

House & Home**Unrest and opportunity**Cheryl Markosky OCTOBER 30, 2010



A gap year in south-east Asia after graduating turned into a permanent move east for 42-year-old Marc Hagelauer, as he exchanged Paris for Bangkok. He lives in the heart of the Thai capital and runs high-end delivery firm Food by Phone, a graphics design company and Le Smash Club and Tennis Academy with his Thai wife, Rungrudee 'Rung' Suwannake. The couple have two daughters, Ellen, 12, and Emily, nine.

Why does anyone choose to live abroad? Some expats, such as writer Martin Amis, plan their departure after a great deal of thought. It's believed Amis wants to exchange England for the US after becoming fed up with public scrutiny and criticism in his homeland. The move overseas would also allow his American wife, Isabel Fonseca, to help look after her elderly parents and Amis to be near friends in New York.

Others, however, find themselves changing continents after making discoveries by accident. Marc Hagelauer's serendipitous moment came while travelling after he graduated from the University of Paris. "I was inspired by my English cousins to take a gap year, which wasn't common in Paris. My parents were very supportive, giving me the same amount of money they'd provided while I was a chemistry student."

Having visited Vietnam two years earlier, Hagelauer was keen to return but his journey wasn't straightforward as he could not fly direct to Vietnam and had to collect a visa in Bangkok. The delay was, however, worth the bother. On encountering the Thai city, he became besotted with it.

"As well as being colourful and exciting, Bangkok is extremely central – you can get to most places in Asia within a few hours – and quite well-developed, with easy access to embassies to get everything done," he explains.

After exploring Bangkok and relaxing on Thai beaches for six months, Hagelauer became bored. He was offered a job with French company South Pacific Electronics, selling smart card software systems to the Thai market. Customers included international schools, many of which dispensed with the company's services when the Asian financial crisis hit in 1997. The firm couldn't expand and left Thailand the following year. But opportunity often comes from adversity. Hagelauer thought this a good time to set up logistics company Food by Phone with Suwannake, whom he met at South Pacific Electronics. Hagelauer says he was impressed with her energy, working full time so she could pay for her studies in marketing and business administration at night.

Food by Phone was the first meal delivery company to launch in Bangkok. The principle is simple: customers order their favourite dishes from their favourite restaurants, to be delivered to offices or their home within an hour.

"The concept is successful in Thailand because the traffic is phenomenally bad and labour isn't expensive," explains Hagelauer. "It certainly wouldn't work in France, with the country's complex rules and bureaucracy."

Today, the company employs nearly 100 people, of whom one-quarter is based in the call centre and marketing department, and three-quarters work as motorcyclists.

As the operation is labour-intensive and can require long working hours, the Hagelauers chose to live in a spacious house in the Sukhumvit district, about a mile from the office.

Most of their friends live outside Bangkok in larger homes and commute into the city but they've opted for the reverse. They have, unusually for the centre of a large city, front and back gardens, allowing them to keep three dogs, tortoises and rabbits.

"So it's quite pleasant for the children when they come home. Meanwhile, our friends complain there's nowhere to get a nice meal beyond the city limits, which is never a problem for us."

Hagelauer says everything is organised around the children's activities, with he and his wife becoming "designated drivers".

"While always keeping an eye on what's going on in the office, we take the kids to football, Thai and guitar lessons and the cinema on Saturdays, while Sundays involve playing tennis, parties and homework." When not ferrying offspring, he loves going to markets to look at beautiful furniture for about one-tenth of the price it fetches in France.

And yet living in Bangkok can be risky. Although the recent political unrest meant more business for Food by Phone – "people were ordering more as it wasn't safe to stay out at night," notes Hagelauer – the flip side was the company couldn't deliver to areas where the protest was taking place.

“In our office, political opinions were strongly divided. We let the staff know we respected their views but this wasn’t the place for red shirts and stickers on motorbikes and helmets. We explained that we had to appear neutral during working hours, and two workers were so passionate about what was going on that they left the company to join the protesters full time. Many others would go to protest before and after work.”

Hagelauer adds that when the army cracked down and protesters set fire to a number of landmark buildings, including the stock exchange and television station headquarters, he closed the company, as it was no longer safe for his messengers to drive in town. “We re-opened the next day and took last orders two hours before the curfew, so messengers could complete jobs and still have time to get home safely.”

Undeterred by the political turmoil, he believes Thailand has always managed to pull itself back after serious situations, such as the financial crisis, mad cow disease and the tsunami. This spirit of survival is one reason that Hagelauer, who visits France every summer, cannot see himself moving back.

His daughters don’t speak French – they converse in English and Thai – and he thinks he would be hamstrung by the unions and regimented systems.

“Although Thailand sometimes can be frustrating, loud and polluted, there are greater opportunities here. I’m looking at setting up Food by Phone in Phnom Penh [in Cambodia], only 35 minutes by plane from Bangkok, and it’s interesting being part of an expat community here, meeting people I’d never have known in my own country.”

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Great food, polluted city

Pros

- Bangkok’s expat community is less exclusive now, with more mid-level workers, such as financial officers and engineers.
- The food is fantastic, varied and very good value.
- Labour is affordable, so most expats can employ live-in staff.

Cons

- Expats usually send children to universities in Australia, the US or the UK, where better English programmes are available.
- Proud Thais can be stubborn about doing things their way.
- Bangkok is polluted due to lax government enforcement.

Property values

- 3,540,000 baht (US\$118,000) will buy an airy, modern and fully-furnished two-bedroom condominium apartment with two bathrooms in the heart of Sukhumvit.
- 35,000,000 baht (US\$1.2m) will buy a newly renovated three-bedroom, three-bathroom house in Sukhumvit with a garden.

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