

# LETTER FROM BANGKOK



## Worlds of Desire

Sexual tourism has brought the First and Third Worlds together in Southeast Asia since the Vietnam War. Now Western-style gay identity is flowering amid the boy bars and bathhouses. GERARD RAYMOND reports.

**A** TWO-HOUR DRIVE southeast from Bangkok, the seaside resort of Pattaya, a small, two-road town, offers tourists everything from wind surfing to scuba diving. But on this strip of dirty sand next to what was until recently highly polluted water—the gay section of Pattaya's Jomtien Beach—everyone is here for just one thing: young Thai men. Ever since this small fishing village was transformed into a rest and recreation playground for American GIs during the Vietnam War, Pattaya has acquired an international notoriety for its sex trade.

On this sweltering March afternoon, the temperature has reached 93 and most of the tourists—both Western and Asian—and several of the locals are lying in the cloth deck chairs shaded by large multicolored umbrellas. A young Thai man in swim shorts and a tank top comes by and chats with

one of the *farang* (Caucasians) in a bathing suit about a mutual friend.

"He can't come till Christmas," says the *farang*. "He has no money now."

"I think he doesn't love me," pouts the Thai.

"Oh, no," says the older man, "he loves you too much."

Lounging nearby, two Caucasians, both accompanied by young Thai men, are sipping beers. One, an American in his 60s, tells an overweight 40-something Australian about his 21-year-old Thai friend. The young Thai had met the American at the airport and will be sharing the first part of the American's vacation in Pattaya. Then he'll make himself scarce, to return only to spend the final part of the American's stay in Thailand. "He understands I need to have other peo-

**What gets exchanged in these sexual liaisons, besides money?**

*Gerard Raymond writes for Harper's Bazaar and The Village Voice.*

RIKKI ENDOLI

ple," says the American complacently.

For wealthy First World gay men, whether white, Asian, or Middle Eastern, sampling the nightlife and picking up a local guy at the end of a day of sight-seeing is fairly standard when traveling abroad—much as Florida's South Beach and Fort Lauderdale conjure up carefree nights of casual sex. But in certain parts of the world the pursuit of sex is believed to be tourism's alpha and omega. Thailand and Sri Lanka are both developing Asian countries that, despite their scenic beauty, rich culture, and sophisticated cuisine, are frequently associated with so-called sex tourism, a pastime many find morally questionable and inextricably linked with pedophilia and prostitution. (A 1984 U.S. law prohibits travel with the intent to engage in sex with a juvenile and carries a maximum sentence of 10 years.) What gets exchanged in these exchanges, besides money?



In Colombo, Sri Lanka, the notion of a gay identity disturbs high society.

"Where are you from?" asks a young Thai, probably in his 20s, seating himself on the deck chair next to mine. "America is the best place in the world," he exclaims. What would he have said if I told him I was an expatriate from Sri Lanka, I wonder cynically. "You're very handsome," he continues. "You want a massage?" And without invitation, he starts kneading my bare thigh. Resisting the flattery, I tell him I'm not interested. He flashes a smile and moves on to the next "handsome" tourist. I've discovered how the mere fact of arriving from another country can make one handsome on a beach in Pattaya.

The snatches of conversation overheard in Pattaya seem to confirm the stereotype of the sex tourist—of the older, wealthier man buying sex and companionship from the younger. But a two-week-long stay in Southeast Asia revealed the more complex fantasies each side brings to the transaction, and very different cultural conceptions of sexuality. Even as Westerners extol the virtues of our own capitalist economy and industrial development, we travel to the developing world expecting it to preserve for us something that's pristine and innocent. The sex tourist is searching for an exotic or "authentic" experience in much the same way the ordinary tourist seeks out the unspoiled village or the genuine artifact. It's a desire for an experience that "doesn't feel commodified," suggests anthropologist Ara Wilson,

assistant professor of transnational feminist studies at Ohio State University. "But ironically they are using money to get it." The indigenous gay communities here, on the other hand, are cut from a totally different cloth than the sex trade.

As someone born and raised in South Asia who has sought both love and sex in the West, I can't help reflecting on the ironies thrown up by cross-cultural mobility. My own observations in Thailand and Sri Lanka are probably affected by the fact that I was a tourist in the one country and a native in the other.

