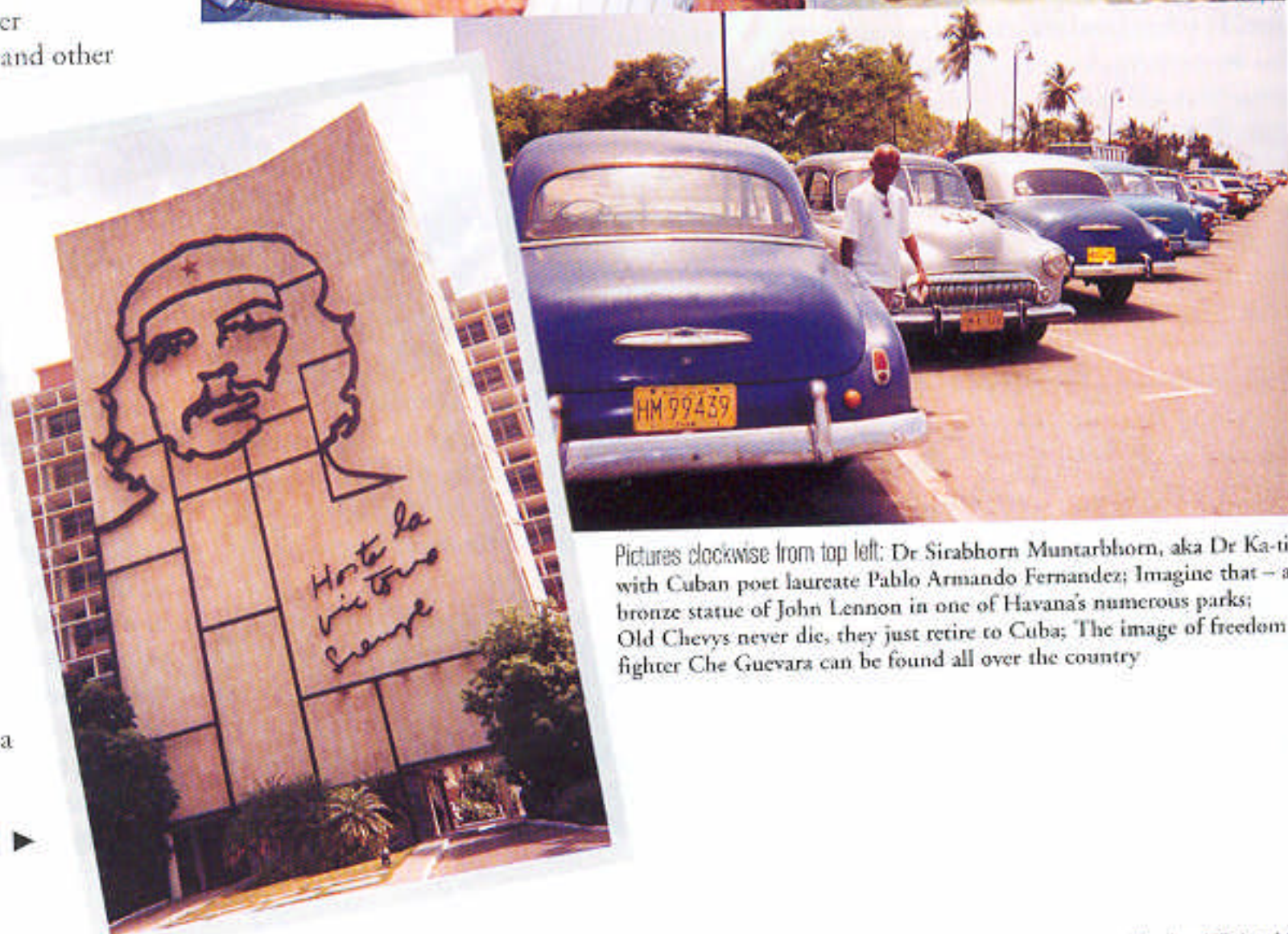


# BON VOYAGE!

IT'S A RARE PERSON INDEED THAT DOESN'T LOOK FORWARD TO HOLIDAYS ABROAD. BUT EVEN FOR THE MOST SEASONED JETSETTER, TRAVELLING TO NEW AND EXOTIC OVERSEAS DESTINATIONS ALWAYS INVOLVES AN X FACTOR. *THAILAND TATLER* ENLISTS THE HELP OF SIX WELL-TRAVELLED PERSONALITIES TO GIVE YOU SOME SALIENT ADVICE ON WHERE TO GO, WHAT TO SEE WHEN YOU GET THERE AND HOW TO BE PREPARED SO THAT YOU GET THE BEST OUT OF YOUR TRIP

