

# ABOUT TOWN

BY JENNIFER GAMPELL



AND THE BAND PLAYS ON **The Moroccan Band at the Arabian Nights Cabaret, left. Above: The terrace at Nefertiti.**

## Arabian Nights

An vibrant Middle Eastern milieu awaits on Bangkok's Arab Street

potted greenery—a pan-Arab throng of Premier League enthusiasts cadges a peek at the action.

It's 11 p.m. on Bangkok's Sukhumvit 3/1, a.k.a. Soi Arab, but night looks like noon at Nefertiti and the similarly luminescent Nasir Al-Masri next door. The glare from the bright ceiling lights and wall lamps at both eateries reflects off kitschy Egyptian clutter and myriad chrome surfaces, making you yearn for sunglasses. Except for the vendors in Thai hill-tribe costume trying to hawk pseudo-ethnic souvenirs to diners, I can almost imagine myself in downtown Cairo instead of the capital of Thailand.

While I've always loved people and places that fit my definition of soulfully strange, 15 years of living in central Bangkok has raised my threshold for the incongruous. During that time I've mourned the demolition of many idiosyncratic nooks and crannies to make way for obscenely big shopping malls or bland residential and office towers. The favorite haunts of mine that still survive—like Khao San Road and Silom Soi 4—have lost their former pizzazz.

**THE CROWD OF MIDDLE EASTERN MALES THAT FILLS EVERY** seat on the outdoor terrace at Nefertiti restaurant is riveted to the ManU-Chelsea game unfolding on the huge wall-mounted TV. From a garish relief just below the screen, two stylized golden stags gaze stonily at the football fans through a haze of shisha smoke. Outside the restaurant perimeter—demarcated by curlicue chrome balustrades, wrought-iron street lamps, and



GRACE NOTES Clockwise from left: Outside the Grace Hotel, Soi Arab's party central and home to the Arabian Nights Cabaret; naan bread at Petra; Abu Dhabi, Petra's gregarious Yemeni manager.

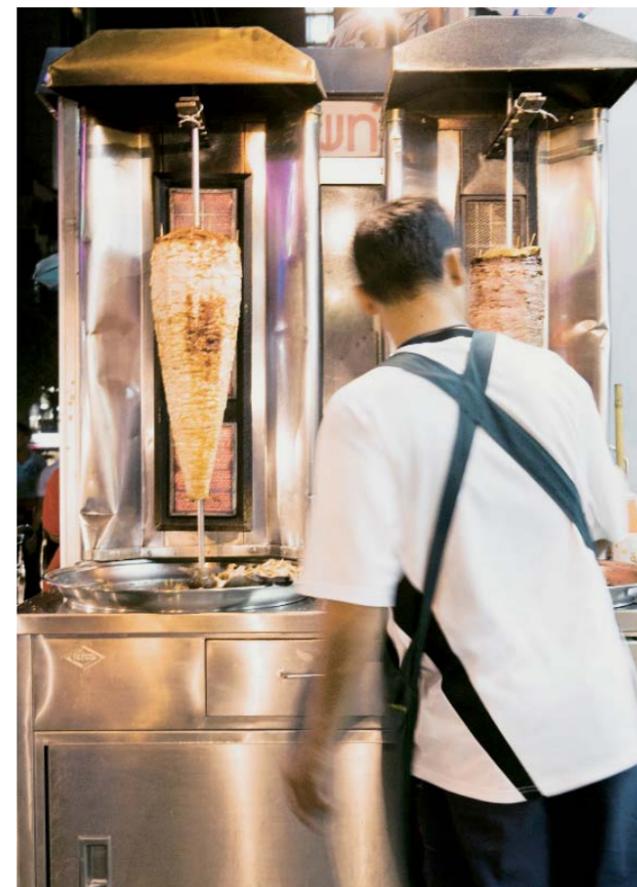


I first discovered Soi Arab in the late 1990s, when the Brazilian ambassador and his Moroccan wife introduced me to the all-night belly dancing show at the Grace Hotel's Arabian Nights Cabaret. (Back then, Bangkok nightlife barely got going by 1 or 2 a.m., the time most bars must close today.) With the ongoing demise of funky people-watching venues, the hyperactive Arab-esque lane on the edge of the city's notorious Nana nightlife district has since become my default bastion of bizarreness against the rising tide of Bangkok modernity.

Of course, Soi Arab has changed since the 1980s, when it first caught the attention of Saudi recruiters hanging around town to arrange exit visas for Thai laborers. In those days, the one-car-wide alleyway and

the tiny lanes leading off it were renowned for go-go bars, not hummus and *laham mashwi* (succulent grilled lamb). But as more Middle Easterners arrived to enjoy the area's nighttime "entertainment" options, ethnic restaurants began sprouting up to serve them. The Egyptian-run Shahrazad (where my favorite dishes are the stuffed pigeon and succulent lamb *tikka*) opened in 1983 and remains popular among longtime Arab residents like Hassane Lemsouri, who arrived in the neighborhood the same year to head the band at the Arabian Nights Cabaret. In 1986, a former Shahrazad chef opened The Egyptian, the first of the four side-by-side shophouse eateries that subsequently coalesced into the blingy Nasir Al-Masri.