**S**RI LANKA doesn't have a well-structured commercial sex business like Thailand, nor does it have a public gay scene. There is a century-old law that threatens a 12-year prison term for homosexual acts, a legacy of British colonialism. What's more, strict emergency laws stemming from a 14-year ethnic civil war that still rages in northern parts of the Indian Ocean island have limited everyone's civil liberties.

Nevertheless, for as long as I can remember there has been a gay subculture in Sri Lanka's commercial and metropolitan center, Colombo, my home until age 28. Without gay bars or venues anywhere in the country, gay men in Colombo cruise in popular shopping malls, in toilets, and along the beach at dusk. A few months ago, a group of men, allegedly police officers in unmarked cars, rounded up a few local homosexuals on a strip of beach well-known for gay activity and took them away to a deserted spot and raped them. In another incident, a government worker was arrested by the police while he was walking on a street frequented by male prostitutes. Given the wide-ranging powers conferred on security forces, no explanation was necessary, and the young man was released from custody 20 days later without charges. Despite this degree of harassment, homosexuality is rarely discussed openly in society, apart from its providing a juicy tidbit of gossip about someone.

Twenty-four miles north of Colombo lies Negombo, a traditional fishing village turned beach resort on the island's west coast. Negombo has been dubbed the "gay capital" of Sri Lanka by both the international and local press; more sensationalist reports insist on referring to it as the country's "AIDS capital." Needless to say, both appellations are exaggerations. In some ways, Negombo is a kind of underdeveloped Pattaya. For more than 25 years, the lure of a tropical beach and low costs has attracted tourists gay and straight. Though the local population is largely Catholic—a legacy of the Portuguese, the country's first Western colonizers—its economic needs seem to have pushed aside the strictures of the Church. Father Leo Perera is a soft-spoken liberal Catholic priest whose parish includes some of the village communities linked with the tourist trade. "They still have their fishing," he points out matter-of-factly, "but now you see some of them have built an extra room or two in their houses for a foreign guest."

The 51-year-old priest tells me that the villagers make a distinction between going with a foreigner and being gay. "Heterosexuality is the norm," he says, "and to say that your son is gay is to say there is something wrong with him. But if he's going out with a foreigner, he's earning income, and that foreigner may be taking him to Germany; that's all right."

DOMINIC SANSONI



In Thailand, acrobatic onstage sex coexists with off-stage modesty.

Given its close proximity to the main airport, Negombo is often the first or the last stop on a tourist's itinerary, and many sexual encounters are one-night stands. For a male foreigner walking along the Negombo beach, finding an available Sri Lankan youth is not hard. A few steps and there's someone at your side saying, "Hello, sir," with a huge smile. (If you speak German or French, the equivalent conversational gambit is also handy.) Dotted the coast are several small guest houses—a few bedrooms with basic amenities, no room service, and little or no police surveillance. Often these are de facto brothels where the 17-to-25-year-old stewards and room boys are commercially available.

Like the American tourist at Pattaya, there are visitors who return to Negombo regularly. Receiving a "guest," as the visiting foreigner is called, is something of an event for the local. The Sri Lankan will be ready to welcome his guest at the airport, and may even introduce the foreigner to his family. Call it pimping, if you will, but occasionally the young Sri Lankan will spread the wealth by sharing the guest among his friends as well.

"Some of the youngsters get confused by the emotional demands, and by issues of sexual identity," says Father Perera, whose ministry extends to helping some of these young men sort themselves out. Local mythology recounts several instances of a smitten foreigner's buying for his local "boyfriend" a plot of land, on which the Sri Lankan builds a tourist guest house and starts his own business, thereby guaranteeing that the foreign benefactor always has a room at the inn. Many of Negombo's "guest houses" have begun this way and have led to a cycle of interdependence between tourists and locals over generations. "Some of those Sri Lankans get married and have children, but they still have a relationship with the patron," says Father Perera.

Just as a foreigner is able to reinvent himself when traveling outside his country, the presence of outsiders can free the local with same-sex leanings from the fetters of his society, without compelling him to define himself as gay. And as the Sri Lankan priest points out, the only sexual outlet sans stigma for a gay-oriented villager in Negombo is trade with a tourist.

