

November 1998

Cheryll and I arrived in Bangkok after 32 hours of travelling. We took a cab to our hotel and then a short walk to the river. I noticed during the cab ride that the speedometer was not working (probably disconnected to keep the odometer from accumulating miles; throughout our trip, 90% of the speedometers were inoperative). The walk was a cultural experience. The Thais apparently don't feel a need for crosswalks. Crossing a busy street seems to be a test of wills. Who will stop first? The car or the pedestrian? Bangkok is a polluted, noisy, crowded place where everyone is in a hurry. Many people were wearing surgical masks to filter out some of the pollution. We took a ferry ride up the river to the center of town and then decided to see some of the sights. We were reading our tour book when a nicely dressed Thai gentleman approached and asked if he could help. We said no; we were on our way to look at the palace. He said we were out of luck. It was Buddha's day and they were closed. We said we might just take the ferry back. He said on Saturday the ferries stopped running early. Instead, he showed us on our map a wat (Buddhist Temple) which was open only one day each year. Nearby was a factory where we could see some local craftsmen. We said we weren't interested in the factory (drivers get a commission on what you buy and prices are increased accordingly), but the wat sounded interesting. He suggested we take a tuk-tuk (three-wheeled motorcycle taxi) for 20 baht (50 cents) and hailed one for us. The tuk-tuk driver drove for about 3 miles when it seemed to me that it should only be 1 mile distant, but we finally arrived at the wat. I paid him and we went to look at this small temple under construction. It was disappointing. We looked it up in our tour book and found that it was not only unimportant, but also open 365 days/year. The tuk-tuk driver had waited for us and I asked to be taken back where we came from. He said he would take us to the factory instead. I said no and we started walking. We were lost, but we had a map and headed in the general direction. During the walk, we were approached by other tuk-tuk drivers volunteering to show us factories. We made it back to near where we started when we were approached by a man who identified himself as a school teacher and he asked "Could he help us?" We ignored him and walked back to the ferry pier where the ferry was, in fact, still running and went back to our hotel.

The lesson we learned, I am sorry to say, is to trust Thai people as far as you can throw them. It seemed like everybody is cheating everybody. If a Thai person says "yes" (they seldom say "no") it means one of three things; 1) yes, 2) I don't understand your question, but I'm going to smile knowingly and nod my head, or most likely 3) I'm saying yes because that's the answer you want to hear. It was frustrating to figure out what they really meant.

The next morning we chartered a long tail boat for a trip through the klongs (canals) around Bangkok. A long tail is a unique Thai experience. A 40-foot long, 4-foot wide wooden boat has an automobile engine mounted high on a pivot in the back. A steering tiller is attached to the engine. Hoses are draped over the side for cooling water and a 20-foot shaft is coupled to the engine, which turns the unguarded propeller. There are no emission controls or mufflers. The cooling fan on the engine is also unguarded and ready to amputate fingers of any less than careful operator. Steering is done by turning the entire assembly on its pivot. Pushing down on the steering tiller lifts the spinning propeller out of the water and acts as "neutral". The operator tried to charge us twice the price we had negotiated, but relented when we started to get out of the boat. Life on the canals was interesting. Many houses were built on stilts. We were taken to a "special" shop on one of the canals and to a "snake farm" where the driver asked us to pay for his admission (we refused). We didn't see much farming, but we did see snakes being tormented for the enjoyment of the tourists. The driver stopped the boat to ask for a tip before we were returned to the pier.

In the afternoon we visited two of the emperor's palaces and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. These were beautiful places not to be missed. In the evening we went to a dinner theater for an uninspiring Thai dinner and classical dance show. Cheryll was fascinated by the dancers' ability to bend their fingers backwards.

On Monday we took a tour to the former capital of Ayutthaya. Our guide was a former street hawker and former Buddhist monk. He taught us much about Buddhism and Thai life. Public school lasts only six years and few families can afford the tuition after that. One of the couples on the tour was a 50ish British tourist and a 20ish Thai girl. We believe she was his "employee" for the week. We saw many similar "couples" during our

stay. We took a boat ride on the Chao Phayra River for about 40 miles. The river is dirty and lined with houses built on stilts over the river. (The typical Asian toilet is a hole in the floor). We wouldn't want to dip a toe in that river, but people were bathing, washing clothes and dishes and brushing their teeth.

In the evening we went to the Patong Night Market. People set up stalls and sell food, watches, clothes, souvenirs, etc. The Night Market is co-located with the red-light District. While Cheryll and I shopped together, barkers had no qualms about approaching me with graphic descriptions of the sights to behold in their establishments with no cover charge. I never found out what a "Ping-Pong Show" was.

On Tuesday we flew 500 miles north to Chiang Mai in the northern hill country. We had more difficulty with a disreputable driver, but we got to see the area known as the "Golden Triangle". This is on the Mekong river where Thailand, Burma (Myanmar) and Laos meet. We took a short walk in Burma which is even poorer than Thailand. Handguns and some more serious looking weapons were openly for sale on the street. This is prime drug smuggling area. The hills are supposed to be covered with poppies. We took a boat ride (for four times the price quoted) on the Mekong River and stopped for a beer at a beautiful little island in Laos. The Laotian customs officer took 20 baht each, but didn't care to see our passports. We watched some small Chinese freighters nudged into the shore being unloaded by hand. We didn't inquire as to the cargo. The Golden Triangle is also rice-growing territory. Growing rice is tremendously hard work. We also visited some hill tribe villages where people scratch out a living and reside in huts.

In the evening we went to the Chiang Mai Night Market and I ordered some custom-made cotton dress shirts for about \$22 each. The next day I was experiencing intestinal difficulties (we learned on the flight home that in spite of being careful, almost everyone does). Cheryll made the best of the day by shopping, shopping some more, and then she went shopping. It was Thanksgiving, but there was no football on TV and no turkey dinner, although there was a KFC nearby. All in all, the food was uninspiring. The Thai people don't seem to believe in cooking food and then eating it. They believe in cooking it, putting it in a pile, letting it age and then eating it whenever. I lost three pounds.

On Friday, we traveled 900 miles south to the highly rated beach resort of Phuket. We can't support the ratings because it is a crowded, noisy, dirty, little city. It reminded us of Acapulco. The worst of the country was evident in the local lifestyle. There is a bar in town called (I am not making this up) "Uncle Charlie's Boys for Men". When you walk on the beach you can see people enjoying romances apparently started at Uncle Charlie's as 14-year-old Thai boys cling to 50 and 60-year-old white men. There must have been a lot of pedophiles doing the resort rankings. While prostitution is technically illegal, the only government response we observed was a sign on the way into town reminding you to use a condom. The next time we hear that some group is boycotting a particular brand of tennis shoes or a line of clothing because children are used in the factories, we'll pause to consider; the country can only afford six years of education. With Uncle Charlie around, perhaps a job making tennis shoes is the best alternative for the twelve-year-old graduate.

We did enjoy a boat trip to James Bond Island. There are a string of incredible limestone islands nearby and we had a beautiful sunny day for it. They filmed "The Man with the Golden Gun" here.

It took 33 hours to get home and a few days to get over the jet lag. The scenery was beautiful and the history fascinating, but we think we've been cured of the need to revisit Asia and particularly Thailand in the near future.

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