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THAI GUYS
the gay newsletter

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Dear Ms. Connie,

Sometimes when a gale has picked up in the Channel and sea foam flecks the windows of my small cottage overlooking the rocks in Sark, I only wish I was back in Thailand, in the arms of Sompong, as he fondly gazes into my violet sixty-five year old eyes and says, there, there Papa, have another lynchee. But even here in this way-post of the Western world, where even the sheep begin to look hunky on a spring day, words have reached the ears of the small coterie of retirees from Sark, who winter on Jomtien, that something's amiss in the Land of Smiles. Rumors have it that pipe smoking is banned on Soi 4. Certain establishments have required that tables in one establishment if frequented by young entrepreneurs in the company of older gentleman, are to be cleared as soon as the Tom Yam Goong has gone. And, Heaven forbid, piss tests are de rigueur if you are old enough to know who Dorothy was, much less her friends. Our group of course will have none of it. We sit around each Thursday evening, muttering and clucking like a bunch of old hens, eating our crustless cucumber sandwiches, and watching Henry cheat yet again at whist, knowing that this cannot be true. Dear Ms. Connie, you have been a voice of inspiration for our little group of survivors.

Connie Lingus
Advice Column

Ms. Connie knows a pseudo-nym when she gets one and her Swiss editress has a strict policy against receiving letters from unknown sources. Ms. Connie has written frequently to you on Sark and has received all her letters returned unopened with the British Postal Service's stamped admonition, Address Unknown, clearly marked in pink. Nevertheless, my editress has relented from her firm policy to respond to your letter because a number of letters have been received asking similar questions about rumours flying around the globe of a similar vein. Ms. Connie is pleased to assure you that none of these rumours have one iota of truth attached. Pipes are still allowed on Soi 4 although people do not take kindly to you depositing the ashes in empty glasses on adjoining tables. There has been a policy announced against slurping noodles loudly because of the bad impression this creates for the image of Thailand. But this policy has languished in a committee attached to the Ministry of Culinary Development and we are happy to say, we think it will go away without further ado. Ms. Connie never really knows who starts these rumours and why they persist in sullying the obvious charms that Thailand offers the world especially lonely Sarskettes, wanting an escape in the winter months.

One fact Ms. Connie can report with assurance is that whist has never taken off here but there has been a resurgence of lawn bowls or petanque as the French persist in calling it, even though bowls is so much easier to pronounce.

And of course the allure of fabled Siam still persists in Boyzstown. If one can afford a break from the hideous winters in the North, there is no doubt that a sojourn in Thailand has been proven to stop the inevitable affliction of the elderly, petrifaction, in its tracks. Defined as the process of fossilization whereby organic matter is turned into a stony substance. Ms. Connie is living proof that Thailand keeps the old, young and spunky and even a return to Sark in February is endurable when one has had a few weeks of reclining in plastic loungers watching windsurfers wallow their way through the surf, with ones valise crammed with photos of hikes through the dunes of pleasure. Not to speak of the added thrill of being in one's seventh decade and being able to say "No" to the oft-asked question, "Do you like boys?"

There is a mystique which has kept Ms. Connie coming back for more, all through the years even though she lives here. Not to say that she is living with Paul Bowles or Cavafy as the poetess laureate of Thailand. Or even Pira Sudham who was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature. But it is a constant thrill to know that you never know what might come bounding round the next corner to take your laboured breath away. And there is a little bit of that frisson of the unexpected, the stealing of self against the illusion that this is love and it is still possible even for an overly made-up petroglyph like Ms. Connie. Oh God, forgive me your Dameness but Ms. Connie has been going through a lot lately and it's time her readers knew that Ms. Connie can't just keep giving, giving, giving, forever without expecting something in return. Sorry about the tears but your image of whist playing in Sark struck a chord with Ms. Connie and she must rush to the loo and refresh her maquillage before Dongchai comes over for supper. In closing, Ms. Connie would like to quote that old Victorian reprobate, Robert Browning from his now forgotten poem, Bishop Blouingham's Apology,

"...Our interests on the edge of things,
The honest thief, the tender murderer,
The superstitious atheist..."

And Ms. Connie would be remiss if she failed to add, the whore with the golden heart.

We look forward to welcoming all of you over the festive season and do open my letters the next time you get them, your Dameness. Just so Ms. Connie can know that you're still out there. And please do say hello, if Ms. Connie is taking visitors at her designated chair overlooking the soi. Anybody local will be able to point her out.
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Take Me To The Hilton!

Martin Frank

Man finished his food, washed his hand pouring water with his left from the tumbler over his right hand onto the plate, chewed some anis seeds, poured more water from the jug into his wide-open mouth without touching the vessel with his lips, and asked, “Shall we go inside, Sir?”

Getting up, my eyes fell once more on the small rosewood frame with the wise adage:

GREAT EXPECTATIONS LEAD TO GREAT DISAPPOINTMENTS.

Man smiled, took my hand and pulled me towards the bedroom door. His wet hair smelled of jasmine oil. His hand holding mine, his eager movements, the slight noise of his naked feet on the cool terrazzo floor, his beauty and my desire: Ripping my eyes off the wise advice, I told myself that this one moment of his eagerness and my desire had to be enough.

Man opened the bedroom door for me. I wanted him so much that I felt dizzy. Stepping inside the room, I groped in the dark for the light switch, when I heard an ear drum-shattering explosion. A split-second later something heavy fell on my head and knocked me out.

When I came to, my head felt like a weight stamped 500 TONS had dropped on it. My eyes didn't open. A lot of stuff was wound around my head, my right shoulder and arm. I smelled iodine and in my neck and shoulder rolled the pain you feel recovering from a bad fall.

“May we inquire after Excellency’s well-being?”

Did I remember this voice? A dry, strong hand took my left hand... In the dark of my past, I found a hotel room and... Man! I closed my hand around his fingers. When I tried to lift my arm, the pain stopped me. Trying to speak, I found that first I had to spit out the plaster particles in my mouth.

“Is it you, Man?”

“It was God’s will that one bomb happened to explode just outside Excellency’s hotel, and it was written in your destiny that one roof rafter should fall on Excellency’s head. Thanks to the graceful protection extended by the perfumed shrine of the beloved son of this holy city, Excellency’s life was spared. The doctor attending to Excellency will return on short notice.”

Wore his lips touching my hand? Was it tears I felt wetting my hand?

“Are you crying?”
"Whatever untoward would have befallen Excellency in the future, that your slave will bear, this we vow at the perfumed shrine of the beloved son of this holy city."

He was crying. I smelled roses. He lifted my head.

"Out of friendliness, Excellency will drink!"

Cool porcelain touched my lips.

"What is it?"

"Rose water. Excellency, it will refresh your disposition!"

I drank. It was wonderful cool, and after drinking, his fingers wiped my lips. I could not see. I could not move. I didn't know where I was, but as long as Man let me hold his hand, I was in paradise.

"You would have been a goner but for your friend doing..." By his colonial service slang, I recognized the doctor. His nicotine-smelling fingers removed enough of the bandaging around my head to free my eyes. "...CPR in the nick of time." The doctor's dark complexion, his yellowish eyes, his brownish suit, his common greedy worried family father voice melted into my pain and the irresponsibility of being sick. The doctor filled small yellow, small red, large white, and long white-and-yellow pills into little plastic bags, which he marked PAIN, SLEEP, FEVER, and STRONG PAIN. "This will be twenty dollars, if you please." While he wrote his bill, he asked me, "Where do you come from?"

