

y plan was simple enough.
Go to Thailand and retrace
the route taken by Rich,
the protagonist of Alex
Garland's cult novel *The*Beach. You know the story.
A lone traveller finds an
earthly paradise: people
living in blissful seclusion on
a secret Thai island. And then things go wrong.

Rich's big adventure starts when a fellow traveller slits his wrists in an adjoining room at a backpacker hostel, leaving a map to The Beach. My adventure starts with a Lonely Planet Guide, a borrowed rucksack and jet lag.

I've always avoided the 'travelling' scene, a decision I made a few years ago when a trusted friend arrived back from his travels declaring himself a better person, espousing enlightened theories on the evils of deodorant and toothpaste, then collapsing later that night from malnutrition. Luckily for me, his top-of-the-range gear – everything in microlight form, from pillows and towels to sleeping bags, Buddhist temple scarves and Tiger Balm – came in very handy for my first foray as a backpacker.

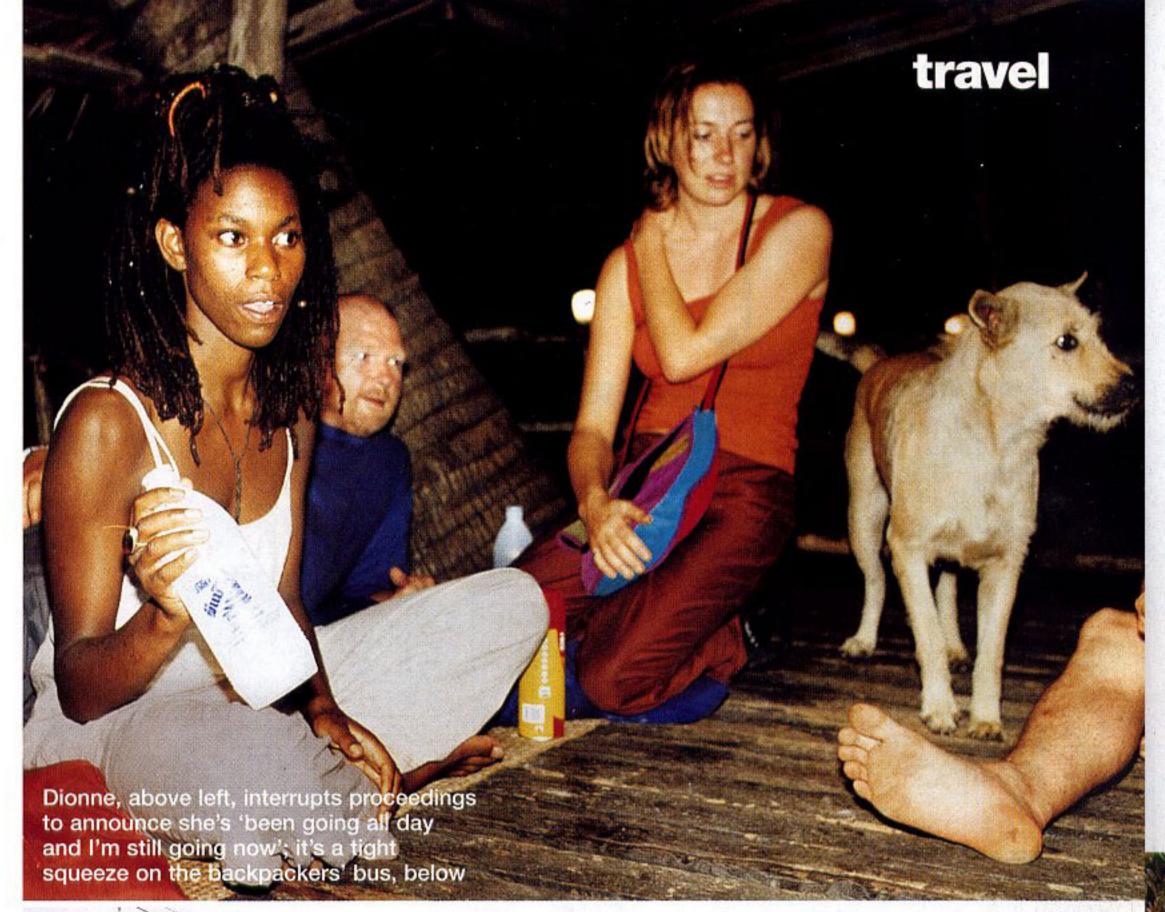
Rich's first stop is Bangkok's Khao San Road, so naturally I head there first. The atmosphere is heady after a bus journey from the airport, during which everyone – mostly young, cleancut, first-time backpackers of all nationalities, and older British and German holidaymakers – apologised for their new rucksacks and suitcases as if they were naughty children.