Most people know Dr Sirabhorn Muntarbhorn as Dr Ka-ti, the renowned Brazilian jazz guitarist. She enjoys travelling the world and takes at least three trips a year, one of which has to be to a country she has never been before. "Travelling gives me inspiration. It keeps me alive. I think I've visited around 40 countries to date," she says.

The queen of the Latin beat has just returned from a trip to the island of Cuba, a destination she chose to help her differentiate between Brazilian and other forms of Latin jazz. "I thoroughly enjoyed my trip to Cuba," she beams, "although visitors must be careful of certain things. For example, don't even think of bringing a laptop computer into the country. It makes the airport authorities very suspicious." Dr Ka-ti also says tourists cannot buy the local currency, the peso, before going to Cuba. "The government and people of Cuba want US dollars and many won't accept the peso. However, if you do get given a few pesos hang on to them because things can get expensive if you're tipping in ▶



Pictures clockwise from top left: Dr Sirabhorn Muntarbhorn, aka Dr Ka-ti, with Cuban poet laureate Pablo Armando Fernandez; Imagine that – a bronze statue of John Lennon in one of Havana's numerous parks; Old Chevys never die, they just retire to Cuba; The image of freedom fighter Che Guevara can be found all over the country



Pictures clockwise from top left: Inthira Ann Thanavisuth strikes a pose in Morocco; Do you know Hotel California? – Ann with Moroccan musicians; No, Kasidit Pan Kanchanaranya isn't getting feisty about the bill, just teaching a hotel waiter the finer points of *muay thai*; The beautiful interior of the Palais Rhoul Hotel; Ann and Pan with the owner of Palais Rhoul

◀ dollars every time. In fact, a few pesos go a long way," she explains.

As for things to do, there are 53 museums in Cuba's capital, Havana, alone, says Dr Ka-ti. This is because when Fidel Castro took over the country, unlike many of the world's other revolutionaries, he made sure his own country's art and culture were preserved. Dining out in Havana is also something of a novel experience, according to Dr Ka-ti. There are plenty of restaurants all over town but what seems to be most popular are the *paladares* – government-sanctioned restaurants (of no more than 12 tables) that have been set up by residents in their own homes. "Not only do they provide valuable extra income for the family but also wonderful home-cooked food for visitors. Oddly though, beef is not on the menu because most of the cattle in Cuba is owned by the government," Dr Ka-ti explains.

Before the Cuban revolution in 1959, Havana was as glamorous as Las Vegas, so it is not surprising to find luxury items still selling (although many of the products are beyond the means of most Cubans). Ka-ti enjoys the shopping and says, "You can have your own perfume made in a perfumery called Hecho A Mano and Havana is a great

place for buying old records and books. Speaking of which, I recommend a visit to the former home of author Ernest Hemingway, which has been preserved as a museum and monument to the writer."

Accommodation is easy to find in Cuba because the government owns almost all the hotels. Pricing usually start from around US\$50 dollars a night. Ka-ti suggests the Hotel Los Frailes in the narrow alley of La Habana Vieja. "It was a former mansion belonging to Don Pedro Claudio Duquesne, a marquis and captain in the French navy. At the entrance of the hotel stands a beautiful copper sculpture of monks by artist Octavio Cuellar."

Like Dr Ka-ti, Inthira Ann Thanavisuth and Kasidit Pan Kanchanaranya are well travelled. So much so that when they are asked to pick their favourite holiday spot they struggle for a firm answer. Ann and Pan usually travel twice a year and their destinations vary depending on their



interest and mood. Their last overseas visit was to the north African country of Morocco where the adventurous couple fell in love with Marrakech. "If you are in for history and a bit of adventure, Marrakech is certainly the place to go," Pan suggests, adding, "We recommend the Palais Rhoul as a place to stay. It is one of the best hotels we've been in, just 16 rooms exquisitely ornamented in the Moroccan style." Adds Ann, "It's wonderful. Staying at the Palais Rhoul is like having your own palace. You're never asked to show a card or to sign anything after ordering food or drinks. It

amazed me how things worked."

