawn DelVecchio in the city of Nakhon Sri Thammarat (see Page 30) as she attends the traditional Thai wedding of a female friend and is repulsed by how the bride must kowtow at the feet of the groom.

Life on the road can also be hard on the gullet, especially when you're eating in a Vietnamese restaurant specialising in dishes made of snake and knocking back shots of whiskey concocted with the blood of a king cobra, like Bruce Cutler did on Pages 42.

The stories by these modern-day adventurers may prove the wisdom of the visionary poet and artist William Blake, who wrote, "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."

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UNTAMED
TRAVEL



regulars:>>



As the so-called "kite winds" start to blow in February, Stephen Evans gets all tangled up in a strange local practice.

p:13

The and the Turtle Hares

"If you're sick of Bangkok, you're sick of life," so said Pliny the Elder, or one of his better imitators. Nonetheless, it is essential for what remains of one's soul to get out of the place now and again, perhaps poking one's sunburned nose into a locale where walking is an option and the air can't be eaten with a spoon. In the spirit of this philosophy, Dan and Stuart, the Christ-like figures who nail themselves to public bars on your behalf, paid a flying-without-a-plane visit to Koh Tao to see just what makes the nightlife tick.

p:58

RAIN

ABOUT GOA:

A NEW YEAR'S TALE

Suzan Crane revels in the full-blown hurricane of New Year parties sweeping through her small Indian town.

p:16

Faith, Hope & Treachery

Who can find logic in the chambers of the human heart? Not Karen Findlay, a.k.a. The Stalker, whose interests are further south. After much discourse on finding the comfort of a stranger while travelling, she gives the low-down on the ethics and practicalities of that most fragile of beasts, the long-distance relationship

p:17

The famous saying "April showers bring May flowers" is jibberish to anyone living in Northern Thailand. Our springtime is now – the monsoon is over, temperatures are heating up, and everyone is once again walking around half-naked. Indeed, it is the season of love and beauty and art and flowers and plenty of opportunities to associate young women with flowers. So get up, get out and enjoy Mother Earth's short-lived unflowering before she starts getting hot flashes in April and peeing herself in May.

BLOOM TOWN

p:61

2005 remembered

In keeping with an annual tradition, Gordon Sharpless aims his razor-tipped tongue at easy targets. Once again, we look back at the year that was and examine the major stories, the minor stories, the not quite stories, and a few stories that weren't but might have been better for all if they were.

p:85

main?events

Thailand: Pins and Needles

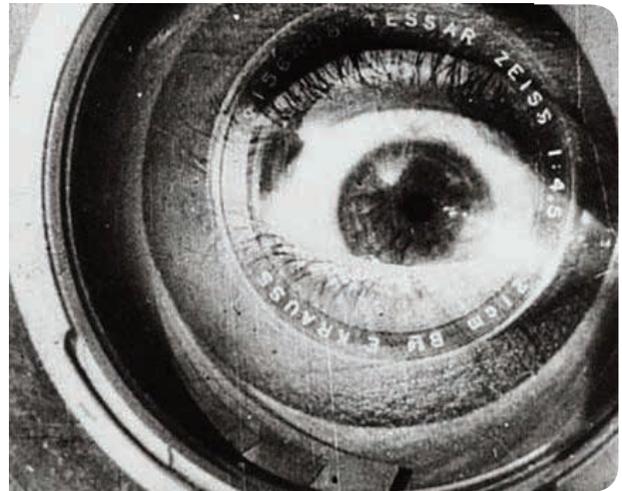
No longer the preserve of tribal and religious rituals (including sailors on shore leave), tattooing is big business and taken seriously as art these days, as everyone under the age of 30 seems to have one. This surging global growth has given rise to the First World Tattoo Arts Festival and Exhibition. Famous tattooists from around the world occupy more than 120 booths, giving demonstrations of their needling and piercing prowess, along with other fun activities like painted models, Joe Louis Puppet Theatre performances, seminars, contests and more.

The World Tattoo Arts Festival & Exhibition punctures away from February 10th-12th at Suan Lum Night Bazaar's BEC Tero Hall, across from Lumpini Park in central Bangkok from late morning until evening. See www.worldtattoofestival.com for more info.



Thailand: Bangkok Sprockets

The most amazing thing about the Bangkok International Film Festival is that they manage to pull it off year after year. In true Thai style (excellent procrastinators, but also great under pressure), few films or celebrity appearances are confirmed until the last minute and in the end, it all comes off beautifully. At press time, we can tell you with some confidence that Terry Gilliam will be there. But if past years are any indication, (in 2005, they had 150 features, special events, seminars, panels, the Golden Kinnaree Awards and gala events), the event will come off with verve and aplomb. *The filmfest spools off on February 17th and fades to black on the 27th. For detailed information as the event date closes in, pan your lens to www.bangkokfilm.org*



Thailand: How Deep is Your Love?

Thailand has a love affair with the *Guinness Book of World Records* (biggest Tom Yam, biggest joss stick, biggest banana pancake, smallest willies), and some people will do anything to make their betrothal unique (often under the mistaken impression that if the wedding is spectacular the so will the marriage). In this spirit, Trang province is holding its 10th Underwater Wedding Ceremony, where for a mere Bt25,000, you and your intended can tie the knot with the fishes and maybe break a world record, in a ceremony that is otherwise traditionally Thai. Spectators, tanked or not, are welcome. *Scores of couples take the plunge from February 13th to 15th at Koh Kradan, Trang Province, Thailand. Flipper on over to www.underwaterwedding.com for more info. Good luck understanding the English.*





Thailand: Tanks for the Memories

Watch yet another Guinness world record bite the sand as 800+ divers sink to the seafloor simultaneously – beating last year’s record of 722. This event is the centerpiece of the Koh Tao Underwater Festival, most of which, oddly enough, takes place on dry land. There’s the Miss Dive Shop contest, Mr. Koh Tao (usually won by some buff Swede who gets ridiculed mercilessly by his friends for weeks afterwards), plus games and activities for the kiddies and late night drinking and dancing by the beach with an all-star lineup of DJs, pounding away until the wee hours.

Koh Tao’s Third Annual Underwater World Festival begins its descent on February 7th behind Mr J’s on Sairee Beach and goes on blowing bubbles until late into the following night. For more info see www.kohtaodoc.com



Japan: Naked as Sin

It’s a little known fact that streaking wasn’t actually invented by the Americans in the 70s, but rather by the Japanese in 767BC. The citizens of Inazawa have held the Naked Man Festival every year since. The fun begins with a naked man, (who has had the great honour of being selected for this ordeal), shaving all the hair off his body, undergoing several purification rituals and then running naked through the streets for several hours while 9,000 men clad only in sandals and loincloths push each other aside to try and touch the poor bastard – as 300,000 spectators look on. The runner ends up battered and bruised, and when he faints they revive him with ice water. Eventually, he reaches the Mounomiya Shrine, performs a ritual and is banished from the premises.

Basically the guy is absorbing all the sins and bad luck of those lucky enough to touch him and dumping them at the shrine on their behalf, then dressed and kicked out of town.

Nobody is sure, but its origins may be as a metaphor for the departure of the plague. *Inazawa’s Naked Festival gets its kit off on Feb 18th at Inazawa City, a short bus ride from Tokyo’s Nagoya Airport.*



Italy: Citrus City A-peel

You think you hate Thailand’s Songkran water throwing festival? Try having oranges lobbed into your kisser for three days. The origins of Ivrea Carnival, which began before the 18th century, are not entirely clear, but since the Napoleonic occupation years, it has been a sarcastic jab at the French and their notions of freedom, with most people getting done up in Napoleonic garb. Out of the 10,000 merrymakers, the people on foot represent the peasantry while those playing the role of the big shots’ henchmen, fewer in number but with a height advantage ride around the town square in horse-drawn carts, and both sides hurl oranges at each other as hard as they can. Any spectators who care to join in only need leave the safe area and start throwing, but don’t come crying to us with a bloody nose. The violence reaches its peak on the final day, which also happens to be Shrove Tuesday.

The annual Ivrea Carnival bombs away from Feb 25th to 28th in the city of Ivrea, in Northwest Italy.

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VOICES OF DISSENT SILENCED

The UN, the US and Amnesty International have all condemned the arrests of a dozen human rights activists in an ever-widening crackdown on free speech in Cambodia. All of the aforementioned activists have either been charged with or convicted of defamation



DRUNKEN ELEPHANTS

Elephants working for the Moscow State Circus were swilling two litres of vodka a day when they recently performed in Mongolia. The alcohol was used to insulate them against the shock of -28C temperatures.



SEA OF GARBAGE

Inle Lake, one of Burma's major tourism magnets, is in danger of silting over because of some 50 tonnes of garbage that have been dumped into the lake by visitors over the past decade. Some of the lake's top attractions are the boatmen who row with their legs and the wooden temple on water where the monks have trained cats to perform circus tricks like jumping through hoops (see *Untamed Travel* Sept 2004).



REIGN OF HORROR

A new report issued by East Timorese officials claim that the Indonesian military is responsible for around 180,000 people during its 24-year reign of horror. The 2,500-page report, put together by the East Timorese Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation also claims people were buried and burned alive by soldiers. Most of the deaths, however, were the result of sickness and starvation caused by the use of napalm and other chemical weapons. East Timor President Xanana Gusmao was to hand the report to the UN last month.



FREEDOM TO SERVE

The Delhi High Court recently lifted a ban on women working in bars. The court ruled that the Punjab Excise Act 1914 was obsolescent. So now Indian women have the freedom to serve liquor.



CROCODILE SAFARI

In what is purported to be the world's first reptile-hunting safari, an Australian hunter named Mick Pitman is offering an expedition to Papua New Guinea to track down and kill six serial killer crocs. For only US\$180,000 per head, you can join the expedition and also get a cameo in a documentary of the trip being made by an Aussie film crew.



MALAY BIGFOOT?

Only a few months after we informed you that a prison in the state of Johor was opening its cells to overnight visitors, there have been sightings of huge and hairy ape-like creatures, up to three-metres tall and standing upright, in the rainforest of the state's Endau Rompin National Park. Local tourism officials hope it will be a boon for tourism.



CANINE SAVIOUR

A young Taiwanese woman went into premature labour while sitting on the toilet. After cutting the umbilical cord with a pair of scissors she collapsed onto the floor and the baby fell into the toilet. But the woman's dog, a female husky, grabbed the newborn's leg in her mouth and saved her from drowning. The dog then licked the baby's face clean so it could breathe and cry.



Scale: 1:50,000,000

SEX FILES

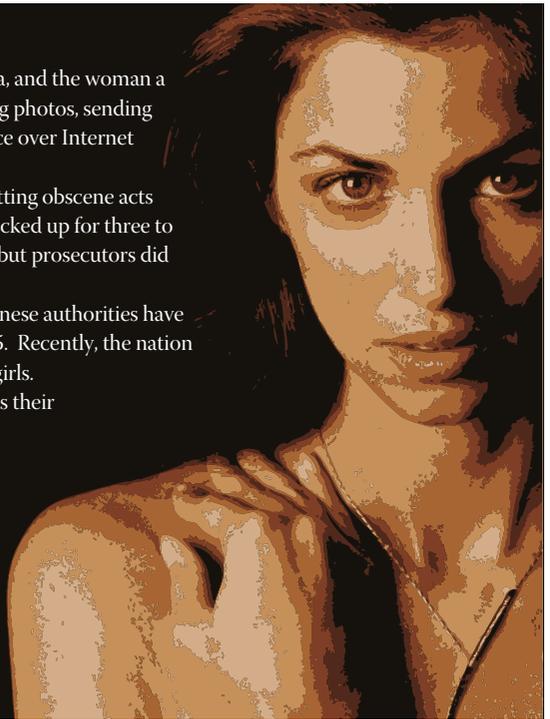
Cyberspace, Virtually Married: Two Indonesians, the man a physiotherapist in California, and the woman a resident of Indonesia's Bandung, got married over the Internet. They had been exchanging photos, sending email and chatting almost every day, but finally took their lawful wedding vows using Voice over Internet Protocol with a Muslim religious official presiding over the ceremony.

Vietnam, All That Glitters: Former sham rocker Gary Glitter is facing charges of committing obscene acts with two young Vietnamese girls aged 10 and 11. If convicted, the 61-year-old could be locked up for three to seven years. Glitter originally faced charges of child rape which carry the death sentence, but prosecutors did not have sufficient evidence.

Japan, Kiddie Porn Increasing: In spite of stiff new measures to combat child porn, Japanese authorities have found that the number of porno models under the age of 18 increased by 3.4 times in 2005. Recently, the nation has been rocked by the sexually tainted kidnappings and murders of two young Japanese girls.

Singapore, Viagra Revolution: Older guys are still rising to the carnal occasion as much as their younger counterparts a new survey revealed. Commissioned by the Society for Men's Health, the survey noted that half of the men between 30 and 59 are still bonking once or twice a week, with 20% saying they were more libidinous. The president of the society said that pills like Viagra have brought about a sexual revolution.

Kuala Lumpur, Sex Education Virgins No More: For the first time ever, Malaysia has come up with plans for classes about sex education. At the moment, sex only comes up as part of biology classes. The country's Education Minister Hishammuddin Hussein said he hoped the new classes would help reduce incidences of rape, cyber-porn and child abuse.



CRIME FILES

Thailand, Death for Rapists: Katherine Horton was walking along the beach on the evening of January 1 talking to her mother on a cell phone when she suddenly screamed. That was the last her mother would ever hear of her. Two Thai fishermen, inebriated after drinking and watching porn movies on their fishing boat, raped and bludgeoned the 21-year-old Welsh woman to death. Bualoi Piset, 23, and Wichai Somkhaoyai, 24, confessed to the crime. Both were sentenced to death. In the wake of the crime, three top cops on Koh Samui have been transferred to inactive posts in Surat Thani province.

Kuala Lumpur, Asleep on the Crime: Two cat burglars were caught cat-napping after robbing a house of jewels and other valuables. Before they escaped the scene of the crime in Johor province, the dim-witted duo raided the refrigerator and fell asleep. Local police woke them from their slumber of the stupid, reported the Malay-language *Berita Harian* daily.

Australia, Chunk of Burning Love: A woman from Perth stabbed her husband six times with a pair of scissors because he kept playing the Elvis song "Burning Love" over and over again. The woman faces charges of unlawful wounding.

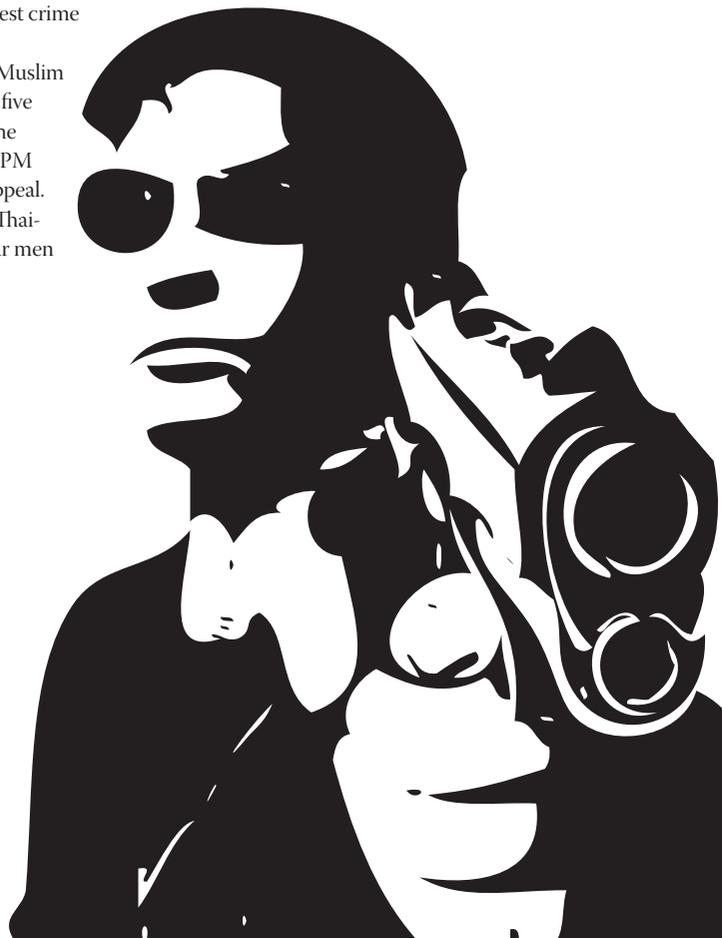
China, Trafficking in Dinosaur Bones: In a landmark case, a Chinese-Canadian scholar, along with five cohorts, has received prison sentences for trafficking nearly 3,000 dinosaur fossils. The official *Xinhua* news agency said it's the largest crime of its kind. The academic got a seven-year jail term.

Thailand, Travesty of Justice: The trial over the disappearance of the outspoken Thai-Muslim lawyer Somchai Neelaphajit ended with one policeman receiving three years in jail and five others being acquitted for lack of evidence. The next day the Thai PM said he thought the lawyer was probably dead. Human Rights Watch, based in New York, has called on the PM to conduct an independent investigation. The lawyer's widow is expected to lodge an appeal. The lawyer disappeared in March 2004 after accusing the police of torturing four of his Thai-Muslim clients, whom the police claimed were part of a large terrorist network. The four men were acquitted in June 2005.

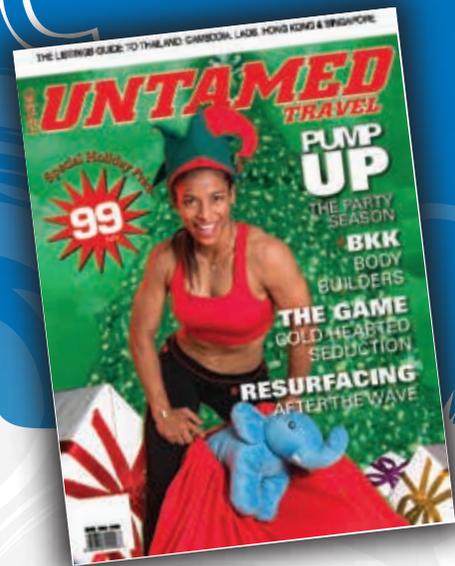
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Bastards...

Dear Editors,

I was wondering, KL6; What does it mean? You can see it on the side of a longtail boat that operates in Karon Bay on Phuket. Does the KL stand for "Karon longtail" "kompletely lacking", "kompletely legless", "komplete lesion", or "kill"?

Does the number stand for the number of amputations or kills?

I was wondering this, because the other morning whilst I was swimming close to the shore, I turned around and saw the bow post of a fast-moving longtail just behind me. I could just see the top of a sunglassed black head, which moved as I pushed myself up, waved and moved to one side of the onrushing boat, the bow post and port gunwale just above me. I managed another kick as the boat and its two crew members passed me within a metre. Both the black dark sunglassed heads were broken by a jeering white grin. I was swamped by the wash and they did not look back.

I was wondering, what would the owner and crew say if a spinning propeller was brought within inches of their genitals? What would they do or say, if a 300 kg piece of wood was thrown at them at 40kph?

Could a person less able than myself have got out of the way? Would a mother have sacrificed herself to save her child? I was wondering, do your readers have any good ideas as to how to get the bastards?

Regards,

Frank.

Achy Baby Heart

Risking a rare display of sensitivity, we offer here a photo of Martyn Goodacre, a regular photographer and Samui correspondent for *Untamed Travel*, (who was once infamous for modelling his life after long-dead Rolling Stone Brian Jones), holding the first of his progeny, a little girl/boy named Jade Yoko Goodacre, thereby confirming his disqualification from the Darwin Awards, since his mad genes have now been passed on.

"Achy" as he is better known amongst the publishing elite of the UK, has photographed Shane MacGowan, INXS frontman Michael Hutchence, Joey Ramone and a virtual Olympus of others for publications like *Melody Maker*, *NME*, and later *Loaded* – founded by Achy's former band manager, who used the lifestyle of his band Fabulous as a template for the groundbreaking publication.

Watch this space for similar announcements involving other mag-related reproductions...



Forwarded Email of the Month...

James Munroe, a great humanitarian and, ironically, a trombonist from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia sends on this email warning:

Subject: LATEST SCAM...

Generally, I hate the warnings that get sent around but I have to admit that this one is important.

Please protect everyone you know by sending this to your entire email list. If someone comes to your front door and says they are conducting a survey and asks you to show them your bum, do NOT show them your bum. This is a scam. They only want to see your bum.

I wish I'd got this yesterday, I feel so stupid and cheap.

Dead End Very Much Alive

Dear Editors,

I read, with interest, your article on Military Tourism, "Birthplace of a Stillborn Revolution" in the January issue of *Untamed Travel* [written by Mat Oakley]. I am delighted to hear that the author enjoyed his visit to Houa Phan province.

Traveling to the province directly from Vientiane is perhaps a little more challenging than travel to other provinces. However, visitors already planning to visit Xieng Khuang (location of the Plain of Jars) or Luang Prabang can continue their journey to Houa Phan quite easily in one day. In doing so, they will be rewarded with outstanding scenic views that are unrivalled in Lao PDR.