I mumbled the name of the country written on my passports front page.

Man fetched the paper bag. "With Excellency's graceful permission, we will reimburse the European doctor."

"What about my money in the hotel safe?"

"Excellency will not worry, nothing will let go astray, that we vouchsafe."

"Would Excellency care to piss? Excellency will just let it flow!" I was lying naked on the concrete floor of a basic bathroom, and Man was washing me. The rich lather of the soap smelled of synthetic American luxury, of female facial powder, lavender, roses, and talcum. Man's left hand kept my erection in check. "Due to the miraculous power of the perfumed shrine of the beloved son of this holy city, Excellency's health will return quickly. Soon, Excellency will enjoy!"

I tried to focus on kissing him. He lifted my head for me and kissed me on my brow. I closed my eyes. Where his lips touching mine? I wanted him to make love to me but the fever was carrying me away... He helped me up and half-guided half-carried me to bed.

Man's fingers put pills on my tongue; his hands made me drink. In a spinning, checkered universe stuffed with cotton, I dreamed of him, of trying to touch him, of hidden meaning and lost memories. In his arms, I was sleeping but in my dream, I was floating towards empty space and oblivion, desperately holding on to his name: "Man!"

My own shout woke me up... There was breakfast smell, breakfast clatter of porcelain cups on porcelain saucers, and of tin spoons slithering over a tin tray.

"Holy oath, this is not tea for Excellency. Necessary to bring better milk too, brother-in-law! Holy oath! Best food only is needed, brother-in-law! Excellency will die if Excellency smells this bitch-in-heat shit..."

Man was discussing breakfast with a bearer. After a cup of tea. I would be all right, but why get up, shower, and dress... Let me stay in bed with Man next to me; let him own my body one more day.

"Where is Peace?"

"Peace has come to death. That roof which fell on Excellency, it was in his destiny that it should kill him."

Man's hands didn't stop massaging my right arm, what did he feel? I said, "That is a big sad thing."

"Due to the miraculous power of the perfumed shrine of the beloved son of this holy city, Peace will now enjoy in paradise. What sadness is there? Rejoice!"

"Excellency will rise please; it has become advisable to leave at once."

Man helped me to get up and dressed me in what he called, "genuine clothes." I could walk but had no strength in my right arm and felt a strong urge to close my eyes. "Did you get my passport and my money from the hotel safe?"

"Excellency will not worry; it is under tons of rubble. One friend will get it for Excellency as soon as digging starts."

"Where are we?" I opened my eyes. The lorry wasn't moving anymore. Around me, there was perfect silence. The sun was shining onto the blankets. I removed them.
The back gate of the lorry was lowered; I saw no building, no tree, no hill. Dry earth stretched until the horizon. I managed to climb over the bags towards the open back gate.

As I slowly lowered myself down to the ground, I heard Man’s voice. I moved towards his voice... From the corner of the lorry, I could see him. He was talking with a short brawny fellow wearing soldier’s fatigues and a dirty olive t-shirt, who carried a gun.

When Man saw me, he said, “He is very sick, please excuse me” and came towards me. He told me curiously, “No talking!” and helped me to a seat made from four bricks near a small fire site. Speaking in the standard national language without much of an accent, and using the kind of modernist words TV speakers use, Man told the soldier that I was a ‘Falcon’. Didn’t Man know that the ‘Falcons’ were fiction? The self-assured air with which Man answered the soldier’s questions didn’t betray the mountain boy.

The soldier offered me a cup of tea from a thermos, cleaning the rim of the cup by spilling a small quantity. My right shoulder was hurting; I used the opportunity to swallow a pill against the pain.

We climbed into the seats of a jeep. The soldier was driving. As soon as we were moving, I got drowsy again. Man put my head on his shoulder and held my body to let me sleep safely. The noise of the motor, the hot air, the slight curry smell of Man’s body, the shaking of the vehicle: I felt myself be carried wherever Man wanted to bring me. Maybe he was my friend as the doctor had said. If not, then he imitated friendship more convincingly than most of my former friends. My fingers found his hand; he didn’t draw back his hand.

I pulled his fingers in front of my eyes; His skin was tan colored; his hand was dry and warm, his nails short, square and clean. How can you not trust a young man who lets you sleep in his lap? Was Man really “one lowly mountain boy”? I wanted to give it some thought, but instead I turned my head to feel through his clothes his half-hard cock against my cheek, and fell asleep.

I woke up more dead than alive. I was on a bed in a small clean house. My clothes were soaked from my sweat. Man was sitting on the edge of the cot, wiping my front with a wet towel. To go to the latrine, I had to leave the hut. Man guided me, helped me, washed me, carried me back and lowered me unto the bed. He put a pill onto my tongue, and lifted a cup of water to my lips.

“Drink please, you must drink!” Man asked me. “How do you feel?”

I opened my eyes. In the corner of the hut, a guy was squatting... Didn’t I remember his face? I remembered the wooden stock of the carbine leaning to the wall next to him. What did “one ruffian” do here?

I had come for the exotic sex the mountain boys are famous for; disbelieving what friends had told me: War, kidnapping, extortion, robbery, cold-blooded murder. - I liked Man’s voice, his eyes, his hands but who was he? What did he want from me? Was I in love with him? I should have asked the doctor to call the embassy to repatriate me. Now, I had no papers, no money, and nobody, not even I knew where I was. What if Man simply left me in the middle of this desert? Who would stick a note to my corpse?

TASTE ME TO THE HILTON!
Raining Trannies In Indonesia.
The usually staid but liberal New York Times recently ran a story (July 24, 2003) on the changing role of transvestites (kateyes) in Indonesia where they are being trained by the government to enter simpatco professions (such as hairdressing) other than their traditional roles as entertainers and prostitutes. The Indo trannies are locally known as "waria" - a word that is a cross between "wanita" meaning woman and "priya" meaning man.

In the major cities, such as Jakarta and Surabaya, on the heavily populated island of Java, the local government provides training programs for trannies who want to run beauty salons and wedding businesses (including gowns, make-up and decor). Not surprisingly, the trainers are also themselves trannies and the supervisor of the program in Jakarta, formerly called Nandy Iskander, is a "waria" now known as Nandy.

In this tolerant, most populous Muslim country in the world, transvestites have a long tradition of acceptance and men often play the roles of females in the dance dramas of Java. As in Thailand, transvestites are regular hosts of television comedy shows and have long appeared as characters in popular shadow-puppet shows known as "wayang kulit".

Surprisingly to some, the modern founder of Indonesia, President Sukarno proudly writes in his memoirs of having played female roles in lipstick and make-up when he was a young man stuffig 'two sweet breads' into his blouse. He boasts that, 'with this addition to my shapely figure, everybody said I looked absolutely beautiful.' As the father of the nation, this admission would cause a scandal in most other countries - imagine how Americans would react if they found diaries of George Washington admitting that he enjoyed dressing up in drag! However, as a queer footnote, it is said that the US Founding Father did have male bed-mates when he was a general during the American Revolutionary War.

