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This page: The sun sets behind Wat Arun, the stunning Temple of Dawn, on the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok. **Opposite:** Three elephants—rescued from a life working in the circus or logging industry, or street begging—get ready for a swim in the river at the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort.

THE LAST HURRAH

STORY
BY
PAULA FROELICH

Just before the globe ground to a halt to battle a pandemic, journalist and author Paula Froelich took a girlfriend trip of a lifetime to far-flung destinations. She shares her Southeast Asia travel log—and unpacks some wisdom gained along the way.

PHOTOGRAPHS
BY
MATT WIER



A fantail boat speeds
along the Chao
Phraya River that
bifurcates Bangkok.



Guests enjoy Sundowner cocktails at the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort's "Jungle Bubbles" surrounded by elephants. A lucky few can book the bubbles for the night and fall asleep next to the gentle giants.



IT WAS THE ULTIMATE GIRL GETAWAY.

When I was invited to Southeast Asia in February to visit several Anantara properties in Thailand and Malaysia, I was beyond excited—even more so when I found out I could invite two friends. I immediately called up my pals, *Sex and the City* author Candace Bushnell (who had just finished promoting her new book, *Is there Still Sex in the City?*) and fashion designer Nicole Miller. I extend the invite: "Wanna go on a dream trip?"

"Obviously," Nicole answers immediately.

She was so excited about the trip she got permission from her husband to postpone their fifth anniversary party (Nicole and her husband, Kim, got married on a Leap Year so while they've been married for 20 years, they've technically only had five anniversaries). Candace had never been to Southeast Asia and was also in—despite some trepidations. "Will I get trampled by an elephant?" she asks (multiple times). "I don't want to die—but I could use some material for my next book."

After assuring Candace elephants weren't going to charge her and she would live to write five more books, we set the trip in motion and hit Bangkok in mid-February—ready for everything.

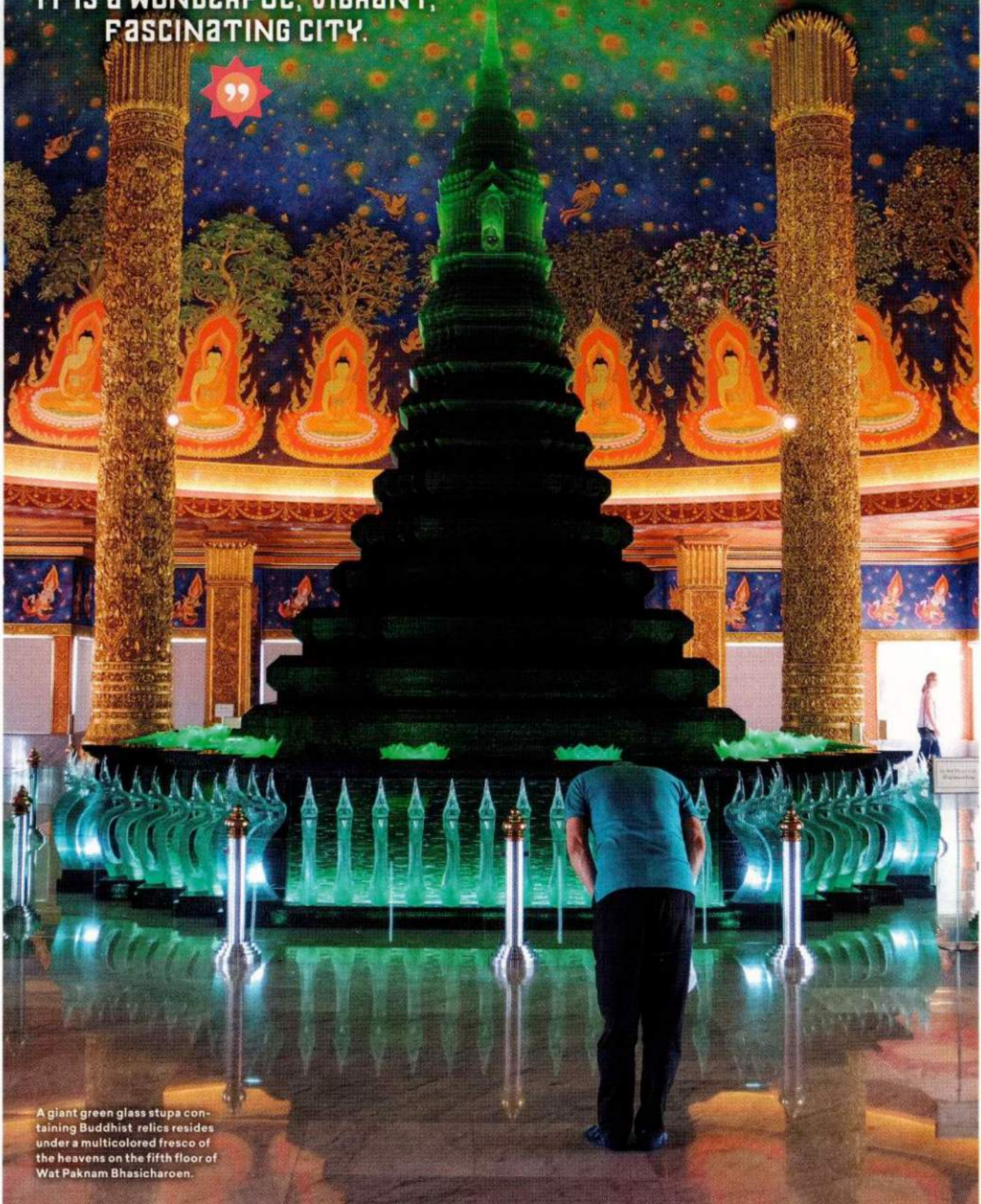
We check into the Anantara Siam Bangkok Hotel, and while Candace opts for a spa treatment, Nicole and I brave the outside world to go shopping.

