

EVERYONE seems to know how to cook in Thailand and, even with their generally slight figures, these people love to eat.

They appreciatively consume at least four or five different dishes at every sitting – which can range from a green curry, pork-filled squid and warming broths to sticky coconut desserts and even fried grasshoppers.

But this enthusiasm for eating only reflects how undeniably tasty their food is.

In my two weeks travelling across Thailand, I never once ate a bad meal.

And at risk of sounding big-headed, this was quite a feat – considering I was cooking a large proportion of my lunches and dinners.

This was the first time I'd been on any kind of cooking course, let alone one based in Thailand and less typical still a singles' holiday.

But here I was joining a band of novice cooks, which included Paul, a 50-year-old ex-army officer from Durham, and Jacky, a 60-something retiree crisscrossing the world.

Admittedly, the romance possibilities were limited – at least within our group. But, when it came to the cooking, our potential was boundless.

We all happily threw ourselves into the itinerary of cookery classes, which took us from the north to the south of Thailand.

We started off in Bangkok. After a night to settle in at our tastefully decorated bed and breakfast, we headed straight off to the upmarket Blue Elephant restaurant.

Making our way up to the fourth floor of the plush eatery, we set about creating our first Thai meal.

Charles, one of the resident chefs, took us through the basics of pad thai, fishcakes, chicken coconut curry and a few extras.

The next two days were spent sightseeing – boating around Bangkok's endless waterways, which have earned it the title Venice of the East, and perusing the spectacular Royal palace.

On the fourth day, we headed to our next destination, Sena, a district of the Ayutthaya province. The contrast with Bangkok could not be more marked.

Arriving in the evening at the headman of the town's home, surrounded by swathes of paddy fields and a network of canals, silence fell along with the night.

But our reverie was briefly broken when a trio of local schoolgirls came along to perform traditional Thai dancing.

Dressed in matching golden outfits, the talented youngsters put on an elegant performance, which left everyone dazzled.

Our two-day stay in Sena and visit to the larger city of Ayutthaya, Thailand's first capital, gave an insight into the slow-paced, simple way many Thai people live.

We gambolled around markets, marvelling at the variety and foreignness of the food there, we huddled along on river trips, visited schools and, one morning, woke before dawn to give an offering to the only monk in the village.

However, our cooking did not start in earnest until we took an overnight train to the cooler, northern climes of Chiang Mai.

We arrived two hours later

A taste of Thailand

An overland cookery tour of the south-east Asian country – from north to south – gives **Sanchez Manning** a real insight into the way of life and the variety of dishes and ingredients to be found there



A culinary adventure ... reporter Sanchez Manning, top left, and above, with fellow travellers Paul Unthank and Jacky Storey; an elephant in Ayuttayah, below left, and a man carrying food on his back in Sena, left.



than scheduled and somewhat bleary-eyed after a long and not particularly comfortable night in our perpetually lit, second-class carriage.

One word of warning, as interesting as it is travelling on a Thai train, if you want to get a good night's sleep make sure you dress warmly and take an eye mask.

But the restlessness felt well worth it once we viewed the natural beauty of our surroundings.

Known as the Rose of the North, Chiang Mai is overlooked by a lush-looking mountain range, while jungles and teak forests dot the landscape and profusions of orchids give splashes of bright colour to the masses of greenery.

A short minibus ride from the train station and we were at our considerably more luxurious homestay.

Our glamorous host Tamon quickly lays on an extensive spread of dishes, which would soon become the norm for our mealtime.

The next day we are off to our second cookery school of the trip.

But first we go to another market to meet our jovial teacher, Max, who gave all his instructions with a little chuckle at the end.

Amid the giggles, we learn that there are five different types

of rice in Thailand.

We also receive a crash course on the ingredients which make up the country's famed coloured curries.

Red curry, for instance, takes on its hue through the large amount of red chillies used to make the paste, while it is turmeric in the case of yellow curry.

Then it's on to the cooking school, where we spend the rest of the afternoon handpicking produce from the idyllic on-site organic farm before setting to work on a four-course meal.

It is at this point we really start to get to grip with the list of ingredients – chillis, galangal (the Thai equivalent of ginger), kaffir limes (a more fragrant type of lime), lemon grass and coconut milk – which will soon become our mantra.

After two hours of chopping, mixing and pummeling, we finally sit down to a feast of curries, stir-fries, shrimp-flavoured salads, spicy coconut and vegetable soups and exceedingly sweet banana or mango desserts.

With a day free in between our next cooking session, we use our time to explore Chiang Mai.

We begin by lying flat on our backs beside the pool at our homestay enjoying a two-hour Thai massage.

This is followed by a whirlwind day trip to the

region's numerous Buddhist temples, an elephant sanctuary and a popular arts and crafts night market.

We shop until we drop, heading back as darkness falls to prepare for our "jungle" cookery course the next day.

This trip is billed on the travel company's website as a soft adventure – a phrase which seems particularly apt when we are led into our "set-up" jungle adjacent to a yoga school in the centre of the city.

But the lack of thick undergrowth does nothing to reduce the enjoyment as our "jungle master" Pong and English-speaking guide Tong demonstrate how to cook the way nature intended.

On rejecting offers of meaty frogs, grasshoppers and cockroaches, we plump for salty red ants' eggs to kick off our jungle experience.

Under the shade of a bamboo canopy, the rotund, bespectacled Pong, with the help of Tong's explanations, then shows us how to cook without any modern facilities.

Along with a sharp chopper, we're given a coconut to fashion into a pot, a bamboo cane to cook our sticky rice in and banana leaves to package our food.

Once prepared, our fish curry, fried eggs, barbecued chicken, whole catfish and tubes of rice are all carefully placed on a wood fire

at the centre of the makeshift camp.

While waiting for our many delicacies to cook, we idle the time away by learning how to make and shoot poison darts.

We also listen to tales of Pong's brave adventures, which seem mainly to be him going off to the depths of the jungle and living on a diet of shrubs, rats and tarantulas.

We leave Chiang Mai a day later with thoughts of Pong scaling trees to search for baby wasps to gorge on still circulating.

Our final stop on our cooking odyssey is Krabi, on Thailand's steamy southern shores.

We enter the fishing town under cover of night and, in honesty, it's not an impressive sight.

But things perk up when we're taken to our accommodation, the Groovy Bungalows, and given a hearty welcome by our larger-than-life landlady Gee.

We wake up to a baking hot day and spend the morning lounging around the pool before continuing our final round of cooking lessons.

The style of cooking in the south is noticeably more spicy and the heat of some of the dishes we're given way exceed the tolerance of my western tastes.

However, with our newest teacher Ya, we learn to love the fiery flavours, trying our hand at making a variety of curry pastes,

Massaman curry, southern Thai noodles and a multitude of other recipes.

This would be the last time that we put our own cooking skills to the test, with the rest of our time spent watching and then devouring food being made for us.

Now our attentions turned to the pleasures of regular holidaymakers.

To really enjoy this part of Thailand they say you need to take to the sea. So it was with some anticipation that we embarked on a long-boat journey around a cluster of archipelagos which lie off the coast of Krabi.

And we were not disappointed – the scenery was stunning. The aquamarine sea was crystal clear and teaming with tropical fish in lagoons encased by craggy rock faces.

On docking at one of the picture-postcard islands we passed, we proceeded to spend a luxurious day snorkelling, picnicking on the beach and sunbathing.

It was a fitting end to what had been a remarkable trip which would be hard to equal for sheer diversity of experience.

For more information about the Tamarind and Spice tour, contact Tell Tale Travel at www.telltaletravel.co.uk or call 0800 011 2571.