

## A Travelogue of Thailand

by Nathan Bruinooge

**E**arly Sunday morning, Suanna and I set out for National Airport, anticipating a short flight to Detroit followed by a very long one to Tokyo, and from there to Bangkok. It's odd, then, that the first image from our vacation is of the two of us walking down the streets of Amsterdam, in matching blue polar fleeces with AMSTERDAM written across them in big letters.

This was all made possible thanks to the discontinuation of our Detroit flight, something we should have caught when we called to confirm it, which we didn't do. I always thought confirming flights was something only called for in less civilized countries, or ones with less reputable airlines – the sort of thing you do three times if you fly Nigerian Airways. The guy at the Northwest desk rerouted us the other way around the world, through Amsterdam to Bangkok, arriving twelve hours later than planned thanks in large part to an eleven-hour layover in The Netherlands. At dawn on December twenty-third, we descended through an inky orange sky toward Schipol Airport.

We couldn't imagine spending the whole day at the airport. The polar fleeces were a necessity because, of course, we hadn't packed any coats at all. We picked the cheapest warm-clothing option in the whole retail area of the airport, and if they made us look like totally clueless tourists, we couldn't really complain, because we were. We took the train to Centraal Station and strolled out with no clue of where to go or what to see.

So we went to Anne Frank Haus and took the tour, which was nice. Downtown Amsterdam is full of coffee shops, but as far as I could tell none of them actually serve coffee. Without exception they have signs in front of them that say "NO HARD DRUGS" and "NO ONE UNDER 18 ADMITTED." And the people? There's an easy recipe for that. Take the faculty and student body of Calvin College. Add the entire audience of a typical Phish concert. Mingle. Voila! Amsterdam.

Our Amsterdam-Bangkok flight was populated, for the most part, by a throng of uniformed teenagers attending the World Scout Jamboree in Chonburi, Thailand. Like the Boy Scouts, the World Scouts put great stock in ridiculous uniforms involving the misapplication of scarves. It turns out that the kid who plays Harry Potter is a World Scout and was attending the Jamboree, where he just wanted "to be an ordinary scout, no one special," according to the Bangkok newspapers.

On our plane, the Swiss scouts starting singing a campfire song together about how "We can kick the asses of the Hungarian scouts," or something to that effect (my French is rusty). The Hungarians, the other World Scout contingent on the plane, responded half-heartedly with songs of their own, but really, their scarves practically had *frills* on them. There was no way they were going to come out ahead.

**A**s Thailand became visible below us, I wrote "looks like Florida" in my notebook. Minutes later, we were there. According to the Lonely Planet guide, its name, roughly translated, is "The Great City of Angels, Repository of Divine Gems, Great Land Inconquerable, Grand and Prominent Realm, Royal and Delightful Capital City Full of Nine Noble Gems, Highest Royal Dwelling and Grand Palace, Divine Shelter and Living Place of Reincarnated Spirits." "Bangkok," for short. Each exit from the airport was

jam-packed with a throng of people holding signs in Thai and English waiting to pick up other people. Fortunately, picking out my sister Sarah among them was very, very easy. She is tall, she has vast quantities of curly red hair, and at that moment she was bouncing up and down.

### **A Few Words About Sarah**

About three years ago now, my sister went to Bangkok to do volunteer work. Before long she decided she wanted to stick around, and got a job teaching kindergartners at an English-language international school. Unlike most of the foreigners who call Thailand home, she has taken time and considerable effort to learn Thai. Now she's conversational in it, if not quite fluent, and her closest friends in Bangkok are all Thai. Everyone who has visited her there – friends, my sister Kate, my parents – all came back talking about how visiting Thailand was a must, especially while Sarah was still there. Inevitably the phrase “great tour guide” came up each time, but calling her a tour guide is like calling Ian McKellan a gifted public speaker – it's probably true, but the fact is only an incidental result of his real talent. What Sarah is is much bigger.

This precedes Thailand, of course. Among the people who know Sarah, there's her family, her friends, and then there's the people who want to be her friend. It's not just that she fails to inspire animosity – she generates happiness. Her sheer presence will do the job in a pinch, but when you throw in her boundless energy, her laugh, her open spirit – words are failing here – you can begin to get the picture.

Now take that notion of her and put it in Bangkok, where no one expects a word of Thai out of her. But then she speaks – directions to a cabbie, negotiations with a lady selling fabric, a question for someone on the street – and their jaws drop. Their eyes light up. They smile. Who *is* this red-headed foreigner? Reading about Thailand, you keep hearing about how friendly and open and good-spirited the people are. Maybe that's boilerplate for all travel guides. I found Bangkok, at least, pretty average as big cities go in terms of friendliness and good-spiritedness, but with Sarah around you got a sense that the travel guides were only skimming the surface. She is largely unconscious (or at least unself-conscious) of the effect she has on people, of the tinge of joy that laces her friends' voices when they say “Salaah.” She learned all her early Thai working and living among AIDS orphans, so her words are unschooled and laced with slang. People tell her she speaks Thai like a teenager, which no doubt only adds to her charm.

We rolled in around noon, and went straight for our first dose of real Thai food at a restaurant near Sarah's apartment. Then it was off to get tickets for the Bangkok premiere of *The Two Towers* the next day.

My first of many episodes of cognitive dissonance came in the mall, where we sat down to chat at a little coffee shop by the movie theatre. I sipped a hazelnut cappuccino in one of the comfy chairs in the back, while Scott Bakula fought back tears in some HBO movie playing in the corner. Nothing I could see could rule us out of being in Fairfax, or Kentwood, or Boise – except for the fact that everyone except us was Thai. I got the sense that whatever city it might have been in 1998, Bangkok was something else

again now, and that the changes – new malls, an ultramodern skytrain – weren't what you would expect, given the implosion of Southeast Asian economies in 1997.

That night, we went to a dock outside one of the glitzy malls on the Chao Praya river for a dinner cruise. We were joined by Oui, a Thai teacher at Sarah's school, and her closest friend in Thailand.

### A Few Words about Oui

You say it "OO-ee." To people who know my sister I've described Oui as "the Thai Sarah," though that doesn't quite hit the mark. It's certainly true that listening to them talk on the phone, sliding between Thai and English, it's clear that they are communicating at a level beyond language, thanks to some sort of deep-seated commonality between them – some shared pieces of personality and perspective that effortlessly transcend language. Oui seems almost American in her demeanor – maybe it's Sarah's influence, or maybe it's the reason they were drawn to each other in the first place. Of course they don't look anything like, and they differ in some key ways. Oui, for example, is much more active in her pursuit of the opposite sex. For her, it represents a noble avocation. She gets crushes on bartenders. She blows a kiss to the picture of my brother Colin on Sarah's refrigerator whenever she passes it, because she thinks he's dreamy. But if it's obvious that the two of them aren't mirror images, it's at least the case that they were meant to run into each other in Thailand, by hook or by crook. It took a couple years, but something as inexorable as the law of gravity demanded that they eventually collide.

The four of us settled in at a table on the cruise boat, near the buffet. Two televisions constantly played tapes of America's Funniest Home Videos, without the sound. The entertainment for the cruise consisted of a band up top playing Sinatra covers, trading off with the emcee and his lovely assistant. He wore a Santa jacket and hat and carried a saxophone; she wore a Santa skirt that requires a word smaller than "mini" to accurately categorize. They both sang, and he occasionally played the sax, all with canned music accompanying them on tinny speakers.

There were quite a few families on the cruise, so at one point the Santa Duo gathered all the kids in the other room for a number of raucous games, including an egg roll. Both of them were miked, so their voices carried throughout the boat. At the height of the egg roll, therefore, this is what everybody heard Santa's lovely assistant crying: "Push it! Push it! Yes, push it! Ahhooo! Yes! Push it! No touching! No touching! Push it! No touching no touching no touching! Yes!"

We went atop decks after dinner, to get a better view of all the lovely architecture alongside the river. The fancy hotels and occasionally avant-garde office buildings weren't the point, of course. Nor was the newest bridge over the river, whose supporting cables were arranged in the shape of a lotus. It was the wats. A *wat* is a Thai Buddhist temple, characterized often by its *chedi* on top – a bell-shaped spire, traditionally used to house a Buddha image or the remains of a king. Neither word really gets at the stately beauty of the things themselves. All the wats were lit, as were the lavish buildings of the Grand Palace. You could tell even from a distance the *chedis* were intricately detailed in a way that reminded me – in texture if not in shape – of Gaudi's work in Barcelona. Our boat shared the river with other

dinner cruises, crowded water taxis, and once in a while a small fishing junk moving like a shadow in the darkness, visible only by the mulled glow of a single red lantern.

At one point the band started playing “Can’t Take My Eyes Off of You” – the singer’s voice might as well have been Frankie Valley’s. Folks started smiling, singing along, tapping their feet, and swaying, Oui included. Every single Thai person on that ship was grooving to it. Oui explained that it was Thailand’s second national anthem – after the king’s anthem, of course – the one that everybody knows, that’s played every night at every bar in the land. (Third place, according to her, is “I Will Survive.” She hadn’t heard the Cake version, though.)

I suppose if you’re thinking about the homogenization of the ways of the world under the looming umbrella of American pop culture, moments like that are foreboding. But at the time, and in retrospect, it inspired delight – partly just for the sheer incongruity of it, partly for the universal joy of people moving to music, but mainly for the connection, across race, across language. I’ll never listen to that song the same way again.

Sarah officially declared us “troopers” after the cruise, because we were still up for hitting a bar afterwards, jetlag be damned. The Gagging Bar, one of their regular haunts, wasn’t far from her apartment. The bartender wasn’t the one Oui had a crush on, but was friendly nonetheless, lavishing what were clearly two of his favorite women with special drinks. “Will you sing for us again?” he asked Sarah. She had made quite an impression singing along to Thai pop songs with the karaoke machine the last time she was there. As far as I could tell, Thai people don’t actually listen to Thai pop – just my sister. Eventually, jetlag did start creeping up on Suanna and I, and we turned back in at the apartment, leaving Sarah and Oui to party away into the wee hours.

## Christmas

**B**uddhism spread like wildfire through Southeast Asia in the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C., and its hold in Thailand hasn’t loosened in all these years. The closest the country came to being Christianized was probably in 1685, when Constantine Phaulkon rose to power. He served me as a constant reminder of an important fact: that the peculiar Thai way of embracing outside cultures while somehow maintaining their own essential quality wasn’t some new information-age development, but a quality as old as the hills.

The Kingdom of Siam carved a place for itself between the Khmers on the right and the Burmese on the left. Around the time European explorers and then traders started arriving in earnest, it must have been one of the most wealthy and glorious places on earth. Ayuthaya, the capital, was already a truly cosmopolitan city, brimming with Persian merchants, Chinese bureaucrats, and Mon and Lao footsoldiers and slaves. Portuguese mercenaries and French Jesuits only added to the mix. Phaulkon, though, was a Greek agnostic – a former traveler and adventurer married to a Japanese Christian. He gained influence with the royal family, eventually becoming *matathai* – a close advisor something along the lines of a vizier. The Jesuits managed to convert him to Catholicism, and he set upon a grand project to convert the Thai elite – then, as now, ethnically Thai-Chinese – from Buddhism to Christianity. It didn’t take, and he drifted into Buddhism himself in later years, before court intrigue got the better of him and he was arrested and executed. Thailand has always been perfectly open to other religions. They

welcome them in, let them build their churches and mosques, and then keep right on being as Buddhist as ever.

So Christmas permeated Bangkok only in surfacey ways, though you'd be surprised how far surface can go. Decorations weren't unusual, and Santa iconography was visible from time to time, but the main sign of the holiday season was that 80% of the city's residents set their cell phones to ring with "Jingle Bells." I came to hate the song with the flaming passion of a thousand dying suns.

