



WHEN YOUR FORK HITS THE PLATE AT **CALA LA PASTA** - THAT'S AMORE! 11B



When the spirit takes you

Ben Davies snaps pictures as we thrill at spooks and thrive on the supernatural

THE NATION

British author and photographer Ben Davies spent five years travelling around Thailand to document the diverse mystical beliefs of people throughout the Kingdom.

The result is "Living with Spirits", a fascinating glimpse at the deep-rooted traditional customs that underpin a rapidly modernising nation.

While the younger residents of Bangkok enjoy lives that seem to centre around shopping malls, trendy clothes, the latest mobile phones (iPods and other electronic gadgets), there is an older world of traditional values, both in the cities and rural areas.

The many different facets of the spirit world - be they Buddhist, animist or ethnic-minority customs - involving fortune tellers (*nuar du*), palm read-

ers, tattoo masters and rituals such as animal sacrifices by village shamans and the like are the featured focus of interest for this well-travelled photojournalist.

Davies is no newcomer to Thailand, having arrived in Bangkok about two decades ago. While mainly a freelance writer for financial magazines such as *Asiaweek*, he is also an accomplished photographer and has published books on buaan, Laos and the illegal trade in wildlife ("Black Market", published by Earth Aware Editions in the US several years ago).

"There is a very dark side to



TOP LEFT: BEN DAVIES AND LING PO SOON GREET DEVOTEES AT THE BAN FAI TEMPLE IN NAKHON PHANOM. AND ABOVE, A RUN-ROADS IN A POOL AT KANCHANABURI'S WAT THAM MANGKAM THONG.

"I was amazed at how powerful the influence of the spirits still is. We tend to think of animism as being the preserve of the uneducated, yet it permeates every level of Thai society."

LEFT: THE LOY KRATHING FESTIVAL RENEWS FAITH IN THE MOTHER SPIRIT OF THE WATWAYS. BELOW: BILLIRIEE CREW SCRAMS UP AFTER A NIGHT OF DEVOTIONS. FAR LEFT, A RUN-ROADS AS A 'NUAR DU' TO TELL FORTUNES.



Living with Spirits - A Journey into the Heart of Thailand

By Ben Davies

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Thailand that is often overlooked," says Davies, whose interest in the spirit world grew from two minor incidents just after he arrived in Bangkok. He caught dengue fever and then fell down a manhole, which prompted locals to say he'd been cursed.

Thai friends advised him to visit a spirit shrine, which he duly did. It was a novel experience for the newcomer - donating a pig's head, lighting incense sticks, clanging bells at the temple, releasing several caged birds and praying for better fortune. But it seemed to work. He returned home reinvigorated and fascinated by this "whole new world" he knew nothing about.

In recent years Davies has travelled far and wide throughout Thailand, documenting traditional celebrations and festivities - from the Vegetarian Festival in Phuket to the Bang Fai rocket

party in the Northeast and devotees bathing in scalding oil in Trang.

The result is a 134-page "journey to the heart of Thailand", a book of black-and-white photos - some of them dark, bizarre and moody, others fascinating and extraordinary - plus explanatory text.

In the North, near the Burmese border, Davies witnessed a spirit doctor exorcising a jungle demon from a young boy, then burying the offending spirit in a hole in the forest.

Another day, in Nakhon Si Thammarat, he watched a "medium" cut his tongue with a sword and write the words of spirits on a sheet of paper with his own blood.

"I was amazed at how powerful the influence of the spirits still is," Davies says. "We tend to think of animism as being the preserve of uneducated rice farmers. Yet it



permeates every level of Thai society."

A level-headed father of two, he's witnessed countless animist rituals but retains a healthy sense of scepticism.

"I don't believe everything. But the next time I visit the city pillar

I will make an offering," he said with a grin.

This is a quality book that would not be out of place on any coffee table.

More of Davies' images can be seen at www.BenDaviesPhotos.com.

