

THAI GIRL

Andrew Hicks first came to Thailand in the late seventies and in more recent years has travelled extensively throughout the country with backpack and notebook, observing the interaction of Thais and foreign visitors.

In his various incarnations he has been a corporate lawyer in London and a lecturer in law at universities in Nigeria, Hong Kong, Singapore and England. When living in Hong Kong, his interest in and concern for migrant workers led him to write a bestselling self-help manual for Filipina domestic helpers. That concern is also a primary focus of this, his first novel.

The *Thai Girl* website, featuring a Readers Forum, an interview with the author, the author's acknowledgements and a picture gallery is at www.thaigirl2004.com.

The author welcomes your views about the book and the issues raised in it for publication on the site's Readers Forum. These should please be sent to andrew@thaigirl2004.com.

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Dedication

Thai Girl is dedicated to the migrant workers of Thailand who, through force of circumstance, leave their land and families in search of a livelihood elsewhere. In particular it is dedicated to those from Isaan, the arid North East region, who provide an endless supply of cheap labour for the modern economy and who in consequence are now losing a traditional way of life and values that are the essence of rural Thailand.



1

Hey, Emm, where did the knickers go? They were in knickers just now,' yelled Ben over the music, keeping his eyes on the girls.

'Stuffed 'em down the boots,' Emma bellowed back.

'I must've blinked!' he hissed. 'And now they're all in their birthday suits.'

In the Bangkok go-go bar, a dozen or so Thai girls were gyrating mindlessly around chromium poles. Sitting a few feet away on pink plastic seats, Emma and Ben stared in disbelief. They were typical backpackers in tee shirts and loose trousers with leg pockets, Ben tall, fair and blue-eyed, Emma carefully made up, her dark hair tied in a neat bunch at the back. As new arrivals in Thailand their pallor contrasted with the golden skin of the dancers who now wore nothing more than thigh boots and glazed expressions.

'Must be weird for a nice lad like you, Ben ... all this flesh on display,' said Emma.

'Think I can get used to it, thanks,' he replied with a broad grin.

'Maybe that says something about you then. *You* wanted to come in here, not me. And now you've seen it all ... bums and tits to last a lifetime.'

'Well, it's certainly livelier than the bars on campus!' he said, his eyes out on stalks.

Emma's head was still spinning from twenty four hours of travel, from jetlag, a day of culture shock in a hot, steamy city, and now the deafening noise of the go-go bar.

After they were hustled inside by the touts at the door, a waitress

dressed as a schoolgirl brought them cold beers and a bill that came as an unpleasant shock. To Emma's embarrassment, Ben refused to let it pass.

'The touts said there's no cover charge ... no wonder with beers at this price!' he shouted at the girl. 'What a rip-off.'

Looking hurt, she took his money and stalked off without a word.

'Rip-off or not, Ben, it's still cheaper than your snobby pubs back home. And you're getting loads to gawp at!' said Emma, glaring at him in disgust.

'Easy Emm, this is what everyone comes to see. Don't take it so seriously.'

'Not serious? Women for sale!' she retorted.

'But they look happy enough to me ... it's them chooses to be dancers.'

'Get real! Nobody does this unless they have to. And I tell you Ben, I just can't believe I'm in here!' she said, shifting uncomfortably on her seat.

'Well, I didn't force you, did I,' said Ben.

'You damn well did! You made me come with you to Thailand and now you drag me into this dreadful place.' She gave him a long, withering look.



Later that night in their grubby guesthouse room, Emma lay sobbing silently into the pillow, trying hard not to let her convulsions shake the bed. Beside her, Ben was sleeping soundly, oblivious to her distress. She lay awake for hours contemplating the rest of the holiday in Thailand with dread.

It was now a mystery to her why she had let herself be talked into travelling with him, though it was probably the romantic dream of Thailand that tipped the balance. She recalled her preconceptions of old Siam, of Anna and the King in soft focus, jumbled up with images of temples and mountains, tropical beaches, buffalo carts and rice farmers in conical hats. But she had quickly discovered that the reality was very different. Bangkok was modern and materialistic, and nothing could

warn of the oppressive heat that made walking the crowded streets arduous and debilitating.

She remembered the arguments about going to Thailand together that started a few months earlier when she and Ben graduated from Sussex University on the English south coast and student life came to a sudden end. Ben was staying at his family home in Haywards Heath and she was living with her parents in Swindon, both of them working all hours to clear their student debts and save enough to go travelling. After three years in each others' pockets at university, she had quickly adapted to a more distant relationship by email and telephone; at least on the phone she could have a smoke without getting told off.

It was often Ben who picked up the phone and made the call.

'Hi Emm, how's it going?' he began, his telephone voice upbeat as always.

'Grim. Crappy work and hell with the wrinklies. What about you?'

'Friend of Dad's just got me a great job doing questionnaires in the high street.'

'Daddy would have a friend! I'm still stuck in Tescos all day, and night times pulling pints in a grotty pub round the corner,' she grumbled.

'So what's wrong at home then?'

'Well, everything. Soon as I get back from work Mum just starts. If plates are still dirty from breakfast, she goes ballistic ... and when I spend too long on the phone or in the shower. It's that sort of stupid stuff.'