Our Christmas celebration consisted of a relaxed morning watching Sarah open her presents, which we had packed along with all our luggage. Afterwards our talk turned to the post-9/11 world, and the way in which even Thailand is getting drawn into the war on terrorism. Most Thais tend to be quite pro-American, though for some it's more a case of being anti-Muslim. Islam is growing in influence in the south, spreading from Malaysia, a fact that fosters the sort of low-level resentment that you don't often hear articulated except by talkative taxi drivers. While it never made the U.S. press that I saw, apparently investigations point to southern Thailand as the possible base of operations for the Bali bombing. There was a media uproar after that event, when the Australian government announced that they would intervene preemptively anywhere necessary in the region to avert further terrorist attacks against its citizens. The world's attention has shifted elsewhere, but it won't be long before something happens to bring it back to Southeast Asia.

## **Pantip Plaza**

**T**hat afternoon, we explored central Bangkok on foot. My main goal in this was to go along, smile politely, and bide my time until Suanna and Sarah dropped me off at Pantip Plaza, Bangkok's computer mecca, font of all things tech-geeky and, most importantly, infamous source of cheap pirated software.

How to begin? Picture a five-story mall, open in the middle, packed to the gills. The food court occupied half of the second floor, while the first was full of big-name display booths, complete with booth-babes – more like a computer convention than a shopping center. Every other floor was a mix of austere, western-style computer stores crammed alongside tiny shops and booths piled high with hardware in OEM packaging and racks of unboxed motherboards. The small shops were framed by colored printer paper listing their current prices for memory, CPUs, sound cards, video cards, monitors, motherboards, and all the rest, updated daily. It was all cheaper than in the U.S. or online, because most of it was coming straight from Taiwan. If you have a cooling fetish, or a case fetish, or at the very least know what those things mean, you'd be in heaven at Pantip. I wasn't willing to risk actually buying hardware, but if I lived in Bangkok I'd need a whole room for all the computers I'd want to build and tinker with.

Software stores were even smaller and sold DVDs and music as well. Some places had a retail wall on one side, while the other wall remained conspicuously unlabeled, though its purpose was clear. Instead of actual pirated software on the shelves, there were flip books filled with numbered CD labels, hundreds upon hundreds of them. You peruse the books, jot down the numbers of the CDs you want on little strips of paper, and give them to the guy behind the desk. If it's a popular item he probably has a couple copies beneath the desk – otherwise he says "fifteen minutes" in broken English and disappears behind the curtain in the back. Clearly he's burning a copy for you on the spot, although that bit remains

unspoken, in order to maintain the veneer, however thin, that something completely illegal isn't going on. Individual CDs cost 100 baht each – \$2.40 or so – with generous discounts for volume purchases. After a bit of comparison shopping, I realized that the reference numbers in the flip books were the same across the stores, leading me to suspect that all those places were essentially fronts for the same massive cache of CD-images in some underground storeroom nearby.

Most of the stores overlooked the central balconies; if you went followed the corridors away from there, you quickly found yourself on the shadier side of Pantip. I was accosted there by kids trying to drag me by the arm toward their booths, whispering “Pretty girls! Pretty girls!” and, when I responded in the negative to that, “Pretty boys! Pretty boys!”

Many shops had a TV out front playing a grainy pirated copy of *The Two Towers*. A small crowd of Thai teenagers usually surrounded each TV, and I felt a keen moment of camaraderie watching them laugh in surprise when Treebeard's eye opens, and then whoop and cheer when he lifts his foot and stomps down on Grishnakh.

My epiphany didn't come until my third visit there, the following week – Pantip Plaza is a great metaphor for Internet commerce. It's chock full of all kinds of *stuff* of varying quality (some legit, some not), with more places than you could hope to account for all selling essentially the same items. It's almost impossible to know where to begin. The prices are very good. It's hard to imagine how some of these places can stay in business – it must be that they manage to keep their overhead ridiculously low. It is bustling, chaotic, and beautiful, just like the Internet – and it's also just like any one of a million markets in Third World cities all over the globe. The only difference there is that it's filled with tech, and it's cleaner. As business models go, it seems the Internet has had plenty of precedents.

Walking out of the plaza to rendezvous with Suanna and Sarah at a nearby McDonalds, I ruminated further on technology's place in global society – something that leaps easily to mind when you see guys selling coconuts from handcarts in front of Internet cafés. What distinguishes the West from the rest of the world isn't necessarily technological advancement, because these days technology spreads so quickly. But a place like Bangkok is much more selective and utilitarian – albeit unconsciously – about *which* tech permeates society. Old stuff that works, like the handcart or tuktuk (a three-wheeled motorcycle with a passenger platform on the back), remains stubbornly in place despite the BMWs and the skytrain. But technology that really represents a sea change, and that is fundamentally useful in society, like cell phones, gets integrated so quickly and completely that you'd think it had been around for decades.

## **Tolkien in Thailand**

**T**hat evening we went to see the Bangkok premiere of *The Two Towers* in a newish theatre not far from Sarah's apartment. I assumed this would be a goldmine for intercultural observation, but my expectations were cut short by one simple fact – Thai movie audience tend to be much less responsive than American ones. So really the experience was about the same, except that the theatre was nicer and the screen was bigger than most places in the U.S., and ushers with flashlights showed you to your red plush seat. The popcorn, however, was awful.

The theater was also our first exposure to the king's anthem. Thailand is a kingdom in the very literal sense – the monarchy is not an antiquated throwback to a past age, or fodder for the tabloids. It is a very real, very current, very powerful institution. King Rama IX, Bumibol Adulyadej, is admired, even loved. His picture is everywhere, which reminded me a bit of S.K. Doe's ubiquitous portrait in Liberia back in the day, but there was a palpable difference here. You got the sense that if someone went around and took down all the pictures of the king, that the Thai people themselves would put them back up.

Before the movie started, the anthem kicked in, and we all stood up. The screen displayed a montage of Rama IX pictures – posing, smiling, meeting people, or surveying public works. The classic picture shows him with close-cropped hair and a western-style shirt and glasses, holding a magazine (or perhaps a proclamation) in one hand and raising a finger to his lips. Other images showed him with a camera around his neck or holding a saxophone, highlighting his well-known hobbies. A soaring children's choir sang the anthem, backed by electronic music.

Our keepsake from the experience was a promo poster, all in Thai, with a big picture of Legolas on one side (Suanna was ecstatic about that) and pictures on the back identifying all the principle characters, with short descriptions. Oui translated it all for me; I was surprised to learn that the blurbs not only provided the back story, but gave a lot of it away: "Eowyn falls in love with Aragorn," "Faramir wants to take the Ring to Gondor," etc. They translated Moria as "Devil Valley"; Ent became "Walking Giant Tree."

We ate dinner at a night market on the street, as authentic as you can get, and in flagrant violation of all guidebook advice. It was delicious.

## **Kanchanaburi Province**

**F**or our first trip out of Bangkok, we decided to visit Kanchanaburi province, home of the famous bridge over the Kwai river, and littered with miscellaneous sightseeing opportunities.

The Three Pagodas Pass, connecting Thailand to Burma, has been a hot spot of one kind or another for centuries. Assorted kings and warlords of Burma (nobody calls the place Myanmar, except in stodgy official documents) rolled through periodically, annexing land, taking slaves, and making war. More recently the pass has been a route for trade and smuggling. During World War II, the Japanese wanted to build the railroad through it as an alternate supply route for their conquest of Southeast Asia, and subjected Allied prisoners and local coolies to infamously brutal conditions in order to get it done quickly.

We hired a taxi driver named Mr. Richard as our guide for the day. His given name is Saanan, but the British doctor who gave him his first big break called him "Richard" because he couldn't pronounce his Thai name. He makes a pretty good living doing charter taxi work – often touristy stuff like our trip, though we got the impression that he was accustomed to showing the seamier side of Bangkok to wealthy businessmen. His Chinese customers call him "Oo," which means black, because his skin is relatively dark for a Thai man. He was talkative, but not to a fault, answering the questions we didn't

even think to ask. Like most people, he fell in love with Sarah just a little, and the sound of him calling her name to show her something (“Salaah . . .”) became the signature of our journey.

We stopped first at the JEATH museum, a memorial to the POWs who built the Kwai bridge. It’s an acronym for Japan-England-America-Thailand-Holland, the chief countries involved, and the poster outside noted that the similarity to “death” was a deliberate choice – an allusion that flirts with being clever but doesn’t quite make it. Inside a replica of a long prison hut, we saw photographs, newspaper clippings, and amateur paintings made by the survivors. A number of them depicted the four nationalities of the prisoners, always with certain iconic qualities:

*The Aussie:* skinny, with a wide-brimmed hat and a cigarette

*The Dutchman:* straight and tall with a well-trimmed beard and a pipe

*The Brit:* clean-shaven, the most boyish of the four

*The American:* a bigger beard and the grimmest look; also with a cigarette

JEATH served as a quasi-shrine to Edward “Weary” Dunlop, the Australian doctor who saw a lot of them through the hardest parts – he is famous for pioneering the use of fish to nibble away gangrene. There were plenty of horrific images, but the museum itself was refreshingly low-budget and laid back, so their impact wasn’t nearly as great as the same sorts of pictures in, say, the Holocaust Memorial in D.C., where sound and lighting are carefully orchestrated to intensify your emotional reaction. A Japanese family made their way through the museum right behind me, and I felt an awkward tension at that – the same sort of thing that might be in the air, though reversed, at a memorial to Hiroshima.

The Bridge over the River Kwai itself was a tourist trap, though in Thailand that just translates into a greater concentration of the market stalls that are already ubiquitous. The bridge has been rebuilt a couple of times since World War II, and regularly carries trains when tourists aren’t clambering over the treacherously open slats. The view from the middle of the bridge was pleasant, almost idyllic, with plenty of lush greenery and river boats adorned with flowers on either side. But even in the mild December heat you could see the ominous jungle behind and imagine the hell it must have been to build a bridge here under any circumstances.

We caught the train there to go to the waterfall at Sai Yok, where Mr. Richard would pick us up again. I sat by the window and watched bald hills stick up out of the jungle, with rounded tops like knobby knuckles.

On the train, we met Dotty and her friend, whose name we never caught but who I feel safe in calling “Mabel.” They sat by the windows across the aisle from me, next to Sarah and Suanna. They were retired ladies, originally from Jackson, Michigan. Mabel had reddish-pink dyed hair and wore a gigantic traveler’s vest; Dotty had tanned skin like roughened leather. They both drank from cans of Singha beer that they bought in a continuous stream from the guy walking up and down the length of the train, selling refreshments.

“Where’d that man go?” Dotty said when she finished one. “I got to get me another beer. Maybe I’ll try that elephant one. You tried the elephant one yet?”



They were on an Overseas Adventures tour across Southeast Asia with a couple other women further up the train and a Thai tour guide named John, who wore an expression of permanent long-suffering. They were quickly fascinated by Sarah, naturally. “You know what you ought to do, dear? You ought to be a tour guide. Oooh, I’d bet you’d be a good one. You’re so pretty and you know the language . . . that’s what you ought to do.” Then, the next moment: “Hey! Beer man! Over here, beer man! One more for me. Uh-oh. John’s going to cut me off. Are you going to cut me off, John? Naw, I’ll have another. We drank our way through Cambodia and Vietnam – we ain’t stoppin’ now!”