Next to the hotel is the house the Hermès family uses for its riding holidays to Morocco and a short trip away is Zouk, one of the top five royal cities in Morocco where discerning people do all their shopping. Morocco is best known for handmade carpets and accessories but buying should be done with caution. "You have to haggle for the price of goods and you can never be quite sure if you paid a fair price," says Pan. After a long day of 'retail therapy', the couple suggests trying out a traditional Arabic hamman, or bath-house, where a very physical but rejuvenating massage can be had, too.

Winter is the best time to visit Morocco (January is recommended) because it can get super hot in the summer. A four-night trip to Marrakech is long enough to experience this exotic town. And bone up on your French, says Ann, because it is the official language of the country.

No such problems with a visit to the States where Los Angeles is said to be home to the largest single community of Thais outside the kingdom. So, if you're planning a trip to that other City of Angels, take a tip or two from part-time LA resident Chiranuj Bhirombhakdi on where to dine and what places to visit. Chiranuj and her parents, Chamnong and Khunying Supatchari Bhirombhakdi, visit LA twice a year for their health check ups and rent a house in Westwood for a couple of months.

"Normally when we first arrive we don't feel like cooking much so we call the Thai Beer restaurant for a take-out delivery. This restaurant offers Thai food close to home cuisine," says Chiranuj adding, "If you're self-catering like us, the place to go grocery shopping is Getson's where you can get fine Asian goods and sauces. The Bangkok Market is also good for meat balls and fresh flat noodles."

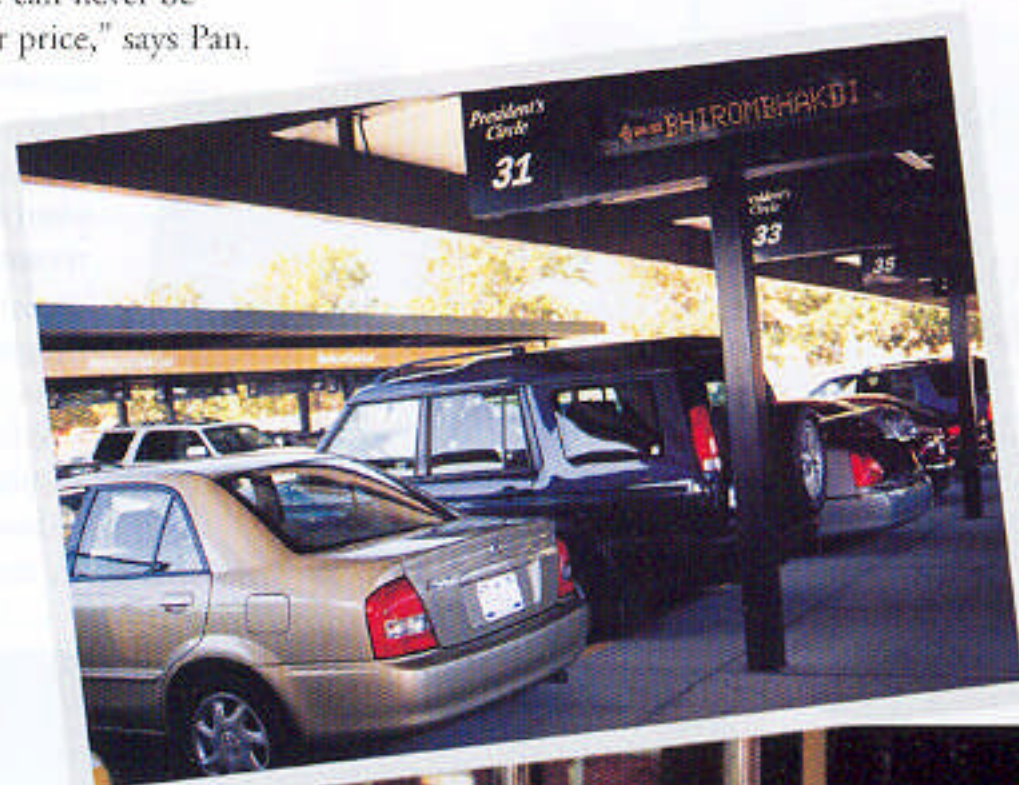
Eating out seems to be a big attraction in LA though and Chiranuj has a long list of restaurants in her computer. Many are famous, like Spago and The Ivy on North Robertson road. "L'Orangerie is another continental restaurant we visit often and I love Le Dome on Sunset Boulevard because of its duck a l'orange," says Chiranuj. The family is also a regular at Matsuhisa on La Cienega Boulevard, the restaurant owned by