'Is that all?'

'No, they make me feel I've let them down because I can't find a proper job,' she said miserably.

'What's the hurry to get a job anyway? Come to Thailand with me instead ... you always said you would.'

'I'm not sure I can, Ben. Jobs are so difficult to find and if I drift off, I won't get anything worth having.'

'Stuff careers! Live life first.'

'You mean run away?' Emma hugged the phone and chewed her lip.

'Remember us in third year, Emm? Thinking about the beaches was the only thing that kept us going. But anyway, if you don't come with me,

what are you going to do with yourself?’

Emma had no answer which made her even more irritated by Ben’s casual failure to look for a career. With his solid middle class background, his self-confidence and family contacts, he gave her the impression that the world owed him a living. As she lay on the bed in Bangkok unable to sleep, her smouldering resentment came back to her, the phone conversation always predictable.

‘Emm, why did you want to work for M & S anyway? One step up from stacking shelves if you ask me. And that biscuit factory thing in Swindon was rubbish.’

‘Well, I was going for something secure.’

‘But why get a job you don’t really like?’

‘Got to do something.’

‘And if you weren’t that keen, why worry when you didn’t get it?’

‘Because Dad sees me as a failure ... even worse if I bugger off to Thailand with you,’ she complained.

‘Travel first, and when you get back there’s always law, accounting, investment banking.’

‘Maybe for you ... with your family opening doors.’

‘That’s crap, Emm and you know it!’

Feeling insecure and sorry for herself, Emma tried not to sound too feeble. ‘Life’s been on rails so far,’ she said, ‘but they don’t help you any more ... after graduating you’re on your own. And they keep on saying, “Well, what sort of career d’you want, Emma?” But how do I know what I want to do with the rest of my life?’

‘Keep working at it and the right thing’ll turn up,’ said Ben.

‘Me with a Lower Second in Sociology? Awesome or what!’

‘You’ve got to believe in yourself, Emm, you’re not that useless.’

‘Ben, I really hate you sometimes.’

‘And I hate your moods and sulks.’

As she lay sweltering in the damp heat of the tropical night, Emma thought of the time Ben rang to tell her about taking his little sister into the local pub for the first time. There was something about Ben’s cosiness with Megan that always infuriated her.

‘Emm, she’s still only sixteen,’ said Ben, ‘but the barman didn’t even

ask her age.’

‘That’s fine for you, isn’t it ... playing the big brother,’ she said frowning into the phone. ‘But me being a younger sister isn’t that great, I can tell you. Now Kate’s married and gone, it all falls on me.’

‘What does?’

‘Like mealtimes. Mum says, “When’ll you be back for supper tonight?” Or, “What would you like to have?” And it drives me mad.’

‘What’s so wrong with that?’

‘She does it to provoke me ... control freak, sort of.’

‘I don’t get you,’ he said, sounding surprised.

‘She makes a fuss over every little job and expects me to fit in with her routine. It does my head in. Then she says, “Emma, when did you last cook or shop? You never put the rubbish out, Emma.” And “What about the cat litter?”’

‘Parents say stuff like that,’ said Ben.

Emma ignored him and kept talking.

‘It’s what she doesn’t say as well. My room’s a mess, but she doesn’t dare tell me to tidy up ... just comes in and noses around, violating my personal space.’

‘Come on Emm, it’s not that bad being at home.’

‘I hate it. I feel trapped.’

‘Better come to Thailand with me then,’ he said triumphantly.

‘Shut up Ben and listen. Why aren’t you shit-scared about what you’re going to do when you get back?’

‘Well, I’m going to enjoy travelling and think about a career after. One thing at a time.’

His glib answers annoyed her, especially as he was refusing to see that their relationship was at a crossroads.

‘Look Ben,’ she said, ‘the problem with me coming to Thailand’s not just about careers ... it’s about us as well.’

‘Why’s it about us?’

‘Now we’ve finished uni, what are we going to do? Travel together or call it a day?’

‘Hadn’t really thought about it like that,’ he said vaguely.

‘Why not, you wally?’ She flicked her lighter and lit a cigarette.

'Dunno, Emm. All I know's we promised ourselves a trip. You were as keen as me.'

'But it's more complicated now. You're no help ... and I get so much pressure from Mum and Dad not to go.'

'My folks are okay ... they think me travelling's a great idea.'

'They would! Mummy's blue-eyed boy!' She drew angrily on the cigarette.

'Oh sod off! Don't start that again,' said Ben.

'No, I'm just not sure I still want to go with you.'

'Why ever not?' he said, sounding hurt.

'Because I'm not sure about you any more ... sorry, but I had to say it.'

'Emm, please don't let me down now,' he begged. 'Maybe it'll bring us back together.'

'No, I've got to make a go of things here,' she said. 'Though if I can't find a decent job ... suppose I'll have to come with you to Thailand.'

Sleepless on Khao San Road listening to the sounds of the city, Emma knew that this had been decision-making by default; it was no decision at all. And the dream of Thailand that had finally persuaded her to travel with him was so far totally failing to materialise.



