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The beautiful south

Quiet beaches, tiger-haunted jungles and extravagant festivals –
Alex Robinson takes the slow train from Bangkok into another Thailand



Another day
in paradise
Sunset over the
Andaman Sea,
Ko Muk Island



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The train to the unknown

Leave Bangkok for the wilderness of Khao Luang National Park (where guides Bao and Boi will cook you a feast) and the untrodden beaches of Ko Kradan

I awoke with a start. The night was as black as a panther and full of every kind of insect noise. Bao and Boi snored in their hammocks nearby, but it was so dark that I couldn't see even the tip of my nose, let alone them. Yet I knew, some yards away – on the other side of the stream – something had moved.

I'd heard it between dreaming and waking. When I finally plucked up the courage to investigate, I cursed my forgetfulness at not bringing a torch, grabbed my camera flash and shot a blink of brilliant light out into the forest – and, in that frozen moment, saw no more than a flicker of leaves and a trail of termites on the trunk beside me. The darkness enfolded me once more and I was left to the cicada and frog chorus – and my fervid imagination.

TRAIN TO NOWHERE

I hadn't expected danger on my journey south from Bangkok. In fact I hadn't expected anything at all. That was the point – I was travelling on a hunch, on a trainline more than a century old that cuts through the tourist heart of Thailand. It passes within a centimetre of ever-popular Krabi and Ko Samui on the guidebook maps, yet the stops along the way are barely mentioned by any. There must be something of interest here, surely? Maybe I'd find another Thailand, one of natural beachscapes free of spas and Bob Marley bars; of forests filled with wildlife and cities where the Thai smile has not become a technical courtesy.

The journey's beginning had boded well. Hualamphong Station in Bangkok was busy with backpackers waiting for a train. I shared a beer with a Kiwi couple sporting tribal tattoos

and baggy fishermen's trousers, who were waiting for the overnight train to Surat Thani and a hop across the water to the full moon party on Ko Pha-Ngan. When they left a parade of tourists followed, clutching dog-eared Lonely Planets. But there were barely any foreigners taking my slow service to Phetchaburi, a few hours south of the capital – just an academic-looking German and some Singaporean students on a weekend break. Out beyond the confines of the traveller tribe, the locals had already begun to feel more accessible. "Where you go?" one Thai man asked, insisting on sharing his family's sticky rice and prawn balls with me.

For a few hours I whisked around Phetchaburi's glorious temples and palaces, and felt the haunting presence of silence in a Buddha cave on the edge of the city, before catching an overnight service to Nakhon Si Thammarat.

Even the German and Asian tourists were absent here. I climbed onto a platform of Thai faces, one of whom picked me out easily from the crowd as the strange, solitary *farang* who wanted to visit Khao Luang National Park. Usually, my guide explained in threadbare English, he only took Thai students there, on weekend breaks from Bangkok's universities.

And what a surprise Khao Luang was proving to be. I'd hoped for a hint of wild. But this was true wilderness, and my nighttime fears were far from groundless. Initially the hike up into the park's rainforest-covered hills had been a disappointing trail of litter running through semi-cleared and then hunted-out forest. But after an hour or so all signs of human frequentation vanished and the path became overgrown, vertiginous and then cratered with huge, water-filled wild elephant footprints. ➤





“You thought Thailand ended at Ko Lanta just because they don’t sell tours to Trang on Khao San Road?”

◀ Mahathat – alongside bands of drummers, satin-clad dancers and doll-like beauty queens, wafting fans and somehow barely breaking a sweat under the torrid sun. Giant floats covered in hundreds of thousands of garlands of frangipanis, orchids and marigolds rolled past for over an hour. It was a spectacle to rival a Latin American carnival yet the onlookers barely crowded the pavements.

By noon the parade had finished and I had been swept along with the final floats to Wat Phra Mahathat. Hundreds of locals were gathered around the temple, spilling through the narrow gate into its maze-like interior. Here they fanned out into manifold corridors and rooms. Many were walking slowly and devotedly around the 80m-high chedi, which ascended white and shimmering into the tropical sky, tapering to a brilliant cone of burnished gold. Demon giants or yak guarded the temple’s sanctum, where dozens of families chanted and burned incense. Saffron-robed monks sat in serried ranks in the long cloisters at the feet of serene seated stone Buddhas; as temple bells sounded, people offered them plates of food – gaining merit for the souls of their dear departed.

That night was as spectacular as the day with Thai puppet theatre, live music and a glittering sound-and-light show performed under the ancient crumbling brick of the city walls. Over an hour – and through elegant traditional dance and mime (and the careful explanations of new-found Thai friends) – I learned of Nakhon Si Thammarat’s glorious past.