One difference between Indonesia and Thailand (the former, predominantly Islam, albeit a relaxed version compared to the fanatic Taliban), is that for reasons of religion, sex-change operations are not encouraged in Indonesia, only cross-dressing. So when Nandy/Nancy visits the imam and elders of the Islamic Council she wears a head-scarf worn by Muslim women, but when she goes to the mosque to pray she says, 'I must go as a man.'

Durian Flavored Condoms.
More queer news from Indonesia. The Jakarta Post reports that durian flavoured condoms are selling like proverbial hotcakes as part of a campaign to fight HIV/AIDS in Indonesia. DKT Indonesia, an anti-AIDS organization promoting safe-sex, said it had sold 150,000 durian-flavoured condoms in the first month it was introduced. For those not familiar with the flavour of the stinky, prickly fruit irresistible to South-East Asians, it is definitely an acquired taste for foreigners. When one farang was asked to comment, he said, 'I'd much rather taste the sweet flavour of cum, than a durian-flavoured rubber!' No accounting for tastes, is there?
**Queer Monks**

Although it is common knowledge that what goes on behind the closed doors in the all-male Buddhist monasteries isn't always strictly kosher, Thailand's The Nation newspaper reports a controversy is raging on whether known homosexuals should be allowed to enter the Thai monkhood, as senior monks discuss the sensitive issue.

Famed preacher Phra Ploam Thammapatee of Wat Suan Kaew in Nonthaburi, better known as Phra Payon Kalayanaro, said he believed that there were at least 700 homosexuals amongst the country's 300,000 monks-no doubt a conservative estimate. One wonders how they can tell, since there is no survey on sexual orientation of the men entering monkhood.

Phra Ploam suggested that the abbots and senior monks carefully screen candidates for ordination and prevent those with so-called 'sexual deviation' from donning saffron robes. Some homosexual monks have caused troubles in the temples, he said. Ironically, it is also well-known that many gangsters enter the monkhood for short periods to escape enemies or the police, but no background checks are done on them.

Senior Buddhist leaders are looking into monastic regulations to see what could be done, but so far have been unable to reach any conclusions. However, as one leader pointed out, it would be difficult to bar homosexual men as Buddhism, an egalitarian religion, allows all men to be ordained. Before ordination, candidates are customarily asked simply if they are men-no females or transsexuals allowed.

Phra Khru Pimomsorakhum, secretary to Bangkok's monastic chief said that gay monks should be permitted to remain in the monkhood so long as they commit no offences. All monks take a vow of celibacy as well as abstention from sin.

In other Buddhist traditions, such as Tibetan, celibacy traditionally meant no relations with women or penetrative sex, which did not preclude 'hanky-panky' with novices, other men or boys. And even in some countries where the Theravada tradition is still strong, such as Sri Lanka, the monks are notoriously known to be a randy lot.

**Heartbroken murderer**

In China police has reported the arrest of a 24-year-old man wanted for murdering seven homosexuals he lured to their deaths after arranging to meet them via the internet. The man from northwestern Xinjiang province also admitted murdering a 15-year-old classmate in 1994. The suspect reportedly told investigators he had gone on the killing spree after the classmate, who had been his former lover, spurned him and left him with a broken heart. It still can be hard to be gay in China.

**Homosexuality condemned in Singapore**

Musilm leaders in Singapore have condemned homosexuality as a sin but at least urged the faithful not to humiliate or ostracise gays. In Friday's sermon prepared by the Islamic Religious Council, Muslims were told to reach out and persuade gays to give up their lifestyle. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong recently said the government was now openly employing gays. Whereas this Islamic Religious Council said persuading gays to give up their lifestyle was difficult, but not impossible. Oh, brothers!
The Intrinsic Quality of Skin

A review by Chuck Pringle

I was looking forward to reading Skin by Peter A. Jackson, having read and enjoyed other works of his, but confess that, after three or four pages I was ready to give up the struggle with the cursive, or at least curly, script in which the book is typeset. I’m all for individuality and variety, but not at the expense of my reading enjoyment.

However, I persisted and am glad that I did. Unlike most gay novels or writings about the Thai gay scene, Dr. Jackson’s first novel seeks not so much to titillate with the undoubted attractions of the young Thai male, but to explore the depths, may we say the seamier side, of the specifically Thai gay culture of the 80’s.

In a conscious rejection of his Australian roots and the recurring rebuffs received at the hands of macho-culture Australian boys and men—the protagonist instinctively relates to the easy sensuality of Thai men and has soon submerged himself in the Thai homosexual sub-culture in the capital and later the provinces.

Living and making a living as a Thai would, he embarks on a voyage of discovery, not only of the world that his proclivities demand that he inhabit, but of the inner motives and subconscious drives of both himself and the men with whom he makes brief contact and sometimes longer-lasting relationships—thus offering deep insights into differing cultures which leaves the reader pondering his own concepts of self and sexuality.

In a world in which few westerners would ever venture, that of smelly pissoirs in back streets and the darker recesses of public parks, another world is revealed, far from that of the smartly dressed and provocative bar-boy and over-painted katoey, that of the labourer, or farmer driven to seek those of his own sex to satisfy desires denied by the society in which he lives. Tender incidents contrast with brutal and abrasive liaisons but all are intelligently and honestly described in rich cultural detail which cannot fail to resonate within our own consciousness—leaving us alternatively deeply touched or ruthlessly flayed by these raw experiences.

Eventually, after several years and many sensitively described relationships—sparked by contact with another Australian gay man who has just been ripped-off by a predatory samlor cyclist, the protagonist discovers that his skin is really his own, that of a Western male, albeit a gay one, and not the brown, Asian one he had been trying to inhabit.

Deciding to return to Australia he meets again one of his earlier lovers and goes with him to the Thai hotel that was the location of their first tryst. Emerging he sees two older men holding hands and bidding each other farewell with a lingering

Continued in page 47
I love Phuket

Arriving at Phuket airport the view is spectacular. As the plane gets closer and closer to the water you wonder whether or not you will make it this time as usual, or... and then you are quite sure, this time the plane is really going to fall into the Andaman sea. But then a secure touch down as always, the plane brakes and slowly follows the path to the terminal. Phuket, here I am once more, I just love you! This is my twelfth - yes, correct, twelfth time in paradise. An auspicious number I am told.

There are so many beautiful beaches to choose from in Phuket. But as a matter of convenience I usually hang out at Patong beach, just in front of the Patong beach bungalows where the gay section is located. Under the many umbrellas creating shade on one of those comfortable chairs, all my needs are taken care of. I can sip an ice cold drink and the eyes wander. See food walks by and grins back. A little small talk is easily started. Where do you come from? And what your name? So pleasant, so nice. See you later alligator. Maybe I should book that famous gay boat trip to kai island again this year that is offered by Connect.

