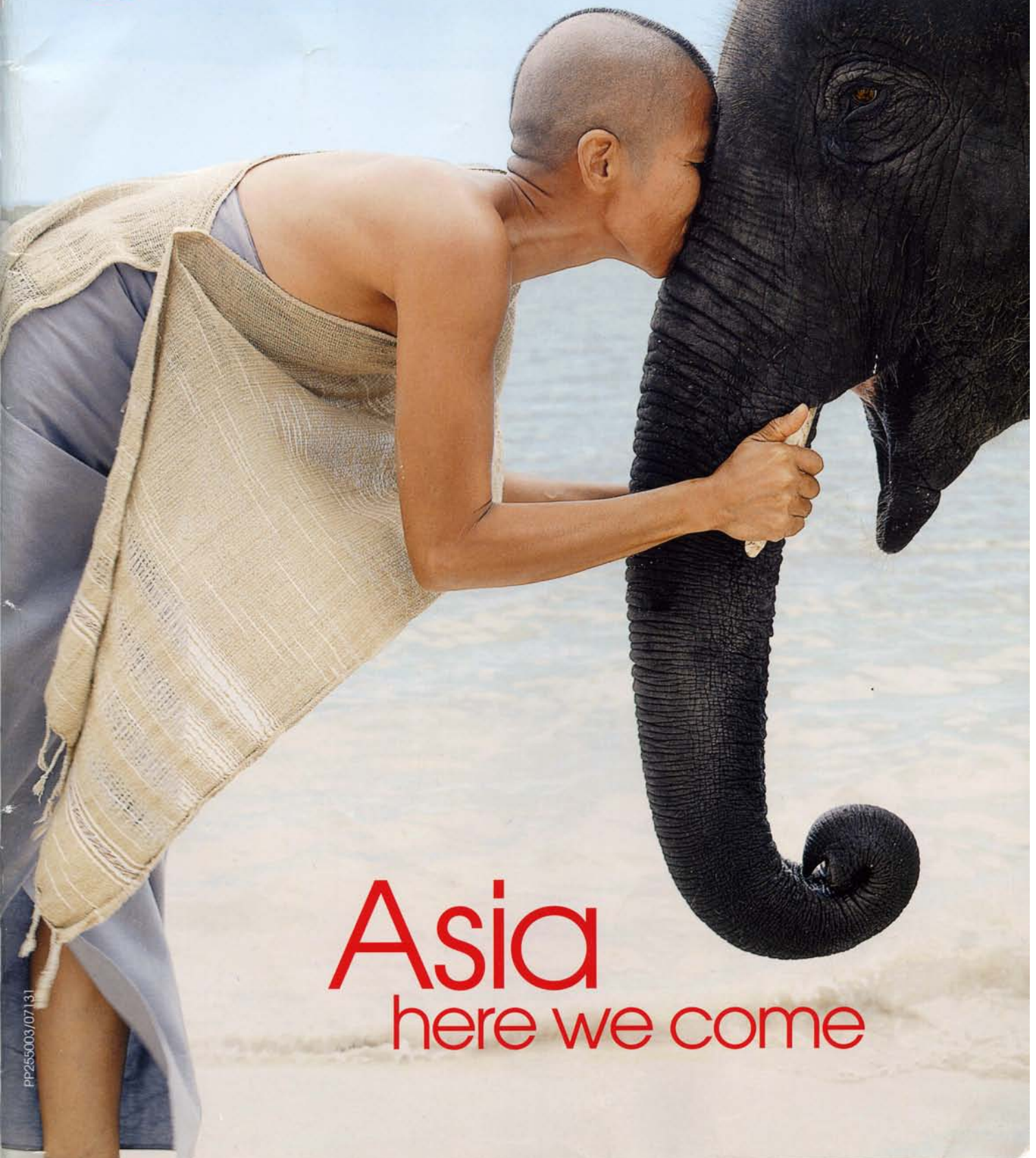


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Muay Thai fighters may be flyweights, but their graceful moves pack a powerhouse punch. **Aidan Ormond** gets a kick out of exploring Thailand's national sport.

In Australia, football and cricket get sporting pulses racing. In Thailand, Thai boxing is a national obsession. Local fans and curious foreigners flock to purpose-built stadiums to watch this fighting art of quick punches and fierce kicks. Add to this maelstrom of movement some gentle Buddhist rituals and a traditional three-piece band, and you have a fascinating night's entertainment. Welcome to the world of Muay Thai (moo-ee-tie).

