



TAJSKO VSAKO LETO OBIŠČE VEČ MILIJONOV TURISTOV, ZARADI KATERIH SE DRŽAVA UVRŠČA V SAM VRH SVETOVNHIH TURISTIČNIH DESTINACIJ. PO STATISTIČNIH PODATKIH MINISTRSTVA ZA TURIZEM JE V LETU 2012 OBISKALO TO DEŽELO ŽE VEČ KOT 22 MILIJONOV LJUDI.

Otok Phuket zaradi svojega kristalno čistega turkiznega morja in z več kot 7 milijonov obiskovalcev letno nedvomno spada v sam vrh turističnih področij na Tajskem. Malokdo pa ve, da se na Phuketu odvija tudi eden najbolj nenavadnih festivalov na svetu. Večina turistov se najraje zadržuje kar znotraj hotelskih letovišč in le malokdo od njih obiše tudi glavno mesto na otoku. Mesto Phuket je administrativno središče, sprehod po stolet starih ulicah pa nam razkriva bogate rezidence, ki so nekoč pripadale tamkajšnjim baronom kositra. Na Phuketu so nameč že v 18. stoletju kopali kositri. Povečini so rudnike upravljali kitajski priseljenci, ki so svoje delavce uvozili iz Kitajske. Nanje nas spominjajo številni kitajski templji in festivali, ki so bili prineseni iz njihove matične dežele. Poleg najbolj znanega kitajskega novega leta je Phuket tudi dom enega najbolj nenavadnih festivalov na vsem svetu, t. i. »vegeterijanskega festivala«, ki poteka v oktobru. Njegov začetek se določi vsako leto sproti in je odvisen od lunarnega koledarja. V devetih dneh, kolikor traja festival, naj bi se vsi verniki postili in uživali izključno le zelenjavo ter se odrekali alkoholu, lažem, opravljanju in posteljnim aktivnostim. V času posta so verniki oblečeni v bela oblačila, s katerimi ponazarjajo čistost in nedolžnost. Festival poznajo tudi v državah, kot so Mjanmar, Malezija in Singapur, vendar mu tam pravijo »festival devetih cesarskih bogov«.

Vse skupaj naj bi bilo se začelo pred približno 150 leti s prihodom potujoče kitajske operne skupine; ta je prišla na Phuket zabavat kitajske priseljence, ki so delali v rudnikih kositra. V času njihovega obiska so se začele v mestu širiti razne bolezni in tako so za malarijo zboleli tudi člani gostujuče operne skupine. V strahu, da so ujezili njihove bogove, so se zatekli k strogi vegeterijanski dieti in molitvi k devetim cesarskim bogovom, da bi si s tem očistili tako svoje telo kot duha. Ker so nato vsi čudežno ozdravili, so v kraju v zahvalo bogovom kot tudi zaradi lastnega veselja priredili festival. Od tistega leta dalje se festival dogaja vsako leto, udeleži pa se ga vedno več vernikov. Največja značilnost vegeterijanskega festivala so procesije, kjer se udeleženci sprehajajo po žerjavici, plezajo bosi po osem metrov visokih ostrih lestvah, narejenih iz mečev, in se z najrazličnejšimi stvarmi, ki jih najdejo doma, prebadajo po različnih delih svojega telesa.

Vse se začne že zgodaj zjutraj, ko je zunaj še mrak in se začne množica vernikov zbirati pred njihovimi templji. Povsod se tare ljudi. Nekateri pridejo peš, drugi z motorji, tretji pa se pripeljejo kar v avtomobilih. Prav vsem pa so skupna bela oblačila in prípomočki v rokah, ki jih nosijo k templju. Z njimi bodo izbranci bogov prebodenji. Izbrancem pravijo »mediji« ali »mah songi«, saj naj bi se v času festivala vanje naselili bogovi.



S TEM, KO SE PREBADAJO, VEŽEJO NASE VSO SLABO ENERGIJO IN TAKO ZAŠČITIMO LJUDI IN OKOLICO PRED SLABO KARMO, BOLEZNIJO IN NESREČO.
OBLEČENI SO V TRADICIONALNA KITAJSKA OBLAČILA, DA JIH MED VSO MNOŽICO VERNIKOV LAHKO OPAZIMO ŽE OD DALEČ.



