

# Anger in the land of smiles

Many Thais are fed up with their country being sold for its sun and sex. Tim Forsyth finds protest growing

Has tourism gone too far in Thailand? Despite an expected record income of £2.25bn this year, an increasing number of Thais are saying yes. But their anger is not just directed at tourists.

The growth of tourism in Thailand has been phenomenal. More than five million visitors are expected this year, compared with 82,000 in 1960. The industry has replaced rice exports as the country's primary source of foreign exchange. Successful marketing has made Thailand "the land of smiles."

But the smiles are disappearing fast as the country undergoes an AIDS crisis. Many blame the spread of the disease on tourists. Although less than 2 per cent of Thailand's prostitutes work with tourists, this crisis has been seen as an unwell-

## THE TOURIST TRAP

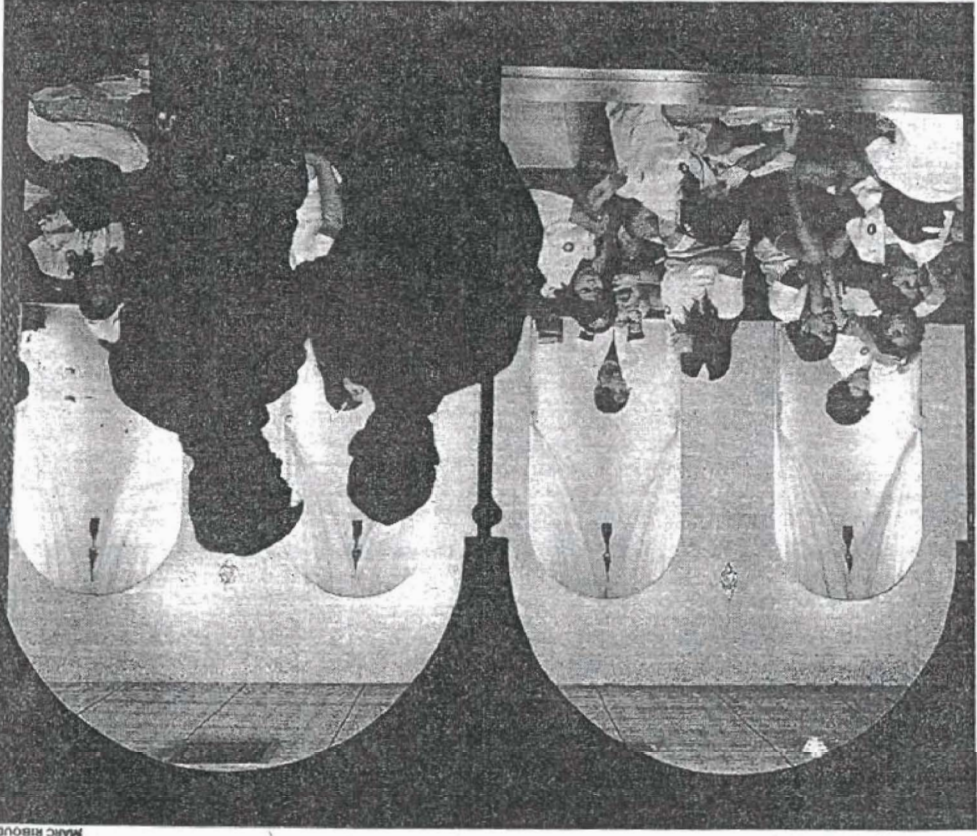
come result of Thailand's reputation for cheap sex. The anti-Aids campaigner, Soopatager, says clearly sees a link: "The AIDS virus was not born here," she said, "it was brought here." It would encourage yet more development, but figures appear to back this up. During 1987, official research has shown there are more plant species on this one mountain than there are in the whole of Britain.

Another proposal in the south at Krabi is to build a luxury hotel on a protected beach, blasting a cliff in a national park to service it. Officially, both schemes are illegal but the law is close to being changed. It seems that the government is backing tourism at any cost.

Meanwhile, feelings are boiling up. In 1987, a "death march" took place outside the headquarters of the Thai Tourist Authority to highlight the problem of AIDS. "No Sex Tours", the banners proclaimed. "Less Promotion. More Protection." Two years ago Thai women's groups crowded airports to protest against Danish sex tourists, and massed at Pattaya when the US fleet arrived. When the Thai beauty queen won the Miss Universe competition, feminists

marked an open letter, in which they asked her to change her nationality. Environmentally, protest groups have benefited from the country's growing green movement. The Phuket Environmental Action Club has closely watched tourism since 1986, and other groups include the Project for Ecological Recovery and Wildlife Fund Thailand but success has been mixed. Legal action is being taken against hotel and bungalow operators in Phuket and Koh Samet for encroachment on protected land. The cable car seems to have been deferred for the time being. But little action has been taken against Pattaya sex workers. Redwing, for advertising sex

Adas has also focused attention on other effects of the sex industry. Thais, as well as Westerners, are horrified by the sales of teenage boys and girls from rural villages into the Bangkok sex trade, and there was outrage when the remains of five women were found chained to beds after a fire in Phuket Island's red-light district in 1987. Thai women abroad find themselves motivated for sex tourism, and massed at Pattaya when the US fleet arrived. When the Thai beauty queen won the Miss Universe competition, feminists



Massage parlour; less than 2 per cent of Thai prostitutes work with tourists, but Bangkok's cheap sex market has been blamed for the AIDS crisis

Similarly, despite the establishment of AIDS control centres it is estimated that only 3 per cent of sex bars see AIDS tested for HIV. Sex bars see AIDS more as a business risk than a national threat. One bar in Bangkok, protected at Pattaya, there was a pitched battle on the beach as outraged prostitutes fought back against feminists who they saw as depriving them of business. Resentment of tourism in Thailand goes back further than the AIDS crisis; more than a decade ago, for instance, has been caused between hosts and guests by top-down the sex industry as a tourist attraction in favour of Thailand's development. The government is playing down the sex industry but successful groups include the Project for Ecological Recovery and Wildlife Fund Thailand but success has been mixed. Legal action is being taken against hotel and bungalow operators in Phuket and Koh Samet for encroachment on protected land. The cable car seems to have been deferred for the time being. But little action has been taken against Pattaya sex workers. Redwing, for advertising sex tourists, and massed at Pattaya when the US fleet arrived. When the Thai beauty queen won the Miss Universe competition, feminists

As a typically Thai question, that critics of sex tourism began perhaps only after the King's third daughter spoke out last year, to take effect with the involvement of such eminent Thai pressure can be applied to make tourism compatible with the long-term interests of all Thailand.

Many feel that their culture is being eroded under an onslaught of Western materialism. They feel that Thailand, the one country in South East Asia to have avoided colonisation, is now undergoing a new, insidious form of imperialism that is replacing traditional Thai independence with a role of sub-