The sport can be traced back at least 400 years to King Naresuan (1555-1605), one of Thai history's most notable military figures. The story is that Naresuan encouraged Muay Thai as part of army training (Thai soldiers still do Muay Thai today). The sport was actually part of the school curriculum until the 1920s, when it was withdrawn due to a spate of injuries. Then in the 1930s Muay Thai was codified, and weight divisions and gloves were introduced. The sport has flourished ever since.

Like kickboxing, Muay Thai allows punches and kicks, but it also incorporates elbows, knees and

grapples. It's sometimes called the "science of the eight limbs" as its experts can make strikes at eight points of contact, rather than the two points (fists) in boxing, or four points (fists, feet) in kickboxing.

Buddhist traditions play an important part. For instance, fighters will precede a bout by performing the Wai Kru and Ram Muay dance. The Wai Kru involves fighters bowing three times to show respect for their teacher, their family and others. They then move onto the Ram Muay, performing it to music. This graceful dance, with its measured hand gestures and basic movements around the ring, is full of symbolism – and it also warms up the combatants for the battle ahead.

Fighters usually wear eye-catching designs on their shorts, ankle protectors and a headband called a mongkon, which is blessed by a Buddhist monk pre-fight and is worn for luck. The mongkon is removed from the fighter's head before the bout, but only by the combatant's trainer.

Bouts are short and sweet. They are fought in five three-minute rounds with two-minute breaks in between. Like boxing, a Muay Thai match is decided by a knockout or points. Three judges decide who wins the round and the fighter who wins the most rounds, triumphs over his/her opponent (a number of women fight, too).

As well as watching the bout, you'll get a three-piece band sitting ringside for the price of your ticket. It

features a Javanese flute (toe pee java), drums (glong-kag) and the aptly named "ching", the cymbals.

The trio plays music to accompany the fight and, as the bout heats up, the music ups its intensity. Sort of like *Dancing With The Stars* for sports fans. And if you have some baht to spare, you can put a bet on a fighter.

Bangkok has two main venues for the sport: Ratchadamnoen stadium (the first-ever Muay Thai venue built in 1945) and Lumpini stadium. They pulse to the sights and sounds of Muay Thai, with an average eight bouts on the card on fight nights.

And it's not just locals who roll up; plenty of visitors enjoy a night out at the Muay Thai. You might even see overseas contenders mixing it in the ring with the best of the Thai fighters (many foreign Muay Thai fighters head to Thailand to learn more at the various training camps across the country).

Needless to say, with such fervour for Muay Thai, the sport's superstars – such as Jomhod Kiatadisak and Pattaya-based Wanlop Sitpholek – are afforded great respect and adulation.

Surachai Sirisute, otherwise known as Ajarn Chai (Ajarn means master teacher) is Muay Thai's most influential figure and the sport's greatest ambassador. A former champion fighter and teacher, Chai has been instrumental in spreading the word of Muay Thai over the last 30 years.

"They used to laugh and ridicule Thai boxing [fighters] when they would

LEARN THE LINGO

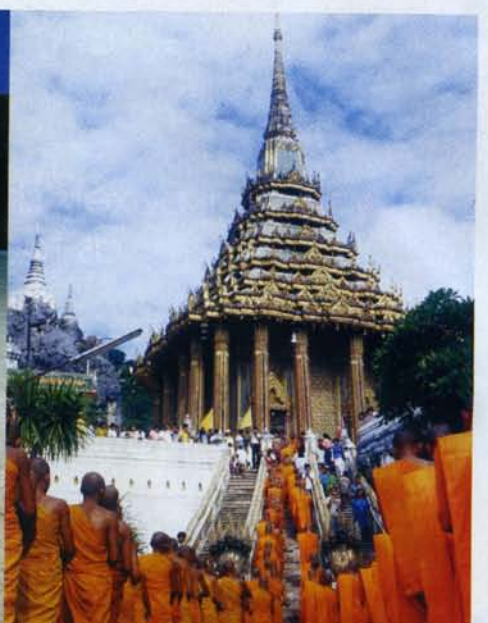
Dontree muay: The music played throughout a Muay Thai bout.

Dtae kao: Knee kick from the side.

Gawn welaa: Literally means "before time", but refers to bouts specifically for novice fighters.

Khuen kroo: The ceremony during which a teacher accepts a new student.

Koo ek: This translates as "number-one pair" and refers to the night's main bout.



THAILAND OF EXTREMES: APINYA SOR PUMARIN, (PICTURED, BELOW LEFT), IS ONE OF MAUY THAI'S TRANSVESTITE FIGHTERS, WHO ARE SOME OF THE SPORT'S MOST POPULAR.

do the Wai Kru," recalls Ajarn Chai of his early days fighting against overseas opposition. "But they don't laugh any more because we always knock 'em out!"