Khao San Road is the centre of backpackerland in Bangkok. Some arrive broken by hours of travel, others are excited. Some wander around high on drugs, others are looking for sex, drugs and adventure. The Thais, meanwhile, simply smile and offer various lifestyle packages for visitors to choose from before they set off on their adventure. There is an endless stretch of Internet cafés, shops and stalls selling everything from psychedelic clothes and fried caterpillars (they tasted like Chipsticks) to jewellery and cult literature, all consumed voraciously by those on the road to self-enlightenment.

In backpacker bars, such as the Happy Valley Café and the Khao San Central, conversation doesn't get much past: 'Where have you come from, where are you going next?', and 'I can't believe we live on the same road in Manchester! That's so weird! How long is it since you went to the toilet? I'm four days, and they're yellow!'

The longer-term travellers just chill out and watch us newcomers with a knowing, amused eye of having been there, done that, bought the tie-dye T-shirt. Only a thirtysomething Geordie in casual holiday gear seems to have any life about him as he dances manically by himself, vainly trying to get a party going. Eventually he gives up. As do I, retiring to my £3.27-a-night hostel (the Khao San Palace Hotel, and it is more of a 6ft x 6ft cell than a palatial suite).

The following morning, the sun goes in.
The word on the street is that monsoons are





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.

'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.

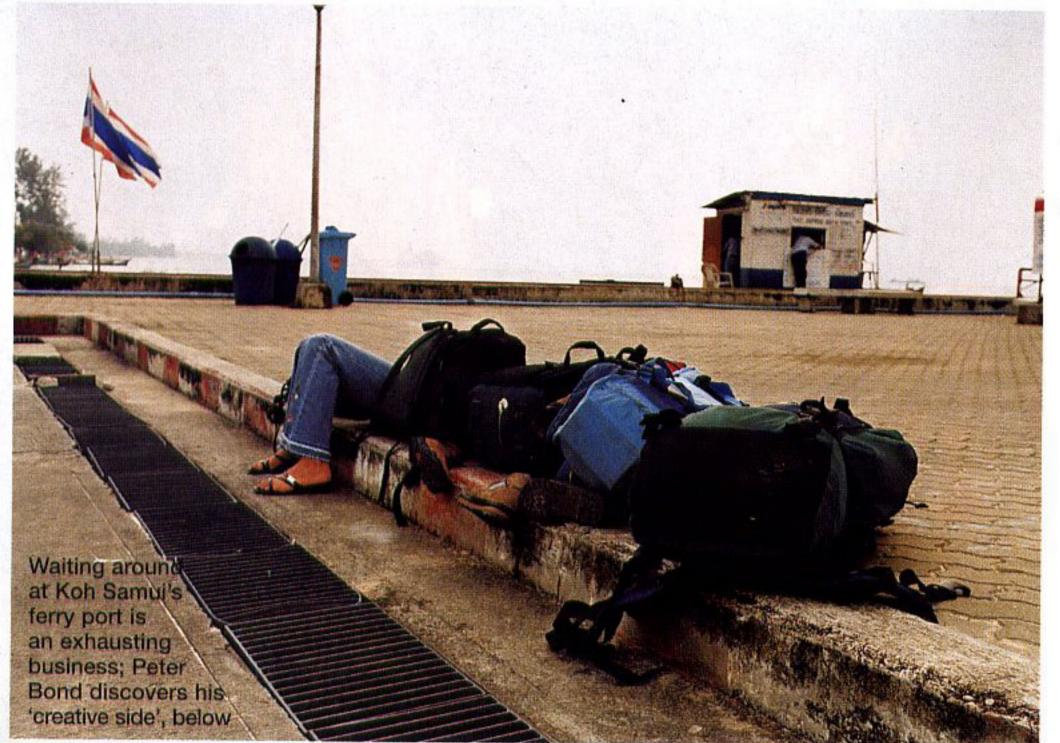
As Amanda talks, it's clear she wants to escape the backpackers, too. Having spent twelve months in Thailand, the majority at the huts, she thinks the whole point of travelling is to immerse yourself in the culture of the place you're living in. 'You should get to know the Thais, enjoy the local food, spend some money to enjoy life.

