

# A world of wonders in Thailand

By COURTNEY BONNELL  
Associated Press

BANGKOK — Trudging up a lush mountainside to a remote village, plunging through a swift-moving river in the footsteps of elephants and cruising Bangkok's gleaming luxury malls — with each step, I walked into different worlds, each one beautiful, all in Thailand.

Don't forget glittering temples, bustling night markets and world-famous Thai massages to soothe weary muscles.

## BANGKOK

The capital's malls and markets are endless, from Siam Paragon, filled with designer brands and an upscale food court, to stands of cheap goods where souvenir-seekers haggle over the price of utensils, bracelets and trinkets. After dark, the night markets come alive, bustling with shoppers grabbing cheap sunglasses and shoes while families and friends enjoy soups and curries in more bearable heat.

Bangkok is also famous for its opulent temples, including Wat Pho, Temple of the Reclining Buddha, with its stair-step monuments to royalty called chedis, similar to stupas. The centerpiece is a massive horizontal Buddha, its gold girth touching the temple walls from end to end.

Next door at the white-walled Grand Palace complex, black-clad mourners waited in snaking lines to pay their respects to King Bhumibol Adulyadej. The beloved leader died in October after a 70-year reign — his image ubiquitous on billboards and shrines.

The complex also houses Thailand's most sacred temple, Wat Phra Kaew, or Temple of the Emerald Buddha, with sparkling, gold-decked buildings. The surprise was the size of the famed Buddha figure, carved from jade and dressed in gold, but just 26 inches high.

## CHIANG MAI

Chiang Mai's walled old city houses more famous temples, including Wat Chedi Luang. Its towering red brick is worn to black, its steps have all but crumbled, but stone dragons still stand guard.

My favorite temple, moss-covered Wat Pha Lat, is



In this Dec. 5, 2016 photo, long-tail boats sit near a small beach on Ko Phi Phi Leh, an island off the southwestern coast of Thailand. The smaller of the Phi Phi Islands is a tourist hotspot for its beautiful water, party atmosphere and famed Maya Bay, where the movie "The Beach" was filmed.



In this Dec. 9, 2016 photo, monks teach schoolchildren religious incantations at Wat Pho, or the Temple of the Reclining Buddha, in Bangkok.

tucked in a forest just outside Chiang Mai. From the university, I got there by hiking Monks Trail, which is marked by strips of orange fabric. Head farther up the mountain to popular Doi Suthep temple or hail a songthaew, a shared taxi.

Hungry after hiking? Hit the street vendors and restaurant options that abound back in the tourist center: vege-

tarian-friendly green curried rice, fried mushrooms and pad thai, plus plenty of beef and pork speared on sticks for meat-eaters. To cool off from the heat or spice, try fresh-cracked pomegranate juice or coconut ice cream.

## TREKKING

Chiang Mai is the jumping-off point for trekking, elephant tours and other outdoor adventure. A friend



In this Nov. 29, 2016 photo, elephants cross a river at the Elephant Nature Park outside Chiang Mai, Thailand.

and I booked an ecotour trek and overnight home stay in a village some 4½ hours away in the Mae Hong Son region. The Karen ethnic group lives there, farming rice and cabbage on vibrant green hillsides. Our guides cut down wild passion fruit for us to sample, pointed out spiders as big as a hand and chopped bamboo to whittle into cups. After reaching the mountain-

tops near the Myanmar border and making it to the village, we used those cups to slug homemade rice liquor.

We set up a bed of blankets on the wooden floor and rested between bags of rice as our hosts cooked dinner in a hearth built into the floor. Sleeping in a home open to the elements was the only time I got cold on the trip, and the only place I skipped

a shower, passing up a tub of chilly water in an outhouse with a squat toilet.

## ELEPHANTS

I wanted to enjoy these majestic creatures, iconic in Thailand but often exploited, in an ethical way. The Elephant Nature Park allowed us to travel alongside them, not on their backs. We kept them moving through the jungle by thrusting bananas and melon into their eagerly outstretched trunks. It was surreal and a bit unnerving as we led four mostly blind and elderly female elephants on a muddy, uneven path, trying to keep our balance while avoiding their feet. In another part of the sanctuary, we got a peek at a baby elephant.

## PHI PHI ISLANDS

After trekking, we looked forward to decompressing on an otherworldly beach on the Phi Phi Islands — pronounced "pee pee." But rain was falling as we arrived and promised not to let up.

Instead of the party-hearty main town on Ko Phi Phi Don, the largest island, we opted for a secluded resort. A long-tail boat plowed through choppy waters to get us there, leaving us windblown and wet from ocean spray and rain as we tried to photograph the green-topped rock rising from the Andaman Sea.

The weather cooperated enough the next day for a group tour to the smaller island, Koh Phi Phi Leh, and its hotspot, Maya Bay, which is breathtaking but overrun after the movie "The Beach" made it famous. Even early in the day, it was tough to find a spot free of people posing with selfie sticks.