Emma had never liked flying, but she tried to be fatalistic. Once Ben had booked the flights, she was destined to converge at the airport with several hundred others, to present her ticket and passport and be herded onto the plane. She could be fated to die in a ghastly inferno or be seated next to someone who snores. She was to be catapulted across the globe to a world she had never before experienced, her ordered existence ending at Bangkok airport where another very different culture begins.

The long but comfortable Qantas flight passed surprisingly quickly as she and Ben were able to snatch some sleep before landing in Bangkok. The airport was still part of their own familiar world but, tired and bleary from more than twenty hours of travelling, both were subdued and anxious. They queued before a silent immigration officer who stamped

visas into their passports; this was not yet the land of smiles. They waited by the carousel for their backpacks, then passed through customs and walked down the long arrivals hall. Confronting a dark sea of Thais, many holding up the names of arriving passengers, Emma longed to be met or to have a comfortable hotel already booked.

Walking out through the glass doors into the roar of the traffic, they were hit by the smell of diesel fumes and drains and by a blanket of hot, humid air. There were taxis parked in lines and Thai faces everywhere, the taxi touts milling about and talking loudly. Emma was feeling overwhelmed and disorientated. But everything happened fast and she soon found herself sitting in the back of a small green and red Nissan taxi, their rucksacks stowed safely in the boot. The driver was smiley and communicative.

'Okay, you go Khao San Road? First time in Thailand?'

'Yes,' said Ben, doing the talking.

'You married already?'

'No, we're students.'

'*Farang* have money, so why you not married?'

'What's *farang*?', asked Ben, ducking the question.

'*Farang* means European. *Farang* good for business ... so welcome to Thailand.' The cheerful taxi driver, their first Thai, was making a good impression.

The Bangkok traffic was a crazy roller-coaster ride, the taxi sitting gridlocked for ages, then surging forward aggressively before hitting the next blockage.

'*Rot dtit*,' said the taxi driver. 'Traffic jam every day.' Emma marvelled that it was possible to be a Bangkok taxi driver and stay sane.

Staring out as the urban landscape unfolded, she was struck by the sheer scale of the city, its high-rise tower blocks crowding on all sides, concrete grey as far as the eye could see. Speeding along the overhead expressway, she could look down on flat roofs cluttered with pot plants, washing lines and television aerials, human details in a harsh environment.

Massive hoardings stood next to the road: Mitsubishi Motors,

Quality in Motion; Cathay Pacific, the Heart of Asia; Bridgestone, a Grip on the Future; Volkswagen, Panasonic, Canon, Pepsi and Nissan, all familiar names in a globalised world. From the next hoardings they passed the glossy haired Sunsilk girls gazed serenely down on the traffic jams with global eyes, eyes that to Emma looked hardly Asian.

As they rushed towards the city centre, she silently admired the towers of Thai Airways, clad in gleaming blue glass and, to her surprise, lavish showrooms for Porsche and Jaguar cars. In front of her stood the tallest building she had ever seen, the seventy eight storeys of the Bayoke tower, on her right the roofs of a traditional Thai temple a bizarre contrast to the stark commercial phalluses of the city.

This seemed to be a city of extremes, the sleek modern buildings dwarfing older ones which were grimy and unmaintained. Its quiriness was brought home to her when the taxi driver, passing a Buddhist shrine outside a luxury hotel, took both his hands off the wheel, held them together in prayer and bowed his head down low.

Exciting though it all seemed, Emma was already finding Bangkok more than a little scary. This ugly place in which she would have to survive on a shoe-string budget was alien and threatening. Though cocooned in the taxi and about to start the holiday of a lifetime, her butterflies were rampant; it was like teetering at the top of the high diving board, staring down at the water.

The dull ache in her stomach was even worse when at last she took the plunge, nervously emerging from the taxi onto the pavement in Khao San Road. Her first glance took in a street packed with guest houses, travel agents and cafés. On both sides were shops and stalls, selling everything backpackers might need. She could see colourful tee shirts and ethnic trinkets, food for sale off barrows, and everywhere busy crowds of cool-looking travellers.

Feeling very much the new girl in school, Emma shouldered her pack and apprehensively set off with Ben to find somewhere to stay. In three or four backstreet places they asked for a room but there were no vacancies. She was becoming overwhelmed by the heat, her back aching from hours on the plane and from carrying her heavy rucksack. Tiredness, dehydration, culture shock and the fear of not finding anywhere showed

in her face.

‘Look Emm, sit down with the bags and I’ll go and look on my own,’ said Ben.

‘But what if I don’t like it?’

‘Oh stuff that. We can always move on tomorrow.’

She breathed a sigh of relief when Ben came back, having found a room in a dingy guesthouse. Damp and musty and with communal showers and toilets, at least it was well within their budget. ‘What’s wrong with cockroaches anyway,’ he said as he opened the door.

Feeling thoroughly let down by Thailand, Emma was appalled at what she saw inside, though she dared not complain. Now she somehow had to get through the rest of the day and then face a long evening struggling to stay awake. She did not expect it to be fun, but her first night out with Ben in Bangkok was to be nothing short of a disaster.