What a great variety of hotels to choose from! Of course, I like to try them all. This time I am staying at Aquarius which is located right in the center of Royal Paradise Complex. Downstairs they have an indoor swimming pool and sauna with some dark, dark areas that can be extremely inter-res-ting at times. I have

Miss PGF event
A challenge for the jury

Continued in page 27

I hate Phuket

Even arriving at Phuket airport is a pain in the ass. First of all the planes land far to close to the water, it looks very dangerous and - believe me - if in Thailand something looks dangerous, it normally is. This overcrowded airport is a permanent construction site. And then those unfriendly gangsters at the transportation desk! They rob you there time after time. Last time the taxi to Patong beach was 500 Baht... bound to have gone up to at least 600 Baht next time or even 700 Baht. My last trip in Phuket was definitely my last.

Okay, the landscape of the so called Pearl of the Andaman is quite nice. But if you want to go to one of the unspoiled beaches, there is no night life whatsoever. So you always end up in sleazy Patong beach instead - and the service of the beach vendors is really poor, nay, outright lousy. You can die there of hunger and thirst but no one will come to your rescue even though they charge 50 Baht per chair, whereas in good old Pattaya it is 20 Baht... and those wooden chairs are really hard and very uncomfortable... and no trees in the interesting part of Patong beach, nor any breeze. In two words: Living Hell. I hate Phuket.

Hotels in Phuket also really over-charge, the price level is about double that of Pattaya which is, anyway, more accessible to me, living in Bangkok. But that is not the main problem. The main problem is those fellow tourists with that phony smile of pure enchantment on their faces. They

Continued in page 27
Xtraordinary Xtreme

On 17 September Xtreme Bar, Bangkok's premier show bar, will celebrate its second Anniversary with a spectacular two hour show. Starting at 10pm you will be treated to three 45-minute acts featuring the Xtreme Dancers and the Xtreme Issan Dance Troupe.

That the bar can put on over two hours of dance entertainment is a tribute to the hard work of the management, choreographer/s and dancers. The repertoire of the dancers is now over 120 dance routines and for the Anniversary strayganza there will be some impressive new group numbers and some smaller ones to pique the interest of the regulars and entertain the newcomers.

One of the unique features of this dance show is that it features no ‘katoey’ (drag queens). These are all male dancers. The 11 dancers rehearse for over nine hours a week to bring new numbers to life and revive and review some of the older ones. They should offer tickets to these rehearsals as I'm told they can be very entertaining!

Alongside the dancers Xtreme Bar has a stable of cute, boy-next-door type GoGo boys (well I wished they lived next door to me). These guys are also pretty talented. On the night of the first Anniversary they suddenly entertained the crowd with a mass Issan dance (Thai traditional village dance) routine. Since that time this has become a regular part of the evenings entertainment and the Issan dancers are also invited to entertain away from the bar.

How did all this start?
About 3 years ago a retired gentleman called Philip came to Bangkok and went against his training and upbringning and bought a GoGo Bar. He offered the usual staple of GoGo boys, candle shows, painted bodies and the more ‘daring’ sorts of entertainment. He quickly realised he was presenting a second-rate form of entertainment and that some other bars were ‘doing it better’.

So he looked around for something different. This came in the form of a small dance group who were prepared to put on properly choreographed, non-explicit, but erotic, dance show. Rather than being on offer these guys were paid a salary. This enabled them to rehearse and perform without the distraction of having to earn money in other ways and also made sure the show was presented with a full complement of dancers every night. This was a radical change from the normal method of payment of performers in bars and was a small but very important beginning of the development of Bangkok's most stylish and different GoGo bar show.

The dancers started out with some reasonably uncomplicated routines and two shows a night that lasted about 20 minutes each with a number of longish gaps between the dance routines. It was very hard work and, at times, quite soul destroying to try to fight against the tide of sex shows on offer from competitors. But Philip persevered.

The Xtreme Dancers were first featured outside the bar at Bangkok Gay Festivals Pink in the Park in 2001 where their performance gained them a lot of friends who have become regular patrons of the bar.

A decision of some of the dancers to go their separate ways saw an influx of new blood and a couple of different choreographers. Each of the choreographers bought a new lease of life to the dance routines with totally new interpretations of songs. This has certainly added to the variety of numbers offered.

The present choreographer, Khun Nut, is a dancer with Freeman's Dance Arena and he has a very 'showbiz' approach to dance. His numbers are flashy, colourful and certainly have more than a touch of a mini Las Vegas to them. For the stage on which they are presented they are of a very high standard. They approach a level of sophistication and excellence that could be presented anywhere.

The show the Xtreme Dancers gave at the Bangkok Gay Pride Kickoff in Soi 4 on 31 July this year was obviously very well received as the numbers of patrons attending the bar increased significantly. To put on those two routines the boys rehearsed for many hours to re-choreograph for the different stage area to give the best show possible.

One of the major complaints patrons have had of the shows has been the gap between dances. These have sometimes been of several minutes duration while the dancers have changed costumes. You'll be pleased to know that this problem has been addressed and the gaps, if occurring, are now much shorter, measured in seconds rather than minutes.

The Anniversary show on 17 September promises to be an evening of total dance, no gaps, featuring both the Xtreme Dancers and the Xtreme Issan Dance Troupe.

And what can you expect in the future? Xtreme Bar has been lucky enough to secure the voluntary services of a teacher of Tap, Mexican, American Country, European, Ballroom and Celtic dancing and the dancers are already beginning lessons in these styles of dancing and the bar expects to present the first routines from October.

Xtreme is one of the few GoGo bars that is a member of Bangkok Gay Pride. It expects to be a continuing part of their festivities during 2003 with some plans for a spectacular in the planning so keep your eye open around your favorite venues for details.

If you're looking for an exotic, sexy show give Xtreme a try. So let's hear it for the boys, the Xtreme Dancers, working hard to entertain you.
Continued from page 23.

look exactly like love stricken Malvolio in William Shakespeare’s "Twelfth Night". Putke-making. Okay, maybe I had the same silly expression on my face when I came to this fair kingdom for the very first time, but after a while you should be able to see the darker sides as well. Those taxi drivers, for instance, that grossly overcharge and are also extremely unfriendly. The food in Phuket: paeng, paeng and mai arøy. (Expensive and not tasty)

The nightlife of Phuket isOkay, if you like commercial sex, that is, but otherwise? No Babylon here, for sure. When you see a smile (should you be able to detect one at all) beware! Every smile in Phuket adds another 100 Baht to the bill presented in the end. Phony friendliness everywhere, nothing is genuine here, and only the poorest possible service. The Boat Bar is fine, but after two nights you have already seen all the regulars and the big yawn starts. Almost as boring as Hua Hin. The real gay crowd of Phuket (not including all those Isaan money boys) is almost as miniscule as in Hua Hin. One good thing can be said about Phuket, you get to bed early. The whole of the rest of phony Phuket? . . . I just hate.

I love Phuket

I hate Phuket

Continued from page 23.

I stayed at Club Bamboo before, perfectly situated in a quiet area near the hill. Last year I had a pleasant time at Siam Palm, which is located within walking distance of all major entertainment sites. They have a very good restaurant as well . . . maybe I should invite a nice Thai friend there for dinner tonight? Or have at least one drink at Jungle Boz next door.

