



# YOU'RE NOT ALONE

Whether it is the pollution or the traffic, a difficulty communicating with colleagues and domestic help, or finding a partner, many expats find the process of adjustment to life in Bangkok more difficult than they first envisaged. Dirty, noisy and vast or chaotic, friendly and overflowing with great street food – these are the two faces of a city that perplexes, invigorates and ultimately either makes us love it or drives us away. Words by **Mark Bibby Jackson**. Photos by **Nick McGrath**.

Sipping a cappuccino in one of Bangkok's many sophisticated and inviting cafés, it's hard to imagine Michelle ever had difficulties adjusting to life in Bangkok, but she did.

"My second week here ... I felt pretty overwhelmed being alone, without friends, with two children and living in temporary housing. I didn't know anyone."

A mother of two, Michelle is keen to stress that the decision to relocate to Bangkok was a "family" one that she has never regretted. Despite this, she believes it was more difficult for her to settle in Bangkok than for her husband.

"Immediately, he knew where and what he'd be doing Monday to Friday during the work day," she says. "For me, it was less obvious to know where to go, who to meet."

This sense of isolation and entrapment only lasted a few days before she picked up her "Nancy Chandler" map and started exploring the city, but her experience is typical of many expats – and not just mums.

Whether we are following our spouse, making a career move, or embracing the challenge of living in an exotic Southeast Asian country, the reality of expat life is often different from our expectations.

## BATTLE OF THE SEXES

Daniel Boyd, a counsellor and psychotherapist at Psychological Services International (PSI) who has been practising in Bangkok for 22 years, agrees with Michelle that married couples often have contrasting experiences



adjusting to Bangkok expat life.

"She's more face-to-face with the culture oftentimes than the husband is and this presents a different kind of struggle for her," explains Boyd, pointing out that sometimes the traditional gender roles are reversed.

While the stay-at-home spouse may encounter problems communicating with domestic help and coping with a sense of ennui, the wage earner experiences a nine to five office life with many offers of post-work social outings.

"A lot of guys don't get that," says Boyd's partner, Ben Weinstein, a licensed clinical psychologist.

This can cause tension within the marital relationship. What at first seems trivial can become blown out of all proportions, especially if the stay-at-home spouse did not "sign up" to the life they are now facing.

A move could mean former powerful executives are reduced to the role of managing the home and referred to at parties as so-and-so's partner. There is a saying that:

"Bangkok is where mediocre marriages go to die," Michelle informs me before adding that "you need a good partner."

It is not just married couples who can struggle. According to Jean-Francois Botermans, a clinical psychologist and third partner in the PSI practice, adjustment can take a totally different form for men than it does for women.

"The main problem for women in terms of adjustment is boredom and for men is excitement," he says.

Many of Botermans' male clients come to Bangkok on the back of a promotion and encounter the twin perils of a stressful workplace during the day and a plethora of readily available sex, drugs and alcohol at night.

Once here they are isolated from friends and family, and lack the usual "guy network" they had back home.

All three counsellors believe that generally men need to live in a structured world, but discover that limits in their own country just do not exist in Bangkok.

Back home we might consider what the neighbours will think. Here the neighbours either do not care or are doing just the same. Surrounded by men who are living a similar life of excess, Bangkok is a city with many pitfalls for those less grounded, especially younger men.

"It's dangerous ... a magic Disneyworld where everything seems to be easy but it is not and you don't learn the rules as you would in the West," explains Botermans, who specialises in patients with obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD).

He has seen several CEOs of major companies fall off the rails, often having experienced some form of burn-out. In such cases the best cure is often a geographical one.

"They need to go home," agrees Weinstein.

#### FEELING POSITIVE ABOUT YOURSELF

Shalinin Yamdagni would disagree. Five years ago, Yamdagni was bed-ridden with costochondritis, an inflammation of rib carti-

lage that can cause severe chest pains.

Despairing of conventional medicine, she says she cured herself through an Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) that involves tapping upon the source of pain while focusing on positive thoughts. Since then she has advised around 500 clients who are "on the edge".

Believing that our blueprint for life is developed in the first seven years, Yamdagni contends that simply removing yourself from the symptoms leaves the root cause untreated.

"Wherever you go, there you are," she says.

She cites a client who was never able to communicate properly with his parents. Now he is showing similar symptoms with his Thai girlfriend.

Through EFT she asks her clients to neutralise the belief they are holding on to – in this case that the couple are not able to communicate – and instead to focus on the positive.

"Eventually it becomes like a movie," she says. "No matter how intense it was it seems like a neutral ground."

Yamdagni believes the people you surround yourself with, influence the world that you perceive.

"Whatever you are radiating, that's what you are going to attract," she says. "If you really believe that Thai people are lazy ... you will find exactly those ones ... and it compounds and confirms your belief, and the belief just gets stronger and you experience it more and more."