Contrary to the information in your article, the road is not a dead-end. [Editor's confession: We were supposed to check that fact and didn't.] The border between Lao PDR and Vietnam, in Houa Phan province, is now open to all foreign visitors who are in possession of a valid entry visa. Therefore, visitors to the province can easily continue their journey through to Hanoi and other parts of northern Vietnam.

Houa Phan province is indeed a very beautiful part of Lao PDR and the caves at Vieng Xai represent one of the most significant and interesting visitor sites in the country and Southeast Asia in general. The province also offers many other attractions that are well worth visiting, such as Hintang Archaeological Park, weaving houses in Sam Neua and a number of stunning waterfalls.

Visitors to the province will be assured of a warm welcome in this most beautiful part of the country.

Regards,

Tony Donovan
Sustainable Tourism Advisor
Savannakhet and Houa Phan Provinces
tdonovan@sntvworld.org

Yet Another Apology

Admittedly, we get heartily sick of constantly apologising to one disgruntled person or another on these pages month after month. It seems that unlike love, putting out a magazine means always having to say you're sorry. So here goes: last month we ran a photo of uncertain origins on the Krabi page of the January issue without crediting a photographer in the masthead. Turns out that Imaginative Traveller executive Andy Jones took that photo of his friend Roachie on holiday with his missus Sevilay, and for that oversight, we humbly bang our collective metaphorical head on the sewer pipe that conducts the company poo down the back of our office building. Lovely photo, Andy thanks.



divejunkie

We Have a Winner! And Another Contest!

Oddly enough, Manapat Chonklang, a young Thai woman who can't even swim, won one of the Divejunkie T-shirt (pictured here enshrouding Untamed Travel Advertising Executive Lek) for correctly answering the incredibly difficult dive-related question: "What does BCD stand for?" The answer is of course "Buoyancy Control Device" – that inflatable vest you wear when you go diving. Other entries that did not win included: "Bite Crabs Daintily", "Banish Crime in Denmark", and the executive editor's personal favourite, "Big Cammy's Dick". Sorry, no consolation prizes.

We must apologise here for www.divejunkie.com.sg for putting in the wrong URL last month, but we've got it right now.

Nevertheless, we still have two divejunkie T-shirts to give away to lucky readers. We'll give away one this month, with a retail value of 1,000 baht, to the first person to answer this question:

How many atmospheres are there at 20 metres (66 feet) under water? Send your answers asap to winbig@untamed-travel.com We will notify the winner by email and celebrate their existence in these here pages next month.

Taking and Giving

Dear Editors and Untamed Readers,

We, that is us travellers from "western" countries, come to Southeast Asia to see the sights, taste the foods, lay on the beaches, trek in the hills, admire the way of life. Here, we are perplexed about all we see. We see their smiles, receive their generosity, and hospitality, admire their artistic abilities, listen to their music – they do enrich our lives. No matter which way you look at it when travelling, your life gets more meaningful, and what do we usually do, is just say "thank you we had a nice time" and take off and go home with our pictures and souvenirs.

In my many travels in Southeast Asia I have spent days and days on end with people in one place, just sitting and talking, learning a couple of words of their language, listening to them and helping them with their English lessons.

I spent many months in Luang Prabang and got to know this particular young novice monk quite well. He told me the old folk stories of Laos, and in conversation it comes up that he wants to further his studies elsewhere but does not have any money. What can I do? What can I really do, me this "rich" guy who is able to travel so far from my home and visit this/his country? I went home that evening and sat and had a Beer Lao and another, cause it tastes so good, and the next day I went back to the temple and asked novice Khanham to come with me to the bank, where we opened up a bank account for him, and I deposited enough money into that account to support him for 1 year to do some studies at a technical college in Luang Prabang. (I am not a rich person by any means, but by living frugally I can save enough money to return to Southeast Asia from time to time.) Now what the hell has that got to do with your "untamed" magazine? Well I was walking down cowshit road and I heard the word "free" behind me, and I turned around and there was this young Thai woman handing out free copies of "untamed". Okay, I would love to have one – it was for free after all. [In December, we did hand out some promotional back issues of the magazine around Bangkok.] Thanks. I flipped open the magazine and who do I see there on page 93, if my memory serves me well, is novice Khanham. I have tears in my eyes. My world is so small, and so large.

Thank you for telling me all those lovely folk stories of Laos, something I would have never known. You enriched my life and I too have told the stories to other people and maybe they too will one day help someone, someday in their own small way.

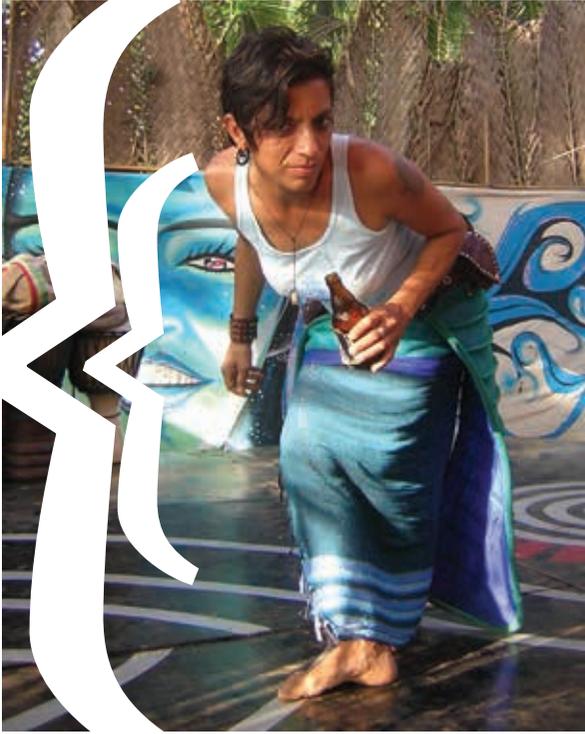
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RAIN

ABOUT GOA:

A NEW YEAR'S TALE

Suzan Crane revels in the full-blown hurricane of New Year parties sweeping through her small Indian town.

The New Year has dawned and I'm still awake as the sun paints a rosy hue on the horizon. New Year's Eve in Goa is amped up to 11 and only the lonely dare to call it a night before the following day. My village is packed, not a room to be had, traffic clogging up the narrow arteries running from the bus stand to the beach. It is hectic and noisy and, although good for business, it is not good for the soul. The sand is littered with beach beds. Trash is strewn about and few say hello because few know each other anymore. The freaks have come to roost but they are now commingling with – dare I say it? – package tourists. What is becoming of this fine hippie village? "It's over," many long-termers gripe, unaware that the latest edition of Lonely Planet India now cites Village X as "the place to go" in Goa.

The day of New Year's Eve is rife with anticipation and planning. People stock up on party favours and stockpile sleep before depriving themselves of it over the next countless hours. Our shop is abnormally quiet until 5pm when I get a rush of girls looking for new outfits, as if their clothes will stay on anyway. There are numerous fetes planned. Discussions concern the night's itinerary.

First order of business. What will I wear? Must be comfortable but look cool. Must have layers as it gets chilly and I'm not sure if I'll be dancing *al fresco* or in an enclosed environment.

Stop One: The Pyramid, an open-air structure on a sand dune overlooking the ocean. Despite complaints about it obscuring views and desecrating once-virgin land, the place and vibe is magical. Kundalini Airport, a cohesive troupe of dissident Western musicians playing jambas, sitar, didgeridoos and drums conjure up provocative tribal and Indian sounds. The crowd is moving in unison, but each to his/her own drummer.

One particular woman is dancing with depraved self-indulgence, silently beckoning the crowd to focus on her instead of the band. She undulates and gyrates, lifts her skirt, removes her blouse, and soon she is bare-breasted and suggestively fondling herself. It is an encore performance, a repeat of many prior public exhibitions. She is one of the eccentric characters who inhabit this small village. But we are not in Patpong or Pattaya. We are in India where women swim in their saris – exposed female flesh being anathema to cultural mores despite the hypocrisy proffered by incendiary Bollywood fare; where

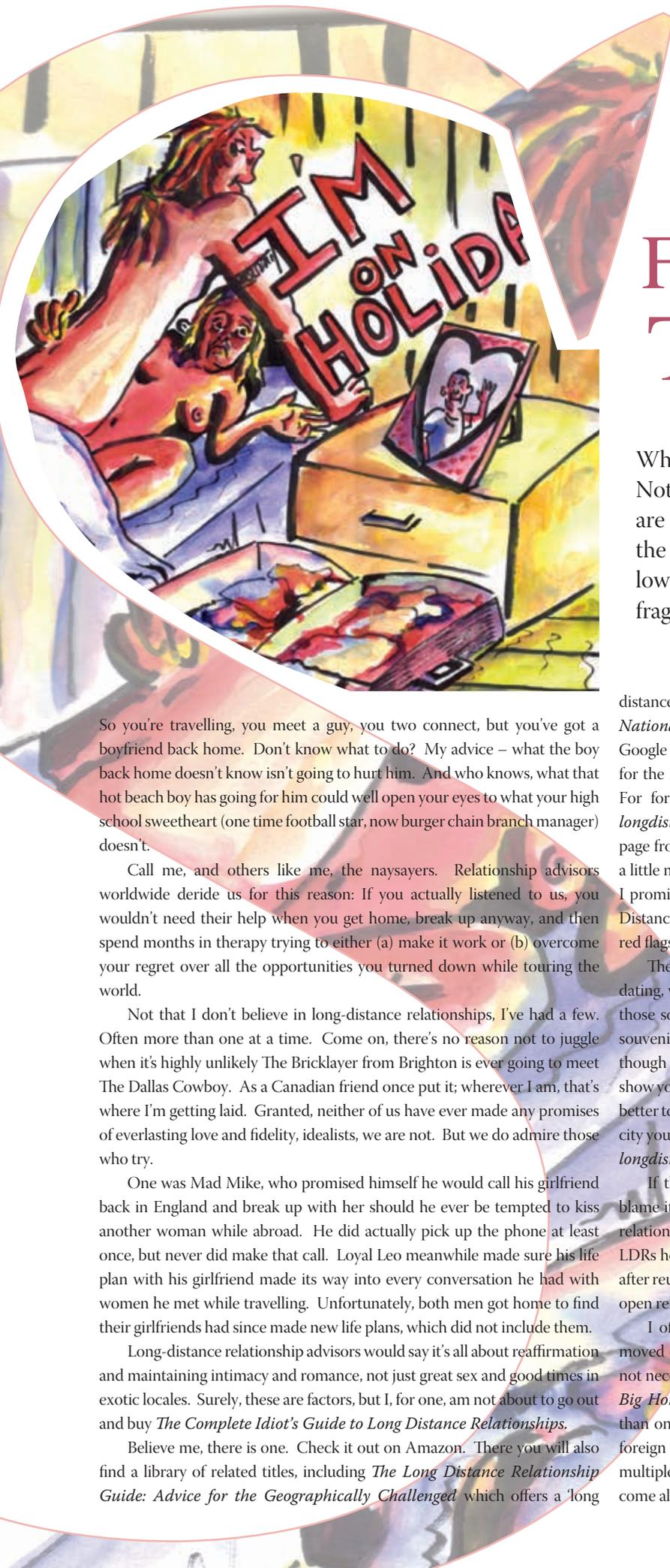
men publicly hold hands and otherwise physically engage but any display of affection between genders is considered unseemly.

Actually, we are not in the 'real India' We're in Goa, a crossroads of cultures, a hotbed of sex, drugs and debauchery, where rules are broken, insanity is tolerated and often provoked. Where the plot is lost more often than written, where people gossip and chide, but accepts the outcasts because they too exist outside dictates of conventional society.

"Lucy" is still topless when the clock strikes midnight. There is no moon tonight and stars glisten behind the explosion of fireworks. The cadence of waves augments the pounding African drums. Contrary to good sense, I make the short coastal walk to my next destination. Normally not a problem, particularly for this hardcore New York native, but tonight a potentially hazardous journey with so many booze-polluted Indian men titillated by the presence of so many scantily-clad foreign females. I arrive unscathed where a second round of Happy New Year's is barely heard above the techno soundscape.

Kidnapped... on my way home. My neighbour, offering me a ride on his trusty rusty Enfield, suddenly decides I'm not to retire, but must join him for the half-hour trip to Anjuna. The Hilltop's annual New Year's rave is kicking off and I'm to grab a jacket for the frosty ride over. So off we thunder into the sunrise, up a one-way road against a stream of traffic. Once inside, we make a beeline for one of the many *chai* mats, helmed with military precision by General Chai Mama. Order a watered-down chai or get off her turf, she declares as she bops one chai-less squatter over the head. No sleeping without her permission, she decrees. Here on the Hilltop, Chai Mamas rule the land.

The night yields to the light and trance-induced Westerners converge from all over Northern Goa. Pre-dawn is for partying Indians, daytime for bleary-eyed foreigners. I hang in there as long as I can, squinting against the reborn sun, drunk with exhaustion but exhilarated by the communal celebration. Choking on red dust kicked up by delirious dancers, I disappear into the mist amidst the all-night ravers. Finally my energy wilts and I stagger into the horde of hungry rickshaw drivers to haggle fruitlessly for a fair fare. It is noon on New Year's Day. Only the lonely dare to call it a night before the following day.



Faith, Hope & Treachery

Who can find logic in the chambers of the human heart? Not Karen Findlay, a.k.a. The Stalker, whose interests are further south. After much discourse on finding the comfort of a stranger while travelling, she gives the low-down on the ethics and practicalities of that most fragile of beasts, the long-distance relationship

So you're travelling, you meet a guy, you two connect, but you've got a boyfriend back home. Don't know what to do? My advice – what the boy back home doesn't know isn't going to hurt him. And who knows, what that hot beach boy has going for him could well open your eyes to what your high school sweetheart (one time football star, now burger chain branch manager) doesn't.

Call me, and others like me, the naysayers. Relationship advisors worldwide deride us for this reason: If you actually listened to us, you wouldn't need their help when you get home, break up anyway, and then spend months in therapy trying to either (a) make it work or (b) overcome your regret over all the opportunities you turned down while touring the world.

Not that I don't believe in long-distance relationships, I've had a few. Often more than one at a time. Come on, there's no reason not to juggle when it's highly unlikely The Bricklayer from Brighton is ever going to meet The Dallas Cowboy. As a Canadian friend once put it; wherever I am, that's where I'm getting laid. Granted, neither of us have ever made any promises of everlasting love and fidelity, idealists, we are not. But we do admire those who try.

One was Mad Mike, who promised himself he would call his girlfriend back in England and break up with her should he ever be tempted to kiss another woman while abroad. He did actually pick up the phone at least once, but never did make that call. Loyal Leo meanwhile made sure his life plan with his girlfriend made its way into every conversation he had with women he met while travelling. Unfortunately, both men got home to find their girlfriends had since made new life plans, which did not include them.

Long-distance relationship advisors would say it's all about reaffirmation and maintaining intimacy and romance, not just great sex and good times in exotic locales. Surely, these are factors, but I, for one, am not about to go out and buy *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Long Distance Relationships*.

Believe me, there is one. Check it out on Amazon. There you will also find a library of related titles, including *The Long Distance Relationship Guide: Advice for the Geographically Challenged* which offers a 'long

distance relationship song list' (gag) and an *Activities Handbook by the National Institute for Building Long Distance Relationships* (seriously). Google what they term 'LDRs' and you'll find a host of other resources for the LDR participant who really wants to make it work and needs help. For forums, facts, quizzes and the occasional airline ticket, see www.longdistancerelationship.com (try to ignore the greeting on the home page from one LDR to her partner who is, um, doing time). For something a little more risqué, try www.longdistancelovemaking.com (not a porn site, I promise). One expert online also offers tips on 'How to ID Serial Long Distance Daters' (which hopefully doesn't have my picture on it) and other red flags to watch for.

The key to making LDRs work, they say, are setting the ground rules on dating, when you'll talk, and when you'll next see each other. Other tips for those so inclined: Leave your scent behind on something personal; take a souvenir of your partner's with you (I don't think they meant soiled panties though so don't even think about it); schedule regular phone calls; have a TV show you'll both watch wherever you are (as if the world traveller has nothing better to discuss than the latest *Simpsons* episode); send postcards from every city you visit; and, for top cringe value, send each other romantic gifts (www.longdistancerelationships.com offers a true barf bag of kitsch).

If things don't work out in the end, these sources say it's easiest to blame it on the distance but you shouldn't. One site claims only 40% of all relationships, 'geographically close' or not, work out anyway. A study of LDRs however found that 48% of those who remained loyal stayed together after reuniting, compared to only 15% of those who agreed on maintaining an open relationship while apart.

I of course would argue that those who had open relationships and moved on found something better while out exploring the world, which is not necessarily a bad thing. I would also have to recommend *Hello My Big Big Honey* as alternative reading for the LDR that wants to explore more than one LDR. A collection of love letters between Thai bar girls and the foreign men they string along, it's an insightful lesson into how to maintain multiple LDRs while still keeping an eye open for anything better that might come along, or be at least worth a night or two.



TRAUMA WARD

In this excerpt from the new book Restless Souls: Rebels, Refugees, Medics and Misfits on the Thai-Burma Border (Asia Books Publishing, 2006), author Phil Thornton interviews Dr. Cynthia, the recipient of many humanitarian awards for the work she has done at her clinic in Mae Sot. Also culled from the book are a number of incidents involving a drive-by shooting, prostitution and cannibalism.

It was a long time before I finally arranged to meet Dr. Cynthia Maung, and even then I had to wait until she returned from one of her many overseas conferences. I was shown into her sparse office that she shared with other staff. Papers sat unfiled, faded colour photographs of her children and Aung San Suu Kyi were glued to a wall.

I sat facing Dr. Cynthia across a low wooden table. Her thick black hair was pulled tight and tied at the back. She nodded, smiled, and waited. I asked about her life before the clinic.

"In 1988 I finished my studies and was running a clinic in a Karen village of about 20,000 people. Like everybody else, I just wanted democracy for my country. The military made our demonstration a crime."

By taking part in democracy demonstrations, Dr. Cynthia was placed on the military's hit list. With colleagues, she fled to the Thai border. "It took us seven days and nights. We could only travel at night because the army hunted us. We arrived in Mae Sot in February 1989 and set up the clinic as a temporary shelter for students who had fled the violence in Burma. They were very young. When we first started, we had only ten people. Word spread and many more arrived. Then in June and July there was a lot of fighting north of Mae Sot, and the Karen leaders sent their sick."

She laughed as she remembered how the clinic started: "It was only intended as a safe house. I never planned for it to be a hospital or even a

clinic. It was just an old wooden storeroom made from scraps of wood left over from an old sawmill. In our first year we delivered six babies, and now it's more than 2,000."

Dr. Cynthia relied on donations from overseas Burmese and the local Thai community to keep the clinic running. "They gave us blankets, plates, and pots. Local Thais helped us a lot. They brought beans and oil. The local Catholic church and Thai businesses supplied rice and medicine. People brought us charcoal, blankets, and mosquito nets. Every month something always turned up. I only carried some basic equipment from Burma. I had my stethoscope and some small items. I've been here sixteen years. I came for three months, then I thought it would be three years, and then five, but the situation in Burma got worse. Our contract for the lease of the land and the buildings is always for one year to the next."

Since those early days, the clinic has outgrown its humble beginnings. It now spreads over an area the size of a couple of football fields and takes in 80,000 patients annually. But Dr. Cynthia doesn't want this to be mistaken for a sign of success. "It just means we are seeing more suffering. It is very difficult for our young people working here. They see social and cultural problems that can't be treated. They see too many abandoned children and babies. They see older people homeless, women with husbands in jail, and drug addicts. It's hard for our young medics to cope with all this sadness. They need to see some happiness and be able to treat more than just hopeless cases. All they witness are broken communities, broken families, and broken people."

Dr. Cynthia paid tribute to her young medics for making the clinic work: "Every medic wants to do something to help. All our workers have had family members killed, imprisoned, or tortured. Many of them are from displaced villages and were brought up running from jungle hideout to jungle hideout."

Karen teachers and community leaders select people who they think have the commitment and attitude to be trained as medics. "They have to be motivated. It's not money that brings them here. A junior medic earns 800 baht a month and a senior medic with a family gets 1,100."

Dr. Cynthia is grateful to Thailand for giving her the opportunity to set up her clinic, but said the problems in Burma cannot be fixed until the dictatorship lets the people take part in the political process.

"The solution to our problems is not here in Thailand. We have no rights here, it's not our country, we're stateless people. But we need to build partnerships with Thai people while we live in their country."

We left her office and Dr. Cynthia took me on a slow tour of the clinic. We passed a queue of anxious faces outside the out-patients department. Many of the women carried babies bundled in faded sarongs. Those too sick to move folded like thin shadows over metal benches.

