

Ghoullish imagery goes mainstream around Halloween, but it dominates the lives of some people all year round. Clad in studded leather, skullshaped rings, denim patches depicting zombies and Viking-like hair, these death heads are heavy metal fans, who find solace in the darkest of musical cults. *Adam R Florance* joins the headbangers in the City of Angels and *Chris Johnson* goes rockin' in Rangoon.

Metal bands nightly from 10pm till 2am. Some could do with a lot more practice but Angel and Silent are tight and extremely talented. At their monthly underground parties, young metal bands like Silly Fools (see p51) and Plahn scream and howl while teenage boys with long fringes rip off their T-shirts, slam dance, swap sweat and pose tough. Very few of those giggling schoolgirls in black t-shirts at the bus stop can be found at these events.

Plahn describe their sound as Aggressive Metal and explain that their name means "chaotic extremes of energy", which is an apt enough description of their live performance. They met at Amnuaysin School, where they discovered a shared taste in anti-social noise and started writing songs about the circle of life, with a satirical bent towards Thai politics and society. They're working on an album which should be out this year and will play on Pirate Radio's



Sweet-faced girls in black T-shirts with gory death images are a surprisingly common sight in Bangkok. Stalls in Chatuchak, MB and Ramkhamhaeng offer a plethora of skulls, snakes, flaming Harleys and unfeasibly buxom warrior-women on jackets, bandannas, belt buckles, rings, t-shirts and even underwear. Names like Pantera, Sepultura, Metallica, and Anthrax are splashed all over teenage busts, backs and butts but how much of a local metal scene is really out there?

The first place to look is live metal. After all, it's very much a live form; cartwheeling guitarists, mosh pits, head-banging and body-surfing are staples of the metal scene anywhere. But for all the skulls and snakes, tracking down a whirling moshpit in Bangkok is surprisingly elusive. **The Rock Pub** on Phayathai Road has been open for about 8 years. Two or three good local cover-bands play nightly, and while the sound and light systems may be impressive, the bands are all in their 30s or 40s, and the punters mostly office types sitting around tables of Black and Chivas, admiring the guitar histrionics during endless renditions of Led Zeppelin, Van Halen, and Deep Purple. You don't see any teens in Metallica t-shirts in here.

Just up the road, the otherwise deserted Hollywood Street Plaza was a Mecca for all things metal, boasting three metal bars, plus numerous Tattoo artists and metal accessory vendors. Alas the **Rock Opera**'s now a snooker hall, **Hollywood Rock Place** a restaurant, **Metal Zone** a disco, and the stalls cleared out as a fire risk (as if there was anyone in there to get burnt). But on the 2nd floor above the Hollywood Cinema ticket booth a tiny new bar called **X-Rock** offers up a string of Death, Speed, Black and Progressive

Pirate On The Rock later on. They're into Black Sabbath and Metallica and get off on the death and destruction imagery associated with the genre, though they prefer to think of it as attitude, a release of emotion, not actual physical violence. They also claim that girls like their scene and sometimes follow them around, but of the five girls in their crowd at X-Rock, one was taking photos for a local magazine, two were selling tickets and two were cowering in the back corner. This is very much a testosterone-driven mob. So what would attract a girl to this loud, aggressive, offensive, masculine sub-strata of society?

Nok (METRO's cover girl) has been into heavy metal since school and her boyfriend gave her some tapes. She's attracted by the guys, music and friends and claims never to have suffered any bad experiences or chauvinism (but her man is very protective), though other girls fans can be bitchy and try to steal boyfriends. "I've never had any problems. I'm confident in what I'm doing and it doesn't bother me what others think. My friends often give me compliments." She hangs out at the Rock Pub and Hollywood, and sometimes joins metal-head friends in up-country jaunts. Body adornments are de rigueur and though not into piercing, she has a shoulder tattoo, which she can hide at work, although her

wedding dress showed it off to widespread compliments.

Pok is a 34 yr old Japanese-speaking tour guide who's hung out at the Rock Pub for six years is similarly confident about being a metal girl in or outside the scene. Her father was a US Serviceman and she grew up with farang music, but particularly liked metal. The music and



U Tin Oo, a former Chief of Staff of Defensive Services, is NLD Vice-Chairman. He says:

"Tourists should see a true picture of Burma. Their money taken by the government will not go to benefit ordinary people, but will strengthen SLORC to remain in power. Even though Aung San Suu Kyi has been released, there's been no progress towards democratic reform by the government. We're asking tourists to wait for our democratic movement to develop further, and consider a more appropriate time for their visit to Burma."

