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BEYOND *our* BORDERS

Among the Masses

A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

BY ASHLEIGH BURNETT



I sat on a plane en route to Detroit. My pants were trickled with tears, and I looked a wreck. My conscience incessantly reminded me, *There's no going back for 12 months—no home, no family, no Taco Bell.* My destination was Bangkok, Thailand. It is a place where I learned that we are all but one in the same, searching for love and desiring acceptance from even the most unlikely persons.

I arrived at the airport in Bangkok with a nervousness of spirit because the unexpected lay before me. I stood, luggage in tow, quite aware of the title seemingly tacked on my forehead: "White American." Apparently, enough foreigners have stepped foot in the airport for the locals to learn a few key phrases.

"Taxi, taxi!"

"Where you go?"

"Need hotel? Very cheap, Miss!"

They took pride in their broken English and said each phrase with such vigor that I almost gave in. I shook my head and walked away in quiet defiance to their calls, pretending that needing a place to stay was the least of my worries.

I felt all eyes on me. Naturally, I checked my hair. Maybe it was disheveled from sleeping in the plane. I checked my teeth. Maybe my smile exposed the complimentary airline peanuts stuck in my teeth. None of the above was a culprit, but I began to notice a common denominator—being stared at happened everywhere I went in Asia.

They thought their stares were inconspicuous, when they were really the least unobtrusive thing they could have done. I remember one student asking me, "Teacher, why are you so white?" The fact is, there was nothing special about



In Thailand, Ashleigh Burnett says she "began to see all people as ones deeply loved by God and deserving of every happiness."



Through experiences shared with her Filipino family and others in Thailand, Ashleigh Burnett learned "we are all but one in the same, searching for love and desiring acceptance."

me in particular; getting stared at is a sort of rite of passage for every fair-skinned person who enters the country.

As an American, I was classified under a single category: tourist. I felt debased any time someone called me such a thing. Tourists carry video cameras and maps and cannot pronounce anything except for brand names. They wear flowery shirts and eat at buffets, and only travel in groups. I certainly did no such things, but I was an obvious spectacle nonetheless. This I learned to expect and eventually ignore. For as much as I desired the locals to adopt me as Thai, they conversely wanted to be like me.

For 12 months, I lived in a sea of faces much unlike my own, and I wanted to fit in. I tried hard to

learn the language and do as the locals, but it never seemed enough. I eventually stopped acting as if I belonged and tried simply being ... me. I found that to be true to self is to be universally respected. I began to see all people as ones deeply loved by God and deserving of every happiness. I learned that though the world is scattered with different people, one thing bonds us all, and that is our search for identity, and within the search itself, we are accepted.

Ashleigh Burnett is a journalism student at Andrews University. During the 2006–2007 school year, she took a year off school to serve as a student missionary in Thailand.