"People in Burma are too busy struggling with daily survival. They don't have time to deal with or even think about the severity of their situation. The main killer is malaria, and we also see many malnourished children."

Malaria has had a devastating effect in Burma. *Medicines Sans Frontiers* (MSF) claim it is the country's biggest killer, and the Thai-Burma border is where the world's most resistant strains are found. Medical experts agree that the best way to prevent malaria is to sleep under mosquito nets treated with an insecticide. But even the most basic precautions are beyond the reach of people under siege.

"Many of our people have been forced from their homes. They are always moving to avoid capture. It's impossible for them to buy nets or insecticide, even if they were available."

Many of the terminally ill who come to the clinic for treatment are scared to die in Thailand because the Burmese military refuses to let relatives take the bodies home. Burmese families are dirt poor and can't afford the cost of a funeral—transporting the body, buying a coffin, and paying for a ceremony. People have become pragmatic about death and simply make their goodbyes



"I've been asked to live in Canada, Britain, the US, and Australia, but what would I do? It would be a good opportunity for me and my children, but what good would it be to my people?"

saying, 'You take the body, and we'll take the soul.' The clinic pays Mae Sot Hospital 500 baht each time they have a body to burn.

It is no surprise to Dr. Cynthia that Burmese national health indicators are catastrophic, especially when the UN notes that the regime spends 222 percent more on its military than it does on health and education. UNICEF reports that as many as 1 million Burmese children are malnourished.

Dr. Cynthia worried that, under the regime, Burma had become a country divided by race, religion, education, arms, and wealth. "If you want a healthy society, all people have to be treated as equals. It's important we have different ethnic groups involved if we are to rebuild our country. If people are to live and work as equals, the barriers that divide them have to be removed."

Inside the door of the clinic's nutrition ward, a small gaunt child, her ribs visible, lay still on a plastic mat. Her four-year-old body weighed only 5.6 kilograms. A disposable nappy swamped her tiny frame. Her finger-thick arms and legs were motionless, but her eyes tracked me as I bent to photograph, and she smiled. Standing behind her, nine-year-old Kama watched as a medic checked the frail child. Kama was also malnourished. Her shaved head and powdered face gave her a haunted look. She weighed sixteen kilograms, about a third of what she should.

A small chubby man poked his head inside the door and spoke in Burmese to Dr. Cynthia.

"Saw Eno has just come from Burma," she said. "He's a nurse in the TB ward of a large Burmese hospital. He'll talk to you if you change his name and the name of the hospital."

I asked him why so many Burmese crossed the border to seek treatment at the clinic.

"In Burma we have no drugs; we have nothing to give. Every day I see forty people with TB. Some are young, some old. Our government says there is no HIV, but it's a lie.

"I earn 5,000 kyat a month. It only pays for food. We have no time to grow vegetables. Our time is spent working, going to meetings, and doing volunteer government work. We have no choice. If we refuse, we're fined.

"We work for the next meal. If we try to buy medicine on the black market, we can be arrested. If we speak out, we're arrested. We never speak without first looking over our shoulder, and when we do speak, we look at the ground. The generals keep a sacred white elephant as a sign they're strong and have the gods on their side. We know it's pink, but if we say it's not white, we're arrested.

"It's very depressing. Talking to you is a jail sentence. Our country is sad. Many of the diseases could be prevented if we had the means . . . that's why we have so much malnutrition. It's especially hard on babies and children."

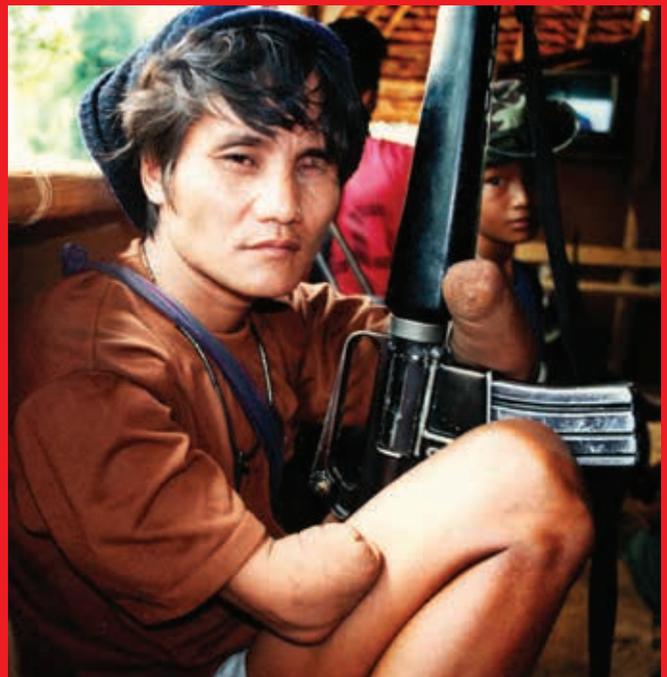
As a mother of three children, it was not surprising that Dr. Cynthia has made the welfare of children one of her priorities. "Our young children," she said, "have seen too much violence. If we don't solve the problems, they will be passed onto the next generation. That's what keeps me motivated. I want a better world for my children and the children of Burma. I ache for the day when at least our children can go home to a peaceful Burma."

A young woman approached and Dr. Cynthia said she had to go back to her office, as some people from a large Western NGO based in Bangkok had arrived. We returned to her office, where a group of four women in business suits sat waiting outside in the comfort of their air-conditioned hotel minibus. The doctor smiled as she scanned the women for clues as to

BULLET POINTS

- The country's military has the second biggest army in SE Asia: 500,000 troops. The Karen rebels have around 20,000 poorly armed soldiers.
- Villagers are liable for a fine of up to 20,000 kyat for destroying military equipment if they step on a landmine.
- Along the Thai-Burmese border some 150,000 Karen live in refugee camps.
- Medicins Sans Frontieres claims that the country's biggest killer is malaria and that the Thai-Burma border is home to the world's most resistant strains.
- The world's longest-running civil war is between the military junta and the Karen.
- Some 250 backpack medics, divided into seven teams, provide medical care for around 150,000 people in the Karen State.
- In Mae Sot, hotel and construction workers from Burma make around Bt1,200 per month for seven-day weeks of 12-hour days.
- According to the World Health Organisation, out of 192 countries Burma has the worst public health record except for Sierra Leone.

The UN notes that the regime spends 222 percent more on its military than it does on health and education.



who they were. She led them to her office and the delegation shed their shoes at the door. Their neat row of leather shoes was out of place among the pile of worn-down plastic sandals belonging to clinic staff.

While Dr. Cynthia dealt with the NGO women, I wandered and chatted with some of the clinic's staff and patients. Rain started to fall, and soon a torrent ran from the unglutted roofs towards the packed-in-patients ward. People and possessions were jammed between beds and floors. A bright-eyed older man mashed rice and fish as his sick wife lay still on a wooden bed. The man washed her, changed her clothes, brushed her hair, then organized the tiny space around her bed, everything grouped on a wooden box that acted as a bedside cupboard. The couple had obviously known better days, before old age and Burma's generals caught up with them. The man smiled as young children pushed past him. He slowly raised his wife to a sitting position and cradled her in his arm. With his other hand he fed her.

A tangible sense of love and humanity permeated the ward. An eight-year-old boy ran and ducked between beds as he fetched rice for his scarecrow-thin father, reduced to skin and bone by some disease. The boy propped his shoulder under his father to try to get him up to walk. As the exhausted man slid to the floor from the effort, the boy bent down and hugged him.

The packed ward may not have been run according to Western standards or expectations, but it lacked nothing in regard for the well-being of its patients. Unlike in Western hospitals, the medics allowed the patient's family and friends to be there at all hours. Families slept under and beside beds, prepared meals, and tended their sick. Instead of disinfectant gagging the air, the smell of cooking rice and curries added a sense of nurturing to the room. The angst and powerlessness that pervades Western hospitals was also missing.

An hour later, the driver took the NGO delegation back to their hotel, Mae Sot's most expensive. I was told by one of Dr. Cynthia's colleagues that the women had come to assess if their money was being well spent. During their meeting, they had grilled Dr. Cynthia about the clinic's "mission statement," "objectives," and "strategies." I thought, if they had taken the time and ignored the mud, a quick tour of the wards would have answered their questions.

NGO management plans sound and look good on paper, but from a local reality fall short of what is needed. Frustrated staff told me the 'non' part of the NGO badge is fast becoming obsolete as more and more organizations comply with rules laid down by governments. If they don't obey, they miss out on funds. Another point of contention is NGO consultants charging up to 1,000 dollars a day plus hotel and expenses. Up close, the jealousy and rivalry between consultants and local staff gets ugly.

The UN and larger aid agencies with infrastructure in place are funded to manage crises caused by natural disasters or war. Their Western staff are paid huge salaries and fly in to evaluate projects like Dr. Cynthia's clinic. But it is important to distinguish between highly paid international career aid workers and NGO consultants, and volunteer humanitarians. The latter give their services for low wages based on local conditions. The careerists and consultants often milk their position for all its worth. Once their salaries, expenses, and per diems are paid, there is nothing left for the people they are supposedly employed to help.

Mae Sot aid workers regularly savaged one particular UN careerist working with refugees for his extravagant lifestyle. Their vitriol was based on more than envy. They contrasted his Jaguar car, wine cellar, large air-conditioned house, and expensive clothes with the conditions refugees lived in. It wasn't hard to understand their resentment, especially when people in refugee camps are fed a daily diet of rice, fish paste, and mung beans.

According to the Thai-Burmese Border Consortium annual report, the total cost of looking after and feeding a refugee is 4,600 baht a year, equating to thirty US cents a day for each person. Next to the consultants' salaries, cars, and luxury accommodation, that figure is obscene.

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DRIVE-BY SHOOTING

Arkar had brought his own photographic nightmare to show me. He had three photographs of a young man laid out in a coffin made from packing crates; black stencil marks were still visible on the rough wood. The man was Arkar's friend, Naing Ling. Arkar told me he was from a small village called Taw Ku, not far from Rangoon. One afternoon, Naing Lin had just finished playing in a soccer game between Mae Sot factory workers. He was walking home when four motorbikes slowed and drew up next to him. Each bike carried two men. One of the pillion riders fired a gun. The bullet hit Naing in the forehead and exited through the top of his skull.

Arkar pointed at the picture and said, "Naing was only 25. Anybody can shoot Burmese workers and there's no problem. We took him to hospital and the doctors called the police. Naing died. The hospital wanted 12,000 baht before they would release his body."

When Dr. Cynthia re-joined me, I asked her about the attitudes of NGOs and consultants working in the region. She took a more charitable attitude toward them than I now do, saying Mae Sot is not an ordinary town and living there is difficult for everyone.

"There are so many political groups and NGOs to deal with. There are lots of power struggles between the different interests and egos. But we can't separate our people from that struggle. We have to keep putting their interests before our own. Many [consultants] have travelled to many countries, but not very far from their own comfort. I feel, because of this, they are not participating fully or being fulfilled as human beings. I've seen so many careers made by diseases."

Dr. Cynthia fixed me with a blank stare and let the silence hang. Finally she said that prejudice at all levels had to be broken down and it would take time to change attitudes.

In spite of some local resentment and bureaucratic hassles, many Thai people in Mae Sot are proud of the international acclaim Dr. Cynthia and her clinic have brought to the town. Local people from all walks of life have offered support. Dr. Cynthia's reputation means she is also in high demand at overseas conferences. I asked her why she hadn't taken the opportunity to

move her family to a more comfortable life away from the poverty, disease, war, and the never-ending line of sick refugees.

"I've been asked to live in Canada, Britain, the US, and Australia, but what would I do? It would be a good opportunity for me and my children, but what good would it be to my people? The world is the same over. Wherever you go, people have problems and poor health. How to fix those problems is the question?"

"People keep telling me the international community will step in and stop the regime. But they haven't. I don't know if it's because the Burmese people are patient or just passive. The people are brainwashed."

She gave a forced laugh at the suggestion that she was a saint, and bit back at people who wanted to beatify her. Then her tone turned to anger. "I feel more like a leaf in a storm when I have to deal with all the factions who want me to work to their agendas. You need to clarify what 'saint' means. What are the qualities? Who determines them... you, the media? Rather than making me or Daw Aung San Suu Kyi a saint, people should take responsibility to do something themselves. Burmese people need to become mobilized. Making a few responsible for solving the world's problems is not a solution. As in holistic health, people have to take responsibility. The situation in Burma

THE PROSTITUTE

Naj said she was seventeen, but she looked only fourteen. She took us down a corridor to the drab concrete room where she sold sex. Her tiny frame made the dingy room look large. Today, she said, she would have to have sex with as many as ten men.

"It's never enough. I'm a disappointment for Mamasan. She says I'm no good. She wants me to work more. I don't like this work but I have no money. I borrowed from Aunty and I can't leave until I pay it back.

Many of the estimated 40,000 Burmese prostitutes in Thailand borrow large sums of money to help their families pay for a funeral, hospital care, a failed harvest, or a debt to a money-lender. Naj was brought from Burma to Mae Sot by a 'carry' [human smuggler] and had to pay him about six months' wages to do so.

The room that Naj worked from was empty except for a grimy plastic mat on the bare concrete floor and a pink nylon mosquito net suspended from a green plastic hanger. An empty brown bottle supported a stubby candle and a stick of incense. A graffiti heart was the only decoration on the sad, unpainted walls. As Naj talked, she clutched a grubby pillow.

"I get 100 baht from each man and Aunty gets 100. There are five girls working here. Mamasan's favourite girl hates me and always picks on me. Life here is hard. If I don't earn enough, Aunty makes me go with cops when they come for their 'present money'."





has made the people irresponsible; they constantly look to someone else to do it for them. What she can do [Aung San Suu Kyi] is limited. Everyone respects her and believes she is a good leader, but how much can she do? How much has changed since 1988? The decline in the economic situation means people can't even think about politics, they're too busy trying to feed their families. The education system is strictly controlled, there are no NGOs allowed in unless they are compliant."

Our interview was again interrupted. Dr. Cynthia had another visitor, and she told me to carry on in the wards and we would continue later. Hovering in the doorway, a tall bearded backpacker stood waiting for me to leave. He pushed past me and I walked towards the trauma ward.

Inside the ward, the senior medic, Law Gwa was examining the raised leg of a man lying prone on a wooden bed. His leg was encased in a metal frame to keep it still and its weight off the bed. Law Gwa's hands were rubber gloved as he slowly dabbed with a piece of gauze held in scissors at the side of the man's leg furthest from my view. I moved around to get a better look at the wound and then wished I hadn't.

The man's upper thigh had a hole, big enough to insert a fist, that ran from above the knee to just below his hip. Most of the flesh and muscle was missing, exposing the entire length of the bone. I asked Law Gwa what had caused the injury, expecting his reply to involve a land-mine.

"His leg was sore and he went to see his traditional healer. The healer only found a pimple. He treated it with one of his potions and gave it a massage. After a few days the spot turned into an open ulcer and the healer put more potion on it. It then rotted away to leave what you see now. He also has osteoporosis, and when his healer massaged his leg, he broke the bone."

The wound was terrible, making it hard to conceive what caused the flesh to rot. According to Law Gwa the healer could have put anything from a buffalo-shit poultice to a homemade mixture of jungle plants on it. Law Gwa had the man on intravenous antibiotics and had cut away the rotten flesh to try to save the leg.

In a small room at the back of the ward, a young Karen man was being prepared for an operation. He had been working with elephants, moving logs out of a forest, when he stepped on a mine.



“The man’s foot was blasted to pulp and bone fragments. The medics needed to amputate the foot and lower leg. A cutting line had been drawn just below his calf muscle, the black ink cruel against his brown flesh.”

In the dim light, he looked crucified on the raised bed in the makeshift theatre. The combination of anaesthetic and the fear of losing his leg made his eyes bulge in anticipation as the medics waited for the painkiller to kick in. They assured me that though the man would be conscious he would not feel pain, but would hear his leg being sawed off.

The man told me he had been on the job just three days when he stood on the mine. As he hadn’t finished the work his boss had contracted him to do, he would not be paid. To add unbelievable insult to his injury, the Burmese army had fined him 10,000 kyat for destroying military equipment—the mine!

He whispered to me that he never thought his “life would be so cruel.” I agreed, and declined the medics’ invitation to watch the amputation. I walked back to the office.

Dr. Cynthia had just finished with the backpacker, who was shuffling his feet into his well-worn Birkenstock sandals. Dr. Cynthia was grabbed by one of her staff before we could resume our talk. Instead I asked the backpacker a few questions. He was from the US and had come to Mae Sot to get his Thai visa renewed at the border. He’d read about the clinic on the Internet and, as

he had studied naturopathy, he believed he should share his knowledge with the clinic. He thought the clinic relied on Western medicine and needed to embrace alternative healing. He wasn’t donating money, medicine, clothes, or even his time. His attitude or beliefs could not be shifted, and he dismissed me as another “straight.” I suggested he spend time working in the trauma ward to get some perspective.

A constant stream of Western tourists come to the clinic demanding Dr. Cynthia see them. Many are unaware of their own insignificance in the overall scheme of the border situation, but have enough front to insist, like one photographer, that Dr. Cynthia spend ten hours being photographed “to enhance my portfolio.”

One of the medics, who had seen me talking to the backpacker, wished she had the money spent by visitors getting to the clinic: “We don’t need more people coming here, but we could use their holiday money to treat more people.”

With my encounter with the ‘new-age healer’ still fresh, I asked Dr. Cynthia her views on how traditional and modern medicine compared. Before answering, she gave me another of her stares that passed through me and finished up about a mile away.

“Because people in remote areas in Burma cannot get good medical care, they rely on traditional methods. Sometimes it makes their condition worse.

Traditional medicine has to walk side by side with science. For example, the traditional birth attendant [TBA] thinks a newborn baby's life force is in the placenta, so immediately after birth they tear it out. In modern medicine we wait, otherwise it can cause massive bleeding and collapse the uterus. It could also kill the mother. Traditional birth attendants don't let new mothers eat eggs or give their babies breast milk for three days. We know mother's milk at this stage is full of colostrum and builds the baby's immunity to infection.

"There are many misconceptions that can cause conflict between health workers and traditional healers. Using buffalo shit on wounds is dangerous. Eating monkey brain is also believed to be good to fight off mental illnesses, but would you do it?"

"We need to know what works best in both systems. The health worker needs to learn more about prevention, and we have to build on the respect the traditional healers have in their villages. The ideal is to teach traditional healers to combine scientific methods with traditional remedies that work. We have seventy backpack teams that go inside Burma to give care to about 150,000 displaced people. They also work with village leaders and traditional birth attendants and healers. Given appropriate training, they can be

important in improving peoples' health."

Dr. Cynthia responded to my interjection to "tell me more about the backpack team" with the stare, more silence, and finally a frown.

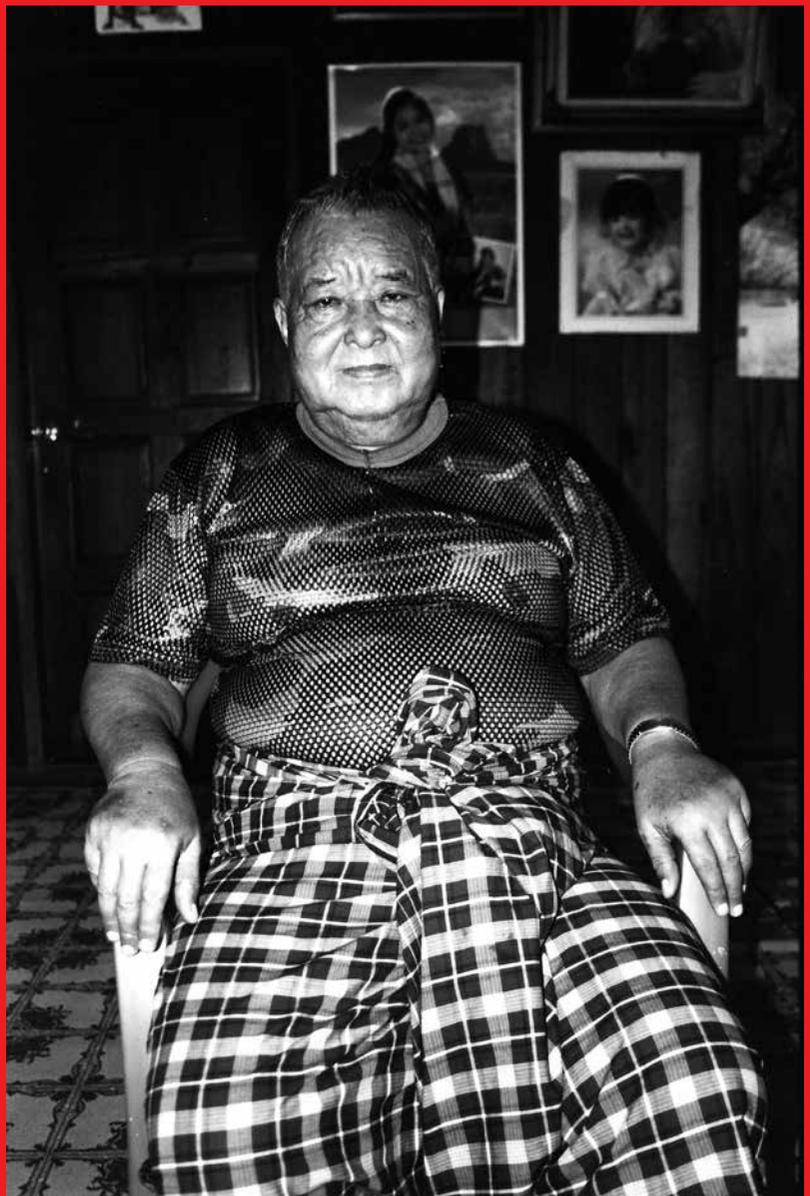
Her patience had run out. She said if I wanted to find out about the backpack team, I should talk to them myself.

