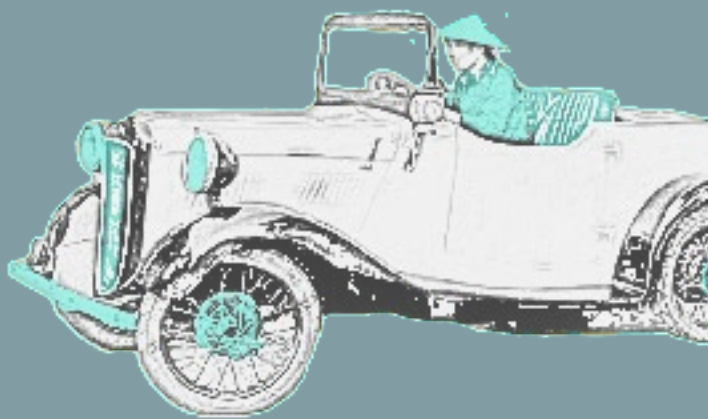




better late

than never

*Stories from a  
late-life traveller*



**DEREK WORKMAN**



better late  
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*stories from a late-life traveller*

**DEREK WORKMAN**

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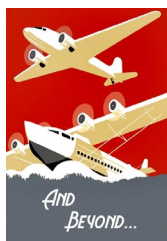
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*Most people's idea of a travel writer's life is one long round of first class travel to exotic destinations, stays in luxury hotels, cruises on the fanciest of liners and sumptuous meals served with superb wines. This may be the case for the Bill Brysons of this world, but for the Derek Workmans, who are around 99.9% of working travel writers, the reality couldn't be more different*

*Click on the image for the full story.*

# Introduction

I have been a travel writer for over twenty years, mostly covering Spain and Morocco, and, since my arrival in Thailand in 2015, dipping my toe into Asia.

When I arrived in Chiang Mai I began to produce a quarterly digital magazine, CHIANG MAI *uncovered*, writing about the weirdly wonderful places and events I discovered on regular bike rides around the city and area. But the world is a big place, and even the small part of it I regularly wrote about had led to hundreds of articles and tens of thousands of photos, a lot of it published in national and international media. So the next step was

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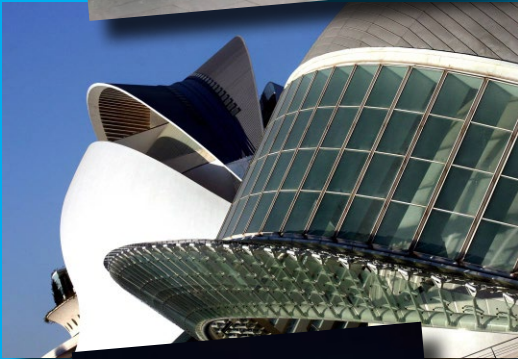
a website with a selection of stories culled from two decades as a full-time freelance travel writer, added to with more recent wanderings.

The stories in this ebook are a selection from the website. I hope you enjoy them, visit the site to read more, and come back regularly for updates. And if you do enjoy them please send this booklet to your friends.

*Bon voyage!*

Derek Workman

Chiang Mai, Thailand, February, 2020



better late than never





**S P A I N**



# Albarracín

Pastelería  
K&K  
confitería

*Hanging Houses  
and  
Vertiginous Views*

*Nothing quite prepares you for Albarracín, with its narrow streets terracing up the hillside and the casas colgadas, houses with wooden balconies precariously hanging over the streets below.*

When Walt Disney had Mickey Mouse running around medieval streets in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, he must have conjured up the idea after a visit to this mountain-top village, where the streets are so narrow that neighbours can not only shake hands from their windows but probably share the same curtains.

Officially designated a city, Albarracín it is little more than a large village, although as there is no Spanish equivalent word for the English 'town', only 'pueblo' or 'ciudad', it probably helps that the 'big village' has a Cathedral to raise it to its higher status.

Standing in the car-park below the town, staring upward, wondering how the wooden balconies above you haven't succumbed to the force of gravity after three hundred years, you are offered three choices; steep – a slope that rises up and provides access for residents and their cars, but the long way round; very steep – a stepped slope, one-third the length of the lower one but definitely puff-making; and 'I'm not sure I can

manage those' – a flight of steps that require a lot of knee-lifting but gets you into the heart of things pretty quickly.

The heat of the day hadn't arrived and I'd had my booster shot of caffeine from the café in the car park, so I took the Himalayan route, unaided by either a hand rail to pull me up the near vertical steps or Sherpa Tenzing to help with my bag. From below, everything looks easily identifiable, so that you can move between castle, cathedral and quaint alleyways with ease, but the moment you step into the shadowed red-stone gullies, whose walls and windows seem to curl inward over your head, their eaves almost touching, you are lost to the idea of

urban planning as you know it and have to guide yourself by instinct – usually wrong – or give yourself up to happenstance. The latter is usually the better option, given that the town is so small that if you get lost, just keep heading down and you will eventually arrive back at the car park.



When I arrive, breathless, at the top, I'm immediately wrapped in a shroud of antiquity as I walk under a thick-beamed archway with great oak posts sticking out at right-angles to support the houses above. With its crooked steps and battered ancient doors, it could pass for a location for a Charles Dickens story of the seedier side of London life. A sharp left at the end of a short passage leads me into the Plaza Mayor, the hub of village life.

Stand in the centre of the Plaza Mayor, and in a 360-degree turn you'll see a town square almost as it would have looked in the 16th and 17th centuries — but without the cars, and café chairs, of course. The buildings have been tidied but not tarted up and the streets that radiate off at odd angles are like cobbled, stone-and-iron canyons; up steps, around sharp bends, down tiny alleyways, where even in the height of summer only shadows dwell.



The Plaza is dominated by the Ayuntamiento, the Town Hall, which forms a 'U'. The square has its origins in the 13th century, when it was built on the foundations of the ancient wall, but the more 'modern' building of the Town Hall is the result of a total renovation in the 16th century, built in the typical Aragonés style of architecture of the period, with its colonnaded lower level providing shade during the heat of the summer months and the snows of winter. To the side, a mirador looks down over the village and the Riu Guadalaviar. A black and white photo of the

Plaza Mayor, taken during the 1950's, shows that nothing has changed structurally in the intervening half-century, probably due more to the economic decline the town went into after the War of Independence with France in the early 1800s until the 'deliverance' of tourism during the last decade than any premeditated conservation on the part of the town council.

For centuries, the Plaza Mayor was the end, or perhaps the beginning, depending in which direction you were headed, of the road to Molina de Aragon, hence the name of the tiny street, barely a couple of metres wide in some places, that heads off into the shadows opposite the Town Hall, Calle Portal de Molino. It's difficult to imagine flocks of sheep and cattle being driven down it to market in the town square during Albarracín's heyday, when cattle and wool exports during the 18th century paid for the magnificently grand, rambling *casas señoriales*, noblemen's homes, that date from this period.

I walk up the narrow street, feeling warmth exude from the ancient walls, not only from the heat of the sun the stone has absorbed, but from the dusky pink hue of some of the buildings. This is because of the locally produced plaster, which contains tiny flecks of iron, which rusts when it rains and gives the walls their unique colour.

Half-way up Calle Portal, it opens out into a small square,

the Plaza de la Comindad, where the Casa de la Comunidad stands. Up until the 19th century, representatives of the twenty two villages and towns of Albarracín would meet here. Far more delightful, though, is the upper area of the Plaza, known as the Rincón de Abanico, Fan Corner, because the interconnecting houses spread out, imitating the shape of a fan. At the end of the street, where one of the original entrances to the town, the Portal de Molino, still stands, I turn around to look at probably the most emblematic building of Albarracín, la Casa de Julianetta, a tiny higgledy-piggledy house, built into the Y of Calle Portal de Molino and Calle Santiago, where there's barely a straight line or sure angle. Other than that it was the home of Julianeta, "una señora del pueblo que tenía una casa muy humilde, modesta, muy propia de Albarracín", a lady of the village who's house was very humble, modest, and typical of Abarracín, there is no historic or cultural reference, but it is a wonderful bit of 'eye candy' for lovers of Medieval architecture.