Nearby, we revealed in an empty swath of sand framed by cliffs before winding through rock formations to the Blue Lagoon, a green-walled swimming hole packed with tourist boats.

After the beaches and long days in the devout atmosphere of temples, without blinking, our nights turned to buying knockoffs of favorite overpriced sandals, swigging 70 baht (\$2) beer and watching men in elaborate makeup and sequined ball gowns perform a dance in a packed outdoor market.

That's Thailand, country of contrasts.

## A little beer is a lot of flavor in these Super Bowl sliders

By SARA MOULTON  
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Big provisions are required to watch the big game, and nothing's more substantial than a burger, even in its mini-form — the slider.

Indeed, if you plan to serve a variety of dishes for the Super Bowl, sliders are more sensible than the full-sized guys. But they happen to be a little trickier to cook than a standard-issue burger. The slider's size makes it tough to put a nice crust on the outside while ensuring that it doesn't overcook on the inside.

These sliders are adapted from a burger I used to make at a bar in Ann Arbor, Michigan, called the Del Rio — my first job as a cook. Dubbed the Det Burger, this marvel was dreamed up before I landed at the Del Rio by a cook named Bob Detweiler, who baptized the creation after himself. The heart of the original version was a quarter-pounder topped by "the Det mix" — canned mushrooms, canned olives, grilled onions, freeze-dried green peppers and slices of cheese.

But there also was a secret ingredient: beer. The Det Burger was steamed in beer. If it wasn't quite "the burger that made Ann Arbor famous," it was undeniably a city-wide favorite.

A generation later, I assembled the same winning combo of ingredients — though in a fresher form — and then focused on the cooking process to make sure that these mini-burgers ended up both juicy and crusty. There are a few key points to preparing Beer-Steamed Cheese and Mushroom Beef



Beer steamed cheese and mushroom beef sliders.

### Sliders.

First, the sliders need to be about 3/4 inch thick, not only so they don't overcook, but also so you can fit all of them at one time into the skillet. Second, the skillet needs to be large, a 12-incher. If you don't have a skillet that big, use two smaller ones and cook six sliders in each. And third, whichever skillet you use, the oil must be heated until it's almost smoking. At the start, you want the burgers to sear, not steam, which is what will

happen if the pan isn't hot enough.

At first, the sliders will be crowded together in the skillet, but they'll shrink down as they cook, giving off fat and juices in the process. You deglaze the pan with beer, of course, which mingles intimately with the fat and juices released by the burgers to create a delectable pan sauce.

I recommend spooning some of this liquid onto the buns before sliding in

the burgers, but my son proposes a more extravagant way to roll: pour the sauce into ramekins and invite your guests to dunk their sliders into it between bites. Whatever happens onscreen, you'll be winning at home.

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### BEER-STEAMED CHEESE AND MUSHROOM BEEF SLIDERS

Start to finish: 50 minutes

Makes 12 sliders

- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil, divided
- ½ cup finely chopped yellow onion
- 3 ounces mushrooms (white, cremini or shiitake), finely chopped
- Kosher salt
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped pitted green olives
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped, drained, canned green chilies
- 3 ounces sliced sharp cheddar cheese, broken into 12 equal pieces
- 1 ½ pounds ground beef, shaped into 12 sliders, each about ¾ inch thick
- Ground black pepper
- ½ cup beer
- 12 slider buns

In a large (at least 12-inch) skillet over medium, heat 1 tablespoon of the oil. Add the onion and cook until golden, about 8 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the onion to a bowl. Add another tablespoon of the oil to the pan, the mushrooms and a hefty pinch of salt. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the liquid the mushrooms give off has evaporated, about 5 minutes. Transfer the mushrooms to the bowl with the onion. Reserve the skillet.

Add the olives and chilies to the mushroom mixture and stir well. Set aside.

Return the skillet to high heat. Add the remaining tablespoon of oil and wait until it is almost smoking. Meanwhile, season the sliders on one side with salt and pepper. When the oil is hot, add the sliders, seasoned side down (it will be a little crowded in the pan), and cook them until they are just browned on the first side, about 2 minutes. Sprinkle the top side of each with salt and pepper, turn the sliders over and cook for another 2 minutes.

While the sliders are browning, top each slider with a heaping teaspoon of the mushroom mixture, dividing all of the mixture among the sliders, then place a piece of cheese on top of each. Quickly pour the beer into the pan, all around the sliders, cover the pan and steam for 2 minutes.

Turn off the heat and let the sliders sit in the pan for another minute to let the cheese melt completely. Spoon some of the liquid in the skillet onto the tops and bottoms of the buns, transfer the sliders to the buns and serve right away.

Nutrition information per slider: 280 calories; 120 calories from fat (43 percent of total calories); 13 g fat (4 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 45 mg cholesterol; 370 mg sodium; 23 g carbohydrate; 1 g fiber; 3 g sugar; 16 g protein.

AP Photo/Matthew Mead