the well-known Japanese chef, Nobuyuki Matsuhisa. "We know that fresh goods are delivered on Tuesday and Thursday so we book a room on both days for a whole month," Chiranuj laughs.

Getting to and from these fine restaurants means having to be mobile and Chiranuj recommends car rental as the best option. Try Beverly Hills Rent-A-Car or the

ubiquitous Budget company, where fancy cars such as Bentleys can be rented as well as everyday runarounds.

Being in the home of the movie industry provides a great opportunity to visit Disneyland and Universal Studios. "Right now there's a new place called Cal Adventure right across from Disneyland. Get a two-day pass so you can see



Pictures from top: Your chariot awaits – the Bhirombhakdis' car ready to depart the rental shop; Don't I know you? – Siranudh Bhirombhakdi meets Arnold Schwarzenegger and his wife, Maria Shriver, at Spago restaurant; Chiranuj Bhirombhakdi, together with her parents and son Siranudh, enjoy a meal at The Ivy restaurant



◀ everything," suggests Chiranuj, adding, "Disneyland also offers a fast pass so that you don't have to queue for ages for the best rides and Universal Studios has a one-year pass for the same price as a one-day pass."

Wherever your destination though, there are things you can do to make your trip hassle-free and more enjoyable. Just listen to travel aficionados Vikorn Srivikorn and ML

Nandhika Varavarn. Vikorn, the director of President Hotel and Tower Company and son of Chalermbhand and Khunying Sasima, is an avid traveller who claims to have visited over 50 different countries. "I love to travel," he says. "I believe you can't really experience something unless you've seen it with your own eyes."

This young jetsetter often holidays for

just short periods. This is why he tries to maximise his time and energy when visiting a country. How does he deal with the common problem of jet-lag though? "I take melatonin or sleeping pills," he says. "Because I always have limited time, I want to use it wisely. For example, if I arrive during the morning, I try to stay up all day and adjust my internal clock right away."

Vikorn usually reads up on his destination before travelling. The Lonely Planet series is a favourite of his. "I also ask the concierge when I arrive for recommendations on where to go," he says. "One hotel that impressed me very much was the Auberge du Soleil in Napa Valley, California. It's set in a valley and the ambience is just fantastic. You can watch the sunset while drinking a

Pictures clockwise from top right: Vikorn Srivikorn chills in the Maldives; Taking in the air in beautiful New Zealand; Where's my camel? - soaking up the sun in front of the pyramids at Giza, Egypt; Avoiding the other tourists in front of the Parthenon at Athens, Greece



glass of wine. It's perfect for lovers."

Another great hotel Vikorn recommends is the Chateau Fontenac in Quebec City. "It's a very charming hotel. Quebec City is northeast of Montreal and it's a quaint town. To me it's just a dream place and the chateau itself is an old fortress overlooking the city."

