



South east asia, the journey of a lifetime

by Claire Brown

I first visited South East Asia many years ago, armed with plenty of gusto and a Lonely Planet guide book entitled, South East Asia On a Shoe String. I had little more than a shoe string on me to be honest – I was what was known as a 'budget traveller'. I landed in Bangkok and after the long immigration process (no computers back then) I suddenly realised I did not have a clue what my game plan was.

I decided to head into town to see what the place had in store. Nervous as hell, I took a cab to the Kao San Road, which even today is the first and last stop for Lonely Planet Disciples heading to, or from, the mystical East. After a couple of Singa Beers I started to feel quite at home. I had never imagined that people could be as friendly as the Thais – I was used to working in the City of London where even so much as looking at somebody on the tube was a court martial offence. After a few days exploring the

city I realised that, as with Asia generally, one cannot be too quick to draw conclusions, as there are so many different elements that make up the whole.

There are world class shopping centres that would exhaust Victoria Beckham, and there are sophisticated international restaurants next to hawkers selling noodles on the pavement for 20 pence. There are the most luxurious hotels I have ever dared enter, just a short walk from the

notorious red light district. You can get a tattoo on the street corner, or you can go to some of the world's most high tech hospitals for major surgery. There is a floating market on the river and an ancient golden temple that can be reached by a super modern sky train. There is a Shrine to Buddah where monks leave offerings and pray, right next door to the Grand Hyatt.

Indeed Bangkok is a fine representative of Asia; diversity, flavour, colour, a genuine welcome and



a culture so rich and deep you could stay years and years without even scratching the surface.

After Bangkok I travelled down to the islands in the South, to Phuket and Koh Samui, where I quite simply could have been happy to stay for ever. Then (still armed with my Lonely Planet, but referring to it less and less as I started to find my own way) I travelled to Penang in Malaysia where I stayed in a Chinese guesthouse but hung out in Little India. My route lead me to the cool hilltops of the Cameron Highlands where I took afternoon tea (clotted cream, strawberry jam and scones!) in Ye Olde Smokehouse – a throwback to our colonial past – and then went trekking in the ancient rainforests.

I stayed for a while in the heaving metropolis of

Kuala Lumpur and then hopped on a government bus across to the East Coast of Malaysia where I was lucky enough to have visited some of the most dazzling islands and tropical shores on the planet. I took the famous jungle train right across the breadth of Malaysia down to Malacca and then daringly jumped aboard a rather dodgy looking vessel that took me all the way to Sumatra, Indonesia, where I lodged by a volcanic crater lake for weeks and weeks until I had run out of things to read.

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Eventually I made Thailand my home and began to build a life. I had almost forgotten what work was, having immersed myself for so long in the

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idea of just stopping to look around, talking to strangers, trying new fruits and dishes and generally soaking up the region. But as soon as I began working again I found that having a life in the tropics and having a great career were not mutually exclusive.



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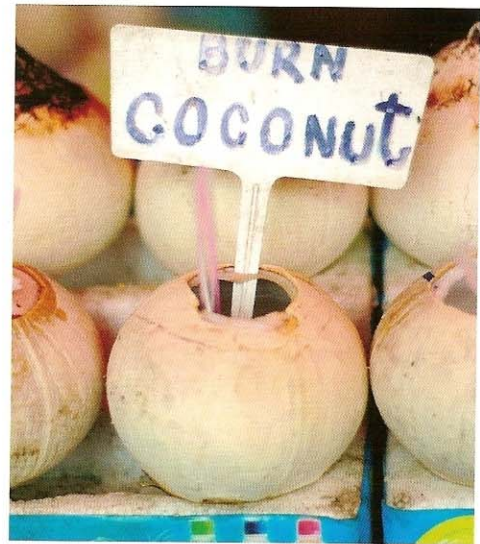
In fact hundreds of thousands of expats live and work in Asia; in the cities of Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta, and it's not surprising that numbers are growing as Asia starts to become the new economic powerhouse of the world. GDP for the region has averaged a growth of over 8% year on year for the last 4 years.

In China, Cambodia, Vietnam and Taiwan, goods from electronics to garments can be produced

efficiently and hyper-competitively and shipped anywhere they need to go. India, Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia are rich in oil, gas and natural resources, making them financially independent from the West. Record numbers of switched on young Asians are studying overseas, and these students will exit university fluent in English (and probably Cantonese as well) and will be leading global commerce. The East is gradually, and of course extremely politely, raising its head up.

I still feel desperately passionate about South East Asia, the place I now call home, and I am equally enthusiastic about its potential on the world stage. It's an enchanting place where industry and commerce are progressing at light speed, yet the cultures and traditions are as alive today as they would have been hundreds of years ago. Clearly progress is not upsetting the core of these exceptional people.

As a region for property shopping, whether for holiday homes, retirement or investment, there



are some wonderful gems that just couldn't be found anywhere else. Private island villas in the Philippines, design-driven architectural masterpieces on the beach in Borneo, beautiful colonial renovated penthouses in Cambodia...

Only Asia can offer all this and so much more.

