

WISH YOU WERE HERE?

Urban escapes and weekend getaways



Sipping in style

When you've spent a whole day hitting Phuket's beaches and need a romantic nightspot to chill out at, The Taste Phuket is your place. This elegant café, bar and boutique hotel is the furthest thing from the superfluous Phuket FantaSea complex or the seedy dives that line Patong Beach. Stretch out on its soft benches, order a bottle of red wine and sip the night away.

The Taste was created by a group of interior designers who wanted to create a sort of living showroom. At first, they conceived a trendy ultrachic cocktail bar that frequently hosted DJs spinning funky house tunes. After the tsunami hit and tourists stopped coming, they redesigned the Sino-Portuguese style building and added 12 hotel rooms. The spacious downstairs area was converted into a café that now features live piano music and a trio jam session every Friday night.

The rooms are all impeccably designed and vary in price from 1,500

baht to 2,100 baht. Better to go with the higher priced rooms. They are on the top floors of the building and offer much more space.

Every room has a bath tub, wooden floors, comfortable beds and cable television. They are all clean and classy.

The café downstairs is where the designers really strut their stuff. The touch is perfect; not too much, not too little. A chandelier hangs from the ceiling and stylish fixtures hang on the walls. The color scheme of off-white, beige and black is a refreshing break from the neon lights outside.

The menu is not extensive. The best items are pasta and sandwiches, which cost about 100 to 130 baht apiece. Beer is 100 baht a bottle, mixed drinks run about 150 baht a glass and wine-lovers face a 200 baht corkage charge.

Guests will soak themselves in opulence while still feeling relaxed. Jack Johnson's soothing guitar and seductive voice filled the café on a recent visit; a reminder that we are still at the beach.

The owners are hoping to spread the concept throughout the Kingdom. A similar café/bar/b&b in Chiang Mai is set to open next year, and a Koh Samui version may follow. In the distant future, Angkor Wat may join the list. — *ThaiDay*

The Taste Phuket

- In Phuket Town
- www.thetastepuket.com
- Hotel number: 07-622-2812
- Sales and Reservations: 02-712-8858

By Roy Hamric
in Bagan, Myanmar

On the first day of touring Bagan, one of the greatest collections of Buddhist temples in the world, you quickly learn the place to be at dusk is the top tier of Mingalazedi stupa to watch the sun's evening glow paint the hundreds of surrounding temples and stupas in deep red and rosy hues.

What you're not told is that the climb to the top is on tiny steps ascending at a very steep angle — it's no place for dizziness.

"Il est grand, si beau," — so big, so beautiful — whispered an elegant French lady, tightly gripping a steel handrail. For me, the only rival to the stunning, panoramic sight spreading across the flat, red plain would be a helicopter ride over the equally massive Angkor Wat complex in Cambodia.

I came to Bagan with a mixed bag of emotions, which included a burning desire to finally see this ancient site up close rather than in glossy, inspiring photographs. But I also feared the ground level view would bring disappointment.

The delicate beauty of Bagan, unfortunately, is under threat. Angkor Wat, for instance, has a World Heritage Site designation from UNESCO which ensures it will be continuously preserved by trained professionals. The organization's decades of efforts to achieve the same status for Bagan came to a halt in recent years, as Myanmar's ruling military junta was unwilling to work with the international body on preservation and restoration work. Many Asian conservationists and art lovers around the world now see Bagan's future as cloudy at best.

To make matters worse, there have been clear signs over the years that unskilled work has been carried out at the Bagan archeological site that could jeopardize its integrity and future.



The brilliance of Bagan

Various forces threaten the integrity of this archeological gem, which deserves continued efforts to secure its preservation



There are more than 2,000 temple sites scattered throughout the Bagan archeological zone.



Some temples have well preserved Buddha images.

TRAVELER'S CHECK

Deals, steals, news and openings

TRIP

As part of a series of five one-day study trips to visit museums and institutions that provide information relating to all aspects of Thai arts and culture, the Siam Society is preparing a one-day trip to visit two educational centers, a museum and a private home on August 26. The sites to be visited include the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Center, the Chulalongkorn University Thai House and MR Kukrit Pramoj's Heritage Home.

The group will leave the Society by bus at 8:30am and will return on the same day at 5:30pm. The cost to join this educational trip is 1,100 baht, which covers transportation, lunch and trip-related services. Visit www.siam-society.org or call 02-661-6470.



AIRLINES

Swiss International Air Lines (SWISS) is offering two packages to Switzerland and Singapore.

A six-day Switzerland package is 38,500 baht which includes a return economy-class airfare, three nights accommodation with breakfast in Zurich, a four day-Zurich card for unlimited travel by trains, buses, tram and cruises, a SWISS multi-purpose bag and a Thai-language VCD highlighting how easy it is to travel independently in Switzerland to places of interest.

The other package is a three-day two-night "Family Fun Package" to Singapore which starts at 5,900 baht. The package includes return economy-class flights, two nights accommodation with breakfast in a shared twin room plus a complementary SWISS shopping bag, special offers on optional tours and a travel related

VCD in Thai featuring Singapore's places of interest and attractions.

SWISS flies daily (except Tuesday) between Bangkok and Zurich and Bangkok and Singapore. Visit www.swisspackage.info

Bangkok Airways is offering a promotional round-trip fare to Hiroshima for 18,500 baht on Sunday, September 3, 10, 17 and 24. A 19,500 baht fare is available for departures on the Sundays of August 13, 20 and 27. These fares are not inclusive of airport tax, insurance and fuel surcharges.

Under this promotion, passengers can fly back on any days of operation, which are Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays.

