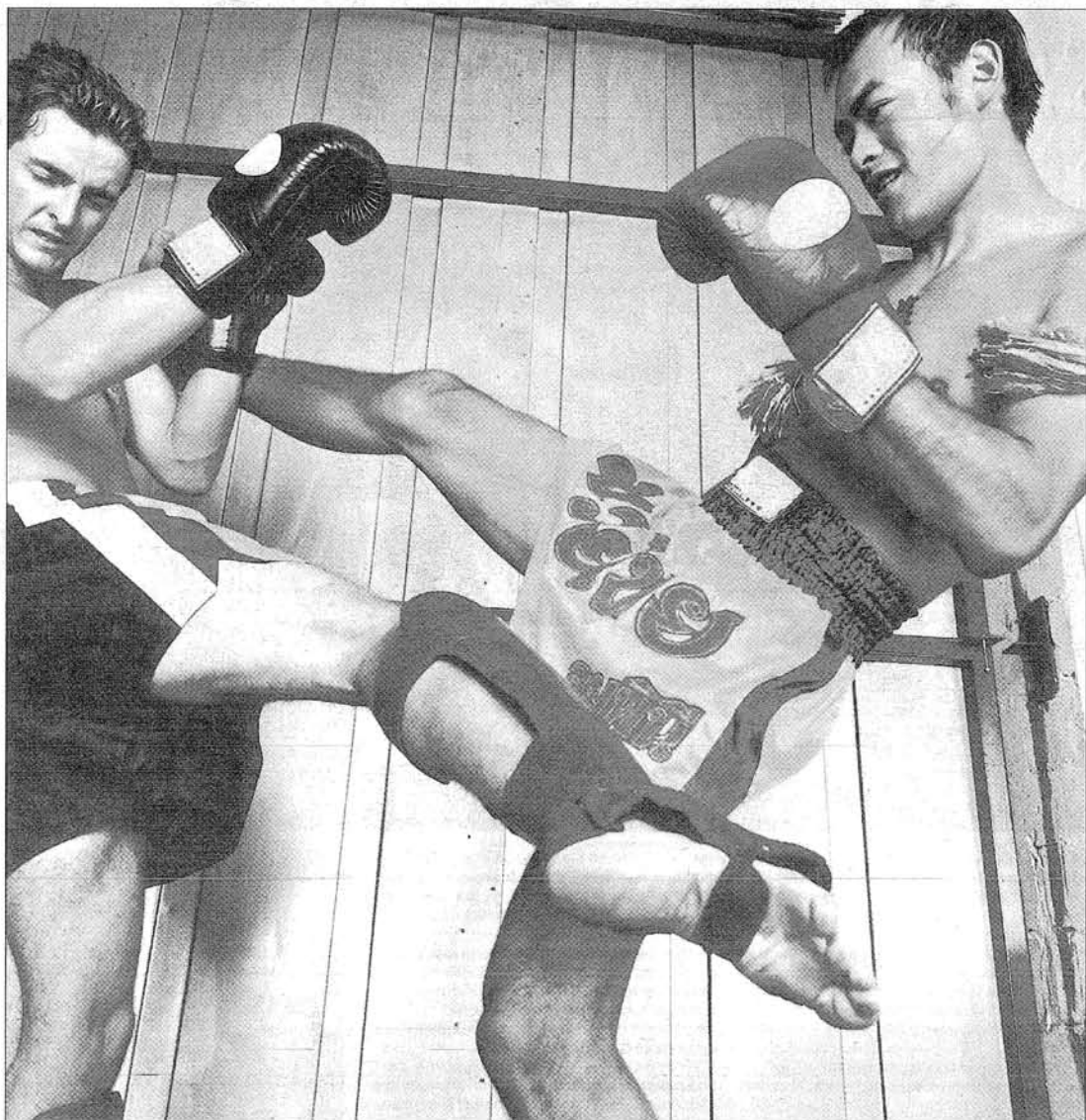


The Guide Thailand Courses



Beyond the beaches

Peeling themselves away from poolside positions, travellers are delving into Thailand's culture through short courses on everything from Thai massage to Thai boxing, writes **Sue White**.

I know what you're thinking. I say, "two-week holiday in Thailand" and you imagine lazy days spent on picture-perfect beaches, and nights combing the markets for bargains.

But beyond the beaches (unarguably enticing) and the shopping (again, excellent), there's an intriguing local culture to explore. Across Thailand, tourists are discovering short courses are one way to get beyond the superficial: foreigners can now be found hunched over hot woks learning Thai cooking; digging elbows into sweaty strangers while attempting Thai massage; or punching their way through a Thai boxing lesson.

Like Thai travel overall, short courses are simple to arrange; ask at your hotel, or scan the noticeboards in tourist spots. With prices significantly cheaper than the equivalent program in Australia, the only difficulty lies in choosing an activity, and deciding how much time you are willing to spend away from your favourite poolside position to do it.

For Sarah Mercier, a stint of bad weather enticed her and a friend away from Koh Samui's beaches to learn Thai cooking. "My friend and

I had baked a lot together, so we thought we'd try cooking." They booked into Samui Institute of Thai Culinary Arts for its professional-looking set-up, and because vegetarian options were available.

"The first session was mainly preparation, learning about the food, then we spent a full day cooking and eating. It was great."

While some cooking schools offer market trips as part of the experience, Mercier's course was kitchen-bound, as participants worked happily at their own burners (glasses of wine in hand), in a semi-circle around the teacher.

