



A cleansing break

Lapsed vegetarian **Mark Stratton** took extreme measures and travelled to Thailand, to see if a nine-day purification festival would help restore his discipline



I initially became a vegetarian for health reasons. In 1987, I set off for my first trip to India, thinking I should avoid meat at all costs to prevent illness. Of course, India is largely a vegetarian paradise but, after six months, I felt great about my new diet, and emboldened by my own sense of willpower. However, my career as a travel writer has meant that, over the last decade, I've strayed from this path. What could I do when sitting down with Saharan Moors for a meal of camel? Or when offered a brochette of goat's intestines as guest of honour in a poor Rwandan household? Say no, and cause offence?

I'm no longer certain why I persist with vegetarianism – for health reasons, animal

welfare, or lifestyle. What saddens me most, however, is how I relate this to a failure of personal discipline and willpower – two characteristics I had always valued in myself.

An opportunity to travel to Thailand's annual Vegetarian Festival, therefore, seemed an ideal way to rekindle my faith. Almost like renewing a marriage vow. I was especially keen to explore how the festival is said to relate vegetarianism to physical and spiritual purification.

This nine-day festival takes place during the ninth lunar month of the Chinese calendar, usually October. Originating from the early nineteenth century, the festival is rooted in Chinese spiritual, not Thai Buddhist, practices. Legend tells of a travelling Chinese opera troupe



falling ill around Phuket Town. By observing a vegetarian diet, and worshipping Chinese divinities, the troupe were miraculously restored to health. Local Thais were said to be so impressed, they adopted these practices to drive away ill health – and so, the festival was born.

Today, it's celebrated all over Thailand, particularly among the country's Sino-Thai communities within Chinese temples. Phuket, an exotic island in the Andaman Sea, located off Thailand's gangling southern isthmus, hosts the largest event. But I would stay 56 miles north of there, at a coastal resort known as The Sarojin, to experience a smaller, yet no less fervent, version around Takua Pa.

From the outset, I embraced the festival's stringent rules. For the first time in ages, I became fussy about food (because fish sauce and shrimp paste are the bedrock of Thai cuisine). I wore white, like all participants, as a symbol of purity, and didn't drink alcohol or swear. No sex wasn't a

problem, as I'd travelled solo, while, unsurprisingly, neither was avoiding the festival due to pregnancy or menstruation – both *verboden* for Thai women actively participating in rituals.

The festival is a vividly colourful affair of flag-waving processions and the setting-up of little shrines outside premises laden with offerings of incense and fruit, in return for blessings of good health. In Takua Pa, I browsed vegetarian stalls and was invited in off the street for spicy veg curry by the Nukuls, a generous couple looking to enhance their karma by providing food to strangers.

But the atmosphere changed dramatically into something far darker the moment the Ma Song arrived. A cult for which the Vegetarian Festival is famed, the Ma Song 'soldiers of God' become spiritually possessed, thus enabling the festival divinities to walk among mortals. I watched these chosen hosts convulse uncontrollably when the spirits entered them, amid intoxicating cymbal and drum music. >



ABOVE: The Sarojin; the Ma Song indulge in some gruesome practices

< At this point, the Ma Song began gruesome practices of self-mutilation in their trance-like state. I witnessed skewers inserted through cheeks, tongues sliced repeatedly by axes, and self-flagellation. Hot-coal walking is common, while men bearing portable shrines dance maniacally upon carpets of firecrackers until their clothes are charred and shredded.

I was astounded. How exactly this was achieving purification through vegetarianism seemed a little sketchy. 'They are obtaining purity through strength,' explained Jaruwat Bunyang, who had accompanied me from The Sarojin. 'They're showing that, despite not eating meat, they have the power to endure pain and drive away bad health.'

As eye-catching as this was, it didn't reveal any tangible personal insights into spiritual or physical purification, as I had no intention of skewering myself like a kebab. In reality, the festival pays homage to folklore, and is a temporary meat-free detox.

Many Thais I spoke with who had been observing vegetarianism throughout it said they felt cleansed yet, despite this, they would return to

carnivorous ways once the festival finished.

My own personal salvation, however, lay closer to home. The Sarojin is 10 acres of paradise. On a white sand beach facing the Andaman Sea, its contemporary villas are secreted amid an exotic garden of lily ponds and fig trees. Its ambience and appearance are easy on the soul, and during my stay I began to realise that the more complex pieces of my own personal jigsaw, such as feelings of self-betrayal induced by my dietary foibles, could be resolved by overall positivism about my health.

I swam and cycled every day. I practised Hatha yoga on the beach and meditation techniques in a Buddhist temple. I was serenaded at night by frog choruses and fell asleep to the sound of the sea one afternoon while enjoying a heavenly mint-and-eucalyptus-lotion massage at the resort's Pathways Spa. Meanwhile, The Sarojin's friendly staff seemed delighted with my observance of this important festival, and I felt good about this. In a touching gesture, Aob-Jang, a waitress, purchased some festival goodies with her own money for me to try.

I also felt my veggie mojo returning during a cookery lesson with a Sarojin chef, who taught me



just how simple and satisfying it was to prepare from scratch Thai dishes such as green curry with coconut milk, rather than being lazy and plumping for tofu ready meals when back home.

I felt fit and healthy by the end of my stay, yet knew challenges lay ahead. My assignment after Thailand would take me to Uruguay to live as a gaucho for a week. The spectre of steaks loomed.

But I felt physically and spiritually nourished, because I'd taken time to recall actions that mattered to me. Stepping off life's treadmill enabled me to reconnect with a latent feeling of how well strictly observing vegetarianism made me feel, and reignited a sense of self-discipline that is important for my own psyche. I vowed to make more time to exercise and meditate, to create a better overall healthy framework. However, this new-found energy wouldn't quite stretch to walking on hot coals. ■

GETTING THERE Seven nights in a garden residence room at The Sarojin, Khao Lak, cost from £1,420 per person room only, including flights with Eva Air from Heathrow and private transfers in resort, with Kuoni (01306 747008, kuoni.co.uk)

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WALES – The Welsh food revolution grows stronger every year. There's a crop of festivals celebrating local produce, from the Caerphilly Big Cheese Festival in July to the Conwy Honey Fair in September (the latter has been running for 700 years). visitwales.co.uk