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substance:

what's inside

regulars:>>

What's New, *Pussycat?*

Ever wondered what really goes on in those 'shows' that Patpong touts are always inviting you to that involve women's private parts and the amazing stunts they can perform? *The Stalker*, aka Sally Leighman, takes a break from attracting men to look into the subject.



pg>14



汇书本小人丹:

the HARD WAY is the ONLY WAY

Visiting the Middle Kingdom, Suzan Crane finds China full of rewards for the traveller with the daring of the fox, the patience of the tortoise and the bowels of the elephant.

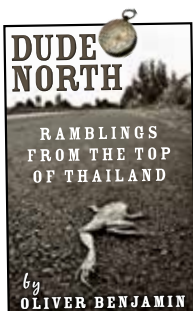
pg>15

The Sacred and the Profane



Cameron Cooper, better known for the foulness of his palate than its refinement, dips his tongue into a bit of Japanese fusion and undergoes a linguistic meltdown.

pg>47



OLDE WORLD CHARM

pg>59

TAXI, TAKE ME TO... OH, NEVER MIND...

Cambodia expatriate Gordon Sharpless wasn't born yesterday and has no problem telling you so. This month his steely gaze falls upon the myriad services offered to tourists in Cambodia, and the risks of using them.

pg>85

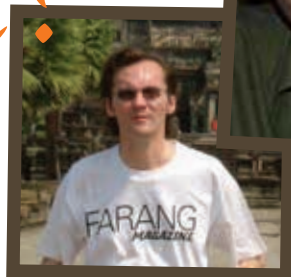
Why Leave Home?



Daniel Cooper



Cameron Cooper



Jim Algie

I've always wanted to visit Paris," says Auntie Nina as she shoos the cat off her lap. "Why you wanna go there! The place is dirty, full o' foreigners," butts in Uncle Kel. "Thieves, filthy toilets and nobody speaks English, and don't get me started on what they eat!" Then he goes on about how "Frenchies" sit down each night to a plate of horseflesh, snails and frog's legs. Maybe it's not surprising that Uncle Kel has a low opinion of France, since the last time he was there German soldiers were shooting at him.

Aunty Nina puts down her tea. "Oh, don't be like that. Doris May went there last year and they went to the Eiffel tower and the Louvre." Now they're arguing again about how things are better here, that Doris May is a loony and how they don't need a microwave oven because those things give you cancer, all of which is fine with me because I'm still zonked from flying in from Hong Kong last night.

Ask any rice farmer and he'll tell you we're crazy to leave our comfortable homes and well-paying jobs to walk about in the sun and watch him shovel shit all day, yet arrival figures for the region climb higher each year.

Once a holiday in Asia meant a week in Phuket or Bali lazing around a fancy resort, ordering room service and generally waving the mighty dollar about. These days, more and more people are blazing new trails further and further off the 'beaten path,' seeking experiences that are not pre-packaged but unique. Some of the fastest-growing areas of tourism are homestays, where you live with a local family under local conditions, eco-tourism, where you sacrifice comfort in exchange for a low-impact holiday, and voluntourism, where you live like a local and pay big bucks to dig holes in the road or count field mice for a local charity.

So why the change?

What's the appeal of dusty roads and lumpy beds that is pulling people off their sunlounge? Perhaps the thing is that our lives in the west have become so safe and comfortable that people need to travel to rattle themselves out of their cages. Most of us enjoy a standard of living that the rest of the world can only dream of, yet so many Westerners seem to have supped from the cup too deeply and have to travel to the developing world to feel alive.

There is a certainly liveliness to living in Asia, the culture shock, the discomfort and the uncertainty of travel connections that keep you on your toes. One certainly feels alive zipping through traffic in the back of a Bangkok taxi.

But finally, many people on the road these days are travelling to prove something to themselves – to prove they're capable of surviving in a foreign land. The challenges and discomforts of the road are legion and conquering them does the ego a world of good. Braving the streets of Calcutta or the toilets in China makes the problems at home and work seem trivial. And at the end of the trip, we're better prepared to enjoy the safety and comforts of home. Of course none of this would be possible if beer wasn't available everywhere.

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substance:

what's inside

features:>>

CONTACT FEATS



This intercontinental drifter and Israeli-American's photography career has developed in tandem with his work as an irrigation specialist, writes Jim Algie. Photos and captions by Boaz Rottem.

pg>18



Twelve Days in Tibet

Ian Green and his cohorts took in all the highs of Himalayan grandeur and the lows of Chinese squalor while searching for traces of the real Tibet.

pg>28

Death Highway



Greg Hardwick journeys via pick-up truck down one of the most perilous stretches of mountain road in Thailand to visit a pasture of eco-tourism. Photos by Greg. Illustration by Lyndal.

pg>16

the Ollie Lama take on singapore

Nothing escapes the eye of canny travel-writer Oliver Benjamin, and as one not to pull literary punches, he takes a good look at Singapore, puts his mouth in gear and tells us how it is in the Lion City.

pg>24

CITY of the FUTURE?

Bangalore is India's IT capital, surrounded by industrial estates crammed with software companies and call centres, writes Tom Vater. With 5.7 million inhabitants, the capital of Karnataka is hailed as India's most progressive city, riding the currents and trade winds of the country's rapid economic development. Photographs by Aroon Thawchatturat.

pg>34

Victor Paul Borg takes a walk on the seamy side to explore this steaming cauldron of ethnic influences, foreign travelers and street-walkers.

pg>36



DRIFTING THROUGH PENANG



main events



Thailand: Salsa Storm

Contrary to initial reports, the 2006 Salsabangkok Fiesta has little or nothing to do with Mexican cuisine and everything to do with dance. The first fiesta, last year, attracted 300 hoofers from around the region and this year is planned to be bigger. There are performances, workshops and, of course, dancing each evening. The event is over two nights in two locations. Performers from China, India and the US will be strutting on Friday the 29th of this month at Dance Oasis in the Montien Hotel (on Surawongse Road) and moves to Lima Coco Resort on Koh Samet for the weekend.

See www.salsabangkok.com for more information

Thailand: Pachyderm Polo

Most of us picture elephants in Asia charging through the jungle with their mates and tearing up trees, unless of course you've eaten a hallucinogenic

pancake and then may imagine them thundering around a sports field.

Hallucinations become reality this month when the annual King's Cup Elephant Polo tourney lumbers into action up in Chiang Rai. It sounds like a lark for rich people and that's pretty much what it is, but the matches are taken seriously by both players and elephants. Some condemn the match but actually the elephants seem to enjoy themselves very much and, being intelligent creatures, know the rules well enough to cheat from time to time.

The Kings Cup thunders into action on the 4th to the 10th at Chaing Saen Secondary School, located some 60 km from Chaing Rai Internation Airport. Funds raised go to the Thai Elephant Conservation Centre in Lampang. Entry is free but peanuts are appreciated.



Australia: Fringe Fest Fascination

The Melbourne Fringe Fest is on again, showcasing independent art talent from around the nation. 2005's festival encased 227 events by 3,000 artists at 120 venues around the town, covering performance, comedy, music, cabaret, visual arts, movement, dance, spoken word and circus in an exhausting two-week orgy of all things arty. Artists are responsible for creating and exhibiting their own work and the festival is largely operated by volunteers (they're calling for some now if you're interested) and encourages artists to produce new, risky works.

The 24th Melbourne Fringe Festival opens on the 27th of September and runs until the 15th of October. See www.melbournefringe.com for more info or to volunteer.



Japan: It's Danjiri Time Again

You can't beat the Japanese when it comes to bizarre and unfathomable festivals, although India gives it a good try. Not as stupid as the Naked Man Festival or as well known as the Big Dick Festival, *Kishiwada Danjiri Matsuri* is still well worth a look-in. The *Danjiri* are three-tonne wood carts, and at the climax of the festival they are towed, at full steam, by teams of revellers around the town and crowned by a brave fellow on top dancing about and giving signals to the pullers. The exciting part comes when the *Danjiri* round a corner. Wheels splinter, carts topple and people are crushed, all in the name of fun and honour (and perhaps it is the origin of the overwhelming desire of salarymen to hurl themselves in front of subway trains.) Needless to say, for the two days of the festival everyone in town is legless drunk, normal social conventions are off and debauchery ensues.

Danjiri rolls into Kishiwada City, Osaka Prefecture, on the weekend of the 16th.



USA: Whacking Great Melons

There's a prize for the fastest watermelon gobbler and another one for who can spit a pip the farthest. We can only be in America – Pardeeville Wisconsin to be precise. Once a year this small town explodes in a shower of pulp and pips to celebrate the most weighty of melons. There is a certain dignity in competition but this event may be stretching things a bit. But in the immortal words of the song "Polly Wolly Doodle": 'I like watermelon, but it wets my ears.'

The Pardeeville Watermelon festival spits off on the first Saturday after Labour Day, that's the 9th on this month in Pardeeville, Wisconsin.



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FORBIDDEN NAMES

Malaysia's National Registration Department has banned the use of Malay names such as Zani (a male adulterer) and Woti (sexual intercourse). Also forbidden is naming babies after insects, animals, fruits, vegetables and colours. Unofficial reports indicate that names like Sparky, Gonad and Fuckface are also taboo.

DEAD IN THE WATER

After lifeguards went on strike in Goa, two tourists drowned and four others are missing in heaving seas off Calangute Beach. Mumbai has also been drowned under relentless monsoon rains that have left hundreds dead.

WOLF HUNT

After rumours ran rampant that a hyena had escaped from Chiang Mai's Night Safari, officials finally admitted that it was actually a wolf from the Czech Republic. On the run for a month, the beast survived by wolfing down chickens and dogs. Fifty zoo keepers, armed with tranquilizer darts, finally succeeded in subduing the wolf and bringing it back to this nocturnal gulag for fauna.

POLITICAL GAG

Hong Kong leader Donald Tsang is being sued by a British teacher, who specializes in practical jokes with a liberal and political slant. Matt Pearce, who had loaned the leader a koi carp named "Democracy," has filed a writ accusing Tsang of not returning the fish, which later died. In such small claims cases, plaintiffs are obliged to show up in court.

NOBLE WINNERS

Asia's equivalent of the Nobel Prize, the Ramon Magsaysay Awards, were recently given out to a Filipino journalist, a South Korean social crusader and, among other recipients, a Cambodian survivor of the Khmer Rouge era who heads up Phnom Penh's water authority. The boss of the Beautiful Foundation and Hope Institute in South Korea, Park Won Soon, won the award for public service because of his campaign to get individuals and companies to donate one percent of

their income, or their time, to help the underprivileged. In one of the most dangerous countries for journalists, Eugenia Duran Apostol, 81, received the journalism, literature and creative communication arts award for "her courageous example in placing the truth-telling press at the centre of the struggle for democratic rights and better government in the Philippines."

MISSIONARIES GET CRUCIFIED

Some 2,000 Christian missionaries from South Korea have had a heavy cross to bear in Afghanistan recently as Islamic clerics demanded their expulsion for "security concerns" and spreading the word of Christ. The Koreans claim they came there for a "peace festival and educational and entertainment programmes" and, one suspects, to regale the locals with rousing Korean versions of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

BEER RAGE

A new boozier called the Rising Sun Anger Release Bar is becoming all the rage in Nanjing, China, because it allows customers to beat up male staff members, who are wearing protective gear, with boxing gloves and a few good karate kicks. Customers can expend their hostility by paying to smash glasses and vent their spleens by screaming and shouting. (Look for a feature story on the bar in our October issue.)

ATOMIC ANNIVERSARY

During a day of mourning to mark the 61st anniversary of the atomic bomb being dropped on Nagasaki, the city's mayor lashed out at Iran and North Korea for their nuclear weapons programmes, and at the US for allowing the nuclear arms race to continue running. On August 9, 1945, the Americans dropped a plutonium-239 bomb, weighing some 4,500kg on the city. Nicknamed "Fat Man," the bomb detonated around 500 metres above the ground. In a flash, some 27,000 people, out of a population of 200,000, lost their lives.

Sex Files

Chiang Mai, The Gik Is Up: Once upon a patriarchal time, private investigators in Thailand mostly tracked down cheating husbands for their heartsick wives. Now the ladies are getting their revenge. Around 10 agencies in Chiang Mai alone are hired by rich politicians and businessmen to see if their *giks* – casual lovers – have another man on the side. One’s heart bleeds for these wronged males. Usually, the agencies take about two weeks to close the case, charging from Bt6,000-20,000. Most of the private dickheads are ex-cops, well-versed in the moral dilemmas of sexual ethics.

Wellington, Porn Star Parade: Permission for a group of some 30 bare-breasted porn stars to cruise down the main street of New Zealand’s

biggest city on motorcycles or open cars has been given by city officials, who say the drive, to promote an expo of erotica, doesn’t break any laws.

New Delhi, Real Hard Man: A farmer aged 88 has recently become the father of a baby boy. *The Times of India* reports that he has daily sex with his wife, who is 45 years younger than him. **Virmaram Jat** lives in Rajasthan and credits his virility to drinking fresh camel milk since he was a boy and taking long daily walks.

Phnom Penh, Sarong Beauty Queens: Cambodia is going to field its first Miss Universe contestant in more than four decades. But for the televised pageant in Cambodia, officials have snipped the swimsuit competition because such gratuitous displays of female flesh would, of course, be heinously immoral in such an incorruptible country.

Bangkok, Racy Dick Wrapper: A condom named after the Thai country singer Tom Dundee may be banned by the Culture Ministry. They’re bitching that *dun dee* means “good penetration” in Thai. But the singer claims he took his adopted stage name from the movie *Crocodile Dundee*.



CRIME FILES

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CRIME FILES

Bangkok, Child Sex Killer

Nabbed: John Mark Karr, a one-time schoolteacher, has been arrested in the capital where he admitted to being with the prepubescent beauty queen, JonBenet Ramsay, when she was strangled in her parent’s basement some 10 years ago. Karr said he loved her and that her death was “an accident”. A Thai police officer quoted the American as saying that he had tried to kidnap her for US\$118,000 in ransom money but the plan went wrong and he accidentally strangled her. Karr, 41, will be extradited to Boulder, Colorado to face charges of murder, kidnapping and sexual assault.

Tokyo, Obsessive Repulsive Caller: A 44-year-old Japanese man has been arrested for making more than 37,000 silent calls (around 900 per day from his mobile phone) to directory inquiries because he liked the kindly voices of the female telephone operators. He has been charged with obstructing the operations of the Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corp.

Hong Kong, Chemical Kraze: According to a survey of HK youth, some 77 percent of the respondents said ketamine, an animal tranquilizer with hallucinogenic properties, is their favourite drug. Almost 63 percent said ecstasy was their drug of choice, while around 48 percent admitted to using marijuana.

Phnom Penh, The Tribulations of a Trial: The upcoming, UN-backed genocide trial in Cambodia could be dealt another death blow as Brother Number 2, Nuon Chea, 81, is seriously ill. A police guard around his house in Pailin province is there for his own protection, officials say. But he is not able to see visitors and probably wouldn’t be receiving many courtesy calls anyway. Not long ago, Ta Mok, the Khmer Rouge’s military commander and final leader after Pol Pot passed away in ’98, died of respiratory failure. “The Butcher,” as he was known for more than his frightful table manners, had languished in jail for seven years awaiting trial.

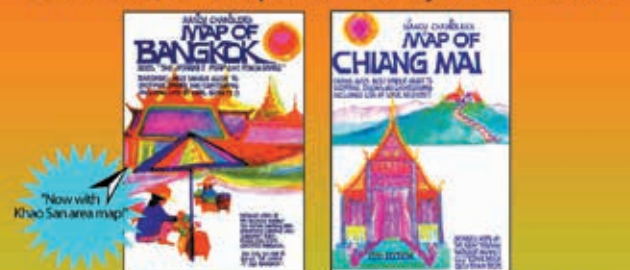


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Letters

Letter of the Month

Untamed's resident book reviewer Daniel Cooper has done it again. Another pissed-off author of a debut book that Dan decided to give a little exposure to [A Chameleon's Tale by Mo Tejani, Aug '06] has sent in a snotty email denigrating his reviewing skills – this in spite of the fact that Dan had a lot of nice things to say alongside his criticisms. We decided to deny Dan the opportunity to reply to this one because it just got ugly last time – men in Chinese happy coats wielding ball-peen hammers storming into the office and ruining the furniture. In any event, Mo gets the Letter of the Month prize and will receive an Untamed Travel T-shirt.

Dan,
thanks for the review and the file.
wonder if u [sic] read the uncorrected proof or the final version... dont [sic] agree with some of your comments but fostunately [sic] there are more important media sources and more savvy reviers [sic] who think very different from you ...see www.mo-tejani.com book website if so inclined...
hope u [sic] enjoyed the free booze and free food at adhere anyway...

Mo

Untamed Replies:

Sorry the review wasn't to your liking, Mo. I guess in the future Dan will have to confine himself to more important books by more savvy authors. But thanks for the gin and canapés – it was money well spent as far as we're concerned – because that's the price of an education: good reviews aren't for sale.

Ugliness in Life, Beauty in Death

Dear Untamed,

Your piece entitled "Suicide Bomber Salute" [Aug '06] was extremely short and sweet. Excluding the men who engage in this, and with religious and political aspects aside, upon reading it, all manner of arousing images sprang to mind. Ebony locks flowing in the breeze as they descend upon a target. Black clothes, lithe bodies, grave (pardon the pun) missions. Loosely veiled, harrowing faces of which one can only see the most bewitching blue/green Persian eyes. Is it wrong to focus solely on the beauty in death? Perhaps I am in need of some serious help? But when a woman decides she would rather leave this world and die, than live in one where her beliefs are compromised, is there truly any greater show of feminist expression in the world today?

Yours,
M.K. Greene

Untamed Replies:

Wow MK, you are a really sick person. While we welcome your correspondence please don't mistake that for an invitation to visit the Untamed office.

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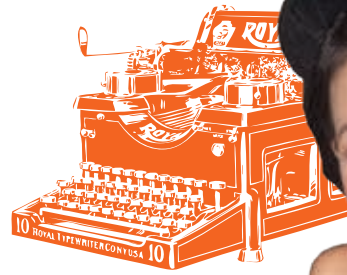
Dear Untamed Gang,

Less of a letter, and more of a collection of my random thoughts, I write in reference to a piece from your Sex Files column that pierced my heart [Crime of Passion, Aug '06]. I wonder just what was going through Margaret Crane's mind in the moment she pulled the trigger, blasting hubby into infinity [we know what was going through his mind at least – a lead slug – ed]. What was the major factor at play here? The domestic violence she suffered? The outbursts and aggression the children surely had to put up with? Or was the final clincher that pushed her over the edge due to her husband's abandonment of her in favour of a Thai counterpart? I, too, have experienced a similar fate. Though there was no domestic violence in my former marriage, my husband went on holiday and was transformed into an Asianophile. Now, after many years of life in the void, he hopes to return to America, and of course, to me. It's a typically sad case of too little, too late and one I'm not prepared to pander to. Anyway, enough waffle. I just wanted to show my support to the many other women out there, suffering under similar causes. With her *Thelma and Louise*-style shooting, Margaret proved she's got the balls that many others probably wished they had.

Firing off,
Jill

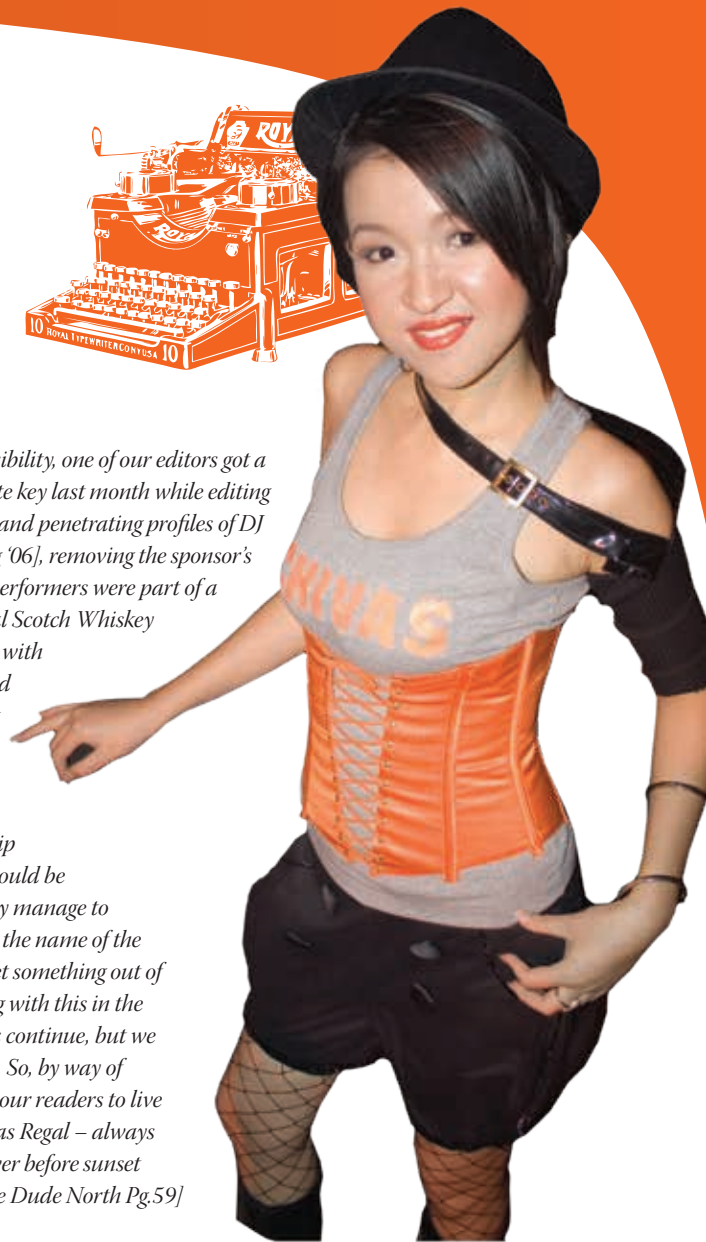
Untamed Notes:

If anyone out there would like to get in touch with the presently single Jill via email to make a marriage proposal, please feel free to ask us for her address, but be aware that Untamed Travel takes no responsibility if she decides in mid-menstrual cycle to beat you to death with a cast iron frying pan for some minor infraction.



We Love Whiskey

Though all of them deny responsibility, one of our editors got a little trigger happy with the delete key last month while editing Cassandra Beckford's insightful and penetrating profiles of DJ Geology and Supernatural [Aug '06], removing the sponsor's name from the text. See, these performers were part of a series of events that Chivas Regal Scotch Whiskey has been sponsoring in Bangkok with slogans like "The Chivas Life" and such. The way these things work is that big sponsors spend loads of money sponsoring talent and thereby subsidising events that in the absence of such sponsorship would mean ticket prices that would be unaffordable. Thus, they usually manage to shoehorn their brand name into the name of the event itself to ensure that they get something out of it as well. We usually play along with this in the interests of ensuring these events continue, but we are mostly human around here. So, by way of recompense, we'd like to remind our readers to live life to the fullest and drink Chivas Regal – always in moderation of course and never before sunset – and to attend their events. [See Dude North Pg.59]



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What's New, *Pussycat*?

Ever wondered what really goes on in those 'shows' that Patpong touts are always inviting you to that involve women's private parts and the amazing stunts they can perform? The Stalker, aka Sally Leighman, takes a break from attracting men to look into the subject.

I went to investigate the deepest, darkest depths of Patpong, Bangkok's infamous go-go bar area and alleged sex capital of the known galaxy. Battling the throng of night-market shoppers in plaid shorts, haggling over knock-off Rolex watches and DVDs that skip, a tout shoved a 'menu' in my face – but the only food on this menu was a banana and it wasn't for eating.

I'd heard the legends of the shows, of course, and countless times suffered the touts shouting such irresistible enticements as, "Pussy shoot banana! Pussy smoke cigarette! Pussy open bottle! Pussy ping pong show!" You get the idea. All this and more were listed on the tout's card, though I noticed there was no, "Pussy writes Master's thesis show."

I never had ventured inside one of these places, so on an adventurous whim, I allowed the man to bustle me through the black curtains, up the stairs and into the bar. The place was dingy with cheesy Euro-pop blaring and migraine-inducing disco lights, colourfully illuminating patches of sticky carpet. The air had a sweaty tang that made my nostrils itch. In the centre was a bar with girls shuffling from side to side on the stage above. I was ushered to the back behind a 160-year-old guy with a naked young lady sitting on his lap, giggling like a schoolboy as he groped her.

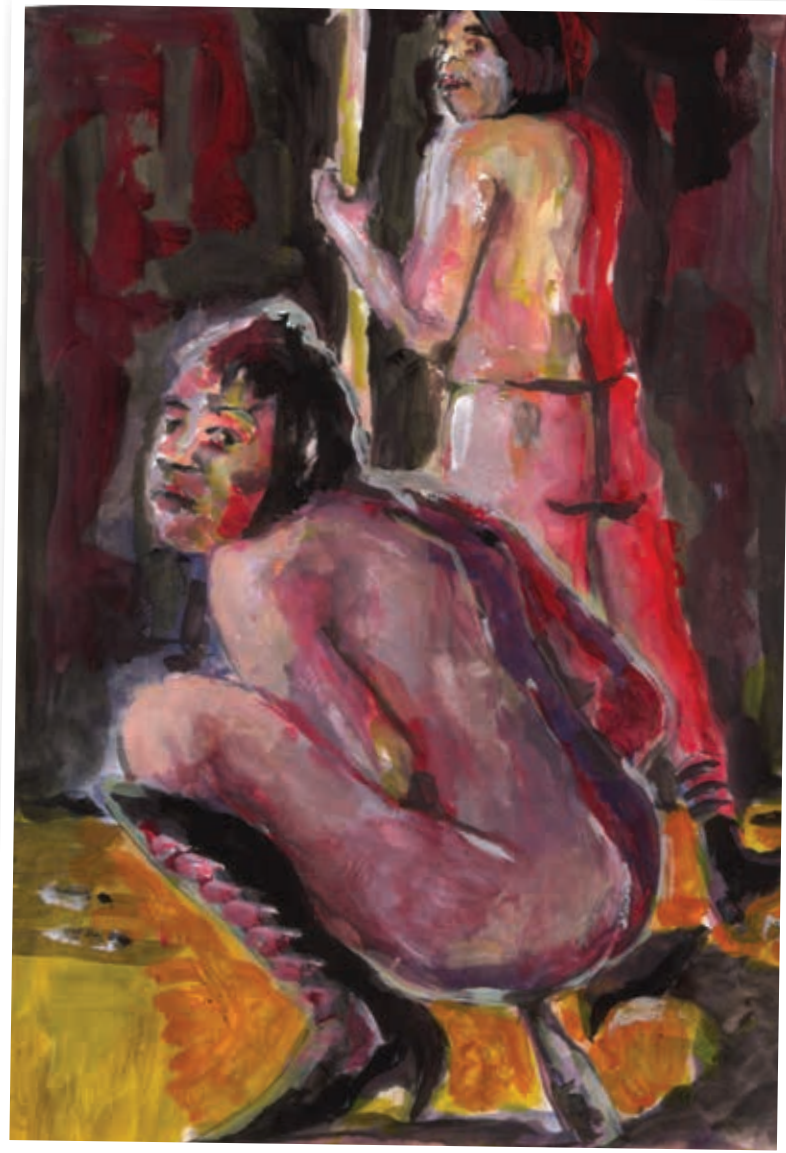
The stools closest to the stage were all occupied by a varied cross-section of men, necks craned towards the stage – most likely tourists exploring the expanded borders of their newly discovered freedom. I, on the other hand, was perplexed.

The aesthetics of the ladies on this particular stage left a lot to be desired. They weren't all pig-ugly and fat, but I couldn't image parting with cash to sleep with any of them. The variety of body shapes was actually quite reassuring from a women's perspective. They had wobbly and dimply bits just like the rest of us. You had to admire their confidence and well-maintained bikini lines.

The tout had promised a show, but watching bored ladies gyrating half-heartedly wasn't my idea of Barnum and Bailey's Circus. It wasn't long before the 'dancers' tottered off and two topless women took the stage, one in thigh-high boots and a thong, the other in hotpants so tight on her pert arse that I wondered if they had been glued on.

They carried an ice-cream cartoon tub of props and plopped it down on the floor. After a bit of faux lesbian revelry and the removal of not-so-under-wear, Miss Hotpants must have worked up a bit of a thirst because she crouched down and opened a bottle of Coke with her reproductive area. I was impressed.

Not wanting to be outdone, Miss Booties took a bottle of clear liquid, and contorting herself into an upside down yoga pose, emptied the entire contents into herself. Turning the right way up, she refilled the bottle with Coke-coloured liquid. Christ would have had a hard time



following that act.

Another girl joined them and began rummaging inside herself until she found a piece of string. She pulled and pulled and pulled, and every half metre was a razor blade attached to the string. At one point, she stopped to cut a piece of cord with one of the razors to prove her daring and skill. That inspired a round of applause. But what man would dare insert his love muscle in there?

The whole affair left me speechless and, call me naïve, but I couldn't work out what was sexy or erotic about these vaginal antics and why they attracted so many people. It seemed like more of a freak show than anything erotic. I wondered if it did anything for the guys. So I asked a male friend who had spent his share of time and money on the sex scene to enlighten me a bit on the pussy show thing. To précis his detailed half-hour response:

"Basically, men – sometimes with their wives or girlfriends in tow – come here as tourists," he said. "Nobody but the sickest bastard gets a stiffy watching a woman pull razor blades out of her birth canal. The shows are there to go to deliberate on extremes – redolent of the Vietnam War era when everyone in the crowd was 19, on R&R and hovering closer to the edge than most people.

"A lot of the folks just come here so they can regale their friends back home about the fleshpots of big bad Bangkok – it has great shock value at cocktail parties in Oregon. No expat I know of is a regular and the only time I go is when I want to freak out a visitor from home. And their reaction is always the same; they wonder why it doesn't all seem more exciting and... dirty, like it was in their imaginations."



汇书本小几舟：

the HARD WAY is the ONLY WAY

Visiting the Middle Kingdom, Suzan Crane finds China full of rewards for the traveller possessing the daring of the fox, the patience of the tortise and the bowels of the elephant.

bus going in the RIGHT direction as we navigated the theoretically short and easy jump from Dali to Lijiang, a lovely UNESCO-listed spot in Yunnan.

Mandarin, like Thai, is a tonal language with many similar words. As such, my most essential companion turned out to be a Mandarin/English phrasebook, but even that didn't always help. Perhaps my most amusing *faux pas* occurred in Dali, a quaint touristy village in Yunnan, populated by colourful ethnic minorities and a battalion of aggressive vendors. Having learned to say "do not touch me," in Mandarin, I was perplexed by the inexplicably strange reactions I elicited until I discovered that I had been bellowing "I want a friend," to the incredulous locals.

Embracing cultures requires serious compromises, and although I'm accustomed to Asian toilets, standards in China fell to a point where I feared permanent constipation. Squat toilets were a luxury compared to the literal holes in the ground – which offered no privacy and stench that boggled the imagination – masquerading as "facilities." Factor in the lack of decent coffee (China being the land of tea) and the vile cigarettes I was compelled to smoke (I know – good opportunity to quit), my system went into shock.

Then there was the spitting. Any rumination on China's abundant and varied delights was persistently interrupted by the revolting sound of phlegm emission. A saying that roughly translated means, "Better out than in" is a philosophy to which the Chinese stringently adhere. Although spitting is supposed to be outlawed in some cities, nobody has told the Chinese.

Despite the annoyances, however, China's highlights were remarkable and many. From the character-etched visages and multihued costumes of the tribal peoples (Yi, Mosu, Bai and others), to the deliriously spectacular landscapes of Yunnan and Sichuan, to the sprawling grasslands of Inner Mongolia (not to be confused with Outer Mongolia, an independent nation), to Xi'an's fabled "underground army" of terracotta figures built by the first Qing emperor to protect him in death, and Beijing's legendary Great Wall (which I trekked mostly on all fours due to perilous steps and my fear of heights!), Forbidden City and Summer Palace, China is a beguiling and compelling travel destination, a dizzying and profound experience which will remain forever engraved in my memory.

A spray of garish neon welcomed me to China, a detonation of colour, flashing lights and pageantry assaulting the senses. Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, resembled any Chinatown in the world, but was no dime-store imitation, no emigrant-ghetto in San Francisco or Kuala Lumpur. This was the real thing, China in all its vivid, vibrant glory. I was enthralled and a bit intimidated by this Asian behemoth, a less well-trodden and more challenging destination than some of my previous travel trails. Although fascinating, a scenically splendid land steeped in culture, history and heritage, China was – and remains – one of the most exhausting and maddening countries on earth. A mangled web of contradictions – at once rigid and linear, chaotic and frenetic – where queues are nonexistent and humanity melds into a mass of flailing limbs and pulsating bodies, it is a country where manners are misplaced and restraint and personal space are alien concepts.

With more than 1.3 billion people (including 55 recognised ethnic minorities) it is indeed a matter of "survival of the fittest." Initially thinking the Chinese to be surly and inhospitable, as I travelled from Yunnan and Sichuan provinces to Beijing, Inner Mongolia and Xi'an, I began to appreciate the historical and sociological circumstances that make up the character of China. With only about one percent of the population speaking English and international visitors a new phenomenon, it stands to reason that the locals, particularly in rural areas, display some wariness towards foreigners. But with Beijing hosting the 2008 Olympics and the MTV generation increasingly embracing all things Western, things are changing fast.

China, for me, was a fantastically disorienting place, a tangle of anarchic traffic (pedestrians, bicycles, cars, livestock), incomprehensible language barriers and undecipherable signage all contributing to the confusion – as alien to me as I appeared to be to the Chinese, who stared at me unabashed. Simple tasks often became trials of patience, resourcefulness and tenacity, as were the many gruelling journeys I endured. To wit: it required two hours and four buses to find the RIGHT

Greg Hardwick journeys
via pick-up truck down one of
the most perilous stretches of
mountain road in Thailand to
visit a pasture of eco-tourism.
Photos by Greg

Death Highway



My knuckles turn white as I grip the bar on the roof and nod to the three men standing beside me. It's a cool January morning as we slowly drive past the Mae Sot Police Station. I look down at my feet to make sure I'm securely standing on the tailgate.

The *songthaew* (a covered pick-up truck with two lines of benches) slows and we turn south towards the village of Umphang. I bend down to stretch my back and see 25 women, children and old men sitting or laying on two small benches.

An old Burmese man in his sarong-style *longyi* looks up and smiles. A woman breastfeeds her infant and a young girl with tanaka powder (a decorative powder made from crushed Tanaka root), painted in two large yellow circles on either cheek, stares with dark eyes towards my partner, Lyndal. My partner's blue eyes look out of place.

The truck regains speed as I lean left to see past the bags, wire and pipes, and the five dark-haired young men sitting cross-legged on the roof. Mae Sot is rapidly disappearing behind us and the road ahead looks flat and straight.