It's said that Sirisute's own Muay Thai teacher, Ajarn Suwong, after meeting the then six-year-old Chai, had a dream that his prodigy would spend the rest of his life passing on the Muay Thai message to the world. The prophecy came true – and this has included spreading the word to Australia.

Melbourne-based Kacey Chong was recently graded as an instructor by Ajarn Chai on one of his many visits downunder. It was an exhilarating experience for the 25-year-old.

"The intensity of the look in his eyes intimidates even the toughest of fighters," she says. "But as I got to know him over the years, I found that he was friendly, compassionate and humble despite his expert skill and legendary status."

Chong enjoys Muay Thai because she feels it's a relatively easy sport to enter. "You don't have to have the fitness of a triathlete, the flexibility of a gymnast or the strength of a weight-lifter."

That said, Chong trains up to five times a week and adds that more females are getting involved in the sport. "Women's Muay Thai has gained more interest in Thailand of late, partly due to a growing number of female foreigners travelling to Thailand to train and fight."

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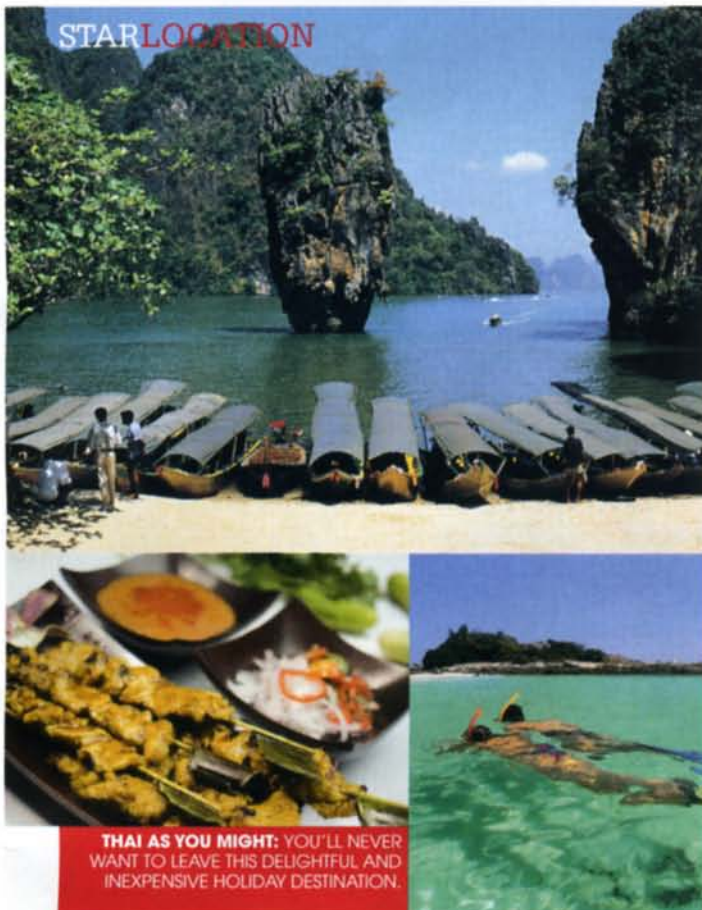
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THAI AS YOU MIGHT: YOU'LL NEVER WANT TO LEAVE THIS DELIGHTFUL AND INEXPENSIVE HOLIDAY DESTINATION.

Teenage Thai girls who train and live in Muay Thai camps like their male counterparts are now leading the charge in raising the sport's profile for all Thai women, even though the male fighters still earn more money.

And in Australia, "More and more promoters are putting on Muay Thai fight nights, many with packed houses," Chong says, adding that not only is it a great spectator sport, but that it's "shaping up to rival boxing and kickboxing in popularity."

However, Muay Thai's spiritual essence has helped the Melbourne instructor in other ways. "It teaches you humility, respect for human life, and also how to remain calm and think clearly under pressure. The discipline, determination and fighting spirit that is cultivated in the practice of Muay Thai can also be transferred into other areas of our lives to help us achieve our goals, and improve our quality of life," she explains.

After a trip to Thailand, many visitors note the gentleness of its culture, the respect for different cultural practices and the warmth of its people.

While Muay Thai does have a spiritual side, it's a tough-as-nails fighting art. This contrast is beautifully summed up by Ajarn Chai himself. "My late father used to say, 'Thai boxers should be soft as silk but as tough as a diamond.'" ■

JETSTAR TO THAILAND

Jetstar flies from Melbourne to Bangkok three times a week, starting Nov 23; and from Sydney to Phuket three times a week, starting Nov 24. All services will be operated by the Airbus A330 aircraft which will offer two classes of service - International StarClass and economy. Flights are subject to regulatory approval.

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