It seems strange to me that something smaller than many village churches I've seen in Spain should be exalted with the name 'Cathedral', but Alabrracín definitely has one, dating from the 16th century. On closer inspection, it doesn't live up to it's grandiose title either, it's most delightful artwork being the stunningly carved wooden alter-piece of San Pedro, removed from the Iglesia de Santa María, on the edge of the city, when it was de-consecrated and became an auditorium. At various times the cathedral plunges into semi-darkness, and the assembled visitors wait for someone to drop a one euro coin into the slot to switch on the spot lights, strategically placed in the side chapels and around the 17th-century High Altar. I once spent €10 this way trying to photograph the glorious Luis XV-inspired ballroom of the Casino in Murcia, giving everyone a free show while getting in my way, so I declined to do so



again. I followed the crowd of misers as we left the building in darkness and empty of redemptive souls.

One thing that did strike me about the Cathedral was that it has the only calvario I've ever seen inside a building. The calvario, the stations of the cross, are usually found, at least in Spain, forming a ziggurat footpath up a hill crowned by an hermita, with each of the fourteen stages marked by ceramic images in small niches. Here, they are illustrated by ancient oil paintings, cracked and faded with years of exposure, interspersed with seven images of Mary in the simple garb of a nun, each with an extra sword plunged into her breast, representing the Seven Sorrows, one for each of seven sorrowful episodes that occurred during her life.

As no trip to Paris can be seen as complete without a ride to the top of the Eiffel Tower, a climb up to the walls of Albarracín is also an itineristic necessity, (although having lived in the French Capital during my thirties and not having entered the Tower's lift, I could possibly have passed on the Albarracín excursion).

The castle stands on a rise behind the Cathedral, but the long crescent of the extant wall radiates from both sides of a tower, curving like protective arms. Which is exactly what they were intended to be. Whereas most walled cities used the walls to protect only the citizens and therefore concentrated on the urban structure, those of Albarracín were designed to safeguard livestock during times of siege and to provide ample grazing land.

Climbing up to the castle may not have seemed the most sensible thing to do on a steaming July day after a heavy lunch of excellent local chuletetas ternasco, a specially bred lamb, unique to Aragon, that even has its own Denominación de Origen. Either a way, to walk off lunch or bring on a coronary, depending on how you look at it, but it needs to be done at sometime for the stunning views.

The apparently steep incline isn't as difficult as it looks, as the path meanders up quite languidly, (unless you want to use the path at the side of the wall which could probably benefit by having a Stannah Stair Lift installed), and is almost a nature ramble – bees gather pollen, dragones, dusky greyish-green lizards, skitter across the stony path, and black-winged butterflies

take short bursts of erratic flight in their short, day-long lives.

The first stop-off point is a short flight of steps up to the top of the right wing of the wall. As you take the last step onto a small landing, the wall offsets to the left – and vertigo kicks in! What appears to be a wall of modest height from below suddenly assumes frightening proportions from this angle. No handrail, no crenulations, no waist-high wall to stop the cumbersome of foot from tumbling earthward. Nothing! – just a rough-topped wall that swoops down to a corner tower before doing a sharp right to continue on its way, the fall of the land dropping to the river valley below. I wouldn't have liked to have been a guard on patrol at night in the depths of an icy winter, and these days to walk it is suitable only for those who find the white knuckle rides at Blackpool Pleasure Beach just a bit of a jolly.

Vertigo and I are old companions so, having gingerly lain down to take a photo, I equally gingerly slithered back down the stairs, to take the final climb up to the Torre Andador, the Walker's Tower, presumably named for those poor souls who had to patrol the nerve-wracking perimeter. It was worth the climb. Ahead of me I looked down over Albarracín – its spaghetti alleyways, church towers and mottled crunched-up rooftops – over to the backdrop of the Sierra de Albarracín, where roam the herds that provide the village's famous queso puro de oveja, pure sheep's cheese. My eye followed the meandering River Guadalaviar, one of the richest trout rivers in Spain, and where the annual national trout fishing competition is held, past the circular turret at the end of the wall, and on through the orchards and cornfields, pockmarked with houses and small factories, as it wandered its way onward to Teruel and beyond.

*better late than never*



# Sunday at the Beach



*In Spain, Sunday is still the day when families get together, take a stroll, have lunch. Fortunately, the beach is the ideal place.*

It was a morning akin to high summer in England, clear blue skies, just a shade whiter than they will be in summer, but not disturbed by a single cloud. It's on days like this that I treat myself to a ride through the huerta, Valencia's market gardens and allotments, to the beach at Alboraya, to the North of the city.

Usually the beach is a narrow stretch of almost empty sand, most beach babes preferring Malvarrosa, where they can park and drag their tables, chairs, bags and baskets and spread out under big, brightly coloured parasols. Here at Alboraya, the beach is mainly used by fishermen, who balance their rods on poles planted in the sand and pass the time lounging in picnic chairs.

For a few weeks during winter the beach loses its tailored look when storms bring seaweed ashore and drop it as a barrier between sand and sea. This year has been relatively devoid of bad weather, but this hasn't stopped the Med dropping its detritus on Valencia's beaches, part of its seven year cleansing cycle.

In some ways, even though the beach isn't exactly beautiful to look at, winter or early spring is a good time to go, espe

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In some ways, even though the beach isn't exactly beautiful to look at, winter or early spring is a good time to go, especially on a day like today, because there is almost no-one else



around. I sit on a rock warmed by the sun and simply watch the coming and going of the sea, the sailboats in the distance drifting across the horizon, and the squawking seagulls ducking and diving.

But to be honest, sea, boats and seagulls can only keep me entertained for so long, so I make my way home, as usual, by the prom that runs for two kilometres along the beach at Malvarrosa to the Port, and which normally provides plenty of entertainment as I watch the Spanish enjoying their Sunday at the beach.

Just as I'm leaving Alboraya along a dirt track that runs parallel with the beach, I see a chap taking advantage of the day. I may have gone to the lengths of taking my jacket off to feel the warmth of the sun as I sat on my rock, (I'm a martyr to bronchitis and only divest if it's steaming hot), but he's gone the whole hog and is down to his black swimming trunks. He simply stands, staring out to sea, occasionally scratching his chest, lost to the world.

Just before you drop onto the prom at the top end of Malvarrosa there are a couple of restaurants which are always busy on Sundays, their tables spilling out onto their terrace (ie the pavement in front of their premises). Things are no different today, and diners had the additional pleasure of being serenaded by a solo electric guitarist, his backing group coming from



an iPod connected to a small amplifier on a trolley. Unusually, he was pretty good, and as I pass I realise that he is playing a mellowed-out version of 'I ain't got nobody', which could equally have referred to his backing group as to his situation in life.

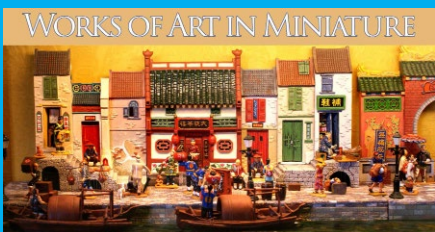


I stop to listen for a while, but know it's time to move on when he segues into *My Way* (*En Mi Manera* in Spanish), the only song banned on BBC's longest established radio show, *Desert Island Discs*. Just as I climb onto my bike a young man on a mono-cycle casually rides by me, watching what's going on on the beach. "Now, you don't see that on *Calle Colon*," I think.

The top end of the prom is usually quieter than the area around the Port, so it gives me the opportunity to look around more. As I turn the corner onto the prom I see a couple coming toward me, sauntering slowly in the sun, she pushing a pram and he, who has obviously just bought a yo-yo from one of the Senegalese 'blanket' salesmen that line the lower reaches of the prom, is trying to get the yellow globes to work their way back up the string. Even if he was the bees-knees as a yo-yoer in his childhood, he's obviously way out of practise because no matter what wrist action he uses the yo-yo refuses to make the return journey up the string.

