

SOUNDING OUT...

BANGKOK

Through *luk thung* bars, temple fairs and backpacker meccas, **John Clewley** discovers the pulsing heart of South-East Asia

Bangkok, or Krung Thep (City of Angels) as the locals call it, is celebrating its 222nd birthday this year. Located some 40km from the sea, it was originally a small trading port dominated by Chinese merchants; it's come a long way since then. And right from the beginning of what is known as the 'Bangkok era' in 1782, the city developed a multi-ethnic character and a love of entertainment that remains today. This hot, noisy, dusty urban sprawl has a vibrancy that few South-East Asian cities can match.

Of course, Bangkok does have one of the most well-known nightlife scenes on the planet but we're not here to talk about that because there is a wealth of alternatives in a city famous for its festivals, dance clubs (Bangkok still holds the edge over rivals Kuala Lumpur and Singapore), bars and pubs, karaoke pits, backpacker haunts, *luk thung* (Thai country music) cafes, Thai 'indie' rock joints and temple fairs.

The entertainment business in Bangkok has expanded tremendously in the past 20 years, extending all over the city, with the Khao San Road area, Silom and Sukhumvit roads and the Royal City Avenue (RCA) the most popular hangouts for travellers. The expat live music scene has also grown massively. Westerners, Thais and some Japanese play jazz, blues (there is a mini-jazz and blues boom at the moment) and, occasionally some Latin, in small but homely bars like **Tokyo Joe's** (9-11 Sivaporn Plaza, Sukhumvit Soi 24, +66 02 661 0359, www.tokyojoesbkk.com) and **Mojo's** (Sukhumvit Soi 33/2, +66 02 260 8430, www.bangkokmojos.com) and **Saxophone** (3/8 Victory Monument, Phayathai road, +66 02 246 5472, www.saxophonepub.com). Several Celtic-based bands ply the Irish pubs in town, including the **Irish Exchange** (1/5-6 Convent Rd, off Silom Road, +66 02 266 7160).

Thais like nothing more than to go out in a group for an evening of *sanuk* (fun). A table of friends might share a bottle and order snacks, while enjoying a procession of singers at a *luk thung* café or a karaoke bar. Eating and drinking go together in Thai culture. For a really big night out with your Thai mates, go to the **Coliseum** (906 Sukhumvit road, +66 02 713 5000), for a night a mega-glitz and beer drinking at a huge venue. But wherever you go, you'll be sure to end the evening by going to eat either noodles or rice soup (actually a kind of rice porridge). Bangkokians pride themselves on knowing which shop makes the tastiest dishes, and they'll cross town to find it.

Tourism Authority of Thailand

And if you do suffer from a broken heart, then take your jilted soul to the **Lovesick Pub** (159/5 Thonglor Soi 10, Sukhumvit Soi 55, +66 02 711 4477), which features a room where you can pin up a large photo of the one who did the damage and lob empty beer bottles at it; much more therapeutic than sticking pins in dolls.

LISTINGS

There are two daily English language newspapers – *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* – that run weekend listings sections every Friday, as well as several monthly listings magazines, the best of which are *Metro*, *Farang* and *BK Magazine*. Information on festivals and big concerts from Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) at: www.tat.org. Excellent detailed website for live music at: www.bangkokguide.com.



Hang Kruang (chorus line)
at a luk thung event
(John Clewley)

TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND DANCE

Thai classical music has an entrancing, mesmerising quality that comes from a musical scale of seven equidistant tones (the Western octave has eight) played by a combination of gongs, zithers, open-ended drums, fiddles and flutes, and it dates back at least seven hundred years. Classical ensembles like Duriyapraeneet do play at restaurants (see local listings) and the Thailand Cultural Centre (TCC) holds programmes of folk music.