Visit www.bangkokair.com or call 1771.

SPORT

Join the fourth Bhumibol Dam International Mountain Bike Championships on August 26-27 at the dam site in Tak province.

The race will be divided into three categories — professional, amateur and family team events — and distances vary between 24 and 60 kilometers.

Call 02-250-5500 ext 3495.

PACKAGE

Mother's Day is approaching. Spoil your mother with a free spa treatment at a branch of Central Hotels & Resorts. Central will offer a free one-hour spa treatment at Centara Spa with any hotel booking made for the August 10-16 period. The participating hotels include — take a deep breath — Sofitel Central Plaza Bangkok, Sofitel Central Hua Hin Resort, Central Krabi Bay Resort, Central Samui Beach Resort, Central Samui Village, Central Karon Village, Phuket, Central Kata Resort, Phuket and Novotel Central Sukhontha, Hat Yai. The booking must be made before August 7.

Visit www.centralhotelsresorts.com/thaimotherday or call 02-937-2222 ext 4444.

Restoration experts have lamented misguided efforts at "improvements" such as the construction of new "cookie cutter design" structures on top of ancient ruins; ancient murals white-washed out of sight; the use of bathroom tiles as material in repairs; the installation of inappropriate "crowns" or "tiers" on top of many pagodas; and the "selling" of some structures to donors, who then proceed with making improvements on the structures without the necessary skills to do so.

And yet the sheer size and beauty of Bagan still overwhelms the eye. Most visitors are not aware of the flaws and threats to the complex.

My first glimpse of Bagan came when the Air Bagan flight from Yangon banked westward and the chocolate-colored Irrawaddy River came into view.

The oldest temples lie nearest the river's east bank. Old Bagan, with its crumbling brick and mortar walls surrounding what was once a moat, still serves as a port to tourist ferries and cargo ships. From the airport, the taxi ride to town costs US\$14 and my driver, Maung San Hla, said I could hire his taxi for a day-long tour of the archeological zone for \$20. Alternatives

are to rent a bicycle for \$5 a day or a cramped, horse-drawn carriage with flatbed seats for \$7 a day. By early afternoon, Maung San Hla and I were zigging and zagging across dirt roads, weaving through green fields of cotton, sesame and maize.

Several large temples loomed over the flat plain surrounded by hundreds of smaller structures. A survey in the late 1970s found there are 2,230 sites, a large number of them not excavated. Within these sites there were 911 temples, of which 347 had painted murals in various states of condition; 524 stupas; 415 monasteries; 31 other structures, including libraries and ordination halls; and numerous mounds of collapsed structures.

At most of the larger sites, tourists must run a gauntlet of vendors selling paintings, lacquer ware, Buddhist trinkets and postcards. Jobs are scarce in Myanmar so the vendors and postcard hawkers are tenacious.

The taxi and horse cart drivers who shepherd tourists through the vast complex are grateful for the in-

come, but they speak guardedly about almost everything not directly related to the temples. After two days together, my driver finally loosened up. "All businesses and hotels are controlled by the military," he said. "Most money goes away. If we say anything bad, it's very dangerous, we get nothing." Like many of the poor in Myanmar, Maung San Hla chewed betel constantly, making his English more difficult to understand.

"You know computers?" he asked on our final day together. "Big problem." Maung San Hla invited me to his home, where he lived with his father and mother, two brothers and a sister, plus six or seven offspring. He wanted me to take a look at his proudest possession, a laptop computer recently given to him by a German tourist. Unfortunately, Maung San Hla didn't have the necessary system password to access the machine.

The house sat on five-foot high wooden stilts. It was without doors, window screens or running water. Electricity came in from a wire strung

from a neighbor's house. Several nails and a few coat hangers displayed everyone's clothes.

Maung San Hla's dream is to connect to the internet, to see more of the mysterious outside world. He doesn't own his taxi; he is only the driver for "a big man."

After a glass of the standard dark tea, the children focused on the two cheap ballpoint pens in my shirt pocket. An oft-repeated refrain heard over and over in Myanmar is, "Do you have a gift for me?" With so few jobs, a basic diet is beyond the means of large numbers of the population. I left the family "gifts" that I hoped would perhaps bring them more food for a short time. Someday, Maung San Hla may even connect to the internet, and what a difference that could make in his life.

As we drove back to my hotel, we passed a 200-foot glass and concrete observation tower nestled among the temples, called the Nanmyint (royal tower). It opened in 2005 and sits adjacent to a resort complex under construction nearby. A project of the junta, the tower stands out as a strange and otherworldly sight, resembling a control tower for a large urban airport. It is meant to provide tourists with a place to view the archeological complex in air-conditioned comfort.

A little farther down the road is the 18-hole Bagan Golf Resort, which opened for tourists in 1999. A few years earlier, a highway was constructed through the archeological zone itself.

I left Bagan with a feeling that its future was at a crossroads. Unless UNESCO officials or some other responsible body works out a cooperative agreement with the Myanmar government, Bagan's authenticity could be threatened. But looking at the state of Angkor Wat 30 years ago and seeing it today shows what can be achieved.

Useful Information

- Air Bagan flights leave Yangon daily for Bagan and Mandalay. A ticket to Bagan costs about US\$85. From Bagan to Mandalay, about \$35.
- Aung Mingalar Hotel, near Nyaung U-Bagan Airport, 061-601171. Clean rooms, \$15 to \$25 for single/double with air. E-mail: thannaingoo@baganmail.net.mm
- Bagan archeological zone: A \$10 one-time fee allows access to any of the temples within the zone.



Detail of a wall mural showing miniature depictions of the Lord Buddha.