Life in Surat

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My first few days in Surat were spent in a suspended dream state. The differences in culture and setting were only amplified by a heavy case of jet lag. However, Thailand does stop feeling like a dream once you spend some time here, and after spending ten months in the city I’ve carved out a routine for myself and found out exactly what Surat has to offer.

One of the initial impressions Surat serves to those who step onto its streets is food. Food everywhere. Surat can safely be classified as a foodie town. There is something for every pallet, taste bud, and diet. Markets and Rice Ladies abound, Khao Man Gai, a popular chicken and rice dish, can be found on every corner, noodle soup venders dot the sidewalks, and virtually any and all meals can be topped with an egg prepared sunny-side up or fried into an omelet for a nominal additional fee.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Surat also provides enough fitness opportunities. How else can you work off that double dinner you just ate? Koh Lamphu, a centrally located quaint island in the Tapi River, is peppered with equipment for body-weight exercises and space to sprint or jog. There is no entrance fee. The gym I frequent, Fit for Life, costs 1,000 THB a month (roughly 35 USD). It’s large by Thai standards and has plenty of free weights and machines, a variety of cardio equipment, and a locker room complete with showers. Smart Gym Fitness and Premier Fitness also call Surat home, with Premier Fitness being the more popular of the two among teachers. Some teachers also opt to channel their inner yogi in group classes.

The city’s location in the South makes travel ridiculously easy. Surat is only one hour from the port of Don Sak, from there you can get to Koh Samui and Koh Phangan in roughly 90 minutes and two hours, respectively. Koh Tao and Samui can also be reached via overnight boats which leave direct from Surat’s own Bandon pier (also home to many delicious eats). Heading West, Ao Nang, Tonsai and Railay Beaches are a little over two hours away by van, the latter two beaches require additional long-tail travel. Another favorite getaway amongst teachers is a lesser known seaside town called Khanom, which is about an hour to the East. Catching a flight out of Surat is a breeze as well, Surat Thani Airport lies approximately 20 kilometers outside of town, flights operate daily to Bangkok, and Chiang Mai.

There is no shortage of housing in Surat either. Relocating teachers will be provided a room to stay rent-free courtesy of Super English for two months. I can not stress enough how helpful it was to have a place to stay arranged ahead of my arrival. And what better opportunity to get to know your coworkers than living with them?!

Since teacher housing, I’ve lived in two apartments, both of which were similar in size and style. These studio apartments typically come furnished, have a balcony, and air con (a must for April and May); some even come with televisions. Expect to pay around 4,000-5,000 baht per month for rent. Utilities (water and electric) are usually separate and run anywhere from a few hundred baht to 1,500 baht. There are bargains to be found, however, it just takes a bit of shopping around.

My current residence runs me 3,500 baht per month, 1,200 baht less than my former apartment. I’m provided a fridge, wall-mounted television, balcony, a massive bed, private bathroom, desk with a chair, wardrobe, and nightstand. The 1,200 baht I save may not seem like much, but that extra bit of cash covers many expenses. And I couldn’t be happier with the upgrade.

If having additional space, such as a kitchen and large living room, and separate bedroom are a must on your list, there are many houses available. Splitting rent on these houses make them very practical and affordable options. If you’re looking for a kitchen, a separate bedroom, and something a little fancier, there are two condos, Garden Condo and Condo Plus, in which rooms can cost anywhere from 7,000-10,000 baht per month.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention the City of Good People stays true to its moniker. More often than not I run into Thais eager to try their hand at English—which is a perfect time for me to try my hand at Thai—or ready to share food and drink. Many times when I’m walking to grab a bite to eat in the evening I’m greeted by strangers with a “hello” and a smile. I have always felt welcomed.

In short, the tongue-in-cheek Southeast Asian saying of “same same, but different” wholeheartedly applies to Surat, and much of Thailand. I have found all the comforts of home, but my daily life has spun a full 180 degrees. I’ve traded in sprawling and boring rural commutes for the hustle, bustle, and organized chaos of an Asian city. I’ve moved as far away from Ohio winters as humanly possible. My days are not spent in a newsroom but rather a classroom, and instead of people calling me complaining about the day’s paper I am simply called Teacha Tom. But most importantly, Surat, and again Thailand, provide a sense of “sabai, sabai” or “chill, chill.” And that, for me, is different and welcomed.