



CREATIVE INSPIRATION
Opposite: Bangkok-born jeweler Jaturaporn "Jatu" Lochotinun at her Nova Art Lab, a workshop offering courses in jewelry design.

NMY

CHIANG MAI

Just what is it about Thailand's second-largest city that has compelled so many Thais and foreigners to relocate there? We ask eight outsiders-turned-insiders to flesh out Chiang Mai's je ne sais quoi

By Jennifer Gampell
Photographs Jeremy Samuelson

FCITIES HAD GENDERS, Chiang Mai would be a woman. I came to this conclusion after spending six days there recently to take the pulse of a place often described as Thailand's creative capital. Home to just 150,000 residents, Chiang Mai is nestled amid the lush mountains of the kingdom's far north, and feels far removed from bustling Bangkok.

And while the urban sprawl engulfing its ancient walled precinct—capital of the Lanna kingdom between the late 13th and 16th centuries—has taken much of the blush off the so-called Rose of the North, the city somehow retains an inimitable cultural allure and charm.

I've visited many times before, usually to review the latest boutique hotel or hip design store. But on this trip, aiming to delve deeper into the essence of the city, I asked an eclectic cross-section of creative Thais and foreigners—who'd relocated here—what attracted them to Chiang Mai in the first place. Surprisingly, most described their adopted hometown with the kind of ardor normally reserved for loved ones. By the end of my trip, I'd developed a crush on the place myself.

UDOM "NOTE" TAE PANICH, perhaps Thailand's only stand-up comic in the Western sense of the term, is renowned for his storytelling and political satire. Performing socially relevant comedy in a country where a long list of topics—the monarchy, the government, the army, Buddhism—are off limits demands enormous skill, not to mention courage.

We meet at the first Chiang Mai branch of Iberry—a celebrated Bangkok-based ice cream chain—that Note opened last year. Unbeknownst to his adoring fans, Note is not just a comedian, but also a talented artist. He single-handedly designed the spacious parlor, from its toy-filled metal ceiling hangings, to the imposing abstract wall paintings, and even the green, larger-than-life Chairman Mao sculpture at the front door.

Note—whose nickname derives from the Thai mispronunciation of "nose," a reference to his prodigious proboscis—clearly thrives on scooping ice cream and chatting to his many customers. But in need of a more private venue to chat, we decamp to his airy home, which is crafted from concrete and recycled wood and also serves as his studio and gallery.

"I first started coming up to Chiang Mai from Bangkok 13 years ago, and immediately felt that it was a city with a good heart," the 40-year-old recalls. "The pace of life is slower than Bangkok: a bossa nova beat instead of a crazy techno dance rhythm."

"I got a crush on Chiang Mai like you get on a woman. Whenever I went away I'd miss her terribly. I kept thinking, 'I must try being in a relationship with this woman who is Chiang Mai.' I'd come up and rent an apartment for a few months at a time, like a trial period before getting married. And I realized I really loved her and wanted to be with her full time. So five years ago I decided to move here and build a house. Not a rich house.

Not a second house. A real home. Now we live together permanently, and I'm very, very happy with my decision."

Note and I laugh at his hokey anthropomorphic description, which I still appreciate even after discovering that I'd been treated to one of the comedian's well-polished sketches rather than an impromptu outpouring.

FOR SOMEONE WHO SYNTHESIZES complicated geopolitical realities into humorous short paragraphs and informative fact boxes for globally unaware American readers, author Melissa Rossi also waxes surprisingly rhapsodic about living in Chiang Mai.

"I believe in geographic luck. Some cities like you, others want to eject you immediately," she tells me over coffee in her book-strewn, southern California-style apartment. "I feel that there's something really great about this city."

And Rossi knows a thing or two about great cities. She penned a biography of singer Courtney Love while living in Seattle in the 1990s. Later, she moved to Florence and then to Barcelona, writing for the likes of *Esquire* and *National Geographic Traveler*. These days she is working on a book series for Penguin entitled "What Every American Should Know About ..." The first in the series was *What Every American Should Know About The Rest of the World*. The day we meet she is past deadline on the fifth



book, this time about the Middle East.

"Every time I come back here I love it more and more," Rossi says. "Whenever I'm away, I just want to be back in Chiang Mai ... Here, I wake to the birds, and go to sleep listening to an insect orchestra."

Rossi, who doesn't own a mobile phone, also seems to be one of the few people in Chiang Mai who doesn't own a car. Not that that's slowed her down. Though Chiang Mai's public transport system is still woefully primitive, consisting largely of smelly tuk-tuks and *song taew* pickup trucks with uncomfortable bench seating, Rossi early on "discovered" Chairit, a fluent English-speaking taxi driver whom she dubs her "cheap shrink on wheels." He shops for her, listens to her rants, and knows what she means when she tells him she wants to visit "that place with pillows and the garden in the back."