The village of Umphang is 165km away, at the end of Route 1090,

the “Death Highway.” The serpentine road acquired its dubious nickname because some 600 workers died during its construction. Some of them were ambushed by Thai communists, or insurgents from the Karen and Hmong hill-tribes, living in the area, who saw the road as a threat to their seclusion. Fortunately, the attacks stopped by the mid-Eighties when the Thai government offered amnesties to communist renegades.

Begun in 1968 and finished in 1987, the road, with its 1,219 bends and switchbacks still lives up to its name. And off to the west of the road, in jungle rife with landmines, the Karen are still fighting the longest-running civil war in history against their Burmese oppressors.

As a testimony to this struggle, we pass a military checkpoint, before making a slow climb into the mountain. The air cools as we negotiate the first of the sharp bends. Each twist of the tarmac provides a different perspective on a green theme of jungle with steep descents down to iridescent green rice paddies, banana groves and chili plantations. The constant swaying of the vehicle makes my stomach flip-flop. Weaving across both sides of the two-lane road, we pass trucks. On the hairpin turns, I can look down past my feet to the valley floor below.

At the halfway point we stop. Two other songthaews on their way back to Mae Sot are also parked, as our driver motions us towards the nearby toilets. We’re at Umpiem Mai – home to 19,000, mainly Karen refugees from Burma.

Across the road the hills are bare except for tall grass. A large village, with cramped bamboo huts and a dirt soccer field, sits amongst the hills beside the road. Two men walk past with large body-length baskets on their backs and slowly disappear into the tall grass.

After our break we find most of our fellow passengers have already reached their destination. The driver smiles and points

towards the roof – he wants me to sit on the roof? I climb up and give Lyndal a hand and we’re back on the road. After five minutes, we stop again. The driver appears and says in broken English that no girls are allowed on the roof. “Local people don’t like,” he says.

Only three of us now ride on the roof amongst the luggage. The swaying continues so I grip both sides of the roof-rack. On the side of the road white concrete markers display the remaining distance. “Only 80 kilometres to go,” I almost say out loud as we sweep around yet another hairpin turn.

My eyes continue to water, my face is sore from the wind and my hair has been wind-gelled into an Elvis bust. The forest is thicker here and an overhanging branch of bamboo tries to scalp me.

Soon the road straightens, the air warms and we slowly descend into Umphang. Until the completion of the road, this journey, via a shortcut through Burma, would take four days on foot or by elephant. We’d just done it in seven hours.

In this town of around 3,000 people, the narrow concrete roads are lined with blue-tiled teak houses and locals sauntering between food stalls and small shops. One woman carries her child in a sling across her chest as she purchases a bag of tamarinds. A small grey monkey sitting with a chain around its neck on a timber window cries out as we turn left up a steep drive. The truck finally stops.

Our guide approaches and with a big smile he introduces himself. A slightly built man, in his early twenties, with a small moustache and wearing a kind of slouch hat, stands with his hands on his hips. “Hello, my name is Boo-Boo,” he says.

Grinning, I’m tempted to say, “Hi, I’m Yogi bear!” But I can’t, my stomach is still moving with the motion of the truck. I jump down off the roof, remove my sunglasses and shake his hand.

Lyndal and I are both lovers of independent travel, but on this occasion we decided to book a

tour. No motorbike hire shops in Mae Sot allow their machines to be taken to Umphang – now I understand why. We had come to get off the northern tourist route to Chiang Mai and see this less-visited region of Thailand. The easiest option was to book a tour at our guesthouse in Mae Sot.

The next day, Boo-Boo guides us by raft for half a day down the Klong River. We set up camp at the headquarters of the Umphang Wildlife Sanctuary, close to Thailand’s most precipitous waterfall – Nam Tok Thilawsu. In 1999, the sanctuary was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site and it reminded me of sub-tropical Australia.

Most of the tours, lasting three days and two nights, include stopovers at the sanctuary and waterfall, along with elephant riding and off-the-well-beaten-trek outings to rarely visited hill-tribe villages.

That night, by the campfire light, we are serenaded by a collection of Thai tour guides. I fall asleep smiling as they laugh at their own attempts to sing in English.

We return to Umphang the next day and now face the return trip to Mae Sot. However, this time, we ride alone with room to stretch out in the back of a new truck. Absolute luxury! We’re both tired and the return trip passes by like an old film in reverse.

Back in Mae Sot we walk past the local refugee detention centre back to the same guesthouse we stayed in before the road trip, and collapse on the soft bed. I can still feel the swaying of the moving truck.

When I look at Lyndal, she’s already asleep. I think of our journey and can still picture those electric-blue songthaews swaying with their human cargo down Route 1090. It’s peculiar how it’s not the waterfall or the rafting that remains in my mind – it’s the journey down a road less traveled.



Mae Sot

A trading outpost, the town is a sometimes combustible combination of Burmese spies, Karen rebel soldiers, foreign mercenaries, UN staff and volunteers. It’s also home to the famous clinic run by the award-winning humanitarian Dr. Cynthia. The town is three kilometres from the Burmese border.

Getting to Mae Sot

Train from BKK to Phitsanulok, then bus to Sukhothai, where regular mini-vans run to Mae Sot via Tak. Another option is a direct bus from Bangkok to Mae Sot – about nine hours.

Umphang

The name Umphang is derived from the Karen word for a small basket used to carry ID documents. Umphang, in the province of Tak, is 670km northwest of Bangkok. Measuring more than 4,300 sq km, Umphang is the largest district in Thailand.

Refugee Camps

Mae La camp, 66 kilometres north of Mae Sot, contains as many as 45,000 refugees. In total, more than 100,000 refugees live in various camps both north and south of Mae Sot.

The Thilawsu Waterfall

Thailand’s largest waterfall is 400m high and up to 500m wide. The falls are at their most plentiful during the wet season. And whitewater rafting is especially popular in September and October. Most visitors come in November and December, when the weather is cool and dry and the road leading to the waterfall not so rutted.

Historic Attractions

The Ta Ko Bi Cave was once used as a hideout by the Communist Party of Thailand. The Karen village of Ban Pa La Ta is more than 250 years old.

Changing Money

There are no banks or ATMs in Umphang so make sure you have some cash reserves.



Breakdancing in Brunei, 2005: "I did a 36-hour stopover from Kota Kinabulu to Sarawak. In this old traditional village where the houses are up on stilts, I ended up on this basketball court with a breakdancer. When he saw I had a camera he started smiling more. I like the Spiderman shirt."

CONTACT FEATS

This intercontinental drifter and Israeli-American's photography career has developed in tandem with his work as an irrigation specialist, writes Jim Algie. Photos and captions by Boaz Rottem.

O bssing over a TV drama about elephants in India back in the early 80s eventually led Boaz Rottem to Asia. Nearly a decade later he was looking for pachyderms on his first day in New Delhi. That was the start of a 13-month journey which took him through India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and China. And that's when he began framing his travel experiences and personal encounters with his view finder.

Returning to Jerusalem, Boaz studied agronomy (the science of soil and water) to write his own onward ticket as an expat working on rural development projects. Two weeks after graduating he was volunteering in the Philippines, where a volcanic eruption had tainted the waterways with ash. This stint lasted four months, but hardly quenched his thirst for adventure and development work. After working on a private mango farm in Venezuela, Boaz finally landed his "dream job" in Andhra Pradesh, India.

Much of the region's rice-dependent economy had evaporated thanks to an eight-year drought. From 1999 to 2003, he helped to design and implement irrigation systems, as well as teaching the locals how to use them. He also lent them a hand in introducing new hybrid crops, methods of cultivation and ways to reap the cash from the crops they had sown.

But it was the strange scenes of everyday life, says the 37-year-old, like "a woman walking around with a python, snake charmers, and fortune-tellers who have parrots choosing the cards" that reawakened his passion for photography. "As a photographer I like to capture life as it is. Indians are very photogenic and they love to have their photos taken but the British taught them these rigid poses."

Born in Philadelphia, Boaz spent five of his formative years in the US before returning to Jerusalem where he did his mandatory three years of military training. "It was a great social experience, meeting people from different social sectors," says the agronomist, who worked in the command centre of field units.

He is well aware of how Israelis abroad are stereotyped as abrasive loudmouths, but points out that they are not the only travelers who roam the planet in ethnic packs.

"Many nationalities like to stick together, but I don't really like that. I prefer to travel as a person. Many Israelis seem loud and rude. These are cultural differences. But the nice thing about Israelis is how they criticize themselves through all the satiric comedies on TV, like one show about backpackers in Delhi."

Over the years of travel and water work, Boaz has developed a fixation with photographing indigenous tribes: the Miao (or Hmong) in China; the Yao in Laos; the Tibeto-Burmese peoples of northeast India; the Warao in Venezuela, who sleep in hammocks; the Paduang (or Long Necks) of Burma; and around eight or nine different ethnic groups in one of his favourite destinations, Ethiopia's Lower Oma Valley.

Only a couple of his working holidays have been marred by surly locals, "like a few cuckoo guys getting aggressive in Ethiopia in the market for an hour and a half." The same went for a market in Botswana, forcing him to use a zoom.

And in '94, in Egypt, "there were a few aggressive people who didn't know I was Israeli. It was a general aggression. But many Sudanese camel traders came over and apologized for them. It really touched my heart."

Now based in Nanjing, China, where he lives with his Indian wife, Boaz is trying to build up his portfolio as a professional photographer. Though it's a big modern city, the air laden with pollution, Boaz likes the old Chinese neighbourhoods and we hope to have a feature story from him soon about the city's new Rising Sun Anger Release Bar. In the bar, customers can vent their spleens by yelling, smashing glasses and even hitting male staff, dressed up as different characters and wearing protective gear.

Photographers often seem like the penultimate voyeurs – 'private eyes' who hide behind their cameras and zoom lenses – even as they remain privy to all the world's rage and agony. But for this wandering Jew, the most poignant advice he has for aspiring photographers is: "Look for the interaction. Usually, my goal was the journey not the photographs, but now I do them together. If you think all the time with a camera, you might not enjoy everything. I like to put the camera down and sit down and talk with people."

Just don't bring up Middle Eastern politics with him or you'll get a repeated chorus of "off the record," or, laughing, "Hey, don't print that." See more of his work at www.flickr.com/photos/photos/boaz.



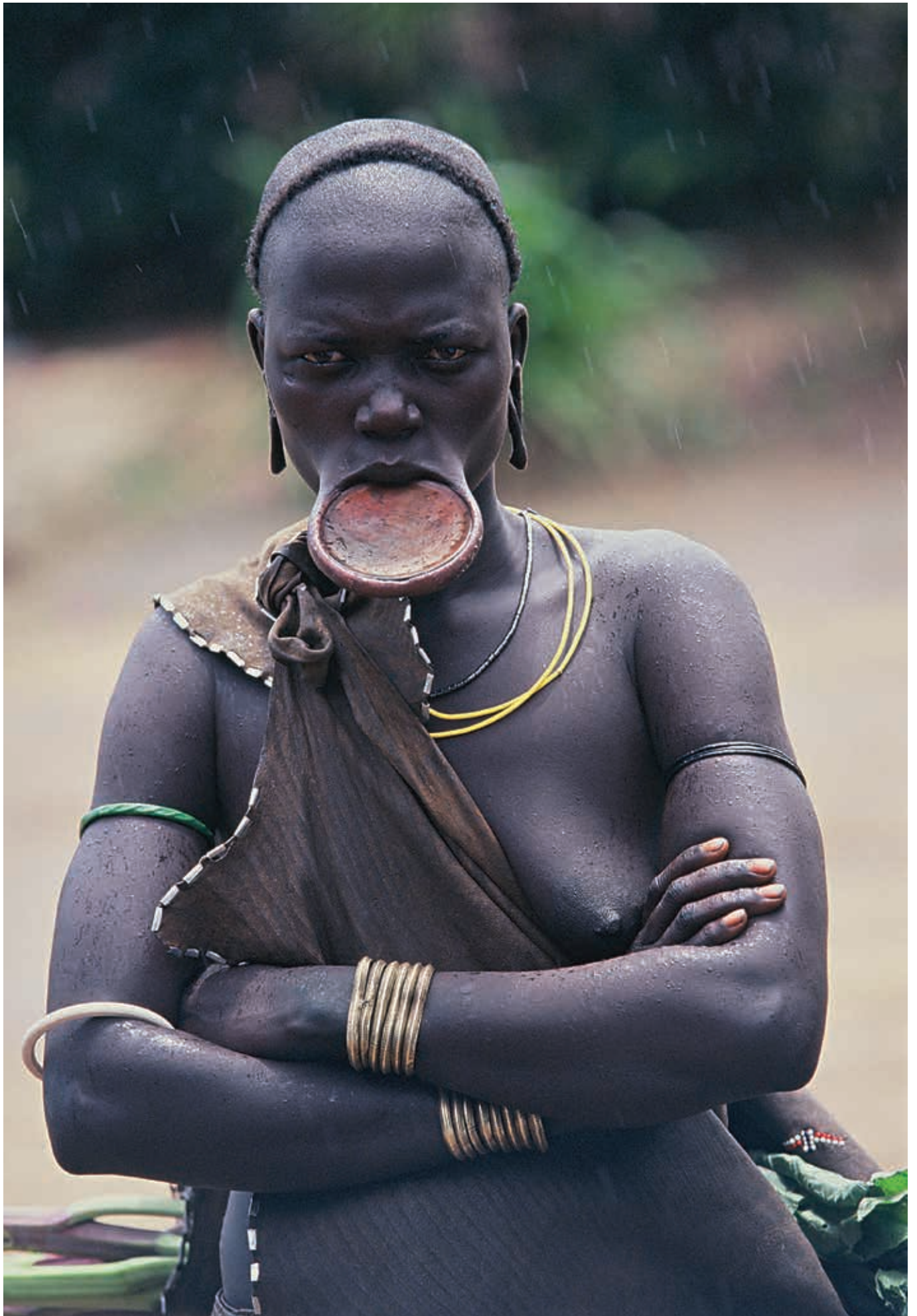
Gansu province, on the Silk Road, Chinese Muslims, '95:

"I was sitting in a bus next to the back door and the driver stopped the bus and people were getting on and there was this gathering of people staring at me. I just picked up the camera and thought it was a nice shot. With the hats, it looks kind of old like the 70s. On the trader's route a lot of them were Muslims because they're good vendors so they settled down there."



Andhar Pradesh, India, '99:
"In order to encourage their children to go to school and not work in the fields, the government gives them rice. I saw this long line of kids walking with rice bags on their heads. Out of four years working there, this is one of my favourite photos."

Mursi tribe, lower Omo Valley, southwest Ethiopia: "This is one of the last untouched areas of indigenous communities still living in their original lifestyles. You can take public transport, a pickup truck with seven or eight locals. Most travelers go to the first village of the Mursi where they charge money for taking photos of them. But I pressed on to visit other villages. I had a guide to ask questions and it really helps to have a guide to tell them why I'm taking photos. My best experience with the Mursi people came at night when all the teenage boys and girls formed a circle to clap their hands and dance and I was jumping around in the middle of them."





Chobe National Park, Botswana, 2002:

"Taken from a boat in the late afternoon, when an elephant herd of 15 beasts were really playing around. I did a little underexposure on the photo to get silhouettes. The boat trip is the most popular daytrip in the park and you see lots of elephants, crocodiles, and hippos, but if you take the Jeep ride, you can see lions or, if you're lucky, leopards."

Top Three Adventures

Words by Boaz Rottem (pictured)

1. Stuck in a 4x4 in the middle of an icy river which flows down from Mount Everest. As freezing water filled the car, I climbed onto the roof and with the help of our driver and friends, jumped to the truck that carried all the equipment. A terrifying but unforgettable experience from 2001.
2. Traveling the Silk Road in 1998 and spending so many nights with local families who rarely meet Westerners. The hospitality of the people of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan touched my heart forever.
3. Smuggling ourselves (my wife and I) onto an off-limits-to-foreigners Burmese train without tickets, heading south from Inle Lake to the home of hill-tribes like the Long Neck. The next day, a rusty old Jeep took us to their market. The interaction with the Long Necks in 1995 was unique; their curiosity was childlike and refreshing. I let them hold the camera and shoot some pictures and they were thrilled.



the Ollie Lama

Nothing escapes the eye of canny travel-writer Oliver Benjamin, and as one not to pull literary punches, he takes a good look at Singapore, puts his fingers in gear and tells us how it is in the Lion City.

take on singapore

HighLights

Ethnic Neighbourhoods

Singapore is like the America of Asia – an engineered ideal where struggling immigrants from other countries all came to seek life, liberty and the pursuit of cold hard cash. Okay, maybe not so much liberty. But in Singapore there's more multiculturalism crammed together in a small space than you'd find in all the backpacker dives in Paharganj. Wander around Chinatown, Little India or Arab Street and sing "We Are the World" at the top of your lungs. Just don't sing off-key or you might get arrested.

Comically Draconian Legal System

World dictators should take a lesson from Singapore – have a sense of humour! Singapore is a totalitarian state where chewing gum can get you thrown in jail. If that isn't hilarious enough, you can buy T-shirts that read "Singapore is a Fine City," which lists the incredible penalties for bringing a durian on the subway, littering, or even "?" The result – everyone is perfectly happy in their little Matrix-world, and you should be too. Or else.

Historical Areas

Down by the quayside you can find all sorts of so-called historic neighbourhoods. That's if you consider tearing down old buildings and replacing them with gleaming replicas to be historic. But that's wacky, forward-thinking Singapore for you. Taken together, Bugis Junction, Boat Quay, Clarke Quay and Tanjong Pagar are all about as historically authentic as the Chinese pork burger at McDonalds. But that doesn't mean they're not worthwhile – tackiness is a culture all its own.

Changi Beach and Village

Singapore doesn't have the best beaches in Asia, but Changi has a few things to recommend it – transsexuals and airplanes. At night the best-looking trannies in Asia come out to dangle their wares, and due to the adjacent airport you can enjoy laying on the beach while having an airplane almost land on top you. Admittedly, neither are everyone's cup of tea, but both can scare the crap out of you and make for funny photos.

Pulau Ubin

For a real taste of old Singapore, head over to this nearby island, where you can see real Malay *kampung* (village) life on a bicycle and stuff yourself silly with fruits of the sea. On weekdays the beaches are practically deserted and you can probably pedal around the entire island without running over a single fat little screaming city brat. Get there from Changi Village by a fancifully-named "bumboat" – which refers not to your bottom but to the boat's.

Bukit Timah Nature Reserve

Want to go wild in Singapore? You can do so without risking incarceration at this beautiful stretch of (real!) green tropical forest. See weird native plants as well as the even weirder racquet-tailed drongo bird. You might even catch sight of the giant 100-legged chattering centipede, which on closer examination is really only a Japanese tour group.

MacRitchie Treetop Walk

Get supernatural in more ways than one by walking above the trees at this centrally-located nature reserve. The 4.5 km suspended walking platform lets you see the rainforest from the rain's point of view. Truly there's no easier way to get "off the beaten path" than to rise above it entirely.

Night Safari

Most zoos are so depressing you wish you could feed the animals cyanide instead of peanuts, putting them out of your misery. Not so at the Singapore Night Safari, where the animals are so happy and well fed they won't even eat you, despite the lack of fences to stop them. So Kipling and Disney were right – animals are all cute and friendly after all. But don't test this theory by rubbing yourself with raw meat.

The Wet Market

What's crab and pike and wet all over? Sounds like a joke, but it isn't – though with all the wacky characters inside it can almost seem like one. Unless you're Aquaman, you've probably never seen so much fish in your entire life. The whole place is soggy as the sea so bring some slip-proof sandals and a bucket – they won't sell you anything under two kilograms. Ofisially.

Sentosa

If Singapore sometimes seems like a geopolitical Disneyland, then Sentosa should be its rightful capital – it's Singapore's fun park. Underwater World, Dolphin Lagoon and "Magical Sentosa" may be attractions more for the kiddies, but an increasing amount of DJ parties are being held here. Hopefully they'll change the name to "Sintosa" and turn the dolphin lagoon into a giant



Shopping

Singapore claims to have invented the phrase “shop till you drop” and with the heat and humidity here, that’s not hard to believe. Today’s modern aircon shopping malls and their interlinked tunnels protect you from the environment, ensuring you squeeze out every last cent before finally collapsing in a heap of exhausted bankruptcy.

General:

Intersection of Orchard and Scott Road

Where most of the serious shoppers go. Enormous shopping malls and throngs of streetside vendors do their part in feeding the booming Singapore economy. Most things are cheaper than they are at home so buy lots of things you never wanted in the first place.

Knock-offs

Lucky Plaza

The mother of all shopping malls – Lucky Plaza started it all and is just as sleazy as she ever was. Buy fake brand-name clothing, cologne, watches



ORCHARD RD

and such for a fraction of the cost of the real things. Luck has nothing to do with it – most of it’s crap.

Electronics

Funan Center

A techie’s dream. Some real deals – just make sure you get an international warranty or that new laptop is going to end being used as a doorstop. Prices are sometimes astonishing, but often the same as elsewhere. Shop carefully, young nerd.

Hip Clothing

Bugis Street

Give the snobs their Orchard Road – true hipsters know that you get cooler threads and much better bargains over on Bugis. The downside is that there’s no air conditioning so those clothes you’re trying on are probably saturated with the dried sweat of countless other shoppers.



Eating

Singapore has a reputation for good eats. It’s the only easy vice in a city where a cheap cocktail costs the equivalent of Bt 1,000, drug possession is punishable by death and illicit sex is often too hard to squeeze into one’s busy business schedule.

Food Courts / Hawker Centres

The best deals in town are not only on food, but more importantly, on beer. Enjoy a big bottle of Tiger for S\$6 (Bt 150). Most restaurants would charge you double that and throw you out if you get too rowdy. On the street, it’s all in good fun, at least until the cops show up.

Clarke Quay

The best mix of high and low cuisines. Snack on a cheap pushcart roti or dine on expensive Chinese seafood. The choice is yours, unless you’re there with your girlfriend, in which case the roti option is likely not a good idea.

Far East Square / Ann Siang Hill

Lots to choose from in both of these places, including a nice selection of nearby bars. Singapore’s restaurants often feature better Indian, Chinese and Malaysian food than in the countries they originated in. But don’t tell them that – countries have very sensitive feelings.



NIGHTLIFE

Raffles Bar

No visit to Singapore would be complete without a visit to Raffles, the most storied hotel in all of Asia. Its bar is the birthplace of the Singapore Sling, the only internationally-famous cocktail invented in the East (sorry, Mai Tais are not Thai). Go back to a time when the English not only ruled the world, but did so while drunk all day long. The secret to their massive colonial might? Alcohol, surely.

Sidewalk Café at the Singapore Marriott

“To See and be Seen” is this café/bar’s credo. So don’t get blind drunk here or you’ll screw up the whole premise. There are both inside and outside areas where you can sit and sip champagne. The prices are steep, so sitting outside will make it easier to run away without paying.

Centro 360, Liquid Room, Pravda, Post Bar

Singapore may have the coolest-looking bars in the world – the confluence of great design skills and drunken multiculturalism adds up to some of the most striking interiors this side of science-fiction movies. All charge a pretty penny so make sure to show up already drunk or sweet talk pretty businessbabes into shuttling you free beverages.

Zouk

The coolest nightclub in Singapore is actually three clubs in one – Zouk, Velvet Underground and Phuture. World-class DJs spin vinyl for eager international audiences. Multiple dance floors ensure that there’s something for everyone, as long as everyone is young, hip, well-dressed, well-off and likes electronic music. See? Singapore is nothing if not diverse and tolerant. Everybody dance now. NOW!

Riding the Dragon



While travelling through China can often seem like taking the path of most resistance, Andy Phillips gives you some hard-won advice about avoiding the potholes and finding the best roadside attractions.

Photos by Gemma Phillips.

From its deserts to tropical jungles and grasslands to futuristic cityscapes, China is not just a country; it's a whole world of its own. If you think you've 'done Asia' but have yet to visit the Middle Kingdom, there is bound to be something to stretch your pupils and make your mouth a flytrap – whether it's the Shanghai skyline and neon nightlife or the natural phenomenon of the Tiger Leaping Gorge. With the Olympics ready and good to go in 2008, it's a great time to beat the crowds to the starting line and see this behemoth of a land before it becomes overrun.

Firstly, there are quite a few prerequisites you should stow away on your mental luggage rack for safekeeping. China's size and relative inaccessibility until recent times have made it unlike many Asian nations. Like many forays into foreign lands, however, the harder the sowing the greater the reaping.

Don't expect to speak much English despite the government's efforts to make it the second language. A few words of Mandarin (or a good phrasebook) will ensure that you can order a bowl of steaming noodles and get that elusive sleeper ticket on the train.

Adapting to the transport network is essential in a country which has provinces as big as European nations – greater Beijing itself is bigger than Belgium. Though China's train system is not ultra-modern, it gets you from one urban sprawl to another and, with a 'hard' or 'soft' sleeper ticket you may even get a decent night's sleep.

Another important challenge is to set yourself some realistic goals as to where you want to go. The Chinese authorities may require a basic itinerary before they issue a visa, so doing your travel homework is crucial.

Gear your itinerary to how much time you have and the season. China is such a massive country that the weather can vary wildly from season to season and region to region. If you want to visit Beijing, but don't like the cold, then go from April to October, because temperatures can drop to as low as minus 15-20 in the winter.

Yet Hainan Island, a tropical outpost off the south coast, enjoys its peak season in January and February, with busloads of businessmen jetting in to escape the freezing wastes of the north. Go in late spring or autumn and you will find China much more pleasant, so long as you don't mind sharing the sights with hordes of visitors.

Beijing, Shanghai and Xi'an dominate the tourist brochures with their incredible history and much-vaunted sights and, yes, they are worth visiting, even in peak season. Winter can often be the best time to take in the sights, as you will probably have attractions like the Great Wall or the Terracotta Warriors to yourself – just don't forget your thermals.

But if you want to get a glimpse of the 'real China,' then blast off from the usual tourist orbits. The south of China, from the wilderness of Fujian in the east to the ethnic patchwork of Yunnan in the west, leave wayfarers grasping for superlatives. For epic scenery and untouched wilderness, a journey through the western edges of China – perhaps even making a trip into Tibet – is a must.

With a couple of months to spare you can enjoy the yin and the yang of China, jetting into Beijing for a few days, before launching expeditions into Xi'an's ancient history or Shanghai's party zone.

Moving west, you can see the Great Wall disappear into desert wastes at Jiayuguan in Gansu province, then go south to view awesome cave paintings at Dunhuang. Qinghai province, which is named after the biggest saltwater lake in China, is remarkably photogenic, just as long as you can bear the cavity-loosening bus journeys and mountain nights cold as a meat-locker.

In the southwest, Yunnan province is the zenith, regardless of the season. Yunnan has China's highest concentration of ethnic minorities, some of the best food on offer, incredible scenery, and towns which have survived the concrete revolution that has all but destroyed other parts of China.

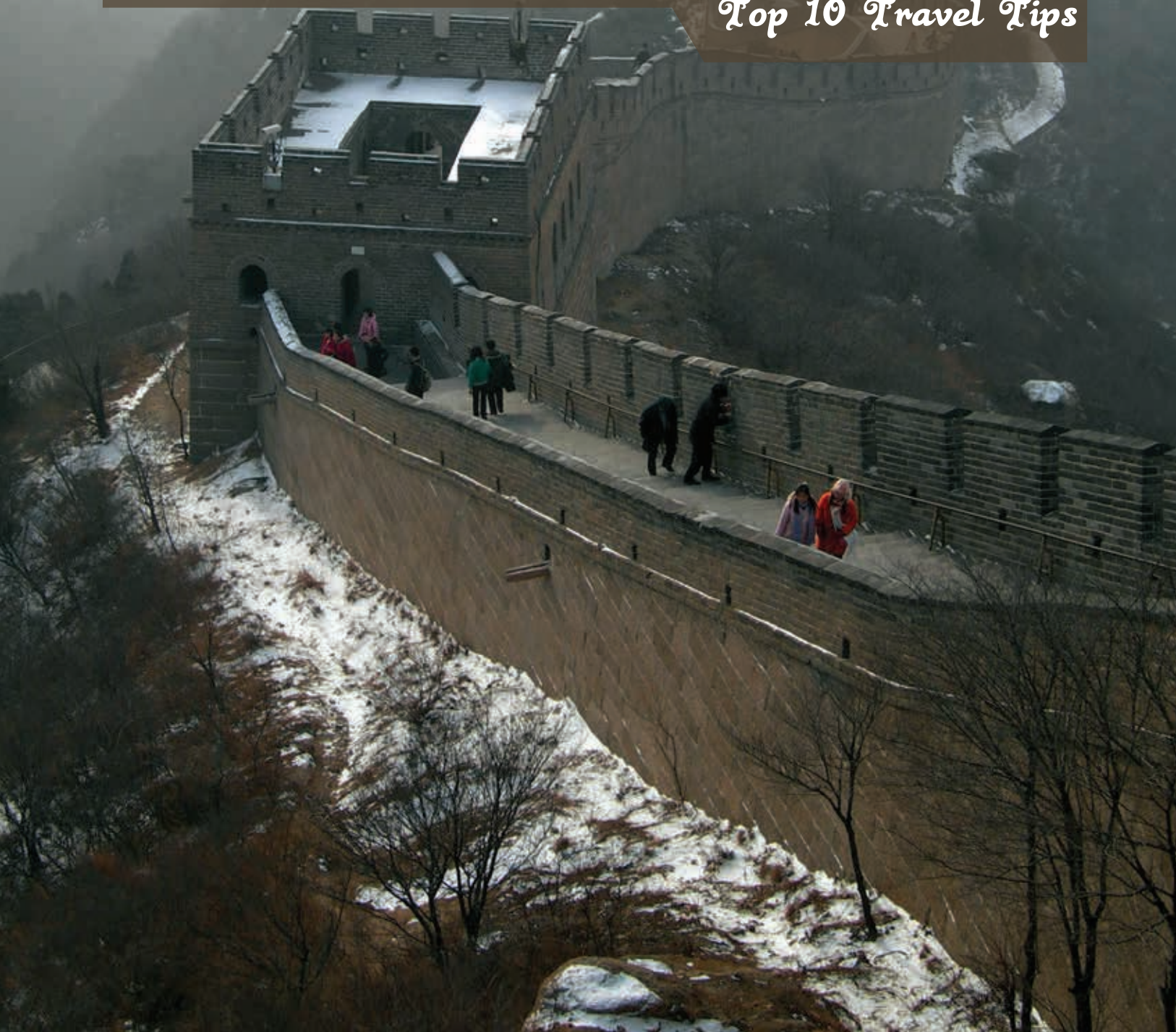
Two of the province's top draws are Dali, near the foothills of the Himalayas, and the 1,300-year-old Lijiang, which is the only Chinese city on UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage list. For great outdoor escapes, the legendary Tiger Leaping Gorge is nearby. Trekking the gorge will take two to three days with stops at mountain guesthouses, which have dorms beds for RMB15 per night (Bt70) and home-cooked food.

Once you have discovered the gorge, try making it to sleepy Xishuangbanna, and its 'capital,' Jinghong. Bordering Laos to the south, jungle treks with sleepovers in hill-tribe villages are the way to go. On Sundays, head for Menghun's market, where the brightly robed members of different hill-tribes descend to sell their wares.

With such a vast country to roam, the potential to make myriad discoveries and be your own 21st-century Marco Polo, is boundless.

1. Get a good phrasebook with a menu reader and Chinese characters. If you can't pronounce what you want to say, simply point and you're away.
2. If all efforts to communicate are failing then find someone who looks young. Chances are they are students happy to help you for the opportunity to practise their English.
3. Trains are the best way to cover long distances, with hard sleepers the most popular ticket. Note that you can only buy tickets from the station you are travelling from; return tickets are not available. Buy three or four days in advance and turn up at the station with at least 30 minutes to spare – they are ruthlessly efficient and won't wait for anyone.
4. If you're attempting to cover large distances in a limited amount of time, try flying. You can book online with www.elong.com and they will drop off the tickets at your hotel within 24 hours, provided you leave the cash at reception.
5. Eating in restaurants with Chinese-only menus will save a lot of money as long as you can figure out what you want. If you are not sure what the dish is on the menu, don't take a stab at it, 'cause it could be 'anything' (and that's not a euphemism). Picking a dish with the character for chicken could leave you with a plate of chicken's feet or gizzards.
6. Unless you have an iron stomach, steel yourself for getting sick at least once. Pack rehydration salts, some chemical 'butt plugs' (i.e. Imodium) and think about going veggie – more germs are hidden in meat than anything else. Warding off vampires with cloves of garlic has its roots in ancient medicine, as the Chinese (Thais also do it) still attest to, eating a clove of raw garlic before their meal.
7. Never stick your chopsticks upright into a bowl of rice as it represents death.
8. As in the rest of Asia, 'face' is vital. Keep your temper from turning into a flare gun and add some levity to any awkward situation by cracking a joke or bringing out your inner Jackie Chan with a sight gag. Inoffensive humour is your best defence.
9. Pack some balloons. This may seem strange but if you encounter child beggars you can blow one up and give them something their parents can't take away from them.
10. Practice musical chairs before you leave. That way, when you get to the subway in Beijing or Shanghai, you may have a halfway decent chance of scrambling to a seat.

Top 10 Travel Tips





Twelve Days in Tibet

Ian Green and his cohorts took in all the highs of Himalayan grandeur and the lows of Chinese squalor while searching for traces of the real Tibet. Photos by Ian Green, title page photo by Boaz Rottem.



With a Tibetan guide who knew less about his country than we did, five chain-smoking Italians, two South Africans, and me, a Kiwi, combined with a complete disregard for all safety warnings about survival at 6,000 metres, everything was good to go. We were going to Tibet, “the Rooftop of the World,” to see what was left after the Dalai Lama went into exile some 55 years ago, and the subsequent genocide.

Considering that Tibet has caused a controversy of such globe-shaking proportions, we set out to answer the question about whether the country really exists anymore.

Unlike some of our predecessors, we weren't going to stand in front of Potala Palace with a group of friends and start chanting “Free Tibet!” which usually results in instant arrest. The Chinese have zero tolerance for such protests. Our plan was to drive a Jeep from Lhasa, Tibet's capital, through the Himalayas, with a brief stop at the Everest base camp, and onwards to Katmandu. It would take 12 days and it would change our concepts of virtually everything.

Relics Of Lhasa

Supposedly, Lhasa is nothing but another Chinese city with little remaining of Tibetan culture. The rumours are wrong. There are still remnants of the 'real' Tibet, but you must search for them.

The main road is a bit nauseating. It could be a main road in any Chinese town and is probably why many visitors say Lhasa is crap. Chinese signs, Chinese restaurants and Chinese hookers are everywhere. With the Potala Palace as a backdrop, there is enough irony right here for a whole book.

