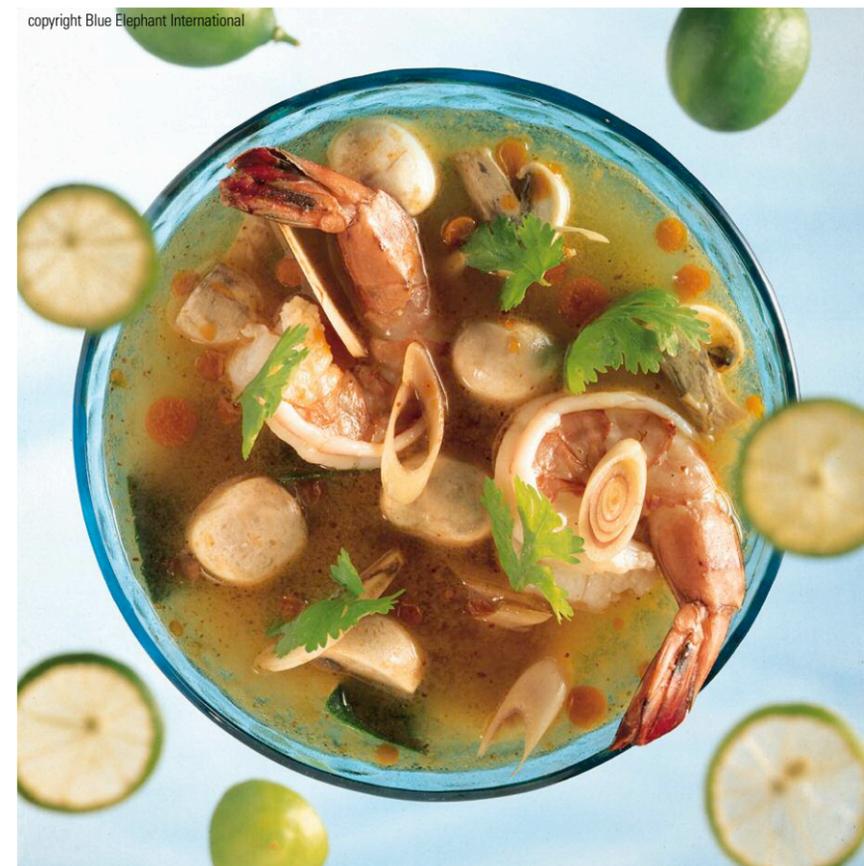


THE POWER OF FOOD

Empires and currencies rise and fall; invasions and buy-outs provoke resistance. But one thing is enduring, cherished, and even welcomed by outsiders – food. From Beijing to London and Lima to Vancouver, people who may know nothing about another country's history are willing to try its cuisine and often love it. Food is the best, most enjoyable introduction to another culture...

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by Denaë D'Arcy

Traditionally, this happened at a restaurant at home or abroad, and diners left no wiser about how dishes were prepared or their place in the society from which they came – but now tourists can explore all these things while on holidays...

Following the 'Lemongrass Trail' on a tour offered by the British company Tell Tale Travel, you can mesh with Thai culture through its cuisine; spending time with local families, learning how to shop at markets, catching seafood and mixing

spices on a holiday revelling in the power of food, that respects and supports Thailand's culture and communities.

Landing at Bangkok airport, you're driven to a charming boutique hotel, and then to Salathip, an upmarket traditional restaurant amidst lovely gardens beside the Chao Phraya river. Diners are entertained by classical Thai dancing, and might see members of Thailand's royal family eating here.

Next day, you visit three of Bangkok's most famous sites. The Temple of the

Lessons cover the uses of ginger, basil, lemongrass and red, green and orange chilies, with teachers demonstrating how to make five dishes: Spring Roll, Tom Yam Koong soup, seafood Phad Nam Prik Pao, Ginger Chicken and Coconut Flan. Each student has their own cooking space, wok and other utensils, and receives a certificate, a souvenir apron, a recipe booklet and an assortment of spices at the end.



Emerald Buddha contains an effigy of solid jade, said to have materialized after lightning struck a building; twice a year, the King ceremonially changes the robes that clothe the statue. Nearby stand the impressive Grand Palace – no longer a royal residence but a government building – and Bangkok's oldest temple, Wat Pho, housing a huge reclining Buddha and countless smaller statues of the Enlightened One. If desired, visitors can experience a Thai massage or study massage techniques here.

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Afterwards you proceed to a venerable mansion housing the Blue Elephant Cookery School (www.blueelephant.com), to be split into classes of ten. Lessons cover the uses of ginger, basil, lemongrass and red, green and orange chilies, with teachers demonstrating how to make five dishes: Spring Roll, Tom Yam Koong soup, seafood Phad Nam Prik Pao, Ginger Chicken and Coconut Flan. Each student has their own cooking space, wok and other utensils, and receives a certificate,



a souvenir apron, a recipe booklet and an assortment of spices at the end. After three days' cooking and delicious lunches in Bangkok, the tour moves on.