Here's the thing about Bangkok—despite its somewhat seedy reputation, it is a wonderful, vibrant, fascinating city. It's also easy to navigate, the train system is cheap and goes almost everywhere—including the Chatuchak Market where you can find everything from antiques to flowers. Nicole and I stop by the market after we hit up the renowned antique store, Paul's Antiques, and a wonderful store called Ecotopia, where I stock up on a hand-painted fedora, organic creams, and a backpack made of reused material. While much of Chatuchak was closed (it's mainly a weekend market), we were still in luck. On Wednesdays, it turns into a huge flower market with blooms from all over the country. We find ourselves getting lost in aisle after aisle of exotic and fascinating blooms that looked like they had sprung out of a botany book from Mars.

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HERE'S THE THING ABOUT BANGKOK—DESPITE ITS SOMEWHAT SEEDY REPUTATION, IT IS A WONDERFUL, VIBRANT, FASCINATING CITY.

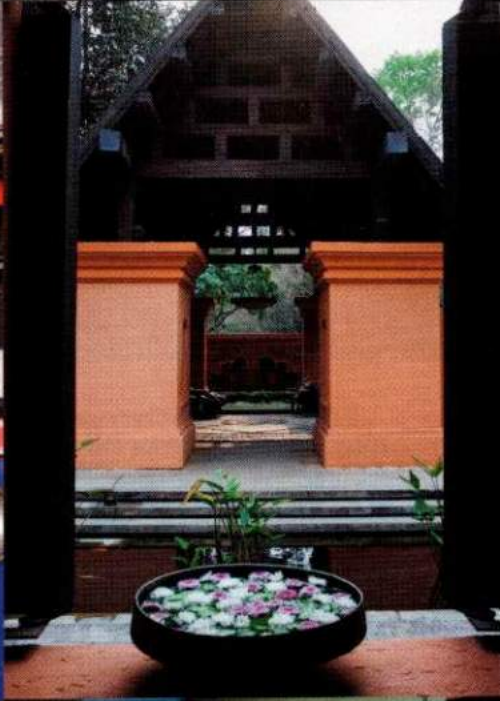
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A giant green glass stupa containing Buddhist relics resides under a multicolored fresco of the heavens on the fifth floor of Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen.



Left to right from top row: A delicious shrimp Pad Thai; a serene pond on the grounds of the Anantara Riverside Bangkok; antique elephants for sale at Paul's Antiques; Candace Bushnell, Nicole Miller and Paula Froelich in a tuktuk en route to the Anantara Elephant Boat Race and River Festival; the entrance to the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort; a romantic gauzy swing in the lobby of the Elephant Camp; the Golden Triangle Resort seen from the grounds below; a woman working at a bakery in Johor Bahru, Malaysia.





But the best was yet to come. A day later we take off for Chang Rai in the north of Thailand and catch a fantail boat up the Mekong, past the borders of Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, to the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort.

We were greeted by a small group of playful elephants waiting for us on the banks of the river. We climb out of the boat and walk onto a platform, where we are handed coconuts with paper straws in them. “You drink the coconut milk and then give the rest to the elephants,” our guide instructs us.