In addition to focusing on the positive, she advises clients to add some meaning to their lives.

"When you are feeling useless and hopeless, if you go out and do something for someone else it's just a way to pump yourself up," she says. "Instead of feeling victimised and sorry for yourself it's good to go out there and do something."

#### FINDING YOUR MATCH

Unlike Michelle, many people are not in a relationship when they arrive in Bangkok or, if they are they, often find themselves single pretty quickly. What is the city like for those seeking a partner?

Of those single women interviewed in the course of this article, most had formed some





sexual relationship while here. Few though had met their Mr Right.

"It's not difficult meeting guys here," says Lynda, who came to Bangkok three-and-a-half years ago to work as a financial consultant. "It is difficult meeting the right sorts of guys, the ones I would be interested in having a relationship with."

Her colleague, Judy, has lived in Thailand for 12 years, meeting her now husband on the beach at Koh Samui. She recommends women looking for partners to focus their attention on people who are here to stay, especially those who have their own business.

The problem is that the men who are committed to Thailand might not be equally committed to western women.

Claudia, 33, has lived in Thailand for 12 years. During that time she has dated quite a few men – both Thai and western – as well as having many male friends. She believes that the men who have lived here for a long time often find western women "quite intimidating".

Is this part of the point that Yamdagni is making?

If you surround yourselves with friends who feel that western men only want sex with young Thai women then that is the type of man you will meet. Likewise men who feel that feminism in the west has "gone too far" will bond with likeminded friends who see the western women they meet as "ball-breakers".

Sadly, this is the impasse that drives many single women away from Bangkok, despite enjoying the lifestyle. Both Claudia and Judy refer to female friends who had left the country because they couldn't find the right man, and felt their body clock was ticking.

#### CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

It is not just sexual relations that cause problems for expats.

John Krukowski is a psychotherapist who

has practiced in Bangkok and Pattaya since 2005. Most of his clients come to him due to problems in their relationships with Thais. Broadly speaking this breaks down into two categories – men having problems with their Thai partner's family, and office workers having problems with their colleagues.

These are problems that western experience has left them ill-equipped to manage.

"Ninety-five percent of the people that come to me don't have a problem, they just need a few more tools in their toolbox," he claims.

Like Botermans, Weinstein and Boyd, he believes that the more grounded you are, the better you are likely to cope with life in Bangkok. However, he also believes that people must be prepared to relinquish some of the lifestyle choices they have back home when they come here – whether that is high-speed internet or watching American Football on a Monday night.

"If you don't want to give up some of the things then go back," he says, adding that most people who come here are in reality escaping an issue back home.

#### EXTINCTION BURST

Many of his clients suffer from a perceived lack of respect from Thais. Others interviewed complain of the Thai 'yes' culture – of always giving an affirmative response even if they don't know what the answer is. Then, of course, there is the traffic.

When *AsiaLIFE* carried out similar research in Ho Chi Minh City, Ton Louw, managing director of Educational Support Services Asia, spoke of an extinction burst.

An example of this is where we explain the same thing again and again to colleagues, becoming increasingly frustrated as they do not accept what we are saying or change their behaviour.

"As organisms, as human beings, what we do in a situation is that we don't just

suddenly stop. What we tend to do is go through an extinction burst – which is we just try harder, and harder, and harder," explains Louw.

There is an intensity in behaviour that crescendos until a breaking point is reached and we either change what we are doing or go back home.

One strategy Krukowski teaches in anger management sessions is to have a plan about how you can avoid issues. If you tend to get aggravated with taxi drivers, then take the BTS, or at least prepare yourself for the eventuality of the taxi driver speaking little English, refusing to turn on the meter, or driving off without you.

#### LIVING IN A BUBBLE

Many of the expats questioned refer to the expat "bubble". The only Thais you may meet – apart from that infuriating taxi driver – are your domestic help, colleagues and Thais married to expats.

While this is not necessarily a bad thing, it means you will find it even harder to understand the culture in which you have chosen to live. In the worst case your friends could end up reinforcing negative preconceptions of both Thai culture and expat life.

On the whole though, most questioned seemed to paint a positive picture of both Bangkok and our Thai hosts, emphasising how easy life is here compared to the West.

People stressed the friendliness of the people, a standard of living that could not be maintained at home and the fantastic food, rather than the pollution and traffic.

However, for those of us who are finding adjusting to life in Bangkok more difficult than anticipated, maybe it's best to heed a few words of advice from Michelle's friend Ann, also a mother of two, in between her sips of cappuccino.

"Slow down," she says. "Any new place takes time to get used to. Don't expect things to be the same as in the West – this can be a good thing." 🇹🇭