I'm totally tickled pink by a young madam of about seven, peacefully promenading with her little white doggy at her side, as sedate as any elegant lady exercising her pet. The dog's short legs nip back and forth to keep pace with m'lady's, but what sets me giggling is that the dog's legs are on wheels, and the pretty purple leash that leads from the small hand of its owner to a bright red collar is the cable that controls it. I can't help but think how lucky she is that she doesn't have to carry a plastic bag to pick up the dog muck that was, until a recent law was enacted that forced dog owners to collect their animal's feces, the bane of pedestrians trying to take a stroll around the city.

# More stories about Spain...



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than  
never*



**MOROCCO**







## *Chaouen the fat*

*Just as Henry Ford was famous for saying you could have his Model T in any colour you wanted so long as it was black, in Chefchaouen in northern Morocco's Rif Mountains you can paint your home in any colour you choose – just so long as it's blue.*

I take a morning coffee on the Plaza Utan el-Hamman, the 'watch the world go by' main square of Chefchaouen medina. The waiter spends more time hustling people into his café than serving them. He seems to take it as a personal insult if they don't come inside, throwing insults after those that walk away.

Chefchaouen in the Rif mountains takes its name from the Berber word for horns, ichawen, reflecting the shape of the mountains above the town that have the appearance of the horns of a goat. Known simply as 'Chaouen' locally it has also picked up the soubriquet of 'The Blue Town', hardly surprising given that almost every available square metre is painted in a shade of blue, from the startling Majorelle Blue of Marrakech garden fame to the washed out shade of a winter's sky.

As ever with these curiosities, you have a Pandora's box overflowing with theories to choose from. Many locals say the blue keeps the mosquitoes away as it makes the streets look like cool flowing waters, another that it was introduced by Jews who

took refuge from Hitler's pogroms in the 1930s, although as it was supposedly founded in 1471 by Moors and Jews who fled Spain you might wonder why they waited so long to give it a coat of blue. Still others will tell you with conviction that the blue is said to symbolize the sky and heaven and serves as a reminder to lead a spiritual life, but there again you may like to believe those that are adamant that it's because the nearby Mediterranean Sea is blue, although commenting that 'nearby' is at least twenty miles away and Chefchaouen can hardly be considered a seaside resort doesn't seem to dent their conviction. Frankly, it doesn't really matter, it's a delightful town whose meandering alleyways bear little of the frenetic that invades other Moroccan cities, and rumour has it that the local government provides all the necessary paint and brushes to the townsfolk to keep up appearances.

The metal rails and stone benches that form a circle around a fountain and tall Cyprus tree in the centre of the square doubles as a display rack for bright rugs and embroidered cloths. On the shaded stone benches in front of the trees men sit, chatting and smoking. In front of some of them strong carrier bags



and holdalls full of tools show them to be jobbing builders looking for a day's work. Among them elderly men in gelabas and the conical hats of the region or small delicately embroidered skullcaps aimlessly watch the toing and froing in the square.

I walk into the upper levels of the medina and the higher I go the streets become less tourism orientated and more directed at village way of life. Small grocers, furniture makers, bakers and artisans fill the tiny shops. Tailors at their sewing machines making kaffans of rich fabrics, sellers of cactus thread with spools of bright colours, sacks of coloured dyes. On the terrace above a grocer's shop a young man fixes the cactus filaments to a

hook in the wall before twirling them with a tiny model airplane engine to make the fine threads for hand embroidery. Broad embroidered strips hang from a line displaying his wares. Laid out on the ground in front of a tiny shop are dozens of small frames, representations of the symbol of Chef,



a blue door set into a section of wall, waiting for small mirrors. Nearby a young man paints them by hand.

Cast an eye to the sides as you walk to see the alleyways that climb the mountain, some barely a metre wide, where neighbours could simply hand a bunch of mint from window to window if they needed to borrow one for their glass of tea.

At the Librairie El Dai Ben Maymouna piles of second-hand magazines going back decades form a low wall outside the shop. To pass the time the owner reads something from his stock, sat on a small rickety stool in the morning sunlight. In his cluttered shop bundles of magazines tied together share shelf space with dog-eared paperbacks, and faded black and white photos pinned to the door show Chefchaouen as it was



generations ago. A couple of postcard stands display out-of-date cards, some of them almost curled double by exposure to the sun. Next door is Janine Internet, with its stock of computer necessities, and a place to send modern day versions of the postcards, the selfies you took a couple of hours ago with an iphone, but lacking the charm of the stock in the Librairie's worn-out display stands next door. It's a curious contrast, the ultra-modern next to the out-dated, but a commonplace sight in Morocco.

This ancient quartier is a place of corners shaded by hanging vines, a dispute as a builder blocks a shop doorway with bags of cement before he hoists them above, boys on bikes dodging the pedestrians as they scramble downhill, a father hand-in-hand with his small son, entering a barber shop that has out-moded photos of models with dense lacquered hair taped to his window.

A mini-moment of drama occurs as a man tries to raise a wire supporting a large grapevine that crosses the narrow street. The wire has settled on a telephone cable, which looks as if it is about to be torn from the wall by the weight of the grapes. Mr. Cable is concentrating so much on poking with his pole that he doesn't notice that the wire has dropped under one of the tiles on his roof. With a mighty heft he pushes the vines up over the phone cable and at the same time dislodges the tile. With a crash, the roof tile hits the ground, scattering shards into the street. He looks around bemused, realizing that he has just created himself another repair job.

The crash makes a baker jump as he steps out of his shop. He's carrying a tray of baked round loaves covered in tea towels that he lays on the low frame of a banquette sans mattress, waiting for the owners to collect them. At one end two metal trays of baked peppers show what someone is having for lunch.

At the end of the day, when all the bread has been baked, he will slide trays of honey and rose-water pastries into the oven to cook by the cooling embers of the oven fire.

As I drift downward I pass by a group of woodworkers who all appear to be making beds. I see a set of wood cramps the size of a narrow-gauge railway line – bigger than anything I ever saw in my years as an antique restorer – clamping narrow planks together to make a headboard. Ironmongers, key cutters, paint sellers with bundles of rollers hung on string, shoe repairers and pharmacies gradually begin to mix with more tourist shops of brightly coloured babouches and imported ceramics, but nothing on the scale of Fez or Marrakech. The invitation to buy, if an invitation is made at all, is done courteously.

The Gypsy Kings burst into song from a CD shop, and two young shopkeepers pick up wooden poles and begin to air guitar at each other. A young iron worker in a black hole, a sweatbox with a small furnace glowing, worthy of anything by Dante, repeats ancient designs, watched over by his father. I'm saddened by fact that so much of the artisan skills of metalwork in Morocco are disappearing to machines, stamped and scrolled to size, whereas even while we are talking the young man keeps checking that the scroll he is making fits perfectly in its allotted space in the beautiful window grill he is working on.

As I return down the hill to Plaza Utan el-Hamman I see an elderly man wearing a deep maroon gelaba walk slowly up the hill. At each shop he stops and gives anyone sat there a small sweet wrapped in bright paper, exchanges a few words and a smile, and moves on.



# *A Tuk-tuk too far*



*I've always been beguiled by tuk-tuks, those strange little workhorses, half motor-bike, half mini-pic-up that in one form or another can be found almost anywhere in the world.*

These marvellous little beasts go by various names, trishaw, autorickshaw, autorick, bajaj, mototaxi, baby taxi, depending where you are, and as the names imply, are a motorized version of the traditional pulled rickshaw or cycle rickshaw. But the tuk-tuks in Morocco are monsters in comparison to their Asian brethren, with big 'don't-mess-with-me' motorbike front ends that would sneer at the wimpish eastern model based on the design of the Vespa motor-scooter.

I struggle to photograph one that seems to be blossoming with plants as we drive into Meknes, but the bumpy road jostles me around too much to get a decent shot. A small conifer, a young hydrangea, deep red and yellow marigolds, zinnias, if I'm not mistaken, which I probably am given that I can't get a good view as we're bouncing along; a bougainvillea climbing a cane, broad leaves and skinny leaves in various shades of green. Plant identification has never been my strong point, which probably accounts for the weird horticultural miss-match that I call my garden.