All the roads surrounding Lhasa are blockaded. You need a permit and a guide to leave the city. Inside, though, you can do whatever you like, bearing in mind that there are cops everywhere and they *are* watching. Once you leave the tourist streets you become lost in narrow, cobbled side roads that seem a little like parts of Rome. This is where you will find some leftovers of what Lhasa may have been like before the occupation.

The main square is bustling with markets and hustlers, selling all kinds of clothing, jewelry, and artifacts both ancient and modern. One particular hustler shoved a *human skull* in my face: a real human skull, freshly dug up, and encrusted with bits of dirt. My girlfriend nearly puked and looked away. I got him down to Y300 (Bt1,400) and shoved the thing in my bag, without realising how much anguish this would later cause me at both the customs counters of the airports at Katmandu and Shanghai. I also purchased the biggest hunting knife I have ever seen; this would also cause me a lot of trouble and paranoia.

When airport officials see a human skull and a large hunting knife in the same bag drift across the X-ray machine... well, I think you see the point.

(There is no easy way to explain this kind of behaviour without being considered psychotic. I don't know why I bought a human skull, or a large hunting knife. I have never even been hunting and I'm a pacifist. All I can say is that *it seemed like a good idea at the time*, but more about this dilemma later.)

At the front of the square is the city's holiest of holies, the Jokhang Temple. There is usually a long queue to get in; Buddhists make pilgrimages of thousands of kilometres to pray here; they bring thermoses of wax to pour into a sacred candle which never stops burning inside the building.

Outside, people prayed before the temple. Hundreds of worshippers that had trodden on bare feet across the plains from Sichuan stood, prostrated themselves with their foreheads on the ground, then got back on their knees, then stood again. Then they repeated the cycle. Their wrist and knees were wrapped with bandages. A hundred voices intoned prayers.

We watched and photographed the scene from a respectful distance. Maybe this was as close as we would ever get to true religious faith, I thought.

At this point I realised that Lhasa still has some form of autonomy. Whether this is tolerated by the Chinese government, or they have been unable to completely eradicate it, I am unsure, but at least some essence of Tibet's culture is left in this city.

Into The Mountains

There was a brief moment's panic the next morning when a few members of our expedition realised they needed to buy jackets, sleeping bags, and hiking boots, for mountaineering. At least I'd had the foresight to bring a large woollen jumper. Under duress I bought a jacket and some new boots. Soon we were packed and ready to leave Lhasa.

The scenery was astonishing. Mountain ranges some 6,000 metres

gargantuan ribboned with narrow winding roads, then flatlands so empty and long they numbed the mind. From time to time, lone nomads would appear like ghosts in the desert or snow-blanketed plains.

We slept in a few Chinese towns, like Shigatsa. Although you will find the usual token Tibetan temples here and there (so obviously restored that they seem ridiculous) these were the parts of the trip that really pissed us all off. When driving through some of the most amazing geography on earth, in search of some remnants of Tibetan culture, you don't really want to spend your evenings wandering around Chinese cities passing karaoke bars and being yelled at by more hookers. But this is the reality of modern Tibet.

Unbelievably enough, up on the ceiling of the world, we had to endure a traffic jam and witnessed high-altitude road rage for the first time. Two Chinese traders swinging at each other next to a thousand-foot precipice; my money was on the guy with the moustache, but someone broke the fight up before the idiots could plunge off the edge to their deaths.

Restaurant On Top Of The World

We traversed a long and overheated stretch of ceaseless sand. Just when the sheer monotony was beginning to make us sick, our driver said we would stop at a restaurant for a late lunch. But where could you eat in the boondocks of nowhere? We hadn't even seen a single yak all day.

A ramshackle building appeared in the distance. As we approached, a small Tibetan family emerged to greet us. Exhausted and confused, we stumbled out of the Jeeps. It was dark inside and we sat down on benches around a table. They pulled out some pre-packed boxes containing a chicken leg, a small bag of rice, a carrot, and an apple. Apparently, once a week these supplies were airlifted in to feed weary and desperate travelers like us. Their 'restaurant' was so humble, and our hosts so gentle, that for a moment we felt we had found what we were looking for: an oasis of genuine and benign Tibetans in the middle of a desert.

While the others ate I went for a walk. There was a small hill nearby. I climbed it, looking at some mountains in the distance and the golden rolls of sandy dunes. I gritted my teeth in the breeze, which is what hardened travelers do in these situations. I gnawed on my chicken leg.

Some nomads approached in the distance with a few yaks in tow. As they approached the restaurant I ran down the hill and greeted them. "*Tasha delak*. *Tasha delak!*" (Which means, "Hello," in Tibetan, I think.) At first they were terrified, as anyone would be when a tall bearded man comes running down a hill at you brandishing a chicken leg. Then, when they realised I wasn't going to rob them or steal their yak, they responded with big smiles.

I gave them what was left of my lunch, and ensured the rest of our crew did the same. They accepted our offerings with eagerness and we laughed together at our mutual lack of comprehension.

Diamond Desert

All of a sudden, the Jeeps pulled off the road and we all leapt out of the vehicles and lined up in awe. For a while no one could speak. Then we started shouting and laughing and hugging. In a flurry of excitement, we pulled our cameras out of our pockets.

Before us lay a desert, washed up like a giant ocean, all the way to the shores of a mountain range. From horizon to horizon, it looked like a diamond-encrusted crown placed on the forehead of the earth.

This was our first glimpse of the Himalayas. Spread out before us

**One particular hustler shoved
a human skull in my face: a
real human skull, freshly dug
up, and encrusted with bits
of dirt**



against an unblemished blue sky, without a scrap of cloud cover, the sight left tears of near-religious adulation in more than a few eyes.

Hours later we left the desert and entered the mountains. As evening approached we stopped the Jeeps and climbed out, shivering in the cold. Nearby, a small sign etched into a marble tablet marked the entrance of Qumolangma National Park, the beginning of the road to Everest. Mountains of rock and snow rose into the clouds. Up ahead the rocky road wound its way into the distance.

You never really understand the word 'silence' until you've heard it at 6,000 metres on a deserted snow field. At that altitude, you hear

Up on the ceiling of the world, we had to endure a traffic jam and witnessed high-altitude road rage for the first time

nothing, not a whisper of wind, not even your own heartbeat. Nothing. Mist and flurries of snow swirled around me – brief whiteouts before the bases of mountains came back into view. Up here, you lose all sense of perspective; you catch glimpses of things that can only be gigantic, but then everything is shrouded again and lost.

Voices drifted over from another life, another state of being, waking me from my reverie. It was time to return to the vehicles. We had a long way to go and the freezing Tibetan night was coming.

At that height, the cold stabs at your bones. It bites any piece of exposed skin and turns it red and numb. Your breath comes out in clouds of vapour. I turned and stomped back to the Jeeps. We were approaching Everest.

Everest Base Camp

The consensus at the Everest base camp is that those who climb *do not* mingle with 'tourists.' The possibility of contracting a cold or flu is high, and that is the last thing you need as you begin an ascent of the world's highest mountain.

Amidst tents and makeshift dwellings my girlfriend and I met a team sent by the Indian air force. For three months they had been acclimatising and were now playing the waiting game. Soon the day would come, when the conditions were right, when the wind was not so strong, and a storm was not on the horizon.

They welcomed us into their dinner tent and we spent the night there laughing and sharing stories. The young Indians, who hadn't seen a woman in months, couldn't keep their eyes off my girlfriend and her breasts. I didn't mind. Neither could I.

People drifted off to bed, including my girlfriend. I was left with the leader of the team. He pulled out a bottle of brandy and we drank it all. At 46, full of wisdom, determination and liquor, he was hoping to become the oldest Indian to scale the mother of mountains.

That morning I woke feeling slightly ill. The drink had left me dry-throated and cranky. I stumbled out of the tent and joined my team on a large rock where they were taking photographs.

We watched the sun rising over Everest, slowly suffusing the sky with pink until it took on a scarlet glow. Now I understood why the mountain has been revered by Tibetans for centuries. It *is* sacred – a natural monument towering over everything else on earth.

Hard Road To Nepal

After leaving base camp, it took two more days of hard driving on unbelievably bad roads that left me feeling like a crash-test dummy, before we reached Nepal. Everywhere I looked I still saw Everest, like an



imprint left on the retina by the sun.

Rocky mountains slowly gave way to signs of life. First, scraps of bush, then sporadic trees, then patches of jungle until we were surrounded by organic life again. Our senses, overloaded by 12 days of vertigo-inducing scenery, struggled to make sense of it.

On the last day we descended *four thousand metres*. This felt strange but it meant we were allowed to drink again, though I had not actually bothered to follow this rule. Actually, you're not supposed to drink alcohol when you're higher than 3,000 metres. But I never had any major problems doing it. And that drunken night with the leader of the Indian expedition was at 6,000 metres.

We spent a night at the last Chinese outpost, a town called Nagasaka. This was sort of "The Final Insult": a Chinese town more decrepit,

impoverished, and desperate than any of the others we'd seen. We drank a lot of beer and checked out the hooker bars, just to make sure they were indeed hooker bars. Through diligent yet distant observation in the name of journalism, I can ascertain that they were, in fact, hooker bars. My girlfriend went to bed, so I spent the night with the Italian guys

drinking more beer, playing pool and laughing about how weird, wonderful, and sometimes awful everything had been for the last 12 days.

The next morning we entered Nepal. A bridge over a tiny river separates the two countries. It is forbidden to take photographs there. We went through the usual rigorous border business then crossed the bridge, one by one. At

the end of the bridge, officially in Nepal, we huddled together to take our final glances at Tibet, the days of wonderment left behind us. I glanced at my friends and considered what was going through their minds.

**I tried to enjoy my last moments of freedom, all the while
expecting a small group of Chinese officials to suddenly appear
from around a corner and discreetly whisk me away**



When people tell me now that “it’s a small world” I beg to differ. The world is not small; it is bigger than you can even begin to imagine, and this is one of the ways in which Tibet changes you. There are other places on earth you can feel how infinitesimal we all are: the Grand Canyon is one of them, the Rub Al Kali desert is another, there is a reef in the Solomon Islands, which is so vast, with water so clear, that it’s intimidating. These are the places that give us a sense of perspective. They were here thousands of years before us, and they will exist for thousands more. They challenge us. But they also teach us a little bit about that wise Buddhist virtue: humility.

It wasn’t until I had sent my bags through Nepalese customs that the penny dropped. I was standing in the airport waiting room enjoying a final cigarette when one of my Italian comrades came up to me, a look of concern on his face, and whispered in my ear, “Do you know what a political prisoner is?”

He began to explain, but I was well ahead of him already. What had I done? How could I have been so stupid? Going through customs in Nepal, nobody had even flinched at the skull and knife. Without even thinking of the possible ramifications, I had been expecting the same nonchalant treatment in China.

As the Italian explained his concerns I quickly began to

sweat. My heart was sprinting. I stubbed out my unfinished cigarette and quickly lit up another one. We both noticed that my hands were shaking.

I was about to carry a Tibetan skull into mainland China. The knife was inconsequential, but the skull could easily be considered an act of political protest. Evidence of the genocide! Instant imprisonment!

We boarded the plane and I spent six hours in a state of quietly restrained terror. Several times I explained to my girlfriend that even though I was about to go away for a long time I loved her and wished her to get on with her life. Be happy, I told her. Don’t wait for me. I didn’t want any visitors on the inside unless they were from the UN.

We landed and I prepared to be arrested. But there were no cops waiting when we got off the plane. As we walked through the airport, I tried to enjoy my last moments of freedom, all the while expecting a small group of Chinese officials to suddenly appear from around a corner and discreetly whisk me away.

I sweated a little more while waiting for the luggage. Still, no cops, no officials, no loudspeaker announcement, “Would Mr. Ian Green please turn himself in.”

My bag went through another X-ray machine. The attendant didn’t even blink as a large knife and a skull drifted past her vision.

No one could believe it. We regrouped and stood outside the airport in Shanghai and were left with a new point to ponder, what is a human life worth in China?

I knew the answer: US\$10.

In reality, though: nothing. Nothing at all.

Does Tibet Still Exist?

“Irrespective of the passage of time the freedom struggle of the Tibetan people continues with undiminished determination.”

- *The Dalai Lama.*

Does Tibet even exist anymore?

My answer is yes, Tibet does exist, and evidence of its cultural origins and inherent spiritual benevolence are there. But you will have to search for them. It won’t be easy, and you will have to wade through a massive Chinese occupation that might make you start retching in the middle of your quest. But Tibet is enormous. You will find fragments, remote, tattered, but still fragments.

The Tibetans co-exist with the unfortunate culture of industrial China. This inherent greed has been passed on and the new generation of Tibetans is not the ones who once wrote *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Now it’s all about survival in a modern world they never wanted but have no choice but to exist in and adjust to.

Go and see the Himalayas. Go and see Everest. There are no other geographical locations on earth that compare. It may even *surpass the disgust* in anyone who knows what has happened and what is continuing to happen in what the Chinese call their own “Winter Wonderland.”

Arrivals

There are a few ways to get there:

1. You can go to Qinghai, China, obtain the necessary permit from a travel agent and take a bus to Lhasa. It will take around four days and probably be excruciating. I have heard that these roads make what we went through seem like a sidewalk stroll.
2. You can fly from Cheng Du which is the capital of Sichuan province in China. But you must be part of a tour group. Agents there will arrange everything for you including the necessary permit.
3. China Southern now has daily flights from Guangzhou to Lhasa.
4. You can reverse the process and go via Katmandu: This way you will not actually need a special permit to get there. You will be issued a 30-day visa for China, and join a tourist group in a Jeep, or simply fly Katmandu to Lhasa. Once in Lhasa it’s easy to find a travel agency to help you get permission to leave the city. The particular route we traversed is usually cancelled during the Himalayan winter, from June to February.
5. The controversial railroad from Qinghai to Lhasa, completed this year, will provide a spectacular alternative means of transport to Lhasa. The highest railroad in the world will take around a week to get you there; once again the documents will need to be arranged first in Qinghai.

WHEN TO VISIT

The balmiest time to visit is from April to the beginning of November. December to February is the most frigid time of the year. To get a good look at Everest when it’s not swaddled in mist, early May and early October are usually the best times.



Virtually every single park bench is occupied by an amorous couple



CITY of the FUTURE?

Bangalore is India's IT capital, surrounded by industrial estates crammed with software companies and call centres, writes Tom Vater. With 5.7 million inhabitants, the capital of Karnataka is hailed as India's most progressive city, riding the currents and trade winds of the country's rapid economic development. Photographs by Aroon Thawchatturat.

This city of high technology and low lives does not make a great first impression. The traffic is chaotic, the pollution is all-enveloping and a drive into the centre reveals that Bangalore is as shambolic and unruly as any other Asian metropolis caught in a development boom. Giant edifices to the future – the headquarters of various conglomerates – disfigure the hillsides.

At street level, Bangalore is all India – beggars, vendors, hustlers, kids and bovines come together in a mad disorderly surge along broken pavements, past flashy billboards. There are no magnificent temples or crumbling colonial structures to marvel at. Bummer.

But Bangalore does have its surprises. A drunken man stands crying on MG Road, the consumer's strip for foreign gadgets. He is a middle-aged, wealthy guy in a white shirt, carrying an attaché case. Most likely in a middle-management position, he is both intolerably sad and viciously angry as he berates passers-by, "I earn more than all of you together and none of you will help me. You are all cowards. You call yourselves Indians, but you are all cowards."

A crowd quickly builds up – young urban poor with nothing to do, beggars with hollow eyes, a gaggle of student girls at the end of a shopping spree. There's no shortage of curious people in India. Next to me, a police chief, dressed in kaki pants and a white starched shirt, wearing the Indian version of a Stetson, is directing his boys in shabby green to pull the man off the road. The oblivious drunk has abandoned his audience and is trying to stop the traffic. A queue of Indian rubber-neckers is grinding their gears to a halt, their symbols of aspiration, tiny Maruti and Indica cars, about to crash into one another.

The police chief is still delegating his boot-boys to arrest the urban menace, "We will take him to the station and ascertain the level of alcohol in his blood. Then the magistrate will charge him for public disorder."

A couple of the low-ranking officers, armed with *lathis*, or canes, manhandle the guy towards the station. He never stops railing against the injustice of it all.

The chief solemnly says, "This kind of thing happens all the time. He will pay a fine of 300 rupees [Bt240]."

The Botanical Gardens, founded in the 18th century by a Muslim ruler, are Bangalore's lungs. They are well kept. No plastic, no smoking and a bunch of sheriffs to enforce the law. Leafy avenues lead from one spectacular attraction to another – a crumbling circular aquarium with a two-rupee entry fee (no bargain), a mechanical sun dial that lies in a dug-up flowerbed surrounded by scary plaster figures of Disney's Snow White and her seven dwarves. And there's a modest glass house, modeled after the Crystal Palace in London. The sign honouring the

politician who restored and reopened the glass house is almost as big as the building itself. The place attracts a sizeable crowd.

Painted figures of full-breasted deities lurk between shady bamboo groves and open fields.

The Botanical Gardens is *the* place in Bangalore where lovers meet. Never mind the cavernous, darkened bars or the brightly lit fast-food joints in town like Stars 'n' Stripes. Virtually every single park bench is occupied by an amorous couple. The state of the couples' relationships can be surmised from their physical proximity. While some lovers engage in earnest conversations across a one-metre divide, others hug and steal kisses at opportune moments. But the chance to let passions run free are fleeting. The patrolling sheriffs, who clamp down on loose morals, discourage the most ardent paramours, and even chase away one couple resting in the shade of a cypress tree. Pissing in public is not nearly as much of a problem as hugging, and plenty of men relieve themselves without decorum or shame.

That said, the sheriffs ensure that the Lalbagh Botanical Gardens are by far the 'cleanest' place in Bangalore, except for the overflowing bladders.

The city comes into its own during the murky afternoon. Then, the shopping malls and glitzy blocks of glass and concrete shine under a thousand strips of neon. A small minority of the citizens has disposable incomes and they spend it on MG Road. Designer clothes and accessories, mobile phones, CDs, handicrafts, clothes, supermarkets, cinemas – it's a consumer's paradise for those who don't have the money to shop in Bangkok or Singapore. If you do, then MG Road is a hilariously pathetic excuse for a shopping centre.

But the glamour faded before the paint dried. On this road, the sidewalks are still broken and the occasional sadhu lights up the consumer darkness in passing. Young Indian women in jeans and flashy tops cruise the streets, some meekly holding hands with their boyfriends, before hopping into a cab and jetting off to their gated communities. On the street, even one that runs above an invisible superhighway of cyber-optic cables, tradition and conservatism continue to dictate people's social behaviour.

Along the pavements in front of fashionable clothes outlets a couple of Hijara, eunuchs in drag, are hustling for money and most shoppers try their best to keep their distance; the eunuchs look as scary as they do in any other Indian city.

Life in Bangalore is a struggle. Despite all the IT money rolling in, the barely lit shopping arcades look as grimy as the nearest corner shop, but not nearly as friendly. The fastest growing city in India has come a long way down the information superhighway, but it's reached something of a dead end for travelers.



DRIFTING THROUGH PENANG

Victor Paul Borg takes a walk on the seamy side to explore this steaming cauldron of ethnic influences, foreign travelers and street-walkers.

You know what *wan hai* means?" asked Jimmy, the Taiwanese owner of the Love Lane Inn, the backpackers' pit where I was staying. "If you find a Chinese woman and tell her that word she will slap you in the face." The scene outside the Wan Hai Hotel dramatised Jimmy's threat: three Thai lady-boys, the sexiest in Georgetown, Penang's old town, pranced around in theatrical solicitation while young men in cars or motorbikes cruised past. Occasionally, a car would stop, one of the lady-boys would hop in and the car would speed away.

The Wan Hai, as I learned more about it, illustrated the cyclical nature of Georgetown: it started as a large and quaint Chinese house, then morphed into a brothel, then reincarnated itself as a respectable hotel, and now it has become part-brothel and part-hotel. It's the only sex establishment left in Love Lane, much tamer now than when the street earned its British nickname: there were three other brothels then, as well as an opium den, a gambling hall, a mahjong factory where players could play on-site, and a Chinese clan house where gangsters vied for the control of the dark lucrative trades.

Now Love Lane largely caters to a different breed of drifters and bums – the backpackers that fill Malaysia's most popular tourist spot.

Yet this is not the whole story. Georgetown still teems with prostitutes, but most are freelancers found lurking in arcaded pavements, such as the group that assemble every night at one end of Love Lane. Walking past for the first time, I didn't see the sex workers because five or six of them, all of South Indian descent, were hidden in the shadows, until they started hissing and whistling.

To find out more about them, I allowed myself to be drawn into their fold. What struck me most on my first night in Georgetown is that all the prostitutes were lady-boys and there was not an authentic female in sight. All of them looked awkward made up as women. A man would have to be irredeemably lonely to find solace among such ugly men.

"Come with me to my room," one of them said. "Just for 20 ringgit [Bt206]."

I asked him if he was from Georgetown. "Kuala Lumpur," he said. "I came here some months ago. Business is better here."

Georgetown, the capital of Penang, was founded by the British

land-grabbing East India Company in 1786. It was an easy acquisition – an island inhabited by some fishermen – and the East India Company, acting at the behest of British imperialism, declared Penang its fiefdom and founded Georgetown – named after King George III – as a port and trade hub. The port boiled over with a pot-luck stew of traders, vagabonds, and opportunists – Chinese, Bengalis, Tamils, Sikhs, Sinhalese, Burmese, Indonesians, and Europeans. Bit by bit the different ethnic groups created an architectural tapestry that has made Georgetown one of the most culturally diverse towns in Southeast Asia. It has an Indian quarter and a more diffuse Chinese influence. There are also a variety of shrines – Chinese, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Christian – which makes for some fantastic juxtapositions.

Even now, immigrants continue to straggle into Georgetown. People like Jimmy, a Taiwanese who arrived nine years ago, and whose business is booming. He's a friendly and helpful guy, yet utterly focused on raking in money and running a pit-hole that characterised the decadence of Georgetown – my bed was full of bedbugs. The suckers didn't let me sleep, and prolonged my nightly wanderings; one night I killed eight of them.

I was passing through Georgetown to renew my Thai visa. During the day I prowled the streets, savouring the ethnic cuisines. The Indian restaurants served meals on banana leaves – a quaint throwback that has largely disappeared in India. It's the same with cycle rickshaws, very popular in Georgetown but largely superseded by motorised rickshaws in India. And the Chinese restaurant called Weld Quay Restoran was reminiscent of restaurants in Hong Kong a generation ago. The proprietor and cook, a man from Hong Kong, runs a dingy place that is redeemed by deliciously authentic Chinese food. He is a middle-aged man with hair bundled into a pony-tail, and he cooks with acrobatic nimbleness – presiding over six woks, each hand hovering over a different wok, cooking three or four dishes simultaneously.

At other times I hung out at Jim's Café. Jim is another middle-aged man with a pony-tail, a Malay of South Indian descent who had been a wanderer in his younger days. Now he runs a café and bar for backpackers. He's something of a waffler, and his waffling becomes all the more earnest when a single women drops into his café.

I drank with the other Westerners also passing through, mostly on Thai visa runs. There was Steve, a former English soldier who quit the army after the agonies of Iraq, and was now slowly depleting his savings by living frugally in Thailand and Cambodia. His jaw had been cracked in a fist-fight, and now it was clamped shut – he could only drink with a straw through a missing tooth, and he spoke with a slushy slur. There was Marthy, another English guy, and Orlando, a Filipino guy, applying for a Thai work visa. There was a Dutch gay who made a living on Koh Samui by creating sideways cut-out profiles of tourists, then imprinting them on T-shirts. And there was an English girl who, on the face of it, seemed proper and diligent, but was actually a sophisticated hustler in London – a tout who convinced gullible teenage girls to pay US\$100 to be taken to a photo studio for a model photo-shoot.

Thai visas are handled by dozens of agents on and around Chulia Road, anchoring its reputation as a port of call. This explains Penang's character, and an importance utterly out of proportion to its size – where else would you find, on a tiny island, an international airport, an international port, many foreign embassies, and one of the largest industrial centres in Malaysia?

Around Chulia Road, only the prostitutes surpassed the backpackers in visibility. I had begun buying drinks for the group who dawdled on Love Lane so I could dawdle among them. On my last night, the one who was friendliest to me, told me: "I'll also be leaving soon."

"Where are you moving to?" I asked.

"I don't actually like this work," he said. "I'm moving back to Kuala Lumpur. Maybe I'll find a job as a waiter and maybe I'll manage to save some money and study something."



POE CHOO SEAH

寶珠社
POE CHOO SEAH

Green Tea:

The Fad and the Facts

Green tea, which now flavours everything from whiskey to potato chips, is brewing a worldwide revolution in healthy beverages. Jim Algie pores over the dregs of its 4,000-year-old history and sifts through the misconceptions about its curative properties.

Fancy a shot of Johnnie Walker Red Label with your green tea? There's no punch-line here and I haven't been drinking: This heady mixture has already been winning over the tastebuds and livers of booze-mongers in Singapore, China, and Japan.

One need only glance at a recent survey by Ogilvy and Mather's Research Department to see that green tea-totallers are a sizeable majority in Thailand. As a matter of fact, amongst women between the ages of 18 and 39, who see themselves as "health conscious," and earn more than Bt25,000 per month, green tea is the flavour of the year. The survey predicts that the market will grow by 40 percent, from Bt6 billion to Bt10 billion, this year.

But with the taste, or just the hype, now being used in everything from potato chips to face cream, its venerable history is at risk of being made into a mockery. To pinch a leaf from the historical record, the beverage has been used as a form of aspirin and an antidepressant in China for some 4,000 years, Nadine Taylor writes in *Green Tea: The Natural Secret for a Healthier Life*. Its merits have also been feted in the Chinese proverb: "Better to be deprived of food for three days, than tea for one."

Only in more modern times, however, have boffins focused their laser-beam intellects on this curative. The evidence for green tea's ability to ward off the most pernicious of diseases is backed up by loads of research. One particular study, published in the 1994 Journal of the National Cancer Institute, showed that drinking this healthy elixir cut the risk of esophageal cancer in Chinese men by close to 60 percent. Other studies by big American universities, which must be excellent

because none of us can afford to go there, have discovered that green tea can also lower your total cholesterol levels.

But how you ask? Just consult Dr. Google. The answer should appeal to every Scrabble player with a lust for obscure and perversely long words: catechin polyphenols, and particularly the elegant-sounding-as-the-dry-heaves, epigallocatechin gallate, better known by its nickname EGCG. The latter is a formidable anti-oxidant, eager to join part of a guerilla movement within yourself to kill off rogue cancer cells. This might also explain why heart disease is rare among Japanese men, even though three out of four of them smoke like crematoriums.

The true tea connoisseurs among you are already aware of facts like these (which would certainly go down easier with a shot of Johnnie Walker), but both green and black tea come from the leaves of the plant *Camellia sinensis*, however, and herein lies the gym or spa come-on line of the year: "The difference between them lies in the processing the leaves undergo. Well, yeah, baby, the leaves for black tea are like almost totally oxidised but the ones used for green teas are steamed kinda lightly before being dried. Hey, do you wanna go and do some sit-ups together, or have our auras balanced?"

Researchers differ about how much green tea you should actually consume per day: anywhere from two to 10 cups, the hot variety, served straight up, being the healthiest. As yet, the medical jury is still out on whether wearing panty-liners scented with green tea provide any additional benefits, though they could certainly spur on the amorous advances of the health-fascist male.

Such seemingly frivolous remarks underline some serious questions, though, like whether the faddishness of this phenomenon hasn't become almost superstitious – and how many times can one consult Dr. Google in search of answers?

So it's time to hear from a real live health professional and get his take on a local market that now includes a dozen-plus big-name players; Oishi occupies the number-one slot with an almost 40 percent share of the market in Thailand.

A herbologist on Phuket for 25 years, the Chinese-Thai Lim Ho has been drinking green tea for the better part of his 62 years and looks like he's been bathing in the fountain of youth.

"Certainly there are many health benefits from drinking green tea, like cutting down the risk, or at least the agony of arthritis," he says at his small pharmacy of natural herbs, named after himself, in Phuket city. He also prescribes green tea for his patients who need to restore their immune systems if these natural defenses and barriers against opportunistic illnesses have been breached by illness.

He pours scorn on the prevailing belief that this elixir is some kind of panacea for all that ails us.

"If you're eating slops like a pig, and not getting enough exercise except lifting a beer bottle and a cigarette to your mouth, there's only so much green tea can help you. Eating a proper diet, which incorporates a lot of other herbs like lemon grass and spices like chili have helped me to stay young, well, that and having a wife who's only 35," he laughs.

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TRAGIC REALISM

Review by Jim Algie

Sherwood Anderson set the standard for collections of overlapping short stories with his still-classic staple of English-lit reading lists, *Winesburg, Ohio*, first published in 1919. Like the best short fiction, Anderson captured his cast of eccentric characters at pivotal points in their mostly miserable lives. In “Hands,” a teacher named Wing Biddlebaum lives in seclusion, having been unjustly accused of molesting his students. In another story, an unhappily married man sets out to warn a younger friend about the perils of his pending marriage. And in “The Shadow People” a failed artist returns to his hometown, slowly going insane as he speaks to make-believe characters in the solitary confinement of his room.

The legacy of *Winesburg, Ohio* is long and distinguished. Short-fiction luminaries like the late Raymond Carver and Alice Munro have all footnoted Anderson’s work. Now, in *The Turning* (Picador, 2006) Tim Winton makes his mark on the genre with a remarkable and often grim collection of stories. Most of them are set around the town of Angelus in Western Australia.

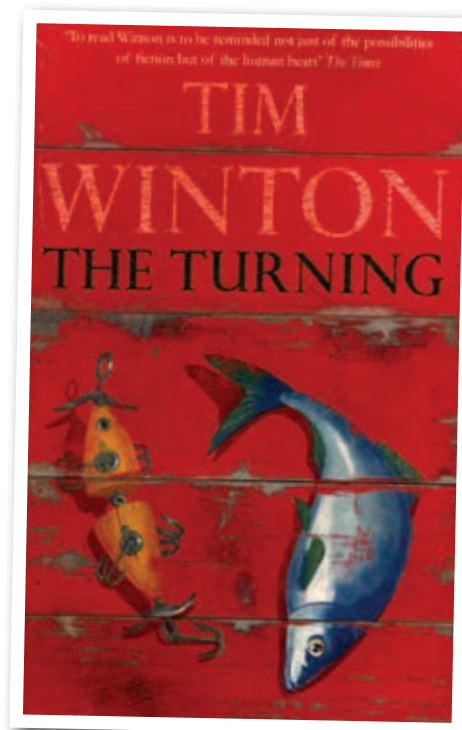
“Big World” takes on that manly theme of an unlikely friendship between two boys who fail their university exams and end up working in an abattoir together, spraying the blood from the floors. To escape this cul-de-sac career, the two mates buy an old VW van and hit the road. But their friendship begins to unravel when they meet a pot-smoking hippie chick who takes a fancy to the dimwitted Biggie, whose only academic triumph came when his mate wrote an essay about the demise of Led Zeppelin for him.

At first glance, this might seem like the author is leading us through some well-trampled terrain. But Winton’s originality is in his visceral prose and the scorpion-tail sting at the end of his stories, like the flash-forward to Biggie’s death and then the flashback to their last day spent together.

This opening story sets the tone for many of the tales to come: youthful expectations battered by the tribulations of adulthood. Troubled marriages and failed relationships, in particular, provide the friction and the grist for much of this collection. The title story chronicles the relationship between a drunken cray-fisherman and the wife whom he beats. Will her burgeoning friendship with a good-looking and well-to-do couple of teetotalers save her from a grisly fate? Don’t expect any easy solutions to the complex relationship questions posed in Tim Winton’s fiction.

Time and again, the writer derails the reader’s expectations with surprising detours. “Fog” may start out like a Jack Londonesque tale of a search party setting out in the Aussie wilderness to find a missing hiker. But the interaction between the ageing, alcoholic policemen and the young female journalist gives the story its humanity. And the ending trashes any pretensions of macho heroism.

The alcoholic cop is the father of Vic, whom we meet at various stages of his life: as a teenager ready to defend his family with a gun against criminals or crooked cops; as an older man trying to track down the disgraced father he hasn’t seen in years in order to honour his dying mother’s last wish; and as a lawyer and nervous wreck whose marriage appears to be headed for the divorce court.



Winton, whose novels have twice been short-listed for the Man Booker Prize, is a masterful prose writer. Rarely does a paragraph go by without a startling image (“Another wave reared from the ocean.”) or a wry quip, like the one about trailer-trash Aussie women sitting “out in the annexe on their beanbags watching ‘Sesame Street’ so loud it took the enamel off your teeth”.

But it’s when waxing lyrical about the landscape and marine life – jarrah forests and clacking wattlebirds, watching whales from cliff tops, and fishing for sharks from a truck on the beach – that Winton adds dashes of local colour to the universal frameworks of these characters’ dilemmas. And his use of Aussie slang is as earthy as the landscapes these folks (and black fellahs) inhabit.

Perhaps the most famous line in Sherwood Anderson’s collection *Winesburg, Ohio* goes, “Everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified.” (Ironically enough, Anderson died of peritonitis, after swallowing a toothpick in Panama, at the age of 65.)

Though Winton’s characters often take a hammering, their resilience is heartening. And there are some incredible moments of compassion. “Family” is one of my personal favourites in *The Turning*. It’s the story of two estranged brothers, Max, the alcoholic wife-beater we met earlier, and Frank, whose promising football career has been sidelined. When the two of them go out surfing together, like they did as boys, their conversations turn septic with recriminations. Then Max is bitten by a shark and Winton writes, “The reef was all over him but he held fast to his brother, hugging him to the board, hanging on with all the strength left in his fingers, for as long as he could and for longer than he should have.”

Having published his first novel at the age of 19, Tim Winton, born in Perth in 1960, is on a par with Peter Carey as one of Australia’s most accomplished authors. In the parallel universe of popular fiction, which has mostly been colonized by mindless escape artists, *The Turning* is a riveting collection grounded in tragic realism.

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Thailand_ 43

Cambodia_ 86

Singapore_ 88

Hong Kong_ 90

Laos_ 93

Living Large_ 42

Out & About_ 52

Dude North_ 59

The Diving News_ 62

Holiday in Cambodia_ 85

When the shit hits the fan_ 97

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SLEEPYtime

Bangkok has heaps of five-star hotels. Fabulous, if you happen to print your own money. Though the city is known for delivering cheap deals-a-plenty, its magical aura still can't make money grow on trees and clever folks know that 'expensive' and 'cool' are often worlds apart. To this end, all listings, apart from the five-stars, are fairly easy on the pocket and well suited to today's flashpackers, who are happy to stray from the beaten track. Boutique hotels are all the rage. Think reception areas that double as an art gallery and Thai-style rooms and gardens that evoke the Sukhothai era. Book in advance over the phone or visit their website for cheapest rates.

