



Theera Hotrakitya and Max Simpson

STEPS WITH THEERA

A BANGKOK COFFEE SHOP WITH A DIFFERENCE

Inside Thailand's first social enterprise providing vocational training to adults with learning disabilities

BY TANYA PERDIKOU

Tucked away down a side street in downtown Bangkok is a café. From the outside, Steps with Theera looks like any other hip, modern little café in the city. But what goes on inside goes far beyond the average coffee joint.

Steps with Theera is Thailand's first social enterprise providing vocational training to adults with learning disabilities. It was opened in October 2016 by U.K. expat Max Simpson, 30, and her Thai partner Theera Hotrakitya, a pastry chef. Downstairs it's a café serving nutritious, lovingly prepared food and drinks. Upstairs is a center providing a U.K.-accredited training scheme to adults aged 14 plus, who also spend time in the café preparing food and serving customers to gain skills for the workplace.

I arrive at Steps with Theera on a humid Friday morning. It's a calm, light space, all greens and greys, with fresh flowers and pale wooden furniture. Max welcomes me warmly, mop in hand. She's tired after a late night and an early morning for a fundraising event the night before. It was worth it though – the money raised will go towards expansion of the Steps with Theera program.

"Bangkok was never the intention. We just kind of found each other," says Max when I ask her how she ended up in this city, thousands of miles from where she grew up in Manchester, England. During a six-month trip to Southeast Asia, she saw a job advertised at an international special needs school in Bangkok. She applied on a whim, having previously trained in special needs. She was interviewed and offered the job, suddenly finding herself with two days to find somewhere to live in the city.

"It was the best decision ever," she grins. "I

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Max Simpson



Theera Hotrakitya and Max Simpson



Theera Hotrakitya



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mean, when I first got here it was scary. Super, super scary. I was in the supermarket with two friends I was traveling with and we were buying stuff for the flat and it suddenly hit me – oh my God I live here, what am I doing?! But it's easy to fall in love with Bangkok. I like how you can walk down the street and go past a slum, and then there's a Starbucks, and then a market. It's an interesting mix."

Max started taking her older students for work experience at Theera, Bangkok's first gluten-free café down the road. Theera (nicknamed Uang), whose son was at Max's school, opened the café due to her son's gluten allergy, a common condition in people with autism.

"Because Uang's son has autism, she was really into what I was trying to do. He is only nine, but she's well aware that when he is older, there are no options for him."

What Uang didn't realize was that Max had bigger plans outside work experience at the café. It wasn't until they got together that she revealed her idea for a café-come-training center. Uang worried about funding, but Max was insistent. She quit her job and they started crowdfunding. "Everywhere I was going and talking to people about it they were like yes, yes yes. The support was there. So it didn't feel like we were doing something crazy; it felt like it was needed."

Max checks her watch – soon she has to accompany Nicky, a 20-year-old trainee, to his coding class. Nicky tells me that, along with coding and working the café, he produces the Steps with Theera blog and newsletter, and manages Instagram. So trainees aren't just here to learn how to be baristas then? "No," says Max:

"It would be a lot simpler for me to train them just to serve coffee. But if they don't want to do that, why should they have to? That's typically what happens in Thailand; with arts and crafts, they make things and sell them in the community. It's great to involve them but it's not really what they're passionate about. Nobody's ever asked them what they're passionate about."

Instead Max has set about forging links with local businesses, eight of which have signed up so far to be trained on how best to employ people with special needs. When the trainees complete the Steps program, these businesses will offer them work, ranging from hospitality and catering industries to woodworking, office staff, designers and architects. "I'm trying to create a really diverse mix so these guys have the opportunity to go into the field that they want, and not pigeonhole them," says Max.

Nicky appears again, ready for his coding class. Max apologizes to me and sets about ordering him



WHEN THE TRAINEES COMPLETE THE STEPS PROGRAM, THESE BUSINESSES WILL OFFER THEM WORK, RANGING FROM HOSPITALITY AND CATERING INDUSTRIES TO WOODWORKING, OFFICE STAFF, DESIGNERS AND ARCHITECTS.



an Uber. She decides not to accompany him after all. Instead this could be a milestone for Nicky – his first lone taxi journey. Uang calls the Uber driver to give specific instructions. It arrives and both Max and Uang go out to ensure Nicky gets safely on his way. When Max returns I can see she's both nervous and happy. If there are any mishaps on the journey, it's hard to predict how Nicky will cope with it.

I ask her: "What's been your proudest moment so far?" She ponders this but we're interrupted by a morning rush of customers, most of whom she greets by name. I'm handed a delicious passion fruit tea, and I think about how impressive Max and Uang's achievements are, not just in terms of the trainees, but the friendly atmosphere of the café, the décor, and the quality of the food and drink. This is, of course, all part of their vision.

"The reason I wanted to make this place look the way it does is because the trainees walk in with a sense of pride that they are going to work, and this is where they work. They deserve that. I didn't want a cheap, under-budget kind of place because it's not going to make them feel good about themselves. They think it's cool, so that makes them want to come here and it makes the local community want to come here. People come for coffee or lunch and they learn a little bit about what we're doing, and then they go away and the effect is so positive. So many people have offered to help."

Now that the café is finished and buzzing, the trainees are progressing, local schools and the local community are engaged, and businesses are on board, what is next for Steps with Theera? "We're working with the Thai Special

Olympics," Max tells me. "We're looking to expand the Steps with Theera program into government schools across the country." I'm struck once more by her dedication to transforming the situation of people with special needs in Thailand.