The nightlife is really fantastic in Phuket. You might start your night with a memorable dinner at Kenya’s Seashag restaurant. For years on and still serving good food with great consistency. Then there are all the bars you can choose from - and you choose number or two or three. My way your way or his way, up to you. Or you have another drink at C. U. Tonight who’s owner is so cute and so smart and from there you can watch what’s going on at Boat Bar. I always end my nights here when in Phuket . . . well, not quite end but you know what I mean. What I do in the privacy of my room after leaving Boat Bar is of not much interest to the public (or so I tell myself). See you tomorrow girls, I really love that Phuket!

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Double take at Dick's Café Jomtien

by Suzy Size

I am still quite young (looking, that means) though not really by date of birth and therefore I feel quite wise at times—this being the dividend of the experience of years past. If one of these young Thai fellows seeks to take advantage of the wisdom garnered over those years, I am always ready to give my priceless guidance free of charge and my good advice may be rendered for hours and hours, a friendly smile is all I expect as a token of appreciation. Should there be further contact of any kind, I am often ready to give a generous cash donation towards the funds ofender-aged water buffaloes that seems to plague Isaan presently, or rather eternally.

Even though I pride myself on looking at least fifteen years fresher than the raddled fruits born in the same distant year as I was (some Thai boys even guess I am only 39 years of age, clever lads indeed, may their buffaloes never sicken), I must admit my memory is getting somewhat unreliable at times. Let me give you an example: I might stroll down Silom Road going to Bangkok Bank and suddenly meet someone, young or old, Parang or Thai, and will be greeted by this person enthusiastically and at times even by my proper name. But I, to be honest, have not the slightest idea where I met the guy before, what important question we may have discussed for hours and hours and certainly I have no clue whatsoever of his name or where he came from. Questions that seem to be of the utmost importance in the land of smiles.

Caught on the hop I, of course, put on a friendly smile pretending I remembered that stranger very well and ask one of those questions like: “How are you today?” and “What are you doing these days?” in the hope that a clue of some sort may be dropped. Or add: “You look much better than last time we met,” only to be told that we saw each other at Telephone just last night. I am quite sure other guys of my (unrevealed) age have the same kind of problem.

About two years ago I stopped going to Telephone because it was so overcrowded then and I would meet all these many confusing people and that incredible bunch of freelancers that I first found to be a nuisance and secondly had a hard time remembering next day. I hear it is not as crowded as it used to be, but I am not going back—I have found other and greener pastures. If I still go to Soi 4 at all I might opt for the inscrutable Sphinx or a peaceful seat at friendly Balcony. I am now a regular at Dick’s Café Bangkok, this venue being my absolute favorite now.

How pleasant to sit inside or outside Dicks on an afternoon, not being molested by wandering whores, reading a book or a newspaper, enjoying one of their cakes or delicious snacks or talking to a friend or one of the regulars. It is not as anonymous as other places and the number of waiters is limited so I can remember their names (or if I temporarily cannot, I just look on their name tags that are readable even without glasses) and they remember mine and always greet me with their unique smiles. After a few visits you get to know the regulars intimately and have pleasant little conversations now and then. Friendships develop and grow in the unique atmosphere at Dick’s and every month or so you get a free art exhibit of either talented or sometimes only cute artists.

On the terrace in the evening you can watch the world go by. You see those shy Japanese walking through the soi with their eyes quickly darting around. You can watch the importunate touts from all the surrounding go-go bars trying to direct uncertain customers to their establishments. It is fun and vital but, at Dick’s, you are not disturbed at all by pushy money boys ... you are in an oasis. But at the same time you can glance at the beautiful guys of “Bonny Massage” next door sitting outside in their neat uniforms—you can even risk a wee flirt with them and maybe more. And if I ever should forget the name of one of the other regulars at Dicks, I discretely ask Lukas or one of the waiters and I am then able to address Stuart or Simon or Douglas or Wynne or even Lee using their proper names, quite an achievement at my age. (My boyish looks are, as I said, slightly misleading)

Sometimes I go to Pattaya to flee bustling Bangkok for a while. I like to stay at the Ambiance which is a really comfortable hotel. The days are usually happily spent at Jomtien beach and, one day on the way back just wandering through Jomtien Complex (which changes for the better at incredible speed), I looked at one of the freshly renovated shophouses opposite Exit and read a sign... did a double take... “Dick’s Café Jomtien” I read. To my surprise it not only looks the same, it is the same as in Bangkok. The food tastes the same, the friendliness is the same, the smiles are the same. Only the neighbors are different. Instead of looking at the Bonny boys, in the Jomtien location you can flirt with the guys of neighboring Derby’s real hunks they have there. Have a look at them, ouch!, I mean at Dick’s Jomtien, your home from home. You will feel totally relaxed although Stuart or Simon or Douglas or Wynne or even Lee might not always be there, you’ll find others to chat with. Maybe you bump into Rob, Art, Heiko, Helmut, Lud, Hans, Jim, Barry or John?
POSTCARDS

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"From The Balcony Chalkboard"

A woman walks into a bar and asks for a double entendre so the barman gave her one!

Q: What's pink and hard?
A: A pig with a flick knife

Q: How is pubic hair like parsley?
A: You push it to the side before you start eating

The definition of confusion?
Twenty blind lesbians in a fish market

Q: Why did God invent alcohol?
A: So fat guys can get laid too

Q: Which sexual position produces the ugliest children?
A: Ask your mother...!!

Doses are red, leaves are green, kiss my ass, coz I'm a queen

Doses are red, leaves are green, kiss my ass, coz I'm a queen

Q: Why don't blind people skydive?
A: It scares the shit out of the dog.

Q: What does a Rubik cube and a penis have in common?
A: The longer you play with it, the harder it gets.

What is it when a man talks dirty to a woman?
= Sexual harassment.

Q: What is it when a woman talks dirty to a man?
- $3.99 a minute.

What is it when a woman talks dirty to a man?
- $3.99 a minute.

I'm a psychic amnesiac. I know in advance what I'll forget

Define "bisexual," Someone who likes girls as well as the next guy.
A: By looking over your shoulder.

Define "proctologist," A crack investigator
Define "skojacking," A hand job at 33,000 feet

Always wanted to be a procrastination, but never got around to it.

I couldn't repair your brakes, so I made your horn louder

Can a stupid person be a smart-ass?

If space is a vacuum, who changes the bags?

If the shoe fits, get another one just like it
Silom comments

Balcony Pub & Restaurant (4)
The Balcony Pub and Restaurant has the longest terrace and the least expensive drinks in world famous Silom Soi 4. A large bar and busy terraces downstairs and an open-fronted upstairs karaoke, games and internet area. Open from 6.00 pm to 2.00am. The Balcony offers nightly happy hours and a wide selection of Thai, British, Indian and Vegetarian food. Famous for its friendliness and informality, one of Bangkok's most popular venues for locals and tourists alike.

Boys of Bangkok (24)
One of the boldest shows in town.

Dick's Café (20)
A very popular and stylish bar and café with a wide range of food and snacks. Comfortable seating and always exhibiting artworks of local and international artists. They open at 11 am and close at 5 am. Very pleasant for a long or short coffee break during the day, an evening or late night snack or a night cap. The music is kept at an agreeable level so that you can talk to your neighbor and if he is not deaf, he will certainly understand each and every precious gem that drops from your lips. Guests are not constantly disturbed by pushy money boys. Pick up your free copy of Thai Guys here or in their newly opened venue in Pattaya.