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Sensitive Paradise

Tarzan's sexual orientation has never been in question but it takes a journey to Koh Tao's Sensi Paradise resort on Koh Tao to convince Keith Anderson



Early Thirties Hollywood had no gay, outdoor icon. Instead they had Tarzan, who had Jane and they lived happily in the jungle with their son and monkey. The 'Lord of the Jungle' swung through trees, swam fast, built stuff out of wood and stood up to people that wanted to live in his tree house. Through all this, he kept a strong family arm, never turning the other cheek. His goals were honest and his instincts pure.

Another idyllic tree house-like setting – but this time with silk fabrics draped fashionably around the interior, aroma-therapeutic shampoos in deft little pots and ostentatious wooden surfaces to lay out your leather underpants. If Tarzan were gay, this would be his home – The Sensi Paradise Resort.

The Sensi Paradise on Koh Tao has been kicking back since 1992, and when they put it together, they got it right. Wood is everywhere – a design feature that makes or breaks the aesthetics of a place, depending on how well groomed the carpenter is – and in light of his first-rate chiselling the resort is hip, chic, pink and at one with nature. The sound of birds and insects create an ambience that developers of concrete hotels would do well to take note of.

The noise of trampling foliage in the Tarzan films meant that a man was making his way through the forest. A swift moving soul would push undergrowth violently aside – shouting and gunfire perhaps followed, but the trampling always came first. One thing you'll notice is that people don't trample at the Sensi Paradise, they sashay nimbly through the trees. There's a soft, deliberate manner to how a guest walks at the resort, and if a heterosexual Tarzan were to check in for a few days, he'd really have to go lightly to avoid upsetting the delicate equilibrium. If he was gay, he'd unlikely be trampling, and on that note I hasten to point out that neither I nor others at *Untamed Travel* have a problem with, or are prejudiced against trampers.

There's nothing discriminatory about the way the food is prepared at the restaurant either, which sits lovingly by the bay. Have yourself a banana split or a toad-in-the-hole, but be advised they plus plus you at the billing stage. A sweet touch at the end of your stay, however, comes after check out, when they pop you into the company vehicle and drive you over to the boat pier. Added courtesies like this make a good stay a great stay, – though if you're not gay, you could swing, swim or trample.

Sensi Paradise is on the southern end of Mae Had beach on Koh Tao. Call +66 (0) 7745 6244 to book or visit www.sensiparadise.com

day tripping



Mr. Potato Head ancestor worship

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 (Khlom Bangkok Noi, near Pinklao



WAY TO GO

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 Bt10-20, depending on distance. The big red and blue buses go all over town for Bt7 and Bt8, 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. However, tuk-tuks are the safest form of transport for women late at night due to the difficulty of sexual molestation.

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 Sala Daeng. It's a commuter system, so tourists tend to find the Skytrain more useful.

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

DUSIT

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

FLOWING COLOURS

Transitions is on exhibit from Sept 5 to Oct 1 at the Rotunda Gallery and the new Garden Gallery & Cafe exhibition space at the Neilson Hays library on Surawong Road. The Rotunda is open from Tues-Sun, 9:30am-5pm. Contact the curator Susanne van Laarhoven at susannevl@yahoo.com or 07-800-8965 for more info.



SUKHUMVIT

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

LUMPINI

An island of green in an ocean of grey, Lumpini Park (Rama IV Road) is Bangkokians' favourite place to run, walk, do aerobics, relax by the lake or get buff on the public exercise machines. Early morning or early evening is best for working out. Muay Thai fans

can get punch drunk at the Lumpini Boxing Stadium on Tues, Fri, and Sat evenings. But in Thailand you're never too far away from the occult, so lurking nearby is the Erawan Hotel Fertility Shrine (2 Wireless Road) devoted to the Fertility Goddess Tubtim. The outdoor shrine, behind the hotel, is studded with wooden phalluses and other offerings made by the limp, the lovelorn, and mothers-in-waiting.

SAMUT PRAKAN

Some 320 acres of monuments, traditional Thai houses, replicas of famous temples, Royal barges and other cultural incarnations, the Ancient City or Muang Boran (Kilometre 33, Sukhumvit Highway) only costs Bt50 to enter and slightly more to rent a bicycle. Sun bears, Indian peafowl, and men wrestling reptiles are some of the attractions at The Crocodile Farm only a few km closer to Bangkok, on the same road. Near the reptile repository, the Erawan Museum is built into the world's largest elephant statue. You can walk up through Erawan's leg to see a Buddhist version of heaven, or check out all the priceless antiques in the pedestal beneath the three-headed elephant god.

MALLS AND MARKETS

It's fair to say that everyone loves a good spending spree, and here, in Bangkok, the opportunities to splurge are endless. Due to a vast array of goods, venues and outlets on offer, wandering the city's cavernous malls and street-markets can be an interesting but, at times, overwhelming experience. Everything is on offer: designer brands, quirky kitsch, souvenirs, uncut gems and handicrafts to high-tech gadgetry. The Skytrain or subway have stops in most shopping areas, whisking you from one hot and crowded market to the next.

Chatuchak Weekend Market (a.k.a. JJ): As the world's biggest weekend market, this is a shopping universe. There are around 15,000 vendors here selling every item every item known to mankind and a few that aren't. Equip yourself with water and patience as hunting for bargains in the heat and crush is draining. Get a copy of the Nancy Chandler shopping map for a consumer's compass. Get there by Skytrain at Mo Chit or Chatuchak Park station on the subway.

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 Located in 'Little India', this market is renowned for selling Indian, Malay and Thai clothes, textiles and accessories and costume jewellery. A walkthrough of tastes, smells and sights, you'll find a wide variety of Indian foods, sweets and spices on offer. It's popular

with those who want fancy, affordable fashion, along with sequined fabrics, bows, tiaras and all the other trappings necessary to cut it as a bona fide Bollywood queen. Take the riverboat to Tha Saphaan Phut and it's just a short walk away. **Nakhon Kasem** Once known as the much cooler named Thieves Market, due to the large amount of second-hand items on offer, today you'll find many unusual things in this Chinatown area: outdated household appliances, imitation antiques, porcelain, brassware are illegally smuggled marital aids. Nearby **Sampeng Lane** (aka Soi Wanit) has a good range of historic costume items. You'll find it between Yaowarat Road and Charoenkrung Road. **Pok Klong Talat** (Flower Market): See Bangkok's best known orgy of botany in fullest bloom at 3am, down in Chinatown. **Khaosan Road** Known worldwide as the backpacker boulevard, this area is rapidly going upmarket. Boots the chemist have laid down roots here, along with Burger King and a couple of swanky hotels.

However, there's still plenty to suit those on a shoe string budget: hippie fashions, trinkets and souvenirs, bootleg CD's, silver jewelry and counterfeit ID cards. Young Thais who have embraced the concept of "going Inter", (international), also enjoy shopping, drinking and hanging out around here.

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 Sala Daeng.

Emporium: Open, airy, and airconditioned, 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: The Bangkok shopping bar has been ratcheted up a notch with the opening of Paragon, now Southeast Asia's largest shopping-mecca. Encompassing a first-class food court with outlets from some of Bangkok's best restaurants, a 16-screen Cineplex, including an IMAX cinema, a 38-lane bowling alley and an enormous gym, not to mention a vast array of shops with outlets for a constellation of brands including Hermès, Chanel, Giorgio Armani, Dolce & Gabbana, Gucci, Versace, Chloé, Tod's, Bottega Veneta, Ermenegildo Zegna, Salvatore Ferragamo, Mulberry, Jimmy Choo, Emilio Pucci, Escada, Kenzo and Jim Thompson. Phew! Not so much a shopping centre as an all-day excursion.

MBK This marble mall complex includes over 2,000 fashion stores, a cinema complex, karaoke and hundreds of great budget food options. Extremely popular with Thai teens, MBK boasts half a floor of mobile phones and is good for business cards, cheap fashion cosmetics and leather goods and is easily accessible by the Skytrain (take the Silom line to National Stadium Station).

Pantip Plaza An electronic bazaar for IT lovers, if you can't find a computer product here, it probably doesn't exist. Counterfeit software and DVDs, games, digital cameras and hardware, hardware, hardware, this place has the lot at rockbottom prices. Exit the Skytrain at Ratchathewi station on the Sukhumvit line and get a taxi. **Gaysorn** The curiously named Gaysorn Plaza offers luxury items at top-end prices. Brands such as Louis Vitton, Fendi and Prada can be found here. The top floor has a stylish tea room where ladies can nibble on snacks, relax in style and compare their purchases.

Central World Plaza Situated across the street from the Gaysorn Plaza, this newly-renovated shopping complex boasts a hotel and an 11-screen cinema, as well as an outlet for Jim Thompson Silk and a King Power duty-free shop. During cool season, the plaza has three of the biggest beer gardens in town out front. Get off at Chidlom Skytrain stop.

Siam Discovery Center Spread over six floors, Discovery was the first of its kind when originally built and specialises in children's goods and other chic design retailers such as Calvin Klein, Timberland, Armani and Guess clothing. Exit the Skytrain at the Siam interchange station.

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The Sacred and the Profane



Cameron Cooper, better known for the foulness of his palate than its refinement, dips his tongue into a bit of Japanese fusion and undergoes a linguistic meltdown.

There are some experiences in life that are so joyful and pure that they can only be properly expressed with profanity. Where official words with confining definitions, like those found in a Microsoft Word spellchecker, so often fall short, cussing is fundamentally about emphasis and euphony, with most of the meaning conveyed by the tone in which it is delivered.

So I have this to say about the food at Wasabi, the new Japanese/fusion restaurant on Q Bar's roof. It is FUCKING brilliant. In fact, the only thing I could think of to say after biting into the wagyu beef slice wrapped around foie gras, topped with orange béarnaise sauce was "FUCK ME!!" Even though I was looking directly at *Untamed's* managing editor Daniel Cooper at the time, a man famous for grasping the wrong ends of sticks, he, who was also chewing one of these rolls at the time, did not mistake my meaning, accompanied as it was by widened eyes and arched brows. He too was thinking – if not actually vocalizing – his own profane thoughts about how sublime this dish was.

We at *Untamed* are not known for our rave reviews. Part of the reason for this is because unlike some other publications – you know who you are, you lying prostitute bastards – we turn down all offers of cash for advertorial bullshit. It is also because we occasionally labour under the puerile illusion that it is big and clever to be smug and condescending. So you can trust us when we say that this place is excellent – fucking excellent, in fact. The food is so subtle that its subtlety is blatantly obvious, the décor is Japanese cool and the tables have no legs to bang your knees against, seemingly floating in the air (they are actually bolted to the wall).

Wasabi originally opened in Bali as the brainchild of David Lombardi, a Canadian building designer of all people, who had spent a decade in Japan, presumably haunting quality sushi bars along the way. According to Wasabi's affable French-accented manager Andy, the whole she-bang, from layout, plates and forks to the menu selection was all down to David.

But back to the food. While there are standard sushi-bar dishes on the menu, all made from top-quality ingredients, it is the fusion offerings that really send the palate to the moon and back. I've always been skeptical of fusion, flying in the face as it does of hundreds of years of culinary evolution, combining such ridiculously mismatched items as peaches and potatoes with brook-trout gravy to appeal to pretentiously wealthy diners whose sphincters contain more taste buds than their tongues. Marketing bollocks, most of it.

So when Wasabi Andy served the "Tiger Eye," a combination of small bits of raw salmon, scallop and cream cheese, enrobed in seaweed and half-mooned by a chunk of squid, the jury was not leaning in the defendant's favour. But as with the other four fusion dishes presented to us, the tastes merge fabulously. Not only do you recognise all the individual flavours, but rolling together in the mouth they press buttons in the brain's pleasure centre that release endorphins, bringing on a natural high that is the ultimate goal of all pleasure-seekers. It is difficult and rare to attain such a high by natural means, whether the trip is sex, music, running a marathon or food – which probably explains the popularity of recreational drugs, with their guaranteed rush. When food has this effect, it is the true essence of fine dining.

Enough. It is agony to write about it; it goes against one's nature to say such nice things and one writes in fear of being branded a toadying suck-up. It is also agony to write about it because one can't afford to eat there every day on a food-reviewer's pay.

Dishes range from a couple of hundred baht to 800+ for the kobe beef tenderloin foie gras rolls. Leaving out the booze, you can spend an hour or so in food heaven for Bt1,200-1,500++ per person, unless you really make a pig of yourself, in which case it will cost a bit more – a small price to pay for the singular opportunity to exclaim the word "fuck!" and truly mean it for a change.

Wasabi is located upstairs at Q Bar at 34 Sukhumvit Soi 11. Tel. 06 002-1727.

FeedingTime

Bangkok truly is a foodie's city. Whether you're a high-flyer with a hankering for foie gras or a twat who thinks Bt25 is overpriced for a bowl of noodles, this town has it all. In addition to the restaurants we've listed there are countless food stalls, canteens, shop house diners and food courts serving affordable and tasty tucker.

In the Silom area of town, Soi Convent is lined with some excellent foodstalls serving everything from noodle soup, chicken and yellow rice, to BBQ pork and jim jum hotpot. Sukhumvit Soi 38 (Skytrain Thonglor) is home to a well-known collection of food stalls and shophouses dishing up quality Thai-Chinese food in the evenings — very popular with locals. For more international cuisine, the small Arab quarter off Soi Nana and Sukhumvit houses some really good Middle Eastern restaurants and kebab stalls. Soi Nana itself even has Bangkok's only Ethiopian restaurant, Abyssinia Café. Worth visiting for a completely different atmosphere than elsewhere in Bangkok. Soi Thaniya (and almost any downtown Sukhumvit Soi) is jammed with Japanese places, most of which are laid-back and informal.

In Bangkok, shopping-centre food need not mean the golden arches. Almost all have inexpensive food courts offering a huge variety of Thai, Chinese and some international food. MBK, Siam Paragon, Siam Center and Emporium, amongst others, all have them. The posher malls and department stores also now have up-market versions (The Park food hall at Emporium, the Orangery at Paragon, and Food Loft at Central) in which international restaurants from around town have their own outlet. These can be pricey but nevertheless convenient for non-Thai food.

SUKHUMVIT

BED SUPPERCLUB (INTERNATIONAL)

26 Sukhumvit Soi 11, (Skytrain Nana), 7:30pm-1:30am, 02-651 3537, major cards

Ultra-cool hybrid of restaurant, club and art space renowned for its ground-breaking tubular, all white design. Excellent Pacific Rim-type grub served alongside a live DJ and entertainment.

CREPES & CO.

(MEDITERRANEAN/CREPERIE)
18/1 Sukhumvit Soi 12, Skytrain Nana, 9am-midnight, 02-653 3990-1, major cards
Really popular, longstanding

restaurant. Reasonably priced crepes and Mediterranean fodder served in a cool and casual atmosphere. Look out for ongoing promotions and food festivals.

LE DALAT INDOCHINE (VIETNAMESE)

14 Sukhumvit Soi 23, (Skytrain Asoke), 11am-2:30pm, 6-10pm, 02-661 7967-8, major cards

Charming Vietnamese restaurant bursting with French-Vietnamese character and ambience. One of the few decent restaurants of its kind in Bangkok.

LE BANYAN (FRENCH)

59 Sukhumvit Soi 8, (Skytrain Nana), Mon-Sat 6.30pm-midnight (kitchen closes 9:30pm), 02-253 5556, major cards

Truly authentic French restaurant open since 1989 and set in a converted wooden house. Specialities include the likes of Pressed Duck Roennaise.

GOVINDA (ITALIAN VEGETARIAN)

6/5/6/6 Sukhumvit Soi 22, (Skytrain Phrom Phong), 11:30am-3pm, 6pm-11:15pm, closed Tuesdays, 02-663 4970, major cards

Homely vegetarian restaurant with reasonable prices, located on a quiet soi. Pizza, pasta, veggie mains and desserts all prepared by an Italian chef.

BELLA NAPOLI (PIZZERIA)

3/3 Sukhumvit Soi 31, (Skytrain Phrom Phong), 11am-2pm, 6pm-midnight, 02-712 5422, 02-259 0405, major cards
Hugely popular with local Thais, this down-home pizzeria is always packed and buzzing. Some of the best pizza around, but also worth trying the pasta.

KOI (JAPANESE)

26 Sukhumvit Soi 20, (Skytrain Phrom Phong or Asoke), 6pm-midnight, closed Mondays, 02-258 1590, major cards
Very stylish restaurant serving Japanese cuisine with Californian touches. Attracts a sophisticated, high-flying

crowd of socialites. Also houses a separate bar, cocktail lounge and four private rooms.

KUPPA (INTERNATIONAL)

39 Sukhumvit soi 16, (Skytrain Asoke), 9:30am-late, 02-663 0450-4, major cards
Bustling restaurant popular with both Thais and foreigners.

Kuppa has a lively atmosphere and tasty food with enough variety to satisfy all tastes. Desserts are top notch.

MAHANAGA (THAI)

2 Sukhumvit Soi 29, (Skytrain Phrom Phong or Thonglor), 11.30am-2:30pm, 5:30pm-11pm, 02-662 3060, major cards

A beautiful restaurant with an outdoor courtyard. The food is basically a fusion of cuisines but with a distinctively Thai identity. Signature dishes like Alaskan King Crab in spicy milk soup come well recommended.

MES AMIS (French)

102/3 Thonglor Soi 5, (Skytrain Thonglor), 11:30am-2:30pm, 6.30pm-10.30pm, 02-260 6445-6, major cards
Definitely one of the better Thonglor restaurants, and not overpriced, considering the high standard of the food and service. The atmosphere is casual but the restaurant is still stylish and classy.

PIZZERIA LIMONCELLO (PIZZERIA)

17 Sukhumvit soi 11 Skytrain Nana Noon-2pm, 6pm-11:30pm, 02-651 0707, major cards

A lively pizzeria complete with chequered tablecloths and a wood-fired oven. Pizzas are thin-crust, of course, and the pastas and salads are also worth trying.

TONY ROMA'S (AMERICAN)

87 Sukhumvit Road in the Nai Lert building, (Skytrain Nana), 11am-11pm (last orders 10:30pm), 02-254 2912, major cards

Part of an American chain and now with a branch also at Siam Paragon. As you'd expect, portions of American-fare, like baby back ribs, are big and satisfying. One of the better places in town for burgers.

VENEZIA (ITALIAN)

24 Sukhumvit Soi 11, (Skytrain



Nana, 11am-2:30pm, 5:30pm-midnight, 02-254 6655, major cards

Neat but lively Italian restaurant with good food and Italian wines. Bargain set lunches and live music in the evenings. A good place to eat before a night out at one of the nearby clubs.

GIANNI RISTORANTE (ITALIAN)
34/1 Soi Tonson, Ploenchit Road, (Skytrain Chidlom), noon-2:30pm, 6pm-10:30pm, 02-252 1619, major cards

One of the cornerstones of Bangkok's burgeoning Italian restaurant scene. Top notch, fine Italian food — the large following of loyal regulars are testament to its quality.

RIOJA (SPANISH)
1025 Ploenchit Road, (Skytrain Chidlom), 11am-2:30pm, 6pm-11pm, 02-251 5761-2, major cards

Bangkok's only Spanish restaurant as far as we know. Great value set lunches. Tapas and paella, of course, but many more lesser-known dishes and a good wine list.

BOURBON ST. (AMERICAN, CAJUN & CREOLE)
29/4-6 Sukhumvit Soi 22 (Washington Square), (Skytrain Phrom Phong), 7am-1am, 02-259 0328-9, major cards

Longstanding, award-winning restaurant and bar. Don't miss the superb Cajun and Creole favourites like gumbo and blackened crawfish. Also serving hearty American and Mexican tucker.

THE BULL'S HEAD (ENGLISH)
Sukhumvit Soi 33/1, (Skytrain Phrom Phong), 11am-1am, 02-259 4444, 02-261 0665, major cards

Arguably the most authentic British pub in Bangkok complete with chirpy, Cockney landlord and a crowd of expat regulars. Great chip-shop-style chips and other affordable pub food. Look out for the Punchline Comedy Club nights.

WITCH'S OYSTER BAR (EUROPEAN)
20/20-21 Ruamrudee Village, (Skytrain Ploenchit), 11am-2:30pm, 5pm-11pm, 02-255 5354-5, major cards
Specialises in seafood and grilled fare, and noted for its wide variety of imported oysters. An interesting mix of

European cuisine, mixed with contemporary British food not really seen elsewhere in town.

ATHENA (GREEK)
594 Soi Ekamai, Sukhumvit 63, (Skytrain Ekamai), 5pm-2am, 02-392 7644, major cards
Bangkok's only Greek restaurant, as far as we're aware. A down-to-earth place with a suitably Mediterranean ambience. Serves a variety of hearty Greek staples such as Souvlaki and Mydopilafio.

WOODSTOCK (AMERICAN)
Soi 13, Thonglor, (Skytrain Thonglor), 11am-1am, 02-715 0202-3, major cards
Nicely appointed eatery with good American and Mexican grub from the likes of Creole Gumbo to Argentine steaks and burritos. The three floors also house a pool table, sports bar and big screen TV. Huge music selection on the computerized jukebox.

MARU TEPAN YAKI AND BAR (JAPANESE)
Sukhumvit Soi 33, (Skytrain Phrom Phong), Mon-Sat 11:30am-2pm, 6pm-11pm (Sunday/holidays 5pm-10pm), 02-662 1744-5, major cards
Small but satisfying tepan yaki place. Also offers a variety of steaks and a good, value for money lunchtime shabu-shabu and sukiyaki buffet.

BEI OTTO (GERMAN)
1 Sukhumvit Soi 20, Skytrain Asoke, 11am-1am, 02-260 0869, major cards
Cosy restaurant serving quality German food such as sauerbraten and pork knuckle, as well as other European favourites. Also has a bakery and delicatessen on site.

ENOTECA ITALAIANA (ITALIAN)
Sukhumvit Soi 33, follow the sign posts, (Skytrain Phrom Phong), 6pm-midnight, 02-258 4386, major cards
Homely and welcoming Italian restaurant with a strong emphasis on completely authentic Italian food from the heart. Superb selection of Italian wines, meats and cheeses. The enthusiastic owners and chef are always on hand to offer advice on food and wine.

GOURMET GALLERY (EUROPEAN)
6/1 Soi Promsri 1, Sukhumvit Soi 39, (Skytrain Phrom

Phong), 11:30-2:30pm, 6pm-10pm, 02-260 0603, major cards
Unique, elegant and comfortable restaurant with some great comfort-food. Lots of modern art and classical music create a really relaxing atmosphere. Very affordable menu.

FOGO VIVO (BRAZILIAN)
President Tower Arcade, 973 Ploenchit Road, (Skytrain Chidlom), 11:30am-2:30pm, 6:30pm-11pm; bar 11:30am-1pm, 02-656 0384, major cards
Bangkok's only Brazilian Churrascaria grill. A good place to fill up with the all-you-can-eat seafood and meat served for both lunch and dinner.

AUBERGE DAB (FRENCH)
Mercury Tower, 540 Ploenchit Road, (Skytrain Chidlom), 11:30am-2:30pm, 6:30pm-10:30pm, 02-658 6222-3, major cards
Real classical French restaurant with excellent food and on-the-ball service. Expect traditional French dishes such as roasted duck leg confit and lobster thermidor. Not the place to go for a cheap dinner.

OAM THONG (THAI)
7/4-5 Sukhumvit Soi 33, (Skytrain Phrom Phong), 11:30am-11:30pm, 02-662 2804-5, major cards
Popular with local big-wigs and sophisticates. Traditional and modern, inventive Thai food and seafood are available. Well located for after shopping or pre-night out dining.

GIUSTO (ITALIAN)
16 Sukhumvit Soi 23, (Skytrain Asoke, MRT Sukhumvit), 11:30am-2pm, 02-258 4321, major cards
Sleek, contemporary-styled Italian with it's own parking. Known for their outstanding wine list Giusto also has a wine bar on site.

SILOM & PATPONG BLUE ELEPHANT (THAI)
233 South Sathorn Road, (Skytrain Surasak), 11:30am-2:30pm, 6.30pm-11.30pm, 02-673 9353-4, major cards
Part of the world-renowned restaurant group of the same name, you can expect the same high standards. Royal-Thai cuisine alongside some more inventive creations. Set in a beautifully restored old building.



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BANN KHANITHA & GALLERY

(THAI)
69 South Sathorn Road, 11am-2pm, 6pm-11pm, 02-675 4200-1, major cards

An award-winning, classy Thai restaurant with superb food and beautiful decor. Filled with fine art, natural wood and happy diners this place has become a household name in Bangkok. Also has a branch on Sukhumvit 23.

LE BOUCHON (FRENCH)

37/17 Patpong 2, (Skytrain Saladaeng), Noon-4pm, 6:30pm-11:15pm, 02-234 9109, major cards

A tiny Parisian-style brasserie serving authentic French fare. Tucked away in an unlikely Patpong location but full of character. Good value set lunches.

EAT ME (INTERNATIONAL)

1/6 Soi Pipat 2, (Skytrain Saladaeng), 3pm-1am, 02-238 0931, 02-233 1767, major cards
Sophisticated and contemporary international, Pacific Rim cuisine. Indoor and outdoor seating available. Excellent desserts.

HU'U IN BANGKOK

(INTERNATIONAL)
Levels 1 & 2, the Ascott Sathorn, 187 Sathorn Road, (Skytrain Chong Nonsri), 6am-10:30am, 11am-2:30pm, 5pm-11pm, 02-676 6677, major cards
Chic mezzanine restaurant with good Pacific Rim cuisine. Check out the downstairs bar for cocktails and regular party nights.

SCOOZI (ITALIAN)

174/3-4 Surawongse Road, (Skytrain Saladaeng), Noon-2:30pm, 6pm-11pm, 02-243 0943, major cards
Another long-time Bangkok favourite, Scoozi now has a superb fine-dining restaurant set in the converted house plus an excellent pizzeria/

café on the main road. Particularly notable for its seafood.

SIROCCO (MEDITERRANEAN)
63rd Fl, the Dome, State Tower, 1055 Silom Road, (Skytrain Saphan Taksin), 6pm-1am, 02-624 9555, major cards
Outdoors, 63 stories up, the views and atmosphere are fantastic, but the food is arguably over-priced. Also part of the same complex are the cool Distil bar and Mezzaluna Italian restaurant.

ZANOTTI (ITALIAN)

Saladaeng Colonnade Condominium, Soi Saladaeng, (Skytrain Saladaeng, Subway Silom), 11.30am-2pm, 6pm-10:30pm, 02-636 0002, 02-636 0266, major cards
Really popular restaurant with a reputation for quality food and atmosphere. Zanotti also has a comprehensive list of Italian wines and the enthusiastic chef/owner is usually on hand to offer suggestions.

LITTLE INDIA (INDIAN)

64/38-39 Soi Wat Suan Phlu (opposite main entrance to Shangri-la Hotel), (Skytrain Saphan Taksin), 11am-11pm, 02-630 7906-7
Authentic and tasty North Indian food. The owners pride themselves on serving healthy, non-oily Indian food prepared to your taste. Live cricket and football on TV.

PATARA (THAI)

2 Sathorn Soi 11, (Skytrain Surasak), 11:30am-2:30pm, 6pm-11:30pm, 02-212 6420-1, major cards
One of the best for contemporary Thai food in a sophisticated setting. Traditional as well as inventive dishes such as raw tuna in a lime and lemongrass vinaigrette are served but all retain the real Thai taste.

THE BARBICAN

(INTERNATIONAL & PUB)
9/4-5 Thaniya Road, (Skytrain Saladaeng, Subway Silom), 11.30am-1am, 02-234 3590, major cards
Brasserie-type restaurant and wine bar popular with expats and after work drinkers. Reasonably priced food and friendly, attentive staff. Win or Lose happy hours Monday-Friday 5pm-7pm and a bevy of other regular promotions regularly.

IRISH XCHANGE (PUB)

1/5-6 Convent Road, Silom, (Skytrain Saladaeng), 9am-1pm, 02-266 7160, major cards
Lively Irish pub with a mixed crowd of expats, locals and the odd tourist. Sports on big screen, pool table and good food including excellent fry-ups and a Sunday carvery. Also has live music on Monday and Thursdays.

ANNA'S CAFÉ (THAI)

18 Soi Saladaeng, (Skytrain Saladaeng), 11am-10pm, 02-632 0619, major cards
Hugely popular, great fun Thai restaurant known for birthday celebrations and raucous atmosphere. Excellent value, tasty Thai food with a sprinkling of Western dishes, especially on the dessert menu.

AOI (JAPANESE)

132/10-11 Silom, Soi 6, (Skytrain Saladaeng), 11:30am-2:30pm, 5:30pm-10:30pm, 02-235 2321-2, major cards
Popular with Japanese expats and locals, Aoi has a wide selection of quality, fresh seafood. Also has a sushi bar and now another branch at Emporium shopping centre.

BAAN KLANG NAAM

(SEAFOOD- THAI & CHINESE)
Soi 14 Rama 3 Road, near Montien Riverside Hotel, 11am-1pm, 02-292 0175, 02-292 2037, major cards

Extremely popular with locals, Baan Klang Naam serves some of the best seafood in town in a converted house on the Chaophaya River. Live entertainment in the evenings. Don't miss the awesome deep-fried soft shell crab.

BANGLAMPHU

ROYAL INDIA (INDIAN)

95, B1 Soi Rambuttri, Chakkrapong Road, 11:30am to midnight, 02-282 6688
Set back from the bustling road, in Rambuttri Village, the restaurant has the feel of, well, someplace much nicer than Khaosan. Outdoor seating around a fishpond may not make you think of India, but the food will leave you with visions of the Taj Mahal. This is a branch of the oldest Indian restaurant in Bangkok, and they definitely know their stuff. Best loved dishes here are Chicken Tikka Masala, Paneer Tikka, and delicious Garlic Nan. The delicious mint sauce is a good bet too. Royal India serves veg and non-veg dishes all day and does Western breakfast, from 7am.

SHOSHANA (ISRAELI)

86 Chakraphong Road, next to the petrol-station, 10am-midnight, 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 ฿35-60. Airon, and friendly. Great for vegetarians.

JOK POCHANA (THAI SEAFOOD)

Samsen Soi 2, 6pm-4am (and beyond), 02-282 9396, no cards
This Thai-style seafood place has been feeding the



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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.

OH MY COD (FISH & CHIPS)
95D, Rambutri Village Inn, Soi Rambutri, Chakrapong Road
A welcome addition to the area's culinary scene, serving superb fish and chips and filling the gap in the English breakfast market with massive fry-ups, pies and mushy peas to die for.

RICKY'S COFFEE SHOP (SANDWICHES)
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.

HOTEL RESTAURANTS
JW MARRIOTT BANGKOK
4 Sukhumvit Soi 2, (Skytrain Ploenchit), 02-656 7700, major cards.

A great choice for gourmands, the JW houses some superb restaurants. Sister restaurants Tsu and Nami provide the full monty of Japanese food from traditional sophistication, at the former, to lively teppanyaki dining at the latter. New York Steakhouse is one of the city's most highly-regarded grills, with top-notch steaks and flawless service. Man Ho offers a wide variety of Chinese fair, whilst White Elephant is the place for refined Thai cuisine.

THE ORIENTAL HOTEL
48 Oriental Avenue (riverside), (Skytrain Saphan Taksin), 02-659 9000, major cards
This world renowned, safari-suit-and-pith-helmet of a hotel houses Bangkok's best French restaurant, Le Normandie - fine food and fine prices to match. There's also a charming Chinese restaurant, China House, and the Italian Ciao serving good pizzas and pasta. Lord Jim's is a lively seafood restaurant, whilst the Verandah offers all day dining both outdoors and indoors.

THE SHANGRI-LA HOTEL
89 Soi Wat Suan Phlu, New Road (riverside), (Skytrain Saphan Taksin), 02-236 7777, major cards
Another grand and luxurious riverside hotel. Angelini is perhaps their best-known restaurant serving sumptuous Italian food in a sophisticated setting. Sala Thip offers classical Thai cuisine on the banks of the Chaophaya. Edogin is the hotel's Japanese offering, and Next2Cafe and terrace a lively, international buffet restaurant.

THE SHERATON GRANDE SUKHUMVIT
250 Sukhumvit Road, (Skytrain Asoke), 02-649 8364, major cards
A conveniently central hotel with some quality eateries. Basil is a sleek restaurant serving traditional Thai food, whilst The Sala has Thai food in a more relaxed poolside setting. Rossini's is a much-praised Italian serving delicious, authentic fare. Stuffed diners can move to the Living Room for live jazz after dinner.

THE INTERCONTINENTAL BANGKOK
973 Ploenchit Road, (Skytrain Chidlom), 02-656 0444, major cards
Well located for cashed-up shoppers near the Gaysorn and Erawan Bangkok shopping malls. Fireplace Grill is the hotel's best-known restaurant serving simple, high quality steaks and seafood. Summer Palace offers traditional Chinese cuisine, and Espresso a varied international buffet.

FOUR SEASONS HOTEL BANGKOK
155 Rajdamri Road, (Skytrain

Rajdamri), 02-255 5443, major cards
Biscotti is one of Bangkok's best-loved Italian restaurants, whilst home-grown culinary fair is available at Spice Market. Shintaro is the hotel's Japanese eatery and the Madison, a New York-style grill, has good steaks and seafood.

REMBRANDT HOTEL
19 Sukhumvit Soi 18, (Skytrain Asoke), 02-261 7100, major cards
Senor Pico is one of the few restaurants in town to serve up really delicious Mexican food in a lively atmosphere. Award-winning Rang Mahal is a fantastic Indian restaurant — reservations are recommended as the great food is no secret. For Thai food there's Red Pepper, for Italian, Da Vinci.

DARK SIDE OF THE SPOON:



Deep-Fried Bugs

Words by Oliver Benjamin. Photo by Daniel Cooper.

One of the Northeast's many unexportable contributions to Thai cuisine. As any fan of reality game shows will tell you, eating bugs is something you only do in order to be a money-grubber. Not so for many Thais, who regularly scarf down swarms of deep-fried water beetles (known as *maeng da*, which is also Thai slang for a pimp), grasshoppers, grubs, worms, crickets and scorpions. Not only a good source of fat-free protein, but also a cheap form of pest control.

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Drum and bass pioneer LTJ Bukem came back to Q Bar by special request. Cassandra Beckford caught up with her musical hero and recounts a journey that begins in England and ends in Bangkok. Photo by Daniel Cooper.

England, 1990. Two of the country's best-known cities, Manchester and London, are mired in urban grime. Inner city life is fast and tough and the growing youth population demands musical experiences that reflect their lifestyle. Enter drum and bass (dnb); hyper, industrial beat patterns, with a gritty realism not dissimilar to Thailand's own protest songs, *pleng phua cheewit*, for when the 80's loved-up, rave generation checked out, dnb presented us with our own "songs for life." At the helm of the scene, Danny Williamson (aka LTJ Bukem), is the master of creating urban symphonies.