### **The Train Conductor – or, The Failure of a Big Brother**

Suanna took a picture of the train conductor – a young, handsome guy with a spiffy brown suit named Rad. When he had a break he came back to sit by us and introduce himself, since he had overheard Sarah speaking Thai. As the two of them started chatting, I didn’t need to know the language to see that he was in full-on Charm Mode, asking her lots of questions and smiling pleasantly at her answers. For her part, Sarah was fiddling constantly with the stone on her necklace – something I took at the time for a flirtation reflex, though I later realized it was just a speaking-Thai-to-strangers thing. He glanced at me a couple times, and asked Sarah something. She responded, then explained that he asked who I was. The big brother.

“Big man,” said the train conductor, and smiled insidiously.

And now I must confess my failure. Because from this point on I sat up a little straighter and flexed my arms just a wee bit and watched protectively over my little sister. It’s not like I was worried she’d be drawn in by this Casanova of the tracks, but it was clear that he was trying. The thing was, I couldn’t understand a word they were saying. I didn’t know, after that, whether he was puttin’ on the moves or just talking about the weather. So I watched and waited.

Then Sarah went for her purse, and took out a piece of paper and pen. She was writing down something for him. Alarms went off in my head, of course, and in that split second I almost lurched across the aisle, grabbed the paper just in time, and then (“big man” that I am) hurled the conductor out the window down the steep jungle ravine below. But – I thought to myself – mightn’t that be overreacting? She’s not *actually* going to give this guy her phone number, is she? She’s a Bruinooge, after all, endowed with a modicum of good sense and a healthy dose of international savvy. And besides, she’s probably just practicing writing some Thai character to see if she has it right – or maybe showing something to him in English. There were a thousand possibilities.

I remained seated, and smiled uncomfortably, and therein lies my failure. Rad pocketed the paper, stood up, shook Sarah’s hand – letting it linger there for a moment too long – and nodded to me as he sauntered to the next car.

“What did you write down?” I asked Sarah as soon as he had left.

“My phone number,” she replied. The rumbling of the train crescendoed for a moment as we passed along the base of a cliff, the clickety-clack reflecting loudly from a stone face scant inches from the side of the train. “Maybe I shouldn’t have done that,” she mused.

Big brothers of the world, hear my tale. Take heed of this warning. Make not my mistake. Language is a fleeting thing, and words are ciphers – but train conductors are the same everywhere.

(He called that night, incidentally, to see if Sarah wanted to go out. She said she was busy in a way that suggested she would probably continue to be busy indefinitely, and he never did call back. At least, not that she's told me about.)

**T**he Sai Yok waterfall was a pretty picnic spot for Thai families, with stairstepping falls that went up and up. They looked slippery, but everything around there was grounded in limestone, which made clambering around easy. Suanna was camera-happy that day, as she was most of the time. To understand her photography, picture this: a gaggle of tourists, jostling each other as they try to focus in on the wat-du-jour, and then Suanna a few yards away, crouching in the opposite direction, focusing in on a cluster of exotic flowers nestled in the gnarled roots of an ancient tree.

My favorite stop that day was the Praputasaiyard Cave. It was one of a number of places where ancient Buddha statues and shrines, long lost, were uncovered again in the early twentieth century. Inevitably, wats spring up on top of them, and they become sites for pilgrimages. At this one, a big, green demon statue with wild eyes and long tusks pointed the way down a steep staircase into the first cave, housing dozens of Buddha statues, including a long, gold-plated reclining Buddha along the wall. The most interesting to me – then and later – was the Naga Buddha. He's a Thai Buddha, thinner than the Chinese version, with an expression both serene and subtly mischievous. He's sitting on the coiled body of a giant snake, whose seven stylized heads rear up from behind to cover him like a fan, fangs bared. They're there to protect him from the distractions of the world during his meditation.

Deeper in the cave we found what can only be described as a shrine to Chulalongkorn, King Rama V. A painting of him stood up in the back, surrounded by trinkets and flowers that had been left there very recently. I had read that he was held in unusually high regard by a lot of Thai, and it turned out that Mr. Richard was definitely one of those. Rama V was the first king of Siam to travel around the world, to meet face to face with the kings and queens and prime ministers of other nations. He introduced the use of Western silverware in Thailand – even now, chopsticks aren't all that common – and had his palace built all of imported Italian marble. He was the one (as Mr. Richard told it) who saw the future coming down the pipe, and did what had to be done so that his kingdom had a place in it. And in a sense, that's true – while the rest of Southeast Asia fell under the colonial yoke of one European nation or another, Thailand remained stubbornly independent. The cost, of course – as those more critical of Rama V will tell you – is that he did cede chunks of territory to Britain and the Netherlands. For Mr. Richard, though, the price was an easy one to pay, because Thailand was able to remain a country of equal status to those of the West, a peer among the great nations of the world – and that made all the difference.

Later on that day Mr. Richard told us a joke that illustrated the Thai mindset perfectly:

A Bangkok taxi driver is driving two businessmen, a German and a Japanese, from their hotel to the airport. “My people can build you a skyscraper, bigger than all you have here. It will take only three months,” says the Japanese man. “That's nothing,” says the German. “We can build a big bridge to cross the Chao Praya in only *two* months.” They drive on, passing by the Victory Monument (a high

spire, like the Washington Monument with statues). “What’s that?” ask the passengers. “I don’t know,” says the driver. “It wasn’t here this morning.”

Back outside, we strolled down to a high cliff overlooking a bend in the river. A hulking Chinese Buddha sat there, covered by a canopy, his generous belly resting comfortably on the ground. His smile beamed across the countryside – part beneficence, part goofiness – to the limestone cliffs across the way. Beyond them, the rolling hills came to pointy bald tops that made it perfectly clear where the inspiration for *chedis* came from. Two bowls of incense burned steadily in the hot sun, though there was no sign of who had lit them.

There, and elsewhere, orange-robed monks were in abundance. I was surprised to learn that many Thai men do a term of service as a monk. They usually don the robes for three months, though the rich and those with busy corporate jobs can get away with less. During this time they meditate, study Buddhism, and fast every afternoon and evening. It gave me a new perspective every time I saw a boyish monk on the street in Bangkok – he might be a fully-committed monk, but more likely he was a young guy chafing under his third week of celibacy. (Monks aren’t even allowed to touch women.) Out on the country roads, we saw far more of the pilgrim monks, whose robes are a slightly darker shade of orange. They carry their sleeping mats with them to sleep in the jungle. Their only form of transportation is their own two feet, and they must rely only on what is given to them freely for food.

## **Bangkok Traffic**

**T**he drive back provided plenty of opportunities to reflect on the nature of traffic, since it was all around us the whole long way. I have had to reevaluate my definition of good and civilized driving after visiting Thailand. Here are the rules for driving in Bangkok:

1. If your vehicle can fit into a physical space, and there’s time to get to it, go for it.
2. Lanes are loose guidelines, not fixed rules. This includes the oncoming lanes, when there’s no one in them. Or heck, even if there is (see rule #1).
3. Size matters. If your vehicle is liable to take more damage than another one in a collision, it’s your job to get out of the way. This applies equally to trucks, cars, motorcycles, and pedestrians.
4. The horn is an instrument of communication, subtle in its intonation. Depending on length of beep and context, it can mean “I am here,” “You are there,” “Hello,” or “Hmm. You almost hit me.” Most commonly, it means “You intend to move into that space, but I currently inhabit it, and have no intention of altering my course. Sorry, Charlie.”

There’s a dizzying assortment of vehicles following these rules. Motorcycles outnumber cars by about 2:1. Most of the cars are taxis, and rest of are BMWs, Mercedes, and up-market Toyotas and Hondas, without any middle ground. The buses lumber along amid them all, slower than the rest but comfortable in their assuredness of rule #3.

It’s a system that must produce far more traffic accidents than most places, though I never did see one. I did a fair bit of door-handle gripping the first couple of days, but quickly acclimated, and even came to prefer the Bangkok style of driving, for one key reason: there’s no road rage. None. Slamming on your brakes because the guy in the tuktuk just cut across three lanes in front of you isn’t cause for alarm – he

got their first, and he was playing by the rules. It's almost impossible *not* to, and so there is nothing to get upset about. For all the things it does express, the horn never expresses anger or frustration. As soon as I appreciated this fact, driving in Bangkok became a pleasant, almost placid experience – as a passenger, that is. I'd still want at least a year of careful training before I was ready to actually get behind the wheel there myself.

Thai radio usually provided a welcome distraction when traffic was too congested. My favorite was a show hosted by a lady with a sultry voice. Taxi drivers would call in to describe traffic conditions where they were, or just to chat – clearly the main thrill was getting on the air and talking to The Lady. The hardest part about the radio was that, in Bangkok, they play “Happy Birthday” *every single day*, multiple times. I guess from a certain perspective it makes sense – I mean, it's always somebody's birthday, right? But this isn't your garden variety “Happy Birthday,” but a synthed-up version that feels like it lasts ten minutes, with a mixture of Thai and English and a cheesy keyboard solo. Not as annoying as “Jingle Bells,” but definitely up there.

We crossed back over the Lotus Bridge into Bangkok proper right at twilight. The city lights mingled with the last bits of the sun in a eerie glow. For a moment we could see the skyline – a mix of the conventional, the avant-garde, and the centuries-old wats. Then we descended the bridge into a roiling mass of shadowy cars and sidewalks constantly shifting with people. Neon signs beckoned from all directions, overwhelming the senses. The skytrain hummed overhead, like something that had arrived twenty years before or after its time. I realized suddenly that this was as close to *Blade Runner* as I had ever seen in real life.

It was all very picturesque until we hit the traffic jams. It took us over an hour to travel the few remaining miles back to Sarah's apartment. The jams are the one genuinely awful thing about Bangkok. Mr. Richard told us that the Bangkok police are all trained to assist in deliveries, because of how often a woman en route to the hospital has to give birth in a taxi. Fortunately, taxi drivers believe this brings tremendously good luck, so pregnant women have no difficulty finding rides.

We ate dinner with Oui at a restaurant owned by a parent at their school. Torchlit pagodas and a wide balcony stretched over a wide lawn in the middle of the city, with a stream running through. We ordered a pile of dishes, from *tom yam* (hot seafood soup) to *muu daet diao* (sundried pork), and a couple more later on as whim struck us. Singha beer flowed freely. We ate and drank and ate and drank, and then had dessert, and when I did the math at the end it had set us each back the equivalent of \$4.50. Wonderful.

**O**ur destination Saturday morning was Ko Ket, an island noted for some old archaeological sites featuring Mon pottery. We took a water taxi far up the Chao Praya river, only to discover, contra the guidebooks, that there wasn't a standard service from the edge of Bangkok to the island. The guy who was willing to charter us there wanted an exorbitant fee, and was so sure that we were terminally naïve that he wouldn't come down a single baht. So we abandoned that plan and wandered around Nontaburi Market, which featured all sorts of food, though it's the fish that stuck in my mind – slithering eels barely alive in an inch of water, and huge vats of catfish.

As we wove our way through the crowds of a particularly narrow alley, I noticed that all the stallkeepers were methodically moving all their wares under the shade of their rickety roofs, and pulling down their eaves as well. I looked up – did they have some keen premonition of rain? Why were they all doing it at once, almost at tandem? Then I saw the cause – a huge delivery truck, far too big for the alley, was inching along toward its destination. At some points it didn't even have an inch of clearance on either side; we had to retreat into a the stall of a guy selling cashews in order to get out of its way. As soon as it had passed, everything was hauled outside again, and in an instant everything was back to normal.

## Muay Thai

That night, we went to Lumpini, one of the two infamous arenas in Bangkok that host *muay thai* tournaments – Thai kick-boxing. We dodged a scam involving a supposed kickboxer-in-training trying to sell us overpriced ringside seats, and made our way to the ticket counter.

