



WATPHO

Estes Park

Surviving the city, finding peace in Thailand

Story and photos by Jay Gentile

I was sitting on a heap of stone staring at the sprawling array of 16th century temple ruins in front of me when I felt it.

Detecting a set of piercing eyes glaring in my direction from the left, I casually turned my head towards it and saw a young Buddhist monk looking at me from afar.

I shrugged it off and reverted my attention back to the glorious ensemble of ruins that are commonplace here in Ayuthaya, a small city about two hours north of Bangkok which reined as Thailand's capital from 1350 — 1767.

Yet I still couldn't shake the feeling of those eyes and when I turned to my left again, the monk had inched much closer, still staring at me — apparently fascinated by how different I must have appeared to him.

Exchanging my shorts for the traditional thin, baggy Thai pants, I thought that my well-tanned self would blend in well with the natives. But apparently I had been found out.

"Can I talk with you?," the young monk asked with a gentle smile.

"Sure," I said. "Come on up." He climbed a few steps to where I was seated — inside the opening of a ruin that must have been the former site of a window — and sat next to me.

The two-hour conversation that followed covered much ground. He began with the standard questions about America (i.e. Hollywood and Tom Cruise), but then began to tell me about his present dilemma.

He was about to graduate from the school where he had been learning to be a Buddhist monk since he was a boy, but was contemplating a career as either a banker or a teacher.

I offered him my advice that he would probably be better suited as a teacher, being a monk with a vow of poverty and all.

The bald monk wrapped in brown cloth wanted to take away a proverb in English before I left, so I gave him the old "treat others as you would like to be treated" mantra that had worked well in my experiences.

He told me he learned English by watching



Matt poses with our tuk-tuk driver.



The 16th century ruins at Ayuthaya, former capital of Thailand.

"Dawson's Creek." I smiled and walked away.

Just another day in Thailand.

The big city

A lot of what you may have heard about Bangkok is true. Driving in a car here, in one of the world's biggest cities, is likely much more dangerous than skydiving or wrestling barnyard animals.

The pollution is choking. Riding on the back of a tuk-tuk, a three-wheeled golf cart with no fear of cutting off trucks ten times its size, will wreak havoc on your lungs after a few days. That is why most drivers wear masks.

And a lot of what you may have heard about this sprawling metropolis is not true.

Sure, it has its shady strip of go-go bars in a small confined area called Patpong (which is no worse than Amsterdam, Las Vegas or the filth that resides within most major cities), but at its core Bangkok is a very holy city.

The madness of the loud and dirty street traffic is easily escaped by simply stepping off the sidewalk



Thailand is one of the world's main destinations to see statues and images of Buddha.

into one of the city's 400 temple-monasteries called wats. Here you can watch the peaceful monks do their thing or just chill out in the ample grass and shade. The city is split by the Chao Phraya River, which offers Venice-style gondola rides or the more authentic ferry ride. From here there are good views of this evolving city where huge modern buildings sit right next to gold-covered medieval palaces.

One of those palaces is called

Wat Pho. Besides its jaw-dropping exterior ornate beauty, its interior offers something of a different variety — the traditional Thai massage.

Spending an hour on a mattress, as my well-built masseuse stood on my back and contorted my body in positions I never imagined possible, was an interesting experience to say the least.

That night, our Thai friends from our guesthouse in Bangkok's tourist center along Khao San Road — where you can score an amazing Pad Thai meal for about 50 cents on the street — took us out for a night of local culture.

We constituted the only "farang" (tourists) within a sea of Thais as we made our way down the street to a large gathering at an opening near the river's edge. There we, along with everyone else there, were issued a bed of flowers that the Thais had spent weeks making.

We then did what everyone else was there for — set the candle within the flower bed ablaze, made a wish and sent the glowing flowers down the river.

After a tour through Bangkok's unbelievably crowded markets, where pig's heads and cheap cassette tapes sell side by side, we made it to an open bridge where we saw a row of flower beds glide past us down the river below.

Island escape

Thailand's southern leg is littered with amazing white-sand beach islands. Choosing which one to visit is the hard part.

Ko Phi Phi became the most well-known after the 1999 filming of "The Beach." Since then, it has been overrun with tourists looking to commune with a piece of Leonardo Di Caprio past.

Matt and I decided to hit the island just below Ko Phi Phi — a little-known speck of paradise called



Wat Pho, the place to go for traditional Thai massage.

Ko Lanta.

Checking into our thatched bamboo guesthouse, we soon noticed we were the only ones in the entire 20-room resort. We had the whole unspoiled beach to ourselves. The chaotic city memories evaporated.

One of the hotel's employees, a young guy named Ding, took us to a reggae party that night where we observed the relaxed Thais sipping drinks by the ocean while listening to Bob Marley's choruses floating through the cool breezy air.



In Bangkok, monks casually walk the streets. Here, a monk passes an advertisement for a local politician.



A scene from our island destination — the quieter stretch of beach south of the major tourist destination of Ko Phi Phi, where "The Beach" was filmed.