

PARKOUR, THE FRENCH FREE-RUNNING DISCIPLINE, HAS MADE ITS WAY TO BANGKOK. WE MEET THE MAN BEHIND THE MOVEMENT

Words Elly Earls
Photos Brent Lewin



l An art form. A physical discipline. A state of mind. Parkour. Free running. *L'art du déplacement*. It goes by many names and by its very nature resists definition. But at its core there is one constant: movement. And the parkour movement has most definitely arrived in South-East Asia.

Established in the 1980s in a small suburb of Paris, parkour, with its seemingly death-defying leaps and conspicuous lack of safety equipment, is still seen by many – including the French authorities – as a “sport” only slightly removed from breaking and entering or vandalism.

But this view of parkour couldn't be further from the truth. “The French authorities didn't portray us as people who have energy and wanted to do something instead of nothing, who created something that's good for the body and can help others,” says Stephane Vigroux, who has been involved with parkour from the beginning and is now in charge of establishing a Thailand branch of Parkour Generations, the world's largest free-running community. Nor have the cynics acknowledged that parkour demands rigorous training, which reveals to its

And it's that freedom that helps make parkour so appealing. Indeed, from the moment Vigroux discovered parkour – created on the streets, bollards and rooftops of suburban Paris by founding fathers David Belle and Sébastien Foucan – there was no going back. “Since that day, I've just kept training,” he says with a laugh. But Vigroux and his fellow enthusiasts have gone far beyond practising their craft. “Over the past five to eight years we've been trying to educate people about what parkour is,” he continues. “We've been developing a set of standards for the sport – methods of training, safe methods of teaching and qualifications for teaching, so people now look at it as a real discipline.”

This has all been achieved through Parkour Generations, which was established in 2007 and has become the world's largest collective of free-running practitioners. It offers teaching through the Parkour Generations Academy, media production for films, TV series and advertising campaigns, live performances and the ADAPT Parkour certification programme. It's an enviable record of achievement but the brains behind the organisation



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practitioners their physical and mental limits and simultaneously offers them a means to surpass them. It's not just about leaping from building to building. In fact, parkour can be just about anything you want it to be.

“It's a physical activity, a way to train your mind and an art form,” Vigroux says. “The very physical definition is that parkour helps you find a way to get over obstacles, using your body as a tool. But it's also a way to train your mind, to be stronger mentally and more confident. Parkour is about facing obstacles and getting into the habit of finding solutions to them. Finally, it's an art form, in the sense that people express themselves through movement. It's a way to release energy, expression and emotions.”

For some, just one of these aspects of the discipline is enough. For others, embracing all three has resulted not only in better fitness but also in a much-improved overall quality of life. “It's down to everyone's interests and motivations,” Vigroux says.

to train your mind; an art form”

aren't the type to rest on their laurels. Having conquered Europe and America, the world's premier community of free runners decided it was time the East got a taste of the action. Enter Parkour Generations Asia.

Based in Bangkok and currently focused on promoting an understanding of the discipline in Thailand, Parkour Generations Asia's ultimate aim is to become the nerve centre for free running in Asia.

So why start in Thailand? “Personal choice,” Vigroux admits. “I've been travelling to Thailand for 15-20 years and I've always loved the country and wanted to live here. It just made sense. Bangkok is also a great hub as it's close to Singapore, China, India and Japan, where parkour is much more developed.”

If the uptake since Parkour Generations Asia was established early this year is anything to go by, Thailand will not be lagging behind for long. “We've currently got three partners at Parkour Generations Asia but we're looking to fly another guy out to help us because we've got too many classes and we can't be everywhere at

once!” Vigroux says. “We’re also looking to expand by employing more Thai people, but this will take time.” Currently there are two strings to Parkour Generations Asia’s fast-expanding bow: teaching and entertainment. While providing free-running talent, including actors, stunt people, choreographers and models for films, TV and advertising campaigns is one source of revenue for the team, education is the primary focus for Vigroux and his Bangkok-based team.

Besides conducting lessons at four international schools here, including St Andrews – the first school to open its doors to free running – the Parkour Generations Academy offers outdoor classes at Benjakiti Queen Sirikit Park and indoor classes at Studio by FIT in Ploenchit, where the specialised equipment includes vault boxes, beams and scaffolding designed by the Parkour Generations team. And it’s going down a storm. “So far, the response we’ve had here in Asia from the international community has been extremely positive,” Vigroux says. “Particularly kids from international schools and ‘Hi-So’ Thai people, who have travelled or studied abroad



“It’s about you and your fear”

and understand the benefits of parkour. It’s the kids that are the easiest to convince. But we’re getting great feedback from teachers too. They’re all coming back and telling us how excited the kids are about parkour. They’re bored with the traditional activities and want something different and fun. Parkour is a fun way to exercise. It involves challenges and games and you need a childish mindset, too.”