"We spent a lot of time making curry pastes, grinding up the spices with a mortar and pestle, and putting in as much chilli as you liked. At the end of the day we tried everyone else's and they all tasted different, because we all made our own paste - it was interesting to see how it changed the meal."

Up north, Breony Lester was drawn to Wok and Roll cooking school, in a local's house in Pai, for a one-day crash course before travelling on to Europe. "Thai food is just so good. I'd just spent a month teaching English in a village, and the family I lived with made

amazing food. But watching them in their kitchen it was all so fast, I couldn't figure out what was happening.

"The course went through everything step by step. The concepts of cooking were very helpful too, as they taught us how to mix and match ingredients depending on what we liked to eat," she said.

While Mercier says that living in Newtown (where Thai restaurants abound) has meant she still mainly eats Thai food cooked by professionals, Lester has enjoyed practicing her skills during her European travels. "Every time I stay at someone's house I cook them a Thai dinner - they love the special curry paste we were taught."

Lester also decided to use her holiday to learn Thai massage. "It's very different to massage in Australia - there's not a lot of oil involved, there's a lot of stretching, you lie there and they stretch and massage you through clothing."

Choosing Thai Massage School of Chiang Mai for its international accreditation, she enjoyed that local customs were integrated into the training: "It was a whole cultural



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Wok and roll... (from left) Thai boxing; Thai cooking lessons; and Ayurvedic treatment. Photos: Getty Images



experience, because each day would start with a warm up, then a Buddhist prayer they had written out for us.

"The typical Thai massage starts off with a foot bath, as feet are considered very dirty there, so they wash them first, and then you begin."

For Lester, challenges arose when massaging big burly blokes. "Depending on how strong you are it can be quite hard. Each day we massaged a different student to get used to different body types. I was fine with my friend, who is about the same size as me, but the next day I had a big Tahitian guy who said, 'What are you doing?' Apparently my hard pressing felt like I was tickling him."

When Deb Hennessey decided to make learning Thai massage the focus of her holiday she left the city comforts behind and headed for the hills. "They told us in advance to expect simple living conditions. We had rice with every meal and simple vegetarian food, with no other options nearby, but it was great."

Daytimes were spent in a hut overlooking the mountains, learning basic techniques and practicing on one another; "there was a lot to absorb".

Even though nights were early, "we were tired; Thai massage is fairly strenuous", Hennessey found the experience quite social, and is still in contact with a number of friends she made during the 12-day training. "Actually, two European participants met and fell in love on our course. They're still together, they visited me in Sydney recently and I went to see them on a later trip to Europe."

For Hennessey, the remote location proved the highlight of her trip. "One night I was out for a walk and some village girls invited me in for dinner. We had no words in common, but to have dinner together and try to communicate was really lovely."

While Hennessey says one of her biggest challenges was becoming a bit sick of white rice - "I couldn't wait to have noodles again when we got back to town", she notes the physical demands too. "It's quite hilly walking

much for me - slightly intimidating, plus my fitness wasn't that good, and I was uncoordinated."

But after a week lazing on the beach while the rest of the group trained, Safavuzzi was persuaded to give it a try. "It was pretty hard at first. It was very hot, I was trying to keep up with the pace - I just couldn't do it. They said punch and kick, and I thought 'which leg goes where?' I had two left feet."

Still, she enjoyed it enough to take four or five lessons, and after going to see some Thai women fight professionally, Safavuzzi returned home inspired.

"I decided to keep training, and eventually my fitness got really good and so did my coordination and reflexes - they were just on the rebound."

Safavuzzi now trains Thai boxing in Sydney four times a week, and is grateful she pushed past her initial trepidation of participating in a male-dominated sport. "I'm a high school teacher, so it's a great thing to do to de-stress."

So the next time you plan a Thai holiday, consider taking some time out to learn a new skill. But watch out, you may get so inspired you'll find there's hardly time to laze by the pool.

► TRIP NOTES

■ **Thai cooking** Courses abound in most tourist centres and can usually be booked once there. On the islands, Samui Institute of Thai Culinary Arts on Koh Samui is one of the best choices. Courses cost 1850 baht (\$65) a person. See www.sitca.net. Up north, Wok and Roll is just one of many cooking schools found in Pai and Chiang Mai. Courses start from 750 baht a day.

■ **Thai massage** In Chiang Mai, a five-day course at the Thai Massage School includes a vegetarian meal in the middle of the day, a detailed training manual and a certificate that is internationally recognised. Courses start from 5900 baht and 10-week courses qualify students for full-time careers in massage. See www.tmc.school.com. For a more remote experience, 12-day massage courses are available in mountain villages outside Chiang Mai. Expect simple living, basic food and limited distractions. Courses start from 10,450 baht. For information, see www.thaiyogamassage.infothai.com.

■ **Thai boxing (muay Thai)** Drop-in classes or training are easy to arrange at gyms and boxing camps across Thailand. Tai Pan Muay Thai runs trips to Koh Samui every year to train at the World Muay Thai Council camp. The next trip departs on December 22. Beginners are welcome. For more information, email taipanmuaythai@hotmail.com.

Foreigners can now be found hunched over hot woks learning cooking.

in the area, and you are using squat toilets - so if you don't have strong legs before, limber up."

Physical demands are part of the attraction for the many international travellers attempting Muay Thai (Thai Boxing). In boxing camps and gyms across the country, opportunities abound for visitors to learn to kick and punch their way through lessons.

When Sophia Safavuzzi first went to Thailand it was not with the intention of taking up Muay Thai. Despite accompanying her partner, who runs boxing trips to Koh Samui every year, she says, "It seemed a bit

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