"I feel really happy here," she sighs. "This is the happiest I've ever been."

JOE CUMMINGS'S INTEREST IN Southeast Asian politics began in the 1970s when he was a high school student and antiwar activist in New Orleans. He purposefully joined the Peace Corps in 1977 to get himself posted to Thailand, and by the time he relocated

to Chiang Mai from Bangkok in 1997, his name was synonymous with the Lonely Planet guidebook series. He's also contributed to Moon Handbooks, Insight Guides, and written for numerous newspapers and coffee-table books.

"Chiang Mai has fascinated me since I first visited 30 years ago," says the lanky 54-year-old. "Long before I moved up here I thought it was the place to live." A serious Thai history scholar with a master's degree in Southeast Asian studies from the University of California, Berkeley, Cummings calls northern Thailand "the cradle, the birthplace of Thai culture and civilization."

"Here in Chiang Mai I'm as near to Thai culture as I can get, in an idealized way," he says.

Cummings acknowledges the melting-pot nature of Thai culture across the country, but insists that its major elements coalesce in the north. "Northern Thailand feels more Thai to me than anywhere else. Chiang Mai is a cornucopia." He includes food, language, and music in his paean.

Centuries ago, the Lanna kingdom of Northern Thailand was

"WHENEVER I'M AWAY, I JUST WANT TO BE BACK IN CHIANG MAI," ROSSI SAYS OF HER ADOPTED HOME. "HERE, I WAKE TO THE BIRDS, AND GO TO SLEEP LISTENING TO AN INSECT ORCHESTRA."

HOME SWEET HOME **Writer Melissa Rossi, above. Opposite: Kamin Lertchaiprasert was among the first wave of Bangkok-based artists to make the move north.**

a cultural crossroads for caravan traders from further north, including the Thai Leu, Shan, Muang, and Lao. Today, Chiang Mai continues to welcome all manner of creative types. Cummings recently shifted his primary focus from writing to rock-and-rolling and, together with singer-songwriter-guitarist Marie Dance, he formed the Tonic Rays band. In Chiang Mai, he finds "the supportive community to make and perfect my music before taking it global."

"CHIANG MAI BREWS creativity in people," agrees Jaturaporn "Jatu" Lochotinun, half of the creative team behind the Nova Collection, a jewelry store and design school. The petite 40-year-old left her hometown of Bangkok before she was in her teens. At the age of 22, having traveled the world, the free-spirited Jatu craved dry land and mountains, and together with her Canadian partner, designer Patrick Lemmon, she made the move to Chiang Mai. Settling in Bangkok was never an option, she tells me. "The lifestyle is much calmer in Chiang Mai. You can really put things aside and sit down to learn jewelry-making or whatever you want."

The couple tried selling their handcrafted jewelry abroad, first in Australia and then Canada. Like hippies of yore, they bought a campervan and sold to shops and markets along the way. But weather and economies of scale sent them back to Chiang Mai where they opened the first Nova Collection in 1995.

Jatu and Lemmon have always renounced mass



DOG DAYS
Comedian Udom
"Note" Taepanich
at Iberry with his
French bulldog,
Charlie. Opposite:
Thaiwjit Poeng-
kasemsoboon
on-site at the
soon-to-open
Mo Hotel.

production and wholesaling in favor of retailing handmade pieces with contemporary designs and finishes. To stock their expanding business, they opened a jewelry school in town and began training a team of silversmiths, many of whom still work for them. Today, the Nova Art Lab offers one- to five-day beginners' courses in various facets of jewelry design and production.

For Jatu, living somewhere with a rich artistic heritage is crucial to her creative process. She likes the fact that Chiang Mai locals retain a sense of their Lanna identity, and finds the northern dialect softer and more musical than the Thai spoken elsewhere in the country. Though she and Patrick frequently travel abroad, they love returning to Chiang Mai. "Whenever we come back, we always say 'It's nice to be home.'"

KAMIN LERTCHAIPRASERT RELOCATED to Chiang Mai in 1995 as part of the first wave of Bangkok-based artists to make the move north. He'd recently returned to Thailand after five years in New York, and found Bangkok's traffic jams and fast pace too reminiscent of the American city he'd just left behind.

