

Thai-ing one on in Thailand

PHUKET, Thailand — Eleven days of non-stop travel across India was fascinating for the mind but very hard on the body, so I decided to recover by taking the pulse of Southeast Asia from this Thai island resort. Now that I've recovered from mal de Madras, I want to take this time to warn Torontonians about Thailand.

First, there is the temperature. Today, it's 98° F in the shade. One can get badly sunburned here. The blue waters of the Andaman Sea are quite salty. Next comes the food. I have been eating all my meals under a palm tree where a smiling, chubby Thai lady cooks for me on a wood-fired grill. She makes me prawn soup with lemon grass and hot peppers, noodles with fried squid, barbecued chicken with sweet, hot sauce and fish baked in the fire's embers.

There are also big bottles of Singha beer and plates of mysterious, succulent fruits. All in all, a thoroughly unappealing diet. Not at all the dry turkey and chips loved by Toronto gastronomes — and there's tons of garlic in everything.

Torontonians who favor hotels where mariachi bands play under their windows all night, or where squiggly things drop from the ceilings onto their heads, will not like Thailand's hotels. The good ones here rank among the world's best. Bangkok's famous Oriental Hotel remains, in my view, one of the five top hotels anywhere. When I die, I want to wake up in a suite at the Oriental.

Last night I went with a group of Italians who had adopted me to the small beach resort at Patong. I was shaken. In a tiny space, no larger than a small parking lot, were 44 bars, each with a bevy of mini-skirted temptresses. Music was blaring, people were drinking and doing who knows what else.

Thai bar girls seem to love their work. They have the natural vivacity, sex-appeal and innocence that I suspect 19th-century mariners first discovered in the legendary girls of South Sea islands. Host Thais are like that. Fun-loving, gregarious, uninhibited yet at the same time decorous and respectful. The Italians I was with got on famously with the Thais who seemed, in turn, particularly fond of the happy-go-lucky Italians. Both people, I noted, have much in common: Charm, warmth, kindness and good looks. No wonder it's so hard to find people who don't like Thais or Italians.

Back to Patong, Sodom on the beach. People were partying everywhere. I noticed a number of men missing arms or legs, and men in wheelchairs, who were being feted and pampered by

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Thai girls with no apparent regard for their handicaps. It's that kind of place.

This wickedness and degeneracy is what inevitably happens when the authorities don't keep a firm grip. What Thailand needs is the Liquor Control Board to straighten things out.

Torontonians will also be upset by the fact that bars stay open after 1 a.m. and, even worse, store are open on Sundays. I guess this has destroyed Thai families because polygamy is routinely practised here. Thai men say two wives are better than one, and a girlfriend better than two wives.

Another random note. An English writer once said that you can judge a people by the way they treat their animals. By this standard, which I have always thought was a good measure, the Thais pass with honors. I saw lots of well-fed, friendly dogs, full-figured cats (but nary a Siamese), pet rabbits and birds everywhere. After India, where animals are savagely beaten and starved, I was happy to see the Thais treating their dependent animals with gentleness and humanity.

This comes in large part because the Thais are mainly practising Buddhists, a religion that teaches humane behavior, non-violence and the pursuit of decency. Thais can be as rough and tough as anyone else, and there are plenty of pirates and other desperadoes in their waters, but in general Thais are known for their easy ways and kindness. Foreigners are usually regarded as honored — if somewhat eccentric — guests.

People come up and say hello, laugh, smile shyly. Girls giggle and blush when you wink at them. Tourists are not badgered for tips or pestered by touts. In all, not what Torontonians have come to expect in such edens as Acapulco or Montego Bay.

Instead of Thailand, I would strongly urge Torontonians to take their Asian vacations in Singapore. There, they will feel totally at home. In truth, Singapore looks almost exactly like Toronto's Eaton Centre. It's all malls, high-rises and office buildings. Anything old or Asian was long ago bulldozed. Singapore is in many ways even better than Toronto, hard as it is to believe. The whole place shuts down at 10 p.m.

Two days ago a law was enacted barring homosexuals or transvestites from nightclubs and discos. Worried club owners are now frantically seeking guidance from the authorities on what to do about customers who have had sex change operations.

Thailand, by contrast, remains unrepentant and probably unredeemable. I'm sure the Thais will one day have to pay the price of their turpitude. Maybe, for instance, God will punish them by turning them into Christian fundamentalists or dropping the temperature to 75° F.