This was the Chiang Mai of southern Thailand: founded 1,700 years ago, Nakhon was known to the Ming dynasty

Chinese, was a cardinal city of the great South East Asian Tambralinga and Ligor empires, and was a trading capital for Renaissance Europe. The great chedi at Wat Phra Mahathat was built on another some 1,000 years old; at its heart it preserves a tooth relic of Buddha Siddhartha himself. Thai shadow theatre was born here, as were whole schools of arts and crafts from *niello* silverwork to unique weaving and textile techniques. Yet while Chiang Mai is as busy with tourists as an airport terminal there were none here but me.

YOU'RE GOING WHERE?

I was back on the railway the next day. But not, as I’d hoped, to the Andaman coast city of Trang. Despite being only 130km away, getting there by rail would involve a change of train and an overnight stop in a town that even the Thai tourism website didn’t mention. I did have a choice – I could hop in a little minivan and be in Trang in a couple of hours. But that didn’t seem quite in the spirit of things. I opted to take pot luck on the mystery town.

As the train trickled out of the station I attempted to find out about Thung Song from my fellow passengers. No one spoke a word of English. So they called the guard.

“Where you go?” she asked, looking at my ticket, “Thung Song?” I nodded and asked her what was there.

“Thung Song,” she said.

Further questions just met with incomprehension and polite giggles from her and half the carriage. I cursed my lack of >

Temple touring

The grounds of Wat Phra Mahathat are free from other travellers



◀ Thai. I tried again in Thung Song itself – in a shop, at the ticket desk; eventually I found help from a girl working on a magazine stand who sold chicken satay in Krabi in the tourist season. “You go waa-fall,” she said, “ve-ey big, nice follest...” and put me in a cab that whisked me out of the dusty town and into the hills.

I spent the day as a foreign curiosity, paddling in a gorgeous little rocky mountain river that fell through the rainforest in a series of plunging falls in the heart of Namtok Yong National Park. And as I fell asleep that night in the only hotel in town I dreamed of aquamarine sea and creamy sand, and reflected that on the coast this isolation surely couldn't last.

FINDING 'THE BEACH'

There wasn't a foreign face on the train to Trang. Nor in the railway station. And once again I was easily picked out from the crowd by waiting guide, Witarn. We spent the morning driving leisurely down a beautiful coast thick with forest and rubber plantations, broken by little villages and fringed with deserted beaches. Waves washed against myriad domes and pinnacles of limestone offshore; as the sea deepened it shaded from milky white through turquoise to indigo. The sky was Poussin blue and the wind played in the casuarinas.

“It's as breathtaking as Pha-Ngan or Krabi,” I said to Witarn, “how come no one knows about this?”

“They do,” he laughed. “You thought the landscape ended at Ko Lanta just because they don't sell tours to Trang on Khao San Road?”

Thank God they don't, I thought as we pulled up at a little jetty in the middle of a tiny fishing port. Children clamoured to

have their pictures taken for the fun of it. Then we chugged away in a rickety boat, crammed with boxes of powdered milk for the island schools on Ko Muk and Ko Kradan.

Two days slipped past gently with the tide on Ko Muk. I did little but eat, swim and sleep – with an occasional massage in between – and take a boat trip out to the still waters and white sands of Ko Kradan, just across the sea.

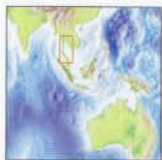
The bungalows along the bay were built for tourists. The menu was in English. But there were still no one in sight. I remembered the crowds of Ko Phi Phi and Lanta. I'd heard they'd got even worse after the 2004 tsunami – resort tycoons from Bangkok moved in and pushed locals off the land with the wreckage. Their crowded beaches were only a speedboat ride away to the north.

On the morning of my final day I decided to take a boat out to the Emerald Cave – a 2m-high gash through a 100m rock wall looking out over open ocean at the far end of the island. We bobbed on the turbid ocean for ten minutes before plucking up the courage to dive overboard for the swim inside.

For ten nervous minutes I negotiated a narrow passage echoing with crashing waves by the light of the guide's flickering torch. Then a green window appeared in front and we swam through into a circular bay where turquoise lapped a beach of white-pepper-fine sand. It was entirely enclosed by jungle-swathed cliffs that towered up to a blue hole of sky. It was paradise. And it was deserted.

It seemed, I reflected as the fine sand crunched between my toes, that despite the country's well-trodden backpacker trail, even after Alex Garland's *The Beach*, Thailand still has its secrets. ■

Oh so quiet
Another action-packed day on Ko Muk



Thailand footnotes

Plan your train trip to southern Thailand – know when to go and where to stop along the way

ONLINE FEATURES

For more on Thailand, including a guide to the country's alternative sights, see www.wanderlust.co.uk/destinations

VITAL STATISTICS

Capital: Bangkok
Population: 66 million
Language: Thai plus tribal languages
Time: GMT+7
International dialling code: +66
Visas: Not required by UK nationals
Money: Baht (B), currently around 55B to the UK£. There are ATMs throughout the country and credit cards are widely accepted.