The basic tuk-tuk model is open to the elements, both the

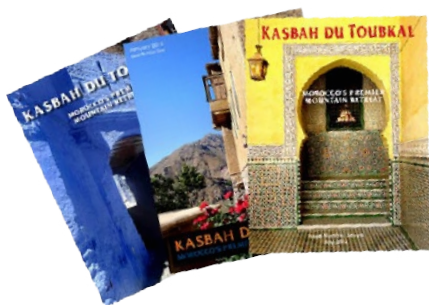
back-end and the driver, who can get pretty chilly with nothing to protect him against winter winds other than a thick djellaba and a woolly hat. These are used mainly for deliveries into the periphery of the medina, creating a bit of competition for the muleteers, but getting their comeuppance with narrow alleyways and steep stepped inclines where the languidly plodding mule come into their own. You also see them occasionally careering around loaded with kids sitting on wooden crates – in fact anybody sitting on wooden crates – who can't afford the price of a bus ticket.

The more upmarket versions will have roll-up plastic sides and an awning to protect the driver from the worst of sun and rain, with some of them even having a full windshield to save streaming eyes from the chill-factor of driving into biting wind in the winter and dust in the summer. Invariably, when the rider has a crash-helmet it will be hung on a hook somewhere and not on his head as nature intended, while to guard against the constant thrub of the engine against a chap's private parts and as minor solace to a bum pounded by bumpy roads, the rider will almost always be sat on a thick cushion or folded rug.

The fancier tuk-tuks have padded benches running the length of the trailer interior and serve as competition to the petit taxis and grande taxis that hustle the streets for passengers. The petit taxis are supposedly for use within a city and the grande taxis for longer distances, with the tuk-tuk getting in where the others can't reach. The padded benches are merely a sort-of approximation of how many people they can carry, and they work on the principle that when the seats are jammed sardine-like and no-one else can sit in the mini-gap on the floor between legs (they are too low for standing) there is still space for a couple of lightweights to hang onto the frame beside the driver. They seem to have taken this packing style from the grande taxis, whose seating plan of driver and four adults went out of the window long ago. I once saw one in Fez that was so jam-packed passengers in the rear seats were trying to hold the doors closed with their arms out the windows and with two kids

sat in the trunk with the lid up. It took off in a cloud of smoke and the exhaust sparking as it dragged along the road.

Hard-working things they may be, but even the best of machines can go wrong. As we pull up a slight rise at a set of traffic lights cars nearest the sidewalk are trying to push in front of others to get past a semi-stationary tuk-tuk loaded with boxes. The driver is almost bent double trying to push his vehicle up the hill but not quite making it. Each time he stops to take a breather his tuk-tuk rolls back a little, like Sisyphus in Greek mythology, forever rolling an enormous boulder uphill only to see it rolling back down again.

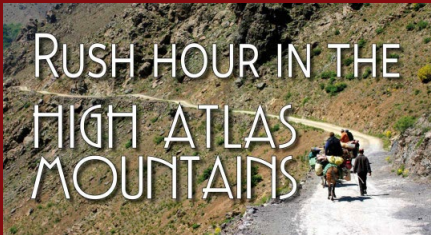
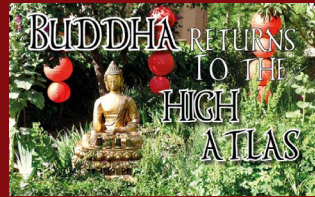
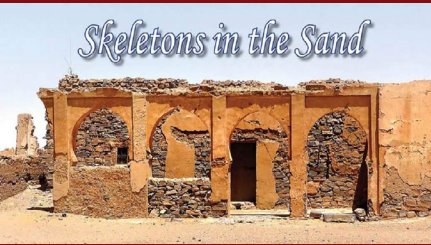


The **Kasbah du Toubkal** quarterly magazine is a must-read for anyone who either loves Morocco or has yet to discover it. Full of stories about this colourful, exotic country, you can access the back issues and full archive from fifteen issues by clicking on the cover image.

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# Thailand







*A Garden Where Retribution Isn't Always Divine*

With my eye to the viewfinder of my camera, photographing two horny-headed demons sawing a woman in half with a devilish fierce two-man felling saw, I sense a frison of terror shiver through me at the thought that the two-metre high chap with blood dripping from his fangs overseeing the job might be eyeing me up from behind, weighing up whether I should even be allowed to get as far as the book where my life's deeds and misdeeds are recorded or suffer his painful caress immediately. I move on rapidly, passing a man with an engorged penis that looks like a baby whale in the middle of a blood-bath, not wishing to know what he got up to in his earthly life – just in case I'd done the same!

Wat Mae Kaet Noi, north of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, is one of twenty hell gardens in the country, and the 'surreal tapestry of pain' conjured up here will give you more heebie-jeebies than all the other nineteen put together.

The hell garden's role is as a visual guide to the benefits of morality and while some illustrate the terrors awaiting you in Naraka, the 136 fiery pits of Buddhist hell, in the mildly prosaic manner of having boiling oil poured down your throat if you were an alcoholic,



or your tongue hacked vertically for lying, Wat Mae Kaet Noi brings modern technology into portraying the whole infernal hog of the terrifying treatment that awaits you for your earthly indiscretions.

Did you peddle drugs in the here and now, or more strictly speaking, the there and then? If so expect to be ridden over by a Hell's Devil with a horse's head, a fan on his motorbike like the wheel on Boadicea's chariot gouging out your innards. Not nice to animals and argued a lot with your parents? Getting mashed between mechanical

rollers is just too good for you m'lad.

At the Buddhist version of the Pearly Gates instead of appearing before the benignly-bearded St. Peter the newly-departed have to face the fiery-red Phya Yom, the Death King. It is Phya Yom's decision, made after careful consideration of your good deeds, neatly inscribed on a gold plate, against your badduns, scribbled on a scrap of dog skin, an animal which, in this case definitely isn't a man's best friend! If the dog skin gets the vote off you go to the fiery pits of Naraka to atone for your deeds, accompanied by a demon who might have the head of a pig if he wallowed in corruption in life – which adds another connotation to the phrase 'pigs at a trough' and seems a perfect image for most politicians.

You may have thought that Buddhism was all saffron-robed monks and chanting, as far from the hellfire-and-damnation of Christianity as you could get, but even Buddha himself was pretty graphic about the lesser joys of hell in his teachings in the Devaduta Sutta.

"The hell-wardens lay him down and slice him with axes. Then they hold him feet up and head down and slice him with adzes. Then they harness him to a chariot and drive him back and forth over ground that is burning, blazing, and glowing. Then they make him climb up and down a vast mountain of embers that is burning, blazing, and glowing. Then they hold him feet up and head down and plunge him into a red-hot copper cauldron... and as he is boiling there with bub-

bles foaming ... he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings.”

Not surprising, really, that he feels painful, racking and piercing feelings given the moderately less than tender treatment he’s been put through.

I continue my Dantean stroll, flicking through the memory to see if I’ve committed any of the sins that will entitle me to having my hands removed by a three-metre saw driven by tractor engine (many of the retributions seem to involve saws of some kind), or boiled in a vat along with a dozen other miscreants (easy to keep at temperature given we’re in Hell, I suppose). I notice that some of the devils have red light bulb for eyes. You are invited to drop a ten baht coin into a slot to get the

son et lumiere. I do, and I’m entertained by the screams of the punished as they are forced into the bubbling cauldrons. Wat Mae Kaet Noi must be a helluva place at night when the light bulb eyes glow with pleasure, illuminating



the ghastly punishments the grinning horned demons inflict on the wicked, accompanied by their terrified screams.

I glance into a bamboo hut and through the glow I see montage of a woman giving birth, the whole graphic scene being very carefully spot-lit. It also seems to be the place to store severed heads, old brooms and empty paint pots. I pass on that particular sound and light show.