Bertil Lintner, correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and former President of the FCCT, is arguably the foremost Burma expert in Bangkok, having written several books and countless articles on the subject. This is his view:

"Burma is a country of breathtaking beauty – golden pagodas and temples beyond description, countryside as varied as snow capped mountains, lush green paddy fields and white sand beaches. Isolated for many years, Burma retains the fascination of a culture steeped in the past, its gentle people – always friendly and welcoming."

The opening paragraph for a guide book? Yes, in a sense. But not really. *Burma: the Alternative Guide* struggles with the moral issue of travelling to a country under firm military rule, especially in view of the fact that 1996 has been designated as Visit Myanmar Year: by the Burmese authorities. The conclusion is that you should stay away from this enchanting, beautiful country – which makes it quite a unique guide book.

But there is a way out, if you feel you absolutely have to go to Burma: then, you should at least learn about the political situation, the authors recommend. Perhaps predictably, they belong to the Burma Action Group, British activists who are championing the cause of Burmese democracy and arguing for isolation of the regime in power.

To further their case, they quote a December 1994 article from the *Boston Globe*: 'Tourists oblivious of the realities are pouring into this land of golden pagodas, flaming red sunsets and incense-perfumed air, accepting the military strongmen's invitation to enjoy, at bargain basement prices, the glories of a unique and ancient civilization.'

The bottom line is that Visit Myanmar Year is an attempt by Burma's military authorities, who prefer the Orwellian sounding acronym SLORC, to raise badly needed foreign exchange to help perpetuate their absolute grip on power. Tourists are made not to pay 'bargain basement prices', as the *Boston Globe* claimed, but exorbitant fees to visit museums and even pagodas. They are obliged to change their dollars at the official rates of five or six Kyats, while any black marketeer would give you up to 150 Kyats.

Moreover, forced labour has allegedly been used to prepare the country for foreign tourists. Young people in chains have been seen clearing the moat around the old royal palace in Mandalay and to build a new road to the fabled city of Pagan. The entire population of Pagan was forcibly relocated in 1990, to make sure tourists would not be disturbed by anything they could possibly perceive as eyesores, such as bamboo houses and dirty locals.

What remains today is a 'history park' very different from the lovely community that Pagan once was. Bulldozers have created moats and ponds which never existed in the history of Pagan – and in the process



Above: Jan Banning's photo of a Burmese doing hard labour in leg-irons. Below: All these notes are worth the same: US\$1 = \$1 FEC (Foreign Exchange Certificate) = 150 Kyat (not 5-6 Kyat as SLORC pretends).

destroyed invaluable archaeological ground, which was being excavated with utmost care when the 'beautification process' began. In private, Burma's few remaining professional archaeologists complain bitterly, but no one has dared to speak out publicly for fear of arrest.

If you still don't want to stay away, the *Alternative Guide* recommends places to visit. Maps indicate the distribution of forced labour, and show places people were killed during the pro-democracy uprising in 1988: the White Bridge

on Prom Road where students were clubbed to death by the police in March of that year; the Kyandaw Crematorium where wounded demonstrators were burned alive; the notorious Insein Prison, where many people have died and which still houses hundreds of political prisoners.

Given Burma's underdeveloped infrastructure and limited hotel rooms, Visit Myanmar Year may not bring in the hundreds of thousands of tourists the government is hoping for. The start has even been postponed from January 1 to October, and now again to November 18 which leaves six weeks to achieve the targets.

Whatever happens to Visit Myanmar Year, the controversy surrounding it has encouraged many to air their feelings about travelling to Burma. The *Alternative Guide* is not the only example of how public opinion may not be in favour of what, to many,

amounts to a military rip-off.

The *Burma Debate*, a bimonthly magazine funded by the Soros Foundation and edited by Burma activists in the US, published in its Nov-Dec 1995 issue an open letter from some foreigners living in Rangoon:

'Come to Burma, if you feel it's the right thing to do. But come with an open mind; talk to ordinary villagers, and learn to distinguish between those elements of "traditional Myanmar culture" that have been fabricated by the SLORC from the reality of a fascinating and beautiful multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual nation. And whenever possible, ensure that your tourist dollar goes directly to private entrepreneurs and townspeople, not to the junta.'