When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

- The wet season along the Andaman Coast (Trang) runs from June to November; September tends to be the wettest month (350mm of rain). The Gulf Coast (Nakhon Si Thammarat) is wettest in October and November.
- Dry and pleasant – top temperatures of around 26°C.
- Though year-round temperatures are consistently warm, the climate is hottest from March to May, hitting around 30°C.

Health & safety

Visit your local travel health centre for the latest on recommended jabs and malaria prophylaxis – you should be up-to-date with tetanus, typhoid and hepatitis A and B. The far south of Thailand, at the end of the Bangkok railway line, is troubled by sectarian violence. Visits to Songkhla, Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat provinces are not recommended; check the Foreign Office website for the latest advice (www.fco.gov.uk).

Further reading

Thailand (Footprint, 2009)
Thailand (Rough Guide, 2009)
The National Parks and Other Wild Places of Thailand (New Holland, 2006) by Elliott and Cubitt. A beautifully illustrated guide.
The Beach (Penguin, first published 1997) Alex Garland's blockbuster about a search for the ultimate Thai backpacker hideaway.

Further information

Thai Tourism Authority For more info on Thailand call 0870 900 2007 or visit www.tourismthailand.co.uk
www.dnp.go.th Information on Thai national parks

The best of southern Thailand

Nakhon Pathom The giant *chedi* here is one of the largest in Asia and is built around the country's first Buddhist monument.

Hua Hin Long sweeping beaches, the best spas in Thailand and the official residence of the Thai royal family.

Chumphon Where boats leave from for Ko Tao.

Khao Luang National Park Remote trekking and the chance to see tigers, hornbills and hundreds of leeches.

Thung Song Change trains at this junction and spend an afternoon swimming under waterfalls in Namtok Yong National Park.

Ko Muk & Ko Kradan Two of an archipelago of islands off Trang's coast. All are far quieter than Lanta to the north or Lipe to the south.

Ko Tarutao Tarutao National Park preserves rugged islands fringed with beautiful beaches. Visits are getting heavier year by year. Boats leave from Satun, 40 minutes from Hat Yai railway station by *kombi*.

Petchaburi Stop for the dramatic hilltop palace at Khao Wang and myriad temples and Buddha caves.

Ko Tao Great diving in safe waters filled with coral; good chance of spotting whale sharks.

Ko Pha-Ngan The Gulf of Thailand's busiest backpacker resort, famous for its messy Full Moon bashes. Hat Rin is party central; the northern beaches are quieter.

Ko Samui The first of Thailand's budget travel paradise islands has turned busy boutique chic; all budgets are catered for here.

Hat Chao Mai National Park This area is home to some of the most beautiful and least-visited beaches on the Andaman coast. The National Park rents huts to visitors. Wildlife includes pangolins, macaques, sea otters and dugongs.

Narathiwat This attractive Muslim town is surrounded by traditional fishing villages where locals build beautiful painted fishing boats. Insurrection has sadly put it off limits.

THE TRIP

The author travelled courtesy of the Thai Tourism Authority, Thai Airways and Tell Tale Travel (0800 011 2571, www.telltaletravel.co.uk), a specialist in authentic travel experiences.

Getting there

Thai Airways (0870 606 0911, www.thaiairways.co.uk) flies from London to Bangkok and cities throughout Thailand from £503 return. Flight time is 11 hours.

Getting around

Thai Airways runs internal flights. The railway south from

Bangkok is run by the State Railway of Thailand (www.railway.co.th); there are timetables online in English. Bookings can be made in advance at railway stations and through agencies on Khao San Road in Bangkok. Inter-city buses and minivans are easily organised through hotels or tour operators. Long tail, ferry and fishing boats ply waters between the coast and islands.

Specialist local guides

Contact Boi (tarzantourth@yahoo.com) for treks in Khao Luang and tours of Nakhon Si Thammarat. Witarn Gangkam (+61 84 3070040) can

arrange boat and pick-up around Trang province. Mahachai Tours (based in Nakhon Si Thammarat; www.mahachai-tours.com – in German; service@mahachai-tours.com) runs wildlife trips around south Thailand.

Cost of travel

Thailand can cost as little as £12 a day if you sleep in cheap guesthouses and eat in street markets and local restaurants. Staying in air-conditioned hotels will cost you £25–50 a day. Luxury is available from £120 a day. A bottle of beer costs around 70B (£1.25), a cup of instant coffee 10B (18p) and a bottle of water 10B (18p).