Dr. Cynthia's children arrived from school with a clatter and swarmed over their mother. The clinic was winding down for the day. Medics left the wards to go to their small, shared rooms to relax, have showers, or play football. Outside the gates *songtaews* waited to collect passengers. A huge red sun dropped over the trees that fringed the back of the clinic, and clouds of insects rose from the rice paddies to chase the last of the daylight. Stray dogs gathered in packs for the night's mischief.

Back in town, the day market had closed, its empty wooden stalls left to the rank smells, rubbish collectors, beggars, and muggers. A large rat scurried among the garbage. Brothels switched on their fluorescent striplights. I made my way to Kung's bar—a favourite haunt for backpackers, journalists, aid workers, and activists—for today's latest rumours and an ever-present dose of Mae Sot paranoia.

CANNIBALISM

I brought up the grisly rumours of cannibalism on jungle battlefields, and asked Bo Mya if there any any truth to this. It was obvious that the general was becoming tired of my questions about the dark side. He fixed his gaze onto me and said, "War is hell... many bad things happen... everything is dirty. You cannot have a nice war. It's about hatred. In the past we had some soldiers who did crazy stuff. Some soldiers want revenge for the death of their parents killed or tortured by the Burmese so they might do this. I have heard rumours... of Burmese officers cutting off parts off a living soldier and making him eat himself. Human beings commit a lot of crimes during fighting. There's nothing good about war, any war. Do you think America's war in Iraq is clean?"



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>>Head to Head<<

Crichton vs. Le Carré Review by Daniel Cooper

Spotlights flare, highlighting the ring as the crowd roars out of the darkness. In the red corner Michael Crichton is bouncing up and down practicing jabs, his hooded silk robe fluttering around him. In the blue corner John Le Carré is slumped on his stool, eyeing Crichton and spitting. Crichton may be at the pinnacle of his career and Le Carré's fading, but Le Carré is a sly old bastard with a few tricks up his sleeve. The match is about to begin.

Last year saw titles from both contestants fighting for shelf space. Le Carré's *Constant Gardener* came out in 2001 but was reprinted by Pocket Books in 2005 to coincide with the release of the movie. Harper Collins published Crichton's *State of Fear* the same year.

State of Fear follows the adventures of Peter Evans, lawyer for a large environmental advocacy organisation whose leader is involved in the shady business of climate change disinformation and propaganda. The baddies are eco-terrorists who strike people down with lightning and are bent on engineering eco-disasters in order to convince the public of the threat of climate change. A noble goal, if a little misguided. Oh yes, and they also kill people with blue-ringed octopi. Peter joins the adventure with a know-it-all eco-scientist and a comely lass.

The book follows Crichton's usual cautionary theme of science gone haywire, but in this case it isn't eccentric dinosaur enthusiasts he has in his sights but the environmental movement, particularly proponents of greenhouse and climate change theories. Crichton uses Professor Kenner, the know-it-all, as a mouthpiece to debunk nominally accepted theories about global warming while Evans asks all the dumb questions for the reader. This kind of hand-leading is needed as the plot moves much faster than its participants with little regard for characterisation, giving the reader the spooky feeling that they're reading a movie script rather than an airport novel.

Crichton's research team has obviously been busy as the claims of the climate-change movement are carefully dissected and criticised, with footnotes to published research papers listed at the back, along with a short essay explaining what is wrong with politicised science, using eugenics as an example of a theory that was popular and widely believed but is now discredited. Admirable aims, but Crichton gives a one-sided view and does not credit the environmental movement's other works with any value.

Finally, readers in the Southeast Asian region may find the book upsetting, as the eco-terrorists' master plan is to trigger a tsunami to wipe out the west coast of the US. That's not a spoiler, though, because the mysterious goings-on in the first chapter are all too obvious today.

The Constant Gardener sees Justin Quayle, a mid-level British diplomat, chasing down his young wife's murderers. The action begins in Kenya, where Quayle is posted to the embassy and his wife is involved in NGOs and activism. She and her colleague Dr Bluhm, an African medical activist, come to a sticky end in the bush amid rumours of their affair. But Quayle knows things aren't what they seem, and he slowly retraces his wife's research, discovering corrupt and compromised medical researchers, a greedy and ruthless pharmaceutical company and a conspiracy to exploit destitute African villagers as guinea pigs in drug trials.

The book makes a decent read, written as it is in Le Carré's 'terribly British' style, however it's clear that he's getting on in years. Although the book is set in the present day, the characters read like they've just walked out of the 1970s and like the main character, Le Carré hasn't a clue about computers. The other weak point of *The Constant Gardener* is that the end is something of a letdown. Sorry.

That said the book's great strength is its exploration of the world of pharmaceutical research and how commercial concerns force ethical and scientific compromises, not to mention the shambolic state of medical aid in Africa. Le Carré inserts a note at the end of the book pointing out that it is a work of fiction, but that it's not far off the mark.

So which book is the winner? It's hard to say, since 2005 was the year science went wild according to these two authors. While Crichton provides the thrills and spills, with the heroes saving the world at the end, we get all that on TV these days. The title must go to Le Carré who injects his characters with pain, hatred and horror in a believable and sincere fashion. In the world or writing (or impressing frustrated reviewers) it's good prose, a credible story and characterisation that wins the cup over plot twists and superlatives. In the end, it was *The Constant Gardener* that got made into a movie, wasn't it?

Both of the above titles are available from Bookazine and other fine retailers.

FARANGPHOBIA

In a country where Farangs, either expats or travelers, routinely ignore each other, it takes a near-fatal accident to bring two of them together, reports Dean.



Two foreigners in Bangkok actually acknowledged each other's presence recently after the two tuk-tuks they were travelling in collided head-on in front of their apartment building.

Neither was injured seriously in the crash.

Nigel Powell, 27, of Gloucester, England and Mike Holmes, 31, of Vancouver, Canada admitted they said, "Hey," to each other after the collision and shared a bottle of beer to settle their nerves in a downstairs bar.

"I ignore him all the time," says Holmes, "but considering the circumstances under which we met, I thought a 'hey' wasn't out of the question."

Sociologists refer to the curious behaviour of foreigners ignoring each other abroad as the Marco Polo Syndrome. The first symptom shows up when foreigners believe one traveller is more 'local' than the other despite the fact that they are both strangers in a foreign land.

The syndrome is known to keenly affect expats of long standing, or repeat visitors, who are sick of the same old questions like, "Where ya from? How long ya been here? How long ya staying for?"

Some proponents of the theory, however, claim the symptoms differ from race to race.

"The English tend to speak to other English only over beer," Professor Toshi Yotsuyama of Saitam University says, "but Swedes will acknowledge a fellow Swede if an encounter is totally unavoidable. Germans appear to ignore each other completely no matter what the circumstances."

Nigel Powell believes the fear of losing one's girlfriend is another reason for the seemingly inherent paranoia of Westerners abroad.

"If I see another [Westerner] with a prettier bird than mine, I generally ignore him," says Powell, who admits being guilty of the odd 'How long ya been here?' "Because I'm worried my girlfriend might fancy him instead."

Professor Yotsuyama says the indifference foreigners show towards each other is symptomatic of the confusion about travelling today.

"History has shown that we travel to broaden our minds by seeing new places, observing different cultures and engaging with other people," Yotsuyama says, "but the new data reveals this open-mindedness does not extend to people who are like us." He also admits that part of the culture of unacknowledgement is due to the fact that when places become popular, they are instantly flooded with all the people most travellers wanted to leave back home.

Asked if Nigel and Mike would remain friends after the near-fatal incident, the pair remained sceptical, but said they would most likely say hello if confronted with each other in the future. Both of them agreed on another point, too: They have no tolerance for other Farangs.

SAVING TIPS FOR SKINFLINT BACKPACKERS

- 1) Never throw away old shoelaces. Instead, pull them apart to make dental floss and hair extensions.
- 2) Collect leaves to use as toilet paper.
- 3) Why spend 80 baht on a new umbrella when you can easily 'borrow' a garbage can lid and hold it over your head during a downpour.
- 4) Save sachets of Coffee Mate and sugar to mix with bottled water to create your own free desserts on long bus trips, like "Sponge Cake du Coffee Mate."
- 5) Don't throw your plastic bags from 7-11 away. Collect a dozen and then tie them together to make a rain-retardant poncho for trekking during the monsoon season.
- 6) Never pay for a bus ticket when you can strap yourself under the vehicle like East Berliners used to do to escape into West Berlin.
- 7) In every restaurant you enter steal as many toothpicks as possible. Later, glue them together with your own saliva in the shape of miniature pagodas to give to all your friends back home as genuine souvenirs of Thailand.
- 8) Never splurge on Valium to sleep on long bus journeys. Simply bang your head repeatedly on the seat in front of you until you're unconscious.

The Khmer martial art of Bokator is as old as Angkor Wat. Antonio Graceffo takes some hard knocks from a grandmaster in Cambodia who shows him how fighters are trained to kill.

“ We can fight standing up,” he said, taking a kick at me, similar to the roundhouse used in Khmer boxing. The kick missed, but with the ease of 40 years of martial arts practice, he shifted all of his weight forward onto his kicking leg, hooked his other leg around me and kicked me square on the jaw.

“The dragon whips his tail,” he said, sounding like a Bruce Lee movie.

Next, San Kim Sean, the grandmaster of Khmer Bokator he dropped to his knees and executed an elbow strike to my solar plexus. “We can fight on our knees,” he said. He dropped to the ground and trapped the kick I had thrown at his face. “We can fight from a sitting position. He sat down, while dragging my ankle and toppling me to the ground. “We can even fight lying down,” he said, laughing.

Khmer Bokator is a very complete martial art, which uses strikes, drags, trapping, and locking for both offense and defense. In Khmer Bokator, the entire body is used as a weapon. Many martial arts use the head butt, but some of the techniques which San Kim Sean showed me used the jaw and even the shoulder muscle as weapons.

“The lion has fangs,” he explained. “We also use fangs in our fighting.” San Kim Sean made a fist, then extended his pointer finger, bending it at the

into the inside of the student’s thigh, sending him to the canvass again.

“You see?” he asked me. “You would never be allowed to do any of that in a boxing ring. But it is very effective.”

The student returned to practice, leaping in the air and kicking the heavy bag with both feet. Each time he landed flat on the ground in a controlled stance, ready to fight.

“That boy has only been with me one year,” said San Kim Sean with pride. “But he already knows 300 techniques. And now he can help me teach the other students.”

San Kim Sean explained to me why it was so important to him to pass on the art. Bokator is the ancient Khmer martial art, the predecessor of Brodal Serey (Khmer Free Boxing). While the art of Khmer boxing is very much alive, and thriving as a professional sport, this, unfortunately is not the case for the much older art of Bokator. This art is nearly unknown, even in Cambodia. “Outside of Cambodia, the only thing people know is Angkor Wat. They don’t know about our martial art.”

Bokator Khmer uses colored *krama* (traditional Khmer scarves) instead of belts. The art is made up of 10 animal styles. The five white krama animal forms include: the king monkey, lion, elephant, apsara (the sacred Hindu nymph), and crocodile. The green krama forms include duck, crab, horse, bird and dragon.

San Kim Sean, now 60, began training in Bokator Khmer when he was 13. Even at that time “only a few old men knew the art.” It was still practiced in some of the provinces, but was unknown in the capital.

The Khmer Rouge regime, from 1975-1979, nearly exterminated Bokator as practitioners of traditional arts and culture were hunted down and killed. “All of my students and

KILLER ART

second joint. With pinpoint accuracy, he used this ‘fang’ to stab me in the pressure point behind the clavicle. Ouch! “If we train long enough, we can make the finger go through the flesh, he said with a likable, but sadistic grin. “And then we can rip out that bone.” He showed me how the finger could wrap around the collarbone, and then how he could use his whole body to rip it out.

“Bokator is much better than Khmer boxing,” announced San Kim Sean. “But my students would never be allowed to fight in the ring. We are trained to kill.”

San Kim Sean asked one of his young students to attack him from a boxing stance. When the student threw a punch, San Kim Sean countered with an elbow strike to the student’s throat. “KILL!” shouted San Kim Sean. The student threw a second punch. This time, San Kim Sean stabbed the student in the throat with his fingers. “KILL!” he yelled again. The student kicked and San Kim Sean hit the student’s thigh with his knee, knocking him to the ground.

The student leapt to his feet and attacked with his knees. San Kim Sean crisscrossed his forearms over the student’s throat and, like a pair of scissors, he crushed the student’s windpipe with his wrist bones. “KILL!” he yelled again. Next, he rotated the wrist bones away from the student’s throat, careful to keep his opponent’s neck locked in his vice-like forearms. “This one not kill,” he explained. Pulling the man close, he smashed his shoulder into the student’s jaw. It was obvious that if he had done it with full force, the student would have been knocked unconscious. Finally, he drove the heel of his foot

training brothers died and I was the only instructor who survived.”

In 1979, the Khmer Rouge fell to the Vietnamese, who prohibited Cambodians from practicing martial arts. “I was teaching in secret. But some Khmer person who was jealous of me turned me into the Vietnamese authorities.”

San Kim Sean would have been jailed, but he and his wife escaped to a refugee camp in Thailand, eventually landing in the USA, where he made his living as a Hop Kido teacher until 1990.

“I took my Hop Kido students all over for competitions. And I never once heard the words Bokator Khmer. I began to wonder why am I doing all of this advertising for a Korean art?”

He explained that Bokator Khmer is an ancient art, predating even the 1,000-year-old carvings at Angkor Wat. King Jayavaraman VII, the creator of Angkor Wat is depicted in such a stance with a Khmer short sword called a *dao*.

San Kim Sean explained why the martial art, which was once so proud and strong, had already faded into near extinction before the Pol Pot regime. “The masters never taught all of their art to a student. They always held back about 10 percent in case a student ever attacked them.

“Khmer young people don’t even know their own history. They don’t know about our greatness in the past, the ancient arts which were taught by the grandfather’s grandfather, which is running in our blood.”

In America, San Kim Sean told me that he began having nightmares about Cambodia. “It was God telling me I needed to come home and help the Khmer people.

teaching Bokator in Phnom Penh," he said.

Then he began combing the countryside, looking for Bokator Masters who had survived the decades of civil war, but many of them were between 60 and 90 and none were teaching. After being repressed under both the men in black and the Vietnamese, the masters were afraid to start teaching.

"I tried to tell them it was okay. We already had permission from the government, but they wouldn't listen," he said. The old men wanted to stay in the province. But San Kim Sean persisted, telling them, "You have a great gift which was given to you by our ancestors. Do you want to steal it from our children? When you die, the art will die with you. Some of them broke down

in tears. In April of 2004 we held the first Bokator conference in Phnom Penh. Now there are schools in eight provinces and we are preparing for the first national championships in 1,000 years."

Most martial artists in the West can't even be bothered to practice, yet here was a man who risked his life and gave up a decent-paying job in America so he could fight to preserve this legacy.

*Contact San Kim Sean at: chamroeuvath@hotmail.com. Antonio Antonio Graceffo has been practicing and studying various martial arts for 25 years. Several of his travel books like *The Monk from Brooklyn: An American at the Shaolin Temple* (Gom Press, 2004) are available through Amazon.com. Or contact him at antonio_graceffo@hotmail.com.*

"But my students would never be allowed to fight in the ring. We are trained to kill."





Roving reporter Dawn DelVecchio heads to southern Thailand to watch her pregnant friend “do the right thing” in a series of sometimes uncomfortable rituals.

Shotgun Wedding

Nok and her groom-to-be had been dating for several months. She didn't seem particularly serious about him, but a surprise bun in the oven discovered after a considerable number of late night encounters led Nok to lots of soul searching. What was the right thing to do? She lived in Bangkok, he in Nakhon Sri Thammarat in the far south, and he was known to have a wandering eye...

For Nok, her family, and most importantly, the groom's mother, the 'right thing' was marriage. Likely against his will and possibly hers too, an auspicious date was set and thus commenced the elaborate plans and excessive expense for the bride's Big Day.

On the eve of the wedding I tucked in with Nok, her female kin and best friend Belle in a small hotel room for some typically feminine pre-wedding rituals (which, alas, did not involve scantily clad men hopping from cakes, but did include oohing and aahing over the bride in her gown, family-centered chit-chat and non-alcoholic beverages).

By 5am the next morning Nok was being tucked, squeezed, brushed, painted and pinned at a local salon. By 6:30 she was back in her traditional marriage attire: a blue sarong with golden embroidery, a deep blue sleeveless bustier, a shoulder sash laced with tiny gold beads and baubles, and the most brilliant make-up job I had ever seen in real life. However dubious the motivation, Nok made a beautiful bride.

A Traditional Thai wedding is made up of four parts. The first is a visit to a local Buddhist *wat* or temple, for a ceremony known as *Tawai Sang Tan*. This ritual is required of every Buddhist couple prior to their nuptials.

Technically, this is not the marriage, just a blessing. At dawn, the families brought nine gifts to nine monks who sat in their receiving hall, chanting prayers over the couple, with the *Jaow Awadt* (head monk) performing a water pouring ritual we laymen would mimic later that morning.

Following Phase One, we headed to a small room in a large hotel. 10:09am was determined to be an auspicious astrological moment for the union, and so we gathered shortly before 10 to await the official merger.

Unlike Judeo-Christian ceremonies, Buddhist weddings require no holy man to validate the union (court documents do that these days). It is the parents who, essentially, marry the couple. Thus Phase Two begins with the groom's attempt to enter a room occupied by the bride and her family. Behind him stand his parents and other immediate family. A golden chain held by two of the bride's family blocked his entrance, and a conversation ensued in which the groom and his dad tried to convince the bride and her dad to let them marry. In spite of the fact that the groom would rather have run screaming into the hills, the deal was settled and all were granted entry when the groom's father presented a golden tray piled with Bt1000 notes. (Money is perceived as a great problem solver in Thailand.) More family members followed carrying more golden trays covered in flowers and holding heart-shaped, velveteen boxes with gold jewelry for the bride.

The parents of the engaged headed to four chairs beside a small altar at the front of the room. Nok and her man knelt first before his parents and then hers, their heads lowered. Each mom and dad took a turn speaking to the couple, touching their heads and offering blessings. Nok and her fiancée then faced each other and exchanged rings.



Nakhon Si Thammarat by: Dawn DelVecchio

The two then rose and headed for the altar for more kneeling, this time facing all the guests. The groom's parents placed two rings of flowers or *mongkhon* linked by a thread on each of their heads. The rest of us then performed the water ceremony, *Rod Nam Sang*, pouring fragrant water from a small conch shell over the hands of the newlyweds.

When all the blessing and picture-taking rituals wrapped up, guests followed the newlyweds up to the honeymoon suite for Phase Three, where it got a little bit weird. We piled into the wood-paneled quarters and crowded around a king-sized bed. Atop it lay a heart-shaped scattering of flower petals, coins and Bt20 notes. First the groom's parents laid down, one on each side of the floral arrangement. They kissed and everyone cheered. (The bride's parents would normally have followed suit, but they had been divorced some 15 years and were hardly speaking, never mind swapping saliva.) This symbolic act is apparently intended to bless the union as both loving and fertile. (At least one aspect of which Nok had already proven beyond doubt, of course.)

The whole thing seemed rather private to my Western eyes, but it was quaint somehow and I figured that would be the end of it. Nope. Following the romps of mom and dad, the groom was escorted to the bed by family members. He took his shoes off, stretched his legs out and rested with what appeared to me to be a gloating expression. Nok then walked to the foot of the bed, knelt down and, to my shock and horror, she *waid* to the bottom of his feet!

For those who aren't familiar with the meaning of the wai and the feet in Thai society this gesture may seem minor, so let me elaborate. A wai is both a greeting and a show of respect. The most respected part of the body is the head, and the feet the most denigrated. So to wai someone's feet is akin to saying "I am the dirt beneath your toes." Only the Buddha and HM the King receive such deference.

