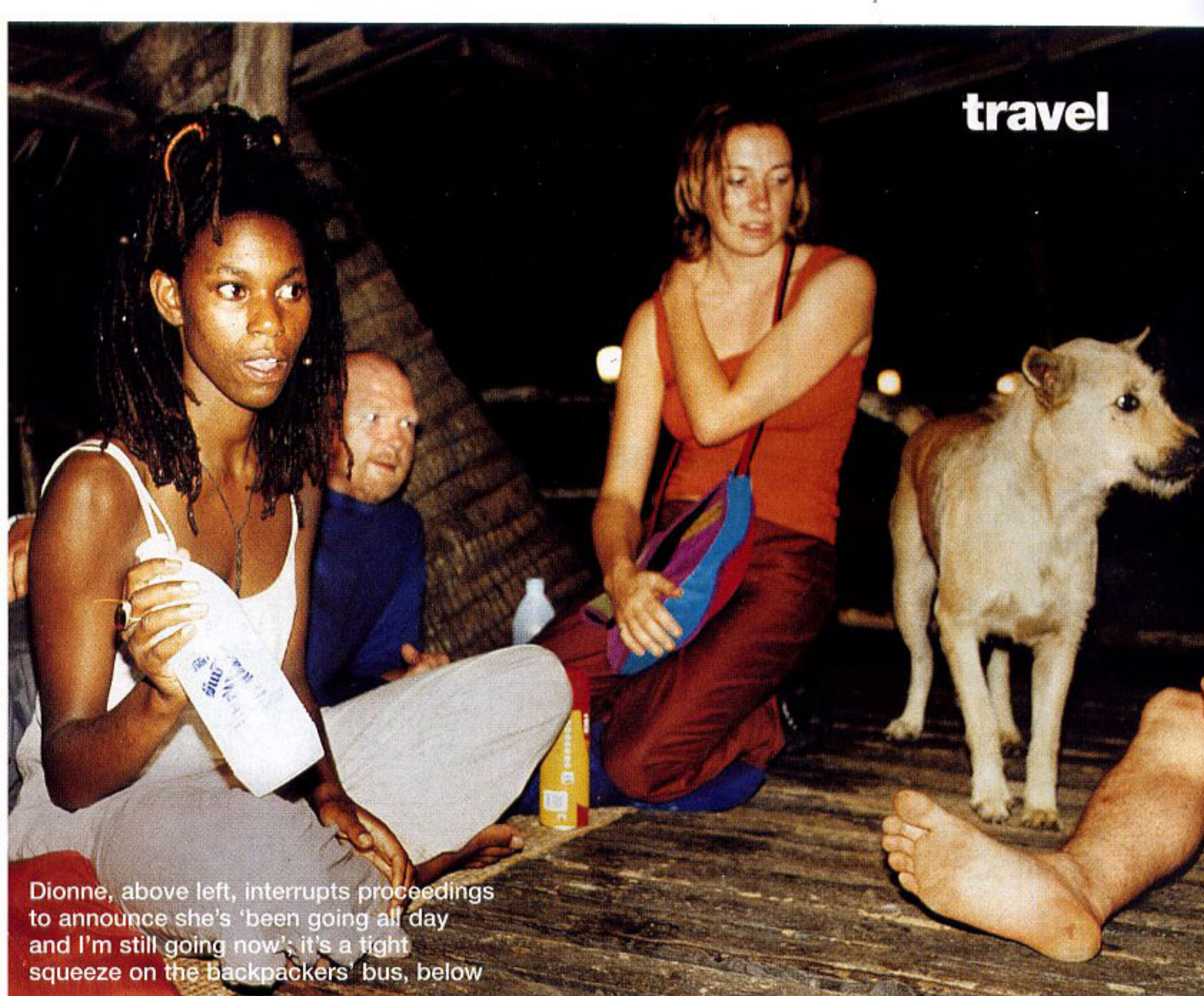




Life's a beach for Chris Morris as he relaxes outside his hut on the island of Koh Samui

PARADISE LOST?

Leonardo DiCaprio's new film, *The Beach*, with its uncompromising picture of backpackers in Thailand, is released this month. Chris Morris followed in Leo's footsteps to find out whether travellers really are a cut above package tourists. Photographs by Jane Hodson



Dionne, above left, interrupts proceedings to announce she's 'been going all day and I'm still going now': it's a tight squeeze on the backpackers' bus, below



