

Mathew Adams

Many Christmas

It was Christmas morning and I was genuinely miserable. This was unusual, as it normally took until Boxing Day for a sense of creeping despair to catch up with me.

Yet this festive depression was not caused by my recurring disenchantment with the hollow consumerism of Christmas; rather it was because I felt lonely. Three days earlier I had arrived in Phimai; an obscure, little town on the neglected rump of North-East Thailand. I had grown sick of Bangkok's rigidly enforced party atmosphere and weary of the company of drunks, so on impulse I had careered off the beaten track. My guidebook informed me that the Northeast Region of Thailand receives only 2% of the country's visitors, which convinced me it would be the perfect antidote.

I was the sole tourist on the bus, and when I disembarked with my oversized rucksack and straggly blonde hair, I felt conspicuous. Phimai did not match my imagined ideal of a picturesque rural village; instead it was a nondescript provincial town of tin roofed, clapboard houses in utilitarian grid form. The well-maintained, candystriped kerbstones and shiny pickup trucks, glinting in the sun, spoke more of civic pride than the rustic simplicity I was longing for.

A single rickshaw driver reclined listlessly on his vehicle, not bothering to accost me. The cut-throat competition which pervaded in the South was clearly unknown here.

"Tchuk Tchuk?" he asked, as I approached.

"No thanks," I said. Then I presented my guidebook, pointing to a hotel; the cheaper of two listed.

"Where is this?" I asked.

"You cannot go" he replied. "Hotel is, uhhh - burn down."

I groaned under my breath. I'd heard that one before. Touts were constantly telling me that a hotel had closed down or fallen over. Undoubtedly, he was about to suggest a convenient alternative, owned by his cousin.

"No it hasn't" I sighed wearily, and left to find it alone.

I lost myself down a tight maze of alleyways and when I finally discovered the plot, I stopped short. Behind a flimsy construction fence, rested the charred remains of a wooden house; like a blackened, upturned ribcage. Jesus, he was telling the truth! I laughed out loud in disbelief and made a sheepish retreat under the attentive gaze of the rickshaw driver. I had more success locating the second hotel, which was a modest family-run establishment. The reception desk was in the living room, below a shelfload of tacky Buddhist figurines. The shrivelled walnut of a landlady, greeted me warmly.

"You want stay?"

For the next two days I wandered around Phimai, absorbing the local culture; such as it was. The residential streets offered very few opportunities for worthwhile sightseeing, but my favourite landmark was a shop selling 'spirit houses'. These are bright, intricately constructed bird tables, used for making offerings of incense and green tea to the spirits. There was something inexplicably satisfying about seeing the miniature dollhouse temples, perched on lecterns and ranked in file on the shop forecourt.

Yet by Christmas Eve, after several days of solitary wandering, I had cultivated a desperate loneliness. So, as I passed the local bar that night, the clamour of English voices arrested me. From the doorway I observed two middle-aged cockneys, slavering unashamedly, as a Thai girl in hot-pants bent over the pool table, attempting a clumsy pot. The fattest cockney suddenly registered my presence and flashed me a leering, gap-toothed grin. His nauseating smile plunged me into a deep depression. Why the hell was I alone on Christmas Eve, in this suburban, Thai hinterland, where only obese sex tourists ventured? I scowled and retreated to my hotel.

I spent a languid Christmas morning being reclusive in my room; but in the afternoon I forced myself to visit the Khmer temple ruins. It was an activity I had deferred until Christmas day, as a meagre present to myself. Strolling between the ancient stacks of red, sugarcube blocks; under the green translucence of banana leaves, I couldn't help feeling somewhat better.

Back in my room I formed a grim resolution: to get drunk at the bar and leave the next day. But as I locked my door, the owner spotted me.

"You go?" she asked.

"Just drinking -" I confessed.

Without another word, she seated me at the family table and gestured to stay put. She returned, with a plateful of steaming, spring-rolls and a tiny, neatly-wrapped package. She nodded with encouragement.

"For you!"

I peeled away the wrapping, to reveal a delicate, mahogany box, inlaid with silverwork.

"Many Christmas!" she smiled.

A lump formed in my throat.

"Thank you so much" I replied hoarsely.

Five thousand miles from home, a Buddhist grandma - a total stranger - had bought me a Christmas present. I felt a pang of sadness. I had nothing to give in return.