With gay sex illegal, organizing is an uphill task for 25-

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year-old Sri Lankan gay activist Sherman de Rose. "People ask me why I'm talking about homosexuality when there's a war going on," he says. "But the society is ready when you are ready, and if you are ready, you go out." A Catholic seminary dropout from a family of Indian immigrants, de Rose has spent the past three years establishing Companions on a Journey, Sri Lanka's first gay organization. Set up with Dutch funding, the group is officially recognized by Sri Lankan authorities as an HIV-prevention organization. "We say we are an HIV agency who work only with gay people," says de Rose, who distributes 2,000 free condoms that he receives from the Sri Lankan health ministry each month at well-known cruising areas in the city. But because of the laws that criminalize homosexuality, it is hardly possible to collect accurate data on transmission of the virus among gay men. Statistics from the World Health Organization indicate that, as in Thailand, heterosexuals are at a greater risk for AIDS; these numbers, at best, are unreliable and, at worst, undermine efforts to educate the gay community.

The recently opened Companions on a Journey center—a kind of safe house that houses a minuscule library and archives—has become the first openly gay-identified space in the country. Among the members, who on average are in their early 30s, is a retired 84-year-old who regales the others at meetings with stories of his wartime romantic adventures. On de Rose's agenda for next year is a legal feasibility study aimed at removing Sri Lanka's antisodomy laws.

On the streets, some gay men pretend they're straight and doing it for money so they can work alongside straight hustlers who go gay for pay. And as readers of Sri Lankan-born novelist Shyam Selvadurai's first novel, *Funny Boy* (William Morrow), would know, homosexuality is not uncommon in many of Colombo's all-male public and private schools. It's gay identification that disturbs Sri Lankan society.

Sri Lankan society prefers a don't ask, don't tell (but let's gossip about it) approach to homosexuality, but so do the Western-educated gay elite, who don't wish to rock the boat. Class and education always play a role in emerging gay identity, but in Sri Lanka they're an obstacle. "Of course they have it all; why should they bite the hand that feeds them?" asks Selvadurai, who comes from that same privileged society. With the publication of *Funny Boy*, he is now

its most openly gay member.

While promoting his already successful novel in Colombo, Selvadurai, a Toronto resident, became a high-society darling two years ago. "In the Western-educated circles, it's chic to have a gay friend, and one becomes a mascot, like a nice expensive dog," notes Selvadurai wryly. Earlier this year, however, when he returned to his homeland to spend a year working on a new novel with his Canadian partner of three years, his welcome was slightly different. Whenever he introduced his local fans to the Caucasian man who shares his life, their faces would fall, Selvadurai reports. No surprise. In these circles, where ancient feudal habits die hard, homosexual members of the ruling elite are apt to elicit services from their less privileged compatriots in an analogous manner to the sex tourists. "That makes it easier for the elite to accept," says Selvadurai. "You don't have to give the person spousal rights in your drawing room."

In Sri Lanka today, there is a studied lack of mutual interest between the sex tourism on the beaches of Negombo and the local gay community. Neither of them takes well to de Rose's out gay work. Paradoxically, while *Companions on a Journey* models itself on Western gay identity and survives on Dutch money, it struggles forward without the support of those Sri Lankans who have had access or exposure to the Western gay world.

**M**OVING EAST to Thailand . . . No laws regulate either sodomy or international sexual relations. Bangkok's highly developed sex industry is a far cry from Negombo's cottage industry. A tour of the commercial bars in the Patpong, Bangkok's infamous red-light district, is a distinctly unerotic experience—kitschy, goofy, occasionally touching, but hardly erotic. Attending the fuck show that comes on at midnight at the black-walled, dimly lit Blue Star (think East Village dive before gentrification) is like a visit to the circus—a guy turns stationary cartwheels on his hard-on while inside his partner. It's more about gymnastics and choreography. The go-go boys at Tawan strut their stuff—but is it sexy? Their Chelsea bar counterparts generate greater heat. Perhaps the erotic tension is missing here because, unlike in New York, these boys will actually deliver.

Unlike the more sedate venues that cater to local Thais, the Patpong developed with a dash of Las Vegas to accommodate the tastes of Western tourists, who expect commercial sex to be tawdry. The acrobatic sex shows are variations on the Coke-bottle and cigarette-smoking routines originally devised to entertain American GIs in girlie bars.

