

My Time at the Odd Gym

Of all my travels, I have never experienced anything quite as bizarre or hilarious as my time at Koh Samui Fitness.

It was a scorching day. I slouched in the passenger seat, pressing my face toward the air conditioning vents so the breeze would lift my sticky bangs. After my usual moaning and complaining, the car lurched to a halt. I gripped the leathery seats while Mum waited expectantly. “Phoebe,” she warned. “Out of the car, please.” I stared anxiously toward the gym entrance. We had only been in Thailand for two days, leaving eight days of the trip, and I hated it when plans went off script. More specifically, I hated surprise trips to learn self-defense when I was supposed to be on the beach, sipping coconut water from a real coconut with a little paper umbrella. Furthermore, I loathed exercise.

“Okay...” I muttered, reluctantly stepping onto a narrow slab of concrete that was supposed to be a sidewalk. It was so tight that Mum and I had to walk single file to reach the entrance. My mouth gaped open in utter disbelief. The place was so worn down that I would have passed it by, assuming it was an abandoned shelter, if Mum had not stopped dead in front of it. “Are you absolutely sure this is the right building?” I asked, hoping she was just pausing to admire the architecture. “Er... Yes...” she frowned. I shook my head at the sight. The roof consisted of white metal slabs supported by a cement wall covered in flaking blue paint, a few glass panels, and two thick bamboo columns propping up both the roof and a rusted iron gutter hanging on for dear life.

I grabbed Mum’s hand and shuffled inside. The floor was gray, marked by peeling paint, with a long strip of artificial grass running down the middle like a budget red carpet. Passing bamboo pillars, I noticed a towel rack to my right that wafted out an odd odor I could smell even from a distance. Next to it sat a Buddha statue holding a fire extinguisher, flanked by sacrificial offerings of Fanta and Coke. To my left stood what looked remarkably like a bamboo tiki bar, complete with tall, skinny stools. As we reached the counter, a tiny Thai woman popped up right on cue. “Hel-lo! Weaoucome to gym! I Sassy! What your nem ka?” I blinked at her for a second before replying, “Hello, my name is Phoebe. What’s your name?” She looked at me sideways and laughed. “I already tell you dat! I Sassy!” It turned out her actual name was Sassy—not entirely shocking, given I’d already met locals named Apple and Pea. It also turned out that Mum’s plan was for me to take self-defense lessons from a Czech instructor named Ondrej. Mum offered an evil smile, waved goodbye, and left me with Sassy.

We passed a dry, green-painted cement pool featuring a naked Buddha statue at the top, along with a cluster of dreamcatchers hanging overhead. Finally, we stopped near a set of peeling

leather mats. Ondrej was sitting on one, checking his phone while Sassy babbled mid-story about her protein shakes. He looked up and offered a warm smile. He had a mop of curly brown hair and deep laugh lines around his eyes. "You must be Phoebe! I'm Ondrej, but Sassy calls me Andy because it's easier to pronounce. You can too!" I grinned. He wasn't bad at all, and I ended up thoroughly enjoying the lessons.

My stay taught me far more than just arm locks, pressure points, judo flips, and gun disarms; I learned the rules of the gym. Surround mats with fans and repellent to beat mosquitoes. Feed raisins to the lady's turtle while she bench-presses. Never refuse Sassy's mid-lesson bananas. Bring your own gloves to avoid stale sweat. Cheer on Danny on the treadmill, greet Sassy's Texan-hippy husband, and never touch the equipment's greasy frame. Most importantly: ask Ondrej about his fishing catch, but never ask Sassy—unless you want to watch her swallow a raw fish eyeball. I left missing Ondrej's stories about his cat Chico, their fierce debates over who fishes better (always Sassy), and rescuing Elizabeth, the nearly bald tiki-bar cat. Now, I judge places by their people, not by rusted roofs or drum-like rain. Ondrej published a self-defense book, and Sassy still catches the biggest fish. I'll remember them forever, even if I'm just a distant memory to them.