



# THE HARD SELLOUT

Khao San Road has lost its soul, says **Simon Hardeman**, as he returns after 20 years. We should stop visiting... probably



Bangkok's path most travelled was immortalised in 'The Beach' (iStock)

It's hard to move on. You know you should, because it's just not the same any more. You tell yourself you will... just, next time. But you keep going back because it's easy and familiar. Yet every time you do you have a moment when you wonder what on earth you're doing.

This is how I feel about the Khao San Road in Bangkok. And it's not just me – most people I speak to about what's become known as global backpacker central feel the same. This is the road that for a quarter of a century has been the hub for backpackers and budget travellers going anywhere in southeast Asia. The road immortalised in Alex Garland's 1996 novel *The Beach* (and Danny Boyle's dreadful film with Leonardo DiCaprio) in which the central character finds clues to a secret paradise while staying in a dirt-cheap hotel there.

Dirt-cheap isn't a metaphor. Twenty years ago, in a hostel down a filthy alley off KSR, I had to wrap myself in my sleeping sheet to protect myself from the blood-dappled bedlinen and whatever creepy-crawlies were staining both them and the walls that the stinking mattress was shoehorned between.



A tuk tuk on the Khao San Road (Getty)

Then, I was on my way to the spectacular southern Thai island of Ko Phi Phi via Cambodia and, like every other backpacker, I'd flown into Bangkok. And when you landed in Bangkok, KSR was the place to go: 500m of cheap hotels, restaurants, bars and kiosks, local travel agents (remember those?) to book your buses, flights and boats; and where the air was so thick with fumes from street-food-frying that you needed eyedrops to walk the length. And because it was where every backpacker headed, it was where you could get the best suggestions of where to go and how, to find travelling companions and to make new friends.



**It seems like the party itself got more important than being in a foreign country**



Now the area is three times the size, taking in the parallel and longer Soi Rambuttri, and its quaintness and fun has been replaced by a glut of street vendors (the city council has tried to ban them) selling globally ubiquitous trinkets, T-shirts and cheap jewellery; sprawling restaurants churning out low-quality approximations of international food (even the Thai food is poor); and, as the day goes on, designer bars pumping out identikit pop at a volume in inverse proportion to the quality of the music.

It all came to a head for me this year as I sat at a street-side table at the Rambuttri Terrace restaurant, finishing off a particularly poor pad Thai. I looked opposite at the Bob Marley, beer logo and Bodhi-tree T-shirts; at the tie-dyed trousers, the "ethnic" jewellery, the organic moisturisers and the whizzing plastic LED flying toys that, wherever in the world they are sold, will end up forming a new supercontinent in the Pacific Ocean. I looked down the street at the industrialised massage parlours, the astrology booths and the yogic therapies. And I looked at the waves of Western ersatz-hippies flowing by. And I realised I could have been in Camden Market, in London. KSR even has a McDonald's, for heaven's sake. And there's another round the corner on Soi Rambuttri.



Insects at a street food market in Bangkok (Getty/iStock)

For many travellers the Khao San Road has simply become little more than a place where westerners (*farang* to the Thai) come to indulge themselves. They are the same kind of alcohol-fuelled budget travellers who have made beautiful Prague the stag-party capital of Europe just because it has the cheapest beer. As a young Austrian I met put it: "It seems like the party itself got more important than being in a foreign country."

And I was just another farang feeding his face on the KSR. I asked myself why I was here. Especially as I was on my way to Laos, and the KSR is terrible for connections to the airport and the bus station. For that I would have been better staying in Sukhumvit (which is also much nearer the tawdry fleshpots, if that floats your boat). And if I didn't like the budget-tourist vibe, why wasn't I on the Samsen Road, just 3km away and much less touristy? Samsen Road has the great Blues Bar too. Yes, why was I here? There are other places in Bangkok to meet old friends and make new ones. I could have gone to Pom Prap, another neighbourhood further south.



Khao San Road from above (iStock)

Except that everyone comes here. Whether they're from Delhi, like the guy I had just met, or Denver, or Dagenham. And so many have fascinating stories. And because everyone comes here, you know you will almost certainly bump into a half-forgotten someone you met a few weeks ago on some distant beach. And the location is fabulous with the river and park nearby and the temple at the end of the road. And there's the roasted scorpions and worms to try. And the fake ID cards and passports and police cards. So much fun. And it's close to lots of little roads with authentic Thai shops and stalls.

But, look, we should all stop going there. It's not romantic any more. It has lost the authentic Thai vibe and is now just party central. And if I stop by again next time I pass through Bangkok, I'm only doing it because I know you will too. Except that I might still need to go to that great little Thai shop around the corner that's the only place I can get some wonderful tea I love...

*Travel essentials*

**Getting there**

Thai Airways flies direct to Bangkok from the UK from £475 return