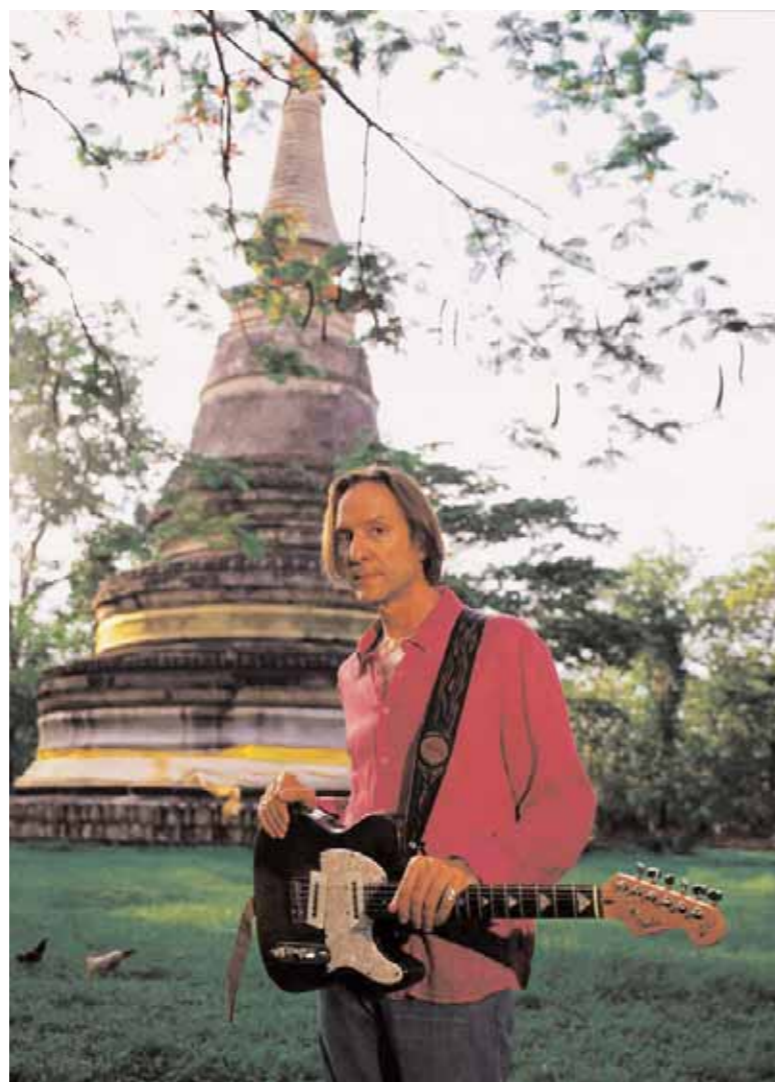
"In Chiang Mai you live very close to nature and feel as though you have time to make the most of every day," Kamin tells me. "If you love bicycling like I do, you can ride up to the waterfall on Doi Suthep [a nearby mountain] every morning." Like many other Thais fed up with Bangkok's unremitting heat, Kamin also loves the cool Chiang Mai winters.

A devout Buddhist, Kamin lived as a monk in the early 1990s. Today, his expanding artistic portfolio—printmaking, photography, painting, sculpture, performance art, video—explores the role of art in spirituality, life, and society. It's a concept close to Kamin's heart: together with fellow artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, Kamin started The Land in 1998. Now known as the Land Foundation, the project is an experimental organization to promote art, self-knowledge through meditation, and natural farming.

A buzz-saw cacophony of insects sounds in the background when we meet in Kamin's towering, open-air studio house, located off a road leading up to the forest temple of Wat Umong. A few blocks away, a new housing development heralds the city's unstoppable swell toward Kamin's semi-rural hideaway. Pondering the changes he's seen in town over the past 13 years, the 44-year-old artist leans back on a rickety chair and gazes up at an immense wall covered with sketches for an upcoming exhibition in Bangkok. "It's changed a lot since I first arrived here," he says casually. "Everywhere changes. It's not necessarily good or bad."

Despite the inevitable shifting of sands, Kamin believes that Chiang Mai retains many positive attributes. "It has a good combination of traditional and contemporary culture. In Bangkok there's nothing traditional anymore," he says. "Here there are many alternative communes and a kind of spirituality, although not necessarily religious. I've met many interesting foreigners—artists, writers, and philosophers—here, all of them seeking a place to live, not just to make business."

ONE SUCH FOREIGNER IS NIKI PRACHENSKY, an eccentric entrepreneur with a seriously spiritual side. The only son of two Austrian artists, the 50-something expat first visited Thailand in 1980. By then he had already left Austria for good: "It's a small country with



nothing new to look for," he tells me. Prachensky spent the next 13 years flitting between East and West. In 1993, he moved to Bangkok, started a job, and fell in love with Indhira "Sherry" Sattayaphan, whom he recently wed in a hot-air balloon hovering over Chiang Mai.