Walking through Bangkok's congested streets, edging past noodle stalls and clothing stands, Bukem stops to shout, "LTJ Bukem tonight at Q Bar! Check it out!" to the amazement and glee of the shoppers and traders. Born in Watford, he is the quintessential Londoner, stopping to hail taxis with an "Oi, mate," that even Bangkok's blinkered cabbies cannot ignore.

As Bukem enters the DJ booth to begin his set I am lost in my own memories. Running away from home to rave in the English countryside. Missing morning classes to stay up late and listen to pirate radio stations. Racing down the M25 from Manchester to London, hitting the clubs in a frantic whirl of euphoria and ecstasy, returning to the North the next day rather the worse for wear; all roads leading to this man's influence. As one of the early visionaries of dnb, Bukem pushed the boundaries, taking the music from simple breaks and reggae dub samples to today's myriad of offshoots like jungle techno, atmospheric, techstep and liquid funk.

The sound changes, the people mature (I am no longer the teen giving Bukem the thumbs-up in an inebriated state nor, thank goodness, knocking over drinks in his DJ booth, and at 39, Bukem has undoubtedly continued to grow through his 20 years of musical history) but the energy and anarchy of dnb remains the same.

Captivating and energetic, Bukem is well suited to Bangkok, the perfect place for any livewire. "Through DJ'ing, I've been everywhere and seen nowhere. Bangkok? It's frantic. England has Saturday markets but here it's everyday, in every street, in every town." I wondered what

Bukem thought of the Bangkok club crowd. "The crowd is mainly English, made up of people who have seen me play worldwide and now live in Bangkok. There's a core Thai crowd that recently got into the music. It feels like people are concentrating, listening to the music, that makes it a good night for me," he added.

To play a Bukem tune or listen to the man in the mix is akin to embarking on a journey. Stirring chords, seamless strings, magical melodies and relentless bass lines, it is timeless music. Which is what he strives for: "If I like a tune on first hearing it, I'll still like it in 20 years time. No tune is made for nothing, with no reason. Every tune I play I love and want other people to hear."

I asked Bukem to come clean about his seminal track "Music," the '93 gem endlessly talked about by true dnb fans. Bukem divulged, "Since its release I continually have this conversation with others. 'That tune! What were you thinking?' One couple said, 'We made a baby to that tune.' I'm glad people still listen to it and request it." Swiftly

moving into engineer mode, Bukem got technical. "I think it could have been mixed down better. Have you ever noticed that when you play 'Music' your speakers vibrate? I was obviously in the studio, trying to put too much bass on. There are many frequencies that shouldn't be there but as a piece of music and a vibe, it definitely sums up what I was trying to achieve, where I was trying to go."

An artist in much demand, a peek at Bukem's current schedule confirms why he has not holidayed in 10 years. Rather, he has embarked on a quest that has taken him around the globe many times over. I was keen to know what kept Bukem inspired today. "Good friends, my business partner and my woman. But" – he laughed – "you can't forget the music. I can't be a dnb DJ without artists making the music and currently it hasn't been better. I get tingles and excitement about tunes I mix today that I did on first discovering dnb. There is something about a perfect mix, of course, no such thing exists but you get close

Stalking bukem

sometimes.”

It is almost a given that whether the venue is crammed to the hilt, or comprised of a group of core followers, Bukem always receives a great welcome on English soil, where dnb originated. However, on past holidays to the USA, I tried playing dnb to cousins and friends and their responses didn't vary much, ranging from, “I ain't listening to that shit” to “I ain't down with that shit, man.” Bukem and I chuckled about those early rebuffs of the music. So I asked about his experiences as a pioneer in the States.

He said, “In '94, places like Washington, NY, and Philly picked up on the sound first. We did a warehouse party; an English-style rave where people phone a number to find the secret venue, but that got raided and shut down. In '95 we went from sporadic gigs to playing to 5,000 people. The scene has continued to grow but I can still go to places like Tuscon, Arizona and play to only 200 people where half the crowd is fans and the other half, their friends. I treat DJ'ing with a 'rock band mentality.' Unless you play lots of gigs, how are people going to hear the music?”

As technology and the web continue to make new inroads in the ever-changing map of the music industry, I wondered what effect this has had on Bukem. He said, “The 'huge staff team' phase is over. We released 5,000 titles in 15 years but things change, now businesses are more mobile. I could practically run the label from here.” He points

to his laptop sitting on the dresser. “I haven't touched my computer in three days but I guarantee there will be 70-100 new tunes on it. There is just too much music to sign.”

With regard to modern technology, I asked about the inclusion of the tag “The real LT” on Bukem's MySpace (a musical online communication engine) page. He tells a funny tale of fending off imposters. “People were using my domain name. One guy was receiving messages people intended to send to me. He answered them pretending to be me. It's quite scary, what people will do. I had to shut him down,” he laughs.

Before leaving, I remind Bukem of a gig he played in my hometown of Manchester; an amazing moment for me, but after so many shows, would this just be one more for the maestro?

Cass: “You played at the cricket ground. It was raining and...”

Bukem: “Yeah, I remember. The rain just came down. I enjoyed that one.”

Cass: “My parents were there; the whole family danced together.”

Bukem: “There's another place, a great little venue. At times it seemed like I played there forever. I loved that place.”

A rapid-fire round commenced, both of us trying to recall the name of a venue which eluded us. But it doesn't matter. It's irrelevant. All that really matters is the music.

PINK POSSE

With wall-to-wall boys commandeering the dance floor, Cassandra Beckford didn't dare ask DJ Gomi to “play her mo-fo song,” opting for a polite chat instead.

Bangkok is known for its gay bars, drag-show cabarets and karaoke. The gay clubbing scene, however, is a different story. Those in the know specifically hunt out the circuit parties, and here in the big, white 'space odyssey' orb known as Bed Supperclub, the “Think Pink/Gyent” nights are the most high-profile.

Chuckling, DJ Gomi pointed to the poster advertising the latest party, which proclaims him to be “New York's greatest gay DJ.” He said, “I'm straight but choose to play on the gay circuit. I love gay people and have lots of gay friends; it's like a third gender for me.”

DJ Gomi's dad was a piano tuner and his mum a traditional Japanese dancer. The family owned a record shop so young Gomi grew up listening to a wide variety of music which helps keep his sound diverse.

Gomi is keen not to be categorised. “I play house music [tribal, deep, bocal], hip-hop and R'n'B. It's all dance music to me. If it works, I play it,” he said. His musical foundation was cemented by studying under Quincy Jones and programming for Junior Vasquez, which has culminated in his mastery of turntable skills.

With proficiency in keyboards, drums, bass guitar and saxophone, it appears that Gomi is reminiscent of an Asian version of Prince. Both are quirky, versatile and shrouded in rainbow hues; pink for Gomi's fan brigade and purple for His Royal funkiness.

Curious to know what the gay party scene in New York was like, I asked Gomi to spill the beans. “Gay people are very picky about the



music. If the mixing is no good or your song selection is bad, they will boo and leave. It can be bitchy, a lot of pressure. There's so much drama,” he said, adding that with riotous, screaming queens like “Lady Bunny” and “Willi Ninja” around and a charged atmosphere, an endless entourage is guaranteed.

In the near future Gomi's diverse theme is set to continue, including work with J-pop artists on his label, Reason Media, and writing for Broadway singers. “These days DJ's have to both play and produce. The parties are for expression but it is in the studio that we get to create.”

Keen to deliver up-to-the-minute music, Gomi heads back to his hotel where he is downloading songs to play for the Bangkok crowd that same night. His parting shot: “I wish I had a couple more bodies. This is a plea to Sony: please make me a cyborg.”



NIGHT tripping

Bangkok's nightlife scene may lack the stamina it once had, but it has grown increasingly sophisticated and eclectic. Where once the city's DJs, tunes and bands were several years behind the times, they're now poised on the cusp of yesterday. From traditional English and Irish pubs to mega-clubs, live blues, tranquil lounges and Japan's revenge for Hiroshima — karaoke — there are a staggering number of places to get legless. But bar-trippers should be warned that at most venues Tam is the closing time and to enter some of the bigger clubs you will need to show ID.

SUKHUMVIT & AROUND

TSUKIYO Soi Ekamai 28, Sukhumvit 63 (100m from Phetburi Rd), 06-527 0099, 01-511 4755, no cards, www.tsukiyobkk.com, closed Tue. 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 DJ Octo. 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, 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 Rd, 02 690 9999, www.conradhotels.com, major cards. 87 has relaunched 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 5:30pm-1:30am, 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 ฿90, ฿150 for large beers. Mixed drinks go from ฿100-150. Happy hour is 6-9pm with ฿80 beers and jugs of Asahi for ฿300. 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.

BACCHUS 20/6-7 Ruam Rudee, Pathumwan, (Skytrain Pleomchit), Tel: 02-650 8986,

major cards, www.bacchus.tv. Priding themselves on their stock (and knowledge of) fine wines, Bacchus is for those of you with a taste for the exquisite. To compliment a bottle (or glass) Bacchus also serves Italian and French fusion food with your very own certified sommelier to guide you through the rocky terrain of matching the right wine with your grub.

CONCEPT CM2 Basement, Novotel Siam Square (Skytrain Siam), 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.

WITCH'S TAVERN 306/1 Sukhumvit 55, Soi Thonglor (between Soi 8 & 9), 11am-2am, 02-391 9791, Visa, Amex, www.witchstavern.com. Equally good for lounging or partying, the Tavern is pub style with matching menu (฿85-700) 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/RACHADA The place to be if you are young, Thai and out on the pull. Royal City Avenue is a huge strip of clubs, pubs and bars. For many years this was teenie-pop central but over the past couple of years RCA has been reborn as the mecca of Bangkok's nightlife scene. Nearby discos Hollywood and Dance Fever (off Rachadapisek Rd) are gargantuan, whisky-soaked dance halls. Worth a look for those seeking a cultural

experience.

FLIX / SLIM Block D, RCA. Brothers, sisters whatever they are: Flix and Slim are and were a key part of the RCA revolution. Switching RCA's staple teenybop to sophisticated-groovin' was a painless move, from the opening day 'til now both clubs are literally jam-packed every night of the week. Slim aims to cater to the lovers of the all conquering Hip-Hop, while Flix offers strictly 4-4 beats. Flix has also played host to some household names in House music: Judge Jules, Seb Fontaine, Little Louie Vega among others, and is fast becoming a favourite among BKK's clubbing faithful. Entry is free but you'll need your passport as ID.

ROUTE 66 Block D, RCA, 06-300 0817, major cards, www.route66club.com. With the arrival of Flix/Slim, Route 66, a legendary RCA teenybop hangout, also evolved into a more upscale venture (which bears more than a passing resemblance to Bed Supperclub). Route 66 originally had the same Hip-Hop & House split as Flix /Slim but soon switched both of its huge rooms to cater exclusively for b-boys and b-girls, i.e. Hip-Hop. After boogeying with the hordes inside, the huge outside terrace area will come as a welcome retreat. Again, it's free but passport essential.

CLUB ASTRA Block D, RCA, 0-9497 8422, no cards, www.club-astra.com. Although it's the new kid on the block, Club Astra has had one of the biggest impacts — hosting big-name international DJs on an almost weekly basis. In the last year alone we've seen Paul Van Dyk, Goldie, Deep Dish, The Stanton Warriors and DJ Craze, to name but a few. Probably the only club on the strip to have an 'international' style dancefloor, i.e. no tables and chairs, Astra's huge expanse lends itself to some serious boogie action. Be sure to check their site for upcoming events.

INCH 55/49-60 Ratchadapisek Road, 02-641 2963, major cards, www.inchclub.com.



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

Weighing in at (cue Dr Evil impersonation) 100,000,000 baht in development fees, this new mega-club is surely one of the most expensive and ambitious nightlife ventures in Bangkok. The look is a mixture of sci-fi space-port and disco-chic, and overall, very, very BIG. INCH prides itself on its unique cocktails, whipped up for you by 'international mixologists' — a rare thing in Bangkok. And although the club offers fantastic sound and lighting the fickle music policy might leave some international guests scratching their heads. Still, INCH is a newcomer to the super-club scene and well worth checking out.

NARCISSUS Sukhumvit Soi 23, (Skytrain Asok) just behind Pegasus Club. 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 Road. 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 11pm is worth going out of your way for.

GROOVE KITCHEN (back of Ana garden restaurant), 67 Thonglor 3, Sukhumvit 55, 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), 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), 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

Q BAR 34 Sukhumvit Soi 11, take quick left at end of the soi. (Skytrain Nana), 02-252 3274,

www.qbarbangkok.com, | major cards except Diners. A stylish venue decorated all in black. 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 (Dancehall & Reggae beats), Globalism Tuesdays (Afro, Latin, Percussive House), Wednesday is Ghetto Fabulous, uniting the best of old school Hip Hop, Funk & more. Liquid Thursday (House with special guests), Frisky Friday (Freestyle), Saturday Night Fever (Funky House) and finally, Beat Therapy Sunday (Hip Hop). **BED SUPPERCLUB** End of Sukhumvit Soi 11 (Skytrain Nana), 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.

What's the Punchline?

The good folk at the Bull's Head are at it again. Punchline comedy, their bi-monthly standup show is on again in September. This time there's four great international comedians gracing the stage to put the punters in stitches. Mark Watson from the UK was called "a scholar, a gentleman and a brilliant stand-up" by the *Evening Standard*. Mark is also the record-holder for the longest solo standup show (24-hours) so be sure to visit the loo before he goes on. Dave Johns is no stranger to the region having performed in Bangkok before, along with doing shows at the Melbourne Comedy Festival, Montreal's Just for Laughs festival and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Britishers may know Greg Burns from his radio show on Heart 106.2FM or have seen him playing himself in *The Office's* Christmas Special. Finally, transatlantic comedian Stewart Francis and expert on all bones funny completes the quartet. *Punchline Comedy* has shows on the 14th, 15th and 16th of this month, with tickets running at Bt1,700 including two drinks. Book early, as they always sell out, on 0-2233 4141-2 or at www.greatbritishpub.com





EVENTS **SEPTEMBER** 2006

SUNDAY 10TH SEPT
DJ QBERT
Widely considered the greatest DJ/turntablist in the world, Qbert, along with his Scratch Pkiz Crew, revolutionized the world of DJing with their mind-blowing skills. A three time DMC World Champion and Hall of Fame member, Qbert is in a class of his own.

WEDNESDAY 13TH SEPT
HAUL & MASON
4 turntables, 2 mixers, 2 FX units, & 2 djs. Haul & Mason have become America's fastest moving duo. Their 4 turntable sets have quickly become staples in the Los Angeles club circuit and even legends like Lenny Kravitz and Biz Markie are touting them as their favorite DJs.

THURSDAY 21ST SEPT
DJ COLETTE
Colette's unique ability to blend classically trained vocals with true turntable expertise is truly something which has to be seen and heard live to be fully appreciated. Her impeccable vocals perfectly complement her programming ingenuity, allowing her to create a completely unique performance.

THURSDAY 28TH SEPT
KEVIN SAUNDERSON
Respected and acknowledged as one of the three Detroit Techno innovators, Kevin Saunderson is a legend in his own right. Responsible for some of the biggest tunes in dance music history, he's have continuously pushed the envelope of electronic music and rocked dancefloors worldwide. Respect the architect! One night only, exclusively at Q Bar.

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LIQUID THURSDAYS
The best in Funky House
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Think lucky number nine, Sapphire stones, Virgoan hypochondriacs and chatterbox Librans. Don't think nine-plus-two or skyscrapers, we've had enough of that already. In Bangkok, its time to party!

Astra

Friday 15th Dude/Sweet Party featuring a DJ set from Rataffagg of the now defunct, art-punk London trio, Test Icicles.

Friday 22nd Japan's Ken Ishii leads the way with all things techno.

Saturday 23rd Makoto (Good looking records) and MC Deeizm offer up atmospheric, club-stomping drum and bass.

Barbies Bar (Sukhumvit 17/1)

Saturday 2nd A riotous punk/rock session with 15 bands performing.

Bed Supperclub

Thursday 14th Bed's 4th Anniversary party. Expect chic schmoozing and stylish beats. Probably invite only.

The Bull's Head

Saturday 2nd Join Billy and the crew for their 12th anniversary.

Friday 8th 'Enter The Dragon', Chinese fancy dress In The Basement.

Friday 29th Disco in The Basement.

Crystal Lounge (Sukhumvit Soi 20)

Every Thursday. Ladies Night. 8-10pm. Cocktails are 'buy one, get one free'.

Q Bar

Sunday 10th DJ Qbert. Watch the three-time DMC champ and Hall of fame member rock the crowd with his scratching/turntablist skills.

Wednesday 13th Hall and Mason. See LA's two-man, four-turntable crew mix 'speed of light' hip-hop at a rate of 60 records an hour.

Time Out (RCA)

Saturday 9th Grand Opening. See www.club-timeout.com to get on the entry list as it is 'invitation only'.

Opposite the dancing bit is the eating bit (hence the 'supper' in Supper club) with set meals served from 7.30pm (8pm sharp Fri, Sat). There's a full schedule of music, with Mondays being 'Electrofrequencies' (Electro, Breaks and House). Hip Hop is spun on Tuesday with Model's Night on Wednesday, dancing to Percussive Latin House. Thursday nights are little more confusing. First Thursday: OK! Magazine 80s Party, second and third Thursday: Rock 'n Roll is Dead (Rock Night) and fourth Thursday: Rehab, with the Futon boys. The weekend starts with Heavy Pumping Vocals on Friday, Hard and Funky Tech-House for Saturday. The week ends with Think Pink, Bed Bar's gay Sunday night.

ANA GARDEN 67 Thonglo 3, Sukhumvit 55, 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 luscious tropical garden this is a restaurant that succeeds in keeping up the hip quotient without a dull atmosphere or minimalist decor. Plenty of grilled fodder, cool tunes and liquor to complement the outdoor setting. No need to head off to a club after eating either as there's a perfect after

dinner groove den out back with plenty of space for dancing off that barbecued pork or slouching on the sofa. Every Thursday is City of Angels party. **GLOW** 96/4-5 Sukhumvit 23, 02-261 3007, major cards, www.glowbkk.com. The bar formerly known as Faith Club has been revitalized and risen anew from the ashes as Glow. Offering some of the largest pours in Bangkok, at very reasonable prices, Glow is a great place to start-off an evening's drinking or clubbing with a swing. A sanctuary for anyone sick of the constant-rotation 'Bling-Bling', Glow has a 'No Hip-Hop policy', instead some of Bangkok's finest DJs drop all genres of House music.

KOI 26 Sukhumvit 20, 02-258 1590, all major cards, www.koirestaurant.com. Los Angeles, New York and now Bangkok, this lavish new fusion restaurant-slash-bar extends Bangkok's ever increasing list of places to see and be seen in. Set sensually in subdued eastern chic surroundings and offering up unique 'Californian-styled' Japanese eats, extensive wine list and experimental cocktails; Koi is a great place to impress your friends and loved ones. The 'beautiful people' come out on Friday night (model's night) and great, cross-genre beats are provided nightly by resident

DJ, Vladi K. Closes 11:30pm.

THE DUBLINER IRISH PUB 440 Sukhumvit Road, between Soi 22 & 24, (Skytrain Phrom Pong), 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 ฿110 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, 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), 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 ฿100 from 2pm-2am! Live music on Mon & Thu 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 & 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, 02-234 6902. 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 ฿150 drinks sets it apart from the slick sterility offered by most Bangkok clubs.

NORIEGA'S Silom Soi 4 (Sala Daeng skytrain), 02-233 2813, major cards. Small, modern two-level bar run by Frank, aka 'Frank Superstar' from his long-time involvement with the Superstar a-gogo in Patpong many moons ago. The small food menu is headed 'nufood menu' which just about sums up the mix of Thai, tex mex and international favourites. Downstairs the bar features prominently in this clean white space. Live music is currently provided seven days a week

and this venue is one of the few in Bangkok to feature live blues every weekend from the city's premier blues outfits. Other nights feature jazz, latin and a range of bands catering to every taste.

DIPLOMAT BAR Conrad Hotel Lobby, All Seasons Place, 87 Wireless Road (Skytrain Phloen Chit), 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 2-for-1 drinks.

AD MAKERS 51/1 Soi Lang Suan (Skytrain Chid Lom & 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 (Sala Daeng skytrain), 02-2344737, www.tapasroom.net, 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 Thursdays and weekends (฿100 entry). Currently, Tapas are promoting their rooftop as a private party venue.

THE BALCONY Silom Soi 4 (Sala Daeng skytrain), 02-235 5891, www.balconypub.com, major cards. The best Happy Hour in Soi 4 offers cut-rate specials (฿49) 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 ฿59.

TELEPHONE PUB & RESTAURANT Silom Soi 4 (Sala Daeng skytrain), 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 (Sala Daeng skytrain), 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 Floor, The Dome, State Tower, Silom Road, 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

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- Forth FM



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- The Times

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BANGLAMPHU

BANANA LIFE Next to Samsen Soi 1, Banglamphu, 06-702 5295. Set on Samsen Rd Banana Life, formerly known as Banana Leaf, is one of the few truly hip places around Khaosan, this eclectic bar and restaurant is filled with funky art and saucy service. Bar Boon features a full bar with blended mojitos to die for. If you're hungry, the kitchen serves some mean fusion food and favorites like fresh glass noodle wrapped prawn with spicy peanut sauce. The place attracts a mix of Thais and foreigners eating and drinking it up. Finally, there's a life-size stuffed dummy for the lonely to dance with.

SILK BAR Opposite Krung Thai Bank, Khaosan Road, 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 Road (behind the Waf). 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 Monument, 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 Tanoo, 58/2 Soi Damnoen Klang Tai, 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, 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 aircon 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 Rd. Walk up Chakrapong Rd 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, 02-281 6565, no cards. Every night 8pm until 2am. Just the place for the lounge too lazy or frightened to explore greater Bangkok. This comfy black and red replication of Hades plays mostly hip hop through an excellent state-of-the-art sound system to a crowd of Thai and International boogyers.

SUNSET STREET Bang in the middle of Khaosan Road. 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, 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, 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.

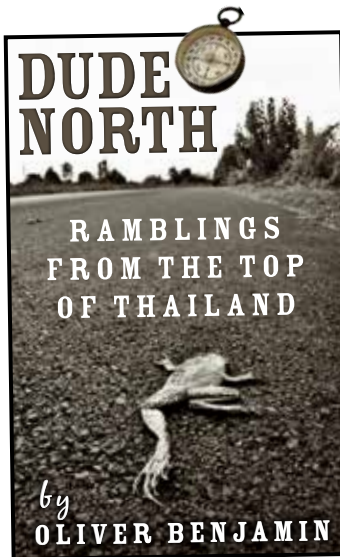
THE BANGKOK BAR 149 Soi Rambutree, just off Chakrapong Road, 02-629 4443, Visa, Master cards. Cool juxtaposition between Thai wood carvings, murals, paintings and contemporary grooves, Hip-Hop and D&B. Come midnight on the weekends, the place is usually so full you'd almost need an electric cattle-prod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

BAGHDAD CAFÉ On Samsen Road next to Ad Here the 13th. Great little sheesha bar. If you've never smoked sheesha (a traditional Arabic bong) before, you haven't really lived. The pipe is loaded with fruit-flavoured tobacco and you and your mates take turns pulling smoke through the hose. Since it's small, the bar is always crowded and Roachie, the affable Australian host, is always on for a chat and has an encyclopaedic knowledge of all things Middle-Eastern. Bt120 buys you a charged and lit bong which will last you and your mates for an hour or more. But leave the wacky-weed at home, kids.

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

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OLDE WORLD CHARM

Remember the good old days of yore? When loinclothed peasants scuttled about scavenging dirt clods while snooty Thai, Chinese, and European elites goosestepped in full regalia under the blistering tropical sun, whingeing about the skyrocketing prices of hemp and mutton? Everyone knew their place, drank all day, and

died well before they got old. This month in Chiang Mai a series of events will bring a nostalgic tear to your jaundiced eye. What can evoke the ambience of the golden age of imperialism better than some hoity-toity upper-class hoo-hah with all the trimmings? Peasants may participate as well – today's watered-down legal system makes it illegal to forcefully shoo you away. If you must turn up, at least do so in a freshly laundered loincloth. And keep your grubby hands off the ladies-in-waiting.

Moon Cake Festival

Everyone has seen Chinese moon cakes. You know, the ones that look like heavy golden hockey pucks. But no one outside of a few Chinese people ever seems to eat them because they taste, surprisingly, like heavy golden hockey pucks. Not so, however, at the prestigious Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi, where Chef Jovi Chan has created a series of gourmet lunar confections in honour of this year's Moon Cake Festival. Sample cakes with such unusual flavours as black sesame, green tea, coffee, durian and cream custard. The festival is in honour of the goddess of the moon who is supposed to confer upon her worshippers both good fortune, and the occasional bout of intestinal blockage. Bt350 for a box of eight.

Not convinced? Then try something lighter and cheaper. A more continental take on cake is also on offer – the Belgian Waffle. For Bt99 you can get one with ice cream. However, unlike the Chinese, Belgium's strict separation of church and cake means eating one remains a purely secular activity.

Until 18th September at Kad Dhara Shopping Village, Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi, Chiang Mai.

The Gymkhana Club Friday Night Dinner

The oldest olde-tyme association in Chiang Mai was hit hard by the floods of last year. Come help them get back on their golfshoe-shod feet by attending their monthly dinner on the terrace, complete with live music and plenty of sauced raconteurs holding court with ribald accounts of the happenstance of yesteryear. Hear, hear!

For more information contact gymkhanagolf@yahoo.com, visit www.cheingmaigumkhana.com or call 053-247352. The 1st Friday of every month at 349 Chiang Mai – Lamphoon Rd.

Free Live Museum

Lanna is what the kingdom of Northern Thailand used to be called before those savages from the south suckered us into joining up with them. Down there: Full Moon Parties, Patpong and civil unrest; up here: rarefied air, paddy fields and lots-o-wats. That's what globalization gets you. Anyhoo, if you'd like to learn more about Lanna, check out the

Lanna Live Museum, where seminars and exhibitions will be offered concerning Lanna cloth, arts and culture, crafts, handmade products and history and more. Lannamazing!

From now to 31st December 8.30am-6pm at the Center for the Promotion of Arts & Culture Chiang Mai University. Tel: 053-943624-8.

2006 King's Cup Elephant Polo Tournament

Normally, the popular King's Cup Elephant Polo tournament takes place at the beach town of Hua Hin, but this year the games will take place upcountry in the leafier Golden Triangle.

Seems the cost of all that sunblock was really eating into the budget. Once again, the sweet, unassuming elephant is at the centre of a giant fracas of humiliating fun in Thailand. Then again, what could be cooler than watching this wacky egalitarian twist on an old upper-crust game? Everyone is invited to watch and there's no admission so the crowds of unwashed masses have helped turn this once-humble attraction into the sixth largest event on the Thai tourism calendar. Aside from some of the world's top polo players, famous rugby stars and other celebrities

find themselves atop these slow-moving mountains of flesh, desperately trying to locate the ball under all that meat and not be pooped upon by their opponents' pachyderms in the process. When high culture meets low comedy, everybody wins.

From 4th -10th September. Within the grounds of the Chiang Saen Secondary School, located some 60 km from Chiang Rai International Airport, www.elephantpolo.com. Tel: 02-4760022 ext 1719 and 081-9047344.

The New Orleans All-Star Brass Band Jazz Concert

Nothing says "good old days" like New Orleans and jazz. Even more so now since, like that other deluged metropolis of Pompeii, poor New Orleans shall perhaps never be the same again. Grateful for the aid that poured in from around the world, the New Orleans All-Star Brass Band/The Survivors have taken it upon themselves to say "Thank you" in song. Show up at this free concert and say "You're welcome" in applause.

Starts 7pm, Sept 25 at the Chiang Mai University Convention Center, Nimmanhemini Rd. Free admission but reservations are necessary. Tel: 053-944805, 086-1900699.

World's Best Chefs

Not to be outdone by the Mandarin Oriental and their Moon Cake/Belgian Waffle extravaganza, the equally posh Four Seasons Resort Chiang Mai give visitors the unique opportunity to look over the shoulders of world-renowned master chefs as they take to the stove during an informal cocktail reception at the Cooking School. Resist the urge to say, "Is something burning?" and "Probably could use a little ketchup," or you might end up with severe chafing dish injuries.

Sunday, Sept 17, 6pm-8 pm. Tickets are Bt1,300 plus tax and service charge per person. Reserve your ticket early by calling 053-298-181 or email: siriluck.lertlarpyot@fourseasons.com

Please visit dudenorth.co.nr for additional events, comments or suggestions. This column is info-powered by www.citylife-citylife.com and www.city-now.com.



CHIANGMAI

Ask someone in the know what's so special about Chiang Mai and even the fondest aficionado will waffle, "Um, well, I suppose there's some nice scenery and there's some good restaurants and lots of elephants and temples. Easy to get around. Plenty of 7-11s." But that sure doesn't do it justice. Chiang Mai is so much greater than the sum of its parts. A recent survey in a mainstream travel mag just rated it the fifth best city in the world! Why? Maybe because it's a medium-size university town with both big-city sophistication and small-town intimacy. It's safer, cheaper, friendlier and cheaper (did we say cheaper?) than most other tourist spots in Thailand or even Southeast Asia for that matter. And it not only has an astonishing per-capita number of temples, but it probably has an even higher punters-to-pubs ratio as well. Yet for those with a healthy bent, the opportunities for physical and spiritual advancement are unparalleled. Chiang Mai's got it all. Aside from a beach, that is. Upside: no sharks.

PLACES TO CRASH

If it seems as if every other building in Chiang Mai is a guesthouse, that's because in some areas, it is. Consequently, you should have no trouble finding a comfy, good-value place to flop. The most popular tourist ghetto is inside the northeastern corner of the old city – around Moon Muang Soi 9. A perennial favourite in that area, but often full is **Supreme House**, managed by ever-cheerful Scottish Gordon. People check in but never seem to leave. Down the lane you'll find **Grace House**, which features shiny rooms and a good restaurant, and **S&P Hotel** which boasts a small swimming pool. Looking for something a bit more quaint? **Mountain View Guest House** on Sri Poom road and **Gap House** off Ratchadamnoen road both feature Lanna-style architecture and a leafy garden. **Sri Pat Guest House** on Moon Muang Soi 7 is a small boutique-style hotel catering to those looking for a little more comfort. Farther afield you'll find many other popular gems like **Julie Guest House** – people who stay there love it so much and so vocally that you wonder what they put in the food. **Dare's Guest House** benefits from its perfect location right at Tha Pae Gate, with a fun outdoor eating area and cheap,

good dishes. Those seeking upscale accommodation can find world-class-and-wonderful crash palaces like **Baan Sabai**, the **Mandarin Oriental Dhara Devi**, **The Four Seasons Resort, Tamarind Village** and **Ratchamankha**. Your pretty penny will purchase outrageously picturesque panoramas – all four mix modern amenity with ancient mystical charm. Finally, for those truly skint, head on over to **Banana Guest House** for dorm beds at Bt50 a bum.

DAY TRIPPING

Temples

More than that you can shake an incense stick at. But each one is unique in its way. **Wat Umong** could be the coolest, featuring a cute garden with inspirational sayings nailed to the trees, an unusual "starving Buddha" statue, a small zoo, catacombs, and instructive illustrations of wayward dogs getting drunk and driving too fast. **Wat Chedi Luang** is massive and particularly impressive when lit up at night. Don't miss the jaw-droppingly authentic wax dummy of a revered old monk. **Wat Suan Dok** offers monk chats every evening at 5pm – everything you wanted to know about *samsara* but were afraid to ask.

Markets

You can encounter just about anything at **Warorot Market**, including smells strong enough to oxidize your clothing. But this is where the local colour is. Every damn

colour you can imagine.

The **Night Bazaar** would be great if it weren't for all the fat tourists blocking the sidewalk. Still your best bet for a fake Rolex and Beer Chang T-shirts for friends back home. One of the best markets in

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, Chaisongkham Rd, offers more upmarket room and A-frame cottages, Bt500-800 including breakfast.

DAYTRIPPING

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

NIGHTRIPPING

Everything centres around Bebop Cafe (Rangsiyanon Rd, opposite the Tourist Police), where Charl'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.

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3 Locations in Chiang Mai

South East Asia is the **Sunday Walking Street**, branching out from Tha Pae Gate in the old city. All sorts of old fashioned cute newness can be found here. Great for people-leering.

Activities

Where to begin? Trekking, elephant-riding, white-water rafting, rock climbing, massage (both receiving and learning), yoga, meditation (and other hippyology), and so on. You'll not be stuck for something to do. Check out the new **Night Safari** – the controversial new nature park where the endangered animals almost made it onto the menu. Or cruise north of town to the **X-Centre** in Mae Rim where every kind of extreme adventure can be undertaken. Saturday you can make a day of it at the world's cheapest **Horse Races**, and then have a leisurely meal at nearby lakeside restaurants and visit the adjacent and interesting **Hill-Tribe Museum**. Nature lovers can find a wide variety of **treks** out into the hinterlands, often coupled with **bamboo rafting** and **elephant riding**. For those with a more adventurous streak, take to the hills on an **enduro-cycle** (*endurotours.com*) or **mountain bike** (*mountainbikingchiangmai.com*), go down that **river rapidly** (*siamrivers.com*) and learn to train those loveable **elephants** yourself (*maesaelephantcamp.com*). Finally, no trip to Chiang Mai would be complete without a visit to marvelous **Doi Suthep Temple** on a hill overlooking the whole valley. On a clear day you can see forever. Most of the time, regrettably, considerably less.