The boys have developed the come-hither technique of locking eyes with prospective johns while dancing. Offstage, however, they are actually quite shy. The boy you see cavorting onstage with a hard-on will revert in the bedroom to his natural, by Western standards almost excessive, modesty. I discovered the extent of Thai propriety at a Bangkok bathhouse, where the Thai men invariably



The mere fact of being foreign can make one handsome to the Thais on the Pattaya beach.

changed under their towels in the locker room and one has to fumble around in the shower stalls, because they are kept almost pitch dark.

According to Michael Fried, a 38-year-old expatriate American businessman who first visited Bangkok 15 years ago, "If Disney had tried to create Sex Land, he couldn't have come up with Thailand." Echoing several other expats, Fried claims to love Thai men for what he sees as grace and politeness, a sense of fun, and, modesty notwithstanding, a lack of hang-ups about sex. Sexual commerce and freedom are unfettered in Thailand, and there has never been any antisodomy legislation—or out gay male politics.

If sex tourism brings to mind an image of rapacious predators from the affluent West, alter that image to include the aging gay man from a culture where the high premiums on youth and attractiveness starve him of companionship. Hugh Millar, the British ex-patriate manager of Boys Boys Boys, the most popular host bar in Pattaya, explains that many of the older customers who frequent his establishment just want to sit with the boys for a while and then go home alone. "It makes an old queen very happy for a short time," says Millar. Somboon Indpradith, editor of the bilingual Thai gay magazine *Midway*, warns against the dangers of misinterpreting what he calls the "nature of tenderness and care" of the Thai people. "In a novel it will be a happy ending between the bar boy and the patron, but in reality it is not so."

Ara Wilson, who spent two-and-a-half years in Thailand as a volunteer for the group Empower, which works with women in the sex industry, helped one young Thai solve a logistical problem and juggle three foreign lovers who were planning to arrive in Thailand at the same time. Wilson later befriended a *kathoey* (effeminate transvestite) who was devastated when it became clear her American boyfriend stationed in the Middle East was asking her to set up a harem for him; she expected a one-on-one relationship and wanted to keep house in a conventional manner. "There is a great deal of sympathy always for the foreigner," notes Wilson skeptically. "But the outsider always has more power to define the relationship."

Like many Thais, Indpradith feels that foreigners focus obsessively on the local sex industry. (continued on page 195)

## BANGKOK (continued from page 64)

Peter Jackson, a gay Australian scholar who has spent several years in Thailand, writes that "cultural differences may lead many Westerners to perceive Thailand as being sexually liberal or even libertine, and many Thais perceive Westerners (whom they often regard as being fixated on talking too much about sex) as being 'sex mad' (*ba sek*). Each society perceives the other as being more concerned with sexual matters than itself." Eric Allyn, the American co-author of the gay guidebook *The Men of Thailand*, notes that the upcountry family of his lover Samorn Chaiyana "obviously know that there is something special going on; they may not visualize a sexual relationship, which is what people do in the West. I think what they see is the reality that there is love."

Sathawat Jittrapirom of Bangkok University conducted a six-month study of the lifestyles of 200 boys age 18 to 24 from various bars in the Bangkok area, which revealed that a boy who's good at his job can earn up to \$900 a month, equivalent to the salary of a university professor in the city. He also says that the boys who work from the bars are now aware of the basics of safer sex and all carry condoms. According to Millar of Boys Boys Boys, the young men get STD checks every week and an HIV screening every three months. Others I spoke with questioned the regularity of these STD checks in the host bars, but agree that safer sex is more the rule than the exception. In Thailand, AIDS is rampant among heterosexuals. "They tell me that they want to have a long life and they have the knowledge," Jittrapirom reports, "but they use condoms only with the men and not when they have sex with a female prostitute."

Thai access to an international-style gay identity, as we know it in the West, is often a privilege of birth and wealth. Take a look at gay Bangkok and its booming gay business enterprise. Thai-language gay porno magazines with English names like *Erotic Man* and *Flesh* as well as rags like *Moraket* and *Mithuna* are freely available. Gay Thais and tourists meet and greet at the popular pub Telephone, the Saturday night disco hotspot DJ Station, or the elegantly sumptuous bathhouse and social club Babylon. Babylon's owner, Nandhawat Nandhabinat, explains that his idea to build the four-floor pleasure

dome—which includes a gym, a restaurant, and a rooftop terrace, along with a bathhouse-style sex area—grew from a desire to provide a space for his friends to "relax, have good food, music, and films." With a characteristic Thai laid-back attitude, he adds, "If you meet somebody, fine—if you don't, you should be able to enjoy yourself."