While he adored his 80-year-old Ayutthaya-style wooden house on the outskirts of Bangkok, Prachensky hated waking up at five in the morning to beat the traffic. He discovered Chiang Mai through his friend Daniel Reid, a traditional Chinese medicine guru and author of *The Tao of Health, Sex, and Longevity*, who lived there from 1989 to 1999. "I went up to Chiang Mai a lot on weekends, and it showed me a different world," Prachensky recalls. "In Bangkok, you're so into the game that you don't realize you have a choice. You're in the grinder, and you just grind and grind."

Prachensky finally relocated to Chiang Mai in 1997. That same year he re-established a 19th-century Austrian firm called Siamese Traders in a Thai-style thatched hut with an oriental doorway, Bose speakers, and an Egon Schiele poster in the bathroom. The company sources natural and organic teas and spices from around the region and exports to food service and hospitality-industry connoisseurs around the world.

In 2000, Prachensky and a childhood friend decided to make licensed reproductions of early-20th-century Austrian silver jewelry and accessories. In the process of training Chiang Mai silversmiths to execute the complicated *objets*, they revived a near-extinct local tradition. The meticulously crafted jewelry sells exclusively at the chic Neue Gallery—owned by Estée Lauder's son Ronald—in New York City. "You can't do this sort of thing anywhere else in the world anymore," Prachensky says proudly.

Prachensky's passion for offbeat business opportunities has also led him to producing organic schnapps. At a tiny distillery on the outskirts of town, he and his Austrian partner, Count Coreth, bottle the essence of fermented Thai fruits—bananas, pineapple, passion fruit, mangosteen—distilled several times in a mammoth copper contraption dubbed "the Empress." Revealing his spiritual side, Prachensky treats the reverse-osmosis water used in the distillation process with magnets and crystals, to replace the vital essence (Prachensky uses the Chinese term "qi") that is lost during its purification. At its first public appearance at the highly regarded Destillata schnapps tasting in Salzburg last March, the exotic Thai spirit garnered two gold and six silver medals.

Sitting in a thatched gazebo next to his modest Thai-style



home, Prachensky talks about how Chiang Mai has changed over the years. "People's impressions of the place tend to spiral down," he admits. "It's hot, the air is bad, it's dusty and ugly. It's all these things, but don't let them stop you from enjoying your life." Eyes twinkling, he describes the principles of his most recent discovery: quantum philosophy. "You create your own reality. Some days I wake up and I go 'Oh, my God.' But by eight in the morning I'm done with that and it's another day and I say, 'we'll make it memorable.'"

PRACHENSKY'S ILLUSTRIOUS ARTIST pal Thaiwijit Poengkasemsomboon has been a familiar figure around town since his art-school days at Chiang Mai University some 20 years ago. He fell in love with the place while still studying and didn't hesitate in snapping up a small plot of land. But despite his

ongoing infatuation with the city, Thaiwijit didn't permanently relocate from Bangkok until last year.

The slight, 49-year-old abstract artist sports a shaved head and studiously understated attire. He speaks slowly and thoughtfully in precise, carefully chosen English sentences. "I cannot say what first impressed me about this place. It was a feeling I got from the air every time I came here. Maybe it's the culture. One thing I know by being an artist: there's a real atmosphere, an aesthetic, here. Many people who were here before and are here now are craftsmen. There's an appreciation, a real sense of that creativity here."

Last year, Thaiwijit created a buzz when he opened an art shop and studio, Mo Shop, in a bright-yellow, three-story

building near the Ping River on Tha Pae Road. The eclectic boutique, stocked with retro furniture, sculptures, and other design objects, has recently closed, but Thaiwijit is pushing ahead with plans to open Mo Hotel, an exceptionally original boutique property scheduled to debut later this year along the same road. The 12 cube-like rooms, set three to a floor at architecturally challenging angles, take their inspiration from the Chinese zodiac, each crafted by a designer born in a particular animal year.

Having spent over two decades yearning to live in Chiang Mai, Thaiwijit has not been let down by the eventual move. "I'm really happy. I think this is what's suitable for me. I have so many good friends here already and I keep meeting more Thais and foreigners who are open to another dimension."

"THE QUALITY AND PRICE OF LIVING, the seven universities, nature, the huge art scene ... Chiang

"CHIANG MAI HAS FASCINATED ME SINCE I FIRST VISITED 30 YEARS AGO," SAYS CUMMINGS, WHO CALLS NORTHERN THAILAND "THE CRADLE, THE BIRTHPLACE OF THAI CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION."