The mutually remunerative Thai-Saudi relationship ended abruptly in 1989 with the still-unsolved murders of four Saudi diplomats in Bangkok. Simultaneously in Riyadh, the Thai



1,001 SITES Clockwise from left: Streetside shwarma; a tuk-tuk looks almost out of place amid Soi Arab's Middle Eastern scene; precious agarwood, which is burned as incense or distilled into musky fragrances; dishdash-clad window shoppers; perfume for sale at the Yusooof Shop.

prince were crude fakes. Nearly two decades later, relations between the Thai and Saudi governments have yet to recover. The gem scam, the first Gulf War, and the 1997 baht crash temporarily slowed but never stopped the influx of Middle Easterners to Soi Arab. According to the personable Lemsouri, who has lived at the Grace Hotel for most of his 25-year stint with the Moroccan Band, Soi Arab has been sustained in good times and bad by its proximity to Bumrungrad International Hospital on Soi 3. The medical facility, which opened as a small hospital in 1980, has become a globally accredited 554-bed behemoth at the forefront of Thailand's medical-tourism industry.

Tall and suave, Lemsouri attributes a significant part of Bumrungrad's boom to Middle Eastern clients, especially those who bring over entire families for health and beauty treatments. (On my own rare visits to Bumrungrad in recent years, I often feel as ethnically anomalous walking its corridors as I do when sipping mint tea at Nasir Al-Masri.) He recounts how, when not attending to their relatives, the men attend to their own partying proclivities, which often center on the Grace Hotel.

Remodeled in the 1980s



The Moroccan Band plays on, though its members have dwindled from 25 to 13 over the years and, sadly, the shimmying belly dancers are gone.

Yet the place still buzzes, albeit less frenetically than during the heady '80s and '90s, and primarily on weekends when resident Moroccans—including some great dancers—join the hotel patrons. The latter tend to be older Arab men who often come alone or in groups solely for the music, which transports them (and me) back to their homelands. They express their appreciation by walking stage-ward and dispassionately tossing wads of 100-baht notes at their favorite singers or dancers. A Thai factotum dutifully

LIFE IN THE ARAB LANE **Soi Arab** is anything but pedestrian.

Address Book



- **NEFERTITI**  
4/8 Sukhumvit Soi 3/1;  
66-2/655-3043
- **SHAHRAZAD**  
6/8 Sukhumvit Soi 3/1;  
66-2/251-3666
- **NASIR AL-MASRI**  
4/6 Sukhumvit Soi 3/1;  
66-2/253-5582
- **ARABIAN NIGHTS CABARET,**  
Grace Hotel, 12 Sukhumvit  
Soi 3; 66-2/253-0651; [grace  
hotel.th.com](http://grace<br/>hotel.th.com)
- **YUSOOF SHOP**  
6/17 Sukhumvit Soi 3/1;  
66-2/655-7521
- **PETRA**  
75/4 Sukhumvit Soi 3/1;  
66-2/655-5230

Housed in the **CAVERNOUS** and dingy ballroom of the Grace Hotel, the Arabian Nights Cabaret is an oasis of quasi-gentility in the midst of raunchy chaos

from a small two-story hotel, the Grace, with a facade punctuated by large saucer-like openings, is a looming neighborhood presence. In terms of sheer size and accoutrements—four-lane bowling alley, snooker hall, ping-pong table, barber shop, hair salon, tailor, perfumery, disco, coffee shops, cabaret, massage salon—its split-level lobby says train station more than hotel. Starting in the early evening, the vast low-ceilinged space teems with old and young Middle Eastern men dressed in everything from dishdashas to shorts, keffiyas to baseball caps.

I can't deny that to reach the Arabian Nights Cabaret involves passing a gauntlet of rough-looking Thai and Uzbek demimondaines (to use the euphemism favored by former *Bangkok Post* nightlife writer Bernard Trink), who sit expectantly in the two coffee shops on either side of the entryway. Nor can I deny that I'm completely mesmerized by the entire scene. Housed in the Grace's cavernous and dingy ballroom, the cabaret is an oasis of quasi-gentility in the midst of raunchy chaos. (According to Lemsouri, unaccompanied women are not permitted.) Tacky

chandeliers shed little light on the decor: leather sofa groupings, pseudo stained-glass windows and Greco-Roman posters behind fake columns.

follows behind, picking the bills off the floor and handing them to the band.

Visitors with less tolerance for the risqué than has this writer can still

participate in Soi Arab's exoticness without wandering through the Grace. I love browsing the small perfumeries that specialize in agarwood (called *oud* in Arabic), a resinous heartwood from the increasingly endangered Aquilaria tree. Prized worldwide and now extremely expensive, the wood is used in Islamic cultures as incense or distilled into musky non-alcoholic perfumes. Staff at the Yusoof Shop (vaguely opposite Shahrazad) is friendlier than elsewhere and lets window shoppers gaze at the various grades of wood chips under glass and at their beautiful not-for-sale collection of ornate crystal perfume flasks.

Dining remains my favorite Soi Arab pastime. For me, no other eatery matches the familial ambience of 13-year-old Petra, located a few meters up from the lane's potholed Sukhumvit entrance. Overseeing the tiny 10-table establishment is Abu Dhaba, the ever-smiling Yemeni manager who chats loudly with his patrons, harangues his hijab-clad waitresses (who taunt him right back), and races frenetically between the narrow interior and the outdoor pita oven. The reasonably priced Arab, Syrian, Yemeni, and Egyptian dishes at Petra range from perfectly acceptable to divine; better still, non-Middle Easterners are not merely tolerated, but welcomed. And, if you're a regular like me, you can expect Abu Dhaba to announce your arrival with a jaunty bow and a heartfelt "Oooh la la!" ☺