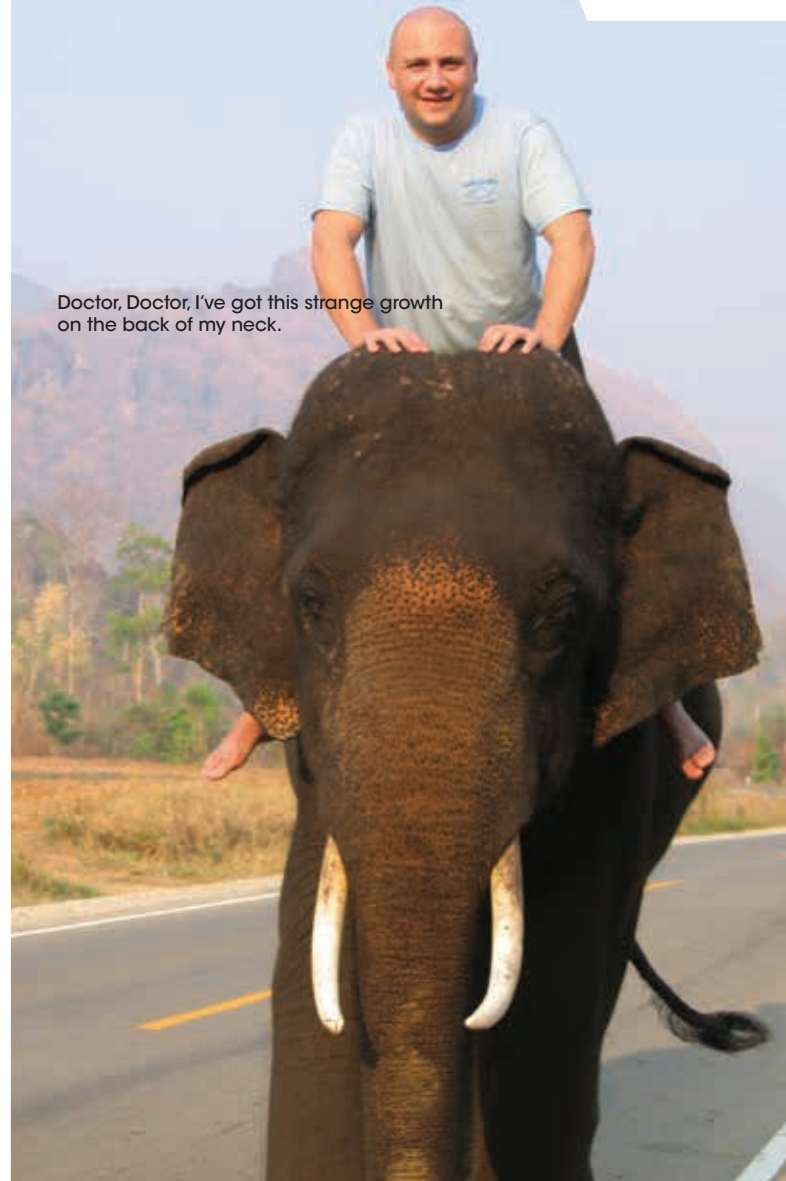
FEEDING TIME

There's so much good grub in Chiang Mai that many a traveller's day is made up of sitting around waiting impatiently to be hungry again. For a

big plate of healthy and hearty sustenance visit **Blue Diamond**, which also happens to be the headquarters for spiritual backpackers a-seekin'. Other traveller favourites include the friendly **Ratana's Kitchen**, which not only serves a wide variety of fab yum, but is blessedly air-conditioned too. For a special night out, hit any of the lovely riverfront restaurants – **The Riverside** is the most popular and tastiest, featuring affordable fare, great ambience and excellent live music. An incredible buffet brunch can be had at the **Sheraton** – eat your weight in imported cheese and shrimp cocktails for only Bt450. Best burgers in town can be found at the **Chiang Mai Saloon**, though their service can be slow – if crowded try **Mike's Burgers** instead. And while Chiang Mai may be beachless, sumptuous and fresh cooked-to order seafood can be had at **Anusarn Food Market** near the Night Bazaar. Over on the west end of town you'll find the popular and healthy **Khun Churn**, which offers a formidable vegetarian lunch buffet for only Bt60, and farther up a hidden gem – **Mi Casa** provides unforgettable gourmet Mediterranean cuisine in a lovely old house at great prices. Finally, for an awesome view of Chiang Mai at night, check out **Palaad Tawanron**, nestled in the foothills of Doi Suthep, where the good food, service and ambience ensure it's often packed to the gills.

NIGHTTRIPPING

Pub-crawlers are well tended to at expat hang-outs like the **U.N. Irish Pub**, **True Blue Pub**, **Bliss Pub**, and even just **The Pub**. Buffalo soldiers should check out Chiang Mai's "Little Jamaica," an area in the centre of town featuring rasta-themed bars with live music: **Babylon**, **Roots Rock Reggae**, **Heaven Beach**, **Utopia** and others. Fans of live rock are



Doctor, Doctor, I've got this strange growth on the back of my neck.

required by all that is holy to see local legend Tuk shred his Stratocaster into sawdust at the **Brasserie** bar – not to be missed. Dancing the night away is also an option at local clubs like **Bubbles**, **Warm Up**, **Bossy**, and **Monkey Club**. All feature young Thais wrecked out of their minds looking good and looking desperately to hook up, though not necessarily with you. Avoid the shamelessly racist **Mandalay** – they charge foreigners Bt300 while Thais get in free! For those looking for a more respectable night out, hit the **Drunken Flower**, a popular

hangout for local artists and literati. Owner Dai has an astonishing CD collection and a welcoming way. Visiting writers should stop by **The Writers Club and Wine Bar** on Friday nights to rub ink-stained elbows and drink with the local scribes. Finally, musicians should drop by **Santia's Grotto** for impromptu jam sessions in what is very likely the only *papier-mâché* cave in all of Southeast Asia. Finally, for a truly sordid experience, cap off your night at **Spicy**, the only place in town that offers pizza, carnal knowledge and punch-ups past 2am.

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diving into History



Most visitors to the Gulf of Thailand are unaware of the battles fought above and below its waters during the last Great War. The sea holds many secrets but diver Tim Lawrence dons mask and tanks to bring them to the surface.

May 15, 2006 – almost 61 years to the date of this attack, a team of divers from Davy Jones' Locker led by myself and local diver JP head for a mark provided by one of the local fishermen.

We concluded that the marks I was given were too close to be a coincidence and we were eager to rediscover sunken evidence of that wartime night. The fisherman had told me that this was a wooden vessel but as I reached the bottom of the line I touched a metal object. The objective of our first dive was to locate the wreck and then try to identify the type, length and beam of the ship and maybe catch a glimpse of any damage caused by a five-inch deck gun.

Of the two ships located on this day, one is thought to be a casualty of that night: She sits inverted with her propeller and rudder still intact. Covered in nets and marine life, the ship is a testament to the fact that nature can thrive where death once reigned.

Our run times did not allow for much bottom time at 40 metres, so a further inspection of this wreck is planned. The wreck is believed to be the remains of one of the WWII tug boats. We have nicknamed her the "Inverted Wreck" for lack of a correct name.

The second target was only 600m away. After the success of the first

May 20th, 1945, the submarine SS320 Bergall is on her fifth war patrol along the coast of Siam. Lieutenant Commander John M Hyde slowly manoeuvres his boat under the cover of darkness; he apprehensively checks his lookouts and listens to the beat of his diesel engines replenishing his batteries.

Vigilant and constantly aware of the threat of being spotted, a report comes to his attention. The silhouettes of ships have been sighted.

The captain immediately commands the submarine to diving stations and the Bergall slowly slips beneath the waves. On reaching periscope depth Hyde sees two small tugs and five barges. Eager to add to his ship's impressive record he proceeds to track his prey.

The success of the American submarines was legendary. They had sunk 60 percent of the Imperial Japanese Navy's cargo ships, seriously reducing the ability of the enemy to wage war.

The Allies' Silent Service started to run out of targets so they were given 5-inch deck guns to use in surface attacks on smaller ships. The Bergall was equipped with one of them and, as the sub surfaced, the gun crew rushed out to bring the gun to bear.

At the first sight of the submarine the barges slipped their tow and made a run for it, but at eight knots they were no match for the attacker's greater speed. The outcome was a foregone conclusion and when the noise ceased only the flag of the victor was left to mark the action.

dive the team wasted no time in kitting up. Our sonar gave us a good sized hit, but what were we to find? A wooden vessel, the result of some distant storm, or something more sinister?

Visibility on this dive was low. Swimming by compass bearing I bumped into what appeared to be a large bow. I quickly secured a line and blew a lift bag after confirming that the line was secure so the surface boat could anchor.

Buoy intact, I secured a reel line and ran it out, first going to the bow where I saw a large hole, the result of a collision or a five-inch shell? I then retraced my steps towards the aft, passing two large holds. This ship seemed to be a little more substantial. I reached the bridge and quickly surveyed the area, noting depth readings and looking for any machinery which could give me a clue as to what type of ship this was, before the constraints of time and gas forced me to return to the surface.

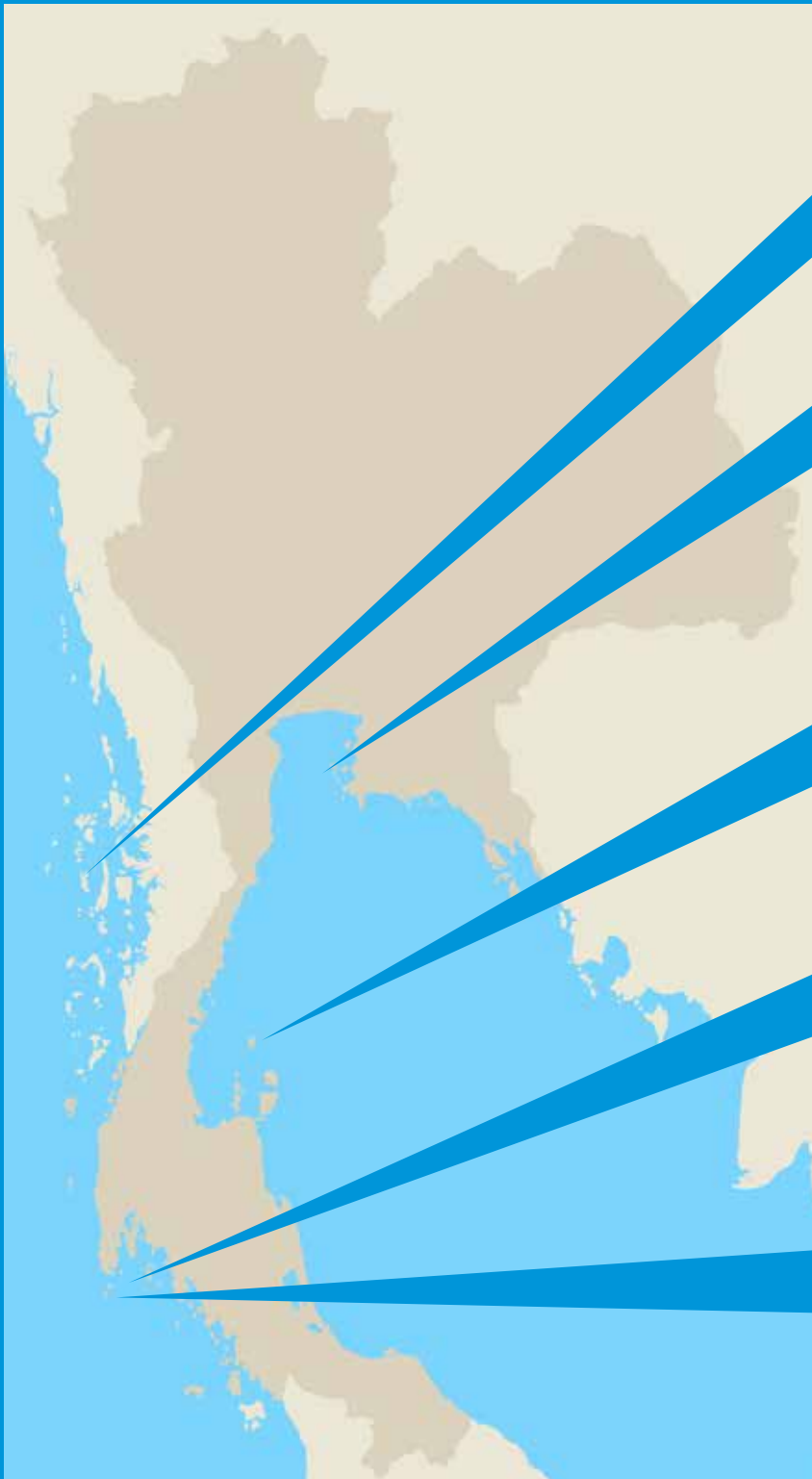
On subsequent dives we confirmed the vessel to be of a later design than WWII. We also identified wood in the cargo holds and we suspect a collision to be the cause of sinking but without records confirming this, it is still open to conjecture. Which leaves us with the tantalizing task of locating anything with a name or date to identify her – an in-depth challenge for future dive teams from Davy Jones' Locker.

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THE SIMILANS

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

PATTAYA

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

KOH TAO

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

PHI PHI ISLANDS

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

PHUKET

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

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BEACH ROUNDUP



The 6th Annual Invisible Man Conference was an object failure

If you haven't planned ahead, knowing where to lay your beach blanket in Thailand can be tricky. Thailand is justly famous for its miles of largely unfouled white sand beaches and new places crop up each year. While not exhaustive, the following wraps up the main beach destinations. Of course the other worry is weather. Keen as a fellow may be on a hand or two of poker, few want to spend their holiday playing indoors waiting for the rain to stop. Luckily, we're in the tropics which means that most of the time the rain comes in intense but short-lived bursts, leaving the rest of the day dry, if a little overcast. Being fairly close to the equator, Thailand's seasons are not pronounced. Nationwide there are three main seasons: Hot season starts in mid-February or March, reaching its peak in April until rainy season starts in May, then it rains until cool season begins to nip in November, which marks the beginning of high season, when the tourists come. Of course, that's only for central Thailand - things are a little different in the south where most of the islands are. On the Andaman (west) coast the seas get rough and the skies get cloudy at the beginning of May and get progressively wetter until the end of October. In the Gulf of Thailand, things get wetter later but it takes almost until December to dry up, although July and August are unusually fair. All that said, there's people on the beach all year 'round, and turning up in low season just means that you pay half as much for your room.

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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

The ideal island for the diver or diver wannabe, Koh Tao can be a bit of a vortex, drawing people that just don't want to ever leave. With spectacular underwater vistas and generally placid waters, Tao's underwater world can become addictive. Most divers who come here are getting their PADI Open Water Certificate as Koh Tao is one of the cheapest places in the world to get yourself hooked and hooked up to diving. There are bazillion places here that operate courses and standards are good and most operators are actively involved in reef conservation.

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

From monkeys to motorbikes, Samui has a smattering of everything. Direct flights from Bangkok have made

this Gulf island a commercial hub. You can still find the idyllic beach experience here along with pubs, nightclubs, hair-braiders, and fish and chips shops.

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

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cheaper places, but accommodations cover the whole gamut from wooden cells to lavish five-star hotels.

KOH SAMET

What was once a small fishing center is now a popular weekend getaway for both city-bound Thais and foreigners. Samet is Thailand's authentic desert island and it's close to Bangkok to boot. White Sand beaches line the east side of the island and range from clubby and crowded to almost empty save for a few bungalows. Midweek the island is cheaper and you can have your pick in beach chairs.

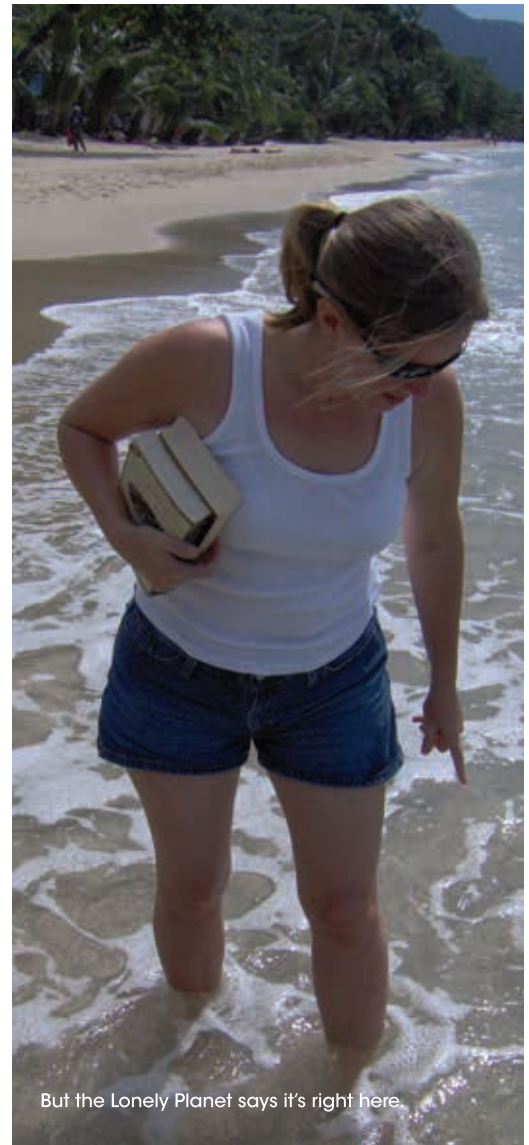
PHUKET

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

Sin City Thailand is conveniently located a couple of hours east from Bangkok for your hedonistic pleasure. Whatever your whim, paintball, eating schnitzel, shopping or deep sea fishing, you can satiate your thirst for pleasure in Pattaya. Speedos abound on the city's streets and beach, which is a bit on the grotty side. To get some nice sand go to Jomtien, a few miles east, or take a boat out into the great turquoise abyss.



But the Lonely Planet says it's right here.

Four Wheels Good, Two Wheels Bad

Hiring a motorcycle on the islands is by far the cheapest way to get around and remarkably expands your holiday horizons, particularly on Thailand's two most popular islands where the taxi-mafia rule. Not only cheap, nobody cares if you've got a licence, insurance or can even ride.

The trouble is that road accidents are the leading cause of death in Thailand, particularly amongst tourists, to the tune of at least one Farang a month going home in a box from Samui alone.

When you consider the cost and inconvenience of a prosthetic limb, hiring a bike looks like less of a deal. You're actually better off hiring a 4WD, which is cheap when split with two or three friends.

If you must ride, use your head. Put that head in a helmet. Don't drive around drunk. Assume everyone else on the road is trying to kill you because, due to lawlessness and the negative attitude of some islanders, they probably are. First gear on most scooters is for going uphill only and you can usually take off in a more controlled manner in second. Finally, drive shit scared. Think about how much skin you'd lose and what the bones would sound like when they break if you come off that next curve and you'll probably take it a little easier.

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SAMUI

In spite of all the development, you can still find yourself in the middle of some spectacularly tropical countryside in Samui, or on mile after mile of empty unspoilt beach. There's also another side to Samui — a clubbing capital with cool new bars opening all the time. You can also find something physically or spiritually cleansing about the island if you look in the right places, and many of the one million visitors who arrive each year return again and again. Some never leave.



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PLACES TO CRASH**CHAWENG**

P. Chaweng Guest House has TV, aircon and fridge, a real bargain for Bt600 on Soi Colibri. Moby Dick's Guesthouse is newly refurbished and is in Green Mango. Central Bay Resort on the beach is cheap and cheerful starting at Bt600 for a fan bungalow while Charlie's Bungalows is so legendary that half the world has stayed here at one time or another. It was refurbished last year and bungalows start at Bt700. Baan Chaweng Beach Resort and Spa is going upmarket but it's still good value with prices beginning around Bt2,400.

BOPHUT

Everything is a Frisbee toss away in this quaint old fisherman's village. Ban Bophut is a fairly new and luxury hotel on the beach; at Bt2,400 the price is right. The petite boutique hotel L'Hacienda has a small pool

on the roof with views of Koh Phangan in the distance, and accommodation for Bt1,900. Eden Bungalow has spacious rooms in a lush garden from Bt1,200, while Red House, in the centre of the village, offers rooms with balconies facing the sea. Smile House is an old favourite – two large pools and peaceful bungalows starting at Bt1,600. Many of the shops, bars and restaurants in Bohput also have apartments upstairs for short-term rental. Ayuthaya Garden Bar is probably the best deal starting at Bt1,200. Further up the beach are many upmarket hotels but also some old-school bungalows, many on the beach. You can find beachfront bargains at Cactus, Freehouse, Gecko and Calm Beach with prices beginning at Bt500 or less for a basic room.

LAMAI

Wanta has wide-screen TVs and triple-sized

beds, proving one of the best deals in town from Bt1,400. Spa Samui has newly redecorated rooms from Bt800, but most occupants are there for the healthy activities like detox programmes. Spa Samui also has one of the best restaurants on the island, which must be frustrating to the fasters that hang out there. Long Island, from Bt700 to Bt4,000, now has a spa and a fantastic restaurant.

MAENAM

Mae Nam Villa has bargain bungalows at the Bohput end of the beach starting at Bt300 for a basic fan room. Maenam Resort has great beach huts for Bt1,800. Sandy Resort is small, tidy, friendly, and family run, offering good food as well as aircon bargains for Bt1,000.

BAN RAK and BIG BUDDHA

Samui Mermaid has sea views, aircon, cable TV, mini-bar and two swimming pools from Bt600, while old-school Shambala (Bt650 and up), has a fine restaurant, and is situated in the centre of Ban Rak, on the beach. Saboey is more upmarket, beginning at Bt3,000 per night, and now has a top-class restaurant.

FEEDING TIME**CHAWENG**

If you're in the mood for original food (chilli ice cream!), try Betelnut's tasty dishes by master chef Jeff Lord who fuses California with Thai. Brasilia homage Zicos has an all-you-can-eat flesh feast for Bt650; the amount of food they offer is impressive as are the super-sexy Queen Samba dancers. Prego is a good Italian place, boasting a soothing-on-the-senses design and an endless supply of free, tasty breads. The Deck in central Chaweng is a laidback eatery with a huge menu of yummy stuff. Newcomers

Rice, Digress and Coco China House are just three of the upper-end nosheries with excellent word-class tucker.

BOHPUT

The latest addition to Bophut's dining scene is Dao Wa Deng, chef Luke's fusion food with a Moroccan twist is delicious. Happy Elephant is the oldest place in town and has seafood specialities. Seaweed is another fantastic newcomer serving Nordic pleasures like pan-fried cod with broccoli potato mash. Many masticators have reported eating the best steak in the world at The Shack. Don't miss Yoga Cafe with daytime healthy stuff and special theme nights. Jonnies Cafe and Steve's Pub have the best Sunday roasts.

LAMAI

El Dorado has a popular all-you-can-eat BBQ on Wednesday for Bt250. Harry's Bar wins the biggest fried breakfast award. Black Diamond serves up cheap and good Thai and Western tucker while The Cliff, on the main ring road towards Chaweng, has incredible cliff-top views, offers Portuguese Piri Piri and has a bar where you may find James Bond or members of Duran Duran.

MAENAM

Angela's Cafe is an old favourite offering choice, quality and value. Also on the main ring road, La Trattoria serves homemade ice cream and great lasagne. Hot Pot Maenam has an all-you-can-eat BBQ, so you can cook the food on a Korean hot stone pot at your table. For Bt89, including ice cream, the food is surprisingly good.

BAN RAK/BIG BUDDHA

For a great Western-style stuffing try Elephant and Castle or Aux Amis for some refined French grub. BBC

WAY TO GO**FERRY**

Seatran boats to Samui from Don Sak and Surat Thani 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 or Tao with aircon and movies. Ferries to Surat Thani leave from Nathon.

PLANE

Bangkok Airways leaves every hour until 9pm, Bt3,500/6,500 Ow/return. Look out for early-bird and red-eye flights for as little as Bt2,000. Ring 02-265-555 for details, but don't forget the Bt400 departure tax.

TRAIN

A sleeper ticket is Bt900 from Bangkok-Surat Thani for an aircon, 2nd-class berth and Bt1,339 for 1st class. Prices vary for all sorts of reasons. Add Bt180 for bus and ferry transfers.

BUS

Bt450 from Samui to Bangkok, or vice-versa, takes 14 hours so bring a book, an iPod and some sedatives.

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NIGHTRIPPING

CHAWENG

For those who like the party scene, Chaweng Lake View is a popular, banging, having-it kind of place. Check listings for Black Moon party and Escape nights. Rock lovers head to Penny Lane for classic tracks or to Springer Pub for live sounds. Reggae Pub, the classic old haunt, starts late and doesn't play much reggae. The best cool and modern sounds in town are spun at Mint Bar by world-class visiting DJs. Green Mango is for loud thumping party times and ladies of easy virtue while Bar Solo has a bucking bronco and

is open late. The Art Palace is a cool club/hotel with a decadent feel. Pod and ESP are two of the best new bars on Soi Colibri and are situated right next to each other. The classic venue Christies has a free lady-boy cabaret show at 11pm every night. Hats off to Coco Blues for bringing in some seriously good musicians from abroad and at home - a welcome change of tunes from the blip-blop android flatulence of most places.

LAMAI

Fusion Bar is a good place to drop yourself into first gear and then get yourself all revved up at Supersub, the only club to stay open past 2am. For good clean fun try Bauhaus for all your foam-party needs. But the real

black heart of Lamai is its female mud-wrestling show and go-go beer bars.

BOPHUT/BIG BUDDAH/BAN RAK

Bands and BBQs go down a treat at Secret Garden by the beach, every Sunday evening. The Looking Glass, Frog and Gecko and Billabong provide the only late-night loudness in Bophut. Sadly, the Gecko (not Frog and Gecko) have stopped their Sunday sessions, "thanks to constant bollocks from our neighbours," they say. A moment's silence, please.

ACTION PANTS

Experience the jungle with Canopy Adventure (07-741 4150) where you slide along ropes to various tree houses above the canopy, Bt1,400 per head. A great way to see the island is to take a Samui Safari (07-741-5123-5). You can choose half- or whole-day trips, from snorkelling and elephant trekking to 4x4 off-roading. There is also a world-class golf course on the island, the Santiburi Golf and County Club (07-741 8557), or try mini golf at Yogi Bear Ha Ha (01-787 9148), situated on a back road between Bohput and Chaweng. Samui also has Football Golf (09-771 7498) near Chong Mon, and Frisbee Golf, in Bophut past the Monkey Theatre. Heading back to the zone of sanity, Red Bicycles (07-726 7202) rents mountain bikes and arranges tours through the jungle and beyond. 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. For more action try Samui Quads and Paintball (01-371 0744). A newcomer to the sports scene in Samui is two freshwater fishing lakes stocked with huge fish

in Taling Ngam (enquiries@fishingthailand.com).

Meanwhile, at the Samui Crocodile Farm, 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 daring are also on the cards at the Samui Snake Farm (07-741-8680-1), where the Guinness-record-breaking Scorpion Queen and Centipede King also hold court. For CSI fans fond of forensic mysteries, Luang Pho Daeng was a monk whose undecomposed body is in a glass case for viewing at the Khunaram Temple near the Namuang Waterfall. For boat charters and diving, talk to Aquademia (01-091 0107). Bring a copy of Untamed Travel to Aquademia and get a 10 percent discount.

ROADTRIPPING

The two main taxis are green and yellow aircon cars and *songthaews* (shared pickups). A ride in a car costs about Bt300 and they never put their meters on, just as well as they're rigged to hit Bt500 in five seconds. For short trips expect to pay Bt150/200, but make sure you haggle over the price first. Songthaews are Bt50-100 for the longer journeys and Bt30 for short trips, but it's every man for himself after dark. Renting a motorbike is Bt150 per day, but remember that road accidents are the number-one cause of death in Thailand, with Samui being ground zero. There's no green cross code, or crosswalks on Samui and it's getting more dangerous by the minute. Renting a Jeep is a much safer option: Budget is insured so that's your best bet if you don't want to end your visit in tears or the Emergency Room.

GREEN CROSS CLEANS UP

Last month Green Cross sifted the sands of Bang Rak beach, removing rubbish and litter to make Samui just a bit more beautiful. You can lend a hand this month by heading up to Choeng Mon beach (in the northeast) for a day of garbage collection, rewarded not just with a feeling of well-being but a free BBQ and party afterwards. For more details get in touch with the Green Cross Project at greencrosssamui@hotmail.com





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KOH PANGAN

Whilst the rest of Thailand gets settled in for the rainy season, the islands in the Southern Gulf get one or two more months sunshine as the monsoon works it's way down the country. Offshore thunderstorms light up the horizon at night and the occasional rain-shower clears the air, but the days are invariably dry with cool breezes making sun-worshipping bearable. Pangan will still be fairly full due to the mini high season created by the European summer holidays thus room prices are not as cheap as they could be, but the weather more than makes up for it!

Full Moon Party is on the 7th September this month, also look out for the excellent half and black moon parties that go off over the month.

PLACES TO CRASH:

HAD RIN:

Get there a week before the party or book first to ensure a room at Full Moon.

On Sunrise: **Paradise Bungalows** and the **Backpackers Lodge** have a good variety of rooms and **Sea Garden** (฿500 – ฿5,000) and **Jonathan** are classy joints. **Drop Inn** (฿2,350 – 19,900) 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** (฿1,000-2,500), **Phangan Buri** (฿2,100-4,100) and **Vimarn Samut** (฿1,250-5,600) are well run with great aircon rooms.

BAN TAI:

Near the FMP – but out of hearing distance, Ban Kai and Ban Tai have some great resorts.

Harmony (฿450-2,100) has aircon bungalows, swimming pool and sauna and **Hunsa Resort** (฿650-2,500) in Ban Tai Village has aircon beachfront rooms with minibars, baths and TVs. **Milky Bay** (฿1,200-4,000), **Morning Star** and **Dewshore** (฿550-3,500) are also recommended.

WEST SIDE:

The west coast of Koh Phangan is a string of beautiful white sandy coves; it has the best coral reef and great sunset views. In Sri Thanu, **Chai Country** is a top place where Chai takes guests on unique day trips. Had Chao Phao is home to high-class **Phangan Cabana** (฿800-1,800), **See Thanu** (฿250-2,500) and the

bohemian **Sea Flower. The Village Green** (฿350-1,400) serves fantastic Euro-Asian cuisine.

Had Son resort (฿400-12,000) 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** (฿400-2,700) and **Had Yao** are popular while the good-value **Over the Bay** has peaceful hillside vistas. Had Salad is a beautiful deserted beach with mid-range **Salad Huts** and luxurious **Salad Beach Resort** (฿1,700-4,000). Near Koh Ma, Mae Had has a variety of huts with the best diving and snorkelling. **Island View Cabana** and **Wang Sai** are also good ones.

CHALOKLUM:

Chaloklum has some well-established resorts and like many villages around KPN, there are houses to rent. **Fanta** has nice beach huts and **Chaloklum Bay** (฿200-2,500) has some great aircon rooms. Had Khom and **Coral Bay** (฿1,500) 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 round, it becomes more rugged; here Had Tien and Had Yao East provide real castaway

dreams.

Bottle Beach is only accessible by boat from Chaloklum and there's sometimes a waiting list for good rooms. On Thong Nai Pan Noi, **Panviman** (฿2,300-19,000) and **Baan Panburi** (฿380-4,500) are posh gaffs that take Visa cards and **Thong Ta Pan** and **Star Huts** are good value. On Thong Nai Pan Yai, **Dreamland** (฿300-1,500) and Nice Beach are popular. **Than Sadet** has a variety of cheap rustic bungalows and some more luxurious resorts like **Mai Pan Rai** (฿200-800). Had Yao East has just two resorts and Had Tien is home to the infamous **Sanctuary**, with a real traveller vibe, and many detox and yoga programmes

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 hug the north-west coast of the island, making it an excellent place to snorkel and one of the cheapest and least-crowded

places to dive in Asia. There are fishing trips, 'round-the-island boat trips and loads of watersports on offer, including catamarans, kiteboarding, windsurfing and kayaks. There is also the **Jungle Gym** for fitness sessions and Thai boxing tuition. Pangan has acres of undisturbed tropical rainforest and a wild jungle interior. There are overnight mountain-treks and coastline walks, temples to visit, elephant treks, paintball, spa and meditation retreats to sort your head out and it's also a pretty good place to do bugger all!

NIGHTRIPPING:

Pangan has a wildly varied nightlife with everything from its infamous beach parties to high-class restaurants and beach bars. If you are not into parties, just head to any beach outside Had Rin, while Thong Sala is a great place to head for a gourmet feed and a few beers.

Pangan's party H.Q is Had Rin, with the Full Moon Beach Party (FMP) every month and nightly parties at a great variety of venues with everything from drum and bass to trance to R'n'B – just take a wander up Sunrise beach to find something

WAY TO GO

PLANE:

The easiest course of action is flying with Bangkok Airways to Koh Samui Airport. Then take a ferry to Pangan (about 45min); flights also go to Surat Thani airport on the mainland, a cheaper route but takes longer to get to the island (five hours). When flying, check your arrival times to ensure you can get a ferry that day; it's best to arrive at Samui before 2:30pm.

TRAIN:

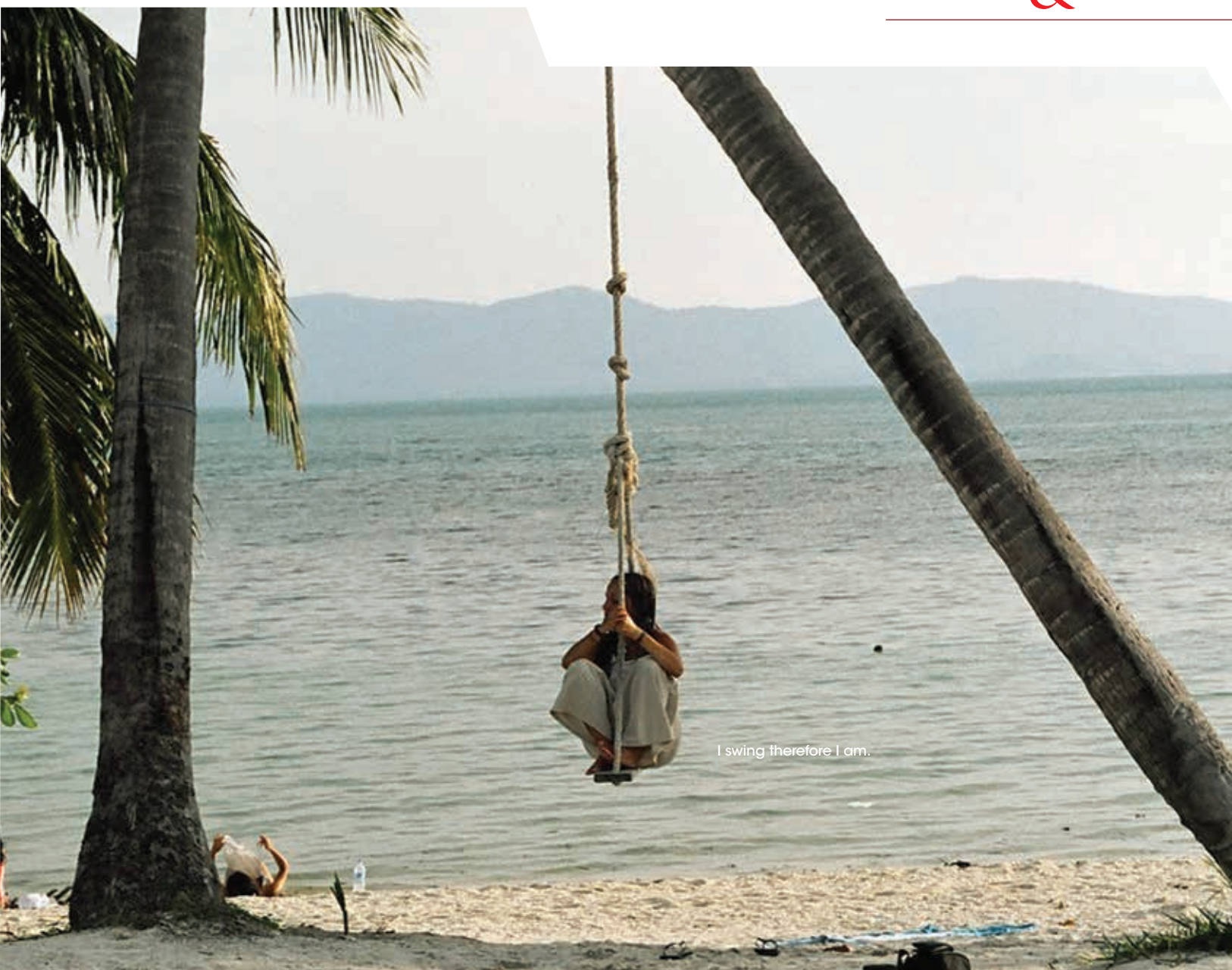
From Bangkok; the train is a great way to go, first-class sleeper ฿1,150 and second-class sleeper ฿650. Leaves from Hualampong station between 5pm and 7pm and gets to Surat Thani the next morning.

