

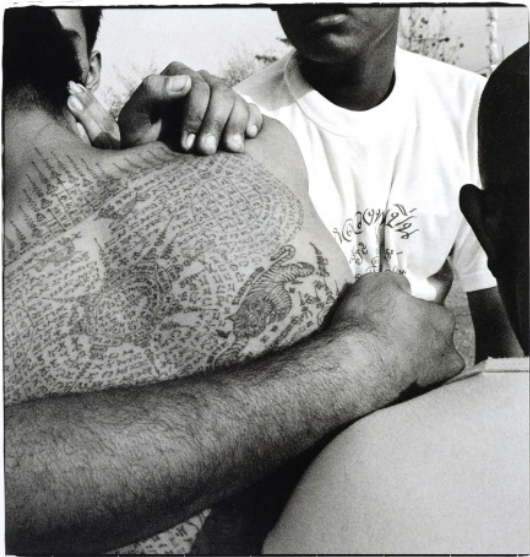
Photography

LIVING WITH SPIRITS

Writer and photographer Ben Davies has written and photographed books on Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia and Laos while his features and reports have appeared in a wide range of distinguished publications including the Guardian, Time magazine and National Geographic. His latest book peeks back the veneer of Amazing Thailand to reveal a world of shamans, astrologers, tattoo masters, palm readers and animist rituals. Ben Hopkins offers a glimpse of what lies behind the book on the eve of publication.

The ear-splitting roar of firecrackers shatters the early morning calm during the Phuket Vegetarian Festival. This man is like a demon, snarling as he twists and turns, propelled by a force that is not his own. After he comes out of his trance he remembers nothing.





A devotee, said to be possessed by the spirit of a tiger tattooed on his back, is brought out of his trance by having his ears tickled.

College days don't get much wilder than that but far from shaking his confidence the early travel experiences opened doors to a brave new world of opportunities. "I did my first travel features on the back of those expeditions."

In 1984 he broke into journalism as a writer for the magazine *Eurromoney*, owned by the London Evening Standard newspaper. The work opened doors to the East and for the next four to five years he'd be sent off to countries like Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia - deciding in '89 to throw in his London job and go freelance in Thailand.



A man's face is pierced by half a dozen metal swords, in a demonstration of his supernatural powers outside the Tsui Tsui Shrine in Phuket Town. Despite the size of the incisions, there is virtually no blood. The wounds are said to heal mysteriously within a matter of weeks and leave barely a scar.



A monk and tiger inside the famous forest monastery of Wat Pa Luang Ta Bua, otherwise known as the 'tiger temple'. Monks are expected to show compassion for all living things. However, critics say that the tigers kept in this Kanchanaburi temple are put on show for profit.



An elephant uses its trunk to spray villagers in the back of a pickup during the wet New Year festival



Eyes dilated, fingers outstretched, a young woman collapses as she comes out of her trance in the southern province of Trang. Minutes earlier, I watched her blessing flowers as if she were a god. She regained consciousness when holy water was sprinkled on her face.

IN THE INTRODUCTION TO HIS LATEST BODY OF WORK, *LIVING WITH SPIRITS*, WRITER AND PHOTOGRAPHER BEN DAVIES RECALLS A SERIES OF MISFORTUNES THAT GREETED HIS ARRIVAL IN BANGKOK 20 YEARS AGO. HIS COMPUTER CRASHED, WIPING OUT HALF THE BOOK HE WAS WRITING. HE CAUGHT DENGUE FEVER, LEFT HIS RUCKSACK IN A LATE NIGHT BAR AND FELL DOWN A MANHOLE.

Lazare and Hardy couldn't have scripted it better. Dazed and deflated in a land he knew little about he was told he may have upset the spirits and was advised to seek forgiveness at a city shrine. Equipped with incense sticks, candles and flowers he approached the shrine, donated a pig's head and two hard-boiled eggs, released three birds from a cage and asked forgiveness from the spirits.

If the spirits were paying attention they would have been impressed by the sight of a wiry Englishman who describes himself as one of the world's great skeptics humbling himself before their shrine. He returned home feeling at peace with himself.

A love for travel off the beaten track was hardwired into Ben Davies' DNA. He grew up partly in France where his English father, who was born in India, would work as a lawyer. While at university in Scotland he recalls a couple of expeditions that led him into the wilds of Africa. "On the first expedition to the Sahara Desert we drove into a ditch and turned the Land Rover upside down. On another expedition we drove into a minefield" he says, grimacing at the memory. "We reversed very gently, very slowly."



To honour the water spirits and to wash away the sins and misfortunes of the previous year, a family launches a 'kruthong' or float made from banana leaves on the Ping River in Chiang Mai. Each 'kruthong' contains a lighted candle, three sticks of incense and a small offering of money for the water spirits.



Soldiers clutching lotus buds pray inside Bangkok's Wat Benchamabodit. For Buddhists, the lotus flower carries special significance. It represents the purity and reward of enlightenment, yet it can flourish in swamps and rancid waters.

