

# Tropical treat

## A visit to Nong Nooth Garden

SADYA AFREEN MALLICK, back from Bangkok

ONG weekend. Brilliant sun. Seemed like a perfect time to hop on a car and make the three-hour drive from Rangsit to Nong Nooth Tropical Garden near the Pattaya Beach in Bangkok. At 400 Baht per head, I was still complaining about the entrance ticket. However, at the sight of the 500 acres of the tranquil landscape, such thoughts washed off in the blink of an eye! The open-air bus was ready to take us around the huge reservation, and needless to say, we didn't keep the driver waiting...

Nong Nooth is one of the world's largest private palm collections. With about 1,000 species and a wide variety of globe to spiral shaped cactus there was plenty to see. We learned that there were also over 500 different orchids, bougainvilleas, gingers, canna and anthuriums. The Japanese tourists were clicking away with their latest digital gadgets, while some craned their necks to breaking point to catch a glimpse of the dazzling greenery all around. But all heads seemed to turn in unison at the sight of the bonsai collection set in a fountain garden besides the lake. It was as if nature had been given a free rein to paint the landscape, and it had mustered all its creativ-



Thai dancers decked in traditional costumes

ity into creating this breathtaking landscape.

The Theme Park employs around 900 people and attracts approximately a million people a year, mainly from Asia. Other than the landscaped gardens, there was also a miniature zoo where children and adults watch agape the tigers, chimps, birds and butterflies.

If that wasn't enough, there were also a few inviting restaurants sprinkled around the park. We went for the Thai cuisine at a posh restaurant overlooking the lake (when in Thailand, do as Thailand do I guess...) and then set off to watch an hour-long show. According to the leaflet, the show would depict the centuries old Thai culture...but we were in for a tantalising surprise.

We were treated to a medley of performances from traditional Thai music to regional dances, but what excited my friends most was the exhibition of kick-boxing!

We learned that the 1,000 seat theatre hosts shows three times a day and are staged by a cast of no less than 90 full-time artistes. To be honest, I wasn't surprised at the large number. I could see from the drama, the amount of effort put in to the performance. Bright costumes, traditional Thai village and palatial settings, an effortless precision dance by girls in royal blue, magenta and gold sequined Thai silk with lighted candles, sword fights. The play takes you through how the simple village life is disrupted by the outlaws and the ultimate duel between good and evil.

But no one could have prepared us for the moment when the elephants entered the arena and joined in the victory dance! All the while, accompanied by the thumping drums and traditional music with bamboo instruments.

As the curtains fell on the fascinating cultural show we were herded out to an open air space to watch the spectacular elephant show.

About 20 elephants marched in military precision and turned on their amazing show. We watched in awe as elephants as large as houses, nimbly played pin ball, painted t-shirts, and even gave a massage to some volunteering spectators.

And did I mention they also high-fived and posed like super-stars after they scored goals in the football match? By then, I wouldn't have been surprised if one of them started knitting a scarf...

By the time the sun set, the audience was bone tired but didn't seem willing to leave. It was as if they wanted to re-live the day as long as they could. Busily replacing batteries and clicking away to capture the scenery on their lenses. I didn't carry any of those hi-definition cameras or camcorder, but I knew the sights and sound of this stunning Tropical Garden would be locked solid in my mind for as long as I can imagine.

PHOTO: STAR

PHOTO: STAR</p