

Travel On Today

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Spiritual in spikes



Guidebook gurus



Falling for Erawan

Spiritual in spikes

Phuket's vegetarian festival is not just about avoiding meat - there are also parades, fireworks and plenty of self-mutilation

With four million visitors enjoying its fancy beach resorts, bacchanalian nightlife and upscale malls, Phuket certainly isn't undiscovered. Many might even suggest that the Pearl of the Andaman has become something of a paradise lost.

But the island is also host to one of Thailand's better-kept secrets. Every year for nine days, Phuket town explodes in a frenzy of sights and sounds, as locals take to the streets to celebrate one of the world's most bizarre and macabre festivals.

The national tourist office seems almost reluctant to divulge too much information.

"Oh yes, the vegetarian festival in Phuket," the young lady in the booth grins. "You can eat vegetarian food and see parades."

The Vegetarian Festival, or "Ngaan Kin Jeh" as it's called, kicks off on the first evening of the ninth lunar month.

Its origins date back to 1825, when Phuket was still covered in dense jungle and Chinese labourers worked its tin mines. A visiting opera company performing for the miners fell ill with an unknown fever during their stay.

The troupe then followed a strictly vegetarian diet, accompanied by a series of rituals honouring their emperor gods, and recovered immediately. Locals, visibly impressed, sent volunteers back to China to study the rites, and the festival has been celebrated ever since.

On the eve of the festival, a large pole is raised in each temple, and the nine emperor gods are invited to descend from the heavens and take part in the ceremonies. At midnight, nine lanterns are hung on the poles, signifying that the festival has begun.

That's when Phuket becomes a sea of yellow and white. Restaurants and stalls fly yellow banners to show they serve only vegetarian food and pilgrims dress in white for the entire week to show that they intend to remain pure and follow the precepts of the festival, which include abstinence from sex and alcohol, as well as refraining from killing or eating animals.

While vegetarian food is delicious and the temples gaily decorated, most visitors focus on the maa song or human devotees whom the gods enter during the festival.

The maa song manifest supernatural powers and perform self-mutilation so they can absorb evil from other individuals and ensure good luck for the entire community. Aside from piercing their cheeks and other parts of their anatomy, they also bathe themselves with hot oil, lie on beds of nails and climb ladders with blades.

Each morning begins with processions through the town. At dawn, one can find scores of young men thronging the inner sanctums of the temples, preparing themselves for self-mutilation.

At the base of the shrines, they go into a trance, begin speaking in tones and don colourful aprons with Taoist symbols, looking on as doctors make cuts at both sides of their mouths.

Once the incisions have been made, various sharp objects like knives and skewers are inserted into their cheeks. Many of the men try to outdo each other with other items such as rifles, fishing rods and parasols.

I saw one fellow with the nozzle of a gasoline pump through his face. His friend had a full-size beach umbrella through both cheeks!

The shops and houses along the parade routes put tables out front covered with baskets of fruit, joss sticks and Buddha images. The entranced are then invited to come and bless each individual and their business as they pass by.

Despite the hideous appearance of a man with a two-metre spear protruding through his cheeks, eyes rolled back and babbling incoherently, folks don't flinch when he approaches. Instead they fold their hands in prayer and wait patiently for his blessings.

Spirit mediums walk through the streets, while young men carrying miniature shrines run alongside.

The shrines are filled with fireworks, which explode as spectators toss entire lit packs of firecrackers into the shrines as they come past. Luckily, the shrine carriers are swathed in towels to protect themselves.

Photographers chasing the procession often compare the procession with a war zone.

Perhaps the most popular event of the festival is fire walking, which takes place in the Saphan Hin stadium near the sea. Coals are flamed, raked and turned for hours, in preparation for teams of entranced men, who gyrate and crack whips to the accompaniment of loud drums, preparing themselves for walking on the hot embers.

While most of the men show at least some sense of mortality, dashing across the coals as quickly as they can, others strut leisurely, without a care in the world. In either case, the participants show nary a burn or a blemish on their feet after the event.

As the week progresses, the street processions become crazier, the noise more thunderous and the devotees more outlandish.



Groups of men swing hatchets, machetes and spiked balls across their backs, whipping themselves in a mad frenzy. Women too jump in the fray as the festival draws to a close, performing the similar acts of facial shish kebab as the men.

These women are often mediums for the child gods, and can be seen skipping through the streets sucking lollipops or their thumbs.

On the final night, the fireworks are deafening and the entire town makes its way out to the sea. The shrines of the emperor gods are loaded into boats and launched adrift, while a monstrous bonfire is lit onshore.

The following morning, the debris of ash that engulfs the town is swept up, the restaurants start serving meat again, people put on colourful clothes and Phuket goes back to being a tourist resort.

I came across the smiling woman running a restaurant who had asked me rather knowingly earlier in the week if this was my first vegetarian festival.

When I saw her later, she winked and asked if I'd enjoyed myself. I replied that I had, and realised that I'd be coming back to Phuket for years to come.

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