Almost everyone was giggling, including Nok. But I felt a bit like vomiting and tried very hard not to grimace. I looked to Belle. Although she is Thai, she could not hide her own reaction and simply glared; a murderous look in her eye. When we were alone later, I asked her about that little element of the ceremony. She told me that fewer Thai women are willing to perform this act of symbolic enslavement anymore and she was as shocked as I that Nok included it.

Once Nok completed her ritualized obsequies, she grabbed all the money off the bed to symbolise her role as the family's Chief Financial Officer. This might have been some consolation but for the fact that Nok earns about twice as much as her new boss – I mean spouse.

Thai Wedding Phase Four was an evening reception, cleverly disguised as an outrageous feast. This was a gala event with an eight-course Chinese meal, including roast duck, shark fin soup and other tasty – if politically suspect – delicacies.

Throughout this five-hour food orgy, the bride and groom were required first to stand and greet every one of the several hundred guests, then go up on the stage to be formally introduced. Three hours had passed at this point and I thought for sure that this pregnant woman in elaborate dress and pinched shoes would be allowed to eat something. Nope. Once their official introduction as 'man and wife' was made, they began wandering to every table to receive gifts of money, make small talk and make themselves available for photo-ops. They never sat down, they never ate. In fact, from the looks of both of them by 10pm, you would think they had been breaking rocks for six hours. Nok's only comment the next day was, "That was not fun."

I don't know how things will work out for my friend. Shotgun weddings, despite any appropriate astrological timing, ritualised blessings or symbolic acts of love and fidelity, have never been known to be particularly auspicious – unless of course one of them is happy to be dirt.

Now a backwater almost unheard of by travellers, it is difficult to imagine what made this town so popular among Kings and conquerors. But its strategic locale—smack in the middle of the sea trade routes between India and China made the city an essential stop and thus an economic gold mine for whomever controlled it.

Nakhon Si Thammarat is a beefy province jutting northeast off the southern Thai peninsula, with an impressive history. Once a major city known as Ligor, it served as the capital of the Hindu Tambralinga Empire prior to the eighth century. Sometime during the following hundred years, the city came under the control of the next big empire: Sumatran-based Srivijaya. The submission of Ligor and its changing loyalties continued from that day to this as empires rose and fell throughout the region.

The area was also instrumental in the region's religious and social formation. Early Indian traders brought with them their religious, cultural and political ideas including Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism, and the concept of divine rule (later manifested in the extreme under the Khmers). These powerful ideas stuck, and from Ligor they spread and cross-fertilised with other Hindu/Buddhist influences arriving via the Dvaravati Empire in the North and eventually, the Khmers in the east.

For the curious tourist these

days (I saw only three on my trip) this is a very old city scattered with aging temples, countless saffron robed monks and some of the last remaining masters of the ancient art of shadow puppetry in the kingdom.

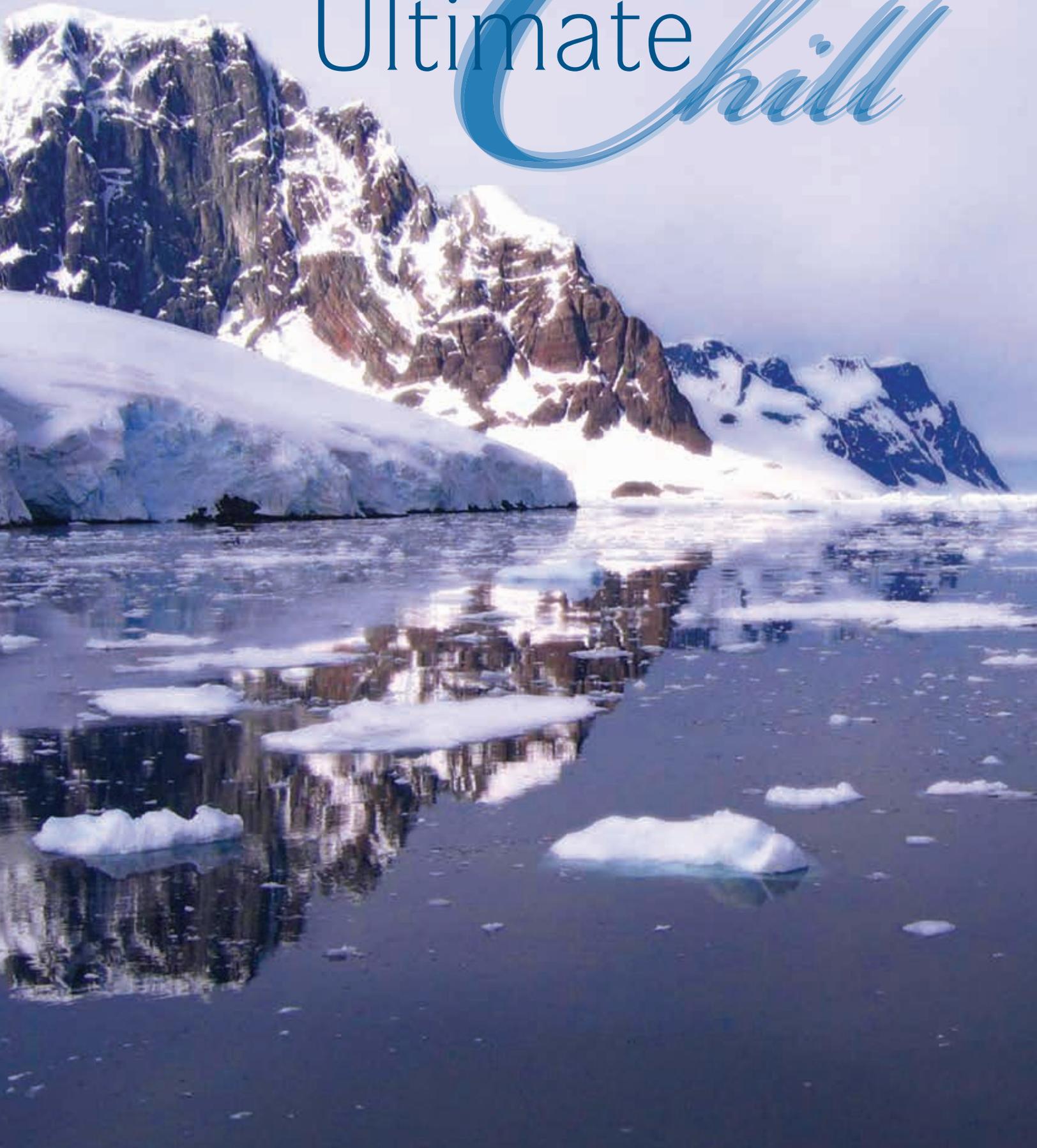
The 800-year-old Wat Mahathat, is worth seeing. This extraordinary compound of artistic and religious significance is the most sacred building in Thailand's southern peninsula. The temple is constructed around a massive 77-metre Sinhalese-style chedi. The bell-shaped tower sports a spire of solid gold.

Each October, depending on the moon, the city's oldest temple, Wat Mahathat, is the setting for an enormous festival. The week-long event is a chance for the living to honor the dead. Puppet shows are performed each night, along with prayers, parades and vigils.

Other highlights are the National Museum, with an impressive display of southern artifacts from the prehistoric to finely-rendered sculptures of the early Hindu periods of the region; Mr. Suchart Subsin's shadow puppet workshop and theatre Ban Nang Talung Suchart Subsin is at 110/18 Soi 3, Si Thammasok Rd. (Mr. Suchart has performed before the King and has opened his home and workshop to visitors in an attempt to keep this ancient art form alive); the remains of the ancient city walls (now under reconstruction); and numerous other ornate Buddhist temples and Hindu shrines.

The
Ultimate

Chill



Antarctic cruises may be getting cooler with travellers, but they're still notoriously expensive, unless you buy one on the spot like David Hall did. Freeze frames by Cate Bryant.

In Ushuaia, the southernmost city in the world, at the very tip of South America, I pictured myself wandering down to the docks to try and persuade the captain of a Russian Icebreaker to take me on his next supply mission in exchange for a greasy wad of hundred-dollar bills. I hadn't anticipated that Ushuaia would be sprinkled with travel agents offering US\$2,500 last-minute deals on ships heading for Antarctica.

Not so very long ago the Antarctic was the perilous destination of great explorers in the Shackleton mould. It has now become accessible to the comfortably off backpacker. There's a choice of two ships in this price bracket; I opted for a 66-berth vessel with a local crew, imaginatively named the *Ushuaia*. Forty-eight hours later, on departure day, I found my pint-sized tub nestled between two much larger cruise vessels, both bedecked with flags. While the nearby *Bremen* was treating new arrivals to a glass of champagne and the *Hanseatic* had erected a marquee on the quayside (were they holding a tea-dance?), the *Ushuaia* was rather shorter on ceremony.

All I had to do was to sign a couple of indemnity forms, presumably in case our ship – like Shackleton's in 1915 – got stuck in the ice for a year or two. Then I trotted off to find my cabin. A little tatty, with two bunks and a shared bathroom, it was surprisingly spacious, and boasted the unexpected luxury of a porthole.

Up on the main deck there was a lounge furnished with grey plastic

Not so very long ago the Antarctic was the perilous destination of great explorers in the Shackleton mould. It has now become accessible to the comfortably off backpacker

comfy chairs, a library containing a rare collection of erotic novels from the 1980s and a restaurant reminiscent of an upmarket motorway service. Not the *Queen Mary* certainly, but comfortable and roomy. The Ushuaia also has an “open bridge” policy, allowing you to go and distract the ship’s officers at any time of day or night. The bridge proved to be a popular hangout as fellow passengers mellowed out to the crew’s choice of music (from Phil Collins to Peruvian Panpipes) and tried to spot icebergs on the radar screen.

Antarctica may be a less geriatric cruise destination than some, the demographic on this ship was distinctly youthful. With two Swiss children and an Argentine teenager to add to the healthy roster of 20- and 30-something backpackers, one cruise veteran declared that the Ushuaia was without doubt the youngest boat she had ever sailed on. This certainly enlivened the somewhat uninspiring three-course dinners, lectures and film screenings on the way south. The Ushuaia may not offer massage or mini-golf, but the drowsiness induced by taking sea-sickness tablets was kept at bay with hard-fought games of Yahtzee, travelling tales and the odd flicker of sexual tension.

This stunning backdrop began to feel like home as we gleefully whizzed around in Zodiac dinghies, admiring icebergs, taking too many photos and marvelling at the fact that it wasn’t really all that cold.

Having crossed the notorious Drake Passage and reached the Antarctic Peninsula, the real adventure began. After getting fitted for rubber boots and receiving a long lecture covering penguin etiquette and getting in and out of rubber boats, we spent the next five days chugging up and down the coast, making a couple of landings on the rocky shore each day.

Our first visit was to Wiencke Island. The island is named after an unfortunate sailor, who drowned in 1898 during a not-very-famous

Belgian expedition which spent 13 miserable months drifting aimlessly around here. These days, it boasts two small huts, one Argentine, the other British, both seemingly competing to have the biggest flag and most uninviting-looking accommodation. The huts, however, are hardly the point and the hill behind them offered us our first properly majestic view. Snow-capped peaks sparkled in a bright blue sky and the occasional deep rumble signalled the descent of large chunks of snow into the sea.

With a few more landings under our belts, this stunning backdrop began to feel like home as we gleefully whizzed around in Zodiac dinghies, admiring icebergs, taking too many photos and marvelling at the fact that it wasn’t really all that cold.

ICEBREAKER

Get your bearings straight by visiting travel agents like Canal Fun & Nature (www.canalfun.com) and Rumbo Sur (www.rumbosur.com.ar). Trips run throughout the Antarctic Summer (approx. December to March).

One treat was a visit to the US Antarctic Programme's Palmer Station. Perhaps ironically, given the US government's controversial stance on the issue, Palmer is in the forefront of climate change research, and we were shown the large tanks used for investigating the effects of temperature changes on marine life. We also gained a privileged insight into how the researchers keep boredom at bay over the long winter (the hot tub has a large role to play: they claimed to have fitted 18 people into it). Our tour ended with home-made brownies and a visit to the astonishingly well-stocked souvenir shop (all major credit cards accepted).

The final piece of the polar jigsaw is, naturally, the wildlife. While the odd seal and more than a few albatrosses, petrels and shags are in evidence, it's the penguin that's the real star of the show. Short, stubby and stinky your penguin may be, but as an Antarctic explorer you'd better get used to spending lots of time studying the little fellow. Many landings consisted of a short walk to a penguin colony, where we would squat for an hour or so observing their cuddly antics and putting wagers on the occasional inter-nest scuffle. We could soon tell our Chinstrap from our Gentoo and

even spotted a rare Macaroni penguin, noted for its flamboyant hairstyle. In fact, research has shown that the presence of humans is rather stressful for these strange-looking birds, so we tried to keep our increasingly competitive snowball fights and toboggan races to a minimum when any of our flightless friends were in the vicinity.

Many landings consisted of a short walk to a penguin colony, where we would squat for an hour or so observing their cuddly antics and putting wagers on the occasional inter-nest scuffle

On our last night, with the Ushuaia safely anchored a few miles from her home port, we launched into our final party. For some reason, moustaches drawn on with burnt cork became the order of the day and soon we were all modelling flamboyant facial hair. Even the captain agreed to a discreet ship's anchor tattoo on his forearm. Flushed with cheap Argentine wine, we exchanged email addresses and

promises to meet in Brazil/LA/London. We were lucky to have found such like-minded company for our Antarctic adventure.

But as I packed my rucksack the next morning, turning my mind to my next destination, I found myself recalling Shackleton's legendary recruitment ad: "Men wanted for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful." And I did pause to wonder whether the Antarctic is becoming just a little too accessible.

SURVIVORS' STORY

One of the most surprising cinematic hits of recent years, *The March of the Penguins* (aka *The Emperor's Journey*) chronicles the perilous quest to breed, and the mating rituals, of these monogamous birds. Narrated by Morgan Freeman, the documentary shows how Emperor Penguins cross the most desolate and hostile terrain on earth to reach their ancient spawning grounds.

After the females lay one egg they head back to the sea, fending off attacks by leopard seals. Meanwhile, the males stay behind, going without food for two months in order to protect and hatch the egg.

Then the females return – maybe – with food for the chicks while the males waddle for hundreds of miles to go fishing. This routine is repeated several times until the chicks are finally big enough to dive into the ocean blue, where petrels (huge sea birds) try to pick them off.

Directed and written by Luc Jacquet, and co-produced by National Geographic, this film documents an incredible and endearing battle for survival against the odds.



ROCKING

BANGKOK

The biggest rock festival to ever hit SE Asia promises a sound respite from the musical dregs who sporadically wash up in this backwater of the globe's live music scene. Words by Jim Algie.

For the bigger rock bands, you'd think that playing shows in places like New York, London and Portugal would be the top priorities. That's not necessarily the case, says the manager of Placebo, Dave Maclean. For his group, touring Latin America and Asia are far more exciting prospects.

Originally, Dave, who booked Nirvana's first gigs in the UK, came to Bangkok to get Placebo a gig. But in concert with Matching Entertainment, he made plans for the two-day Bangkok 100 Rock Festival on February 18th and 19th at the Lakeside Muang Thong Thani venue, on the outskirts of Bangkok.

The biggest rock festival to ever storm SE Asia is to be headlined and galvanised on the first day by Oasis, touring in support of their best album in years, *Don't Believe the Truth*. Supporting them are the snappily dressed and riotously popular Scottish art rockers, Franz Ferdinand, along with the former frontman of the Stone Roses, Ian Brown, and the eclectic dEUS, from Belgium.

To give the festival a particularly Thai slant, indie rock pioneers Modern Dog, the hardcore Ebola, and Flure are the warm-up acts.

The lineup for the second day is no less impressive with Welshmen the Stereophonics, who just notched up their first number one single in the UK with "Dakota," David Bowie favourites Placebo, about to release a new album, and Maximo Park, who have been nominated as best new band for the NME's 2006 Shockwaves Award.

Also on the bill is another up and coming British group Snow Patrol that's been winning a sizeable following and critical kowtowing with their latest album *Final Straw* which has racked up sales of 1.8 million copies in the UK alone. For local talent, there's the phenomenally popular Bodsyslam and Big Ass.

Dave is expecting crowds of 20,000-plus for each day of the festival. Not an unrealistic expectation when you consider the deadbeat state of live music in Bangkok. "This city can surely do better than Engelbert Humperdinck and The Scorpions – no disrespect," says the affable Scotsman.

For this festival, he talked to around 100 groups, including The White Stripes and Kings of Leon, and all of them were enthusiastic about playing. Which is why he's planning on making the 2007 version of the festival a much bigger affair and doing more regular shows every few months at the Muang Thong Thani arena.

If the festival doesn't come off, however, then Bangkok rock fans are going to be sentenced to yet more agonising rounds of karaoke, clubs and Mickey Mouse boy bands.



Placebo



Oasis

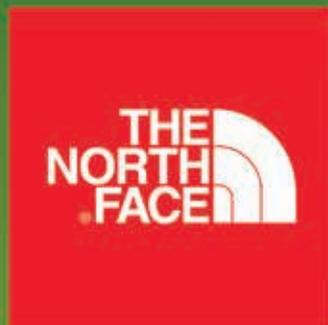


Franz Ferdinand

Pick up your tickets for the show through Thaiticketmaster outlets (02-262-3456). The best seats at Lakeside Muang Thong Thani are Bt5,000, Bt3,500 and Bt1,700 for a two-day pass, or Bt3,000, Bt2,000 and Bt1,000 for a one-day pass. The fest begins around noon with local bands on smaller stages and an exhibition on rock 'n' roll history. The bigger Thai groups hit the main stage by mid-afternoon before the international acts rock out. The festival's website is at www.bkk100rock.com.



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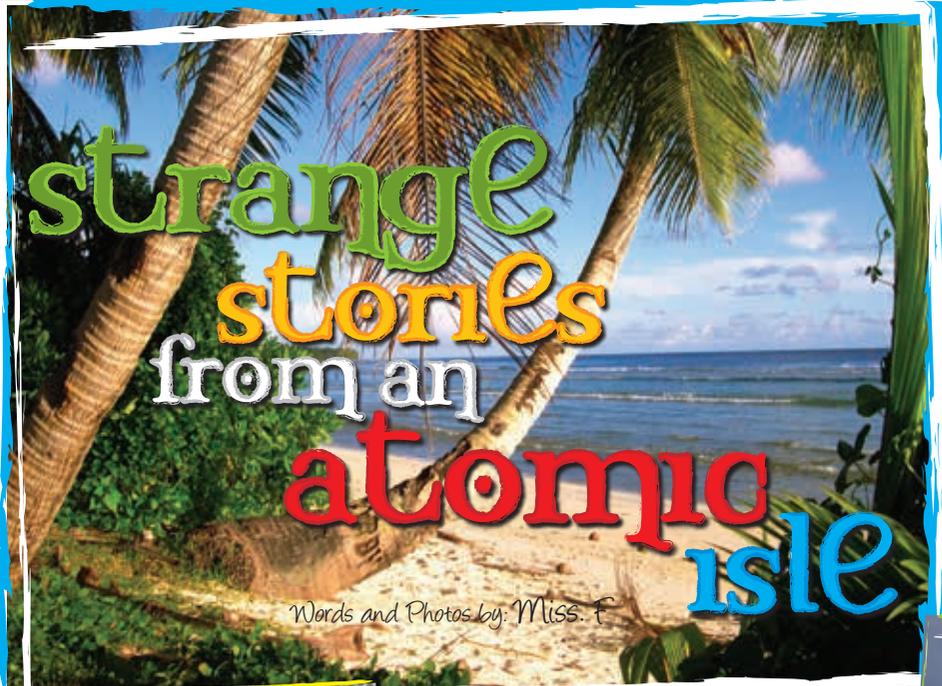


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strange stories from an atomic isle

Words and Photos by: Miss. F



Halfway around the world and in the middle of nowhere, there is a tiny 30 mile strip of land with beautiful beaches and a trash containment problem. It is called Majuro.



The island, inhabited by the native Marshallese, have been shared over the course of time with German missionaries, Japanese imperialists, American soldiers, and most recently, a smattering of religious zealots, sexual predators, and the strange and shady sorts that seek out the farthest ends of the earth.



At one end of the island, there is a tiny tropical village with beautiful beaches and slightly less of a trash containment problem. It is called Laura, a holdover from a time when American GI's lived there and named it after the loveliness of Lauren Bacall



The dirtier end of the island is named Rita, the GI's lasting toast to Rita Hayworth and a loveliness that's since been lost to a strip of expat commercial ventures like EZ Price, Fast Bill's Tacos, and a bowling alley with a shattered neon sign from the 70s.