Like the Japanese word *gaijin*, Thai has a word for “foreigner” that connotes not just “from another country” but also “Not One of Us”: *farong*. In prices for things, especially anything resembling a tourist attraction, there is blatant discrimination between the two. At Lumpini, the *farong* prices were three times higher than the Thai prices. Sarah, of course, sidled up to the ticket counter and asked in Thai whether she could get in for the Thai price. I watched with delight as the gruff guy behind the counter went through all the typical responses: his eyes widened, his jaw opened and closed, and the corners of his mouth started to break into a smile, though he checked it for propriety's sake. In the end, he discounted her ticket. How could anyone say no to her?

“What about my friends?” she asked, gesturing back toward Suanna and I.

The ticket guy craned his neck to spot us. “No,” he said. “They don't speak Thai.”

I wished at that moment for the alternate history where I'm really good with languages and was able to pick up a smattering of Thai before we arrived, so I could respond to him with a witty comeback and feel, you know, with it. But no – at the time I had no clue what they were talking about, and probably grinned like an idiot wearing a blue polar fleece with the word BANGKOK on it. We were *farong*, no doubt about it.

It did make me wonder, though – just what is this concept of Thai-ness if something so simple as knowing the language can get you past it? Probably the gate price at Lumpini is just an incidental result of a larger divide; it's one thing to save a few baht the night of the big fight, and another to truly shed the term *farong*.

We met up with Oui again, who wisely navigated us from the isolated seats we found for ourselves to ones right in the middle of the screaming crowd.

There's not really all that many kicks in muay thai – less than you might think if you've seen Jean-Claude Van Damme in *Kickboxer*. (Yes, yes, I have.) The elbows and the knees are used to strike the decisive blows – kicks are just a way to whittle your opponent down before the end. In the past few decades it's become a regulated sport along the lines of western boxing, with padded gloves and

sparring rounds with points awarded by judges, and ludicrous colored shorts. There's also a ritualistic element reminiscent of *sumo* – each fighter performs a complex meditation/exercise/dance before the fight, a hybrid of moves traditional at his school and individual flourishes worked out between him and his trainer.

Picture the scene: a low-ceilinged, dingy amphitheatre ringed with wooden benches. Green fences separate third-class seating at the top from second-class in the middle and the first-class ringside seats. Smoke fills the air – potsmoke in some corners – and a band of drums and bells constantly plays hypnotic rhythms off to one side. The combatants circle warily, lashing out from time to time, separated by the referee when their blows turn to wrestling. The crowd is alive, crying out at every hit, and driven to a near frenzy every time one of the combatants attempts a more flowery move, like a circle kick.

That was just the kiddie round – twelve-year-old apprentices sparring around the ring in the preliminaries. A dozen fights were on the schedule that night, and after the first few we wondered if we had arrived at kids' night or something. Even the later fighters were so small and wiry – none topped 140 pounds – that they all looked way too young to be in the ring.

To be honest, the fighting itself was a bit of a disappointment. I expected to be awed by the poetry of their movements, and shocked at the violence of their attacks. Those moments arose rarely amid a familiar pattern of sparring and occasional hits – usually a knee shooting up to strike the other guy in the side to knock him off-balance.

The real show was in the third-class stands, among the gamblers. Thai men of all ages and a handful of middle-aged, disheveled Japanese guys constantly shouted over each other, offering (I can only surmise) odds for one or the other fighter to come out on top. There was no central bookmaker, no order to it at all – it was just a matter of the sort of bet you could get the guys near you to make. And the betting continued strongly during each match itself, with shifting odds and (still guessing here) double-or-nothing offers being made between rounds and even between punches and kicks. When money wasn't changing hands or they weren't negotiating with each other through shouts and finger signals, all the gamblers had their attention fixed on the boys in the ring, shouting in encouragement or despair at each hit with the kind of energy that only real stakes can bring.

## **Chatuchak**

**T**he Chatuchak weekend market is the sort of thing that's familiar in principle to anyone who has gone shopping in the Third World, or even to Eastern Market in D.C., for that matter. But, like so much else in Bangkok, it takes that principle and runs with it farther than you'd think was reasonable or even possible. Chatuchak is a sea of crowded alleys full of shops selling everything you can think of – clothes, pets, food, leather goods, and a mind-boggling sea of tchotchkes, some genuinely Thai, most fresh off the boat from a big tourist-memento sweatshop in Indonesia or Hong Kong.

I am not the sort of person who is built to appreciate such a place. Keeping up with Sarah and Suanna was largely an act of patience and endurance. But even I must admit we came away with an astonishing amount of stuff for very little money, and some of it – the lovely wall hangings, assorted laughing Buddha figurines, a pretty spiffy shirt, two swords – I was quite pleased with.

If Suanna and I had been in Bangkok, say, eight years ago, in the early days of our marriage, restraining her from buying twice as much as she wanted to would have been an active and grueling process. It would have gone something like this:

*SUANNA:* Oo! Look, Nate! A garishly painted teapot in the shape of the . . . the . . . what's it called?  
*NATE:* The garuda bird.  
*SUANNA:* Oh yeah. Let's buy it!  
*NATE:* But . . . we have half a dozen teapots lying around the apartment already that we hardly ever use. And it's kind of shoddy, isn't it?  
*SUANNA:* But it's the garuda bird! You *like* the garuda bird!  
*NATE:* Yeah, but that doesn't mean I want a touristy knockoff teapot garuda bird staring at me all the time.  
*SUANNA:* But it's only 400 baht! That's hardly anything.  
*NATE:* It's \$10.  
*SUANNA:* Exactly. Do you know how much something like this would cost if we bought it in the States?  
*NATE:* (gritting teeth) *That's not the point.* We don't need it; I don't want it . . .  
*SUANNA:* You're no fun to shop with.  
*NATE:* OK, look – let's make a note of it and we can always come back later if you don't see anything else that you want to buy more. But I really think there's cooler stuff –  
*SARAH:* You have no idea how big this place is. We're not going to be able to find it again. If you see something you want, *buy it now.*  
*NATE:* Argh!

But long years of marriage have seasoned us, and our negotiations at Chatuchak were actually much more efficient. I no longer have to reign her in. It goes more like this:

*SUANNA:* Oo! Look, Nate! A garishly painted teapot in the shape of the garuda bird! Let's buy it!  
*NATE:* (silence; pretends he doesn't hear)  
*SUANNA:* It looks pretty cool – and you like the garuda bird, don't you? Although . . . I guess we have a lot of teapots already. And it's 400 baht . . . let's see, about \$10. That's cheap for the States, but not really for Thailand. And where would we put it? I guess it's all right, but it's not actually made all that well. Hmm. Yeah, let's just forget about it. I'm sure we'll see something better.  
*NATE:* (smiles to himself)

## **Khao Lok**

Since the earliest days of planning for our trip, we had known that a few days in southern Thailand, land of pristine beaches and tropical exotica, was going to be part of it. In one of those odd twists of fate, Suanna's sister, Becky, was going to be there. Her boyfriend Adrian's parents live in Penang, where their whole family (Becky included) gathers for Christmas. For the past couple years they've all

driven up to southern Thailand for a bit of diving and beach-bumming. This year, they graciously invited us along. That's why we found ourselves back at Bangkok Airport that afternoon, waiting for a flight to Phuket, southern Thailand's big and overdeveloped tourist trap. Our 747 was full of white people, but none of them were American – instead, an assortment of Dutch, German, and Scandinavian tourists crowded in for the two-hour flight.

Phuket airport was swanker, cleaner, and more efficient than any U.S. airport I've seen. Becky and Adrian's father, Tom, met us outside, and we piled into his SUV for the drive to Green Beach Resort, in Khao Lok.

### A Few Words About Tom Seah

**H**e is impossible to categorize. He is Singapore-Chinese, and has lived in both those countries, as well as the U.S. (mainly Holland, Michigan) and now Malaysia. His wife, Lita, is from the Philippines. He can be curt and demanding, and is often in a hurry, but his brash voice is often accompanied by an earsplitting laugh. He has a sharp mind and a generous spirit. I don't know which image of him to cherish more – his voice filling a restaurant from the head of a table, or the quieter picture of him driving at night, humming *sotto voce* to a endless supply of Perry Como songs and forgetting to turn his brights off for the oncoming traffic. He didn't let us pay for a single thing while we were there. We couldn't have asked for a better host.

**T**he town of Khao Lok is in its sweet spot – on the way to becoming spoiled and overbuilt, but not there yet. Every other shop on the main drag is either a tailor or an Internet café; the rest are restaurants, bars, and dive shops. Sarah, Suanna, and I unloaded our stuff into the small beach house we were to share, and met up with the rest of the Seahs for dinner at Green Beach's own restaurant. Afterward, looking out over the night ocean, I was puzzled by all the bright lights on the horizon – far too bright to be boats. It couldn't be land, could it? According to my mental map, we were on the west coast of the sliver of Thailand that cuts south, facing the Andaman Sea. India's east coast would be out there eventually, 1500 miles away across the Bay of Bengal. Only later did I learn that they *were* boats – a fleet of squid trawlers that shine incredibly bright lights straight down into the ocean, attracting their quarry to the surface.

**L**ate morning. Suanna was off with her camera, taking the pictures most people wouldn't think to take. Sarah and I decided to set up camp at the beach, hoping for a ray of sun or two to peek through the clouds. We set beach chairs down on a prime piece of real estate. The waves crashed around jutting low-tide rocks. Thai kids played in the surf alongside a few naked German toddlers. Behind us, in the shade, three Thai masseuses worked their craft.

I had just opened my book – *1001 Nights*, in the translation I had always wanted, a Christmas present at Thanksgiving – while Sarah turned on her phone to check her voicemail. A moment later, I felt her touch my shoulder with just the slightest pressure, and I immediately knew something was wrong. It



was as if everything in her was focused on the voice she was hearing on her phone, and she lacked the spare energy to properly grab me or say my name. Her face still registered shock, not yet anguish, as she relayed the news: Grandma Euny had died.

An hour before, we had been checking our email and sipping iced mochas at an Internet café. Every other person we saw was from a different country. The world seemed very, very small. In an instant, every mile between us and our family became all too real. We were so far away that making it back in time for the funeral services wasn't even an option.

I don't know how to begin to describe her, for those of you who didn't know her. She grew up as a missionary kid in China, and returned to Asia after marrying Grandpa Red, serving as missionaries first in China, then for many years in Japan. In her time, she had been hidden belowdecks to avoid Yangtze river pirates, and had made her way by herself, my infant father and uncle in tow, to escape to Japan during the Cultural Revolution. Growing up, hearing the stories was wonderful, but hard to mesh with the lovely but simpler woman we knew, maker of the world's best chocolate chip cookies. What came through all of those experiences, for her, was a way to live based on the sure knowledge that few things are more important in life than an open mind and an open table.

At Grandpa Red's memorial service, years before, the preacher was going through the litany of all he had left behind. He mentioned that there were fourteen grandchildren, which was right by blood but didn't include Suanna – we had only been married a year or so. Grandma was sitting next to her, and she leaned over to touch Suanna's hand. "It should be *fifteen*," she said. That was Grandma Euny.

The whole day darkened after that. We walked, sat, stood in a daze. Got the details from my parents through frustrating static. The waves on the beach seemed sadder, the cry of the birds more plaintive, the crickets' chirping, a dirge. The world seemed charged with danger, and I remembered that it had felt the same way when Grandpa Red died. Then, I had been irrationally worried for Sarah, who was out of contact on a rafting trip. When death is in the air, you notice things more. Every sight is a painting, every heartbeat a gift.