BUS:

Cheapest at ฿600, including ferry. Tourist buses leave from around Khaosan Road around 7pm, arriving at Surat Thani the next morning. From there, it's a three-and-a-half hour bus and ferry transfer to Pangan.

FERRY:

From Koh Samui North (Bophut/Airport) take the Lomphraya Catamaran or Seatran Express for the quickest and most comfortable crossings to Thong Sala or the Had Rin Queen for the most frequent crossings. From Koh Samui South take the Sonserm Express at 11am or the Seatran Car Ferry at 6:30pm (book first to ensure a place for cars).



I swing therefore I am.

you like. On Sunset, the **Outback** has quality tunes and food and try not to miss the **Backyard** for its infamous recovery party that goes on all day the day after the moony. Outside Had Rin, **Black Moon Culture** hosts one of the biggest outdoor parties in Ban Kai Jungle two weeks after the FMP, whilst the **Half Moon Festival** goes off a week before and a week after

the FMP; both in brilliantly decked-out jungle with excellent facilities; expect hard, progressive and quality trance. Other venues include the **Moon-Set Party** at the **Pirates Bar**, Chao Phao Beach going off three to four days before each FMP in a secluded private cove and the **Ban Sabai** daytime after-parties that go off after any major event in a super-sandy beachfront venue.

ROADTRIPPING:

To hire a songthaew it's about Bt350 to go half-way across the island and over Bt500 for hard to get to places. Normal prices from Thong Sala (the main town) are: Bt30 for Ban Tai and Woktum; Bt60 for Had Rin; Bt 80 for 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 cost Bt200 to Bt400. Only experienced riders should attempt the Had Rin/Thong Nai Pan hills – and do it sober! Much safer Suzuki Jeeps cost between Bt600 to Bt1,000/ day. Boat taxis go from Thong Sala, Chaloklam, Ban Tai and Had Rin. Costs are similar to songthaew prices.

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KOH TAO

Koh Tao is catching up with its larger neighbours in visitor numbers, thanks to improved travel connections. The island's infrastructure is expanding quickly, albeit in a more controlled manner than other surrounding islands, so still retains its small island charm.

PLACES TO CRASH

Accommodation choices are varied and cater for all tastes and budgets; from beach-shack chic to the more luxurious pads with all the mod-cons and prices to match. With an increasing amount of rooms to be had, you'll be sure to find something to satisfy. Most resorts now have a choice of fan or aircon bungalows. Expect to pay around ฿400 for a fan room, double that for aircon. Check out www.untamed-travel.com for latest accommodation deals. Although many resorts cater specifically for divers, most are happy to accept non-divers except during the peak of high season.

MAE HAAD

This main point of arrival and departure has everything you would expect from a main town: shops, restaurants, bars, travel agents, banks, a post office and the veterinary clinic. A small range of budget and luxury accommodation can also be found. 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 highest concentration of bungalows and the longest beach. Starting from King Rama V rock moving north, Intouch Resort is a traditional Thai-style beach resort with well-established huts and a chilled-out atmosphere. AC Resort has a choice of fan and aircon rooms and a newly-built swimming pool. It can get noisy at night as it has one of the largest bars on the island. SB Cabana, Lotus Resort, and Sairee Huts have good value, centrally located aircon or fan bungalows. Silver Sands has old and new wooden bungalows set in a beautiful tropical garden. Simple Life Villas, an island institution with a regular party crowd and tireless atmosphere offers a choice of large concrete bungalows or older Thai huts. Sunset Buri Resort offers Mediterranean-style bungalows with a swimming pool overlooking the beach. Blue Wind, a quiet haven with a relaxed atmosphere and daily yoga classes, has a wide choice of accommodation. For classic traditional-style beach-huts try Mama O Chais slightly

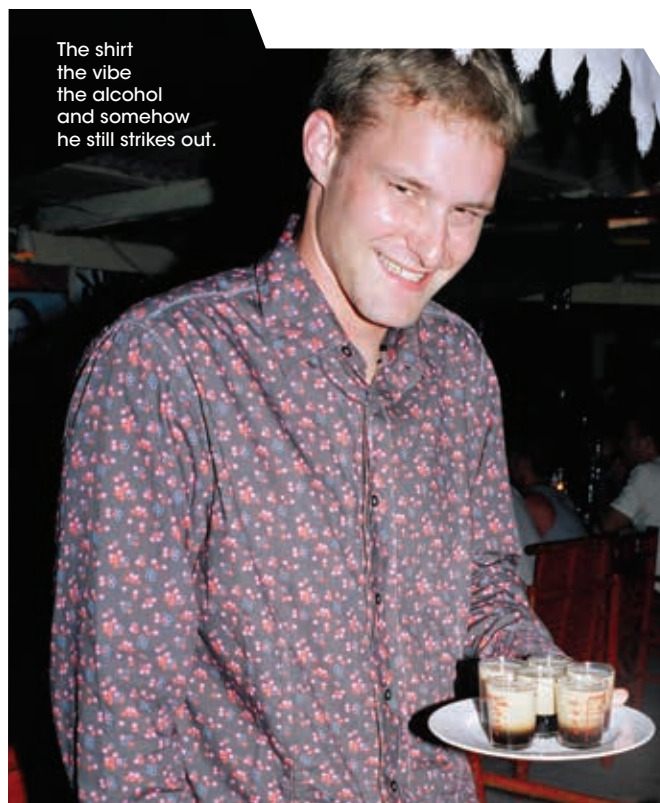
further north. If you want to be away from the beach and relax in the cooler mountain breeze try OK View Bungalows or Moonlight inland from Sairee beach. There is a fair amount of accommodation in North Sairee. Sun Sea and View Cliff have basic, cheap huts on the rocks with great views of the sea. More up-market is Thipwimarn Resort with outstanding views from its terrace restaurant. At the end of the road and island is CFT Bungalows, a quiet retreat which offers daily meditation and massage.

THE EAST

The northeast coast is much quieter and more secluded

with a smaller selection of accommodation. Worth checking out are Hing Wong Bungalows, Green Tree, or View Rock Resorts. Moving south Tanote Bat has a small selection of bungalows 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 bays can be arranged from the pier by either taxi or longtail boat.

The shirt the vibe the alcohol and somehow he still strikes out.



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DRAFT BEERS:

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THE SOUTH

The main area here is Chalok Ban Kao, quieter than Sairee, set between San Jao beach and Taa Toh Lagoon. It is easily accessible and has all the conveniences you would expect to find at the third-largest beach. Sunshine Resort, Koh Tao Tropicana, Taa Tao Lagoon and Ko Tao Resort are all 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 SSI and PADI being the major standards. Tech-diving courses are available for the less faint hearted. Most dive operations are members of the Koh Tao Dive Operators Club, (KT-DOC) which is responsible for setting professional standards and

monitoring and improving the marine ecology. Price competition is all but levelled by the KT-DOC, so choosing a dive school depends on reputation, service, and quality. Fair play we say.

Alternatively, snorkelling is another way to see the abundance of marine life here. With many secluded bays and beaches here, try a day snorkelling and swimming at 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, water skiing and more.

For those who prefer terra firma there is plenty to keep you occupied. If you're the active type, trekking trails are plentiful and the most arduous routes reward the survivors with isolated 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. Try your hand at bowling and mini-golf at Koh Tao Leisure Park.

NIGHTTRIPPING

With hundreds, of divers completing courses daily, there is always a vibrant party-scene on the rock. A regular mix of home-grown and visiting DJ's play a variety of musical styles, assuring the freshest sounds. Most venues are open nightly, although the party night changes, keeping the atmosphere alive and a scene of, great people and good spirits. Check posters and fliers for more info.

For bar butterflies there are plenty of places to choose from. In Sairee the forever popular Dry Bar is ideal for sunset and 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 it promises unadulterated tunes and unrivalled energy. In Mae Haad, Dragon Bar serves up oriental mystique and seductive beats with an extensive cocktail list. Irish pub Dirty Nelly's is a welcome addition to the Mae Haad bar-scene.

FEEDING TIME

The choice of eateries on Koh Tao is broad and impressive whether you're after tasty Thai tucker or your favourite farang fodder. Puk's Kitchen and Yang's - Mae Haad, offer a wide choice of cheap 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 cooking, using traditional recipes. Farango Pizzeria also offers a fine 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 soak up the sauce try Greasy Spoon breakfast bar and chip shop. For fiery curries, funky tunes, and expat prattle, Tattoo Bar is the place to be. A new addition to the international-cuisine scene is Chopsticks with a selection of tantalizing Chinese fare.

In Sairee, Suthep, on the beach offers of quality Thai and Western food. Mash balls or Massaman, it's all good, as is the wit of the humorous host. Papas Tapas, near the Sairee 7/11, has a hookah lounge and a selection of absinthes. For funky Mexican, El Gringo's, Mae Haad and Sairee, has a reputation for wicked fajitas washed down with tots of tequila. Choppers Bar and Grill, a wicked two story Aussie-style sports bar with an impressive selection of Western and Thai-style home cooking, draught and imported beers, has two wide screen projectors to watch all the current sporting events. Live music twice a week with the Roaring Boys and monthly with the infamous Lee Shamrock. For fine authentic Indian cuisine sample the delights of Noori India. Check out Green Mango, Sairee. Its popular with expats and serves superb Sunday roasts. New Heaven Restaurant, Chalok Baan Kao, has beautiful views from its open-air restaurant, serving fresh seafood.

WAY TO GO

TRAIN

Trains leave from 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.

BUS

Joint bus-and-boat packages leave from Bangkok early in the morning transporting you to the island by mid-afternoon.

FERRY

Several ferries of various speeds leave from Koh Pangan, Koh Samui and Chumphon, mainly in the morning. Times and boats change depending on demand and the weather. Check travel agents for latest times and prices.

PLANE

Fly in style to Samui, with planes departing hourly, and catch a ferry to Koh Tao.

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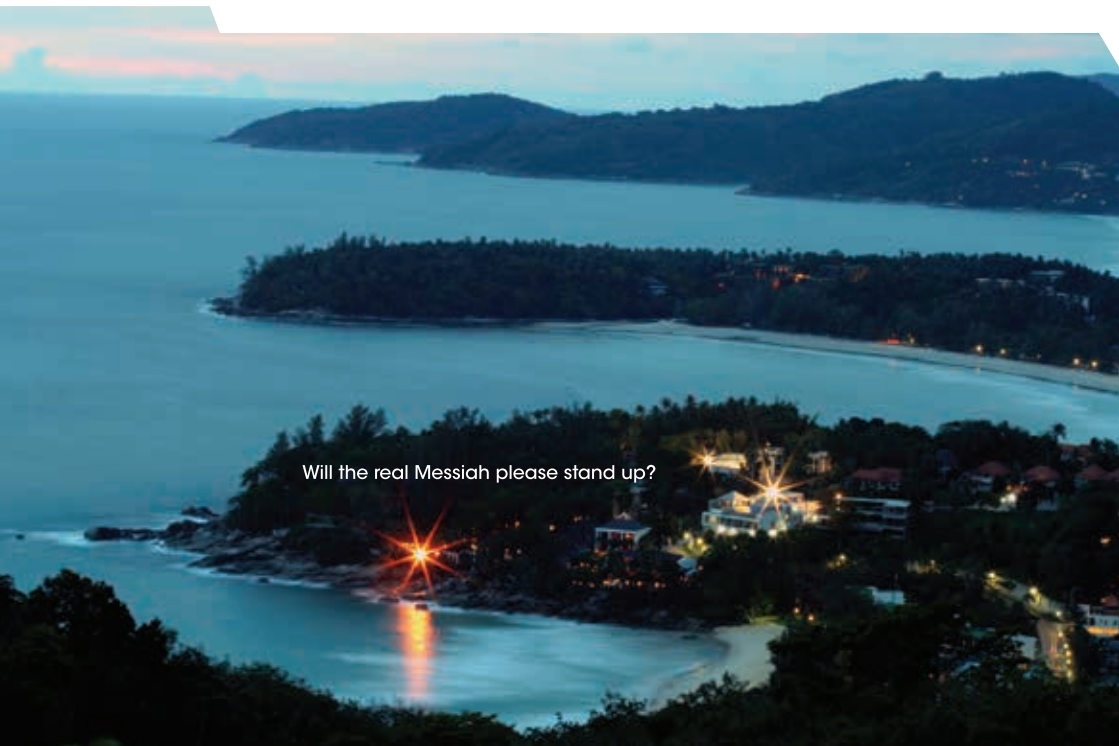


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PHUKET

Phuket is jumping again. Patong is full of sightseers, shoppers and party hounds, and the beaches are filled with families enjoying the low-season rates. It's a good time in Phuket, but remember the treacherous monsoon-season swimming conditions. The choppy seas present numerous rip currents and undertows, and Untamed Travel wants you to enjoy your stay. This month's big news is Ao Po's new ultramodern 600 metre jetty and the brand new Sino-Portuguese-style TAT offices on Talang Road. Complaint of the month is the Bt400 National Parks fee – the parks never saw any benefit from Bt200! Where will all that cash go? Be careful on any trip to Phi-Phi. Speedboats are often overloaded, not a good thing in rough open seas. If the boat is over-capacity, better to get your money back than take any chances. Phang Nga Bay is always protected from the waves, with everything from sightseeing to sea canoeing, so stay in calm seas. Away from water, spend a day in Phuket town.



Will the real Messiah please stand up?

PATONG

PLACES TO CRASH

The **Novotel** on Kalim Beach is the usual five-star fare but has a low season rate of about Bt3,000, not bad by Phuket prices. Forum comments give it top ratings. **Patong Lodge** (Moo 5 Patong Beach, 076-341 020) on Kalim beach has excellent rooms at around Bt1,500 and up. Basic, but good value. **Expat Hotel** (076-342 143) in Soi Expat is set back from the beach and has rooms for around Bt750 and up. **Club Bamboo** (076-345 345) offers quiet Thai-style ambiance on Patong hill for around Bt1,100, while **Amari Coral Beach** in South Patong still comes in for under US\$100/day.

FEEDING TIME

Concaved Beach Restaurant offers a panoramic view right from the centre of Patong

Beach, everything from red meat and poultry to the grilled white snapper that is the specialty of the house. Nice wines and desserts and excellent beachfront ambiance. Patong street food is good fun, cheap and generally safe – remember Thais don't want to get sick any more than you do. At Patong's north end is the always famous **Baan Rim Pa**. You can't eat every meal there, so also try **Lim's Baan Yin Dee la Casa** and **Pum's Thai cooking school**.

NIGHT TRIPPING

Patong is all about night life – Soi Bangla rivals Bangkok and Pattaya for debauchery. Something for everybody, but watch out for the ladyboys in the Silly Soi's and Soi Paradise gay district – most are expert pick-pockets (blowing in your

ear as a distraction whilst lifting your wallet). The best place to see men dressed as women is **Simon Cabaret**. Bar flies find Soi Animal appealing, with **Tiger Disco** and **Crazy Horse Saloon**. **Dragon, Star Club, Crocodile Disco** and **Safari Club** round out Patong's disco scene.

KATA-KARON

PLACES TO CRASH

Pacific Club Resort on Patak Road in Karon comes in at US\$46. Sitting on a cliff overlooking Karon Beach, the **Central Karon** is stunning at any price. **Orchidacea** (formerly Pop Bungalow) in an excellent hillside location and with great value rooms overlooks Kata Beach, starting at Bt2,000. Alastair Why's **Aspasia** is great value in low season with a Jacuzzi in your room – on the point behind

Peach Hill. Excellent location and value. Northern Lanna-style boutique hotel **Kata Minta** is five minute's walk from Kata Beach and is great value.

FEEDING TIME

Forget the old name-places, overpriced and serving the emperor's new clothes. Find good eats by walking toward the mountains from Kata Corner. There are plenty of reasonable Thai, Italian and seafood restaurants. On Kata Noi, head to the south end of the beach and pick your restaurant – great ambiance and better food than the big-name hotels, at local prices. Walk from the traffic circle about 100 metres to find good eats. **Chanadda** in Kata Noi, **Cinnamon**, and **Perfection's Fashion Café** are the names to look for

NIGHT TRIPPING

Ratri is a new jazz club high up Kata Mountain, with a roof that's higher still. The food is great, and the music better. Call owner/operator Jae on 09-874-5286 for directions.

SOUTH END

PLACES TO CRASH

South Phuket is far from the maddening crowds and hosts our favourite Phuket 5-star, the owner-operated **Mangosteen**. Transfers take you to any beach you can see from your mountaintop abode. **Cape Panwa Hotel** is 15 minutes from Phuket town and excellent value at under Bt3,000. **House of the Rising Sun** private villas is in a class of their own, beyond backpacker's budgets, but excellent value for expat families. Studios start at US\$200. Old-time resorts like **Friendship Bungalows** are going upscale, but still in the Bt1,000-2,000 range. **Shanti Lodge** is a true eco-resort from Bt350-1,000. If that's too high, try the nearby **International Youth Hostel**. (Bt200-450). **Baan Maai** on Koh Lone in Chalong Bay includes free transfers to Chalong Pier, US\$150 and up. Starting at Bt2,000, **Nai Harn's Baan Krating Jungle Beach Resort** is refurbished, idyllic and funky. At Bt950, **Sonny's Nai Harn Beach Resort** remains a great deal.

FEEDING TIME

Belgium Bakery near Wat Chalong is so popular with

SEPTEMBER EVENTS

This year's Phuket Surfing Contest is set for September 8th-10th at Kata Beach, as usual. After you get hungry watching the surfers, try the Por Tor Food Festival from September 10th-21st in Phuket Town at the Fresh Market on Ranong Road (the local bus stop) or Por Tor Kong Shrine, both in Phuket Town.

local expats it's difficult to get seated for breakfast. **Don's Mall** isn't at his old place anymore, but the food is still great (and so is the deli market) so Don's remains the afternoon-evening gathering place in Phuket's South. Homesick Brits find **The Green Man** pure heaven, a perfect rendition of a top-end old English pub and restaurant. Thursday is Quiz Night. **Family Restaurant**, across from the Chalong cop shop, has Thai, Western and Middle Eastern food at excellent prices. A kilometre towards Phuket Town, **Something Fishy** is the new fish 'n' chips sensation. In Rawai, it's the **Mangosteen** again – one of the few hotels anywhere where you go just for the food. Down at Rawai Beach (longtail heaven) just pick an open-air seafood restaurant and take your chances – we've never been disappointed in almost 20 years.

NIGHT TRIPPING

Rawai Beach's beer-bars aren't exactly Patong-style, but may be more fun. Start at **Nikita's** (076-288 703) on the east end of the beach and work your way west. **Friendship Bungalow** (076-288 996) now has Jazz every Sunday from 4-8pm, but usually goes on later. The pub at **Don's Café** gets rolling after 9pm, about when the rest of Rawai goes to sleep.

NORTH END

PLACES TO CRASH

Try **Phuket Country Home** for a little peace, built on a hillside 10 minutes from the airport and a short walk to the beach, but beware, this place is *quiet!* Bang Tao is now its own destination. On the way to **Amanpuri**, you pass **Twin Palms**, **Surin Beach Resort** and **The Chedi**, all luxurious. New kid on the block **Phuket Pavilion** can set you back US\$1,000 and up. Bang Tao

Beach is back in business with accommodations from three-star to beachfront bungalows. **JW Marriott** at Mai Khao is very five-star with low season rates averaging US\$300. Their **Vacation Club** has great deals if you attend a low-key sales pitch. Back by the Airport, **Indigo Phuket** (formerly Pearl Beach) starts at US\$100. A short way, but worlds apart in style, is **Mai Khao Bungalows** (01-895 1233). Even more natural is beach-camping or bungalows at **Sirinath National Park**.

FEEDING TIME AND NIGHT TRIPPING

Albatross in the centre of Laguna Phuket is the best dining value north of Patong. If you stay at a Laguna Phuket hotel, just jump in the Canal Village boat shuttle. Open-air over-water dining is so quiet the trees sing in the breeze, with unreal food that doesn't damage your wallet. Try anything scampi. Albatross even has an elegant private dining room for special occasions. For a bit more, try **Tatonka**, **JJ's Irish Club** and **Supper Club**.

PHUKET TOWN

PLACES TO CRASH

Metropole and **Royal Phuket City** are downtown Phuket standards, along with world-famous **On-On Hotel**, refurbished for "The Beach" but still Bt250. Next to Marine Biology Institute, **The Bay** is excellent family value from US\$75. Old stand-bys include **Talang Guest House**, **Thavorn**, and **Merlin**, which also houses Phuket's most happening underground disco.

FEEDING TIME

China Inn, **Dibuk** restaurant and **Ka Jok See** set the trends in Phuket town restaurants, all superior to typical tourist fare and much better prices.

Tung-Ka Hilltop restaurant hosts Phuket's all-time best panorama view – the food is so good reservations are a must. The architecture along Dibuk and Talang roads are also a highlight. The low prices and art-shops make Old Phuket top value. Across from the Merlin Hotel, **Baan Klung Jinda** offers spectacular Sino-Portuguese ambiance with food matching the interior quality. **Natural Restaurant** behind the open market is Phuket's funkiest dining – budget an extra hour to check out the creative junkyard art. Food as exciting as the ambiance, at local Thai prices.

NIGHT TRIPPING

You won't find many Phuketians in Patong – they frequent Phuket Town's great local clubs. Our recommendation is to get out of the tourist areas, take a local bus to Phuket in the morning, enjoy lunch on Dibuk or Talang Roads, do the afternoon walking tour, and enjoy dinner at **Ka Jok See** or **Baan Klung Jinda**. Finish off with **Jammin'** or **Timber Hut**, and take a meter taxi back to your beach hotel.

OFF PHUKET

Guests call **The Sarojin** in Khao Lak "the World's Greatest Hotel" but maybe they haven't been to **Mangosteen**. Even so, this place is so amazing it's worth the drive to Khao Lak. Over on Koh Yao Noi, try the **Koh Yao Resort**, an old stand-by that's blended in with the island for almost a decade without making waves, nothing like the tacky mainstream hotel on the north side of the island. Visit

Koh Yao before mainstream tourism destroys this idyllic island.

At the other end of the spectrum (and the island) is **Capt. Bean's Bungalows and Restaurant**. The bungalows may be basic, but the restaurant makes no apologies to any fancy night spot.

ROADTRIPPING

Best advice – don't drive, especially a motorbike. Phuket roads are 50 times more dangerous than most in Western cities – motorbike deaths about five times that. Remember Thailand's second most common cause of accidents is turning into traffic without looking. Accidents caused by Thais driving in the wrong side of the road are common. If you do drive, rent a car, drive defensively, slow and on the left. Phuket now has over 20 rental car agencies. Avoid Tuk-Tuks – rude and overpriced. Best to order a meter-taxi. At the airport, walk the parking lot towards the exit gate to find the local taxi stand. Avoid dangerous transfer concessions – low-paid drivers speed just to make ends meet. Best to take the local bus from anywhere to Phuket town for the day – cost is Bt20 or less.

DAYTRIPPING

There's plenty to do on and off Phuket – remember, it all started as a dive resort. Unfortunately, finding straight answers at the tour counters is difficult. For honest advice, try **Albatross** in **Canal Village**, and the **Tourism Authority of Thailand** at their new Sino-Portuguese digs on Talang Road.

WAY TO GO

AIR: One-way Bangkok to Phuket:
Bangkok Airways: Bt2,470 • Nok Air: Bt2,750 (varies)
Thai Airways: Bt3,230 • One-2-Go: B1,700

TRAIN:

2nd Class Aircon (Pullman berth): Bt788 + Bus Surat Thani-Phuket Bt238
3rd Class Air Con (Seat sleeping): Bt578 + Bus Surat Thani-Phuket Bt238

BUS:

Bangkok-Phuket direct
VIP - Bt970
Aircon - Bt626

KRABI

Krabi is a must-see province. A varied and veritable montage of scenery, rich in natural appeal – deserted beaches, thick jungles, spooky caves, towering waterfalls, twisting mangroves. Best to rent your own transport and make your way to these hidden wonders yourself – otherwise you're stuck in the middle of one of the most well-developed tourist traps in the region. This also means that you'll never find yourself far from a comfortable and affordable room, a hot shower, great pasta or good old steak and chips. The town centre is host to a rather fragrant market. Only a short drive from Krabi town is Ao Nang, a resort town offering all the pleasures and necessities for the modern tourist. Around the corner on a sea-locked peninsula is one of the world's natural marvels: Railay – two main beaches, (east and west) plus Phra-Nang beach on the southern tip. Tonsai Beach, hidden away in the northwest of the peninsula, is home to a diverse crew of backpackers and rock-scaling thrill-seekers.



Another day another trophy

KRABI TOWN

Fast changing into a large urban centre, Krabi town still retains its classic local charm. Numerous hotels of a two- to three-star standard offer aircon rooms with hot-water bathrooms and satellite TV (sometimes better to check which particular channels). Try the Krabi Loma or the Krabi City Seaview for comfy rooms in the vicinity of Bt600 and helpful, well-mannered staff. Old Chinese shophouses adorn the Khong Kha and Chao Fah Roads, where you can still find various levels of cheaper rooms

between Bt150 and Bt400 at Cha and Judy Guesthouses.

FEEDING TIME

Krabi has a real buffet of choices. The Khong Kha Road Night Market sells all types of local delectables, from simple noodle soup through to crispy, fried oyster omelettes, which are way tastier than they sound. Want to loosen the bowels? Southern Thailand is renowned for its liberal use of chillies in the local curries. Head for the day market on Soi 10 and marvel at the aromas wafting around you at the restaurant stalls. If unsure, just point and ask, "Chicken? Beef? Pig guts?"

Ruen Mai is charming and cheap; it has all sorts of exciting and exotic flavours, plus some great seafood. But the best seafood in town is served up at Chow Seua. Tired of spice and rice? Café Europa, one of Krabi's first foreign-owned restaurants, serves a smorgasbord of Scandinavian favourites. And the Italian-owned Viva Pizzeria has great antipastos, pasta and pizzas.

NIGHTRIPPING

Bangkok it is not but that doesn't mean you have to stay in your room playing dominoes. If in doubt about the town's varied nightlife, stop the nearest motorbike taxi and in your best Thai accent, ask "Techno? Band? Pub?"

Of these three distinct types of different local styles The Crazy Pub can be recommended for having a fairly "pumping"

atmosphere as live bands and DJs entertain you with a combination of Thai and European tracks. Fashionable, fun, smiley clientele surround you and the beer boys and girls refill your glass the minute you sup the last drop of liquid. For the Asian "dance music" lover, you can risk heading to Mixer Pub where the music is loud and sometimes makes your eyelids twitch.

DAYTRIPPING

Rent your own car or bike if you're feeling daring and take a spin to Wat Tham Seua (the Tiger Cave Temple), the Khao Phanom Bencha National Park with Hua Toh waterfall, Ao Leuk and Ao Thale with mangroves and caves, hot springs, the Emerald Pool, or just keep on driving along the coast and marvel at the countless kilometres of empty, unsullied beaches.

AO NANG

If you haven't been here for a few years, then you may not recognise this once sleepy and quiet beachfront road. There may be a McDonalds, fashion malls, five-star resorts and more

WAY TO GO

Bangkok to Krabi:

BUS: Mini buses cost about Bt350. Government buses are about Bt700 from the Southern Bus Terminal.

AIR: Flights from Bangkok cost about Bt2,500 one way.

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concrete than greenery, but Ao Nang is still a cool base camp for a few days. Recently, all of the phone lines and electric cables on the beach road were relaid – underground!

Get off the main strip and you will find a stunning, nature lover's location with some of the most scenic sites that Krabi has to offer within a short hike.

The level of accommodation in Ao Nang has climbed over the years. Wanna's Place has rooms for around Bt900. The Somkiet Buri resort is in a wonderful location with rooms that go for about Bt1,200. Nowadays, the average "budget" fan-room in Ao Nang comes with hot water, TV and costs in the region of Bt350. Numerous guesthouses behind the beachfront are a safe bet with friendly staff.

NIGHTRIPPING & FEEDING TIME

A regular haunt is the Irish Rover Bar & Grill for its lively atmosphere and some marvellously meaty dishes, good tunes and live sports on the TV. For the more serious sports freak, JJ's Sports Bar and Café is notable for its giant screen, decent pub food and a bouncy, enjoyable atmosphere. The juiciest steaks in town can be found at Café 154. Live music pumps out of the Encore Café: jazz, blues or good ol' rock 'n' roll will put a bounce in your step. The Last Fisherman and The Last Café offer a relaxed atmosphere on the beach, where you can soak up a cocktail and the last rays of the setting sun before tucking into a variety of local dishes. From the old days, The Luna Bar has survived thanks to their UV lighting, neon paint, trancey-music and party-hard atmosphere, which inspires unplanned 'parties' that stretch on late into the night.

DAYTRIPPING

Aqua Vision takes you on the best diving trips the area can offer while Koh Kayak Expeditions (www.kayakthailand.com) offers adventurous travellers the best self-catering trips available (for the less confident, a guide can accompany you on your quest) in real sea kayaks with waterproof compartments for storing a cooker, navy maps, mobile phone (just in case!), tents and hammocks. So you can head off into the ocean blue yonder, buy fresh food from a passing fisherman and cook it up on any secluded beach you've chanced upon. Or charter a longtail boat (Bt1,500) for the day and make waves for offshore islands. Real white sand, fringing reefs and natural shade from the palm trees all guarantee a magical day out. Further out there's Koh Hong (Bt2,000). For snorkelling, diving and water-sports equipment visit the One Stop Dive Centre.

RAILAY

A healthy and hedonistic hideaway for backpackers, couples or families, travel surveys repeatedly vote Railay as one of the most beautiful beaches in the world. Split into four stretches of sand, the East Beach, West Beach, Phra Nang and Tonsai, the Railay peninsula offers the

traveller a multitude of ways to spend their time. Relax while watching a magenta sunset, or sweat it out climbing the megalithic limestone cliffs, which, half a billion years ago, formed part of the world's largest coral reef. On the west (sunset) side, room prices are higher. Railay Bay Resort and Spa offers the cheapest in luxury with rooms ranging from Bt1,050 to Bt2,000. Railay Sand & Sea Resort has similar rates. The east side is home to the cheaper restaurants, bars and bungalows. Viewpoint Resort and Diamond Cave Resort both come complete with comfy and spacious two- to three-star standard rooms with swimming pools; and Bt400 should get you a comfortable bungalow with en-suite bathroom during the high season. Meanwhile, that old classic, YaYa Resort has upgraded their rooms but kept the prices down to around Bt350. Cabanna Resort provides basic bungalows with attached shower room.

NIGHTRIPPING

The east side also hosts most of the main bars with parties rotating between them nightly. The best of the bashes are at the Gecko Bar and the Last Bar, both boasting warm welcomes and that usual cocktail of Sangsom buckets, contemporary music, happy-smiley people and a headache in the morning. The Gecko Bar also has live music from time to time.

TONSAI

What Railay was like the in good (or bad) old days, this is where you do nothing but watch climbers, base-jumpers, slack-liners, and jugglers. A very laidback location blessed with some of the cheapest accommodation around. Tonsai Bay Resort will give you the closest in 'luxury' that Tonsai can offer for Bt1,200. Banyan Tree Resort has cheaper but comfortable rooms for an affordable Bt350 and Jungle Huts have basic bungalows with showers for Bt200 per night. If you're craving a full-on night of cheap drinks and heady tunes try out the Sawasdee Bar. For dancing, The Freedom Bar hosts regular beach "raves" with DJs playing the latest club anthems from Europe.

DAYTRIPPING

Diamond Cave, a diamond-studded cave (well, more likely to be Pyrite but, hey, the walls sparkle) is worth a visit. A well-built pathway takes you in, where giant stalactites and stalagmites await. There's a Bt200 entry fee, but if you are smart then head up after sunset when it's closed. Alternatively, you could take a treacherous journey up and over the mountain to the lagoon, a true landlocked treasure. Ask any climbing shop for info or a guide. The descent is not for the faint-hearted but children have made it, so why shouldn't you? Hot Rock, Cliffsman, King Climbers all offer similar deals for climbing courses/guides/route maps/equipment. Railay Diving offers a variety of choices for the beginner through to the experienced diver – definitely explore the King Cruiser wreck.



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PATTAYA

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 B1300 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 Sawadee 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 kilometres. 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 bungy jump, which is just near the go-cart speedway (South Pattaya). Plus there's paintball, horseback riding, skydiving and shuffleboard. Needless to say, the landscape around Pattaya is littered with quality golf courses.

NIGHTTRIPPING

The main nighttime activity in Pattaya City quickly becomes obvious on arrival. If you happen to be a white male in town, a quick stroll around dusk will illicit several invitations for a drink or other offers that may make you blush or tremble. Beer-bars sprout from every bit of available space and there seems to be another acre of them around every corner — plenty of go-go bars around the downtown as well. Two of the more famous clubs and hunting grounds for happy hookers, and the men who lust after them, are Walking Street's Marine Disco and the Bangkok-based Lucifer's. If that's your

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

FEEDING TIME

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

WAY TO GO

BUS

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

AIR

Not really worth flying from BKK, but Bangkok Air flies to and from Samui twice daily.

TAXI

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





JOMTIEN HOLIDAY HOTEL

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

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HUA HIN

A few years ago Zimmer frames and handkerchief headgear would have outnumbered Honda Dreams in Thailand's oldest and most prestigious beach resort city. Things are changing. H.M The King's decision to make Hua Hin his primary residence, the exploding property market and the recently completed Market Village complex, with over 40,000 square metres of shopping, international eateries and entertainment have kicked Hua Hin firmly onto the playing field as southern Thailand's most up and coming mainland destination.

PLACES TO CRASH

In terms of accommodation the city is rich with luxury hotels and resorts. The Hilton, the Marriot, the Dusit and the historic Sofitel (built in 1923 and still resplendent of that era) all compete for the upscale visitor's baht. For the slightly less well-heeled the Peony guesthouse offers aircon rooms opposite the Sofitel from 1,400 B. For those travellers still on the comfort verses beer quota kick, try the London Guesthouse or Top Marks (it deserves them) in Poolsuk road, Bt250-1,200. Both offer good sports coverage and Western food in their popular downstairs bars.