Until the word *gay* gained common currency, the typical Thai expression for a homosexual was "girl-man." Of course there were homosexuals, says Allyn, but in the eyes of Thai society they were all *kathoey*. Now the local culture is also quickly assimilating rainbow rings and pink triangles—the symbols of a faraway gay world and history.

The closest Bangkok has to a gay and lesbian center is Utopia, the brainchild of American ex-pat John Goss, a 38-year-old multimedia artist and computer programmer. Once he decided he was going to live in Thailand, he says, he wanted "an environment that was not commercially oriented, where gay people could meet each other on a social basis." Sensing a good business opportunity, he has also established a colorful Web site, which reaches out not only to the Western gay community but also to the growing numbers of South East Asians from metropolitan centers between Tokyo and Sydney (who also represent a good percentage of the tourist trade to Thailand). At Utopia's West Hollywood-style book shop, a new generation of gay-identified Thais can hang out with one another as well as with foreign gay visitors and shop for everything from videos such as *My Own Private Idaho* to Magnum XL condoms, flavored lubricant, and glow-in-the-dark Knight Lights.

But a Thai gay man's concept of coming out can be somewhat different from that of his Western counterpart. "We are not eager to tell the public, because we still care how society sees us," says Indpradith, making a distinction between gay self-identification and public assertion in a country where a high value is placed on privacy. Allyn argues that the fact that the coming-out process in the West is usually defined against a climate of homophobia and violence makes a significant difference. Echoing the sentiments of the majority of Thai gays, Indpradith adds, "We don't want to fight for gay rights, because we feel happy the way we are now." ■

## Projecting a Higher Vision

The Human Rights Campaign works to heighten awareness of lesbian and gay equal rights issues in the political dialogue of this country. Film can be a powerful catalyst for sparking this dialogue. Sundance Channel is dedicated to preserving the diversity of voice in filmmaking and is proud to join Out Magazine in support of HRC with a benefit film screening.



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## Departments

- 31 **Contributors**
- 34 **Editor's View**
- 36 **Mail**
- 40 **Scenes**
- 44 **People**
- 46 **Dispatches**
- 52 **Letter From Ft. Lauderdale**

The victories Cheryl Wilson won on the set of TV's *American Gladiators* did not give her the strength to escape her abusive and finally fatal marriage. Dorothy Atcheson reports from Florida.

### 58 **Letter From Bangkok**

Gay men have long headed to Asia to hook up with young locals—for a price. Now, Gerard Raymond reports, Western-style gay identity is taking hold in the East, further complicating this controversial cultural exchange.

### 69 **Signorile in America**

Many gay men and lesbians can't imagine living anywhere except in the Southern states where they grew up. Nor can they imagine returning to the closet.

## Out in America

- 73 **TV**
- 74 **Film**
- 78 **Music**
- 82 **Theater**
- 84 **Books**
- 89 **Reviews**
- 103 **Art & Commerce**

One of the century's greatest art forgers fancied himself a great artist in his own right and thought the dealers were the crooks. Deb Schwartz looks at the double life and mysterious death of Eric Hebborn.



## OutSmart

- 169 **Travel** Leaf-peeping and antiquing in Massachusetts' Berkshires.
- 170 **Food** East meets West Village in chef Anita Lo's kitchen.
- 176 **Style** Metallic accessories for a steely effect.
- 178 **Beauty** Rejuvenate your sun-weary skin.
- 180 **Fitness** How to avoid three common workout mistakes.
- 182 **Health** Are you addicted? Plus: STDs on the rise.
- 188 **Cyber** Spicy fun and vital resources on the Web.
- 190 **Sex** Are you still gay if you sleep with the opposite sex?

**THIS PAGE:** Bangkok photo by Rikki Ercoli (top); Joi Cardwell photographed for OUT by Michael Stratton (center); Berkshires photo by Paul Balido. Belt photo by Baron C.