Bruce Gaston of the avant-garde classical group Fong Nam entertains imbibers of some

of Bangkok's best home-brewed beer at the **Tawandang German Brewery** (462/61 Rama III Rd, +66 02 678 1116). Along with Thai classical dancers and classical musicians, Gaston plays the gongs, doubles on keyboards and even plays a mortar and pestle in a cabaret that features Thai classical and modern, Western music and dancing.

FESTIVALS & TEMPLE FAIRS

Bangkok does hold an annual festival of dance and music but it caters to the city's elite and corporate suits. There is usually one world music act but the icily formal TCC, where it's held, is a dampener. Better head for a *ngan wat*, or temple fair, particularly around public holidays and events like Thai New Year. Just look for large hand-painted billboards in front of temples, which are only put up at festival time; check

the dates and ask someone which star is going to perform. Luk thung is the kingdom's most popular music. It features huge travelling troupes, with large orchestras, up to 50 chorus dancers, as many as ten singers, including the star, a comedy team and an MC. Luk thung singing is the feature, though, with achingly beautiful songs that tell of hardship and broken dreams.

You can catch luk thung acts in the schools connected to Wat Plapachai and Wat Hualumpong, both temples are in walking distance of the main Hualumpong train station and hold colourful temple fairs. Quite apart from seeing some luk thung, these fairs are fun to go to. Just around the corner from here, near the July 22nd roundabout, is **About Café** (418 Maitrimit Road), which is a privately-funded arts centre, set up in an old Chinese shophouse, which holds all kinds of events – musical performances, conceptual art events, poetry readings and art exhibitions.

And if you're up for a trawl through the city's luk thung cafes, check out the evening's line-up of singers at either of the top two venues, **Param 9 Café** (just say to a taxi driver: "Param Khow café") and south

of the river in Thonburi, **Thonburi Café**. The cafes are really dimly-lit nightclubs that feature a house band; singers take to the stage, starting with the least famous and working up to the star singer, and the acts are often interspersed with comedy skits.

CLUBS: KHAO SAN ROAD AREA

This is the backpacker's mecca, immortalised in the film, *The Beach*. You're spoilt for choice here, with everything from beer bars to chill out dives spinning Buddha Bar-style house sounds. Top choices include: **Café Democ** (Ratchadamneon Road); **Lava Club** (Khao San Road); and for those wanting to puff on a *sheesha*, while listening to Arabic music, check out **Baghdad Café** (Samsen Road). You'll hear of any ad hoc gigs or mini-raves by word of mouth or fly-posted around the area.

DOWNTOWN: SUKHUMVIT & SILOM ROADS

I've lost count the number of times I've gone into a so-called 'reggae' club only to hear 'Hotel California' by the Eagles. Fortunately, Bangkok's only reggae club, the **Roots Reggae Club** (Sukhumvit Soi 26, +66 02 259 7002, www.rootsreggaeclub.com) has come to the rescue. Live DJs and MCs Thursday to Sunday. The best Latin club in town is **Senior Pico's** at the Rembrandt



The beautiful people
of Q Bar Bangkok

Hotel (Sukhumvit Soi 18, +66 02 261 7100). Best funk and Latin grooves at **Faith Club** (Sukhumvit Soi 28, +66 02 261 3007) or at **Q Bar**, the trend-setting 'New York-style' (it must be the black padded walls) club (34 Sukhumvit Soi 11, +66 02 252 3274, www.qbarbangkok.com) voted best nightclub for the past few years; also the bhangra heart of Bangkok. Plenty of Bangkok's beautiful people are at Q Bar, but the best place to ogle them is at **Bed Supperclub** (26 Sukhumvit Soi 11, +66 02 651 3537, www.bedsupperclub.com). ■

NIGHTLIFE CRACKDOWN

From April 1, only three entertainment zones – including the go-go bar area of Patpong and Silom roads, and two areas mainly frequented by Thais – are supposed to open until 2am; everywhere else must close by 1am. Not strictly enforced yet but raids for drugs and underage drinkers are ongoing. Always carry your passport or a photocopy of it when you go out, or you'll be fined.