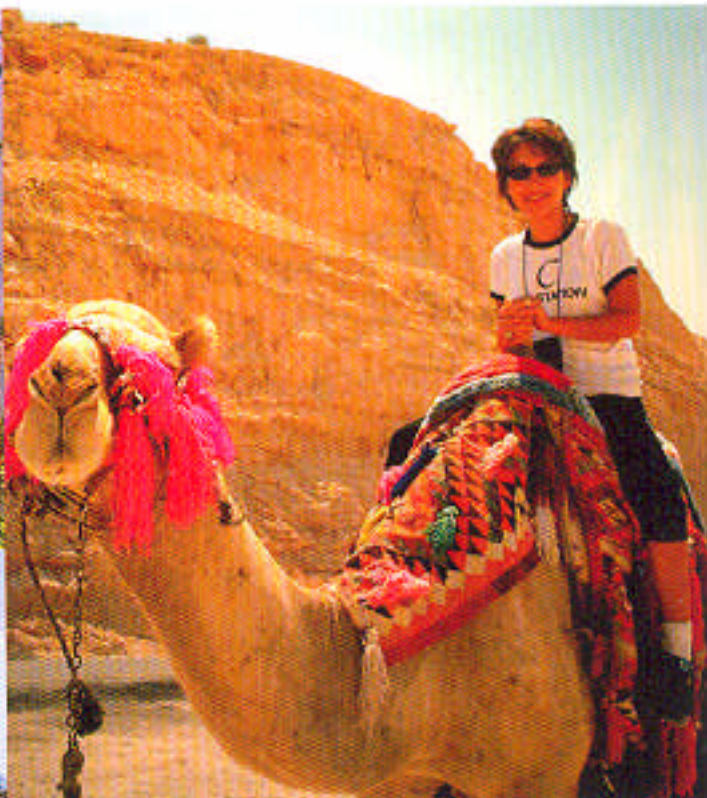
In terms of tourist spots, Vikorn also highly recommends a visit to Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. "Niagara Falls is probably more famous but I think Victoria Falls is much more beautiful," he says. "There's also a great hotel there, the Victoria Falls Hotel. It overlooks the Zambese River gorge and the views are just breathtaking."

Vikorn has many favourite countries in the world but when pushed to name three he says they would probably be Kenya, the Maldives and Zimbabwe. "I like Africa. I was pleasantly surprised the first time I went. Many people are not interested in visiting the continent but it's actually a very interesting and beautiful place. Also the people are very family oriented. And there are beautiful hotels and nice restaurants."

Does Vikorn have any tips for those planning holiday trips soon? "Do some research about the place before visiting and if you need any vaccinations, be sure to get them early. When you reach your destination don't overdress – it marks you out – and don't carry too much cash. One thing I always do is keep my credit cards in my socks... and I haven't been pick-pocketed yet!"

Vikorn's wise advice is endorsed by ML Nandhika Varavarn, for whom travel comes with the job. The senior director of the Corporate Communications Department at Bangkok Airways has spent 11 years with the airline during which time she has made countless overseas trips. Her main tip for those bitten by the travel bug? Travel smart. "Don't act like a tourist. There are gangs that prey on tourists by taking advantage of their unfamiliarity with new surroundings and the likelihood that tourists are carrying reasonable amounts of cash on them. Gangs are most active at airports, that first port of call," Nandhika says.

When she travels, Nandhika makes sure she doesn't keep all her valuables together in the same bag. Her passport goes in the pocket of whatever she is wearing, while her money, credit cards and jewellery are divided between her handbag and other travelling bags. "Keep your handbag with you at all times, and don't leave it on a trolley," she cautions, "otherwise the very minute you take your eyes off it, it will most likely be gone. Vigilance is the key."



Pictures clockwise from top left: Nandhika Varavarn with son Claude in Bali; Getting the hump on the road from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea; Don't point that at me – posing with an Israeli soldier at the Wailing Wall; In front of a temple on a visit to Luang Prabang, Laos

Another tip is not to dress up with diamonds, expensive watches and designer clothes and bags while you are travelling. "It is better to dress casually when you are flying, instead of wearing your best clothes and jewellery. Don't draw attention to yourself by looking ostentatious. Besides, it is also more comfortable to dress in casual wear on a long flight," Nandhika advises. "You can always change once you arrive at your destination if you need to get dressed up."

Other useful tips from the well-travelled Nandhika include making sure you prepare lots of small US dollar bills when travelling to countries with restrictions on foreign exchange, such as Cambodia or Burma. This is because the local vendors prefer to trade in US currency, which means that you can pay for purchases with the American greenback but any change will be returned in the form of the local currency. So unless



you want to return home with a heavy wallet bulging with kips and kyats, make sure you are able to give the exact amount in US bills.

So, where does Nandhika pick as her favourite hideaway? Huka Lodge at Lake Taupo in New Zealand. It is an exclusive retreat in beautiful natural surroundings that is frequented by international celebrities. "I love this place. You are always treated like someone special here," she says. And isn't that what travel at its best should be all about? ■