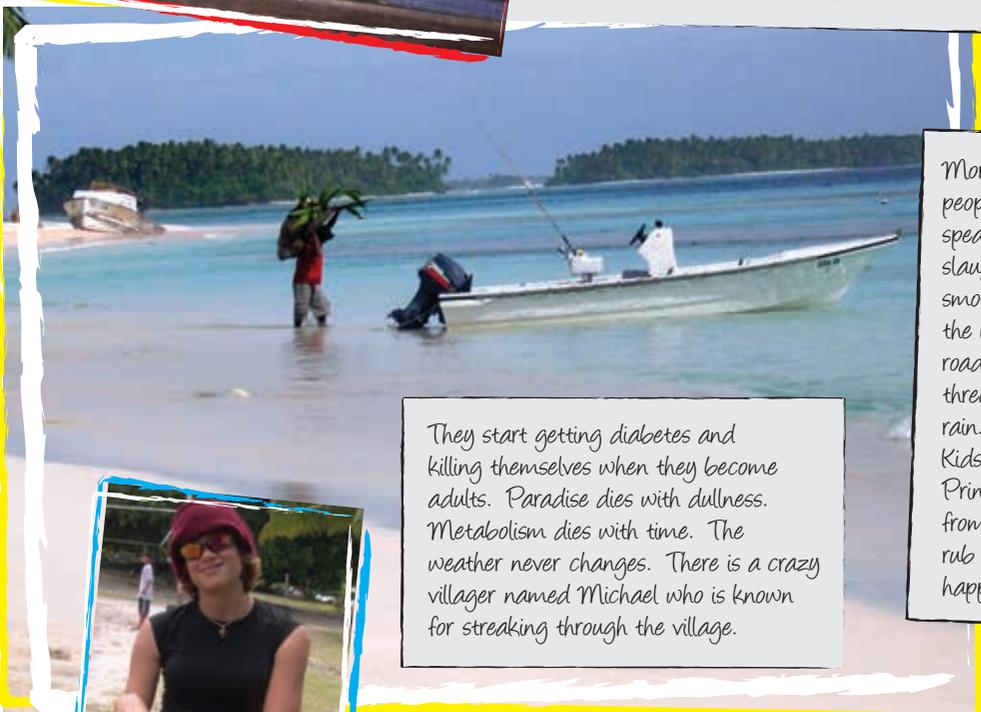


There is one road that is lined with rusting trash dumpsters and dogs that have big balls and who bite those that don't throw rocks at them. The island has a single barbershop with a transvestite proprietor called Popcorn Delicious.





Laura is 3 miles long and has two schools, 5 churches, and lots of roadside stands that sell Pringles, lollipops, and raw chicken. People sell Pringles and lollipops or they don't work at all. It is, after all, an island paradise.



More often people sit and chat. They spear fish for dinner and slaughter chicken. They smoke and wait out the walk to the next roadside stand during three-minute spells of rain. They go to church. Kids are fat from Pringles and toothless from the constant rub of lolly. They are happy.

They start getting diabetes and killing themselves when they become adults. Paradise dies with dullness. Metabolism dies with time. The weather never changes. There is a crazy villager named Michael who is known for streaking through the village.



Laura has five English speakers. Collectively, they are known as *ribelles*.

There is Miss F -- a young American high school teacher with poor classroom management skills. She is known as the

girl that runs, against custom, around the village in shorts before the sun comes up



Some days she is joined by a bratty pack of 8-and-unders that chase after her with machetes (it is custom) and snot swinging from their nose. They giggle and make grabs for her ass. Miss F admires their energy and their command of simple English, and before long, comes to view them as friends.

Miss F lives in an empty elementary school classroom that backs out on to an unused strip of oceanside beach. Always a romantic, she often watches the sunset and occasionally sends out a message in a bottle. It--often tangled with wisps of drift wood or the shell of a dirty diaper-- invariably returns with the tide.





There is also a pair of Mormon men, 20-some year old missionaries in starched white shirts and pleated pants that tool around the village road in their Windstar minivan, proselytizing and never acknowledging the village's other young American (because she is female of course).



And there are the Bixby's—Gary and Marge—a superficially lovely and normal couple who live down at the island's end in a tidy, and well-kept home where they practice exorcism. Gary teaches math at the village high school and came to the Laura because, late one night, God told him to.



Word had come, (and apparently it came often) with peculiar specificity, with God's finger strangely pointed spot on the village of Laura and the detailed instructions to start a night GED school.

And so they had come, from Hawaii. Nevermind the little trail of messes that leads back there. The slightly strange 19 years of Coast Guard service. The church they started. The man Gary almost killed. The estranged family members that committed banking fraud using Gary's credit card. Margie's complicated, heavily drugged and much referenced, but never fully explained medical history. (Talk revolves around swelling, retention and salt intake).



There is also something about a disputed land claim—rights to a pretty parcel of land off atoll Likiep—that according to complex custom of matrilineal land rights, or at least the Bixby's tales of it, rightfully belonged to part-Marshallese Margie. If Bixby's tales be told, one particularly cunning and ruthless rival claimant had made an assassination attempt one night using food poisoning on Margie's bowl of ramen at the popular Tide Table restaurant. While Margie loves to eat, they will never eat at the Tide Table again.



Second only to the eight-year-olds making grabs for her ass (and maybe her students), Gary and Margie are Miss Erika's best friends. They are especially generous giving her cans of grape soda and rides to town in their



With little else in common, Miss Fand Gary equally despise their high school principal. They bond through acrimonious conversation in the teal sedan.



The school principal is Eli DeRequito. A meek Filipino man whose pants are worn by his wife, Miss DeRequito (and he calls her that), he is a stickler about only two things: the school's ban on 'short pants' and the diligent capping of dry erase markers.



Miss Ophelia teaches life science and world geography. She has a wandering eye and sticky fingers when it comes to school supplies. While she denies it, she has the school's entire stock of colored pencils stashed in a file cabinet, and chromatically arranged in a locked cashbox.

He fancies sewing and making elaborate graphic displays using the school's only full four-color set of dry erase markers. In his former life, he was an activities coordinator at a nursing home in Chicago. He still has the soft hands and quiet tread shoes of his former life.



The DeRequitos have a retarded daughter of undisclosed age named Caren. Caren is given a 50 cent weekly allowance by her parents and is forbidden to spend it on her favorite soda, Dr. Pepper at the store beside the school. She is notorious for unprovoked spells of physical violence and of deep affection, both cases often involve face smothering and aaccessorial stuffed panda. She is generally bossy, possessive and officious, but especially so when it comes to the office copy machine.



He is correct of course. For they have come to this irradiated place--for God, for land, for love of power and regulated pant lengths, or for the apparent romance that comes with watching one's own epistles wash in with the tide.



The school has one Marshallese teacher, a grandfatherly, soft-spoken man called Mr. Aloicious. Miss F thinks he looks like Morgan Freeman. Mr. Aloicious thinks everyone else that works at the school is nuts.



Chateau du cobra

*In a small Vietnamese village Bruce
Cutler is wined and dined on some
serpentine aphrodisiacs.*

reading a list of ingredients used in Vietnamese cuisine – turtles, bats, rats, cats, frogs and dogs – it's difficult to stifle your gag reflex. Many eateries in Vietnam also stock extensive arrays of similarly unique wines and whiskies. Bee wine, lizard wine, seahorse wine, monkey whisky, and goat's testicles whisky are all available by the glass or by the bottle depending on how much of a beastly boozier you are. Apart from the alcohol, most are believed to contain certain medicinal qualities.

Just north of the capital city of Hanoi is a small village famous for one liquor delicacy in particular. People go to the village of Le Mat to drink snake blood whisky. The flavour of snake most favoured in Le Mat is the cobra, and the majority of those who partake in this indulgence are Vietnamese men. But more and more travelers are seeking out Le Mat to find out what all the bloodlust is about.

Like much of Vietnamese cuisine, the consuming of snake is thought to originate from China. Historians have traced this Cantonese tradition back to the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD).

Ask locals around Le Mat why people drink snake blood whisky and many explain, with a cocky grin, that it gives them strength. Both men and women go to the restaurants of Le Mat to eat snake but drinking the special whisky is usually a male-only affair. Amongst the Vietnamese, it is widely believed that drinking snake blood whisky will put more ding in your dong.

Whether it is a natural form of Viagra is hard to confirm but for a unique culinary experience increasing numbers of tourists are slithering off the well-trodden path. Finding Le Mat is a task in itself for the uninitiated. A sole sign shows the narrow alleyway and entrance into the snake village branching off Highway 1, six kilometres north of bustling Hanoi. Making snake-like movements with your arm while saying Le Mat (pronounced Lay-mat) is sure to win you some smiles and directions.

There are over 20 restaurants scattered throughout the alleyways of Le Mat village so finding one is easy. A swarm of touts wait at the entrance to the village and surround any motorbike or taxi entering to try and direct diners to their supplier of serpents.

Having chosen a restaurant, it's time to choose a snake. The set up of each of the house-restaurants is much the same all round the village. On the ground floor at the front of each building is an open area with cages of assorted animals. The biggest cage is the one housing the snakes. A Vietnamese version of *Crocodile Hunter* Steve Irwin pulls a length of slithering reptile by its tail from the cage before setting it down on the floor for inspection.

In Le Mat the snakes come in two varieties – cobras and all other serpents. The former reign supreme as the monarchs of the reptile kingdom and are considered a delicacy. The snakes that aren't cobras will be offered at a cheaper price but to start at the top of the snake-eating tree go for the cobra flavour. Like most everything in Vietnam, a price will have to be negotiated. Around US\$20 is what the locals pay for a 1.4-meter snake turned into 5-8 different dishes washed down with the famous snake-blood whiskey. When the price is settled so is the fate of your selection; the cobra has less than five minutes to live.

A couple of glasses are brought forth, each a third-full of high-octane rice whisky. The snake is pinned to the ground, grabbed behind the head by one guy. An able assistant takes hold of the tail to stretch it out so the underbelly is exposed. A sharp blade appears from somewhere and an area about 20 cm down from the snake's chin is swabbed with alcohol, and then sliced open with the blade. A finger gets poked around inside to locate the heart and once found, the main artery to the heart is cut and the blood drained into one of the glasses of rice whisky as the snake writhes around in a reptilian danse macabre.

The heart is about the size of a marble and is cut from the snake while still beating and placed in a shot glass. The knife work of the handlers is quick and precise.

The second glass of rice whisky is then brought forward and another

incision is made some 40cm further down the belly of the snake. This time the gall bladder is fished out and emptied of bile turning the contents of the glass a luminous green. The hooded head of the cobra is sliced off and the body turned over to the cooks in the open-air kitchen nearby.

The dining area of each restaurant is located on the first floor; it's decked out with ornate traditional Vietnamese wooden chairs and tables. The glasses containing the reptile's lifeblood are brought into the dining area of the restaurant and poured into smaller shot glasses.

Traditionally, whoever is the guest of honour has the added privilege of swallowing the heart with their shot of snake blood and whiskey. The taste is unmistakably salty and raw. Carrot sticks and cucumber slices are brought out to munch on between throwing back shots of blood and bile.

Soon after, dinner begins arriving: snake and corn soup, rice porridge and snake, snakeskin chips, serpentine spring rolls. Unlike the scarlet moonshine, the white meat is rather palatable to a Western tongue.

The restaurants of Le Mat also make and sell another variety of snake liquor where the entire serpent is placed inside the bottle. To make this type of wine, the reptiles are bled, gutted and washed, then marinated in rice wine and herbs. The wine is ready to drink after 100 days, but connoisseurs say the second batch of wine made from a marinated snake is better for you.

Sadly, if truth must be told, on the two occasions this writer and four other snake-drinkers dined at Le Mat, nobody developed any rampant trouser-snake symptoms.

The selling of snakes is not unusual in Vietnam and the snake trade is growing steadily in line with the country's expanding economy. In 1997 the Vietnamese government banned the sale of wild animals to try and protect some of its remaining fauna in the densely populated country. The offshoot of the ban is that snake-farming has become a lucrative source of income for some.

It is not uncommon to see a motorbike with a load of cobras on back, scooting through the traffic-clogged streets of the bigger cities and rural people often bicycle into town with snakes for sale. They set up an umbrella and chair on the side of the road, place signs saying *ran ban* or "Snake Sale" over the cages and wait for any buyers to bite.

The last reported death involving snake cuisine in Vietnam took place in the port city of Hai Phong (about 100km from Hanoi) in 2002 when an unwary chef was bitten by a sea snake a customer had ordered for dinner.

The 23-year-old chef died on route to hospital. Newspapers reported that the customer ate the snake anyway.

The main artery to the heart
is cut and the blood drained
into one of the glasses
of rice whisky as the
snake writhes around
in a reptilian danse
macabre.

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Synonymous with quality, the Hilton delivers on founder Conrad's original vision – though even he probably didn't anticipate being kneaded by bundles of hot herbs. Cameron Cooper dips his big toe into a wealth of tradition and personalised technology at the Hua Hin Hilton.

into the HILTON



The Hilton name has that *je ne sais quoi* to it – when a colleague asks you where you're staying and you casually respond, "I'm at the Hilton," they say "ooohh," and occasionally "ahhh." It's all well and good to stay at one of these hip and trendy street-cred boutique joints that only the select few know the name of, but the Hilton still commands respect and, far from resting on its laurels lives up to the name – in spite of Paris Hilton's best efforts to the contrary.

The name emblazons more than 2,500 hotels worldwide and offers 147,667 rooms, at last count. But in spite of its mighty size, the establishment endeavours to maintain the personal touch, mostly using technology, ironically enough – but then the Hilton, founded in 1919, has used technology from the beginning for purposes of their competitive edge. Though in those days it likely involved a network of pneumatic tubes delivering rolled-up messages, and of course trunk calls on the telephonic device.

When I checked in to the Hua Hin Hilton, my selected crash pad during a friend's wedding at a Hua Hin beach resort (the place has become a fashionable wedding destination of late), I checked in swiftly, without incident and dropped my bags in my room (I'd be damned if I'd tip some porter for carrying a five-kilo overnight bag). The television was already on, set to a channel featuring a blue screen that said, "Welcome Cameron Cooper to the Hua Hin Hilton, and some other informative text I was too flabbergasted to read.

There were also two envelopes on the table – one containing a note welcoming me to the place, signed by the general manager and another from the front desk manager assuring me that I only need call and ask for her by name if I needed anything. I confess to being frightened somewhat. What if the shower spoke to me and asked my desired temperature? I could only

hope they weren't sharing such information with the White House.

Paranoia aside, the room was top drawer – nicely furnished with a tasteful tip of the hat to local style, nothing chipped or non-functional, fluffy bathrobes just begging to be stuffed in my bag before departure (but given their intelligence system, I'd doubtless be caught), and a badminton court-sized balcony overlooking the Gulf of Thailand. I peeled back the cover sheet. Yep, Sealy Posturepedic. You could give it your worst during an hour-long pillow fight or an orgy with seven or more vestal virgins and the springs would withstand the punishment. Suffice to say that anything I called for was delivered or sorted out forthwith by staff that spoke excellent English and appeared to actually care. My wife's dress, left in the closet during our hasty packing, found its way back to us before we'd finished checking out. The pool is massive meanderingly shaped, and surrounded by lush landscaped grounds. The Italian lunch counter served up complex-flavoured salads and sandwiches and the spa was tranquility itself. My wife and I were massaged by two women who glided silently across the floor to our parallel massage tables, and worked out the kinks of the previous night's dancing-fool festivities utilising hot and moist softball-sized herbal bags, in a room that was all brass and wood, though I missed too much of it because I had cucumber slices covering my eyes, and at a couple of points achieved a state of relaxation so deep, I actually stopped breathing.

So, 86 years on, Conrad Hilton is definitely not cursing when he gazes from his heavenly gold-plated perch upon his great-grandchild in Hua Hin. Shame he can't feel the same way about Paris.

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.bcgh.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/Suksavittaya, 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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MARKETS

Chatuchak Weekend Market (or JJ in local parlance): An exhausting stopover at Skytrain 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 Lum 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 Subway.

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 Sompeng 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. Skytrain Saladaeng.

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 chaotic 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.

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.

Gaysorn: 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 Gaysorn, 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.



Daytripping



RATTANAKOSIN

Within spitting distance of Khaosan Road – hint, hint – this is the city’s most regal, historic and heavily toured 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). Templed 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** (Khleng 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 Prachathipok 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 of 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.



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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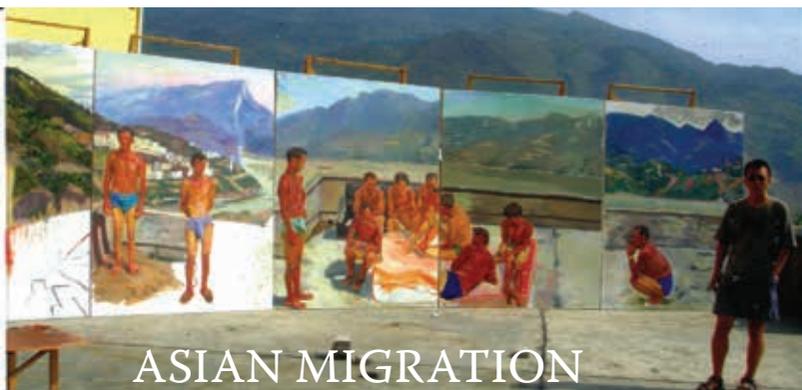
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As more and more Asians leave their rural homes to try and find wealth in the cities, the contradiction is that more and more urbanites want to return to nature. Liu Xiaodong frames this dilemma in his new series of paintings called *Warm Bed*. He did the first series of sketches around China's Three Gorges and completed the second half of the exhibition in Bangkok after inviting 11 local workers to be his models.

The show continues at the Tang Gallery until Feb 20th in the exhibition venue at Unit B-28, in the basement of the Silom Galleria at 919/1 Silom Soi 19. The gallery is open from Mon-Sat, 11am-7pm.

Places to Eat: Around Bangkok

Any visitors to Bangkok are happy to shovel discount Apad 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.



The other, other pink meat

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 treading 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

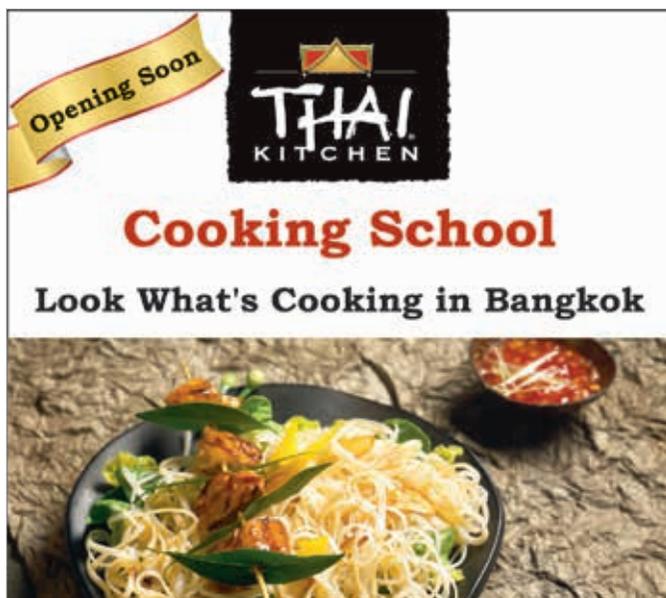
non-oily dishes with an authentic Indian taste. Suitable for veggies and carnivores, it also has a Thai menu, and live cricket and football on TV.

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.

TRADER VIC'S (POLYNESIAN)

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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 redbfish 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.
ABYSSINYA CAFÉ (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 café-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.dininginthailand.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, raddicchio 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 Wah Hin (Chinese), Focczia (Italian) and The Square (international). The latter is the perfect place to stuff your face at the lunch-time buffets, only Bt550+, 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 hoards 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 whiskeys 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 shooting, catching up on the latest gossip and stuffing down some of the excellent BBQ ribs, nachos, burritos and such (Bt75-250). Happy hour 4-8pm.

AUBERGE DAB (FRENCH)

Ground Fl. Mercury Tower (Skytrain Chidlom) 11:30am-2:30pm, 6:30pm-10:30pm, Tel. 02-658 6222-3, major cards Fine French dining with fine prices to match. In true Parisian-style, Auberge has built up a reputation for excellent food and service. Entrees include such delights as Atlantic salmon marinated in Chablis with a lemon and orange jus (Bt280), while mains like pan-seared red grouper with fennel and potato confits, white wine and salmon egg sauce go for Bt420 up. Also has an extensive wine list and some classic French desserts such as crepes suzette and profiteroles.

ATHENA (GREEK)

594 Ekamai Rd, Sukhumvit Soi 63. (Skytrain Ekkamai), Mon-Fri, 3pm-midnight Sat 11am-midnight, www.athenabangkok.com, Tel. 02-392 7644, major cards except JCB To our knowledge the only Greek restaurant



Voila! The perfect scorpion soufflé

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 POKHANA 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.

Sensation Consummation

Going on holiday is about pleasure. Pure hedonism. A time to cash in on all that hard work throughout the year and treat yourself properly. While Thailand is host to white sand beaches and a pleasant climate, many bungalow operations' restaurants leave something to be desired – man cannot live on *pad Thai* and Sprite alone. Not so in Koh Tao, where new outlet Papas Tapas brings world-class dining to the beach. In true hedonistic style, the restaurant/bar offers a tapas menu (with a twist, but more on that later), Cuban cigars, sheesha pipes and probably the best cocktails on the island.

