

at the same time, at this very dance party in the market of Chiang Rai.

### *Saturday night live*

The Saturday night market is located on Thanalai Road, which runs east-west through the center of Chiang Rai. Dancing is held at the minipark near the east end of the road, facing south.

### *Photo tip*

Eric adds: I find that I make friends very easily in Thailand when I am roaming around with a camera. The locals simply love to look at themselves in the viewfinder. Most of them don't possess cameras, and the few that do had to save up for it. They are grateful if you take the trouble to give them a copy, so I hand out reprints all the time—affordable and easy.

## NORTHERN THAILAND



*Kristianne Huntsberger  
celebrates Christmas fourfold  
in northern Thailand*

Because I was traveling alone in Thailand during December, I assumed I would go without Christmas.

Back in the States stores would be decked out in shiny red and green, blaring various versions of "Deck the Halls" and offering free gift wrapping. My mother would be baking sheets of cookies, and my sister's children would be peeking at gift tags under a plastic tree. But I was in a predominately Buddhist country, so I imagined the whole holiday might pass me by. The more I thought about it, I had no doubt about it—I would go without a Christmas celebration.

Instead, I had four.

The morning I planned to leave Sukhothai for Lampang, I went to Mae Sot on the Thai-Myanmar border instead, three hours west by bus. The road to Mae Sot was a climb, full of belching trucks. Trying to catch some fresh air through the window while avoiding the hot glare of direct sunlight, I arched my body awkwardly in the narrow space allotted me, my bags stacked on my lap, someone else's baggage piled at my feet.

I was seated in the back behind John, a man originally from Myanmar whom I had just met at the bus station. "What are you going to do in Mae Sot?" he asked, assuming I was either one of the town's many NGO workers or a traveler who needed to make a border crossing to renew a visa. I was neither, I told him.

John had lived in Mae Sot for years while running an education program for immigrant children from Myanmar, though now he was back in Bangkok with his family. He provided me with a few sightseeing suggestions: a drive to nearby

waterfalls, a visit to the sauna at the temple, a day trip into Myanmar. Or, he added, I could join him in creating two Christmas parties, one for an unofficial school that had sprouted up near the town dump and another for some of the street kids he used to work with.

For two days, I helped John play Santa Claus to more than one hundred migrant children. I went with him to the market, where he greeted people in Thai or Burmese, asked about bulk prices for oranges and figs, and purchased a big sack of individually wrapped preserved fruit, which he explained is a favorite treat in Myanmar. We bought little coconut milk pancakes called *khanom krok* and plastic trays full of a Burmese custard called *shwe gi*, made with sticky rice and sugar.

In the open dirt courtyard at the community school by the dump and at John's guest house in town the next day, we helped children pour juice into paper cups and play ring toss games. We gave each of their families a small plastic bag filled with basic supplies like shampoo, bars of soap, toothpaste, and a toothbrush or two. We blew up balloons, handed out pencils, and raffled off donations that John had gathered in Bangkok: small notebooks, piggy banks with company logos emblazoned on their bellies, stuffed animals, a handful of herringbone throw blankets, throw pillows printed with smiling faces of cartoon characters, decorative magnet clips, pens with bobble-headed clowns and cartoon bears, and other

little stocking stuffers. The children laughed and used me to practice English phrases they had learned.

In the evening, John told me that not all the children he worked with were Christian. Some of the families were Hindu, and many were Muslim—but that hardly mattered, he thought. Wasn't Christmas, he asked, a time to support people in need?

In my first two holiday celebrations, there were no Christmas decorations, no Christmas songs or kitschy snowmen and reindeer. The lack of familiar commercial items of the season was made up for in my third Christmas, which had all the trimmings. This celebration was in the town of Lampang, where I stopped for a few days to ride a bike along the meandering river path and visit temples.

The central area around the clock tower had been blocked to traffic and was filled with booths of food, handicrafts, and addictively good orange juice. There was a huge illuminated tree and a stage where Christmas standards, sung waveringly in English, were broadcast across the square and the adjoining park. Packs of red-nosed clowns made balloon sculptures, and several Santas, dressed in red suits and false white beards, posed with kids for picture-taking parents. A parade of marching bands and schoolchildren opened up a path through the celebration. Everyone was costumed in Santa hats, reindeer antlers, angel wings, and, a little more inexplicably, in cowboy hats and chaps or giant-headed



manga character costumes. Rumors were flying that someone was bringing in a snow-making machine.