“This is heaven,” Candace sighs. And even though she’d been deathly afraid of elephants, she sings a different tune after feeding one.

The next morning, we take a jungle walk with three of the former circus and logging elephants that the camp had rescued and

watch them frolic in the river. “They’re just so... beautiful,” Candace says.

That night, we have dinner at the hotel’s outdoor restaurant overlooking the jungle below and see fireflies light up across three borders. “The food is the best I’ve had,” says Nicole (who considers herself a foodie and eats out on average six nights a week), while moaning in pleasure over a spicy chicken larb salad.

For three glorious days we walk with elephants, venture to the nearby opium museum to learn about the area’s dark, heroin-steeped history, and even eat at the resort’s two new “jungle bubbles”—where guests can sleep in clear bubble-like rooms surrounded by elephants all night.

It is slightly devastating to leave but we have to get to Bangkok for the annual Anantara Elephant River Festival Boat Races along the Chao Phraya River. In the past, Elephant Polo games had been played—however, with a new animal-friendly mind frame, humans now race boats to raise money for the animals’ conservation. To be closer to the festivities we check into the Anantara Riverside Bangkok Resort where the boats train and race past our balconies.

The day of the race, we head to the Veuve Clicquot VIP tent, find some front row seats and cheer

on racers, which include the ultimate international celebrities: the Thai Navy Seals who rescued the soccer team from the Tham Luang caves in Chang Rai last year. Candace and Nicole do some interviews with local press and watch the fireworks finale from the nearby roof-deck of Seen restaurant—on top of the Avani Riverside Hotel, which looks out over all of Bangkok.

On our final day in Thailand, we take a tour of the markets that line the canals (khlongs) in old Bangkok—which was once the Venice of Southeast Asia. As we walk long wood-slatted walkways over the canals, Candace tries some homemade organic ice cream, Nicole snaps up several bags of interesting rice snacks and I feed the large fish in the canal colorful corn puffs, creating a feeding frenzy in the water.

After leaving Bangkok, we fly to the Anantara Desaru



YOU DRINK THE COCONUT MILK AND THEN GIVE THE REST TO THE ELEPHANTS, OUR GUIDE INSTRUCTS US.

