



Global gastronomy

Travel writer **Jane Hodges** would venture around the world to capture a stellar food experience — this one in Thailand only took her half way around!



Globetrotting Gourmet group at lunch at Four Seasons Resort, Chiang Mai.



Flower seller with locally grown roses.

PHOTOS: MAREE AZZOPARDI

Food memories are some of my most vivid. Like a photo album, they are a link to time and place: I recall the weird, slippery saltiness of my first oyster at nine; the revelation of ‘real’ pizza on my first trip to Italy; and the sunburst of flavour of the finest apricots I’ve tasted (a kilogram devoured silently in the back seat on a family holiday drive in Tasmania’s Derwent Valley).

And I will never forget the traditional northern Thai ploughman’s lunch I shared with fellow travellers sitting on the floor of a rice barn set on a lake edged by sun-drenched rice paddies; water buffalo wallowing nearby and birdsong twittering on the breeze.

The rice barn is in the grounds of the Four Seasons Resort in Chiang Mai where we had just been planting rice and learning about its growth cycle and how the resort donates the crop to the local hill tribe villagers.

For all our back-breaking work, Executive Chef Rewat Srilachai and his crew laid out a feast of narm prig lanna (northern style chilli dips with vegetables, boiled egg and pork crackling); sai oua (local pork

sausage); a local hill tribe specialty, larb pla tub tim (jungle curry of ruby fish baked in bamboo); Gai Yang (grilled chicken with tamarind dressing) and kaow tom mud (sweet sticky rice and banana wrapped in banana leaf).

We were under the expert chaperone of the Globetrotting Gourmets – not basketballers who love to eat, but cookbook author and food stylist Robert Carmack and textile designer and erstwhile chef Morrison Polkinghorne, who guide several small group culinary and cultural tours to Asia each year.

We began our eight-day journey with two nights at the elegant Four Seasons Bangkok which set the tone for a string of highlights including: dining at ex-Sydney chef David Thompson’s amazing modern Thai gem, Nahm; visiting gilded Buddhist temples; learning to cook a banquet step by step at Four Season’s indoor/outdoor cooking school in the jungle; watching silk being spun and having Morrison on hand to advise on quality and designs to buy; a walking and tasting tour of Bangkok’s busy Aw Taw Kaw market with street food expert ▶



Market stall holder and cook in Chiang Mai.



The best barbecued fish.

TRAVEL FACTS

Getting there

Thai Airways flies to Bangkok several times a week from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth. Visit:

[\[@\] www.thaiairways.com](http://www.thaiairways.com)

Bangkok Air flies daily from Bangkok to Chiang Mai

[\[@\] www.bangkokair.com](http://www.bangkokair.com)

For Globetrotting Gourmet departures, tel: 0400 663 644 and visit: [\[@\] www.AsianFoodTours.com](http://www.AsianFoodTours.com)

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Kh Chow, author of *Bangkok's Top 50 Street Food Stalls*; and a morning spent with two experts who set us up to appreciate the food and culture that lay ahead of us.

British expat and long-time local Philip Cornwel-Smith author of the cultural bible, *Very Thai*, schooled us on the Lanna culture of Chiang Mai; and M L Sirichalerm Svasti aka Chef McDang, Thailand's answer to Gordon Ramsay minus the swearing, prepared us to eat. The highly effusive TV chef, columnist, cookbook author and foremost Thai food expert, painted a brief history of Thai cuisine, its cooking methods, ingredients and flavour profile and explained to us the concept of 'sum rap Thai' – literally the way Thais eat – family-style with a set of dishes shared communally.

We were entertained and educated by experts, but nothing felt high falootin' or too basic. Whether you were a foodie or a novice, the experience was one of quality.

As well as their access to those in the know, our hosts' own knowledge, insights and love of their work ensures their bespoke tours are a very special and exciting adventure.

Robert took the lead in markets and restaurants explaining weird and wonderful ingredients, the nuances of flavours and regional food specialties; while Morrison was the cultural attache – fluent in Thai, he interpreted the poetry and the practicality of the language as we went – a beautiful example is his translation of a dish, pla nam tok – pla is fish and nam tok means waterfall – so the fish is literally dripping in sauce. For me this kind of detail brought much meaning to the journey.

And even though many people speak some English, Morrison's Thai often scored us an 'in' – gaining us extra information, a tasty morsel to sample or a wider smile than we would have achieved on our own.

On this trip I shared some of the best food and food-gathering experiences of my life in the company of people who truly care about where food comes from, what is done to it and by whom: food memories to savour. •



Amazing serenity away from the hustle and bustle.



There's something about Thailand that can almost immediately have you feeling more calm, content, healthier and happier than you have in a very long time. There's a sense of tranquillity and balance here that is so easy to tap into the second you arrive. Leave the stress and clatter behind at home and immerse yourself in indulgent bliss. Think massages and spa treatments like you've never had before. Think reading a book on a gorgeous beach by the aqua blue water. Think relaxing in a hammock. Think nothing. Take the opportunity to re-energise and revitalise your body and soul. You deserve it and you know you need it.

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