Sarah and I grieve the same way. We're quiet, contemplative, not prone to tears – Suanna did more crying than either of us. We spent a lot of time reminiscing, which was conspicuous because it's not something we often do. We're both creatures of the moment. The Seahs got the news and kept a respectful distance. Strolling in the dark to dinner that evening, they let Sarah and I walk alone on the road ahead. Not all of our talk was of Grandma then, but all of it was an attempt to weave together memories of the past, and so begin healing.

For the rest of the trip, we carried on, consciously doing nothing differently because we knew it's what she would have wanted us to do. So far from our grieving family, it was sometimes disturbingly easy to let it all slide from our minds. After that first day, we spoke of Grandma's death seldom, but it was never far from my mind. Every hour, at quiet moments, I'd remember her. I felt myself trying to experience everything a little more acutely, to notice more, as if she were watching over my shoulder and needed my active effort to share in it all. Mostly, I missed her.

## The Similan Islands

The next morning we found ourselves on the *Mariner*, a big diving boat with gear and berths for a couple dozen divers, dive masters, and crew. I headed right for the top deck, and as we slipped out from the quay I felt the weight of the previous day lift from my shoulders. It wasn't that Grandma Euny ever left my thoughts, but the open sea was a balm, an instant anodyne. I get a particular kind of happiness from being out on a boat that I don't get from anything else. If I believed in previous lives I'd be quite certain that I was a seaman or a fisherman in one. At the moment when the jungle hills were slipping out of sight behind us and the first of the Similan Islands was peeking out over the horizon, I couldn't imagine anything more pleasing than going somewhere, anywhere, on a boat.

The Similans are a handful of jungle-topped rocks surrounded by coral, just out of sight of the mainland, surrounded at night by the hyperluminescent squid boats. The first island came in view almost immediately, and the others gradually popped up afterward, grey mounds under a cloudy sky. It took three or four hours to get there in our big diving yacht, so it was amazing to see fishing boats with tiny outboard motors as far out as we were, and wonder how long it had taken them to get there. In the distance, it was raining – it looked as if the clouds were falling apart into a haze, kissing the islands.

If you ever want to feel like an urbane world traveler, get on a dive boat in Thailand. Our dive instructors included a Brit, a German, an Aussie, and a French Arab. Along with the Seah contingent (Singaporean dad, Filipino mom, three American kids, three other Americans, one of whom lives in Bangkok) there was a Dutch couple living in Hanoi, a German media consultant, a Scots-Swiss consultant of some other sort, an aloof Swede, and two Japanese ladies who had brought their own dive instructor because they didn't speak any English. The crew were all Thai – a laconic captain and his first mate to keep things running, two ladies who made amazing Thai food in the tiny galley, and two kids to do everything in between.

The Similans are one of the best diving sites in the world. That first day it was cloudy, even drizzly, but that didn't stop me from feeling painful jabs of jealousy and regret as I watched everyone except Suanna and I get ready for their first dive. Why didn't I get licensed before we left for Thailand? Because I was stupid. Because I foolishly thought that snorkeling would be plenty enough fun. Because I had never really given much thought to diving before.

Diving is one of those activities that humans seem perpetually drawn to that 1) involve putting their bodies in places that, according to nature, they don't belong, and 2) take far more time to prepare for than to actually do. I knew that diving is a pretty big strain on the body, and is way more complicated than it seems at first, thanks most of all to the relevant passages in Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon*. But it's one thing to know it in theory and it's another to see a bunch of folks crowded onto the main deck, watching one of the dive instructors sketching out the Dive Plan on a whiteboard. It's very much like a briefing for a spy operation or Special Forces mission. There's a lot of miscellaneous information (depth of dive, rate of ascent), cool maps, careful rules for timing, arcane protocols, and the very real risk of injury or death if you do something wrong (for example, holding your breath while you're down there). Then there's the long process of getting a bunch of people into their wetsuits and checking and double-checking tanks and hoses and breathers and masks. Though much of it seems quite tedious, it has that aura of preparation that suggests that what's to follow must be Immensely Important.

For that first dive, it was actually raining when they went down. The *Mariner* inched forward so that the divers could flop off the back. They clustered in their dive groups at the surface, only hazily visible, and then, group by group, they disappeared beneath the waves.

Thus began the rhythm of the next couple days: eat, hang out, dive, eat, hang out, dive. During some of the dives, Suanna and I snorkeled. I hadn't done it since Liberia, where the snorkeling was good at ELWA beach maybe twice a year. This blew all that away, of course – especially our second time out, when the sea was thick with fish below us and the sky was perfectly clear. I came to understand why damage to coral reefs is such a sensitive issue for some people. When you're watching all the fish go by, you have a very clear sense that you're a foreign observer in a world that has nothing whatever to do with you – an extraordinarily beautiful world with infinitely-varied coral as its foundation. But then you'll see a spot where the coral has been damaged. It's not that the damaged area looks ugly, or is itself an eyesore, but the absence of beauty in those places calls out like a shriek of pain. Damaged coral is one of those few situations where the awful word "blight" is entirely appropriate.

I had no shark encounters. I wanted to see a shark, and I didn't want to see a shark. Indeed, the simultaneous desire and fear was my constant companion under the waves. Of course, Suanna *did* see one, on our last time out, after I had already clambered back into the dinghy. It was threading its way along the ocean floor, quite oblivious to her – at least, that's the impression it tried to create.

Whenever possible, I gravitated to the top of the boat. The view was fine, but the real draw was the sheltered platform with three hammocks. I was great fun to lounge around up there, chatting with the Europeans and feeling very cosmopolitan. Talk came around to politics only occasionally and briefly, but when it did it was clear that we were pretty much on the same page: the world's a crazy place now and there's no clear path through what lies before us; the U.S. isn't the Big Evil and is actually quite a fine place to be; Bush, on the other hand, has a totally wrongheaded approach to a complicated situation, and is badly advised. More often talk centered around travel, especially in Southeast Asia. Their one glaring blind spot was their universal opinion of Bangkok: "It's the place you hurry through to get somewhere else," according to Ditmar, the German. Ah, if only they understood Bangkok as I do, I smugly thought to myself, though of course Suanna and I would have been lost there as well without Sarah guiding our every step.

The dive instructors kept to themselves, professional but distant. It was clear that they wanted to structure their lives in such a way as to be underwater as much as humanly possible, and this was the way to do it. When they weren't diving, they played chess or sunned themselves. At night, they drank, and at the end of the trip they smoked weed. Earlier on I had thought that getting a game of poker going might be fun, but none of them even had a deck of cards, and in any case they only really wanted to play chess – and only with each other, for that matter. By the end of the trip their aloofness had overtaken their exotic and enviable lifestyle in my eyes, and I wrote them off.

Here's the image I'll always remember from the Similans: it's just after sunset, and the islands are vague silhouettes around us. Beyond them, the lights from the squidboats glow distant and bright like will-o-the-wisps. It's raining in a light, steady drizzle. I'm sitting on the main deck, looking aft to the diving platform below. Unaware of me, the two Thai boys on the boat are playing. They've finished helping the cooks clean up, and they're taking turns doing backflips off the platform into the water. They strain to outdo each other, all the while laughing. The world seems wonderfully quiet and at

peace, and I find myself wondering if this is the sort of thing these kids have known their entire life, and if they know of anything else. Briefly, the thought creeps up that it will be hard for them when they grow up if they have to leave the diving life and find work on the solid unromantic earth, but I stuff that thought down and leave it for another day. When they notice me watching them, they smile and redouble their efforts.

**I**n the next moment, misery set in. I climbed the ladder to the top deck, where most folks were, and surveyed the horizon. Which was no longer visible.

It's an academic question of whether my ensuing nausea was the result of a minor stomach virus or seasickness. Undoubtedly there was an element of each. I had always been proud of my sea legs, which, while for the most part untested, had always been quite adequate. I always liked to think, previous lives or no, that I could be quite at home on a ship for any length of time. What no one had told me was that it was not at all uncommon to have seasickness settle in after sunset, when you no longer have the horizon as a stabilizing frame of reference. Some people can be perfectly comfortable on a boat during the day but then have a very hard time of it at night. I discovered that I was one of those people.

Thus began the Long Misery. Thankfully, it did not involve vomiting, though there were predictable occurrences of what Cormac McCarthy's characters are wont to call the "drizzlin' shits." I assumed the fetal position in my berth, hoping that a bit of sleep would ease things up. But it was a windy night, and the *Mariner* rocked and creaked, and I didn't sleep a single wink. I had to hold my breath when walking past the galley – though I'm sure the food was wonderful, the tiniest whiff of its scent drove me to the edge of the boat. Just before sunrise I retreated to one of the hammocks with my notebook and a couple liters of water – and remained there, in a semi-wakeful state, from dawn until noon.

That part was actually quite lovely, in a gray, blustery sort of way. The sky and the sea were equally dark, and the wind was very strong. You'd think a hammock would be the last place I'd want to be, but suspended up there, the constantly-varied shifting of the ship resolved itself into a steady, rhythmic side-to-side. I lay there and occasionally dozed, taking a sip of water once every fifteen minutes or so. When I felt brave I moved very slowly and carefully down the ladder to the main deck to get a cup of tea, and then retreated back up to the hammock. The sleeplessness and the grey sky and the rocking all contributed to a mood that I couldn't put a name to until I remembered the title of one of Douglas Adams' books: *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*. My thoughts drifted toward global anxiety and personal worries about the future, about danger and death and the fundamental uncertainty of the universe. I'd listen to the bustle as the divers set out below, and I'd wait for the horn to blow that signaled the return of a group to a surface. I'd always feel a little better when I saw Sarah's red hair amid the waves, and knew that she was safe again.

I can't think of a good place to mention the napkin dispensers on the boat, so I'll just do it here. They were bright orange, with a drawing of a pair of fuzzy cats on them. Block letters spelled out "BLACK AND WHITE" above the cats, and on the other side of the box:

WE ARE VERY COOL AND PROBOBLY [sic]  
ONE OF THE MOST COMPOSED BEINGS

BUT WHEN WE CAT WE GET WILD ON INSTINCT.  
DO YOU?

These words spoke to my heart. I've never catted before, to my knowledge, but I feel sure that if and when I do, I, too, will get wild on instinct.

By that afternoon I was finally feeling better. We spent several hours in the vicinity of the farthest island, which was by far the most beautiful. Sheer cliffs surrounded it, pocked by countless caves, grottoes, and tunnels. Up top lay inaccessible pastures of what looked like ordinary grass – you could almost imagine that it was some knobby hill in Scotland transplanted across the world. While I admired the scenery on the surface, the divers down below got to snap pictures of real, live manta rays.

We headed home under a constant drizzle and strong winds, which brought the nausea back in full force – apparently night-seasickness, once it has a hold, doesn't necessary give up just because you can see the horizon again. We got back into port after sunset, and the only way off the boat was our "gangplank" – really just an aluminum ladder, slippery from all the rain, spanning the distance from the boat to the dock. It was one of those "this would never fly in a country with safety regulations" moments, but of course everyone made it across safely. The truck we crammed in to go back to the resort had recently been used to deliver fish, I was sure.

### New Year's Eve

**B**ack at Green Beach, I took a very long, very hot shower and savored the stern immutability of the ground beneath my feet. Looking back on it all now, I'm still certain that the sea is in my blood, and I'd go back out again at a moment's notice, but at the time I was a converted landlubber through and through.

