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'Lovely Girls, Very Cheap'

Decca Aitkenhead

'Ko Samui is full of fat and unattractive European men driving around on mopeds with beautiful young Thai women on the back.' Decca Aitkenhead on the benefits of foreign travel.



The Oriental Hotel in Bangkok is proud of its aristocratic past. It describes itself as colonial, though Thailand has never been a colony, and is staffed by bellboys in magnificent pantaloons who wring their hands when they bow. We arrived there on our first night in Thailand and were immediately presented with personalized gold embossed stationery, so that we could write letters to prove to our friends that we had stayed at the Bangkok Oriental.

The bar was a hushed, burgundy room, and that evening a jazz band was playing. A young Thai woman sheathed in sequins sang Western love songs, and from every table middle-aged white couples watched in silence. The women sipped cocktails through straws, holding their glasses with both hands, never taking their eyes off the band. The men leaned backwards, arms locked straight out in front, palms flat, and from time to time their heads would swivel, as though every one of them was stranded on a blind date that was not working out. We took a table and ordered a Mai Tai. Its arrival was noted by one of the men, and his face lit up in delight.

'Eh, that looks good. What's that one then? A what?' He studied his cocktail menu, then held it up for us, pointing. 'We had this one last. This one's next on my list.' My husband took a sip of his Mai Tai, and the man practically leaped out of the sofa.

'Eh, when I saw that I thought, oh, he's spoiling the wife. But it's for him! And she's got a lemonade, and you've got that!' He laughed and laughed, shaking his head. When he'd subsided he leaned across to Paul. 'Beer man normally, are you?'

Satisfied, he went on, 'When did you get in? We got in this morning. Saw the King's palace. It's definitely not to be missed. Full of lots of different cultures. Different influences. Thai influences.' There was a long pause. 'Um, Cambodian. Very spectacular. Then we went to Papong.' His wife was perched stiffly at right angles to the conversation. She was small, with a frosted blonde hood of hair, and didn't shift or turn her head. 'Papong,' she corrected softly.

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'Yeah, Patpong. Anyway, market were 'eaving, absolutely 'eaving. But it weren't as bad as what I'd thought it would be.' Patpong is Bangkok's famous red-light district. If he'd thought the vice would be bad, I wondered why he'd wanted to go there. 'But the shopping were amazing. We saw this bag,'—his wife wordlessly produced a fake Prada handbag—'and we got the price right down to four hundred baht. Didn't we, love?' He talked us through the haggle like a fisherman reliving how he landed a shark, while his wife murmured, 'You've got to be hard.' She repeated it to herself. 'You've just got to be hard.'

Four hundred baht, at sixty-five to the pound, is roughly equivalent to six pounds, or nine dollars.

'And it's flame resistant!' cried the man, and she held it up like a magician's assistant, and lit a match to it for us to see.

'Normally we go to the Caribbean,' he went on. 'This is our first time East. The wife likes cocktails, you see, so we thought, well, let's go to Fooket. Eh, where are you going?' Paul told him we were aiming for Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan, and he looked momentarily thrown.

'So you're on a three-centre holiday, then? Bangkok, Ko Samui, and—and the other one. Phew.'

We flew south the next day. I had heard about Thailand for most of my adult life, but not of a fallen tiger economy feasted on by herds of package tourists. Friends had described Ko Samui as a hedonist's wonderland, and its neighbour, Ko Pha-Ngan, as a place of dreamy charm. Ko Pha-Ngan had become famous for its Full Moon rave, said by some to be a quasi-spiritual experience. In the course of the Nineties it had assumed the status of Mecca for the Ecstasy generation.

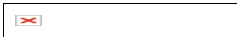
Thus it was that Paul and I found ourselves landing in a small clearing of palm trees later that afternoon. We had undertaken a sort of Ecstasy pilgrimage across the globe in order that I should write a travel book about clubbing, and the trail had naturally led us to Ko Samui. Paul had spent a week there ten years ago, before the gap year or *The Beach* had been invented, and stayed in a town called Chaweng. He remembered it as rustic and charming.

The airport taxi let us out in a resort that looked like Magaluf, Majorca. It had a main strip—two miles of potholed road running parallel to the beach—lined with concrete restaurants and shops, and pubs with names such as Fawltly Towers. Neon signs advertised pub grub, cold beer in a pint glass, and western toilets for the ladies. On one side of the strip, short muddy tracks led off to collections of bungalows that sprawled down to the beach. Some were built of wood rather than breeze blocks, and we chose the first one with a vacancy. An Italian with a shiny pink head was in charge; he called himself Papa, and showed us to our bungalow, a single creaky room only inches larger than the bed, with sheets of wallpaper for carpet. We unpacked as night fell and then set off back up the track through the dark.

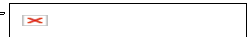
'Hello, welcome! Welcome, hello! Hello, welcome!' As we turned the corner and stepped into the neon glare of the strip, about a

dozen young Thai women came running at us. They bumped into each other as they pulled up a yard short, and some clasped each other's shoulders and pretended to double up in giggles, like teenage girls on a dare, astonished at their own audacity. They pointed at a small bar behind them. 'Come! Come!' Twenty yards further down the street this happened again, and then again, and then again. Some of the girls wore tight jeans and halter-neck tops, and others wore little Lycra dresses, but all of them had long glossy hair, which they tossed from side to side, and laughing kitten eyes with which they pleaded. They were stationed at the entrance to every bar, and when we walked past they spilled off their stools and took a run at us. 'Hello, welcome! Hello! Where you from?'

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