



THAILAND

VOLUME ONE
OWEN JONES



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Are Asian Bars Any Different to Our Own?

The first time that someone from Europe or America goes to a bar area in an Asian city that is intended to be part of the tourist industry, they will be struck by the amount of noise. These bar areas are set aside in some cities, a little like a 'Red Light District' in the West, but it is not intended to be a Red Light District, it is just too noisy to be in a residential area.

There are also cities that have been built up as one big pleasure zone and then the whole city centre might be full of bars, and residents will live in the suburbs. In Thailand, Chiang Mai is in the first category and Pattaya falls into the latter category. I am told that it is similar in most other Asian countries.

Many, but certainly not all, Asian bars have 'resident' bar girls who have certain jobs or 'privileges'. An expression used in some areas is working 'inside the bar' and working 'outside the bar'.

Those who work 'inside the bar' area are there to serve drinks and food, clean glasses and tables. They are 'traditional' barmaids, if you like. Those who work 'outside the bar' area will order you a drink and help you get served, but it is not their 'real job'. Their real job is to keep you entertained and to coax drinks out of you – more like hostesses.

These are the girls who might go with you, if they like you. Asking for 'special favours' from the wrong sort of worker can be taken as very insulting, but it happens all the time, so most girls do not get upset by foreigners who don't know the ropes.

This is probably quite similar to some areas in Europe and the States. In general, bars are not 'traditional' in Asia. Many Asians have never been in a bar in their lives and it would never occur to them to go. Although most Asians drink alcohol, they tend to drink at home with friends and family.

Having said that, when an Asian man goes looking for casual company, there are places for him to go and, in general, non-Asians are not encouraged, not welcome or even not allowed in. There are also some local equivalents of foreign-

style bars, which are frequented more by Asians than by foreigners. These are often in the style of Karaoke Bars.

Karaoke Bars are tremendously popular in most Asian countries. Most local Asians do not speak English, so the songs they sing are also in the local language, which very few foreigners will understand, which makes them less popular with most foreigners.

Depending on the tourist's reason for coming to Asia, he (or she) will like the sex tourist cities, the historical cities or the countryside. And these areas are completely different. Many foreign men who have been coming to Thailand for decades have never got further than Pattaya and Bangkok, or Phuket and Bangkok.

Others prefer the historical cities like Chiang Mai in the Golden Triangle, which also have a foreign-style, but unobtrusive nightlife. Yet others like to backpack through the mountains and visit the Hill Tribes. There are also forests and beautiful sandy beaches on quiet islands.

In the novel by Owen Jones, "Behind The Smile ~ the story of Lek, a bar girl in Pattaya", Lek starts working inside the bar, until she realises that she needs more money when she moves outside. After 10 years of doing that, she moves back inside the bar for fear of her daughter finding out what she did for a living.

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