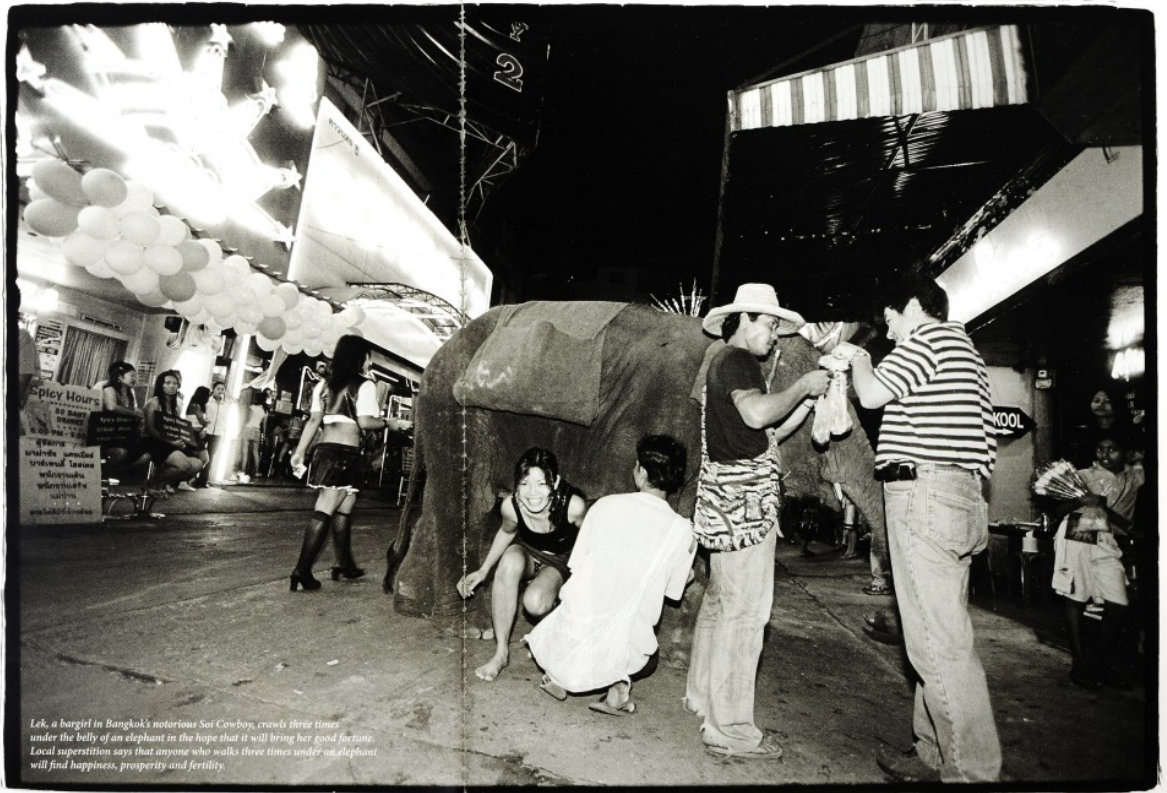
"I chose Thailand because I felt it had more energy than Hong Kong or Singapore and was a good base for traveling around Indo China." It's a choice he has no regrets over. "In London you can have wild dreams about what you want to do, then wake up and realize it's not realistic. Here, if you want to do something, you can do it - here you have amazing opportunities - in the UK it's easier to get stuck in a rut."

His latest work, *Living with Spirits* was five years in the making. The images lead the reader into the spiritual heart of Thailand. Peeling back the veneer of Amazing Thailand to a slightly darker place where archaic superstitions and rituals are passed down through generations - adhered to and respected.

The project took Ben to all corners of the country. Often it would require trekking through remote mountainous regions in the north and into semi nomadic villages where the local dialect was different from Thai. A translator was indispensable. Together they would revisit villages and rituals, allowing the locals to familiarize themselves with their presence in order to capture their world as it is.

"Spiritual belief in these communities is total and permeates throughout Thai society - right up to the educated class in Bangkok. Military coups start the exact second an astrologer says it'll work best."

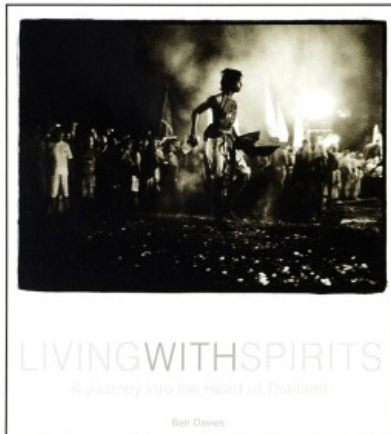
As a born skeptic he began the project very dubious but has, over the years become less doubtful. "A lot of it is to do with the power of the mind" he says. "A guy can have ten swords stuck through his cheeks and there's no blood or scars, they go into a trance and afterwards aren't aware of what happened." It's a gruesome illustration of how the mind can overpower the physical self but to do so the beliefs must run deep. "A lot of these people look up to the medium from an early age. When bad things happen to their family they might think they've upset the spirits, become possessed, and ask a medium to help."



Lek, a bargirl in Bangkok's notorious Soi Cowboy, crawls three times under the belly of an elephant in the hope that it will bring her good fortune. Local superstition says that anyone who walks three times under an elephant will find happiness, prosperity and fertility.



My landlady consults a palm reader at the Nang Nak Shrine in Bangkok. The palm reader is an 81 year old nun, who learnt the art of fortune telling from a monk.



LIVING WITH SPIRITS

A Journey into the Heart of Thailand by Ben Davies can be found in all good bookshops throughout Thailand from January 2010

Sometimes a medium will be called in to end a drought, economic hardship or fighting between clans. In some cases such beliefs allow those responsible for hardship off the hook. If a politician screws up the local economy or a logging company creates floods by ripping out a forest they can blame angry spirits.

More potently, the ceremonies and animist rituals provide believers with a sense of strength and unity, much in the same way as a church, mosque, synagogue or temple.

Living with Spirits succeeds in providing a rare insight into a belief system that runs through the country's bloodline, sealing a sense of wholeness and continuity untainted by the hands of time.