



# side B

MAGAZINE



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## One Day in Thailand

Randy Ross

Bangkok.

Bang. Cock.

The name alone sounds skeezy and from the moment I get off the plane, I'm on high alert. I've read about the transsexual lady boys, tuk-tuk scammers, and locals who play volleyball using their feet. The terminal décor doesn't help, either: smirking Buddhas, sneering Buddhas, a gang of Buddhas wrestling a giant, three-headed snake.

The airport bus drops me downtown on Sukhumvit Road, a boulevard that's supposed to be two blocks from my hotel. On the corner stands a local woman wearing a t-shirt that says, "University of Nepraska." That's "Nepraska" with just one "p."

The whole area is pocked with little carts selling noodles and soup. I start to walk and the sooty, humid air stings like a lungful of red ants. Immediately, I'm lost. So, I approach a guy with a mossy, blond beard growing down his sternum. He is wearing a fishing vest and shorts. The chinstrap on his wide-brimmed hat is pulled snug across his jowls; he looks like he's bracing for a typhoon.

"Excuse me," I ask. "Do you know how to get to a street called Soi 38?"

He points down the block. "You from the U.S.?"

"I'm from Boston."

"Yeah, I'm from Texas. I was an MP back in Saigon, one of the last guys out, last guys out."

"Wow. Is it OK to eat at these food carts around here?"

"You don't want to hang around here. Soi Cowboy is only a few subway stops, subway stops." He tugs twice on the travel wallet around his neck. "This whole Sukhumvit area is built on a swamp. I'm going to retire here, retire here."

Then he exhales into his hand and smells his breath.

In less than two minutes, this guy has confirmed my worst fears about Southeast Asia: This place can do things to you, permanent mind-warping things. I put on my hat, tighten my chinstrap and walk away, walk away.