As if in illustration of the events that led up to the ladies condition, next to the hut is a statue that sends a shudder all men will relate to. Severing a penis in retribution for its wandering is commonplace these days, but having it cleaved vertically by a woman with an enormous tongue that transmutes itself into a cobra’s head is enough to keep the trouser snake firmly tucked away.

I'm curious as to why six naked beauties caressing a single man can be considered as Hell, but the deep red of his genitalia convinces me that this is one cat that won't be killed by curiosity, and move one.

Having worked my way through Hell I arrive at Heaven's Gate, where smiley-faced kids in school uniform listen enraptured to a pair of instructors in khaki – but before I get too complacent I see behind them a group of colleagues who strayed from the path and are hoisted on enormous hooks.

Eventually, though, I'm in Heaven, a peaceful garden of reclining maids with babes suckling contentedly on the breast, gilded Bud-dhas nestled in cascading deep pink bougainvillea, nymphet priest-esses and smiling couples united in heavenly happiness.

At least you can bear in mind as you suffer the excoriations of a demonic thrashing machine while it flays skin from bone is that unlike in the Christian tradition, where Hell is for eternity, Naraka is only for doing your penance and sorting out your Kama for the next life. Even if you do come back as a cockroach, to be stomped on as you peacefully stroll across a kitchen floor, and it takes lives as a lizard, a goat and a braying mule to get back to human form, you at least have the chance of working your way to enlightenment, at which point you are safe for eternity from a revisit to the fiery furnaces – even though it's probably taken you a fair bit of that eternity to get you there.





# Chiang Rai

## Capital of Kitsch

*The Thai way of life can be described in two words (or more strictly speaking, three), sabai sabai, meaning relax, enjoy yourself, have a good time, and sanuk, fun.*

This easy going acceptance of most things spreads to many aspects of Thai culture, even seeping into the decoration of their temples. Fat laughing ladies, Mickey Mouse clocks, miniature farms of the phantasmagorical sit happily alongside gilded effigies of Buddha in any one of his hundred-plus personifications. To a western eye it can appear to be verging on the kitsch at times, but if it is then its kitsch with feeling, a sense of joyfulness.

### **White Kitsch**



Wat Rong Khun, more popularly known as the White Temple, was designed by Chalermchai Kositpipat, one of Thailand's best known artists. Photos can't do justice to the sheer extravagance of the edifice with its demons and ferocious guardians, (check from photos), all in brilliant white with the sun sparkling off tens of thousands of tiny pieces of broken glass embedded in the walls and sculptures. The colour is said to represent Buddha's purity, the latter his wisdom.

The ultimate wedding cake architecture with outrageous sculptures covering every square inch and internal murals that feature such unquestionably religious figures as Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson, a panoply of superheroes, the New York skyline, rockets coiled in the tentacles of enormous monsters and robots galore. At various times a few Buddhist traditionalists have voiced their displeasure at the sacrilege but everyone else regards it with a bemused smile.



### ***Black Kitsch***



As counterpoint to the lightness and spirituality of the White Temple, the Black House (Baan Dam) is said to represent the darkness inside man, and the preponderance of cow and buffalo skulls, horns and bones, many made into uncomfortable-looking chairs draped in snake skins and leopard pelts, makes it pretty clear that Thawan Duchanee, another nationally renowned artist who conceived of the museum, had a fairly dour nature tucked away inside.

Darkness aside, the park is a rambling array of lovely wooden buildings with the appearance of traditional homes built around a shady village green. Filled

with an enormous and eclectic collection of object d'art, ninety-five per cent of it in wood; enormous plank tables, African masks, huge ceremonial drums on wooden-wheeled carts, dug-out canoes, intricately woven bamboo and basket ware, with not a single label to explain why, what or where. It is a movie-makers dream emporium for gothic set dressing.



### *Colourful Kitsch*



One of the lesser known temples of Chiang Mai but to my mind probably the most gaudily delightful, Wat Huay Sai Khao is a twenty-kilometre drive south of the city but worth every one of them for its sheer visual delight. It may seem like a Disneyesque playground demonstrating the religious creeds of the world but

this is a functioning temple, open to everyone to celebrate their faith. But where many religious edifices demand dignity and solemnity, Wat Huay Sai Khao draws out the playful, the joyful, the sense of *sanuk*.

Bright and colourful, with the gigantic statue of Dvarapala bearing his fearsome scowl guarding the entrance, gaping sheep with welcome signs hung around their necks to counter the guardians grimace, gods on rockets, axe-waving hunters on buffalo – children have a wonderful time here, treating it as a large playground more than a religious edifice – and no-one seems to mind.

## *Clock Kitsch*



Whatever else you do in Chiang Rai you must get yourself to the golden clock tower at the junction of Jet Yot and Baanpa Pragarn streets at seven, eight or nine on any night. Hoh Nalika Chalerm Prakiat, to give it its formal name, was designed by Chalermchai Kositpipat, he of the White Temple fame, and the ornate structure has

all the curlicues and embellishments to be found on said temple. But as impressive as the clock might be, it's the nightly son et lumière that brings on the smile.

As the hour strikes the clock tower begins to change colour, washing through red, blue, yellow, pink and purple light accompanied by Thai orchestral music. After five minutes

a moment of stillness occurs before suddenly bursting into life once more with a rousing solo from a full-voiced lady with the lights continuing their colourful cascade. The whole show lasts for ten minutes, which makes you think that some of the locals would much prefer the traditional bong, bong, bong to chime the passing hours.

# More stories about Thailand...



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Warmly Welcome & Take Care of Tourists



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*AND  
BEYOND...*





# Shake, Rattle and Roll



## Riding the rails in Yangon

*Round and round it goes, first one way then the other - the aptly named Yangon Circular Railway*

Between six a.m. and five in the afternoon the trains of the Yangon Circular Railway leave platform seven of the city's Central Railway Station off Bogyoke Aung Sang Road, alternating its departures in a clockwise and anti-clockwise direction. For three hours it collects and deposits commuters, between 100,000 and 150,000 daily, clacking its way in a loop through thirty-nine stations on its twenty-eight-mile circuit, for which you will pay the princely sum of 200 kyat – 12 pence.

As the train prepares to leave the station vendors move through the central aisle. If you need a fix of betel nut a man with a portable kit slung over his shoulders will make you a fresh quid. A dozen quails eggs to snack on, a toothbrush or disposable lighter? A lady with a plastic basket balanced on her head will serve you. Elegantly dressed in traditional white high-collared shirt and checked sarong a charming vendor with a winning smile will prepare you a delicious snack from his tray of small pancakes, shredded vegetables and bottles of mystical sauces. Snack-man sells out by the time we reach Isein. He leaves the train and I watch him go to a vendor on the opposite platform with a pile of

samosas heaped high in a pyramid on a metal tray in front of him. The itinerant salesman will re-load his tray and sauce bottles and catch the next train going in the opposite direction, anticlockwise around the city. Round-and-round, day-after-day, selling his snacks to the same faces on a daily basis as they commute their way to work or home. He sees me with my camera and puts his thumb up, waving as our train pulls out of the station.



This is no time to stay in your seat and let the world go by, as life inside and out is always on the move. I prowl the aisles.

Have your camera ready for Danyingon, one of the main stops almost half-way around the circuit. On the station platform on either side of the track a large fruit and vegetable market glitters in bold Technicolor. As we're waiting a male vendor shouts at me and points to a woman peeling mango. He calls to her, she looks up and sees me and smiles making the 'V' sign, raised index and middle finger with palm facing outward. I take a photo and return the 'V'. She bursts into a cackle, shared by almost everyone else on the platform. This sign, usually held somewhere around the face, is ubiquitous throughout Asia, with no definitive answer to its origin.

As the train clacks on small moments of no great importance add delight to the ride; the thumbs-up and toothless grin of the old man sat next to a wooden station shed and the pretty smile of the young girl stood at his side; the man who shouted 'Move!'



at me as he threw an enormous bunch of plastic-wrapped lilies through the cabin door and his smilingly profuse grin as he thanked me for dragging them in as the threw up two more bundles; the wave from the elderly lady under the big black umbrella protecting her from the monsoon downpour as the train slowly pulled out of Migaladon.



