



Street *banquet*

It's a way of life for locals in Thailand. It's how they eat. For these lanes are where some of the best Thai culinary traditions come from. NEHARICA GUPTA hits the streets of Bangkok savouring some of these flavours intending to come back to one in particular —Khao San Road. It makes for a quintessential street food experience with its overwhelming choices



I SIP my Thai lager and watch people dancing on the road at what can only be called a pop-up party. Makeshift speakers blare out as the crowd moves along to beats by Drake. This backpacker's haven in Bangkok is a much-needed break for my hippie heart. A young ponytailed Thai chap walks up to me and asks if I want a bucket of alcohol. I decline but I make do with a couple of Singhas. I do need them. I am sitting on the side of the road while a chubby Thai lady, who is wearing a psychedelic t-shirt and polka-dotted trousers,

braids my hair. This could take a while.

Khao San Road, in the heart of Bangkok, greets you like any other night market with its standard Bob Marley themed shops. Opposite graffitied tattoo parlours, the road begins, and you venture into a facet of Bangkok the usual tourist has never seen before. Pubs line both sides of the road, along with clothes shops to buy from and to sell to. Massage parlours slowly encroach upon the road but it doesn't really matter as there are no cars here, just walking traffic of the bohemian type. Young Thai kids, barely out of school, mingle with



SPOILT FOR CHOICE



SOM TUM OR GREEN PAPAYA SALAD

Arguably the healthiest of all street food, this is just a starting point for the various salads like green mango, seafood or meat. Many ingredients like fish sauce, red eye chillies, peanuts, garlic, palm sugar, dried shrimp, lime and papaya create a flavour like no other.

HOY TOD OR OYSTER OMELETTE

The only serious competitor to the Pad Thai, this dish is a fried omelette with beansprouts, topped with oysters or mussels. With a fried and nonfried version, the crispy oyster omelette is the current rage in the street food world.



PAD THAI

Traditionally served with shrimps, this is one of the most well-known Thai dishes internationally, along with the papaya salad and Tom Yum soup of course. Pad Thai noodles are rice noodles stir-fried with your meat of choice and full of delectable flavour.

MU PING OR PORK SKEWERS

With the usual appetising mix of Thai ingredients, pork skewers are grilled on satay grills, which are incidentally available to order online.



STICKY RICE WITH MANGO

Rice in sweet coconut milk with mango, all in a bite, makes up the essence of this dessert. A childhood favourite, this recipe is one of the Thai family gems, rich in tradition and sweetness.

the tourists here who are from everywhere, except India it seems.

I'm absorbed in a projection screen playing *Braveheart* on top of a shop, distracting myself from the strands of my hair being pulled and prodded. I smell something burn and suddenly notice the big-buxomed Thai lady is holding a lighter to my head, but it turns out to be the way she fixes a feather to the braid. Hair-raising or hair-burning rather, this is better than traversing from one mall to another,

accumulating shopping bags and kilos to my luggage. An American guy next to me asks if I think he should get dreadlocks or braids. A German couple begins to chat with us, slurping their red alcohol buckets through straws. It is an impossibility not to be entertained on this street and two hours of sitting upright on a little stool seem too less to experience the Khao San aura.

Standing up after having my hair twisted into more than 50 braids, I realise the need for a



massage. I join my compadres for a quick shoulder and back rub. It doesn't take long, hungry that we are. It's now midnight, on these streets, we are perfectly in time for dinner. Pushing through dancing people with selfie sticks and past fried insects, we move towards the conglomerate of aromas coming from the row of woks.

I am spoilt for choice—I can try the chicken, pork or beef skewers or choose from the various types of noodles which a withering old lady will make into Pad Thai, right before me. I go in for the chicken Pad Thai noodles. The cook breaks an egg onto already boiled chicken pieces, in simmering oil. Next, in go the bean sprouts, one of the main ingredients of street food in Thailand, followed by fish sauce, noodles, chilli flakes, garlic and crushed peanuts. With a practised hand, she gives it a good beating.

Ready and plated in two minutes, I finally let go of my hard feelings towards Maggi noodles which have never been ready in less than 10 minutes. The chicken Pad Thai passes the tasting test and turns me off restaurant food in Bangkok forever. The pale noodles and white sprouts have come together to create a delectable palate-pleasing and sweat-inducing addiction. Never have I tasted something as divine. I am reluctant to share it.

Culturally, Thai people would cook at home, or eat out on the street; the restaurant culture is new to them, says acclaimed Thai food chef David

Thompson in his book. There are street food guides on Google maps to navigate Bangkok with and apps for iOS and Android. Google Thai food blogs before you step out on the streets of Bangkok on an empty stomach. And remember, some food vendors will be cleaner than others. Some will have longer queues. And some will be downright greasy. But you will not be lost for choice.

After another plate of the Pad Thai, my buddies and I decide to hit the bar. Avoiding the local Mekhong whisky, we drink suspicious-smelling rums from Bacardi bottles on alcohol carts and walk through the shops. After some wandering through unnamed toy stalls, the hunger pangs strike again.

This time, we decide to try something new and go for the chicken pancakes. This is boiled chicken dipped in egg and flour, fried and mixed up with crunchy sprouts. We decide to go for another round of Pad Thai noodles sealed inside an omelette. By this point, I have forgotten Soi 11 (street food hub). An entire universe of pleasures is opening up to me.

I think of previous trips where I would hop from one restaurant to another, red curry to green curry, Central World to Central Chidlom and my experimentation would be restricted to food courts. My gastronomic happy ending has been met on the streets of Bangkok. Khao San has a repeat customer.