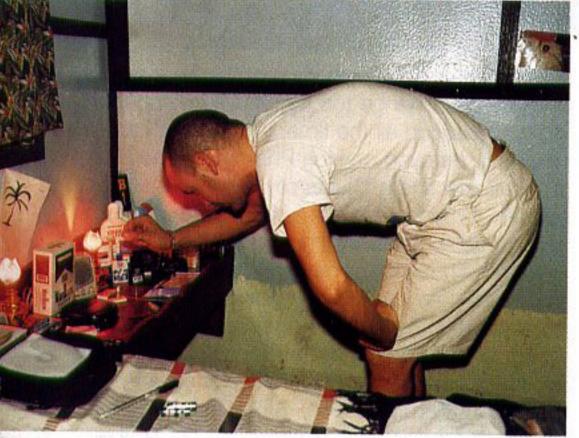
'There are those who don't connect with Thailand. We call them stiggers,' she says. 'They float in, want to see this and that, try to live as cheaply as they can, even though they're financed by their father's credit card. They dress like hippies, eat rice and tomato ketchup to save money, and even share 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. \triangleright

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

travel





□ 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-thanthou attitude, but in fact they're no different from

everyone else. They say they want to discover their environment, get into the culture, but really what everyone wants is a good time.

'It's the old joke about the public school postgrads who dress like hippies, put on a hippy attitude, but are no better than tourists in Ibiza who just want to get drunk and have sex. They don't care about the environment.'

The following night, I move to a neighbouring settlement, where the air is thick with the smell of marijuana. Suddenly, and unexpectedly, Dionne, a twentysomething model, jumps to her feet. 'I have an announcement to make!' she cries. 'I'm sorry, but I must say this.' Everyone waits, including Jonathan, an unemployed Internet consultant from London, who himself has recently announced, twice, that he's been tripping on the magic mushrooms he found in some dung and cooked into an omelette.

'I've been going all day and I'm still going now,' says Dionne. 'I just had to say that.' I expect everyone to applaud, and almost want to join in. I'm beginning to know how she feels. It's easy to lose your marbles in these circumstances.

I wonder if a game of pool will help. But it is never a good idea to take on Kurt, a Canadian surfer who declares himself the undisputed champion. Fortunately, Nathan, from Plymouth appears. He steals my cue and says: 'Don't take any shit from him. He's American.' And once Nathan has crushed Canada on the pool table, Kurt admits: 'I know everyone hates me. They think I'm just a rich kid travelling around with loads of money, trying to live a hippy lifestyle. I just want to connect with people, that's all. I'm not competitive.' Nathan chooses the moment to announce that he 'hates Americans'. 'He's Canadian,' I point out. 'Is he? Shit. He's probably alright then,' Nathan adds. thought he was American.' One world, one people, is a nice illusion.

The next day, the sun still hasn't come out. No boats are running to any of the other islands. My

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 spoilt 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.