FEEDING TIME

Want the best tom yum in Thailand? Try the Sirin opposite Burger King. Gastronomes wanting a second opinion should visit La Mer or Supatra in Khao Takiap. Both of which will delight the tastebuds without giving your wallet a coronary. In town La Brasserie de Paris on the waterfront stands apart from the competition offering a French country twist to Thai seafood and steaks. Street-stall aficionados should check out the Grand Night Market (4pm-12pm). For a little more northeastern spice try the strip between Soi 88 and the railway station. Breakfast is best served, at either end of the day, by Crawford's Irish Bar in Poonsuk road next to the temple.

NIGHTTRIPPING

If "Hello, welcome" is your kind of thing then head down to Soi Bintabat, otherwise known as 'Soi Disappointment'. Crawford's and Butterfly Rock offer imported draught beers

in aircon surroundings before proceeding to the Brewhouse owned and operated by the Hilton, the closest Hua Hin currently has to a nightclub. The Country Club next to the Grand hotel hosts big-name Thai acts from time to time, usually well advertised via mobile loudspeakers and misspelt flyers, as are the city's two boxing rings. Not satisfied with a "Bintaburger" and an early night? Head to Sam Sam bar next to the Brewhouse, open as long as the owner's eyes are. The karaoke strip behind will take you through until dawn along with the friendly local constabulary finishing the nightshift.

DAYTRIPPING

The biggest tourist-pullers are the nine 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, bananaboating, 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 four kilometres 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. 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. Another good daylight option is the Elephant Village, located near the Palau Waterfall and the Eitiuskato Temple. Heading further out of town, the Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park (30km south of Hua Hin) has some photogenic beaches, limestone hills, and caves. The park is also a roost for sea eagles, painted storks, and purple herons, and a lair for deer, serow and many different kinds of primates. A two-hour drive and a 15-minute speedboat brings you to the island of Koh Thalu. The coral reefs around here, teeming with tropical fish, provide sunken pleasures for snorkelers.

WAY TO GO

BY ROAD

Buses leave regularly from the Southern Bus Terminal in Bangkok, take around three hours, and cost about Bt150. Busses from Hua Hin to Bangkok go every 45min, 3am-9:30pm.

BY RAIL

Trains leave the Hualamphong station in Bangkok all day and cost around the same as the bus. 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.

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KOH CHANG

As the month of September winds on, shopkeepers will begin to replenish their stock of "Same same, but Different" T-shirts as the island emerges from a green-season state of stupor so dull that the only 'event' of any kind to take place was the opening of a new post office. With a bit of luck this September won't see a repeat of last year's storms which many locals recall as the worst in living memory. Although that probably says more about their powers of recollection than it does about the severity of the weather. Yachties should take note that the conditions for sailing around the Koh Chang archipelago are excellent at this time of year. However, mere landlubbers will have to wait until mid-October for all the trips and tours to be up and running on a scheduled, rather than ad-hoc, basis.

WHITESANDS

Not a bad choice out of season as everything you need can be reached in a two-minute dash between rain showers.

PLACES TO CRASH

Cliff-hugging budget-bungalows can be found at Star Beach and Rock Sand, at the northern end of the beach. The ever-popular KC Grande Resort covers all the bases with Bt350 bamboo huts to Bt6,000 villas. Kacha Resort is the package-tourist's hotel of choice. For good value long-stay digs, try the small roadside resorts on the road south out of Whitesands.

KLONG PRAO

A long curving beach that's often deserted at this time of year making it a great place to get away from it all.

PLACES TO CRASH

Moving from north to south,

Koh Chang Paradise is a safe bet for comfort-seeking 'suitcasers', KP Huts provide the pick of the backpacker beachfront bungalows. Flashpacker favourite Baan Rim Nam, has ensuite, aircon rooms for Bt900, less if you ask nicely. Four-star frills come courtesy of Tropicana Resort and Aana Resort, both more than adequately catering to credit card-carrying aficionados of architect-designed luxury.

KAI BAE

Aka Whitesands for the independent traveler. An ever-expanding conurbation of beach bungalows and roadside shops and eateries.

PLACES TO CRASH

Read no further if you're on a budget as Siam Holiday & Porn's both have beachfront huts for Bt300 or less. Check out Kai Bae Hut, not so much for the rooms as for the ostriches and crocodiles which inhabit the owner's

mini-zoo. For peace, quiet and a cosy bungalow pop down to KB Resort or Kai Bae Beach where prices range from Bt700-2,500. Mum, Dad and the kids will be better off at Seaview Resort & Spa.

LONELY BEACH

Backpacker central is now undergoing a facelift, with more resorts moving upmarket in order to attract guests other than cash-conscious travellers.

PLACES TO CRASH

Your best beachfront bet is Siam Beach Resort with low-season rates from Bt700-1,700. Nearby, Nature Beach has beachfront beds for Bt300 and up. On the hillside, 'no frill' seekers will find Oasis Bungalows' ensuite huts for Bt300 are a steal. Down the road a couple of clicks, the back-to-basics Bailan Hut provide simple huts by the shore for Bt200.

BANGBAO

No amount of development can spoil the views from the pier, but Bangbao itself is now charming with a small "c".

PLACES TO CRASH

Bangbao Sea Hut and Blue Café both offer good value aircon accommodation in the stilt village. If you want to be alone, make a detour around the peninsula to the Bt150 Homestay Beach.

ELSEWHERE

The recently opened Spa Koh Chang on the shore of Salakkok Bay is a must for health addicts with deals on bungalows from Bt600-2,000 representing excellent value. Further south, The Treehouse on Long Beach lays claim to the title of most remote hut complex.

NIGHTTRIPPING

No surprises on Whitesands as prime locations and live music mean Sabay Bar and Oodies grab the crowds. Friendly, budget beach shacks with ambience include Barracuda, Klong Prao beach and Porn Bar, Kai Bae. On Lonely Beach it's got to be Sweet Zone and Backsound for cocktails in a bucket and DJ-driven dancey/trancey tunez.

DAYTRIPPING

Ploy Scuba remains open through the 'green' season, but check conditions as visibility ain't great after a storm. A Thai cooking class at either Ka-Ti Culinary or Blue Lagoon, both Klong Prao, is a fun way to kill an overcast afternoon. Alternatively, get a pampering at Sima Massage, Klong Prao or Herbal Sauna, Bailan. Stick Elephant trekking at Baan Kwan Chang, at the top of your 'to do' list regardless of weather conditions.

WAY TO GO

BY AIR

Bt4,400 return on Bangkok Airways. Twice daily flights from Bangkok at 8:30am and 4:00pm.

BY BUS

Bt250 for a direct bus to the ferry piers from Ekamai, departures at 7:30am and 9:30am.

BY MINIVAN

Direct to KC from Khao San Rd or Sukhumvit for Bt600 or so.

FERRY

Bt50-90 one way or take a speedboat for Bt150.

Choose to take a vacation. Choose Thailand. Choose an island. Choose a beach. Choose a generic three star resort, choose an air-conditioned bungalow, a mini-bar, 40 channel cable TV, a Continental breakfast, a seafood buffet dinner and a beach massage. Choose colour co-ordinated beachwear. Choose idly lying by the pool reading a mind-numbing novel. Choose Factor 40 tanning lotion. Choose an overpriced snorkelling trip and 'Made in China' souvenirs.

I chose not to follow the herd: I chose something else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you've got www.lamKohChang.com?

KOH SAMET

If you can brave the four-hour bus ride from Ekamai to Ban Phe, entertained by the latest Vin Diesel movie dubbed in Thai at top volume, you will find yourself in a little slice of paradise. Koh Samui this is not. Samet for the last decade has been a place for Bangkokians, Thai and Western, to escape the grit of the city for a weekend and relax, so the place is mostly empty on weekdays and packed the rest of the time. Basically a long sandbar, Samet is the place for summer lounging during the day and a cheeky bucket at night. Don't forget the mosquito repellent though.

HAT SAI KAEW

For a banana boat fix go to White Sand Beach. The sand is much as you'd expect, blindingly white, though much of it is covered by beach mats, football games and families napping. This isn't the quietest place around. Its proximity to the ferry and abundance of services (in comparison to the other beaches) make it one of the busiest spots on the island. White Sand has a monopoly on the beach chair industry, with rows five or six deep. They are cleared away at night to make room for the outdoor restaurants that monopolise the beach after dark. Haad Sai Kaew Villa and Ploy Thalay have clean and affordable rooms at Bt500-1,000. Ploy Thalay has a good restaurant as well and a massive new club. Snorkeling and diving trips can be arranged here in case you get restless.

AO HIN KHOK

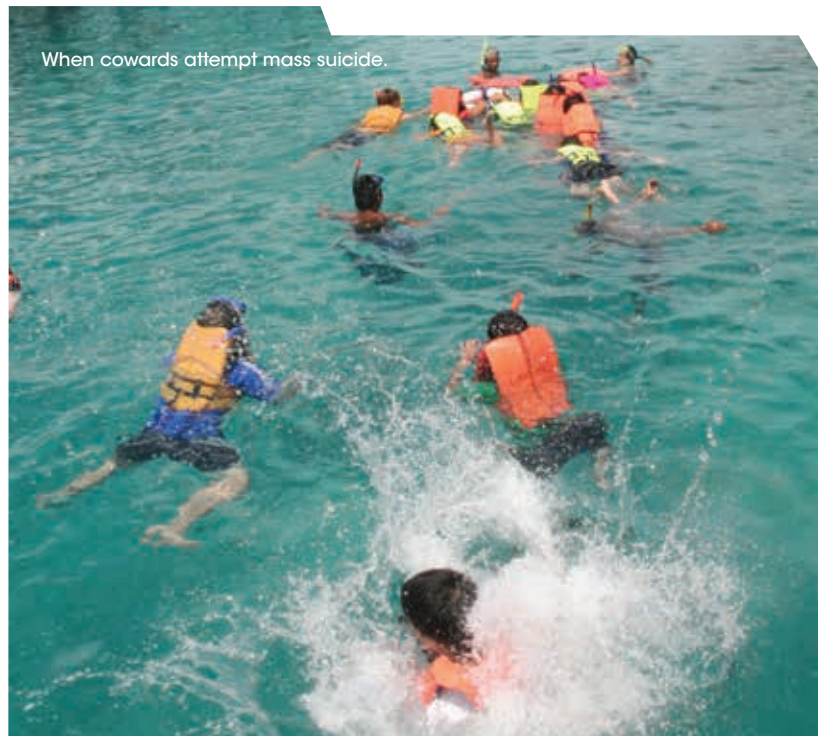
The next beach south is the place for eating. Jep's is the best of the best with excellent Thai food, barbeque and Western favourites. If you can tune out the Enya you'll be better off for it. A word to the wise: approach anything containing sour cream with caution. They also have quality rooms and a movie-

watching area. For all its past popularity and despite the promos to try to draw the crowds back in, the bar at Naga just isn't that cool anymore, but the lodging is still decent and affordable at Bt1,200. Anyone who's anyone who wants to get drunk and dance like J-Lo walks the short distance to Ao Pai, the next beach over. They have also installed a streetlamp on the pathway; the days of using your mobile screen for illumination are over.

AO PHAI

For the complete beach party experience it's Silversand all the way. With fire-twirlers after 10pm (you can try — just don't wear polyester), disco lights and bartenders with attitude. The music is nothing to write home to your hipster friends about, but after a few buckets of unidentifiable liquor that tastes alarmingly similar to Nyquil you'll most likely be shaking that thing with all the rest of 'em. Note: the staff can be downright surly here and fights are common. Don't push your luck. You can crash at Silversand as well or walk a few more meters to Seabreeze Bungalows. You'll see signs around for fishing and snorkeling tours that depart daily at around

When cowards attempt mass suicide.



11am and stop off at various islands and sea animal farms. If you wanna go solo, kayaks are for rent at Bt100 an hour.

AO PUDSA

Sometimes known as Ao Phudsa, this stretch of luminous white sand has a sign hanging from a tree that says it's a "Rabies Free Zone." Yes, the beach 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 stagger home. 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 aircon jobbies for Bt1,200. And their restaurant is one of the best on the island.

AO NUAN

If you don't want anyone seeing you in your swimsuit, or you'd just like a break from the banana boats, Ao Nuan

is one of the prettiest and most secluded beaches on the island. The aptly named Nuan bungalows, the only accommodation option here, cost about Bt600 and include a fan and not much else.

BEST OF THE REST

Ao Vongduean, the longest beach on Samet, has nightlife, beautiful crystalline sand, and less of a crowd problem than Hat Sai Kaew. Ferries run to and from Ban Phe at regular intervals. Ao Thian, sometimes called Candlelight Beach, is just south of Ao Vongduean and can be reached by a steep and perilous path connecting the two. Its boulder-studded sands offer postcard views and the food is excellent. Bungalows can be rented for around Bt500 but there's not much to do in the wee hours. For an Alex Garland trip, adventure forth to Ao Kiu and Ao Karang where you can rent a tent, crap in the bushes and pretend you're really roughing it.

WAY TO GO

PUBLIC BUS

Departures every hour from Eastern Bus Terminal on Sukhumvit Soi 63, near the Ekamai 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 sandy and will leave you with a serious case of hemorrhoids.



TAXI, TAKE ME TO... OH, NEVER MIND...



One of the first things most visitors notice upon arriving in Siem Reap, after the comical assembly-line visa-on-arrival process, is the enormous number of new hotels going up. While the large three-star and four-star hotels along the airport road might first grab one's attention, (probably because they're near the airport and that's where you started), the real building boom has been in the construction of lower mid-range hotels. Generally cavernous, characterless villa-style buildings, these contain between thirty and fifty rooms, offer the usual amenities (aircon, hot shower, CATV, minibar), and are priced in the \$15 to \$25 per night range.

The market has become so glutted that more and more establishments, in an effort to keep their rooms full, have upped their commission offers to airport and bus station taxi and motodriver to as high as 60% of the total room rate. And not for one night, but for the entire stay. Come out of the airport and let your taxi driver choose your accommodation and in the course of three nights at \$25 per head, he may very well be walking off with \$45 of the \$75 you pay.

Ridiculous, huh?

With offers this generous it's little surprise that we're hearing an increase in the number of reports of taxi drivers quite literally ejecting their airport customers out in the middle of the street if they refuse to go to the driver's favourite commission-paying hotel.

Given that, at present, Siem Reap airport taxi drivers consider taking a customer where they want to go to be of the lowest priority, you can in the meantime do one of two things:

1) Book in advance. Most non-commission paying establishments will be happy, no delighted, to pick you up at the airport and many will do so for free. Not only does booking in advance and securing an airport pick-up cut out the taxi hassle, you may also get a better deal on the room as no one is giving up 40, 50, or even 60% of the bill to the driver.

2) If a taxi driver ejects you from his vehicle, be sure to take down the ID number on his door – it's displayed in large figures, you can't miss it – and waste no time reporting him to the tourist police.

THE BOAT SUCKS

Well, that's kinda blunt. Yeah, but it's true.

Old Cambodia hands felt a twinge of excitement when rumours spread that the speedboat service between Siem Reap and Phnom Penh

Cambodia expatriate Gordon Sharpless wasn't born yesterday and has no problem telling you so. This month his steely gaze falls upon the myriad services offered to tourists in Cambodia, and the risks of using them.

had finally gone down the gurgler and for good. But, aw shucks, it was only a rumour. They're back in service gleefully ripping off tourists every day. So let's say it again: the speedboat sucks.

Long ago romanticized as a "cool" way to travel, say back in the 1990s, when road travel in Cambodia truly was an adventure, what with motocross tracks for highways, military checkpoints, and early, early departures. Yeah, back then the boat was "cool." Now it just sucks. Cambodia has good roads, at least between Siem Reap and Phnom Penh, buses are modern, about one-third the price, and as fast or faster. Oh, but the views from the boat? "Oh, look dear, look at all the brown water!" And the ride? Sit inside with freezing aircon, blaring karaoke, and puking locals, or sit on the roof and fry, unless it rains... Fun stuff. There are better ways to see the lake.

WHY BOTHER WITH TAXIS, WHY BOTHER WITH BOATS, AND WHY BOTHER WITH... E-VISAS.

As one who dispenses information on Cambodia, I've received a couple of e-mails from whatever outfit has been contracted to run Cambodia's new e-visa service, asking me to tell the world about this great new offer.

Well, it's new, but I don't think it's all that great. Sort of okay, maybe, but hardly worth a stop-press press release. It costs five dollars more than a visa on arrival and is ONLY valid for entry at either one of the two international airports. I suppose there could be a time-saving element involved, which if you are the last person off the last of three airplanes landing at the same time, it might be important, but visa-on-arrival lines can move fairly rapidly. And... you have to give your credit card details to the Cambodian government. Hmm... And... It goes through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs... source of many a dodgy visa extension... but that's a scam for another article.

So there you are ... get your visa on arrival, book in advance, and take a bus or taxi to Phnom Penh.

PHNOM PENH

It may be smaller, dirtier and more dangerous after dark than Bangkok, but Phnom Penh has undeniable advantages: swinging riverfront, less traffic, and ubiquitous French baguettes.

PLACES TO CRASH

Budget: The young traveller ghettos are around Boeung Kak Lake (Street 93) and the noisy centre of town (Narin's, Capitol, TAT). Our personal recommendation is in neither location and is the Dara Reang Sey Hotel at the corner of streets 13 & 118. Rooms from \$8 fan, and from \$12 for aircon.

Mid-range: Along the river the California 2 and the recently opened Tonle Sap Guesthouse are recommended. In-town the Billabong (\$35-\$50) is a peaceful oasis amongst the chaos. Those visiting Phnom Penh seeking nightlife might want to check out Flamingo's. Just off Street 51 in the heart of it all.

Upper: Raffles Le Royal or the Intercontinental are the

places to go. For more sane rates, try the Sunway.

DAYTRIPPING

Khmer Rouge horrors are documented at the Tuol Sleng Museum in town and the Killing Fields Memorial at Choeung Ek. West of the airport, there are two shooting ranges where you can fire off 30 rounds from an AK for about \$20 – same price for a grenade. A grenade launcher will set you back \$200. No, you cannot shoot a cow, that's an urban legend. Back in town, the cultural attractions include Wat Phnom.

According to legend, it's the site of the historic founding of the city in 1372. Near the river are the Silver Pagoda and Royal Palace. Make sure you pay the camera fee

if you plan to take photos – they enforce it. Nearby, the National Museum has lots of carvings and stuff, much of it lifted from Angkor.

NIGHTRIPPING

Though not Bangkok or Singapore, Phnom Penh has come a long way in the past few years. Still, if you go out in search of revelry after dark, take a taxi or a moto – don't walk. Although not nearly as dangerous as it once was, the city can still be risky at night. That said, the city retains its faded French grandeur but has added a great drinking strip of bars by the river and an environment where getting hammered is still a 24-hour sport. Along the river there are notable holes-in-the wall such as the Cantina and the Jungle Bar, as well as larger corner establishments like the Foreign Correspondent's Club (FCC) and Riverside. A whole line-up of bars on Street 51 between streets 136 and 178 include the Walkabout (open 24 hours), Howie's (a very late-night joint), and Shanghai Bar (a single guy's kind of place). Forget about the Heart of Darkness and what you heard about this being "the" place to be. It ain't the place to be unless you we'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 \$5,400/10,800 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

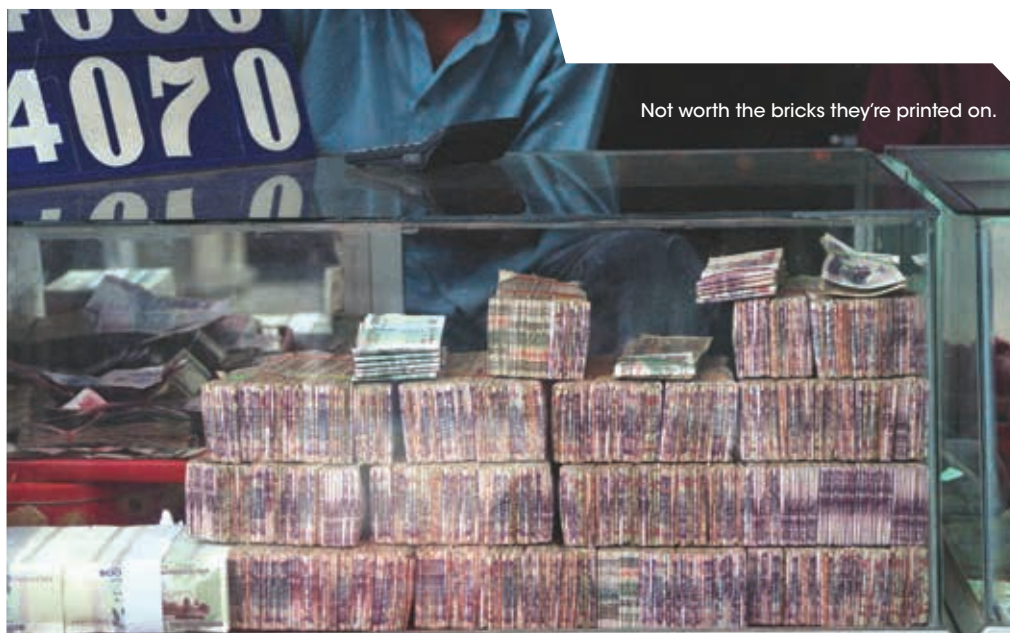
VISAS & BORDER CROSSINGS

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 \$1,000 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.



SIEM REAP

Stop! Stop! Why can't we all just get along?

This former French colonial outpost is growing rapidly with a bigger range of international restaurants and nightlife, and a much wider demographic of travellers, 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 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 Bi4300/8600 one-way/return, to much much more from travel agents.

ROAD: Take Thai government bus to Aranyaprathet, cross border, take taxi to Siem Reap. Expect to pay \$35-40 for a whole car, \$10 for a seat shared. Road is wretched. Plan on five hours of dancing in your seat.

UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES SHOULD YOU PURCHASE A BUS TICKET TO SIEM REAP FROM ANY TRAVEL AGENT ANYWHERE!

ENTER THE TWO DRAGONS

Long-time *Untamed Travel* magazine correspondent Gordon Sharpless has in a short period of time managed to get married, become a father, and fulfil his life's dream of opening his own guesthouse in his adopted home of Siem Reap. The Two Dragons Guesthouse in Wat Bo Village has raised the bar of the crowded Siem Reap budget accommodation scene with the nicest rooms at the best prices, along with cable-TV, free tea and coffee, curtains, beds, even pillows! The real gold is in photographer Gordon's encyclopaedic knowledge of the area, advice on avoiding scams, and a home-spun menu, the brain child of his Thai wife (who might even cook the meal for you...). Get a taxi from the Poipet border (a shithole you'll want to leave right away) so call ahead on +855-63-965-107 outside 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 *Untamed Travel*.

SINGAPORE

Singapore has changed remarkably over the past five years – “out” are the bans on chewing gum, the pedestrian barriers on Orchard Road, and the Tam bar closing, and “in” is the revitalised river area – a bit of culture at the new Esplanade, local foods ‘til dawn at Glutton’s Bay hawker’s market, and a spruced up Clarke Quay for late-night partying. Even the old party favourite Zouk has had a facelift!

DAYTRIPPING

SHOPPING

Shopping all centres on the famous Orchard Road, a shopper’s paradise lined with mega-malls and five-star hotels. If you fancy some high-end window-shopping, the “top end”, up the road from Orchard MRT station, has all the Gucci, Prada, LV etc you’ve ever dreamed of. Girls, drop off your guy at Wheelock’s Apple store and Borders bookstore, and check out the Tang’s dept store’s HUGE collection of handbag stalls on the ground floor across the road. The shopping fun extends all the way down with Wisma Atria (newly renovated), Takashimaya and Paragon (the twin hearts of Orchard’s high-end). For younger style check out the cheaper Far East Plaza, and the hip local designers on the 4th & 5th floors of the Heeren, above HMV. Further down Plaza Singapore and the brand-spanking new Cathay allow another half-day of shopping centred on Dhoby Ghaut MRT station, both boasting 10-screen movie cineplexes.

CHINATOWN & ARAB STREET

Chinatown is excellent for shopping, food and culture. Must-sees include the Thian Hock Buddhist temple, the Sri Mariamman Hindu temple, as well as “Food Street” (Smith Street) and the Maxwell hawker’s centre. Chinatown is now easily reached by a new MRT line, as is Little India with its great food and market-life atmosphere. Arab Street is getting more attention. Check out the lovely tree-lined Bussorah Street parallel to Arab Street, with its eclectic shops and local cafes.

OLD FAVOURITES

There’s also a laundry-list of Singapore icons: The US\$500/night Raffles Hotel (City Hall MRT) oozes heritage; it opened

in 1887; Joseph Conrad, Somerset Maugham and Rudyard Kipling stayed and wrote here. By the 70’s it was showing its age, becoming a favourite of the backpacker and hippie set, but a full renovation in the 80’s restored its lustre. The Singapore Sling was invented here in 1915, and even at \$14 a pop, stopping by the original Long Bar or newer Courtyard Bar to sample this gin/cherry-brandy/fruit-juice cocktail is a must for many visitors.

The most common tourist question is probably, “Where’s the Merlion?” Singapore’s symbol of tourism, a half-lion, half-fish, water-spouting statue. There are actually two, the most-photographed one being located at One Fullerton, with the Esplanade theatre (nicknamed “The Durian”) offering a spectacular backdrop. Get there from either the City Hall MRT, walking via the Esplanade, or the Raffles Place MRT, walking via the grand Fullerton Hotel. The other statue is eight-storeys high and located on Sentosa Island, which now has its own MRT connection at the Harbourfront station. Sentosa is shedding its “theme park” reputation with the closing of some of the lesser attractions, and a lot of landscaping and F&B options emerging. A day on the beach might even seem like home to some — the sand was imported from Thailand! The Musical Fountain is a bit tacky but surprisingly fun — an 8pm show projects stories and love messages onto a water-spray screen.

It’s worthwhile to take the Cable Car from Harbourfront MRT (daily, 8:30am-9pm, \$10) to Sentosa, but be sure to also visit the cable car’s other stop, Mt. Faber, with glimpses of old colonial houses and WWII fortifications.

NATURAL DISTRACTIONS

The Zoo, Night Safari and Bird Park are old favourites, and still by far the top tourist attractions. The best is the Night Safari, but there’s an excellent value ticket covering all three (\$20 for one, or \$31 for all three). The Zoo closes at 6pm and the Night Safari runs from 7:30pm-midnight, but there’s food and entertainment in the interim. Take the MRT to Ang Mo Kio, then bus 138. The Bird Park is near Boon Lay MRT. Taxis are cheap in Singapore, so unless you’re by yourself, just grab a cab. The Bukit Timah Nature Reserve (Bus No. 171 or 182 from Orchard Rd) comprises 81 hectares of forests, and more plant species than in all of North America! A cab ride away is the new Tree-Top walk where you look down from above the rainforest canopy, and the MacRitchie Reservoir which offers 5km of very pleasant boardwalk perched over the edge of the water. Last but not least is the untouched and undeveloped Pulau Ubin, where you can rent a bike for half a day (\$8) and experience pre-development Singapore! Info on all of these at www.nparks.gov.sg

WELL CULTURED

Singapore’s surprise is the growing sports, arts and culture scene. The Singapore Art Museum (City Hall/Dhoby Ghaut MRT), housed in a classical baroque building, focuses on Singaporean and regional artists, with a strong emphasis on electronic arts, while the Asian Civilisations Museum (City Hall or Raffles Place MRT) has a mix of permanent and visiting displays focusing on South East Asia culture. It also has a small but excellent (and free!) display on the history of the Singapore River. The visually striking Esplanade theatre (nicknamed “The Durian”) is an excellent

venue for large-scale performances, and attracts many international shows, including notable Western and Asian theatre. On the sporting front the Singapore Slingers begin their first season in Australia’s National Basketball League, with a number of home games against Australian teams at the Singapore Indoor Stadium during September/October. Never mind that there aren’t actually any Singaporeans on the team – expect to see top-quality professional basketball, as the Australian league is pretty competitive, with plenty of rough and tumble.

NIGHTTRIPPING

Drinking is not cheap in Singapore, but there are some great outdoor bar locations, and nightclubs. To keep it cheap, have your beers at the open-air food centres and stalls you find everywhere (\$7 for a big one). Most young Singaporeans do not drink much, so many places cater to the large community of highly-paid expats working in the financial sector, like Boat Quay’s famous Harry’s bar (\$14 a pint). The Singapore River has cemented its place as the stomach and liver of the nightlife scene. The 30 to 40 bars and restaurants at Boat Quay (spectacular location, but a bit touristy and not always great value), is complemented by the newly renovated and buzzing Clarke Quay with a like number of bars and restaurants, plus a Reverse Bungy Jump (do this BEFORE your meal!). The Esplanade also has a thriving youth scene on the waterfront promenade, including free concerts every Fri/Sat/Sun night by local bands. Making a big splash is the brand new “Q Bar”, modeled on the Bangkok icon of the same name. Lavishly decorated in a gorgeous colonial building

(Old Parliament House) directly across the river from Boat Quay, Q Bar offers a wider selection of cocktails and a great atmosphere. For the best-tasting beer hit the Brewerkz micro-brewery located on the other side of the river from Clarke Quay, where Brits catch football, Aussies catch AFL and Super 14, and Americans can glimpse NFL and baseball. Next door is Iguana, with great margaritas and Mexican food, and even a range of quality, aged tequilas. Best hotel bar (and a must-see) is New Asia Bar, with a spectacular view from the 72nd floor of the Swissotel. It's expensive, but drinks are half price 3-9pm (City Hall MRT, next to Raffles Hotel). Bar None at the Marriott Hotel (Orchard MRT) is pricey but popular, with it's top-quality local cover bands. Jazz@South Bridge has cosy mainstream jazz and comfy sofas; it's at the far end of

Boat Quay, away from the city end. For debauchery of the carnal kind, Orchard Towers (400 Orchard Rd, Orchard MRT) is open 24 hours. Nicknamed "Four Floors of Whores," this is a four-storey complex that conjures the image of a tamer version of Bangkok's Nana Plaza. Neon-lit bars, thumping music, transsexuals and Western men prowling for Asian women. Singapore's hottest dance clubs are Zouk (the oldest and still the best), and the Clarke Quay newcomers Attica and Ministry of Sound. All three are open Thurs-Sat til 5am and the cover is about \$25, with two drinks included. The music is state-of-the-art. All have dress codes - don't show up in shorts or flip-flops.

FEEDING TIME

The variety of places to chow down is one of the best things about Singapore, from

yummy, inexpensive street food available 24/7 to fine international cuisine. For budget travellers, hawker stalls (outdoors) and food courts (indoors) offer great grub, a relaxed atmosphere and clean surroundings for a few dollars a plate. Of course there's Chinatown and Little India for authentic treats. Boat Quay is rather touristy and expensive, but the riverside atmosphere should be experienced. Clarke Quay has newer and more refined restaurants. Meanwhile, Chijmes, near Raffles Hotel, is a collection of Western restaurants and bars in what was a formerly a Catholic convent girls school. The new Glutton's Bay (next to the Esplanade Theatre at the mouth of the river) is a glutton's heaven, with new branches of old stalls carefully selected by the writer of Singapore's

excellent hawkers' centre guidebook, the *Makan Sutra*.

PLACES TO CRASH

There is accommodation for all budgets in Singapore - even top-end hotels are affordable, relative to other cities. Expect to pay S\$200-250 for excellent five-star central hotels like Swissotel, Raffles the Plaza, Marina Mandarin, Pan Pacific, or \$300 for high-end Ritz-Carlton, Fullerton, Conrad or Marriott. "Budget hotels" in Singapore mainly mean those that also rent by the hour, and there's literally dozens of them. The main chains are Hotel 81 (www.hotel81.com.sg) and Fragrance (www.fragrancehotel.com). 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. In Little India, decent, boutique-style hotels for under \$100 include: 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. There are also a few new backpacker hostels which (unlike the older backpacker hostels) are pretty pleasant. You share a dorm with others, but the upside is free breakfast, free Internet and tips from other travellers. All are modern, clean and nicely decorated, the best being Sleepy Sam's (www.sleepysams.com), Hangout, and the Inn Crowd (all about \$25/night).



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HONG KONG

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).



Suicide contemplation lounge...
surprisingly empty.

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 (not what you think) 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 specialities). 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

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, Setthathirat 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 Setthathirat 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 Setthathirat Road, past the

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.

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.

NIGHTRIPPING

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.

A lonely fruit juice lair
Despair nobody will arrive
Everyone drinks beer



LUANG PRABANG

This town, at the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan Rivers, is usually a few day's stop for travellers going south. The town has World Heritage status since it's loaded with history. Ancient Buddha-bedecked caves and colonial shopfronts, all dropped in the middle of beautiful, dirt-poor hills give the place a gallery-like feel. High marks go to the waterfall, the coffee and the abundance of good and cheap French and Lao food.



PLACES TO CRASH

In Ban Wat That area, the best guesthouse 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 Souvannabablang 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 guesthouse 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 percent 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 aircon setting. The Cafe de Arts is an exceptional eatery with a great mix of French and Lao dishes at very reasonable prices. Nearby is the Yonkhoun, where you can slice into a deer steak that is as tender as an angel's bum. Also good is Le Potiron, a cheap French/Euro joint with decent pizza and exceptional desserts — the best place in town for a budget binge of non-Lao grub. Villa Santi is in Luang Prabang's classiest hotel. The restaurant is excellent but not prohibitively expensive. Lao food is the best choice. Duang Champa, on Kingkitsalat Rd, has Lao and French cuisine in stylish surroundings. Colonial splendour with a generous bar, Han Sontam Khaem Khong is around Wat Nong on 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.

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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 airconditioned 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 \$14 per minute, while some travel agencies in Thailand charge \$15 per minute. The following numbers are not toll-free outside of the US. **VISA's** U.S. emergency number 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.

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When in dire financial straits, get money wired to you via Western Union (tel. 800/325-6000; 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 Rd,
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
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Tel: 02-7118000

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LAOS

Heaven help you if you have any serious ailments while in Laos. There are few qualified doctors and they just don't have the facilities. Get to Thailand. From Vientiane, there are one or two okay hospitals just over the bridge in Nong Khai. Otherwise, it's back to Bangkok.

Clinique Internationale
Luang Prabang (856) 214-022. Centre de Traumatologie et d'Orthopedie de Vientiane (Private) On the Road to Tha Ngon, north of Vientiane.
Tel: (856) 413-663, 413-306 (Call for ambulance service)
Nong Khai Watttana Hospital (Private) 1159/4 Prachak Rod, 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:

Australia
Tel: 2-3446300
02-344-6400
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Tel: 02-303-6057-9
Cambodia
Tel: 02-254-6630
02-256-0196
Canada
Tel: 02-636-0540-9
China
Tel: 02-245-7032-3
France
Tel: 02-627-2105
Germany
Tel: 02-287-9000
02-287-1224
India
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02-539-6668
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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
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02-286-1434
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02-261-1938
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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

Tourist Police 24-hour Tourist
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