If impatience grabs you, jump off the train at any station and grab a taxi back into town, but the Yangon Circular Railway is

one of those experiences to simply relax and go along with, smile at the locals, snack on simple food, and take a happy-go-lucky breather from the bustle of the city.



*better late than never*

RESERVED  
FDD

# Indian Christian Cemetery

New Delhi



*Half-way up a narrow alley on Ramdwara Road, close to New Delhi's Nerhu Bazar, an arched sign welcomes you to the Indian Christian Cemetery, Paha Ganj.*

Through the gates, another sign informs visitors 'This cemetery is full to its capacity. Only family graves (doubling) is allowed.' 'The space for fresh graves ran out long back,' says Arnold James, Chairman of the Cemetery Committee.

I walk into the graveyard and the first thing I see are rows of crosses close together that mark the last resting places of children and indicates the high infant mortality rate; Baby Nisha Thomas who lived one day in October 2010; Justin Raju, whose short life only lasted eight days in June 1999, and the poignant memory to an un-named 'Baby girl, still born 11.11.9....', her exact date unknown because the right arm of the cross is broken off. D/O is seen on numerous markers, signifying 'Daughter Of...' followed by the parents' names.

'Doubling' refers to a recently introduced option of reusing graves, digging up the existing grave for second burial, but a facility only allowed after ten years, and only offered to people with a family member already buried in the cemetery.

'There are already about nine thousand graves in Paha Ganj cemetery,' comments James. 'Now we are exploring the option of third burial in the same grave, although at funerals, relatives sometimes complain about having to dig up old graves belonging to other people to bury their dead. This, they feel, takes

away the dignity we owe to the dead and also leads to confusion among those coming to pay homage in later years’.

Most graves are quite simple affairs, no more than a white-painted cross with a hand-lettered inscription. Others have a canopy over them, sometimes with a photo of the deceased on a marble headstone. It’s almost understandable to see photos of elderly people but on a bright, sunny day it is sad to see the freshly-garlanded, smiling photo of Anumol Joseph, who passed away at the youthful age of seventeen. Nearby, a faded photo of baby Rachel John is a sad reminder that she died aged only eleven months and one day on 16.2.2003.

While many of the crosses bear western names, it is apparent in some cases that whoever carved the inscription wasn’t a native English-speaker. On the gravestone of Therese Maria Kanjamala, who lived for eighteen days short of her third birthday in September 2012, a memorial shared with Treesa Jose Punnayil, whose short life lasted only four months and six days in 1998, an inscription reads:

*Let the little children come me  
And do not binder them  
For such belongs the  
Kingdom of Heaven*

The shrinking burial space is forcing a change in Christian funerals. Today, there are about three thousand Christians in Delhi,



half of them Catholics, many of whom are forced to opt for cremation because of lack of burial space in the city. But most people still prefer burial so one solution lies in creating kuchha (mud) graves rather than pakka (concrete) graves in cemeteries. Kuchha graves can be reused in 5-6 years, a bonus being that such graves bring down the cost of a funeral, the latter, at 3,500 rupees, almost twice the price of the former (as publicised by a rates board at the entrance to the cemetery). The Delhi Cemetery Committee is now also promoting the use of niches – small shelves in cemetery walls – for storing the remains of a body after opening the grave. “This will allow other people space to bury the dead. Necessity is the mother of invention,” commented one committee member.

Sahil Kerketa and his wife, Reena, a Catholic couple, are concerned about what might happen to the grave of his father, buried in the Indian Christian Cemetery prior to the ‘doubling’ order being given, and are unsure about where they might be able to pay their respects in future.

‘My father was buried in a fresh piece of land, but now there is so much shortage of space that I feel insecure about his grave; who knows when they will dig it up for re-use?’ Sahil told me. For practical reasons the couple would prefer the burial of ashes rather than that of the body. ‘The eighteen by eighteen inch box rather than the six by eight feet coffin will give space to many more people for a much longer period,’ said Reena.



<b>INDIAN CHRISTIAN CEMETERY</b>	
<b>CHARGES FOR BURIAL</b>	
<b>KACHA BURIAL</b>	<b>Rs. 2000</b>
<b>PAKKA BURIAL</b>	<b>Rs. 3500</b>
<b>PLATFORM</b>	<b>Rs. 5000</b>
<b>CEMENTED CROSS</b>	<b>Rs. 500/</b>
<b>KACHA TO PAKKA GRAVE</b>	<b>Rs. 3500/</b>
<b>NAME PLATE</b>	<b>Rs. 500/</b>
<b>POLISH BOX</b>	<b>Rs. 3500/</b>
<b>CLOTH BOX</b>	<b>Rs. 2500/</b>
<b>LOCAL VAN</b>	<b>Rs. 1000 TO 1500/</b>
<b>N CR VAN</b>	<b>Rs. 2500/</b>
<b>WAITING CHARGES BEYOND 4 HOURS</b>	
<b>Rs. 100/ PER HOUR</b>	
<b>IF ANY COMPLAINTS CONTACT</b>	
<b>किसी भी कार्य हेतु केयर</b>	
<b>टेकर से मिलें!</b>	
<b>PENZY MORGAN</b>	
<b>CARE TAKER</b>	

So far the Indian Christian Cemetery has avoided the route taken by the authorities of the St Thomas Christian Cemetery in Tughlakabad who, in 2012, decided to build a vertical cemetery of three hundred crypts. Completed in 2015 it is Asia's largest vertical cemetery.

Despite the desperate shortage of space, many of the graves are abandoned but it's nice to see that for others their loved one's memory lingers on, and even though she died in February 2003, the grave and cross of Mrs Catherine Perdon have been freshly painted fourteen years later, her name carefully picked out above that of Budha Masito, who died almost half a century ago, the pencil lines used to guide the painter's hand still in place.

Like cemeteries world-wide, the Indian Christian Cemetery of New Delhi isn't just a place of death, it's as much a place of colour, vignette and touches of humour. The grave of five-year-old Arokia Raj is bright blue, that of Baby Kushi bright pink, while sixty-two-year-old Christina Sha opted for green, decorated with garlands of yellow marigold.

A couple of boys in their early teens working with a group clearing dead branches spot me taking photos and rush over to strike a pose as if they were picking up a pile of dry grass; close by, Mr Pushna chips away at the old pakka that covers the brickwork he has exposed from an original grave, preparing it for doubling, although as he appears to be only in his mid-forties it's unlikely that he will be the future resident; a family arrives in a red electric tuk-tuk, large mum and small son sit in the shade in the vehicle while dad peers at grave markers as he wanders between aisles, occasionally indicating his lack of success to his family; a tiny, arch-topped red-stone marker, no more than 6" high has 'Reserved for' etched into it, without saying who the reservation is for, although it was obviously made a long time ago, given its weathering and angle of settlement.

It seems a shame that someone with the delightful name of Twinkle Joseph shouldn't have lived beyond her second year. Imagine the sparkle she could have brought into the lives of others.





# A Stroll Down *Rua das Flores*

*From serving the royalty of Europe to becoming a backwater in a run-down area of Porto, Rua das Flores is making a come-back*

Stand with your back to the arched entrance of São Bento railway station in the historic heart of Porto, with its glorious entrance hall, the walls decorated with 20,000 blue and white azulejo tiles depicting battles, monarchs and country scenes. In front of you is Rua das Flores, possibly Porto's most famous street and one which, after decades of the city being little more than provincial backwater, is seeing a resurgence of popularity and restoration., although while the street is stylish in both in its architecture and shops it still has its share of emporiums selling towels, dressing gowns, baggy grannies knickers, postcards and Porto sweatshirts to keep the street in sanity and stop it getting above itself.