Tarntawan Place Hotel (61)
Tarntawan means sunflower in Thai. The stylish, comfortable hotel is right in the heart of the action, but still not a bit noisy. The friendly and able staff have been there for many years and so has the excellent management who really takes care of their guests-which is why they return year after year. The rooms are constantly upgraded. Some wonderful suites are also available. Book early, since this sunflower of Bangkok is becoming ever more popular.

Utopia Tours (42)
Asia's gay and lesbian travel pioneers. Personalized private holidays, local gay guides, famous for their short side-trips all over Thailand, or to Laos, Vietnam and Bali. They encourage visitors to drop by their office (in the lobby of the Tarntawan Place Hotel, 02-238-3227) and chat about their travel plans.

Blue Star (25)
Funny sexy shows. Totally renovated.

www.thaiguys.org

Cutey & Beautey Hirsalon (46)
Thaniya Plaza 3rd Floor (between Silom Soi 2 and 4) Extremely friendly and able. Wednesdays are now BUDDY DAYS at Cutey & Beauty. If you bring a friend along any Wednesday, whatever you do your friend gets done for FREE. (Or to put it another way, whatever your friend gets done you get done for FREE) Mondays are still Value Days. All hair coloring done on Mondays cost only 1,000 Baht. Highlight are 500 Baht. Cutey and Beauty is on the 3rd Floor Thanita Plaza Soi Thanita. Silom between soi 2&4 Tel. 02-231-2315 www.cuteyandbeauty.com

Xtreme Bar (23)
Would you believe it? This unique bar with its famous shows (and go-go) has been here for two years already! Located in Soi Duangtaweew (yes, where Boys of Bangkok, Blue Star and Dick's Café are). Shows daily at 10.00, 11.00 and 12.00.

S Paragon (40)
Not long ago S Paragon has opened just in front of the entrance of the Malaysia Hotel. S Paragon is a Pub and Karaoke and a massage place. The massage opens at 3 pm and stays open all night. The Pub stays open as long as there are any guests which might be very late as well. When you visit this watering hole be sure to take your swimming gear with you. As a customer of the Pub you can use the pool of the Malaysia. Yes, all night as well.

Under the same management are two new places just a little bit up the road, opposite the Pinnacle Hotel. "Size X" is a disco and "Stud" is a sauna. Should both be up and running when you read this.

Samsara (50)
The newest venue in Silom Soi 4 closed down shortly after opening. Another victim of the SARS hysteria? Samsara is supposed to reopen in November. We will keep you posted.
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Chiang Mai Map Legend

- Lemongrass Boutique Guesthouse 3
- Adam's Apple Club 16
- Amazing Sandwich 7
- Ba Roi Thai 4
- Bubbles Disco 20
- Circle (The) 8
- Coffee Boy (The) 5
- Cruise Bar 21
- Darling Wine Pub 1
- Dei Dei Pub 10
- Fan Club 9
- Gemini 17
- House of Male 2
- Lanna Paradise 26
- Lotus Hotel 15
- Mass Thai massage 13
- Mr Way: Two of Us 11
- Spa Roma 18
- Simon 23

Chiang Mai Comments

Adam's Apple Club (16)
Biggest bar in town with karaoke, pub, restaurant and somewhat raunchy shows.

Cruise Bar (21)
This popular open air bar is located behind Night Bazaar like all the others in this area. First you have to pass some giddy bars. Hidden in the background are some obviously gay bars as your restless eyes will soon discover. The most popular seems to be Cruise.

House of Male (2)
Popular, very friendly sauna. Centrally located in a renovated Thai mansion. Pool, garden, gym and other amenities.

Spa Roma (18)
Luxurious sauna popular with young professionals. The ambiance and tasteful décor of Bangkok's famed Babylon sauna.

The Circle (8)
Congenial "off" bar with imaginative nightly non-ladyboy shows and a friendly ambiance.

Lotus Hotel (15)
The comfortable and inexpensive Boutique hotel of the Rose of the North. Near to Adam's Apple. In the middle of gay Chiang Mai.

www.thaigays.org

(But I wish it were set in Times New Roman, Garamond or even Arial)
Map of Phuket Legend

Aquarius 20
Anaconda 43
Angel 28
Bingo 7
Blue Dolphin 38
Boat Bar 14
Climax 15
Club Bamboo 33
Connect 9
C.U. Tonight 39
Flying Handbag 18
Formula One 1
Heaven 19
Colin 40
James Dean 10
Jrack John 8
J.B. Bar 26
Jungle Boyz 36
Jochen's 2
Kenny's 37
Koh Joy Restaurant 41
Lionchai Guesthouse 32
Man-Ya Karaoke 42
Monte Carlo 23
My Way 12
Paradiso Inn 16
Passport 6
Rendez Vous 27
Rim Suan Restaurant 36
Sea Hag 31
Siam Palm Hotel 36
Spattacus 3
Super Boy 34
Tawean on the Hill 25
Tangmo 4
Tiger Bar 13
Time Bistro 11
Twilight 21
Uncle Christies 35
World Gems 30
Young Shark 5

Phuket Comments

Boat Bar (14)
Nightly shows that are very popular and regularly draw large crowds. Owner Khun Daeng is probably the best known gay man of Phuket, a pioneer of our kind of entertainment.

Aquarius (20)
Aquarius is basically a sauna - on the other hand it is more, much more like a one-stop center for all your needs during your stay in the South. On the ground floor they have a pool, a bar, the gym and the showers, on first floor locker room, steam, sauna, Jacuzzi and the dark room. Third and fourth floor contain total 9 rooms. Luxury rooms/apartments incl. 1 Master Suite with 2 bedrooms and a Jacuzzi. On the roof you find a sundeck with showers.

Lionchais Guesthouse (32)
Lionchais Guesthouse has not many rooms, but they are spacious and well equipped. All come with private computer and ADSL Internet access free of charge. Reservation recommended. Good Internet cafe downstairs.

Siam Palm Hotel/Rim Suan Restaurant/Jungle Boyz (36)
The 15-room Siam Palm is a gay-owned, "gay-friendly" Patong establishment in the middle of the action, but still quiet. Its Rim Suan Restaurant offers fine Thai cuisine and European dishes. Next door the Jungle Boyz is also worth a try. All three places are under the same ownership and management.
Modern Form At Euro Design

It would be true to say that most people at some time think of their dream home. That dream can be closer to reality here in Pattaya, or elsewhere in Thailand, than in most places.

With the cost of purchase of a house or condo being relatively inexpensive here when compared to the West, many more people are able to afford their heart's desire.

Having selected and either bought or taken a long-term lease on a place through a reputable agent—the next thing you need is furniture that you like. You probably have a particular style in mind, modern minimalist, period or traditional furniture to enhance your new home. Any of these can be found at Euro design or created by their craftsmen with designer elegance for custom-made items.

Recently Euro Design has been the granted the exclusive franchise for the Eastern Seaboard to market and supply the modernform range of furnishings—which increases your options. If you are looking to re-furnish a room in your present abode, or to furnish a newly purchased or built house from scratch, then take the drudgery out of it with a visit to Euro Design in Soi Thepprasit. The bright and open showroom, situated on the ground floor of the first tower block opposite Der Farang offices (just after the Outlet Mall corner), make excellent showcases for the ranges of furniture available and have ample parking in front.

