

I recently spent two months travelling New Zealand and Thailand with my partner. Two destinations that could not be more different if they tried.

I used to think the whole point of travelling was to come home with photographs. The sort where you're standing in front of something objectively magnificent, squinting into the sun with the expression of someone who is having a very important experience. That it was about collecting €1 fridge magnets and bracelets that will break before I even make it home.

Oh, how wrong I was.



The things I brought home from New Zealand and Thailand won't fit into a photo album or the small space left on my gran's fridge. They exist somewhere between memory and instinct, in that strange little filling cabinet the brain keeps for moments that didn't seem all that significant at the time but refuse to leave.

Like the sounds of the birds in New Zealand's Sanctuary Mountain singing the most beautiful tunes. As if they had swallowed an orchestra but couldn't decide what instrument to play first. Or the waves rolling in towards Mount Manganui beach that looked as though they could consume every surfer in the water with ease. Or the beat boxer performing for a small crowd of people at the Fisherman's Village Market in Koh Samui. Or the first time we rented a moped and rode around aimlessly enjoying the escape from 100% humidity it gave us. Or the way both countries somehow managed to make me forget what day it was, albeit by entirely different means.

If New Zealand and Thailand came to a dinner party, they probably wouldn't sit next to each other.

New Zealand would arrive wearing crisp linen, apologise for being early and quietly sit down the homemade bread they had brought. Thailand would burst through the door 20 minutes later carrying enough food to feed a village, insist the music should be turned up louder and convince everyone to party into the early hours of the morning.

And the extraordinary thing is, I adored them both in entirely different ways.

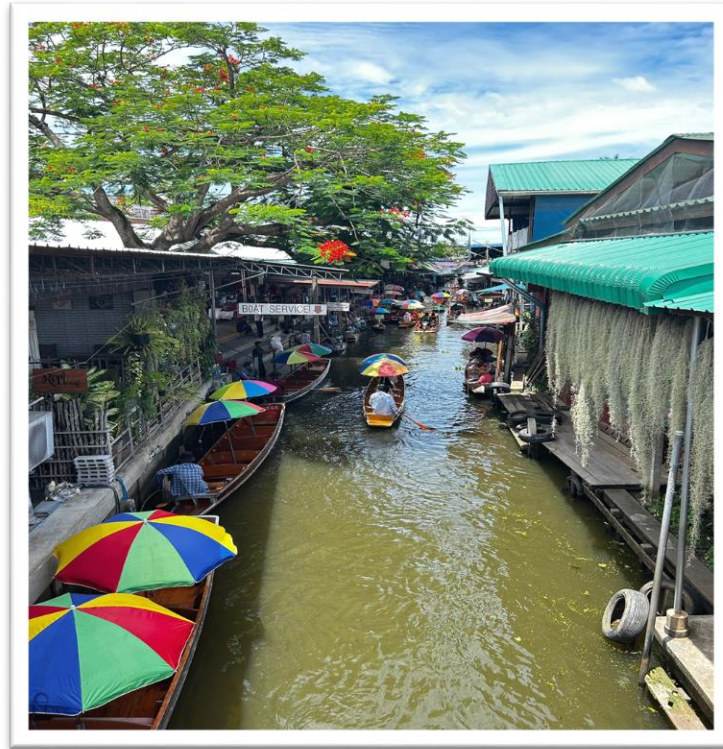


New Zealand has mastered the art of making you feel gloriously insignificant. Every bend in the road reveals more beautiful scenery that appears to have been edited by someone who got slightly carried away with the saturation slider. Every mountain and walking trail quietly suggests that your emails can wait another day.

Thailand on the other hand, doesn't believe in easing you in.

The moment you arrive the atmosphere wraps around you like air (very, very warm air). Each street you walk down seems to have a life of its own. Tuk tuk drivers weaving through crowds, mango sticky rice being sold on every corner and stall owners calling out to passing strangers. Even the convenience stores

were exciting. And no, the ham and cheese toasty from 7/11 is not overrated. I will **not** stand for any more toasty slander.

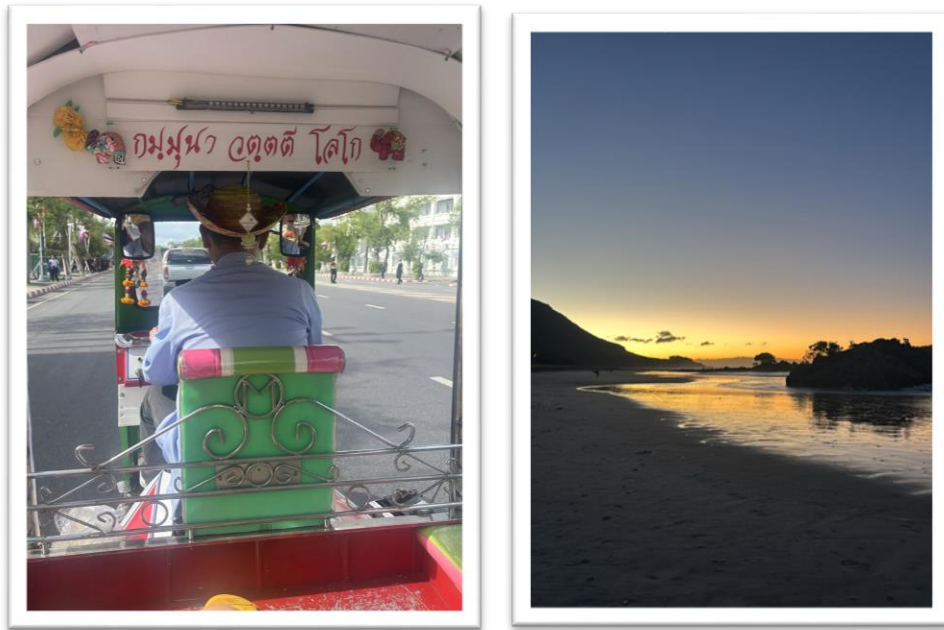


In New Zealand, I spent most of my time looking up. Up at mountains, waterfalls and landscapes that looked like they came straight from your computers background.

In Thailand, I looked down instead. Down at the handmade noodles being sold at a stall on Khao San Road. At the shrines tucked between buildings. At dogs fast asleep in small corners of shade.

One country made me notice horizons. The other taught me to notice the little things that could easily pass by without a second thought.

Perhaps that's why I cannot compare the two. Asking which I preferred feels like being asked whether I would rather read a book in the garden on a hot day or dance barefoot with friends at a festival. They each solve entirely different problems.



We spend so much time planning holidays around the main attractions that we forget the best parts often happen in the margins. They're found in the accidental detour you took. In the restaurant you chose because you were starving and couldn't be bothered walking any further. In the walk along the beach before heading to a bar. In the stranger who couldn't understand you but offered their kindness, nonetheless.

The photographs and cheap souvenirs are lovely, of course. But they are not the reason I came home feeling different.

That belongs to the tiny miracles and the realisation that the world is endlessly bigger and kinder than we could have ever imagined.

And I think that's my favourite thing about travelling.

You leave hoping to see somewhere new.

But come home seeing everything – including home itself – with slightly different eyes.