Počasi se začne daniti in množica ljudi postaja vedno bolj evforična. Zaslišjo se prvi težki udarci na tradicionalne bobne. Ljudje se umaknejo s cest na obrobje, zavlada tišina. Prav vsi nestrpočno čakamo na mah songe, ki so jih bogovi izbrali, da nas začítijo. In res, kmalu se pojavi prvi. Mlad fant nosi v prebodenem licu skoraj dva metra dolgo stekleno reč, ki spominja na nekakšen meč. Zaradi teže ga podpira z rokami, iz prebodenih lic pa mu kaplja kri. Ustavi se tik ob meni in počaka na svojega prijatelja. Le-ta ima prebodenata usta z igلامi. Skušam jih prešteti, a obupam pri številki petnajst. Sledijo še drugi in prav vsak je drugačen. Na trenutke se zdi, kot da se prebadajo s stvarmi, ki so jih mimogrede našli doma. Naj bo bambusova palica, stoeča svetilka, tradicionalni tajski dežnik, loparji za badminton, jambori lesenih maketnih ladij, žage, navojni svedri, avtomobilска platišča, kolesa, rože, noži, pištole, mitraljezi. Nekateri si skozi lica ne prebodejo le enega ali dveh nožev, temveč po sedem ali osem. Zakaj bi se ubadali le z eno pištolo, ko je pa povsem mogoče uporabiti kar dve naenkrat. Med vsemi prebodenimi presenetijo še brusilci jezikov in možkarji z dolgimi meči, ki si zadajajo udarce po hrbtnu. Procesija traja nekaj ur in se vije več kilometrov daleč po ulicah starega dela mesta. Za konec se mimo nas sprehodijo še moški, ki na svojih ramenih prenašajo lesena

nosila s cesarskimi bogovi. Gledalci nosače pozdravljajo s petardami, ki jih mečejo direktno nanje. V zraku se kar naenkrat znajde večno petard, ki s svojim pokanjem spominjajo na pravo vojno stanje. Na trenutke je komaj opaziti dogajanje, saj se jasen dan spremeni v veliko območje z gostim dimom. Ljudje si prekrivajo usta z brisačami, krpami, oblačili in se skrivajo pred ostanki petard, ki letijo po zraku.

Z vsakim dnem se dogajanje stopnjuje in vrhunec doseže na zadnji večer festivala, ko se količina odvrženih petard kar nekajkrat poveča.

Po koncu festivala se rumene zastave – simboli vegetarijanskega festivala – pospravijo in ulice, kjer se je še prejšnji večer odvijala prava vojna, počasi dobivajo spet spokojno podobo. Ulični prodajalci po devetih dneh odvažajo svoje stojnice. Mestece postane zopet barvito, saj bela oblačila verniki zamenjajo za barvna. Vse, kar spominja na ta nenavadni festival, je piskanje v ušesih kot odmev odvrženih petard, ljudje z brazgotinami v licih ter nekaj poškodovancev, ki se zdravijo v bolnišnici. V letu 2012 je bilo takih 81, v preteklih letih pa tudi kakšna smrtna žrtev.



THE PHUKET VEGETARIAN FESTIVAL

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS: [NINA KOGEJ](#)

THAILAND IS VISITED BY MILLIONS OF TOURISTS EVERY YEAR, MAKING THE COUNTRY ONE OF THE WORLD'S TOP TOURIST DESTINATIONS. ACCORDING TO FIGURES FROM THE TOURISM MINISTRY, MORE THAN 22 MILLION PEOPLE VISITED THAILAND IN 2012.

The island of Phuket, with its crystal-clear turquoise sea and more than seven million visitors each year, is without a doubt one of the very top destinations in Thailand. Not many people know, however, that Phuket is also the venue for one of the most unusual festivals in the world. Most tourists prefer to stay inside their hotel resorts and few of them visit the island's main city. Phuket Town is the island's administrative centre. A stroll through the streets of the Old Town reveals grandiose residences that once belonged to Phuket's tin

barons. Tin began to be mined on Phuket in the eighteenth century. Most of the mines were operated by Chinese immigrants, who brought their own workforce from China. The numerous Chinese temples and festivals imported from China are a constant reminder of Chinese presence on the island. As well hosting the best-known Chinese New Year celebration, Phuket is home to one of the most unusual festivals in the whole world, the "Vegetarian Festival", which takes place in October. The festival begins on a different date every



feature of the Vegetarian Festival are the processions, in which participants walk on burning coals, climb barefoot up eight-metre ladders made of razor-sharp sword blades, and pierce various parts of their bodies with a variety of household objects.