The kitchen items have three specific designs, Donna, Regency and delite which offer three totally different styles and ambience to make food preparation a pleasure, not a just task.

Serene and Karisma by Klasse, part of the modernform range offer different styles of bedroom furniture all of which display simplicity with elegance, functionality and above all space. However you use your bedroom there is plenty of room to move around. The cupboards, closets and night stands all have a large storage capacity.

For the sitting room, dining room and study, Casa Bella and Saporiti Italia have plenty to offer, both comfortable and functional.

Whether you have already made a decision to buy or are just thinking about it, a visit to the Euro Design offices will be both useful and a feast for the eye. From 10:00 - 19:00 daily, the friendly staff will show you around or leave you to wander and look at your leisure. The show floors are display areas depicting entire rooms with all the "extras" and occasional items to add those artistic touches that complement the furniture. Everything is available—including original paintings and artefacts that can enhance your home. Call in today; you will not be disappointed.
Teddy Bears’ Picnic

"If you go down to Splash and Throb
You’re sure of a big surprise
If you go down to Throb and Splash
Be sure to go in disguise.
For every teddy bear who’s been good
Is sure to be there for certain because
Tonight’s the night
The Teddy bears have their picnic...."
Map of Pattaya Legend

ABC 15
Adam R & Eve 30
Ambiance Hotel 53
Amigo TaiLor 12
Amor Restaurant 10
Angela 63
Aroma's 66
Body Club 3
Boon Travel 23
Bouz Bouz Bouz 1
Brunos Restaurant 8
Casa Pascal 73
Champion Travel 26
City Boys 59
Country Club 76
Craze Pub 44
Decorum 27
Dee Hai 13
Deva 77
Dicks Cafe 25
Dream Boys 67
Julios Restaurant 11
Exit 6
Flamingo Hotel 18
Frenzy 67
Funny Boys 1 39
Funny Boys 2 14
Horizon 45
Icon Hotel 24
Image Car Rent 48
Jim's International 5
J.Siam Restaurant 46
Kalea Art & Decor 69
Le Cafe Royale 4
Minou Bar 47
Narcissus 55
Panorama 9
Paradise Restaurant 19
Pataya Properties 17
Picasso Clubhouse 42
Rabbit Resort 50
Royal House 31

SLM Thai 28
Sophons Boys 43
Splash 52
Spain 72
Star Boys Boys 64
Star Tiff Cabaret 22
Swiss Siam 35
Thai Boys 60
Thio 2
Top Men 36
Toy Boys 61
Trophy 37
Tur's Place 29
Two Faces 41
View Talay Villas 20
White Night 65
World Gems 7

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Ambiance (53)
The first gay hotel in Pattaya. Well decorated rooms with all necessary amenities. Conveniently located in the heart of Boyz' Town.

Boyz Boyz Boyz (1)
One of the first go-go bars in "Boyztown". Still in same location and thriving. Very popular as a night cruising venue for beachboys.

Bruno's (8)

Funny Boys 2 (14)
The newest Go-Go in Boyztown has opened. Have a look yourself.

Royal House (31)
Stylish massage parlor with a wide variety of masseuses. Try the VIP rooms with video and music.

Le Café Royale (3)
Piano Bar and Restaurant opens 7:30 pm daily at Le Café Royale with full range of drinks and food. Live entertainment with pianist from 8 pm and famous singer Toi appearing from 11 pm to 2 am (or later). On Sundays, entertainment starts at 11 pm. Certainly the best in Pattaya.

Amor Restaurant (10)
Richards well known restaurant is located right in the heart of Boyz Town. The only 100% gay restaurant in Town. But you can also bring your mother since they are hetero-friendly or at least hetero-tolerant (they pretend). Even if you are overweight already, try the desserts!

Jim's Tailor (68)
Certainly the best looking tailor in town with an absolutely intriguing smile-but probably married... and an excellent tailor for suits and dresses. Whatever you want, girls, they can do it, clotheswise, strictly!

Panorama Pub (9)
Open air pub with a panoramic view of all that goes on in Boyztown. Before or after dinner sit with friends and watch the world go by. Games room upstairs.

Funny Boys 1 (39)
Now newly decorated in Thai style, very beautiful. Have a look for yourself.

Siam Thani (28)
The only exclusively gay resort in Thailand. The cozy, colonial style boutique hotel in Pattaya. The traditionally worked timber structures and the private swimming pool in the common area help to make this place the stylist hideaway where your tranquility and privacy is guaranteed. Visit their newly opened Spa where clothing is optional.

Exotic (6)
This is the ideal place for your sundowner after another hard day at Jomtien beach. Sit outside on the terrace or inside and enjoy the company of the friendly gays there. Or just watch them play snooker.

Dicks Café Jomtien (25)
Bangkok's successful Café has now got a cute little brother in Pattaya. Jomtien area. Just beside Derby's Men Club and opposite Exotic this new venue opened just now. Be the first ones to pay a visit.

Two Faces (41)
Do not worry, there are many more than only two faces at Two Faces. Nice atmosphere, friendly hosts, fun to go there. Try it on your way to or from Jomtien.

J. Siam Restaurant (46)
This new restaurant is located just opposite Siam Thani resort & spa. The similar style of old Siamese (or Colonial) decoration with a lot of wood creates a fine atmosphere. Thai and French cuisine.

Horizon (45)
The former Star Restaurant with the great view on bay and ocean has been taken over by a Swiss chef. New menu and management.
A Quickie In Kashmir

by Duran Gray

Before setting off on my Kashmir adventure, I had another kind of adventure in Delhi. I was being hosted at Delhi's Marriott Welcome Hotel as a media delegate for an Indian travel mart, and the Marriott, one of Delhi's newer 5-star hotels really rolled out the red carpet. For starters, instead of having an ordinary fruit basket in the rooms, guests could call up room service for any kind of fruit they wanted, whenever they wanted. Noticing the friendly, handsome room service/house-keeping staff, I ordered bananas and loquats everyday (kumquats unfortunately were "not available"). After they ran out of loquats, I just ordered bananas. When the flirty (and apparently well-hung) room-boy asked, 'Only bananas, sir?' I replied, 'only bananas... unless of course, you have some banana juice'.

He winked, 'maybe', and a squeeze on his hardening banana duly produced the desired 'banana juice' on more than one occasion. Now that's what I call good room service!

After a week in Delhi, I hoped to find some juicy kumquats in Kashmir. Once one of India's major tourism attractions famed for its scenic Edenesque valley (the Vale of Kashmir) with houseboats on the lake and South Asia's only ski resort (Gulmarg), Kashmir had fallen on hard times during years of civil unrest. But now with relative calm, tourists were starting to come back to Kashmir and we, the travel media, were in the vanguard to promote it.

There are two flights a day from Delhi to Srinagar-a small airport that serves only two other cities, Jammu and Leh. Because so few people were flying to Kashmir these days, sometimes flights are cancelled. There were certainly no other foreign tourists queuing up for the flight and I couldn't even find the two Germans who were supposed to be in my "group".