The team spirit that’s so evident at Parkour Generations is another reason the discipline has become so popular worldwide. “It’s not a competitive sport. It’s about you and your fear, your choice. It’s about challenging yourself,” Vigroux says. “But it’s also about being better together.”

“Compete” is derived from the Latin word *competere*, which originally meant “come together” but in later Latin became “strive together”. It is this definition of the term that the Parkour Generations team lives by. “We don’t have levels, like you have the black belt for karate. In parkour, we prefer to keep it open,” Vigroux

says. “We hang out as a group and evolve together and we like this idea much more than a set of levels.” Vigroux aims to spread this spirit of togetherness throughout Asia as the free-running community develops. “We hope to offer parkour resources and knowledge for the whole continent, including lots of different clubs and communities, workshops, seminars and events, the same way we do in the UK and the US,” he says. “It’s all about linking up with the community. Parkour is spreading across the world – there’s a lot of demand – but people don’t know how to train or what to do. That’s where we come in.”

In the UK, parkour really started to take off in 2003 following the airing on primetime TV of the free-running documentary *Jump London*. “They portrayed us as artists, as guys following a strong desire to build something really cool, and that completely changed the perception of parkour,” Vigroux says. Though it’s still early days for the discipline in Asia, there’s no reason that parkour can’t instill this perception here from the get-go. That’s certainly what Vigroux and his team of parkour practitioners have set out to achieve. And what better time to get involved than at the outset? 📍

! To find out more about Parkour Generations, visit facebook.com/parkourgenerationsasia or email the team at asia@parkourgenerations.com



กิจกรรมพาร์คัวร์ (Parkour) ที่เริ่มเป็นที่นิยมในแถบเอเชียอาคเนย์ เป็นที่รู้จักในชื่ออื่นๆ เช่น Free-Running หรือ L'art du déplacement หรือ The art of movement ไม่ว่าจะเรียกชื่ออย่างไร ก็หมายความว่าถึงกิจกรรมที่เน้นการเคลื่อนไหว และนับเป็นกิจกรรมที่ต้องใช้พลังกำลังทั้งทางกายและใจเป็นอย่างมาก

พาร์คัวร์กำเนิดขึ้น ณ เมืองเล็ก ๆ ทางใกล้กรุงปารีส และแม้ว่าจะเป็นกิจกรรมที่แสนอันตราย ทว่าตำรวจฝรั่งเศสก็ยังเห็นพาร์คัวร์เป็นการเล่นสำหรับเด็กชอบเสี่ยงตาย หรือพวกชอบก่อความวุ่นวาย คุณสเตฟาน ไวกูราซ์ เป็นหนึ่งในบุคคลแรกที่เริ่มเล่นกิจกรรมผาดโผนนี้ ทั้งยังเป็นผู้ร่วมก่อตั้ง Parkour Generations ในประเทศไทย เขากล่าวว่า ตำรวจฝรั่งเศส ไม่ได้เห็นพวกเขาเป็นพวกที่มีประโยชน์ หรือมีแรงกายแรงใจจะทำสิ่งดีๆ เท่าไหร่ ทว่าความเป็นจริงนั้น การเล่นพาร์คัวร์ต้องผ่านการฝึกหัดเป็นอย่างดี ไม่ใช่แค่การกระโดดไปตามตึกเท่านั้น เป็นกิจกรรมที่ช่วยฝึกจิตใจให้เข้มแข็งและมีความมั่นใจมากขึ้น หลักของพาร์คัวร์ คือการเผชิญหน้ากับอุปสรรค และการค้นหาทางออกให้กับปัญหาต่างๆ นับได้ว่าเป็นศิลปะอย่างหนึ่งที่ใช้ร่างกายเป็นสื่อในการแสดงอารมณ์

Parkour Generations ที่ก่อตั้งขึ้นเมื่อปี ค.ศ. 2007 ได้กลายเป็นแหล่งรวมผู้เล่นพาร์คัวร์ที่ใหญ่ที่สุดในโลก มีการจัดสอนผ่านโรงเรียน Parkour Generation Academy การถ่ายทำพาร์คัวร์เพื่อภาพยนตร์หรือโฆษณา ไปจนถึงการแสดงสด ส่วน Parkour Generations ในประเทศไทยนั้น เน้นเรื่องการทำความเข้าใจกิจกรรมพาร์คัวร์ในประเทศไทยเป็นหลัก และมีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อเป็นศูนย์กลางของพาร์คัวร์ในทวีปเอเชีย ปัจจุบัน พาร์คัวร์ ได้รับการตอบรับอย่างมาก โดยเฉพาะจากชาวต่างชาติที่อาศัยอยู่ในเอเชีย หรือเด็ก ๆ จากโรงเรียนนานาชาติ ที่ได้รับการสอนพาร์คัวร์ เพราะเป็นกิจกรรมการออกกำลังกายที่สนุกสนาน ไม่ใช่ซ้ำจำเจ ไม่มีการแข่งขันเอาชนะกับใคร นอกจากตัวเองและความกลัวของตัวเองเท่านั้น