Despite the tinsel on the trees and the clanging of "Silver Bells" through the streets, I was sweating in my light, sleeveless shirt, so the thought of snow seemed antithetical. I walked to the edge of the scene and sat in a streetside noodle shop near a middle-aged Thai couple who told me the pagentry in town grew larger every year. When they were children, Christmas was a blink. "But we like to celebrate things here," the woman said.

My final Christmas celebration was in Chiang Mai on Christmas Day. The young Thai owners of the guesthouse where I stayed had arranged a gathering on the rooftop deck that looked over the old city. Though there was no tree, glowing plastic snowmen, or reindeer, several of the guests had helped with blowing up balloons and putting together a gift exchange.

Like my other three parties, this was mostly a chance to step back from the everyday and celebrate. Ten of us gathered together, ate, had a few beers, and practiced our creaky Thai language skills.

As the night got longer, the guests grew nostalgic. There were definite things that were missing, according to two German girls, like the special pudding that a favorite aunt made and a walk in the snow. A young man who was cultivating new dreadlocks argued that he traveled during this season specifically to miss the holiday mess of family quarrels, mindless shopping, and all the waste. Other

people on the deck, in their hammocks and folding chairs, bantered and poured themselves more drinks. A few excused themselves and went downstairs to talk on computers to their families, who were all somewhere else, just beginning or maybe ending the holiday.

It was late when one of the young Thai men, who had been lounging with us on the deck and talking about colored shirts and holiday snacks, went downstairs and came back with a large paper lantern. He lit the wick, and as the flame heated the air inside, the pale paper ballooned and then lifted into the night. We stood together and watched the lantern rise and grow slowly smaller until it was just one tiny point of light amid many in the sky.

## KHON KAEN



*Danielle Koffler  
has an "eary" feeling  
in Khon Kaen*

When I moved to Khon Kaen in northeastern Thailand, my apartment was close to Khon Kaen University campus and across from Bung Nong Waeng, a small manmade lake. Every weekday around dusk, I heard music playing from the other side of the wa-

ter. When I went out to investigate, I found the quiet, usually deserted park surrounding it had transformed into a busy venue full of people from the neighborhood who were enjoying their evening hours there.

A small shop had been set up where couples and families were painting statues and canvases for a small fee. Others were walking or jogging, while some were using the blue exercise equipment that had been placed at regular intervals around the lake. I had never seen anyone in this park in the daytime, but at nightfall it was obviously the place to be.

Intrigued by the discovery, I kept walking until I came to the source of the music. A flamboyant Thai man was leading a large group of ladies in dance aerobics. At the back of the group were about ten grandmas signing people in and collecting the 5-baht fee. I wasn't dressed appropriately for dance aerobics, so I came back the next night, ready to try something very different from the gyms and dance studios back home.

I was the only foreigner who had come to take the class. The old women collecting money handed me a pen and asked me to sign the attendance sheet. My Thai language skills were marginal at this stage, but I wrote my name in English in a column that looked appropriate and scribbled a few illegible words in the other columns to make them look filled up. I put 5 baht in the collection bowl and found a spot at the back of the class where I wouldn't make too much of a fool out of myself.

Because I couldn't understand the teacher's instructions given in Thai, I had to closely watch what the other people were doing. I spent the first part of the class following the girl in front of me, who had her own interpretation of the dance moves, which looked significantly different from the rest of the class. Several times, I bumped into my neighbors because I didn't see they had switched moves, but they were very kind to the only foreigner in their midst, knowing full well that I had no clue what was going on.

The old ladies who had been collecting the money came to join the dance aerobics and took positions at the back with me. They did the moves a little bit slower than everybody else, but I have to say that their endurance was incredible. I could barely get through the hour-long class, which I blame on my bum knees and heat exhaustion, while these women who were forty years older than me were still dancing the night away and not breaking a sweat!

I was probably the worst dancer in the group that day, but I'm sure I was also the one who had the most fun.

There are similar workouts taking place in public parks all over Thailand—Bangkok's Lumpini Park being the most famous, where hundreds of locals come to exercise in the open air with friends and strangers. But this little park by the lakeside in Khon Kaen somehow seemed more special because I was exercising with my Thai neighbors and there weren't any foreigners in sight. Plus, I had found