The father of those cocktails, Swedish barman Jasper, has been pouring drinks and getting customers elegantly legless since the age of 17. With an extensive knowledge of mixed drinks, he was part of the team hired to work on Absolut Vanilla and has created cocktails adopted by Absolut for that vodka. Plus, he has a third-place world bartending champion title to his name. You can trust this man to fill the Czech crystal glasses with your favourite tippie.

Chef Martin, also from Sweden, has cooked in some of that nation's best restaurants and has created a frequently revised menu that marries the small-dish dining style of Spanish tapas with international cuisine. You don't find tuna sashimi with tempura vegetables and sesame glaze or pandas leaf chicken with sweet sesame dip on the menu in Spain.

Manager Alex is a veteran manager of Sheraton and Marriot hotels and has spent the last four years on the island. The plan was to open a resort catering to Swedish visitors, but a delay in the opening left his chef and

barman idle, so Paps Tapas was born. "If I'd listened to all the advice I got from people on this island we would never have opened this restaurant," he said when *Untamed Travel* visited, but points out that there are already plenty of big spenders on the island – the scuba diving that draws so many to Koh Tao isn't cheap.

Operating a top-end restaurant on a small island like Tao isn't easy. Almost all the ingredients are imported from abroad, through an assortment of specialist suppliers, except for a minority that are purchased fresh at the market in Chumphon. Given that due to rough weather almost all boat services to Koh Tao were cut, supplies can be a big challenge.

Things run smoothly enough though and the result is an extensive taster's menu of small but reasonably priced dishes to set the mouth awater. Highlights during the *Untamed Travel* visit were the Feta & Parsley-stuffed Meatballs in spicy tomato sauce (Bt110) and the Skewered Lamb with apple tzatsiki & balsamic reduction (Bt100). Dishes are small so you'll need a few, so we racked up seven by the end of the night and had to be rolled home at the end of the night – Alex recommends five dishes for the hungry connoisseur.

One of the more curious aspects of the bar is that they stock and import a fine collection of absinthes, including the super-strong authentic stuff from Spain. This is served by Jasper in traditional Bohemian style. Two traditional absinthe glasses, with a rounded bulb at the bottom holding a shot of the liquor, are presented, and a sugar cube is caramelised over each before being set alight and the glasses filled with water from an absinthe decanter, all according to Bohemian ritual, we are assured. Try one while sitting on a beanbag in the lounge smoking a sheesha with a belly full of good food and wine and you won't be disappointed. Hedonism indeed.



While Koh Tao may be well established on the 'banana pancake trail', there's one restaurant that's bucking the trend and offering fine relief for discerning masticators. Join Daniel Cooper and his newly-refined palate at Papas Tapas – with nary a fruit crepe in sight.



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.tokyojoesbkk.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.



The first and second runners-up in the Iggy Pop lookalike contest



T. 02 234 4737, 02 632 7883 / www.tapasroom.com "Best Bar in Bangkok" Metro High Five Awards 2003

CONCEPT CM2

Basement, Novotel Siam Square (Skytrain Siam), Tel. 02-209 8888, 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 Diners A 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, major cards, 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



EVENTS IN

February 2006

Friday 3rd DJ Marky

Qbar Bangkok & Vertigo welcome back Brazilian superstar, DJ Marky. Marky is heralded by many as one of the greatest DJs in the world. Technically flawless and an amazing selection, combined with sheer energy will make for a jaw dropping performance. Marky has worked with and remixed many of the worlds top talents, including Fatboy Slim, DJ Craze, Roni Size and Bebel Gilberto, his sell out shows worldwide are testament to his unparalleled skills, and his 6 hour bi-monthly sets at London's infamous 'The End' have set new standards in DJ culture.

6pm with 2 drinks b4 11pm then 800b

Valentine's Special Tuesday 14th The Mad Professor

LOVER'S ROCK OR VALENTINE'S DAY @ Q BAR featuring the legendary REGGAE producer/remixer THE MAD PROFESSOR in his first ever Thailand performance! A Dubard Dubz Live Mix, 24 Channel Lover's Rock Dancehall Session! THE MAD PROFESSOR has produced such artists as MASSIVE ATTACK, U-ROD, LEE SCRATCH PERRY, and BADE and is one of the All-Time Reggae greats, NOT TO BE MISSED!

Thurs 16th Dave Piccioni

Qbar & Blend Recordings introduces Dave Piccioni. Founder of seminal UK label, Reddy, which has become one of the largest and strongest independent labels in the UK. When not touring the world David can be found rocking crowds as resident DJ at London's coolest night VERTIGO at The Cross.

Thursday 23rd DJ Iain Taylor

Q Bar welcomes DJ IAIN TAYLOR (TRIBAL SESSIONS, RIPTIGHT BREAKS, UK) and DJ Tribal, Funky, Electric House, more! Come be part of DJ article and piece of this mixmag

(TRIBAL SESSIONS, MAGAZINE for a night of Breaks, and quite a bit MAGAZINE's exclusive Award Winner's Asian tour!

Tuesday 28th BLACK

BLACK...it's the new white! Dark, Dirty, Dangerous. Deranged sounds from your Custodians of Crunchy Chords, DJ's OCTO, CAVO and TUL

BLACK...it's Back. ALL ROCK MUSIC ALL NIGHT! (WEAR BLACK)

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

Massive Mondays
REGGAETON/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 & OFAY 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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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 Thonglo 3, Sukhumvit 55, Tel: 02-3911762, 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 lush 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 Bt10 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, 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 Ploenchit), 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 dancey 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 loungee 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 boogeyers.

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 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.

Woodstock
3 Floors of Peace & Music
& a Hell of a Party!
44 Soi Thonglor 13, Sukhumvit Road, Bangkok 10110

Gilligan's younger brother couldn't find his way off the island either

The Turtle

and the Hares

“If you’re sick of Bangkok, you’re sick of life,” so said Pliny the Elder, or one of his better imitators. Nonetheless, it is essential for what remains of one’s soul to get out of the place now and again, perhaps poking one’s sunburned nose into a locale where walking is an option and the air can’t be eaten with a spoon. In the spirit of this philosophy, Dan and Stu, the Christ-like figures who nail themselves to public bars on your behalf, paid a flying-without-a-plane visit to Koh Tao to see just what makes the nightlife tick.

8:07pm *Simple Life, Sairee Beach*

Stu: Time to teach city-boy Dan a bit about back-to-the-beach, island-style drinking. For once, he wasn’t late since all I had to do was stroll across the resort and plant my bum on his balcony, helping myself to his bargain-basement Burmese gin before heading down to the island institution and the place I called home for so long, Simple Life.

Dan: Taking Stu’s advice, I had procured two bottles of Myanmar’s finest gin on a recent visa run. A little guilty about helping prop up the evil junta, I’m pretty sure my Bt140 didn’t go too far. I took my punishment though, by smoking an entire carton of their crappy cigarettes, which left me coughing for a week. Gin finished, we headed down to the beach for a few more liveners. Like so many beach bars in this region, it’s a rustic affair of old wood, lacquer and paper lanterns. Simple Life is Stu’s old local and former place of employment, so he’s still widely tolerated. Foolishly, I’d stuffed myself with mash balls and burgers before coming out and was feeling a bit bloated and grouchy. Hard work, being a glutton.

10:01pm *Dragon Bar, Mae Had*

Dan: Mashballs and burgers were no longer a problem after a terrifying motorcycle ride, courtesy of one of Stu’s crazed island friends, to trendy pub Dragon Bar. Currently holding the title of the island’s coolest bar, architect and Aussie Craig has created a little bit of New York right here on Koh Tao, but without the traffic, sticky footpaths and muggers. Inside the décor is all Communism and robots, subjects dear to my heart. I own a Mao Tse-tung watch and a Mao lighter that plays ‘The East is Red’, but that can’t compare to this! Great stuff, but I did notice that although he had a twin-towers snow-dome, he didn’t have the Mao one I spotted at the mausoleum. Guess there’s still room for improvement.

Stu: With an impressive bottle bank and cocktail list, and our sobriety sliding,



we were in for a treat with the host's selection of brain-bending cocktails and shooters. First on the cards were Green Tree Frogs. Tricky little bastards, I can tell you. Next in line were a round of V2s equally as damaging as the rockets that rained upon London during the war. Last on the agenda was the house's own shooter, a nameless yet potent concoction.

11:41pm Dirty Nelly's, Mae Had

Stu: Being sufficiently slaughtered, we fit right in at Koh Tao's only Irish pub. Bloody prolific Paddies find every corner of the planet and build nothing more inspiring than a pub (thank God). Who'd have ever thought that Ireland would become fashionable? However, in the true spirit of globalisation, this one's jointly owned by a Frenchman, a Swede and a Canadian.

Dan: A big night for mixing drinks, we moved on to some of the best-poured Guinness I've ever seen in Thailand. Inside, the pub is all green paint and polished wood, the very epitome of olde Eire, except for the open-air design and palm trees. I guess we missed the crowd since it was pretty much just us, or maybe they knew we were coming, but that's the way I like it – no waiting for a drink. The rumble of roller-doors descending at midnight reminded us it was time to move on.

12:40am, Pure Lounge, Sairee Beach

Dan: Red and orange beanbags, a circular bar with a hub of booze, cool design and groovy tunes. This is definitely the place to take that someone special. Sadly, I was with Stu. The highlight is the seating, the most comfortable beanbags in the universe – but keep an eye on your pocket change. Manager Sjon told me they're custom designed and made from wide-fibre nylon, usually found in hiking equipment. Almost too comfortable, one must balance thirst against the effort of getting up. Luckily, they have beanbag service.

Stu: Fortunately for me, I prefer propping up the bar than lounging about which allows me easy access to drinks whilst struggling to stay on the stool. This place certainly rocks with a mix of upbeat soulful tunes described by resident DJ Absolut as "pure and from the heart." It was knocking on 1:30am now when I announced to Dan that I'm officially drunk and it was time to stop 'working'. So does island drinking beat Bangkok boozing? Dan said so as he slid off the saddle of his motorbike. For me, the best part is the sand between my toes, the onshore wind in my hair, the star-filled sky and a smorgasbord of Swedish beach babes. The downside is waking before dawn to crowing roosters, and sporting a hangover to match the days following the fall of communism.

KANCHANABURI RAILWAY TIES



The North Face River Kwai Trophy 2006

Not for the faint hearted, The North Face River Kwai Trophy kicks off on Saturday the 4th of March at Pung-Waan Resort, Kanchanaburi.

An adventure-race combining swimming, cycling, kayaking and jungle running is sure to test anyone's athletic abilities. There are four categories: men's, women's, mixed and masters for the over-forties, competing in two disciplines, extreme and adventure.

Come and join in the fun and witness the *Untamed Travel* team slipping and sliding along the course in an effort to prove that we are not permanently desk-bound. For more information and to register check out www.riverkwaitrophy.com

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.tbrconline.com

NIGHTRIPPING:

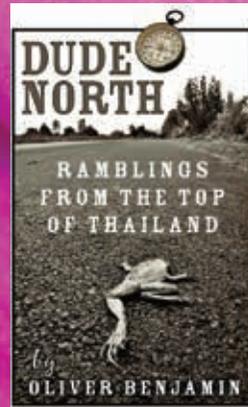
There are still floating discos and karaoke bars on the river, but they're now limited to weekends and have an 11pm curfew imposed upon them by locals who need to sleep. However, there are a number of new bars sprouting up in the spaces between the tour operators and guesthouses on Mae Nam Kwai Road. 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.

The famous saying "April showers bring May flowers" is jibberish to anyone living in Northern Thailand. Our springtime is now – the monsoon is over, temperatures are heating up, and everyone is once again walking around half-naked. Indeed, it is the season of love and beauty and art and flowers and plenty of opportunities to associate young women with flowers. So get up, get out and enjoy Mother Earth's short-lived unflowering before she starts getting hot flashes in April and peeing herself in May.



b bloom o

BLOOM TOWN

Citylife
Chiang Mai

All the world's a parade, though in Chiang Mai, doubly so. While all our festivals feature floats with mannequin-like lovelies perched for hours upon *songthaew* festooned with flora, the Chiang Mai Flower Parade takes the bouquet. With no unwieldy mythologising to get in the way, this is what our parades are really all about – pretty, vapid, superficial excuses for everyone in town to get together, get drunk and leer. When the weather is good, biology can beat the crap out of mythology.

Chiang Mai Flower Festival: From 3rd-5th February at Buak Haad Park. Flower-Float parade starts at 7a.m. February 4th on Nawarat Bridge. Visit www.tatchiangmai.org for more information.

Apparently, flowers are not just on the floats – the actual hills around Chiang Mai are chock full of *dok* as well. So if you want to see how real, uncivilised blossoms live in the wild, embark on a journey up nearby Doi Suthep mountain and if you're lucky you might encounter a flock or a gaggle or a pack of savage blooms. African Marigold, Globe Amaranth, Orchids, Ban Chun, Chrysanthemum, Celosia, and assorted roses such as the *Fa Mui* and thin *Uang Dok Lek* are all quite tame and unafraid of humans. Please, though, take only pictures and leave only footprints. Always purchase flowers from those professionally trained to kill them.

Speaking of taking in the wilderness, the ill-starred Chiang Mai Night Safari suffered another setback recently when it announced it would feature unusual animals like lion, emu, and even the common dog on its "jungle menu." This was met with a flood of international revulsion and ire by the international community, who insisted that humans should only kill and eat uninteresting animals, or at least those which are not particularly cute. Evidently, they don't know that millions of Chinese have enjoyed a "jungle menu" for well over 4,000 years.

To compete with the successful "all press is good press" strategy of the Night Safari, Chiang Mai Zoo has launched its own version of the Night Safari,

though they call it "Twilight Zoo." Anyone who's been to the zoo quickly discovers that most animals tend to sleep all day. What they don't know is that they also party all night. At least that's the theory behind Twilight Zoo. Tigers, wolves, hyenas, gorals, Asiatic black bears, binturong and wild boars all hunt at night, so they should be extra-pleased to accept your late night snacks, and if you get too close, some just desserts. Don't fret though, electric trolley cars shuttle tourists around the 100-rai compound with guides that offer information, and hopefully on-the-spot medical care.

Until the end of February. Call 053-221179, 053-222479 and 053-358-116 for more info.

The success of the walking street has spawned an ever-growing legion of imitators. City planners project that by the year 2010, all streets in Chiang Mai will be walking streets and commuters will be forced to get around via piggyback-ride. Surely *songtaew* drivers are already racing to set up a piggyback-ride monopoly. Until then, enjoy the latest incarnation, Anusarn Walking Street, at Anusarn Market near the Night Bazaar, where obligatory everyday crap will surely be peppered throughout with random tidbits of sublime genius. Buy now! The clever bits will quickly be copied en masse and relegated to everyday crap status within months.

The Writer's Club and Wine Bar, Chiang Mai's local nexus of literacy, liberation and libation, is hosting an important art exhibit showcasing the works of contemporary Burmese artists, most of whom are unable to exhibit their works in their home country due to their political nature. Come down and see this rare breed – modern artists who actually have something to say.

Until the end of February. On Rachadamnoen Road, opposite La Villa Restaurant. The club is closed on Saturdays.

A slew of additional art exhibits are taking place this month. Please visit www.citynow.com for additional events taking place in northern Thailand. Also visit www.dudenorth.co.nr

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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Thapae Gate Jirayuan
Thapae Gate Books
Gecko Books

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 ye 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 Buttress, 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 Nimanhemim Rd hosts exhibitions of Thailand's top artists, as does Chiang Mai University's Art and Culture Museum at the corner of Nimanhemim 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 Pokkloa 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 delicious 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.

NIGHTTRIPPING:

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** (Ratwihai 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, Nimanhemim 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).

NIGHTTRIPPING:

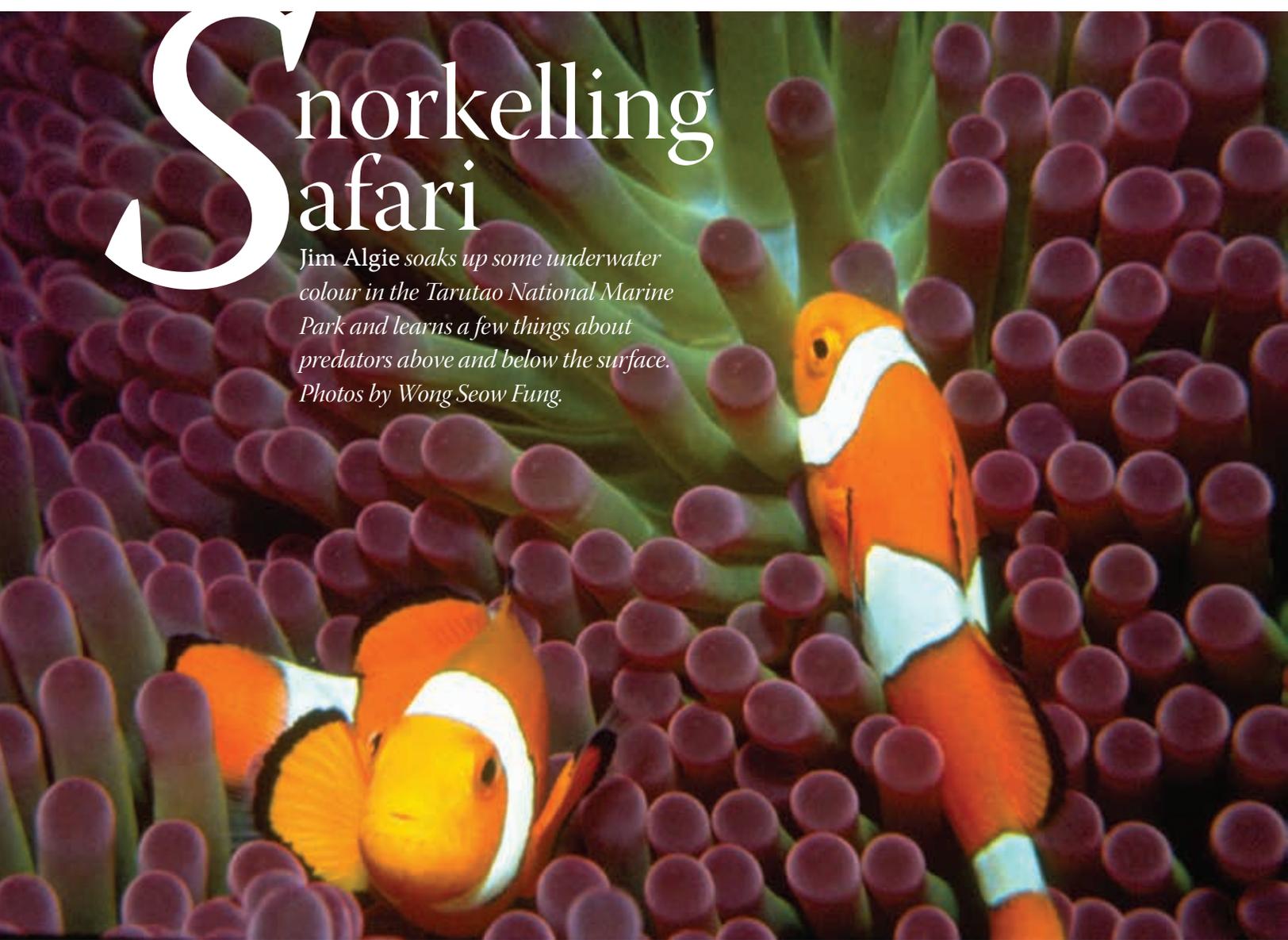
Everything centres around **Bebop Cafe** (Rangsiyanon Rd, opposite the Tourist Police), where Chart's house R&B band gets a buzz on nightly. Or rack out on the floor cushions at **Edible Jazz**, opposite **Wat Pa Kham**, sip tea and work your way through Kung's tasty jazz archives. When all the bars 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**

S snorkelling Safari

Jim Algie soaks up some underwater colour in the Tarutao National Marine Park and learns a few things about predators above and below the surface. Photos by Wong Seow Fung.



Okay. Hands up. Who's been on a shitty snorkeling trip in Thailand where you saw more rocks than fish and your visibility was blinded by silt and murk? Time to jettison those forgettable memories and head for the Tarutao National Marine Park in Satun province. Just off the beaches of Koh Lipe is an aquarium in the wild with clown fish, banded butterfly fish and banner fish.

Easily the best spot is the small strip of sand tucked away beside the Pattaya 2 Resort on the beach of the same name. In waist-deep water your snorkeling

safari begins. The reefs and boulders here – no iridescent rainbows of soft corals but enhanced with some brain and staghorn coral nonetheless – attract an array of species that give off flashes of brilliance and grace as the sun streams across the sea floor in arcs of light.