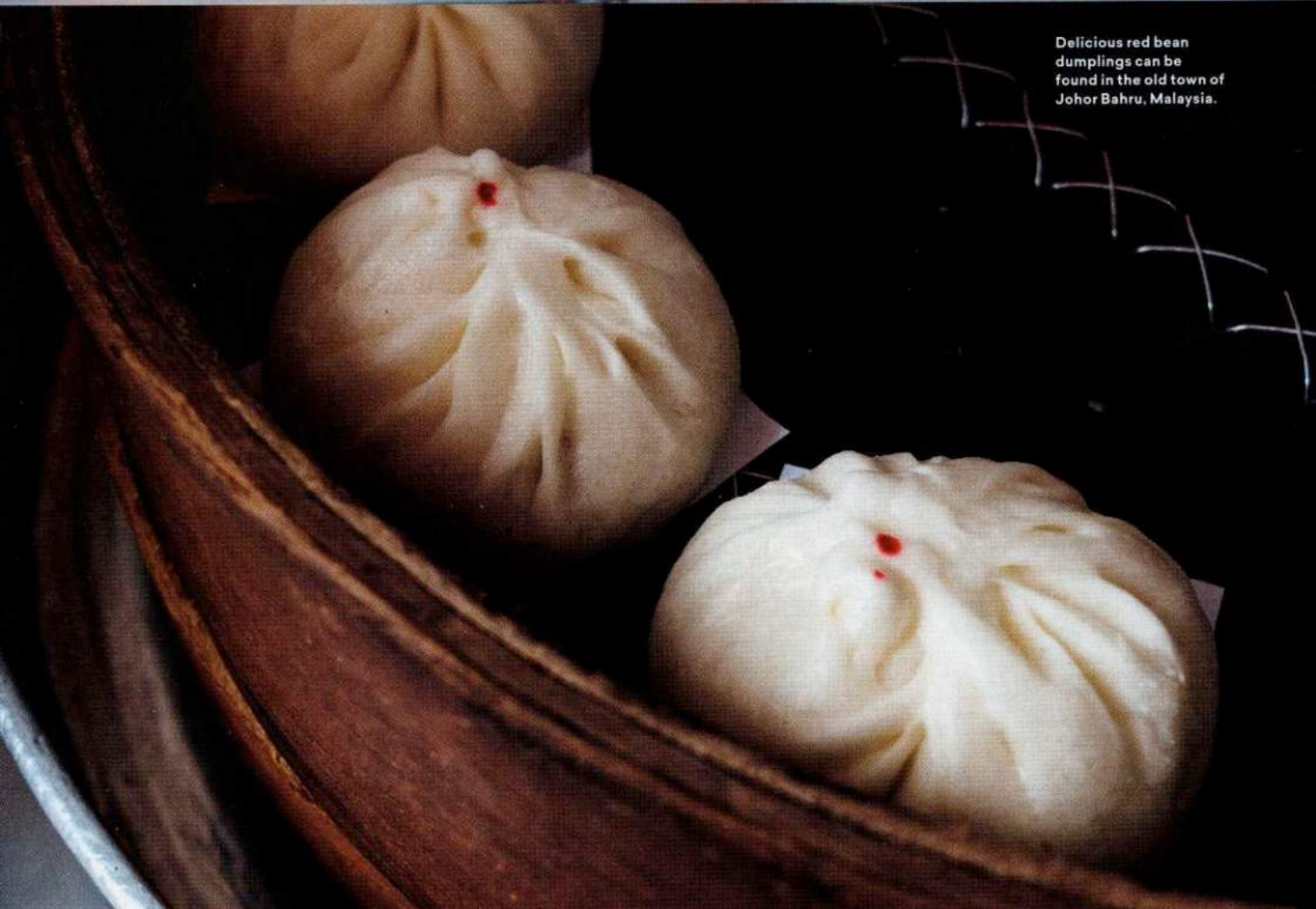


Opposite page from left to right:
Wooden trinkets for sale at the
Chatuchak Market in Bangkok; detail of
a small temple along the khlong canals
of Bangkok. This page: The view from
the veranda at the Anantara Golden
Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort.

A woman pounds out the beat on a drum while men row furiously during the Anantara Elephant Boat Race and River Festival.



Delicious red bean dumplings can be found in the old town of Johor Bahru, Malaysia.



The details of a golden god inside Wat Khun Chan, Bangkok are intricate.



Coast Resort, outside of Johor Bahru, Malaysia, just in time to catch the sun set on the golden shores of the South China Sea. The next few days were spent bicycling around the property, relaxing poolside, and swimming in the ocean—a perfect way to end a perfect girls' trip.

"I don't want to leave—can't we just stay here?" Candace asks, voicing what Nicole and I were thinking. But our lives were waiting back in the States.

Turns out, thanks to Covid-19, our trip was the last hurrah—at least for a while. But the memories of elephants swimming in the Mekong, fireworks over the Chao Phraya River, and the sound of the surf lapping against the

shore at the Desaru Resort are sustaining me these days. These memories and Doug—the Dorgi I adopted to keep me company during isolation (@dougthedorgi on Instagram!) are keeping me sane.

But the ultimate silver lining may still be to come. The other day I got a text from Nicole saying, "BTW, remember the travel (clothing) idea you thought I should do? What would be on your list?" A dream of mine has always been to have a line of smart, stylish, comfortable, and practical travel clothing for women (and now Doug). This could be the start of yet another chapter to begin when the world comes alive again.

TRAVEL IN TRYING TIMES

Paula Froelich and her friends returned from a dream trip just as we were learning what a nightmare the pandemic was unleashing. So, we wondered—how did that impact her thoughts on travel and the world? Here's what she had to say:

CONSERVATION CHANGE.

I have hope that this pandemic disaster will bring about much needed change in wildlife conservation. Because the virus started in a wet market in Wuhan that sells exotic meat, China and Vietnam have pledged to stop importing wild animals for meat. Sadly, traditional medicine seems to be unaffected, however the pressure is now on to include that as well.

TOURISM ENLIGHTENMENT.

Heavily trafficked areas like Venice, Dubrovnik, and Rome have had a chance to catch their collective breath and are now talking about imposing stricter sanctions and limits on tourism that aim to preserve their national treasures. I dearly hope the cruise industry, which is one of the largest polluters in the world, will scale back.

HUMAN AWARENESS.

The human condition is now on an international stage. People are talking about universal health care systems, a basic living wage, finally dealing with overcrowded slums, and housing for the poor. It took this tragedy for the world to take these symbiotic issues seriously, and I hope upon hope we will actually do something about them.