It's mid-morning so I begin my walk by taking coffee and a delicious slice of caramelised apple pie in Café Jónia da Coroa at No. 213, its exterior luxuriously decorated with kitsch plastic floribunda in keeping with the name of the street, Street of Flowers. Once Ourivesaria Allança, the largest jewellery store in



the Iberian Peninsula with five buildings of five floors each, who claimed Queen Victoria of England among its patrons, it is now a curious mixture of French salon and Edwardian tea-room

with the addition of a totally OTT gold rococo button-back sofa.

You are waited on by young ladies, their pretty, cream frilly dresses with red belts and ribbons look prim and sexy at the same time, conjuring up the image of a slightly recherché tea room of the Belle Epoque.

I sit on an elegant pink velour chair, the sparkling chandelier casting its warm glow over the porcelain coffee cup and tea-plate, gilt-banded with a pretty rose decoration. I feel as if I should keek my little finger as I drink, as if the spirit of Queen Victoria has joined me at my table. On the second floor are displays of dresses, jewellery and other elegant ladies' fol-de-rols; part museum but if something takes your fancy they may sell it.

Spread over four floors (including basement) at number 28,, Livraria Chaminé da Mota is the largest antiquarian bookstore in the country, with over one million items in stock.

The collection began without a catalogue as the private passion of one Pedro Chaminé da Mota, and has continued that way ever since. The reference system is idiosyncratic to say the least. Four thousand strips of paper, some written in elegant script, some in capitalised deco font and others in a tidy scrawl, indicate themes, authors etc., with collections bound with lengths of coloured string. The customer asks if the shop has a such-and-such a book and a member of the staff shuffles into the archive to physically search for it, coming back with a yay or nay. Curiously archaic in a Dickensian sort of way, but it works.

I delve into the basement, a tunnel of texts, not all of which are learned tomes. *No Rasto do Anne Frank* (The Story of Anne

Frank), *Rebecca* by Daphne Dumuriere, *Enciclopedia do Charlie Brown* (self-explanatory), *Delicioso Pecado* (Delicious Sin) by Maria Domingues, 24 pages, number 8 of a saucy monthly series – even Tin Tin gets a look in.

Pedro da Mota, the current proprietor (all the male family members are called Pedro), nephew of the original Pedro, regales me with the stories of collectors finding the totally unexpected in what, to the non-Charmine da Mota eye looks like a very confusing pile. A Parisian who flew into Porto for one night to buy a rare letter by an obscure French poet (name withheld), a South African couple who stepped in to shelter from the rain and got lost in the shelves before leaving four hours later and 10,000€ less in the bank account, and the biggy, the anonymous London-based rare map collector who refused to believe Chamine da Mota had a complete copy of one of the rarest atlases in the world, impossible to find elsewhere, until he inspected the genuine article himself and happily paid 70,000€ to take it home. Sometimes not having a catalogue can lead to the nicest of surprises.

At the bottom of Rua das Flors where it does a dog’s-leg down to the Port, Largo São Domingos is a small square. At number forty, Ferragens Fermoura sells wooden toys, household linen, pans large enough to cook a wedding feast, hessian sacks, hardware, catapults, plastic gloves, slate writing boards, wooden toys in fancy-shaped wine boxes, spinning tops, wood-handled skipping ropes, wellington boots and pan scourers, welding



masks and bellows, a cornucopia of the everyday, neatly displayed on the original pine shelving that has seen sixty years of service by three generations of the Ferinova family. The decorative high point is the beautifully peaked arch above the otherwise mundane green painted serving counter.

I work my way down to the Port, only to work my way up again via the 167 steps of Escadas das Verdades that rise up from the river, ending in Largo do Primeriro de Dezembro. My intention is to take a walk across Ponte Luis I, the huge arc that spans the River Douro.

Nervously I cross the bridge, the vibration from approaching trams and the height of the drop into the Douro not helping my vertigo in any way. I couldn't help noticing, though, that most people walked nearer the bollards separating the footpath and the tram line than by the rail at the side of the bridge, some even walked on the tramway itself. I had to do it, though, for the glorious view along the quayside on the opposite side of the river and the colourful buildings as they scale the hill.

I reward myself with the emblematic Porto lunch, *francesinha*, a sandwich of layered spicy sausage meat, bacon, pork and ham, and a fried egg. On top of the sandwich is a layer of melted cheese. Served in a bowl with chips and a thick tomato sauce. Almost soup-like, this is the food of winter months, tasty bulk to give you energy – or send you to sleep.



# More stories from Beyond...

better late  
than never



# Food

---

- 1 - buy it with thought
  - 2 - cook it with care
  - 3 - serve just enough
  - 4 - save what will keep
  - 5 - eat what would spoil
  - 6 - home-grown is best
- 

*don't waste it*



*When compared to the street bustle of Bangkok's Chinatown the word 'frenetic' would indicate a pace of peace and tranquility.*

Soi 6 off Yaorowat Road draws you into a world of Chinese gastronomy, some of which you will recognise, most of which, the greater percentage in fact, you won't. Side alleys take you into the bowels, where no health and safety inspector dare tread – but where I find the fresh ginger I've been searching for, sold to me by the epitome of ancient Asian as depicted by Hollywood, a hump-backed old crone who cackles a figure at me in Thai that I obviously have no comprehension of. I hold up a green 20baht note and she hands the ginger over with a 'that'll do nicely' glimmer in her eye. Probably three times what she'd charge a local, but a bargain for me because all I've seen elsewhere is the dried variety that never reconstitutes to anything other than a slightly spicy shoe leather. While I'm waiting for my ginger to be bagged a Thai man walks behind me whistling 'Jingle Bells', curious from a resident of somewhere where snow and sleigh bells aren't part of the usual cultural mythology.



Everywhere, hanging from beams, bags set on counters and fat sacks on the ground, are plastic bags full of what looks like very large pieces of pork scratching (from some pretty sizeable porkers), but which are actually fish

bladders, indispensable for soup, apparently.

The encrustation of filth is indescribable, and when I put my shoulder bag down to take a photo of dried fish hanging from thin wires I nearly lay it on top of a colony of scurrying cockroaches – and here's me thinking they were solitary beasts. I watch an inch-long beastie meandering over open bags of fish bladders and wonder if he'll end up 'in the soup'.

Each turn takes you deeper into squalor. I feel like Charles Dickens on a foray into the sulfurous underbelly of 19th-century London. Barely a hundred metres from the gold shops and screeching traffic of Yaorowat is a world of boys portering huge sacks of rice (although these days on trolleys and not on their backs), and the detritus of filthy rags lying in runnels of scuddy water at the foot of wooden platforms from which cross-legged matrons sell fresh fish from age-chipped enamel basins. A beautiful blue glazed ceramic jar which elsewhere would adorn the terrace of some chi-chi apartment, here acts as a receptacle for scraps of food waste – and nothing much is wasted in Chinatown.

On and on it goes. Fishballs by the tens of thousands and long sections of meat-filled pastry, hand-rolled with the skill of a Cuban maid rolling a cigar, but in this case, fortunately, not on





anyone's thigh; a trio making tiny pancakes of coconut flour one at a time on an intriguingly ancient contraption, picked out when they have finished their chain-driven cooking cycle by an elegantly dressed young lady and placed five to a pack, priced at 50 baht. Alongside a food stall I watch a mother, daughter and son stripping flesh from crabs, the smallest nippers being picked over by the nimble fingers of the small boy.

It's time to eat, so I crowd around an obviously very popular street food stall. Like an auctioneer spotting someone making a bid, or a tic-tac man at a horse race track signaling the starting prices, a man on a stool keeps his beady eye circling the crowd. You take a menu from a



box fixed to a pole and make your choice while waiting to catch the man's eye. When spotted he points at you to let you know he's seen you and calls to a waitress to take your order. Within moments she's there with her order pad and your number on a piece of paper. From then on it's just a case of waiting and being fascinated as to how the whole thing operates. Stools don't get time to cool before someone has cleared the plates and bowls and wiped the table before the tic-tac man waves to the next in line – more a virtual line than a row of people because of the crush – and you step forward.