At the opposite end of Pattaya Beach, near the abandoned police station (always a blessed sight), there's another cache of boulders which provide cover and sustenance for denizens of the shallows.

Sunset Beach, however, is a waste of breath for snorkeling. Over on the east side (aka Sunlight Beach), home to the island's 1,000-or-so sea gypsies, down by Viewpoint Bungalows, affords some mediocre fish-spotting because the water is shallow and the sea near the rocks ripples with strong currents.

Most of the bungalows on the island, or dive shops like Chao Ley Divers on Pattaya Beach, organise snorkeling trips to nearby islands like Adang (only



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a kilometer from Lipe) and further out, Koh Rawi. Or you could just charter your own long-tail boat for about Bt800 per day; then toss in another Bt100 for the rental of a mask, snorkel and fins.

Rawi is Treasure Island for the snorkeling set. Only a few metres from the main beach, with sand like the dandruff of angels, are some bedazzling reefs teeming with marine life – visual proof that the Andaman Sea is home to around 25 percent of the world's tropical fish species – and the biggest schools of sergeant-major fish I've ever seen.

Our long-tail boatman's knowledge of the sea and its deadliest creatures added a few degrees of danger to the experience. The most poisonous of all, he said, is the stone fish. If you happen to touch or step on one of its 13 dorsal spines, the pain is excruciating, but not often fatal. They're difficult to spot because these underwater gargoyles (part of the lion fish family) look like they've been armoured with pebbles and shellacked with shit so they can blend in to their rocky terrain. Mostly they're found in shallow water, the boatman said, and there's quite a few of them in the Andaman.

That news drowned my euphoria for a while. As I went back for another plunge, with all the grace of a duck-billed platypus bobbing for cockles, I kept both eyes out for moving rocks, but didn't see any.

They're difficult to spot because these underwater gargoyles (part of the lion fish family) look like they've been armoured with pebbles and shellacked with shit.

Later, back in the boat, Jack admitted that in 15 years of fishing and leading tours the worst injury he'd ever sustained was from the whiplash tail of a stingray, during high tide, in knee-deep water. The sting left him in tears for an hour.

Heading to and from Rawi, he kept his fishing line in the water, reeling in some decent-sized tuna and this other silver fish that had a long mouth, picketed with rows of teeth, like a baby crocodile stuck in the sea of evolution. He invited us to reel in some of the fish, though he was still entrusted with the task of smacking them over the head with a pair of pliers. Having killed the fish, he used the pliers to pull out the lures.

In these seafaring climes there's a fine line between predators and prey, tourists and tour operators, as evidenced by the fact that our boatman, after we indulged his fishing, which ate up around an hour of our underwater time, and helped him reel some of them in, then invited us to eat some of the fish at one of the beachfront bars and restaurants. His wife would do the barbecuing and all he wanted from us was a few hundred more baht – the parasite!

Apart from soaking up the local colour you can learn a few lessons in life and tourism dynamics from the clown fish and the symbiotic relationship they have with sea anemones. Immune to the stings of the anemones' tentacles, the fish use them as their sanctuary. In return, the clown fish help to attract predators who then become prey for the anemones to sting and consume.

Over dinner we met some of the boatman's other friends. Nice enough folks though you're never quite sure if the niceties aren't just bait to reel in some more baht.



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RAYSOFLIGHT

It's never too early in the year to take a holiday. And it's certainly never a bad day for the beach. Thailand is blessed with miles of spectacular coast and a climate well suited for wearing next to nothing. It is also February. That month of much romance, and accordingly, also well-suited for wearing next to nothing. Ergo ipso facto—it is the time for the Thai beach.

Among the nation's many islands, inlets, beaches, bays and other places given to golden sands and swaying palms - there are several ideal for those wanting to make love or make records.

Trang—the aquatic equivalent of a little church in Las Vegas — brings out the boats for its 10th year of making magical moments and matrimonial bliss at its annual Valentine weekend Underwater Wedding. This year, like the past nine, an unusually large number of unusually gung-ho people will turn up willingly to wed in wet suits and underwater breathing apparati.

Koh Tao also makes this month's beach round-up radar. February 7-8 marks the gulf island's annual Underwater Festival, where divers and glory-seekers alike will attempt to make waves and the pages of the *Guinness Book of World Records* for the largest number of people diving simultaneously.

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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.



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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.

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.

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.

>>> 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

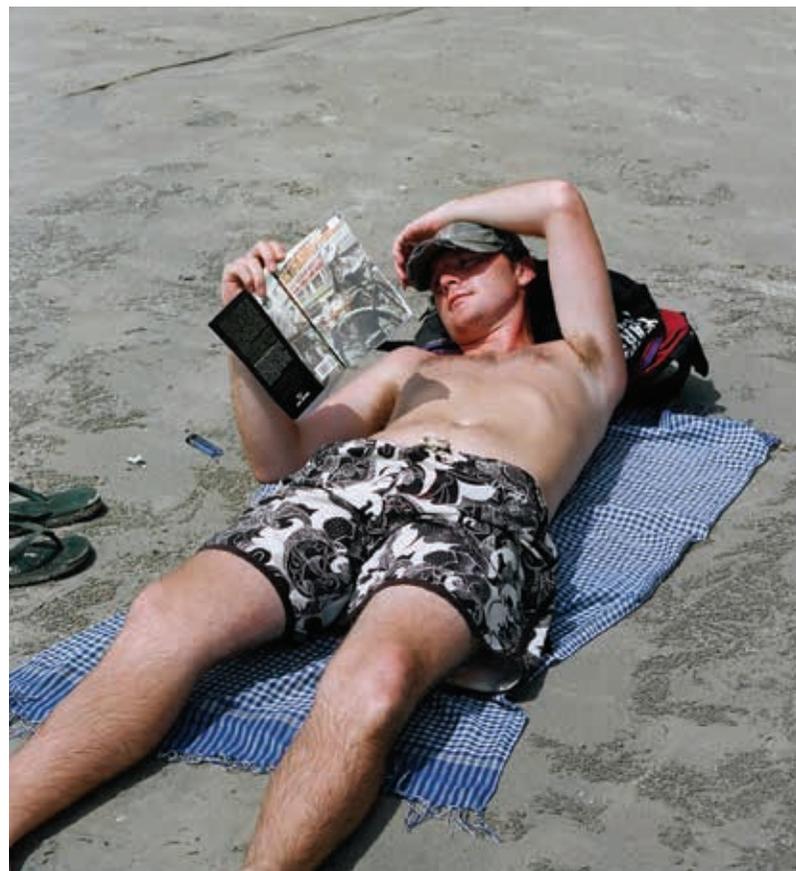
PLACES TO CRASH:

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 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.



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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.



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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.

NIGHTTRIPPING

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.

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 piripiri 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 Saboey (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 B2,500. 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 Juzzza'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 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 Surrattani 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 Khaosan are often uncomfortable and prone to theft.

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.



Conjoined at the head and abdomen, the twins nevertheless travelled extensively

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:

Chaloklam 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 kayaks. 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 catermaran 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

With high season in full swing, bungalows are filling up and boats and bars are heaving. The main event this month is the Underwater World Festival. Two days of fun-packed festivities including the Guinness Book of World Records attempt for the largest number of divers underwater simultaneously. Best book rooms in advance as the festival is expected to attract over 5000 people on what is a rather small island.

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 their 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 Saturdays 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

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PHUKET BEACHMIRAGE

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 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 Katoey drawing in the curious and deprived. 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 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 Maikhao 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, bungee jumping, Bang Pae and Tonsai waterfalls, and the Gibbon Rehabilitation Centre in Khao Phra Thaw 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
Private Bus: From Bangkok, Bt480 (with stopover in Surat Thani) dep. 6pm arrives at noon
Government Bus: Bt630 (direct) dep 5pm arrives 6:30am



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KRABI LIMESTONE LAIR

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.



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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.

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.



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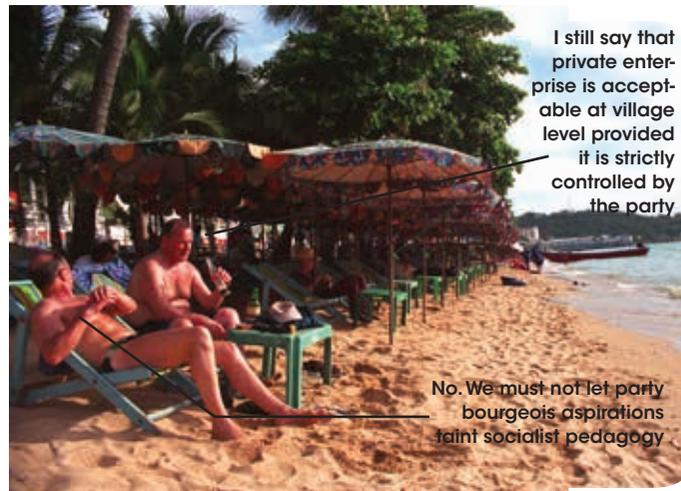
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>>> way to go >>>

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.

PATTAYA DASISTGUT



I still say that private enterprise is acceptable at village level provided it is strictly controlled by the party

No. We must not let party bourgeois aspirations faint socialist pedagogy

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.

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.

On land, 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 MoChit 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.



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HUAHIN GULF GOLF



Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil,
and that goes double for the middle monkey

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 Thalul. 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 Binthaban, 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.

>>> way 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.

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 the 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 southeast 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 Ekamai 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.

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.

THE PERFECT ANSWER FOR YOUR MEMORABLE VACATION WITH OUR WARM SERVICE.

Sea View Resort & Spa Koh Chang 10/2 M, 4 Koh Chang, Trat 23170 Thailand
Tel : (66)0-3965-2888, (66)0-6325-7143 Fax : (66)0-3965-7089 www.seaviewkohchang.com
E-mail : reservation@seaviewkohchang.com

KOH SAMET SANUK

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 travellers 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

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.

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

>>> 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.

2005 *remembered*

In keeping with an annual tradition, Gordon Sharpless aims his razor-tipped tongue at easy targets. Once again, we look back at the year that was and examine the major stories the minor stories, the not quite stories and a few stories that weren't but might have been better for all if they were.

JANUARY: US quotas on garment exports expire on New Year's Day. Opposition figures stage a demonstration and the government announces a national holiday, "Garment Day".

Bird flu concerns re-emerge when a Kampot resident dies in a Vietnam hospital. Opposition figures blame the Vietnamese and stage a demonstration. The government announces a holiday, "Bird Day". Two hundred cases of the bubonic and pneumonic plague worldwide fail to make headlines.

MARCH: Panic sets in when Cambodia records its second bird flu victim. Two hundred more worldwide cases of the plague go unreported and 10,000 people worldwide are killed by faulty electrical appliances.

APRIL: Khmer New Year is celebrated with full fervour as teenagers delight in flinging bags of water at anything that moves, even if it kills somebody. The government announces a new holiday for April 17 "Khmer New Year Senseless Killing Remembrance Day". Teenagers in Sisophon and Battambang extend their water throwing festivities for an extra day.

Jackie Chan visits Cambodia on April 21 to raise land-mine awareness, teenagers in Sisophon and Battambang throw water bags at him. The government announces "Jackie Chan Remembrance Day" and teenagers add four more days to their water-throwing festivities.

In an effort to raise revenues at the Angkor Archaeological Park, heritage police are assigned the important task of evicting all cows found within park grounds not in possession of a ticket.

MAY: The plowing ceremony is a particularly joyous occasion as the Royal cows are supplemented with hundreds of apsara cows recently expelled from the Angkor Archaeological Park.

Having failed to raise any funds by requiring cows to purchase tickets, the Apsara Authority decide to publish a guidebook. The book is offered at the entry gate as "Free for \$3". The plan lasts not even a week. In commemoration, the government announces "Apsara Authority Guidebook Remembrance

Day". Teenagers in Sisophon and Battambang celebrate by throwing books at motorcyclists. Four are killed. The celebration is considered a success.

JUNE: Members of a gang known as the Four Morons of the Apoplexy hold a class of kindergarten and pre-school children hostage at the Siem Reap International School. In all seriousness, it was a plan without a plan to seek revenge on a former employer that made the events of *Dog Day Afternoon* appear to be a finely-executed heist. The result is the loss of life of one two-year-old boy.

Failing to generate any revenue from "Free for \$3" guidebooks, the Apsara Authority decide to require foreign tourists to wear plastic shoes when visiting the temples. The scheme calls for a mandatory purchase price of \$3. When it's suggested that Cambodian feet are probably no less damaging to the temples than foreign feet, the plan is shelved until someone can come up with a more logical approach that might suggest a greater concern for the temples than for the finances of the Apsara Authority. The government announces a new holiday "Plastic Shoe Day" and teenagers in Sisophon and Battambang celebrate by throwing shoes at motorcyclists. Six are killed. The celebration is considered a success.

PM Hun Sen does his part for traffic safety by declaring it illegal to have sex and drive at the same time. The government announces a new national holiday, "Driving Sex Day". Teenagers in Sisophon and Battambang throw condoms at passing motorists. None are killed, many are thrilled.

JULY: Apsara Authority, with a pasture of ticketless cows, stacks of undistributed guidebooks, and a storage shed full of plastic shoes, hatches a new idea: battery-powered bicycles for tourists. It takes a few months, but this plan actually flies.

Hun Sen and China PM Wen Jiabao sign agreements bringing \$400 million in aid to Cambodia. Opposition figures ranting against Vietnamese control of Cambodia fail to notice Chinese flags on government buildings. Later in the week, a miniature version of the Great Wall appears across Preah Vihear province. Everyone is too busy attending rallies in Svay Rieng province and shouting protests at Vietnam to notice. Next week ticketing rights to Angkor Wat are sold to a company believed to have Chinese origins. Still, no one notices. The following week the government announces a new national holiday "China Day". No one notices. Teenagers in Sisophon and Battambang throw Vietnamese goods at motorcyclists. No one notices the items are actually Chinese.

SEPTEMBER: Phnom Penh police request visiting Chinese police to donate surveillance cameras for Phnom Penh streets. Opposition figures accuse the Vietnamese of spying on Cambodian citizens.

OCTOBER: Officials shut down a candidate for the World's Dumbest and Most Tasteless Business Ventures Award – a restaurant that aimed to recreate the Khmer Rouge dining experience. Watery gruel for \$6. Torture and starvation extra.

Hysteria in Kampot province when an expat is found to be promoting Cambodia as a suicide destination and apparently recruits one customer. Suggestions that the proprietor test his own product go nowhere, but then again, nothing else works either. The government announces a new national holiday, "Suicide Day". Teenagers in Sisophon and Battambang are encouraged to join the festivities.

NOVEMBER: The government announces it is negotiating with a Chinese firm to build a \$280 million, 145-meter high dam in Kampot. Overnight, the dam is approved and built and no one notices as the opposition has everyone protesting in Ratanakiri against a Vietnamese beaver found building a dam on the Srepok River.

DECEMBER: The gang known as the Four Morons of the Apoplexy, are sentenced to up to life in prison for turning an act of revenge into an international incident, not to mention senselessly killing a two-year-old boy. May they rot in a cell forever and a day.

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 Choeng 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. 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.

>>> way to go >>>

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.

NIGHTRIPPING:

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

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.

enter :>
The Two Dragons

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!

SINGAPORE SOPHISTICATION

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.

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: Habor 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
A 11 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



A CITY IN YOUR BACK POCKET

How many travellers have sweated under the weight of a cinder-block-sized guidebook? And then had to suffer the ignominy of pulling it out on a busy street to find some info while feeling like a total tosspot of a tourist?

That probably includes most of us – save for the 85 percent of Americans who don't own passports.

The City Fan Singapore Travel Guide aims to change all that by condensing the city's coolest hotspots, cultural attractions, restaurants, shopping centre and activities into a guide that can be carried around in your back pocket or purse. It's small and

reader-friendly enough so that you can discretely whip it out, find whatever info or map you need, and avoid feeling like an ignorant tourist.

Lacking the depth of the bigger guidebooks, the City Fan Singapore is more for the weekender than the long-term traveler or expat. But for Bt350, who can gripe?

The company is currently developing another fan guide for Bangkok and one for eating in Singapore. Check out their website at www.fanmediaguides.com.

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.

BREWERYKZ

#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.

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HONGKONG CHINESE TAKEAWAY

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).



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CHINESE PROVERBS

If men can be trusted then female pigs could climb trees.

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 Tusi 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 Tusi. 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 Tusi 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 overnighter. 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 – shoestring 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 Tusi 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 Tusi (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.

VIENTIANE URBANJUNGLE

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 Nginn.

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 accommodations along the riverside for US\$35. 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.

LUANG PRABANG CAPITOL GAINS

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 Souvannablang Rd has shiny wooden floors and views over the river for US\$5-8. Along Khem Khong Rd, the View Khem Khong (US\$6), Bounnasouk (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.

NIGHTRIPPING:

The New York-style Maylek Pub is a funky retro-esque nightspot 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:

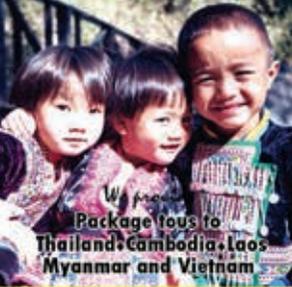
Xiang Thong Road is one of the town's great food streets and Khao Biak Sen is one of the best noodle shops in town. Round rice noodles cooked over an open fire outside a decaying French house – very tasty. The night market in front of the palace is the best spot in town to pick up cheap Luang Prabang 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 Somtam Khaem Khong is around Wat Nong on Manthatoulat 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.



Q: What do Englishmen, rich Americans, Germans and hilltribe women have in common?

A: They all wear socks with sandals.

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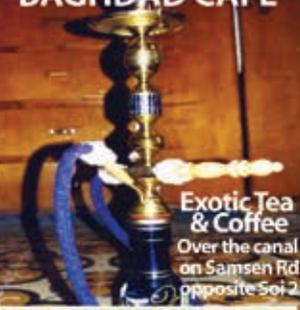


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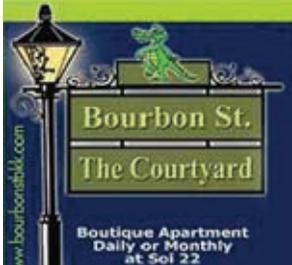
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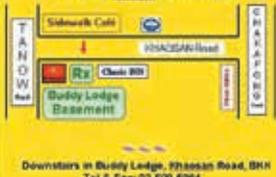


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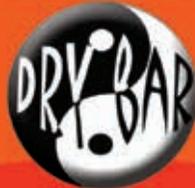
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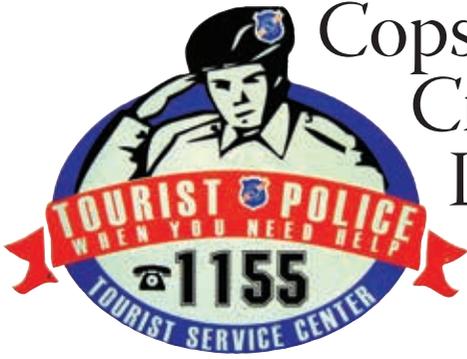
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Cops, Crimes & Lifelines

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 Cimic Tower, 209/1 Sukhumvit Soi 21, Cimic 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 rip-offs are being overcharged for goods. And the streetwalkers along Nathan Road in Tsim Sha Tsui 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.

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



EMERGENCY CASH

When in dire financial straits, get money wired to you via Western Union (tel. 800/325-6000; www.westernunion.com), which has 225,000 agents in 190 countries and territories.



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.

BANGKOK

Bangkok Adventist Mission Hospital(private)
430 Pitsanulok Rd, Dusit Bangkok 10300
Tel: 02-2811422

Bangkok Genral Hospital (Private)
2 Soi Soonvijai 7 New Petchburi Road,
Tel:02-3103000
Hotline: 1719

Bumrungrad Hospital (Private)
33 Sukhumvit 3 (Soi Nana Nua)
Wattana, Bangkok 10110 Thailand
Tel: 02-6671000

Samitivej Hospital (Private)
133 Sukhumvit 49, Klongton Nua
Wattana, Bangkok 10110
Tel: 02-7118000

CHIANG MAI

Chiangmai ram Hospital (private)
8 Boonruangrit Road,
Chiang Mai 50200
Tel: (053) 224851,224861,224871

KOH SAMUI

SAMUI INTERNATIONAL HOSPITAL (SIH)
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Surat Thani, Thailand, 84320.

CAMBODIA

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House 1611, Street 51,
Sang-Kat Boeung Peng,
Khon Doun Penn Phnom Penh, Cambodia,
Tel: 855 23 216 911

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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02-256-0196
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02-287-1224
India
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Tel: 02-252-3135-40
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02-260-4856
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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
USA
Tel: 02-205-4000
Vietnam
Tel: 02-251-5836-7

THAILAND EMERGENCY NUMBERS

THAILAND EMERGENCY NUMBERS:
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1155 then press 1
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