



PHOTOGRAPHER: CHANOK THAMMARAKKIT

## Desert Diva

Seven years ago, Sally Cowley moved to Thailand with her successful jewellery business, Desert Diamonds. She hasn't looked back since. **Bronwyn Ure** reports.

## Living in Thailand EXplores the EXpatriate EXperience

**A**ccording to the company mantra, Desert Diamonds is what women want. And on meeting Sally Cowley, she seems the kind of person most women would want to be. Not surprisingly then, the woman behind the successful name Desert Diamonds is the company's own best advertisement.

A down-to-earth Australian with an exploratory streak, Sally left sleepy Ferntree Gully in Victoria for vibrant Saudi Arabia in her early twenties. It was there she met her husband Richard, who at the time was working for Coca Cola Bahrain. They married and, along with starting a family, Sally started her own business making quality jewellery featuring simulated diamonds.

In the aftermath of 9/11, after fourteen years in the Middle East, Sally and her family decided to relocate. Sally describes their move to Thailand as a decision 'to follow their hearts'. Richard had long held a passion to apply his skills in Asia and Sally was already doing regular business with manufacturers in Bangkok (where she considered some of the world's best master craftsmen were found) thus Thailand seemed like the obvious choice. Their fate was sealed when Richard landing a plum job as Regional HR Leader for Kimberley Clark.

Seven years on, Sally and her family couldn't be happier. "We love the mix of local cultural nuances with Western influences," she enthuses. "The stimulation of the colours, smells and exotic foods; and the prevailing calm ... it's a blessing never to hear a car horn! I can enjoy being pampered on a daily basis here as it is so affordable, and of course we have our favourite hangout – Bed Supper Club."

Their reasons for loving Thailand are seemingly endless. As Sally continues, “Our kids are receiving an excellent education here. We also appreciate the availability and affordability of everyday services such as transport, medical services and living in general. There are exotic, beautiful locations right on our doorstep and still a load of other places our family has yet to discover.”

Of course, as with any big city, there are a few annoyances – traffic and pollution being the main ones. Sally, however, does not complain but only gives constructive suggestions. “For business, it would be great to have more support from the Thai government to allow local businesses to become more competitive on an international level,” she says, “for example more support with tax incentives, improved ease of setting up business and removal of constraints such as the Thai/foreigner ratio in companies.” Such detractions have often led to many foreigners to choose Singapore over Thailand for their business operations.

For the most part, Sally can't think of a better location to run her company. “Being in the jewellery business, it is exciting to work with some of the most highly skilled master craftsmen and creative goldsmiths in the world,” she notes. “I enjoy the luxury of being able to source high quality, affordable raw materials for our products right on my doorstep!” A successful leader gives credit where it is due, and Sally is no exception. “I appreciate the opportunity to work with locals. They've certainly taught me a lesson or two in being more *'jai yen'*. Their calming influence has proved to be just as important for achieving the right outcome,” she says with a sprinkle of humour.

As a business owner and employer, Sally is quick to praise her local staff. “Thai people are very self-sufficient and industrious,” she points out. “Given the minimal government hand-outs, there is a very strong work ethic and people will do any work to ensure food is placed on the table, and that their children are educated.”

Sally cites family as the one thing she misses most about Australia. “Having been gone for almost two decades now, the family on both sides have expanded and I also miss seeing my children build up relationships with them. My parents thrive on having their grandchildren around.” Indeed, the emphasis placed by Thais on family is something Sally relates to and admires. “In Thai society there is a real culture of caring, beyond the normal boundaries,” she notes. “Everyone looks after each other, including mother-in-law and distant cousin.”

Sally and her family keep a similar set of values, with the main priority being to spend any spare time with family. “Given my extremely busy work schedule, any rare opportunity for time off is filled with family and ‘me time’,” she says. “I love spending time with my husband and children watching a movie or going out to our favourite family restaurant, Crepes & Co. I also enjoy doing Pilates, catching up with girlfriends for lunch or winding down at a hip wine bar. I love being pampered, and I like to try something new and different.”

Like many locals and long-term expatriates, Sally and her family have established traditions for holiday time together. “For many years our favourite family spots have been Hua Hin and Phuket. I am, in some ways, a creature of habit – if I enjoy it somewhere, I like to go back again. It has been amazing to see the development in both places. While they are still idyllic locations, they are slowly becoming more commercial with high-rise developments and mega-malls. They are losing a little of their charm.”

Sally is resolute that the family's next permanent relocation will be to Perth, Western Australia. As Australia's hub for gemstone and precious metals, Perth seems like the obvious choice in many ways. “A few years ago we purchased a beautiful plot of land with a rather old house on it, overlooking the spectacular Indian Ocean. All we have to do now is build our dream home on it!” Sally already has family living in Perth, as well as many friends made during their years spent in the Middle East and Thailand.

“We love the Perth climate and the casual, outdoor lifestyle. It will give our children a chance to do healthy outdoor activities like bike riding or learning to surf.” It seems, though, that Sally will never really leave Thailand for long. “Perth is only a short flight from Asia, so we can easily come back to visit Thailand and our other favourite Asian destinations. For me, the convenience of the short flight back is perfect for overseeing my business.”

With a successful business and a happy and healthy family, Sally really does have what women want. And, she deserves it too. ●