When we finally arrived in Srinagar, the airport was bristling with military. At passport control, I found the one German travel agent, travelling with his chotchey, polyester pants-suited mother who had never been to India before. And yes, like in military-ruled Myanmar, domestic
passengers have to go through an “Inner-Line” passport control.

We were met outside by a rep of the Jammu & Kashmir Tourism Board who was hosting us. The air was a crisp 15 degrees Celsius. Lots of barbed wire, sandbags and soldiers—many of whom were Nepalese Ghurkhas in the Indian army—and it seemed, the only ones smiling.

It really felt like we were in a foreign country as everything looked so different from the rest of India. First the architecture, the timber houses with pointy roofs—even the mosques were so unusual. The landscape was very similar to Central Asia—which of course it borders—the tall, thin poplar trees, the flowering forsythia and other blossoming fruit trees, the snow-capped mountains. Then all the writing is in Persian script rather than Devanagari like Hindi. As the majority of the population is Muslim, the people adopt Islamic dress codes—head scarfs and even all-concealing burqas for the ladies and the men wear tent-like caftans over their other clothes. The Kashmiri men are generally hirsute, most with beards under their rather prominent noses. The adolescents however seemed quite comely, as we observed bus-loads of laughing schoolboys with budding peach-fuzz moustaches, some returning knowing glances to our raised eyebrows or winks.

Once in Srinagar, there were unexpected traffic jams due to a film crew blocking the road in front of a boat-dock on picturesque Dal Lake which is used as an exotic backdrop for those Bollywood masala musicals that attract the masses of sweltering, swarthy Indians from the plains who swarm into the cinema halls for vicarious pleasure.

We drove into the immense grounds of the posh Intercontinental Hotel, site of the former maharaja’s summer palace facing the lake. It was this Hindu maharaja whose last minute dithering accession to India instead of Pakistan (as most of Muslim dominated Kashmir expected) has been the source of tension between the two belligerent states ever since Partition in 1947. The erstwhile maharaja’s sprawling property had been converted into an ideal resort hotel. Our room was in the old, original palace wing, a long two-story structure overlooking the lake. The suites were enormous, and the marble and original tiled bathroom with stand-alone stall shower and bath-tub, was larger than most budget guest house rooms! The fresh-cut yellow daffodils were like a burst of sunshine in the otherwise chilly room.

Being right on the lakeside, the guide arranged for us to take a ride on the paddle-driven “shikara” boat. Basically the boats are designed for lovers in a big central cushioned seat for two with an elongated leg rest. No sooner did we leave the docks when two floating vendors silently glided up to us like buccaneers. The first was trying to tempt us with bags of pistachios, while the second was selling knickknacks, film and postcards. We were about to dock at one place selling cold drinks but, as it was army camp property they didn’t let us disembark without our passports, which we had left at the hotel. I did however speak with one cute Ghurkha with chintly features who turned out to be from Pokhara, Nepal.

The German lady in our group decided she wanted a papier-mâché bangle, so we stopped in one of the lakeside souvenir shops. At this one shop on an island, there was a very handsome youth, his beauty enhanced by the glow of the setting sun. It would have been a perfect snap, but he sullenly declined to be photographed or to engage in conversation, much to my disappointment.

We then drove back down to the famed Shalimar Gardens built by the Mogul emperor Shah Jehan, more famed for his construction of the Taj Mahal tomb for his beloved wife Mumtaz. The gardens had just reopened for the spring and it was still under renovation. The garden was all abloom with spring flora, just like we have at home at this time of year—weeping willows, sycamores, yellow forsythia bushes, daffodils and emuppled, scented hyacinths. But for me the most attractive flowers of all were the students in their green blazers, apparently there on a school outing.

From there we drove around the lake to downtown Srinagar where I wanted to see some old mosques and view the local scene. The old part of Srinagar which sees few tourists is jumble of crooked lanes with bazaars and two-three story wooden buildings, some gabled with almost a Tudor look. At one time—before Partition—it was one of the crossroads of Central Asia, like Peshawar. Now it is connected only with India. There are a number of old mosques, two of which date back 600 years when Islam was first introduced to the area from Central Asia. The oldest is entirely built of wood and colourfully painted papier-mâché, just like those flowery papier-mâché boxes that Kashmir is famous for. As we drove around the city, a couple of sights caught my gaydar. One was a printing shop called, are you ready—Bag Printers! That’s right and I swear to Oz that I’m not making this up. I should have asked the driver to stop so I could have taken a snap for proof. I wondered what they printed? This was in an old part of town right around the corner from a gym called “Muscle Freak.” After those two signs, I should have been ready for what I saw next, but I still was off-guard when guess what I caught my eye sancerting down the street—a heavily made-up tranny (called “brijia” here) with a five o’clock shadow. She was flinging with men on the street, and gladly posed for a photo. The reaction? A bit like in Thailand.
where katoeys are just taken in stride as part of the rich tapestry of life. When I mentioned that I had seen hijras like that on the Pakistan side of border, the Muslim guide just shrugged it off with the remark that, ‘Oh, they are in every country in the world!’ If I had more time I would have made the effort to explore the hammams (public bath houses), usually a good place to meet men in Islamic societies.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have time to make friends with any of the locals, although a couple of young house-painters at the hotel gave me eyes that signalled that they were available after I took their snaps. The next day I checked out of that draughty hotel and shifted to a cosy houseboat.

The houseboat, called New Gulistan Palace, was like a long barge with interiors of carved wooden paneling, 3-4 spacious heavily carpeted bedrooms, living room, dining room, kitchen and outdoor porch. The owner was a doctor named Yusuf with relatives in America. I was the only guest and I had a middle-aged manservant named Bashir to look after me, but alas, no banana boat boys, and no kumquats!

Word soon spread that a foreigner was on the houseboat (which are all moored together in a small area), so I was visited by a series of unctuous, salivating vendors who peddled postcards, leather jackets, carpets, shawls and saffron. The leather-wallah had a cute assistant named Gulshan, but unfortunately he wasn’t for sale. I ended up buying one gram of pure saffron which is extracted from the long pistils of the purple crocus flower which blooms here in early March. The vendor claimed that saffron has aphrodisiac properties.

Although the houseboat was certainly not five-star, it could still be an attractive holiday for lovers who want to be alone, but not recommended for singles who want to meet others. The price is about $35 for singles, $40 for doubles, including meals and shikharra transfers.

The next day was cold, windy and slate-gray. After breakfast of Kashmiri naans, yogurt and qahwa (sweet green tea flavoured with almond, cardamom and saffron), more vendors came but I escaped across the lake to try to find an internet shop. There was one in a budget hotel with snooker, which seemed to be a local hangout. The terminals were all enclosed in private booths with saloon style swinging doors. When I remarked about the unusual set-up I was told, ‘We like our privacy here!’ which is very Islamic. I guess space is not a problem in Kashmir; there seems to be plenty of it.

After nearly an hour online, I returned to my houseboat to check out and began the long ordeal of departure from Srinagar Airport, arguably one of the most sensitive in terms of security checks in the world.

PS. Don’t bring your hat-bags, as no carry-ons allowed, although I certainly did carry on when I found out.

Readers interested in travelling to Delhi, Kashmir or Pakistan may contact the author at lonesomelangans@rediffmail.com.
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