

In the mid eighties when I began my career as a travel agent, a new destination burst on to the scene - Phuket, Thailand. After we (and the travelling public) moved on from the obvious mispronunciation it became quite mainstream and continues to be so - after the fashion of Bali. Seemingly, 'everyone' goes, has been, or is planning to go.

I too have visited several times since those early days when Phuket basically meant Patong Beach. Its obvious appeal/charm began with the wonderful Thai people, and continued with excellent hotels opposite what was surely the world's most perfect beach. Dining out meant simple meals of BBQ seafood washed down with Singha beer. and all of it for a mere pittance, and the stuff of holiday dreams. It was only a matter of time till word got out, and it did with resounding success.

Over the years hotels and resorts have swelled to massive numbers, each seemingly outdoing the last with all manner of villas, pools, spas and so on. The value for money remains, as does the Singha beer however, a simple BBQ meal is hard to find. But, along the way Phuket has lost its innocence - largely in the main streets and back alleys of Patong.

This week, I found myself in Phuket for a lazy day, on a cruise itinerary, and of course I headed to Patong, for the first time in several years. It took a while to get my bearings such has been the level of "progress". A walk through the streets showcases a slew of half open bars, some massive, some tiny. A few stools are occupied by die-hard drinkers - the kind who measure the quality of a holiday by the size of the bar bills, and almost always Westerners. Others are occupied by sleepy bar girls (and lady boys), variously chatting to the clientele, or filing their ugly long fake nails; the ones which haven't fallen off! Tattoo parlours abound - the operator usually catching some sleep ready for the evening trade, and shops are filled with cheap "throw-away" tourist merchandise; the kind where the only guarantee is post purchase regret. It is impossible not to notice the number of older Western men with a Thai girl on their arm, usually on a promised, or demanded shopping excursion after the previous night's activities.

By day, it's truly awful, but worse by night when Patong comes "alive" Every imaginable kind of dodgy client, bar owner, and shop keeper awakes from a day sleeping to enhance the seediness of the night. Rows of pea lights hang from every possible anchor point, powered by Thailand's scary "spaghetti" electrical wiring - often within arm's reach. The music ramps up to a deafening level, and another "fun" night in Phuket unfolds.

Nearby the beach is the hot spot for day time commerce, and largely the domain of "masseurs", offering cheap therapy of every imaginable kind, and water sports operators. Littering the water's edge are dozens of speed boats and jet-skis, with their dubiously qualified custodians touting their wares. The cacophony of noise (while you are enjoying your quiet massage!) is a mish-mash of yelling touts, ear-splitting music, the revving of power boats and jet skis, and the screams of barely clad young ladies, as one by one they are kidded into paragliding, and frozen by fear, fly stiffly overhead like shop window mannequins.

The Thais are beautiful people; warm, hospitable, graceful, and tenacious, yet gentle. These bountiful attributes, combined with an idyllic location (equally convenient to Europe and Australia), superb weather, wonderful beaches, and some of the world's best holiday value for money, see them throw open the doors for all who wish to visit.

Sadly, for the Thai people, everything seems to have a (cheap) price, and these days in Patong, there is an endless supply of seedy merchandise, and queue of western visitors wishing to buy.

I beat a sad retreat to my ship which was berthed on the opposite side of the island, but on the way, took a small detour to Phuket Town, rarely visited by visitors, and shunned by those preferring the mayhem of Patong. Here you have a "normal" thriving provincial city, filled with people going about their daily lives, in a

wonderfully authentic Thai way. The lovely old town - especially Thalang Street - is lined with pretty colonial shop houses. At street level, uniform old-style signage ensures the streetscape remains intact, and there is a delightful mix of fabric stores, antique stores, a very old herbalist, simple (but very inviting) hostels, restaurants and coffee bars. In a side street is a superb market, with endless stalls of vegetables artfully arranged as the Thais always do, and flower and food stalls; I picked up a large bunch of orchids for about 80 cents to enjoy in our cabin on the ship.

This is the Phuket I love.

So, after finding some wi-fi and getting some emails out, we moved on to Langkawi.

I confess to being not such a fan of Malaysia, and for no good reason really so, having visited twice before, I had no real interest in Langkawi however, again I needed to send an email, so in search of wi-fi, we found ourselves in the sleepy Chaleng Beach village near the (remotely located) port.

