

**Sleeping with Ghosts**

**By Francis Chang**

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## Sleeping With Ghosts

Monkol and Num left Chiang Mai long before dawn. They had been planning this trip for some time and at last the day had come. Both were students at CMU, the University of Chiang Mai, completing their final year before taking their BA in tourism.

Highway 11 to Lamphun is straight and flat and they made good time on their motor scooters, which although old, were well maintained and in good running order. Traffic was quite light and they ‘jumped’ many of the red traffic lights along the way.

After Lamphun the road began to rise with many bends as it climbed onwards and upwards into the mountains separating Lamphun and Lampang. The rising sun was directly in their eyes as they crested the mountain and they pulled over into the service centre to refresh themselves and wait for the sun to rise a little.

Monkol handed Num a bottle of still cold water as they lay on a grassy bank outside of the service centre.

“How long do you think that it will take us to get to Lampang?”

“Hmm. No more than an hour – it is downhill for most of the way and the road is in good condition. We’ll fill up with benzene at the petrol station there. We can load up with snacks and drinks at the 7-11.”

“Do you think that we will make Tak by nightfall?”

“For sure, maybe we will even stop at Thoen for lunch.”

This adventure had been planned for many weeks and Num and Monkol had been inspired by Yann, a French student at CMU, who

had decided to drive his motorbike to the South. It had taken him several days hard driving to reach Bangkok where he changed his plan and caught a bus the rest of the way. He was undecided where to leave his bike in Bangkok and in a moment of bravado he drove it to the car park and the Central Police Station. He made the appearance of entering the building and suddenly stopped and asked a police officer if his bike would be okay in the car park.

“Of course!” said the policeman. “This is a police station.”

Encouraged by the officer’s reply, he left the bike at the car park while he was in the South and eventually caught the train back to Chiang Mai with the motorbike in the goods van.

Monkol and Num were amused at Yann’s story and changed their mind about driving all of the way to Bangkok. Instead they decided to break their journey in Tak and Nakon Sawan and then return via Sukhothai to see the Buddhist Temple ruins.

They were both looking forward to their overnight at Tak. They had booked a room at a very reasonable rate at the Viang Tak Riverside Hotel.

The drive from Lampang to Tak took nearly five hours. Some of the time the road was through a plateau of rice fields . At others, it wound its way through the forested hills. Everywhere there were signs alerting everyone to the danger of forest fires.

As they passed the turn to Bumbhipol Dam Monkol called out to Nun-

“Hey shall we take a side trip and go and see the big lake there?”

Num replied “I think that we might run out of time and I don’t want to drive through the mountains in the dark. Tell you what, we’ll stop on the way back.”

After a long straight stretch of road they arrived at Thoen. They turned off from Highway 11 and found a small restaurant.

“Tell you one thing Num, my bum really aches!”

Monkol replied. “That’s nothing! Wait until we get on the road to Nakhon Sawan! Say Num – didn’t one of the Ajarns at the university come to live in Thoen? I think that his wife came from here.”

“Yes – I think so. Let’s find out.”

Num called over the owner of the restaurant who had taken their order.

“Hello. We are students at Chiang Mai University. We seem to remember that one of the Ajarns, a medical professor and a Farang, who left CMU came to live here. Are there many Farangs living in Thoen?”

The owner replied. “Yes, I think that I know who you mean. Ajarn Graham. He lives on the other side of the village. This year at the festival and carnival he had his movie camera and filmed everyone”

Num and Monkol looked at each other. “What do you think? Should we go and say hello? Maybe he would remember us.”

“I know we are almost at Tak but same thing applies as the Dam.” said Monkol. “ We really don’t know how long we will be. Let’s stop on the way home.”

They finished their lunch, climbed on their motorbikes and headed for Tak.

As its name indicates – the Viang Tak Riverside is a hotel overlooking the Ping River and the river at Tak is very wide. Num and Monkol had no problem finding the hotel as it was well sign-posted from the main road. The hotel is constructed of two buildings, one newly built and the other much older. As they were staying on a promotional low price they were given a room in the older section. After finding their room and leaving their bags they went exploring.

For a while they sat on the wall overlooking the lido man made lake, with their feet in the water. Bored - they went in search of the night market but looked in vane. Ultimately they returned to the hotel and went to the swimming pool.

“I don’t want to talk bad Monkol, but although Tak city is very large – there does not seem to be much here. Just a lot people driving through in all directions.” Thy sat for a while looking across the river and the various boats coming and going and eventually decided on having an early night.

Early the following morning they back-tracked to the village of Ban Tak. The roads were busy with many motorbikes, trucks and buses going in all directions. Tak is a large crossroads where several highways, including the road to the Thai border with Myanmar and the North-south Highway 1 from Chiang Mai to Bangkok. When they reached Ban Tak they found the old Wat Phra Brorom that entered. A Monk heard their Tamboon and blessed them.

Feeling light of spirit and full of adventure they drove back to Tak and over the long bridge and road to Kampaeng Phet.

Their euphoria was not to last. The road was in a dismal state of repair with vast tracks without tarmac and full of pot holes. Their grueling drive continued by-passing the town of Kampaeng Phet and continuing south.

As they crossed the flatlands between Kampaeng Phet and Nakok Sawan, Num suddenly indicated for Monkol to stop.

“What’s up Num?”

Num pointed ahead to the horizon. “Monkol – whatever do you make of that?”

He was pointing to a strange rock formation which had just become visible, on both sides of the road, some kilometers ahead.

Monkol looked to where Num was pointing. “I have no idea but tell you what.... let’s go and find out!”

They revved up their motorbikes and sped ahead down Highway 1 to find a solution to the mystery.

On the left hand side of the road was a small mountain which was daunting and completely out of place with the plain that lie around it. On the right hand side of the road were several smaller hills. All of their appearances conjured up the word ‘Jagged’ in Num and Monkol’s minds. Just how many years ago did the earth erupt and give birth to these incredible craggy mounds?

“Monkol – have you any idea what these are?”

Monkol shook his head. “But I would like to go and see the big one close-up. There must be a road somewhere.”

Num and Monkol decided to drive on until they found either a road or someone that they could ask.

They found a small shop selling a variety of drinks, snack and toiletries. While topping up their supplies – they asked the old man serving them about the mountain.

“That’s ‘**Khao No**’. Its very famous and made out of limestone. Many years ago King Rama V visited and stayed overnight at the top. At the bottom of the mountain is the Wat Khao Lo and a shrine. If you climb the steps to the top of the mountain you will find a large Buddha Image in an even larger cave.”

“Thank you Lung, we would like to visit the Wat. Which way would we drive there from your shop?”

“Thanks that’s easy – there is an old road leading to the Wat and the mountain a few kilometers along the road. But be careful as it is not paved and in very poor condition.”

Num looked at Monkol and realized that they were thinking the same thing.”It can’t be worse than the road from Tak!”

Num smiled when he paid the old man and thanked him. Together they loaded their provisions onto their motorbikes.

“By the way Lung – how far is Nakhon Sawon from here?”

“About 50 kilometres. If you are staying there, my daughter has a guesthouse.”

Promising to return, Num and Monkol set off in the direction of the road to the mountain.

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