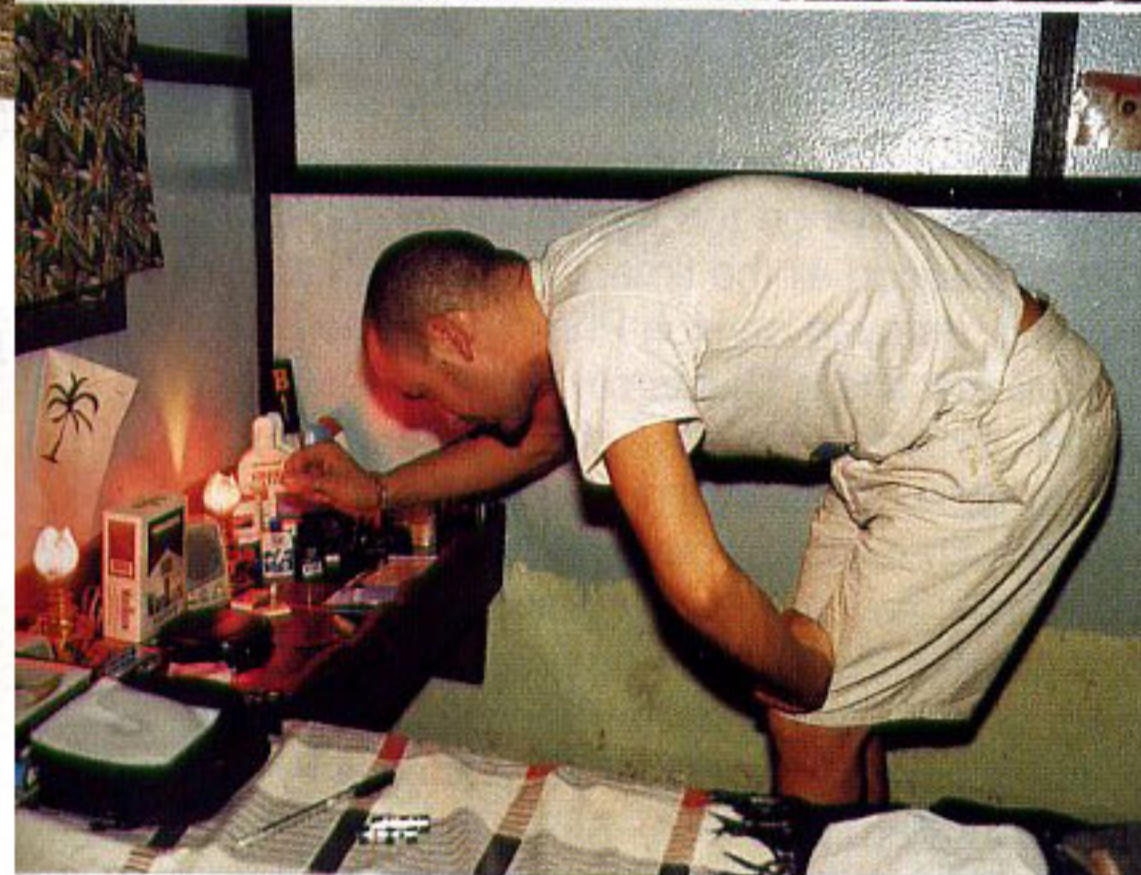
expected, which might make travelling difficult. In *The Beach*, Rich takes a twelve-hour train ride down to Surat Thani, before catching a boat over to Koh Samui. I cheat, by flying. Whereas Rich manages to persuade a 'local spiv with a boat' to take him where he wants to go, I have difficulty persuading a taxi driver to drive to the Moon Beach huts I've heard about on the north side of the island, because of the huge puddles of rain along the track. Meanwhile, one of the straps of my rucksack has split and the other is cutting a welt into my shoulder. Once there, I find palm trees, sea, sand and tranquillity, but, so far, paradise is proving elusive. In the restaurant (every hut complex has one, selling cheap Thai noodles, rice, and the ubiquitous travellers' fare of banana pancakes), I meet 34-year-old former antiques dealer Peter Bond, who's been in Thailand for three months 'discovering his creative side'. 'Everyone's looking for their own Beach,' he says. 'I'm not sure everyone finds it, or even if they know what they are looking for, but this is mine.'

A thirtysomething Geordie in casual holiday gear dances manically by himself, vainly trying to get the party going

