

Trips



Local kids take no notice of a boatload of tourists



Lamai beach, Samui island, Thailand

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE BUNK

Wonderment: not quite dead at 38

STEVE BUNK loses weight as the oldest lotus-eater in South-East Asia

I'm 38, youth is gone, yet I still sourly fend off middle age. I steal a few weeks of freedom and return to South-East Asia, to the backpacker's trail, that circuitous stepping-stone adventure of cheap hotels, mountains and beaches followed faithfully by an international melange of young adventurers, every one feeding a guide book, travel-by-numbers, an entire continent, the whole world turned into a practice area for orienteers.

I peek into my guide book when no one's watching (what the hell, it helps) and pick out the Railway Station Hotel in Kuala Lumpur. It's more expensive than some of the others listed but has the advantage of being a few metres from the train — no need to hassle with local transportation — and it accepts credit cards. Yes, I am middle-aged. There's no wonder left in the struggle merely to find my way around.

The hotel is a tattered Moorish extravaganza, the room of palatial dimensions with very little in it. After a shower, I stand in front of a mirror set against peeling paint, grasping in each hand a dense roll of fat: guilt made flesh, age and indulgence. I vow to lose it, somehow.

This early part of the trip, I'm still easing back into being a relatively comfortless creature and I approach the effort of travel with

as much resignation as resolution. Why am I determined to forego the grinning taxi drivers and air-conditioned rooms? Simple: I want to stay, as Dylan (Bob) would have it, forever young. Travel is youth, tourism is old age. If I give up doing the hard things, I won't be travelling.

That evening, I walk to the cinema, a long stroll full of traffic and, at one corner, I stop a tick too long to look at the map. I now have an immensely friendly and helpful young passerby as companion, eager to show off his English and his beloved K.L. Well, I would have preferred to be alone but, without such interactions, the visit loses purpose, becomes a valueless ego trip; been there, done that, back home knowing nothing, unaware even of ignorance, atrophied of spirit, comfortable, a tourist.

Next day, I buy a paperback copy of Yukio Mishima's *Runaway Horses* from a second-hand book store. I'm startled to read: "How oddly situated man is apt to find himself at age 38! His youth belongs to the distant past. Yet the period of memory beginning with the end of youth and extending to the present has left him not a single vivid impression. And therefore he persists in feeling that nothing more than a fragile barrier separates him from his youth. He is forever hearing with the utmost clarity the sounds of his neighbouring domain, but there is no way to penetrate the barrier."

Now I really feel sorry for myself. Those initial misgivings about again submitting to the indignities of travel give way to sweet melancholy, the nostalgia-in-action of re-experiencing my lost youth, travelling the same way I did a decade ago on



Arm-pit sniffing is an endearing Gibbon trait

the European curlicues of this long global ribbon and, before that, in America.

I go to an island, then to another even more remote, and another. Here, the awful slimness of youth reigns. I get the last hut on the hill, with a hammock on the veranda overlooking the village and the ocean. I feel this perfect hut has been waiting, empty, for me.

In the hammock, the sound I hear from the neighbouring domain of the bay is a wolf's cry. It rises in the middle of the afternoon, from one of the swimmers, a spontaneous call of joy and energy answered immediately by a distant female. I smile like a parent, knowing I could no more howl like that, unselfconsciously, than I could be 20 again.

By now, rice and swimming have combined to do their trusty South-East Asian fat farm trick and I can walk around in Speedos once more. I prow the beach, feeling like a masquerader. The beautiful young women, stalking about naked despite possible offence to the local people and, with their boyfriends, openly smoking *ganja* (sold to them for absurdly low prices by people running the beach-side restaurants, this place being far from a police station and the well-known horrors awaiting drug dealers in South-East Asia), are the interchangeably gorgeous low-rent jet-set offspring of capitalism, to be found on every nice island listed in every guide book in any western language. It's reassuring to see nothing's changed — except, of course, me.

Back in the hammock, Mishima continues to harp remorselessly on 38: "An age when one felt strangely unready to say that one had lived and yet reluctant to acknowledge the death of youth. An age when the savour of one's experiences turned ever so slightly sour, and



Up-market accommodation, Samui island

when, day by day, one took less pleasure in new things. An age when the charm of every diverting foolishness quickly faded."

I reflect that the death of youth probably is the death of wonderment, a condition which should defy chronology but seems to do so only in those who have not had wide experience, because youth and wonderment go with innocence and ignorance. I reach down to the board floor of the veranda and rock the hammock, relishing the romantic image of world-weary traveller.

A kid in Penang comes to mind, a teenager sitting on the dirty sidewalk in the early morning, waiting for the travel agency to open. He's doing sums on a pocket calculator. Being on a budget puts him on par with the locals. He has to seek

out bargains as they do, travel and eat with them, live their way. He might go home and become an accountant but at least he's done the finishing school of the backpackers' trail, *de rigueur* nowadays and rightly so.

The constant readjustment of established thinking and behaviour patterns which goes with travel: isn't this allied to the retention of wonder? In the way a fantasy requires a wilful suspension of disbelief from its audience, travel insists on childlike wonderment even from the jaded. Otherwise, it becomes drudgery, resulting in the same reluctance I felt at the beginning of this trip.

That reluctance has melted away with the body fat, replaced by the calm exuberance of being on the road again, if only for a while. Surprisingly, it feels relaxed rather than itchy to be forever dislocated from the discos, the girls with their silver butterfly earrings lodged in nostrils, the bandanas and wild-patterned cotton pants, the ankle bracelets and headwork necklaces on bare torsos, the counterfeit emotions of boat-side partings after six-day affairs. Lightweight love, sadness until the next port of call, youth's hip quotient in all this lewd transience, bless their souls and good luck to 'em.

Even if I have been mooning around for weeks now, entertaining pseudo-intellectual thoughts and missing the life boat. I also got what I wanted from this trip: I'm refreshed. That moment standing in the shallows under the limestone cliffs facing the exquisite Swedish girl, too young for me yet possibly willing (my gratitude for her attention is boundless), instantly becomes indelible memory, a future restorative. With relief, I realise I will travel like this again, somewhere else, hopefully forever young. ■



The rush hour: Sunset Beach, Phangnga