Now I know where Patong Beach disappeared to!! Here you have everything Patong in Phuket once was, but is no more: a gorgeous white beach, with crystal, clear warm water, lined with coconut palms, and simple holiday cabins. On the street, you have the usual throw-away tourist merchandise, but not an aggressive seller in sight, and prices so cheap, the stuff really is throw-away. There are plenty of restaurants selling everything from Japanese to local Malaysian food. There are plenty of stores to fill a day out of the sun, including one massive Duty Free place with the cheapest alcohol east of Burma!

It was too hot to go any further inland and we didn't venture into the main town, but we had a nice day anyway.

Singapore was next, and after many visits over the years, and having fallen out of love, I am in love again!!! Singapore is a bit like Dubai. Everyone has an opinion, and like it or not, you definitely have to be in awe of what has been, and continues to be achieved there.

We had 24 hours in port, and arrived at yet another new Cruise Terminal. Over a period of about 25 years I have cruised into Singapore 4 times, and used three different (new) cruise terminals.

The one at Marina Bay was our home, and lovely as it is we encountered one of the more annoying experiences of the trip so far, in that each time we left the ship - several times over the time we were there, you had to go through full Immigration/Customs/Security - both leaving the ship and returning. On some occasions the queues were very long, and airport-like (but not Singapore Airport - no queues there!!).

We took the train from the Bayfront Station near the ship, and headed into town and enjoyed a meal at one of the clip joints along Boat Quay. I know they are to be avoided but they have a wonderful dress-circle spot on the river, and we enjoyed a meal off the ship. You also get a bird's eye view of the laser light show at Marina Bay Sands from here.

Then we went to Gardens by the Bay on the other side of Marina Bay Sands, and got there in time for the light show, from the "trees" which are really vertical gardens in the shape of trees, beautifully lit, and each hour the lights "dance" to synchronised music. My goodness! What a stellar attraction this is. Those clever Singaporeans again. We loved it.

After a terrible night's sleep (we had to keep our curtains closed because we were on the terminal side of the ship), we made an early start for another fun day in Singapore. This time we took the train again, and went to Little India. I have always thought this to be one of Singapore's great attractions however I did not know about

Mustafa!!! Here you have a massive shop which covers two city blocks and opens 24 hours. It has everything from Duty Free to a Supermarket, and is positively heaving with activity - you can imagine! But, the real Aladdin's Cave is downstairs where I have never seen such a range of beautiful fabrics - silks, linens, cottons, and gorgeous saris (16 metres for \$22!), and at eye-wateringly cheap prices. What a shame I was in the company of two impatient men!!!

Then I took them to Arab Street, another of Singapore's gems, with the streets and lanes beautifully restored and preserved, and in some cases, traffic free. Again, there was shop after shop selling gorgeous fabrics, carpets, anything remotely Middle Eastern. There is also a large Turkish section, and dozens and dozens of restaurants. So, what did we have for lunch? Probably the world's finest hamburger at Berg's Burgers in Haji Lane!!

Both Little India and Arab Street and surrounds are superbly authentic in their ethnicity, and it's impossible not to be transported to another place while visiting. We loved it.

We had one more thing to do before heading back to the ship: we needed to visit those gardens again by day, so we did. This time, we had time to visit the massive Flower Dome and the Cloud Forest. The former houses every kind of garden (including an Australian one) imaginable, and every kind of flower, all growing in perfect conditions. It is truly a special place to go, and I am so glad we returned to do so. The other massive Dome houses the Cloud Forest and the world's biggest indoor waterfall. It beautifully recreates a rain-forest, and complementary vegetation. You go all the way to the top, then walk down through it all, on an "air-walk". At the bottom, there is a very confronting environmental display with lots of facts and stats about how we are destroying the planet, and pointing out that the entire gardens complex is completely self-sustaining.

Just five years ago, we stayed at the newly opened Marina Bay Sands, and all the land which is now occupied by Gardens by the Bay was just reclaimed and being marked out for development. What has taken place since has our heads spinning.

So, we sailed again, and are presently on our second sea day before arriving in Bali tomorrow morning.

Anne