All the Khao Lok resorts threw their own New Year's Eve parties for their guests. Ours had tables arrayed in front of a makeshift stage. Garish fluorescent lights illuminated everything, but they were just a little off in a way that raised the suspicion (later confirmed) that no one planning the event had an actual background in theatre of any kind. The sound crackled out of big, outdated speakers. The sign above the stage read:

WE LOVE YOU  
HAPPY NEW YEAR 2003

It was a cabaret show in the classic sense – a series of short acts from different performers, each of them singing or dancing their hearts out, none of them quite fit for the big time, and the emcees even less so. I have a whole page of just their quotes in my notebook. From the raffle: "Who has coupon lucky? Coupon lucky? Who has it?" Introducing the limbo: "Who is to play Pass By the Tree? Come play Pass By the Tree!" Then there was the game the guy called "Stop Move," where you had to stop dancing and remain immobile when the music stopped: "If you move, if you smile, you lost."

There were quite a few traditional dancing acts, with young Thai women in opulent traditional dress. They moved with hypnotic precision, every step transcending the tinny music blaring from the speakers.

The slightest inclination of the head or the hand was every bit as important as the movements of their feet.

Clearest memory of the night: two dancers are standing just offstage, waiting to go on. Because of the oddball arrangement of the light, their faces are perfectly visible, and their eyes reflect the nervous anticipation all actors feel in that just-before moment, regardless of how routine the role or how small-time the venue. They're about to perform dances from the northeast of Thailand, and I find it easy to imagine that's where they're from, and that this slapdash cabaret is for them the fulfillment of a lifelong dream in an impossibly exotic place. One of them raises her hand and, without even looking, replaces one of her friend's stray locks of hair.

All the while I'd been eyeing a group of unusually garish dancers who were watching the acts before theirs, primping, strutting, and chatting among themselves in tight circles. They were *hot*. It was clear that they were closer to being professional performers, because they definitely knew how to carry themselves. As I admired them, it did occur to me that their costumes were a little bit over the top, like someone had taken historical designs and primped them up for "Thailand! The Musical!" on Broadway.

I leaned over to Sarah. "Who are they?"

She smiled. "They're katoeys."

My jaw dropped. I should have known.

Sarah had told us about the infamous Thai cross-dressers before. It's an accepted outlet for homosexuality in Thai culture, right along the lines of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. The katoeys preceded and probably inspired Aussies lip-syncing to Abba, though. Whatever the case, Hugo, Terence, and Guy had nothing on these guys. Even once I knew them for what they were, they *still* looked hot.

"Don't worry," said Sarah. "You're not the first *farong* to be suckered. At least you didn't go home with one."

Someone from the audience approached the katoeys and asked to take a picture of a couple of them with his digital camera. They posed provocatively, and afterwards he showed them the picture on his little LED screen. They tittered like young schoolgirls and covered their mouths bashfully.

By the time they actually took the stage, though, I was fighting to keep my eyes open. The lack of sleep the night before was catching up to me, and Suanna had already turned in. Their intro music was that ominous stuff from the score to *Batman*, and then they launched into a pretty disappointing "Come See Thailand" number, both touristy and cheesy. That's when I said my good-nights and stumbled back to our cabin, where I fell asleep almost immediately and slept as soundly as I ever have.

It wasn't even midnight yet.

**B**reakfast the next morning was accompanied by some lovely news. Somewhere there in the darkness of New Years' Eve, Adrian suggested to Becky that maybe they ought to be married, and Becky agreed. By most accounts it was a long-expected and even overdue moment, but not a bit less splendid for all that.

After a relaxing morning, we (that is, the kids) went to a place called the Rainbow Waterfall. Judging from the stares everyone gave us as we arrived, it wasn't a spot often frequented by tourists. Several dozen Thais were picnicking at the base of the waterfall or swimming in the pool at the bottom. We climbed the steep path to the top and discovered a lovely secluded spot where the water split off into a number of rivulets before falling off the edge. Rolling hills of jungle surrounded us. The waterfall continued above, on up the hill and out of sight. It was the sort of scene that was too quintessential to be believed. That happened a lot in Thailand – things seemed *authentic*, so ridiculously so that I kept waiting for the director to yell "cut!" from the wings and all the extras to break character and start griping about SAG dues.

That night we ate at Mai's Quiet Zone, a beachside restaurant owned by an American expat from Chicago. We sat on the floor, traditional style, in a little bungalow. The owner's dog and cat wandered by to say hello as we ate, as did a hermit crab from the beach. Concerned about my continuing bouts of the drizzlin' you-know-whats, I buckled and ordered boring *farong* food.

Sampan, a guy from the resort, drove Suanna, Sarah, and I back to Phuket airport the next morning. Though he wasn't technically a taxi driver, he fit the niche perfectly in that once he discovered that Sarah spoke Thai, he started talking about politics and didn't stop until we had arrived. As we wove along the slippery curves at truly reckless speeds, he talked about how he "liked" Bin Laden for being the underdog and for getting the goat of the world's superpower. There was a bit of a translation barrier there as Sarah tried to clarify whether he really meant "like" or "respect" or something a little less full of admiration. We were never quite clear on that. From there he told us (through Sarah, who constantly fiddled with her necklace as she spoke) about how much he loved Clint Eastwood from all the westerns he had seen when he was 15, and that *that* was the America he loved, but that this America, the one now, was too big, too much of a bully.

He took it for granted that George Bush would beat Bin Laden in the end, but what wrangled me was the way he personalized the conflict, polarized it into a war between one man and another. It's the inevitable way that people make sense of history, though, especially when they're not privy to all the details. We iconify Bush here, too. Even when we realize that he's not a monolith but really represents a bunch of people, sometimes at odds with each other, we *still* personify: Rumsfeld versus Powell. To what extent is this a gross oversimplification, and to what extent is it true that it's individuals that shape the course of history, even in these modern interdependent times?

Suanna asked Sampan if he liked Clinton better than Bush. He said he preferred Bush because he was strong – Clinton was too much of a . . . he couldn't find an English word for it, but the one he was going for was a "playah."

"Like Thai men?" Sarah asked.

"Yes, yes!" he replied, laughing.

Sampan admitted that he was sure that Bush was a playah too, and must have a girlfriend hidden away somewhere – he was just better at hiding it. He compared Bush to Taksin, Thailand’s current prime minister, who he said was able to stay in power because of all his money and extensive corporate connections. He assumed that Taksin had naturally used his money to buy votes, but liked him well enough now because he was thinking about the “little people” and running the government like a business. I asked him if he thought it was like that in America as well – that great wealth was necessary to achieve power. Surprisingly, he said no – that money helps, as it does everywhere, but it wasn’t a *sine qua non* like in Thailand, where there’s far more corruption. The Thai word for corruption is *geen*, which means “eating,” and is usually paired with the word for “country.” A particularly apt metaphor, I thought.

### **Pat Pong**

**B**ack in Bangkok that evening, Sarah took us to Pat Pong, the touristy version of the Bangkok sex district. It was a wide avenue with no room for cars, because every square foot was packed either with people or with market stalls foisting the standard tourist fare. (I’m still happy with the laughing buddha figurines that I bought, though just a little less so having seen their brothers staring at me from every single market or tourist trap we encountered.) One could catch occasional glimpses of listlessly swaying girls through the doorways of the brothels themselves. They were all in competition with one another for the crowd’s attention; this was accomplished by guys harassing passersby with lists of the exotic sex shows available within – some of them with crude and improbable illustrations. “Pussy Shoots Ping-Pong Ball” was a staple of all the venues, and things ran from variations on that theme all the way up to “Pussy Magic Razor Blade.” Was all this stuff for real? We decided not to find out, though since then Sarah has had the opportunity. “There is truth in advertising on Patpong street,” she wrote me.

Running parallel to the main drag was the Japanese stretch of Pat Pong – quiet, austere, with no market stalls or male stalkers with lists, but at least a dozen Thai girls lounging in front of each doorway.

It was Mr. Richard, several days before, who had told us the most about the prostitution industry in Thailand. Recruiters will leave Bangkok and travel to the outlying towns, where they’ll offer families lots of money – enough for a new house or a car – in exchange for their daughter’s indentured servitude for a few years. Often, the opportunity is too good to pass up. Many girls stay on once their term is up – the life of prostitution is all they’ve ever known, and they’ve grown accustomed to their cellphones and clothes and makeup, and to making decent money. What Mr. Richard didn’t talk about is what happens to them when they grow too old, or when they get sick, or what life is like for the prostitutes not lucky enough to have a contract with an established brothel.

### **The Grand Palace**

**T**he next morning, Sarah sent Suanna and I on our own to tour the Grand Palace – not one building, but rather the entire compound that houses a couple of royal residences, some other historical buildings, and



the famous Temple of the Emerald Buddha. Tall white walls surround a whole city block, and inside the gate, Buddhist monks keep an eye on everyone to make sure they're appropriately attired.

It was there because of the Ramakien. It's the central story of Thai mythology, an epic poem of 60,000 stanzas. Like a lot of things in Thailand, it comes originally from India – the story of the Ramakien is closely modeled on the Ramayana. Both tell the story of young Prince Rama, who must rescue his wife from the clutches of the demon Ravana. The resourceful monkey Hanuman also plays a crucial role. In the Indian version he is a Buddhist ascetic, but in the Ramakien he is a much more lascivious figure, more of a trickster-god.

All this I had discovered a long time ago, during my initial readings about Thailand. For months before we left I desperately tried to lay my hands on a copy of the *Ramakien*, but without success. What translations there have been – all abridged – are out of print and either unavailable or prohibitively expensive in the States. As far as I could tell, no one has given this poem a proper and complete verse translation, which is a tragic shame.

A gigantic mural depicting the entire story winds around the inside wall of Wat Phra Kaew, the temple compound within the Grand Palace. All told, it must be a good mile's worth of mural, about eight feet high. The colors were deep and rich – even richer in the spots that had been recently renovated. It was all highly stylized, with a medieval European sense of perspective and depth, and Breughel's penchant for cramming space with dozens of different things to look at. Every few feet we saw another palace and someone, be it human, demon, or monkey, holding court. The battle scenes, while massive, each consisted of dozens of individual vignettes – here a bristling demon fending off hordes of spearmen, there a clever monkey-warrior deflecting an arrow with his shield into the eye of another enemy. In the corners you might spy a couple making out in the bushes, or, in one scene, four women in a courtyard playing a boardgame that looked a lot like backgammon.

At every step I regretted that I hadn't been able to read the whole story before arriving. What on earth was up with the flying naga warriors, the green-skinned guys flitting around in pockets of shadow, or the gold-studded cows guarded by fiery amazons? Who were those giants emerging from the ground, or the monks meditating in airborne pagodas? What was the story behind the gigantic, bare-breasted demon woman who lives in the sea and swallows ships? Or the one who's so large that an entire city sits inside his mouth? Hanuman was clearly the star of the show, whether he was hunting cows, growing to giant-size in order to serve as a bridge over a river, or breaking into an underground palace with a yo-yo.

Scott McCloud would have a field day with this mural. It's a classic example of centuries-old advanced comics art, albeit without the panels. The general chronology flowed left-to-right, but within any given area, the sequence of time flowed in every direction, with cues so subtle that I had to step back to really appreciate how effortlessly a complex story was being told on a single, gigantic canvas.

Suanna repaid all my patience in the markets by sticking with me as I took in the mural at a snail's pace. From there we went on to explore the rest of the temple compound, which consisted of several buildings large and small built on a series of terraces. Temples, statues, and reliquaries were all decorated in gold plate, colored glass, and colored stones in a mosaic style that glittered from a distance and dizzied you with detail up close. It was overwhelming – and I mean that literally, in the sense that all the inlay and detail was too much to focus on, and this, for me, lessened the overall effect.

Wat Phra Kaew's main attraction was the Temple of the Emerald Buddha – one big room, with murals along its walls, Ramakien-style, depicting the life and trials of the Buddha. The Emerald Buddha itself sat enshrined atop a 300 foot high pyramid of sculpted gold. As Buddha statues go it's on the small side, only a couple feet high, but it's an ancient relic, discovered centuries ago and reclaimed from Vientiane by Rama I. Now it's a symbol of the Rama dynasty, one of the most revered Buddhas in Thailand.