'I'm here for the next six months, as long as things don't change too much. It's getting more commercialised all the time. When I first came to Thailand, I stayed on Koh Pha-Ngan. There was just one hut and a Thai family living on the beach I found. When I went back six months later, it was a restaurant, surrounded by several huts.' I realise I might just have crashed his paradise. As we talk, several other residents gather round to check out me and the other new arrivals. There is Xavier, a camp Parisian who talks of suicide attempts and his friends Vanessa Paradis and Jean-Marc Barr (yes, really); a mysterious writer who practises self-styled t'ai chi; a quiet Israeli couple; and Amanda, a thirtysomething Londoner who has a Thai boyfriend. As Amanda talks, it's clear she wants to escape the backpackers, too. Having spent twelve months in Thailand, the majority at the huts, she thinks the whole point of travelling is to immerse yourself in the culture of the place you're living in. 'You should get to know the Thais, enjoy the local food, spend some money to enjoy life. There are those who don't connect with Thailand. We call them stiggers,' she says. 'They float in, want to see this and that, try to live as cheaply as they can, even though they're financed by their father's credit card. They dress like hippies, eat rice and tomato ketchup to save money, and even share bottles of water. Water only costs 20p! A meal is about £1. Luckily, the majority all congregate on Koh Pha-Ngan, which is now far more commercialised than here.' The atmosphere at the huts is laid back. The people are convivial, advice is offered on where to go, and joints are passed around freely. The residents have adopted the Thai way of relaxing among the coconut trees, lying in hammocks, and eating the local green curry. Time has no meaning, and days lose their names. No one ever makes any plans. >



Waiting around at Koh Samui's ferry port is an exhausting business; Peter Bond discovers his 'creative side', below



< But, just as in *The Beach*, the desire to protect their settlement from non-like-minded invaders leads to paranoia. I can feel tension lurking beneath the surface. It's hard trying to fit in with those who have chosen not to fit in, a living dope opera. Later, Peter tells me he is a 'guest' of Amanda's because she has been there the longest. 'Oh, right,' I bluffed, 'I see.' It seems there are rules of behaviour to follow, even if nobody knows what those rules are. The following morning, I catch myself unconsciously twisting my hair, lost in thought. When I look up, so is everyone else. I feel like I'm in some kind of therapy group. It takes a swim in the Hin Lat waterfall to feel restored. A main attraction for tourists, it's a trek through banana trees and over rocks to reach the top. In places, the pathway is littered with empty water bottles and cigarette packets. Later, I meet a group of Irish postgraduates in a backpacker bar. Amanda would probably call them stiggers. 'We saved and worked to come away, to travel, and we just want have a good time,' says Aitbhe Gaffney, 22. 'Some travellers look down on us for that, treating us just like holidaymakers. They have a holier-than-thou attitude, but in fact they're no different from

Only a palm tree breaks the view to the sea, above which a star glints. The next day, I realise this was my Beach

hopes of finding my own Beach are fading fast. I hop on a bus filled with backpackers that's headed for the Big Buddha, a huge golden statue. Everyone stares silently at their feet. Perhaps they haven't found their Beach, either. Or perhaps it's just the weather. I ask Bo Hewlett, 23, a Londoner, newly arrived from India, if she has come across any hippy communities like those in *The Beach*. 'No,' she says, excitedly. 'But do you know where they are? I'd love to find them. I've met all sorts, the Berghaus travellers, the students, the pretend hippies.' When I tell her I'm writing an article about Thailand, she adds: 'I'm skint. You must put that in.' I never did find out why. I head off to Lamai beach but it's full of German holidaymakers. Things move fast and places change from month to month – from peaceful havens to hippy territory, to tourist destinations, to peaceful havens again. That night, the last before I fly home after five solid days of searching, I also visit hell in the form of the Green Mango nightclub in Chaweng. This is pure hedonist territory for those who just want to lose their heads. The Thai mafia are more than happy to help by supplying the necessary stimulants and to pump out techno music from gigantic speakers. For me, it's a long way from the paradise I'd imagined. I leave after ten minutes and almost break into a sprint. I collapse on the bed in my hut, exhausted physically and mentally. I didn't find my Beach. Ironically, even though Thailand is riddled with corruption, you can sleep safely with your door wide open. Staring out, only the arch of a palm tree breaks the view to the sea, just 25 yards away, above which a lone star is glinting. The only sound is the wind in the trees and the gushing of the waves licking the sand. There are no holidaymakers, tourists, backpackers, travellers, clubbers or hippies around. The Thais have a phrase which fits them: 'Same, same, but different.' Instead, just one of the dogs that roam around is sleeping soundly on the bench outside. I fall into a deep, relaxing sleep, away from all the madness. It's only the next day I realise that this was my Beach. The moment had passed and I hadn't even noticed, too busy still trying to work out where I'd find it. In Thailand, you don't go looking for paradise – it finds you. 'Life is what happens while you're busy making plans.' John Lennon was right, and wasn't he the most famous hippie of all? Of course, I can't tell you where my Beach is. I might go there again and wouldn't want it spoiled by intruders. That's if it has not already been turned into a McDonald's. ■ Chris Morris travelled to Thailand with *Bridge The World. Flights to Bangkok with Qantas, flying via Frankfurt or Rome, cost £358 for departures between 16 April and 30 June. Bangkok to Koh Samui with Bangkok Airways is £100 return. For more details, call Bridge The World on 0207-911 0900. The Beach is released nationwide on 11 February.*