Next stop is the village of Bang Sadet, among the paddy fields and canals of Thailand's Central Plains, about two hours' drive from Bangkok. Students stay in wooden houses with polished floors, peaked roofs, and verandahs overlooking the canals and fields. Each family has its own wooden boat, in which guests can explore the

community. Having enjoyed a traditional rural lunch of rice and spices, students get a cookery lesson from the village headman's wife. Thai desserts are based on flour, sugar and coconut, combined and presented in different ways, such as Coconut Pancakes, Sticky Rice Balls and Pandan Rice Cake (*pandan* are leaves, used to make a green paste). You also learn how to cook with Snow Peas, Straw Mushrooms and exotic fruit.

On the fifth day you rise early to visit a market and learn how to select

the freshest produce. On the way back, you stop by the sea to learn how Thais fish with nets. The local headman's wife will show you how to make a delicious seafood dinner from your catch. Afterwards, you can explore local Buddhist temples or relax by the seafront.

The next destination is Panut Nikhom, on Thailand's east coast: an area known for its handicrafts fashioned from palm leaves, which make excellent gifts. Here, your hosts are Nung and Jeab, who know the area well and have a passion for

Thai food. On the first night, Jeab initiates guests into the secrets of Isan cooking, and how to prepare the spicy salad *Som Tam* (made of shredded papaya, pounded with lime, peanuts, garlic, chilies, sugar and fish sauce, using a traditional stone pestle and mortar).

Students can take a break from the kitchen to explore the countryside, with its lush forests, waterfalls and wild elephants. Pack a picnic of fresh fruits such as Durian, Mangosteen and Rambutan, sold at local markets and by



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BLUE ELEPHANT
ROYAL THAI CUISINE

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street vendors. As a rule of thumb, the higher the price, the better the quality.

Another day features an excursion to two organic farms, where herbs, fruit and Shitake mushrooms flourish in the warm, humid climate. In the afternoon, Jeab demonstrates Chinese/Thai fusion cooking, using ingredients from the organic farms. Also in the vicinity of Panut Nikhom is the Pakthongchai Silk Centre, where you can see how silk is spun and woven into high-quality textiles, which make wonderful souvenirs.

Close to Pakthongchai is the Phimai Historical Park, surrounding the most significant Khmer temples in Thailand. The Khmer Empire ruled parts of modern day Thailand, Laos and Vietnam from what is now Cambodia, where its greatest legacy remains the ruined city

of Angkor Wat. The temples you see here are Buddhist, though at the time of their construction in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the state religion was Hinduism.

From here, you travel on to Krabi, near the mouth of a river flowing into the Andaman Sea between Thailand, Burma, Indonesia and Malaysia. The regional cuisine is influenced by Malaysia and China and naturally involves seafood. Among the dishes that you learn to master are Kaeng Mat Sa Man (a Massaman curry with a mild coconut base), Pad Thai (flat rice noodles and prawns mixed with tofu, peanuts and egg) and Khao Yum (a breakfast salad of bean sprouts, lemon grass and dried shrimp). Accommodation here consists of cosy bungalows, on what used to be a palm plantation.

Next day, you rise early for a boat trip around uninhabited islands, with plenty of opportunities for snorkelling amidst coral reefs, and sunbathing on pristine beaches. The following day involves another early start, to join local fishermen on the Andaman Sea, where you can help haul in sailfish, black marlin, king mackerel, tuna, barracuda or sharks and cook it in a local kitchen.

By the tour's end you should have learned enough to impress your friends back home with your mastery of the power of Thai food.

This 14-day tour from Tell Tale Travel (www.telltaletravel.co.uk) costs 1,350 GBP per person, including return flights, twin-share accommodation, activities and some meals.

▶ REC TO A FRIEND



STICKY RICE BALLS

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup** glutinous rice flour ('sticky rice flour'), available from Chinese/Asian food shops
- 1/2 can** lite coconut milk
- 1/2 tsp.** salt
- 1 cup** brown sugar
- 1/2 cup** dried, shredded, sweetened coconut
- 1/2 tsp.** oil
- 1/2 tsp.** Pandan essence/paste, available from Chinese/Asian food shops (optional)

METHOD

Mix rice, salt and coconut milk to form a stiff dough; add Pandan essence if desired. Form the dough into small balls by rolling in the palm of your hand, and indent each ball to add 1/2 teaspoon of brown sugar, pinching the ball closed afterwards so the sugar stays in the centre.

Roll back into balls and drop into boiling water, where they will sink to the bottom. When they rise to the top, leave in the boiling water for 2 minutes, before placing on greased wax paper to cool. Roll in dried coconut and serve.