The Vedic gods of India are a big part of Thai iconography, and we saw dozens of representations of them here. Elephantine Ghenesh made frequent appearances, as did the garuda bird, Vishnu's flying mount. Tusken demons also guarded doors in arches in the same fashion as Western gargoyles. All of it was very rich and wonderful, though it served to further confuse me about the nature of Buddhism. Though I came to Thailand pretty well-versed in its history, I was woefully underprepared when it came to religion. I had responded early in the trip to Suanna's inquiries by explaining, somewhat patronizingly, that the Buddha wasn't a *god* in our sense of the word at all, and that Buddhism was less a religion than a life philosophy. But the sheer wealth of the wats, the ubiquitous images of the man himself, and the imported Vedic mythology contradicted my assumptions. His images are the focus of all the temples; everyone must remove their shoes in his presence, and Buddhists kneel before him and pray to him. Maybe he's not a god in the technical sense, but he might as well be in Thailand, and I can't imagine that's the only place where that's true.

From there we explored the rest of the Grand Palace compound, including the palace building that Rama V had built out of Italian marble. It was impressive in its own way, but unlike the wats, it wouldn't have been out of place in Naples or Prague. Standing alongside the temples, the palace made up a powerful metaphor for the line that Thai culture seems to walk along, somehow holding a clear and even elitist sense of their own identity, of Thai-ness, while at the same time borrowing willy-nilly from other cultures, especially the West.

**A**cross the street, we explored Wat Pho, home of the biggest reclining Buddha in the land. I can say "46 meters long, and covered in gold plate," but I don't know if that will actually convey how *big* the guy was. Imagine the Statue of Liberty, lying down. That's what it felt like. The bottoms of his feet were engraved in mother-of-pearl with the signs of the Buddhist virtues, each of them associated with one of the Vedic gods. A constant clinking filled the air in there – along the length of the temple were hundreds of tiny bowls, and at the head of the line a monk handed out change in half-baht coins so that visitors could *plink* a donation into every single one of them. Wat Pho also boasted a Thai massage center that was deserted when we visited, though there were some pretty weird sculptures, and dozens of cats.

In case I haven't made it obvious by now, Buddhism is alive and well in Thailand. Those paying respects in the temples are young girls in jean jackets alongside the orange-robed monks and the venerably old. As a religion it lacks the regular religious services of Christianity or the detailed prayer schedules of Islam; instead there's "making merit," which you can do by visiting certain temples, or making donations, or even by buying a catfish at Nontaburi market and setting it free in the river. (Doing a stint as a monk is the ultimate form of making merit.) Temple pageantry aside, Buddhism in

Thailand is pervasive but low-key. I wonder if that makes it easier for people to hold on – how do you lapse out of a religion that’s so laid back?

We met up with Sarah later that afternoon at a Starbuck’s near her apartment. (It was just like Starbuck’s everywhere, except much bigger and with truly frigid air-conditioning. Same sort of prices, too, which felt appallingly expensive for Bangkok.) She was, to put it mildly, freaked out. She had almost no hearing out of one ear – it had been completely blocked up ever since her first dive a few days earlier. On her past diving trips this sort of thing had cleared up in a couple days, so she wasn’t immediately concerned. When she still couldn’t hear out of it that morning, though, she decided to see a specialist at the hospital. The doctor was immediately concerned that there was permanent nerve damage, and prescribed a whole suite of drugs for Sarah to start taking right away, including powerful steroids to strengthen existing nerves, and other pills to quell the nausea that would come from the steroids.

This news was bitter, unwelcome, and surreal. My first thought was that she should be sure to get a second opinion, though that sort of thing isn’t *de rigueur* in Thailand like it is in the States. There was still the hope that things weren’t as ominous as the doctor had made them sound, but also the possibility that her hearing in that ear would never recover. I was desperate for a way to console her.

“Well, if your hearing doesn’t come back, you’ll just have to get a hearing aid. And maybe you can get a really good one and it’ll give you super-powers – you could hear even the tiniest sounds, and even hear people’s thoughts. That would be cool. Then you’d have to pick out a costume.”

The fact that Sarah actually found this *comforting* can only be explained by the fact that she is my sister, after all, and has probably grown used to reasoning of that sort. Flashing forward a bit, the good news is that she did start to recover hearing a few days, and now has just about all of it back. Loud concerts will never quite as pleasant for her again, but she’s OK with that, considering the alternatives.

Sarah’s friend Richard and his girlfriend Dtan were both in town, visiting from Vientiane for a few days. Richard had volunteered with Sarah during her first year there. We arranged to meet them that night at a well-known seafood restaurant outside of town. Suanna and I, Sarah, and Oui (who had met us at Starbuck’s) all piled into a taxi. On the way there, Richard called Sarah on her cell phone in order to get directions to the restaurant for his taxi driver. Sarah handed the phone to Oui, who knew her way around better, but while that was going on Oui’s phone rang, so while she was talking to Richard Sarah went fishing in Oui’s purse for it. Meanwhile Oui, finding it too difficult to relay the instructions to Richard, handed Sarah’s phone over to our taxi driver while Richard handed over his phone to *his* taxi driver. Then Sarah handed Oui’s phone to Oui and our driver started relaying instructions to the other one in very rapid Thai. Meanwhile Oui was trying to talk to whoever-it-was that had called her, and she and the taxi driver progressively increased their own volume in order to hear themselves over the other person. It got so you could barely hear yourself think in there – and then they both hung up at exactly the same time. I burst out laughing and everybody looked at me strangely.

The restaurant (Baan Glang Nam, “The House in the Middle of the Water”) fit a universal archetype of The Seafood Place that must apply across all cultures. It was a white-paneled wooden structure with docklike floors and a big open-air balcony that extended over the river. Fortunately my stomach had recovered enough by then that I was ready for more Thai food. I feasted on whole fish and *somtom thai*, a mind-bendingly spicy papaya salad.

## Ayuthaya

When Shakespeare was penning the great works of English Literature over at the Globe, London was, globally speaking, a rural backwater podunk town. The amount of gold in Elizabeth’s palace was easily outweighed by the amount of toxic makeup that the ladies caked on to their faces to hide their age and distract from their bad teeth. At that same moment, Ayuthaya was a wonder of the world – a gigantic metropolis that attracted people from around the world, center of the biggest kingdom in Southeast Asia, with gold and treasure unrivaled by any in the world. For sheer wealth and influence it was the Kingdom of Siam’s golden age, even though politically things were quite a mess, with just about every royal succession involving a flurry of infighting, assassinations, and civil strife.

It all ended in 1767 with a familiar fixture in Thai history – an invasion from Burma. This time the Burmese fought their way into the capital, carted away thousand of slaves, and set fire to everything. What they couldn’t burn, they stole, and what they couldn’t steal, they destroyed. Then, unwilling or unable to sustain their influence that far away from home, they left. In time Siam reestablished itself under the Rama dynasty, first along the Chao Praya river at Thonburi and then in Bangkok, on the safer eastern shore.

The jungle crept over Ayuthaya’s ruins, but it never stopped being a place where people lived. In fact, up until the 1980’s, that’s just what Ayuthaya was – another town in Thailand, not far outside Bangkok. Everyone knew it was the former capital, of course, but the ruins of the ancient city were overgrown, and the folks in town carried on their lives without paying them any mind. But then a combination of foreign archaeological interest and economic strength jump-started interest in Ayuthaya’s historical value, and the jungle was cleared away. Now most of the city is a historical park, though the ancient *chedis* now rise up alongside modern roads and the everyday hustle and bustle of Thai life.

I had been looking forward to visiting Ayuthaya since before we arrived in Thailand, and that Saturday morning we finally got our chance. A few minutes before 8:00, Sarah, Suanna, Oui & I arrived at the train station, where we met Marina, another Thai woman who works at Sarah’s school. At the station, for the first time, I saw flocks of backpacker scum in their natural environment. These are the Westerners who congregate at the ruins and beaches of Southeast Asia, where they can live for months on little more than pocket change. As I had come to expect from white people here, they seemed to be mostly Europeans with an occasional American thrown in, though the English-speaking one we chatted with was Canadian – and, now that I think of it, turned out not to be backpacker scum but a dive instructor from down south. Anyway, “backpacker scum” is the term Sarah used; I don’t know if that’s a translation of a Thai epithet or something she coined herself.

At eight o’clock sharp, a military officer strode into the main terminal and blew a whistle. Everyone stopped, and all the Thai people stood up to face a huge portrait of Rama V that hung at one end of the

hall. The *farong* followed suit in fits and starts, except a few lazy backpackers lying down in the corner. Then the king's anthem started to play through unseen speakers. When it finished, the officer blew his whistle again, and like stopped time starting, everyone returned to their business.

We had only heard the anthem once before, at the movie theater, but apparently it's played every single day at 8:00 and 6:00, even on the city streets, where of course it can't make a dent against Bangkok's general hubbub. I asked a bit more about the current particular king, and learned that he had recently published a book about his dogs. It became an instant bestseller, and t-shirts with pictures of the dogs were hot items on Bangkok's streets. These dogs' names are well-known to the populace, and rumor has it that palace servants must address one of them as "Captain." It's not that people don't realize that writing a book about your dogs is a little unusual, and that Rama IX may be getting a little punchy in his old age – but it's still by the *king*, and they love the king. The man or the office? He's been around for so many years now, the distinction must be getting lost.

Sadly, before we left, Suanna had to come to terms with the fact that she hadn't been feeling well all morning, and an entire day in Ayuthaya, riding a bicycle under the hot sun, wasn't something she thought she was up for. With deep regret she hopped into a taxi back to Sarah's apartment, where she spent the rest of the day catching up on sleep and relaxing by the pool. I missed her camera almost as much as I missed her that day; I can only imagine the photographic magic she could have worked, had she been there with us.

On the train, we met Jamlong, another of Sarah's friends, and our self-appointed guide to the ancient capital.

### **Some Words About Jamlong**

**J**amlong is quiet, composed, thoughtful, and articulate even in English, though he's more prone to watch and listen carefully than to speak. After his mother died of AIDS, he grew up at a Buddhist monastery. He studied Thai literature in college, though he proved himself quite well-versed in art history as well. After college he worked with a woman filming a documentary about Luk Nam, an AIDS orphan at the place where Sarah volunteered. Luk Nam's mother had died of AIDS, which also took her sister's life while the documentary was being filmed. She was understandably wrapped in a tight shell, and Jamlong was the one who got her to open up.

He had always loved Ayuthaya, and when we met him briefly on Christmas Day, he offered to show us around there whenever we decided to go. It was his idea to rent bikes and ride around, his idea of where to stop. He was the one who fielded my interminable stream of questions with patience and attention.

**T**he city of Ayuthaya is built on a big, flat island that's formed at the confluence of three rivers. We rented bikes across the street from the train station (none were quite big enough for me) and headed south and east away from town for our first stop.

Wat Yai Chai Monkhon was one of the older wats in the area – a big brick structure dominated by a single *chedi*. The Ramas copied its style for Wat Phra Kaew and the other Bangkok temples. It was made in honor of the battle of Nong Sarai, a famous military victory against Burma. As the story goes, King Naresuan rode into single combat on war elephants against the Burmese crown prince. According to Wyatt's *A Short History of Thailand*: "As the two elephants closed, the crown prince slashed a glancing blow at Naresuan with his war scythe, whereupon his body lay exposed to a sudden slash of Naresuan's sword. The crown prince was slain, and the Burmese army fell into disarray and retreated toward Kanchanaburi." (Wyatt's book is short on everyday cultural details, but is great for battles and royal politics.)