As we're winding up the interview, Max's phone goes off. She opens it to reveal a series of photos from Nicky, including the Uber driver, the road outside, and a selfie of him beaming from the excitement of the adventure. He's made it to his destination safely. Max looks up at me from her phone, misty-eyed and with a huge smile.

"You know you asked me what my proudest moment so far has been? Well I think this might be it."

Find out more at www.stepswiththeera.com ■

LIFE AS AN EXPAT IN SPAIN'S VALENCIAN COMMUNITY

BY AMALIA MALONEY DEL RIEGO

How do I tell you about expat life in Spain's Valencia Community? Hmm... well, first things first; let's get ourselves a *copa de vino tinto* (glass of red wine). Now we're set. Years ago when I heard about Valencia, Spain, what came to mind were images of juicy oranges, sailing on Mediterranean turquoise waters, and a charming historical center in the city. After living here for almost two years, I can still say every day that life is not far different from that. If anything, it's all of those things and more that are part of an expat life in Spain's Valencian Community.

When We Hear 'Valencia'
There's more to the name Valencia than just being the third largest city in Spain and the capital of its region. It's also one of the various regions that make up Spain and is known as the Valencian Community. In Castilian it is referred to as *Comunidad Valenciana* and in Valenciana, the *Comunitat Valenciana*.

Like most regions in Spain, the Valencian Community has its own language, Valenciana. It's very integrated into the culture here and is especially used in government and education sectors. It has similarities to Castilian, yet is more similar to Catalan and French.

Great Location
Valencia's great accessibility was a big factor for us in choosing this area, not only for exploring Spain but also for getting around Europe and traveling the world. From the city of Valencia, getting to Madrid is a pleasant train ride of 1.5 - 2 hours and to Barcelona, a beautiful train ride along the coast in as little as 3 - 4 hours. There are also international airports in the region, in Valencia city and in Alicante.

We used to love living in the city, yet Valencia's beach town of Denia changed our mind about that. As much as we love Valencia city and had a great time living there, in Denia we can live in a house right on the beach. The city of Valencia is still only a 1-hour drive



Denia Marina

away or easily reached by bus. From our house in Denia, we're within pleasant walking distance into the town's historic center and its picturesque castle overlooking the sea.

Finding Your Castle by the Sea
The ancient, historic fishing village of Denia has everything we were dreaming of, even the castle right by the sea! Denia's castle is perched on a small hill that rises up in the center of the town and right on the sea's edge. There are two newer Marinas here – perfect for our desire to sail more – and one of them is the world headquarters for the Balearia Ferry company. It's now one of the main ports for getting to the islands of Ibiza and Formentera.

Other distinct architectural features in the Valencia Community are the indigo-blue Spanish tiles on churches, the Spanish classic casitas and row homes of white stucco walls and red Spanish-tiled roofs, and the distinct influence of Arabic design from when the Moors inhabited this area.

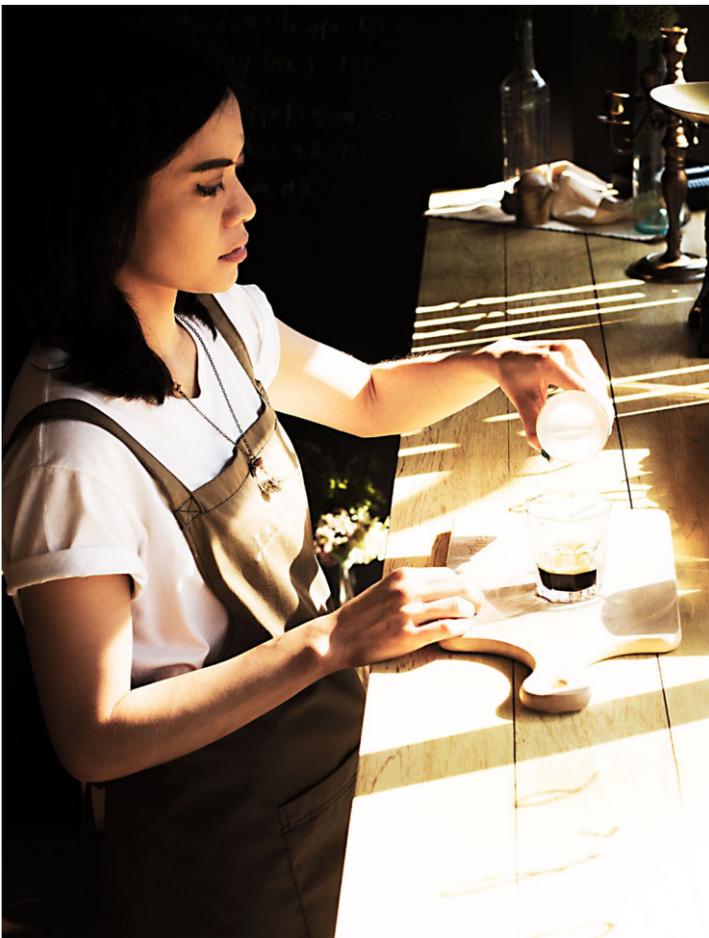


Denia



Denia church

WE STILL GASP IN DELIGHT AT THE HIGH QUALITY OF LIVING HERE FOR SUCH LOW COSTS.



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