

WEEKENDER

Soccer team didn't fulfil their Eastern promise

AWAY THE LADS!



They were small, fit and fast, with hardly an ounce of flab between them.

We were dehydrated, hungover and suffering from a raucous night at Suki Wong's.

The match was to be played in the shade of an imposing temple. Perhaps a prayer there wouldn't have gone amiss.

The pitch was an unlikely mixture of sand, grit, tree roots and occasional clumps of grass. Most of the bricks had been removed.

A brass band boomed merrily away as hundreds of locals hooted with laughter whenever the big lads from the other side of the world slipped up. Which, as it transpired, was quite often.

Some, though, were a little miffed. Wasn't this Swindon Town, a velly good team from the Second Division?

Nine months earlier, and from a safe distance of several thousand miles, a soccer tour of the Far East had seemed an exciting proposition.

An 11 day trip with four games in eight days - more than most of us had played in as many years. We might even slip a few beers in.

Behind the escapade was freelance travel journalist Stewart Cruttenden, of Oak Drive, Highworth.

Said Stewart, 30, who specialises in the Far East: "They're soccer crazy in Thailand, but English teams never go out there. It seemed like a hell of an idea to get a team over from Swindon."

So it was arranged: The Wild Westerners tour of Thailand and Philippines. Hotels, airlines, the lot, all for under £600.



Eighteen players, or rather, a ragbag collection of drinking pals, former workmates and old schoolchums, virtually all from Swindon.

The kit? Well it had to be, didn't it - an exact replica of Swindon Town's famous red and white strip.

This was procured, some weeks before the tour, at a sports shop in the dingy backstreets of Bangkok.

Explained Stewart, a former Evening Advertiser journalist: "I asked them about providing an entire Swindon kit and the little man behind the counter almost burst with enthusiasm."

"Ah, Swindon Town, Lou Macari, promotion next year, yes," he beamed.

The kit, beautifully made and meticulously embellished with a hand woven Swindon Town badge, was purchased for a fiver each.

Football, though, seemed an appalling prospect as the weary and not so wild Westerners arrived in Bangkok after 18 hours in the air. The heat and humidity took our breath away. It was like walking into an oven.

The first game was in three days and our training, comprising enthusiastic tours of some of the less salubrious hostels in



town, was hardly out of the Don Howe coaching manual.

The side from British Club of Bangkok - embassy staff, communications experts, computer people etc - play every week. All we had managed was a couple of unpromising practice matches back home.

But the Westerners, fired with passion and Singer Beer drew 1-1 - a moral victory for a team who had mustered probably a few hours sleep between them over the previous three days.

"The British Club Of Bangkok Welcomes The Wild Westerners," blazed an enormous banner across the bar at the club's plush heart-of-the-city premises. A reception of civic proportions.

Pattaya, a busy seaside resort 100 miles from Bangkok, was the venue for the second match three days later.

It was early to bed that night - about 6am - for the big match with Pattaya Hotels, a lean, nippy soccer-mad bunch with hardly a decent beerbelly among them.

In front of hundreds of spectators, they came at us like ants, swarming into the goalmouth as if possessed.

In our snazzy kit, half of them thought we were Swindon Town before the kick off. A notion, alas, soon dispelled.

The first half was played in a heat wave, the second in a sandstorm topped off with fierce blast of tropical rain.

They beat us 2-0, another moral victory, we agreed, although you can only stretch these things so far.

Two days and a 1,000 or so miles later we were in Manila in the Philippines, a

lawless island rife with tales of gunfights and corruption, and where opulent apartment blocks rise from scenes of depressing squalor.

It was the monsoon season and against Manila Nomads - another expats side - we squelched hopelessly around in several inches of water. Frogs the size of rabbits hopped and croaked contentedly in a swamp masquerading as a football pitch. The floodlights were mere pinpricks in a black hole.

It was here that the inevitable happened - the Westerners divebombed.



Three of our best players were left behind at the hotel as the beleaguered squad, suffering from the heat, the nightlife and vast quantities of San Miguel beer, were narrowly defeated 5-0.

"Where's it gone?" grunted Pat The Cat Harrison, our formidable goalie, as the ball trickled viciously through his legs.

Even worse, there was another game in two days against Philippine Airlines, winners of a recent top notch cup competition.

Drained by the loss of salt, nigh on crippled and heavily bandaged from the wear and tear of too much hobbling after a damn silly ball, these once proud athletes now resembled extras from Night Of The Living Dead.

And the horror didn't end there as we were inched out of it 6-1 by a bunch of imish, darting fitness fanatics.

Under the conditions, we were later forced to agree, it was, well, a moral victory.