PILLOW TALK *Citylife* magazine's Pim Kemasingki returned to Chiang Mai a decade ago, left. Opposite: Academic-turned-musician Joe Cummings at Wat Umong.



SCHNAPP TO IT Niki Prachensky in his distillery on the outskirts of town.

Mai's got a little formula that seems to work," says Pim Kemasingki, the editor of *Citylife* magazine, in her plummy British accent. The half-Thai daughter of a former Honorary British Consul in Chiang Mai, Pim hasn't always been so fond of her birthplace. Educated in Switzerland and the U.K., she imagined herself living "somewhere exotic, like New York, London, or Paris."

After graduating from the Byamshaw School of Art in 1997, Pim spent a year traveling around Israel. The collapse of the Thai baht in 1997 meant that her parents could no longer support her while she looked for work, and she was eventually encouraged to move home, accompanied by her boyfriend (now husband) Dean Henderson. "Chiang Mai was a backwater little town then," recalls the vivacious 35-year-old, sitting in her office in the bustling complex that was once her childhood home.

For lack of anything better to do, Pim

and Dean spent April 1998 retooling the old-fashioned *Chiang Mai Newsletter*, a free monthly broadsheet for expats, published by Pim's father. Beginning with its inaugural May 1998 edition, the newsletter—which changed its name to *Citylife* in

2002—has grown into the liveliest and most informative city magazine in Thailand under Pim's watchful eye.

In addition to standard lifestyle fare, *Citylife* also highlights a range of locally controversial issues like crime and gun control. Last January, the magazine operation went carbon neutral, setting an example for other small Chiang Mai businesses.

"We came back because we had nowhere else to go. But now, we're proud to be here," says Pim. "As the city has grown, we've grown along with it. I get to

Fact File

Chiang Mai

GETTING THERE

Chiang Mai's airport is served by several daily flights from Bangkok on **Thai Airways** (thaiairways.com) and **Bangkok Airways** (bangkokair.com); Thai Airways also offers direct connections between Hong Kong and Singapore.

WHERE TO STAY

The **Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi** (66-53/888-888; mandarinoriental.com; doubles from US\$322) sprawls over 25 hectares, with villas, suites, and facilities designed to pay lavish tribute to northern Thailand's rich Lanna heritage. Those looking for a more pared-down aesthetic will appreciate **The Chedi** (66-53/253-333; ghmhotels.com; doubles from US\$337), where 84 sensuous rooms overlook the Ping River. Smaller still, **At Niman Conceptual House** (66-53/224-949; atniman.com; doubles from US\$130)

is a charming boutique hotel with just eight rooms—those downstairs feature Indian, Nepalese, and Tibetan trappings, while the first floor has Lanna-inspired decor. Just outside of town in the Mae Rim Valley, the **Four Seasons Resort Chiang Mai** (66-53/298-181; fourseasons.com; doubles from US\$533) makes the most of its verdant surrounds with 64 Lanna-style guest pavilions centered on terraced rice fields.

WHERE TO EAT

Kamin, Thaiwijiit, Rirkrit and other art hipsters occasionally hang out at **Hatena** (20 *Nimmanhaemin 11*; 66-81/595-0562), a laidback Tokyo-style Japanese dining bar. Pim Kemasingki, true to her roots as the daughter of an honorary consul, adores the colonial-style clubhouse at the 110 year-old **Gymkhana Club** (349 *Chiang Mai-Lamphun Rd.*; 66-53/241-035), where she sips her gin and tonics on a veranda overlooking gargantuan rain trees. Also recommended are **Heuan Pen** (112 *Ratchamankha*; 66-53/27-103) for *khao soy* curried noodles and other classic northern dishes, and **The House** (199 *Moon Muang*; 66-53/419-011) and At Niman hotel's **La Muang** (37 *Nimmanhaemin Soi 9*; 66-53/224-949) for updated Lanna cuisine. Cool off in between with an ice cream at comedian Note Udom's **Iberry** (13 *Nimmanhaemin 19*; 66-53/895-171).



do the coolest range of things. I meet absolutely fascinating people who are so much more worldly, mature, and successful than me, and yet we all live together in this city ... I'm definitely in a small pond here, but what's wrong with that? I'm a bigger fish than if I were in London copywriting. I feel very grateful."

Ten years on, *Citylife* magazine is part of a multimedia company specializing in Web-site design, branding, photography, financial aggregation, and, most recently, corporate films. Pim justifiably calls Chiang Mai "my little land of opportunity." ©