I asked Jamlong some of the questions about Buddhism that had been bouncing around in my head, including the one about why Burma and Siam were at each other's throats throughout history when they were all Buddhist. It comes down to strains of Buddhism, of course – in Burma, as in China, they practice Mahayana Buddhism. The name itself means "big vehicle"; little personal action is required of the faithful. Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia tend toward Theravada Buddhism, which is stricter, especially for the monks. It's not the first time theological hair-splitting has resulted in open conflict, although here, as elsewhere, land and resources probably provide the main impetus.

Then, just as I was thinking that I was finally getting a handle on Buddhism, I came across the Teddy Bear Shrine. I knew about the concept of the donation-specific shrine, but I had never imagined it like this. Stacked all around the altar were plush toys – lions and tigers and bears, Pooh, Pikachu, and dozens more I couldn't begin to identify. Wind-up toys and other assorted plastic gizmos were scattered amid the multicolored fur. I faced one way, and saw a majestic old ruin, partially restored, jutting up in stark relief against the morning sky. I turned around, and saw a corner of Toys R Us after an earthquake. Who knew?

**O**ur next stop, Wat Phanan Choeng, had a Western-style outer structure, though the original wat dated back to 1344. The air was thick with incense there, and an old monk was leading dozens of folks in prayer in front of a huge sitting Buddha. They sat in columns and held strips of yellow cloth over their heads. Jamlong told me a story about when the temple was founded, and I scribbled in my notebook "Thai prince, Chinese princess, holding breath, all that." I figured I'd remember the details, but they've completely slipped my mind. You may fill in the story yourself.

In Wat Pho it was the clinking of coins; here, the sound that echoed throughout the hall was the rattling of prayer sticks. I made a donation, shook some sticks myself, pulled out one, and then cross-referenced it to find the slip of paper on the wall that told my fortune. I will be like the dragon over the waters, with great power. Travel prospects are good, though I should travel by boat.

We hopped back on our bikes and crossed the bridge to the island proper, then stopped for lunch at a riverside restaurant. It was a fine place except for the muzak, which must have been special Simon & Garfunkel musak made for export only, guaranteed to be thirty percent more cloying than regular muzak.

The general dynamic of the day was as follows: we'd stop somewhere and look around, I'd ask Jamlong lots of questions, and Oui and Marina would do their best to keep Sarah under control, because of her tendency to ricochet off the walls. It was the steroids, of course. She had asked the doctor about them.

“Will they have any effect on me?”

“Well, yes. You will some extra energy.”

“How much?”

“A lot.”

She said it was like a caffeine high without the buzz. She didn't act all that differently – she was just Sarah, only more so. More prone to flail, and often behaving like, as my mom used to say, a “giggle-gork.”

**A**t the Ayuthaya Museum, we looked at a series of Buddha faces and how they changed through the ages. First came the Dvaravati Buddha, clearly more primitive than the others. The Sukhothai Buddha was soft, even a little pudgy for a Thai Buddha, but the Ayuthaya Buddha had stark, well-defined features – a strong Buddha for warlike times. On the one hand it was fascinating to see the bulk of Thai art history encapsulated in the evolution of a single figure, but I must confess that I craved a bit more variety. I lingered longer when examining a sculpture of a garuda bird or a painting of a demon with fiery eyes.

We hopped back on our bikes and wove our way further into the island, passing tourists snapping pictures from the backs of elephants. Our next stop was Wat Phra Si Sanphet, an area which included the ancient palace of Ayuthaya's kings, as well as three massive *chedis*, each holding one of their remains. The ruins reminded me of Chichen Itza in the Yucatan – not because of the style, of course, but in the way they were surrounded by close-cropped grass, and the fact that there weren't really any restrictions on where you could poke around. There's a trade-off, of course, between maintaining the integrity of a historical site and letting people clamber over the ruins. I've come to believe that the clambering is by far the greater virtue. There is something primally cool about being able to stand on a balcony of an ancient temple and imagine who had stood there before you – something far superior to looking at old rocks from across a fence and reading a paragraph of information on a plaque.

I asked Jamlong if there had been any move to build any new *chedi* in Ayuthaya. He made the obvious point that when these structures were built, it required menial work on the part of thousands of laborers – something that was possible only in an era of greater kingly power and religious devotion. “And of slaves,” I thought, but didn't say. Slaves aside, labor was the chief currency of Thailand for much of its history. Outlying provinces paid their taxes primarily in the form of bodies – men whose services were indentured to build a temple or serve in an army for a certain amount of time. It's what made the construction of so many giant structures possible.

A moment etched in memory: We are strolling among ruins little more than rubble, somewhere in the middle of a historical site, so that the roads are out of sight and it's unusually quiet. The bright sun

drenches everything, but at the moment we are walking under the shade of gnarled trees. Oui has been talking about music she likes, and spontaneously starts singing a Joni Mitchell tune. Sarah joins her, and they sing together quietly as we walk, their voices perfectly meshed into one.

Jamlong suggested that we press on to the far side of the island, but after considering how long the ride back would be, the ladies overruled him, and we returned the bikes. We hopped into a tuktuk for our last visit of the day. Wat Chai Wattanaram was built in the early Ayuthaya style, reminiscent of Angkor Wat, with Khmer-style *prang* instead of *chedis* (think corn-cobs instead of bells). Like the rest, this ruin was a pale shadow that hinted at its former glory. Hints of frescoes lined the outer walls, and in one courtyard sat a line of two dozens Buddhas, all beheaded. The brick crumbled. Everything was still and magnificent. Sarah and I climbed steep stairs to a shrine at the top. Inside, pigeons, bats, and swifts shared a chamber where a large Buddha once stood and now only a small figurine sat, surrounded by offerings. From the top we could see rice boats navigating the canal, old Thai-style houses, and the tops of the *chedis* and *prangs* of Ayuthaya jutting out among the trees. Even Sarah was starting to slow down at that point, and so after we climbed back down, we spent a fair bit of time lying on our backs on the lawn, staring up at the sky.

Back at the station, we managed to catch an express train inbound from Isan province, one of Thailand's poorest. It was packed with people of a very different class than those I had been meeting – people who clearly found a couple *farong* on their train an occasion worthy of a bit of gawking. We all hopped off at our respective stops, but made plans to rendezvous again that night at Khao San, once we had picked up Suanna.

## Khao San

**K**hao San is backpacker central, the place where the low-budget tourists gather in cheap hostels before leaving on trains and buses for the beach. It used to be accurately referred to as a backpacker slum, but in recent years it morphed into a trendy Bangkok night spot. Now there are three castes in Khao San – genuine backpacker scum, faux backpacker scum traveling on mom & dad's money, and young, wealthy Thais. The rarest sight was what we were – a mixed group of Thai and *farong*.

The main drag of Khao San was closed to vehicle traffic. Food vendors filled the street, some genuine, others selling things like fried bugs clearly meant to appeal to the newly-arrived backpackers. (“Dude! You just ate a *bug*! Whack!”) Increasingly-expensive hotels, hostels, and bars lined the street.

As we sipped drinks at a streetside bar, my attention wandered from the conversation to the dizzying array of people moving up and down the street. I saw several young Thais dressed completely in biker leather, touting a brand new deodorant. I also saw an old, hunched-over Thai man playing “Happy Birthday” on his harmonica while wheeling two fierce-looking chihuahuas dressed in Santa Claus red-and-white in a baby carriage. After that, really, what else was there? Suanna and I (the old fogeys) went home, and Sarah soldiered on into the night with Oui and Jamlong.

## Last Day in Thailand



I could say that our last day was one of contrasts, but what day in Bangkok isn't?

Sarah volunteers for the Human Development Foundation, at one of their homes for AIDs orphans in Klong Toey, on the seedier side of Bangkok. Our first images of Sarah in Thailand were the pictures she sent of herself surrounded by a dozen girls of all ages, beaming smiles. The girls were out when we arrived, though, so Sarah could only show us around the building. At every step she had to explain that it really wasn't this nice when she first arrived – the floors weren't finished, there wasn't a room full of iMacs, etc. HDF has come into some money, largely due to the efforts of Father Joe, its founder and archetypically micromanaging director.

We caught up with Sarah's girls at the Mercy Center, a community center for the orphans, as well as an AIDS hospice. They were busy in preparation for an upcoming Sports Day, dividing themselves up and planning their team colors and chants. When we arrived you could see the self-control it took them to keep their places in line and not jump up to surround Sarah.

There was a lot that was painful to see there. We walked through the hospice itself and saw the long rows of beds filled with people withering day by day, barely holding on. We saw a room full of boys, all orphans, none older than three, sprawled all over their room for naptime. Many preferred the floor to their beds. What was hopeful was the number of people who were working there, and their unhesitating generosity with their time and energy. I expected them to mostly be Western missionary-types, but we were the only *farong* in sight. Cultural differences couldn't mask the universal traits of a volunteer-driven organization.

I'm not one for cutesy baby antics, but my heart did warm when we came across a couple one-year olds. The ladies who were watching them encouraged them to say "hi" to us, and they smiled bashfully and brought their hands together in a *wai*. That's the traditional Thai greeting – the palms come together as low as the chest or as high as the nose, depending on the relative status of the person you're greeting. (When *wai*-ing the Buddha, the hands go up to the forehead.) Thai kids are taught to *wai* at a very young age, and their cuteness factor when doing it is off the scale. I didn't feel comfortable enough to *wai* when I was there, but I must confess that I've been caught throwing out a *wai* or two since I've been back. I know, I know, I might as well wear an "ASK ME ABOUT MY TRIP TO THAILAND" sign around my neck. But as greetings go, I really like it. It has more formality than the wave, more elegance than the handshake, and is somehow more intimate than either.

After lounging by the pool in the afternoon, we got dressed up and met Oui at the Sukhothai Hotel for High Tea. It's one of Bangkok's nicest hotels – the sort of place where the guys working behind the desk are better dressed than most of the guests. We sat at a low table in a room adjoining the hotel lobby. High Tea consisted of an hors-d'oeuvres buffet on one side and an all-chocolate buffet on the other, manned by a real-life French chocolatier. He stood by a tray full of different chocolate shavings, making hot cocoa to order. The beautiful, elegantly attired woman who brought us tea served it while kneeling, according to tradition. I tasted what I'm certain is the best ice cream I've ever had in my life, along with some really great tea and even better sushi. Afterwards we posed for each other's snapshots sitting on the fancy hotel furniture. We stopped at the nighttime flower market on the way home, but

made a point of getting back relatively early – to make it to the airport on time, we needed to be out the door by 3:30 a.m.

And then, home. The return voyage was a haze of Immodium and sleeping pills, tolerable except for an awful layover in Detroit. Suanna was already talking about when our next trip would be. This was her first voyage overseas, and both of us had been a little worried about how she would take it. There was a time in her life when this sort of new experience would have terrified her, but the person she was is not the person she has become. She was on fire while she was there, loving every minute of it. She bloomed. Watching her embrace each new experience with open arms and open eyes was a wonder and a privilege.

That last night, after packing, I had stepped out onto Sarah's porch and taken a last long look at the city. It came through as a network of lights, extending to the horizon and beyond. Cars and motorcycles wove around each other on Ekkamai street below, and in the distance, the skytrain pulsed along silently. It was a clear enough night that even a few stars were visible. In that moment, I could imagine myself as a seasoned expat, across the world from the place of my birth, but perfectly at home right where I was. Being overseas again recharged a battery I didn't even realize had drained. I would never have thought to travel to Thailand if Sarah hadn't been there, but it turned out to be a place of constantly unfolding wonder, easy to love and impossible to forget.