It all begins early in the morning, when it is still dark outside, as crowds of devotees begin to gather outside their temples. Everywhere is teeming with people. Some arrive on foot, others on motorbikes and others again by car. All are dressed in white and carry an assortment of items, which they take to the temple. It is with these that those chosen by the gods will be pierced. The chosen ones are known as mah song or "spirit mediums", since it is believed that their bodies are inhabited by deities during the festival.

By piercing themselves, they take into themselves all the negative energy and in this way protect people and their surroundings from bad karma, sickness and misfortune. They are dressed in traditional Chinese garments so as to stand out among the great crowds of devotees.

As day begins to break, the crowd becomes increasingly euphoric. The first heavy blows on the traditional drums ring out. People withdraw to the sides of the roads and silence falls. Everyone waits patiently for the mah song, whom the gods have chosen to protect us. At last the first one appears. It is a young man whose cheek is pierced by a sword-like glass object almost two metres long. He uses his arms to support its weight, and blood drips from his pierced cheek. He stops right in front of me and waits for his companion. The latter has his mouth pierced by needles. I try to count them but give up when I reach fifteen. Then come others, each one different. Sometimes it seems as though they have pierced themselves with the first thing that came to hand. Bamboo poles, table lamps, traditional Thai umbrellas, badminton rackets, the wooden masts of model ships, saws, drills, car wheels, bicycles, flowers, knives, pistols, machine guns... Some don't have just one or two knives in their cheeks, but seven or eight. Why have just one pistol when it is perfectly possible to have two at the same time? Other surprises in the midst of the mah song are tongue-sharpeners and men beating themselves on the back with long swords. The procession lasts for hours and winds for several kilometres through the streets of the Old Town. Bringing up the rear are a group of men carrying the sedan chairs of the Nine Emperor Gods on their shoulders. The crowd greets the bearers with firecrackers, which they hurl directly at them. Several hundred firecrackers are suddenly in the air all at once, and the explosions make it seem like a war zone. At times it is hard to see what is going on, since the clear day has disappeared in a great cloud of dense smoke. People cover their mouths with towels, cloths and items of clothing and try to shelter themselves from the fragments of firecrackers flying through the air.

The frenzy increases with each day of the festival and reaches its climax on the last evening, when the quantity of firecrackers multiplies several times over.

When the festival is over, the yellow flags – symbols of the Vegetarian Festival – are put away and streets that had been a battlefield the evening before slowly resume their tranquil appearance. After nine days the street vendors wheel away their stalls. The town becomes colourful once again, as the devotees exchange their white garments for coloured clothing. All that remains to remind us of this unusual festival is a ringing in the ears like an echo of the firecrackers, people with scars on their cheeks, and a few unfortunates recovering from their injuries in hospital. In 2012 there were 81 such casualties, while past editions of the festival have even seen the occasional fatality.

year, depending on the lunar calendar. Throughout the nine days of the festival, all devotees are supposed to fast and observe a strictly vegetarian diet. They are also required to abstain from alcohol, lies, slander and sex. During the fast, devotees dress in white, as a symbol of purity and innocence. Similar Taoist celebrations are observed in countries such as Myanmar, Malaysia and Singapore, under the name of the "Nine Emperor Gods Festival".

The Phuket festival is said to have its origin around 150 years ago with the arrival of a travelling Chinese opera company, which came to Phuket to entertain the Chinese immigrants working in the tin mines. During their visit, various diseases began to spread through the town, and members of the visiting opera company were taken ill with malaria. Fearful of having angered their gods, they adopted a strict vegetarian diet and prayed to the Nine Emperor Gods, so as to purify their bodies and souls. Miraculously, everyone was cured, and a festival was organised to give thanks to the gods and as an expression of joy. From that year onwards, the festival has been held every year, attended by a constantly growing number of devotees. The principal



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