My tilapia, a stout fish eaten by the million in Asia, is superb, with a ultra-spicy chilli sauce that will be hanging around the tongue long past bedtime, but for the moment has my eyes, nose and sweat glands streaming. I've no idea what's in the seafood soup, other than the seafood, obviously, and the lemongrass and coconut milk that is mentioned on the menu. When it's served I think I can see onions and mushrooms in there and

a dangerous level of chopped birds eye chili, but I decide it's probably best not to look too closely at those bits I don't recognise.

A few minutes after I begin my meal, a young lady, elegantly dressed and with her make up carefully applied by an experienced hand, sits down at my table and tucks into the same spicy soup as me, a bag of steamed snails and another of grilled prawns, which she devours at a rate I've never seen before; snails scoured from their shells with a tiny pick, heads of prawns detached and sucked dry almost in the same motion that she peels them. The momentum never stops; I'm completely mesmerised. While she and everyone else is dining apparently as fresh as a daisy, I'm Niagra. I feel the sweat streaming down my neck and beneath my breast bone. She laughs and pulls a handful of serviettes from the plastic holder and hands them to me. I thought I could do spicy.

The competing of staff trying to make themselves heard over the cacophony of tuk-tuks, taxis and motorbikes makes conversation difficult, although as my Thai is limited to sawadeekap, the

traditional greeting, I wouldn't have much to offer in the way of dinner conversation. My dining companion pays her bill, gives a hearty blow of her nose and departs as speedily as she arrived, leaving almost all her soup and a half-empty bag of cooling snails. I fleetingly wonder if sitting opposite a red-faced old fogey with

sweat streaming down his face who is constantly bellowing into a handkerchief has put her off her meal. I suspect it would me, if it were the other way around. I try one of the snails. It is disgusting, so I offer the bag to a young German couple on the next stools along. They saw my face when I tasted them and smilingly decline.

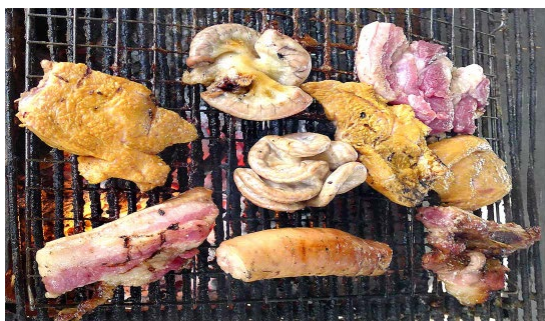




*Food glorious food, although sometimes we might  
get more than we bargained for*

Prince Philip, the doyen of the ‘foot in mouth’ brigade once made a splendid gaffe at a meeting of the World Wildlife Fund, saying that “if it has got four legs and it is not a chair, if it has got two wings and flies but is not an aeroplane and if it swims and it is not a submarine, the Cantonese will eat it.” He’s probably not far from the truth and while the phrase ‘you can use every part of the pig bar its squeal’ is almost universally acknowledged, there are certain parts of the animal that I’ll happily pass on to the Cantonese.

Thailand thoroughly deserves its reputation for excellent street food but it’s fair to say that it also has a fair range of gastronomic oddities that many farang (foreigners) shy away of – and often with just cause. One of the country’s most famous fruits, which you either love or hate, is durian, a creamy fruit that emits such an appalling stench of foetid flesh that many hotels and all railways bear a prohibition sign similar to that of a no-smoking area – a red circle with a cross over the spiky fruit



in lieu of a cigarette. Aficionados claim that the soft, creamy centre is akin to ambrosia, but I'm one of those who believe that this most disgusting fruit has absolutely no re-

deeming features whatsoever! Being close to it is one of the few times in my life that I'm grateful for having no sense of smell, but my sense of taste is good enough to know that it's sludgy mush of an interior tastes as disgusting as I'm told it's 'aroma' smells.

Insects are another 'delicacy' I tend to be wary of, although an adventurous palate can still bring me grief, as this story of a visit to the Buffalo Market at San Patong, near Chiang Mai, Thailand explains.

### ***Everything but the squeal***

As the morning drifts on it's time to eat. A brief glance at a stall selling cooked insects and I move on. I've tried various varieties and not been particularly impressed; crickets, which I dislike because their crispy fried legs get stuck between my teeth, the silk worm has a pulpy texture that I find distasteful, and a large bug called a mengda, which translates into 'pimp' in English, so called because it follows the female around, is so close to looking like a cockroach that I find the idea of putting it in my mouth totally repellent.

I stop at vegan haeds, a rustic kitchen whose menu is made up entirely of the innards and gizzards of pigs and chickens. Once used raw for the traditional spicy mince northern Thai dish, larb, they are now usually cooked, either in stews or grilled, although the dark paste fermenting in an aluminium pan at the side of the gas burners looks a bit suspect. On the battered old charcoal grill slabs, curls and misshapes of pigs' guts are cooked, including a thick tube that my Thai friend, Kai, who I previously considered the font of knowledge of all Thai edible delights,

describes simply as 'pig's dick', although I was always under the impression that a pig's penis was corkscrew-shaped.

Two large aluminium bowls are simmering away, one the colour of rich brown gravy with chillies, kafir lime leaves and an assortment of things I try not to look at too closely; tom som, which turns out to be a soup of chickens' innards, including tiny hearts and a handful of miniscule un-formed eggs. I'm told the abundance of spices is to cover the smell and flavour of the animal ingredients. The lady cook persuades me to sample it, plus a small bowl of aom curry, something to do with beef but I really don't want to pursue the ingredients any further. Both are reasonably tasty in a thick, spicy sort of way and working on the premise that the best way to jump off a height into water is to hold your nose, the best way to eat at any of these stalls is to close your eyes and try not look at what's on the spoon.



While I'm savouring these rustic delicacies a customer extols the delights and benefits of the 'pig's dick' so I finally give in and accept a slither. About as chewy and tasteless as anything I've ever put in my mouth. I ask Kai to find out what the Thai name is. When the uproarious laughter finally settles it seems that it wasn't pig's dick after all, simply the pig's large intestine, but the staff and customers thought it was hilarious that this farang would eat pig's penis, even just to sample local gastronomy. Too late, I'd swallowed it by then.

Step across two continents to Spain, where a marginally less odiously ugly local speciality is about to be sampled.

## *Turning the other cheek*



It's almost two o'clock, the beginning of the Spanish lunch break, and I stop off at Valencia's Mercado Central to nibble on something tempting. The gorgeous early nineteenth-century monument to gastronomy is said to be the oldest covered food market in Europe. I stop off at Palomo, one of the stalls that form the periphery of the Mercado, and about the only place in the city that still serves the working-man's favourite of cabeza de cordero, half a sheep's

head roasted in the oven with potatoes and onion. Alongside a battered oven tray of pigs feet, (tried them once – never, ever again), was a similar tray with one remaining half-head tucked forlornly in the corner surrounded by sliced potatoes and onions soaked in pan juices. "You're lucky", the smiling lady in her frilly apron told me. "It's the last one," which made me think that being unlucky isn't always a bad thing.

As well as the last half-head, I got the last seat at the counter and ordered a glass of white wine so rough that it justified the old Spanish saying, *los mejores blancos son tintos*, the best whites are reds. The dish was placed in front of me and I stared down at it. It couldn't stare back because the eye had popped during cooking, but the skin had peeled back from the teeth to reveal a hideously evil grin. I flipped it over, not wanting to share its morbid joke and to avoid the skeletal glare of the empty eye socket.

We hear of people asking photographers to make sure they get their 'best side'; that was the sheep's 'best side'. The teeth on the inside were also bared, so not only did I not escape the demonic grin, I was presented with half a well-browned roast

brain, which ranks along with pig's trotter as my favourite dish to scrape off a plate into a waste disposal unit. I flipped it back over.

To be fair, the cheek meat was delicious, but sheep have very small cheeks, barely enough to fill a finger-loaf sandwich.

I thoroughly enjoyed the potatoes, though.

## *More stories about food..*



*better late  
than never*





*better late than never*