

**Chiang Mai Through The Looking Glass**

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**Free-ebooks.net Edition**

V2 11/10/2012

### Thailand Re-visited

A number of years have passed since I originally wrote 'The Q&B Guide to Thailand'. These years have been filled with events – many good, some painful, some sad - but none of them boring.

The following is an account, in no particular order, which may give you an insight into my life in Chiang Mai and Thailand.



## Chapter 1 – The Migration

### ‘Mum’

Sometimes in life, you experience great concern over a forthcoming event, and when it comes to the day – well.....

Mum had been ‘uming and ahing’ about coming out to Thailand for some time. Both my brother and I had encouraged her, knowing that we could provide loving family support rather than the isolation that would increase, if she remained. Life in England had changed dramatically and Mum had experienced a few hiccups with her health. Over the years Mum had welcomed Thais in the family with open arms, and had much experience of Thai customs, culture and food. – She loved it all. Finally she decided to join us, and it was quite a brave decision for a lady eighty years old.

I had been clearing the family home, at Kew near London, for some months of many, many years of clutter and this had become tantamount to an archeological dig. One of Mum’s joys in life was visiting the car boot sale on Sunday mornings and she had become some what of a hoarder. Many times I had to suspend work after uncovering what appeared to be a treasure trove at the bottom of the dig. Deciding what to jettison, what to give to charity and what to pack-up to bring with us – this was the challenge. It reached the point when the charity shops and also the local church would place a ‘Closed for Lunch’ sign when they saw me coming, (time and time again), with arms stacked full of boxes. The boxes were full of books, trinkets, artifacts, swords, prints and, frankly a lot of rubbish.

Cassie, the family dog, was one of the last things to be sorted and packed. I had dropped her off at the airport’s local kennels to be housed in her travel box, for the flight the next morning.

On the morning of our departure, all of the neighbours gathered to say goodbye. Mum had lived at the family home, on and off all of her life – so knew everyone, and despite what she may have been feeling inside, she appeared cheerful. That couldn’t be said for the neighbours. One Irish lady was inconsolable. She had been to Mass the evening before and had asked for Mum to be remembered in many masses to come. She presented Mum with a religious medal which ‘would keep her safe from the natives and heathens in the jungle’.

### Come Fly With Me

Mum was the wife of a military man, so she was no stranger to flying and travelling. Still, when we considered her problems with high blood pressure and the risk of deep vein thrombosis, we decided that the cost of traveling in business class, was a good investment. In fact, due to the good nature of my brother we managed to do a quick shuffle with the boarding passes and he sacrificed his Business Class seat for Mum.

The business class cabins on the Thai Airways B-747, are on two levels. The cabin on the upper level - ‘The Bubble’ seems to be more popular, so Mum and I had the entire downstairs cabin to ourselves. Wanlapa, an old friend and work mate from Thai Airways International, had walked Mum down the air bridge and escorted to her to her seat. Pom, another old friend who worked in ground operations, came up to assure Mum that Cassie was secure in the hold of the aircraft and quite happy.

Mum sat there drinking a glass of champagne and was thrilled looking out of the window at all of the activity around the aircraft.

Once we were airborne, I showed Mum how to work the entertainment system and she was fascinated by the dynamic map representing the aircraft’s position. In the downstairs cabin of

business class, the flight attendants set up an open bar and you are free to help yourself. Mum had always liked Campari Soda and she spotted a bottle at the bar. I went over to mix Mum a drink and when I returned, she had moved to the aisle seat.

“Wouldn’t you like the window seat Mum?”

“No, Love... its a lot easier from here to get up to stretch my legs.”

I could see that there was going to be a well travelled path to and from the bar and that the Campari might well evaporate somewhat - no doubt due to the rarefied atmosphere.

Many years ago, I worked for an airline and once arranged for an elderly princess of the British Royal Family to travel with us, First Class to Canada, with her Ladies in Waiting and RDPG officers (Royal Diplomatic Protection Officers).

Also, travelling in the cabin was one of our own security officers.

After the trip – he related to us, some of the things which had occurred. The Princess, although having her own favourite brand of whisky on board, sampled all of the aperitifs, wines and after dinner drinks. When the toiletry bags were distributed, she opened hers and inspected every item, and, as against usually handing it to the Lady in Waiting, put in into her handbag. She frequently opened the window shade to see out. In those days the sunlight used to affect the movie image being displayed on a cabin screen.

And so it was with Mum. Everything was a novelty for her and she enjoyed the flight to the maximum, sampled everything and even went to the toilets several times to retrieve the complimentary lotions and potions. I usually have a wobbly pop (drink) or two, eat the first meal and then sleep the rest of the flight. Mum ate both meals and also the sandwich snacks in between. After the flight, I was shattered, but Mum was the first off from the aircraft. We had requested a wheelchair for Mum, but she was having none of it and happily walked up the air bridge and into Thailand.

#### Welcome To Your New Home

Mum took to Thailand like a fish to water, and after an initial adjustment, settled into the house that Tack, the personal assistant that I had hired, had found us out in the country in Saraphee, a village close to Chiang Mai. We both had some surprises. What we thought to be monkeys calling – turned out to be a bird. At night Mum was upset to hear an old man coughing – It turned out to be the large and ugly Tokay lizard.

Bliethe Spirit? – Our house was an old Thai teak wood house, in wonderful condition, with every modern convenience inside. The gardens were beautiful with two Rai of land (nearly an acre). At the front of the house Mum would keep Cassie busy and exercised with a tennis bat and ball. At the back of the house was a small canal with a shaded, concrete bench where Mum, Cassie, Tack and I used to sit and watch the fish. One day we were walking back to the house when I saw a very small wooden house on a stand. I asked Tack as to what it was. She replied –

‘A San Pra Poom *Spirit House*’.

‘It may be a silly question Tack, but who lives there?’

Tack, as she would many times in the future, helped us with our education of Thai culture and traditions. It turns out that most Thais believe that there are Spirits everywhere including water, land and trees – all over the place. A ‘Spirit House’ is found at nearly every house and building. The Spirits who live there are Pee Ban *Spirits of the House*. By paying respect and making daily small offerings – the Spirits, hopefully, will watch over things, remain appeased and not do

anything naughty.

Since then, I have seen Spirit Houses of all shapes and sizes, not only in gardens, but also outside of hotels, restaurants and supermarkets. Every morning you can see someone place a plate of offerings with lighted joss sticks, paying respect and making a Wai. The Wai can mean many things ranging from a greeting, to a show of respect and even an apology. It is made with both hands held at chest or face level – the higher the hands are held, the greater level of indication. There are also Spirit Houses close to the road at ‘Accident Black Spots’. What worries me - are the number of drivers whose hands leave the steering wheel, when passing the Spirit House, to Wai. I wonder how many of them rapidly join the other Spirits in the House!

I had to return to the U.K. for a few weeks to attend to family business and Tack had an appointment with the Royal Family to receive her university graduation certificate. We made provision for Mum to be cared for but forgot the daily respect ritual at the garden Spirit House. While we were away Mum had her first accident in Thailand – chasing after Cassie’s ball. The accident resulted in a broken knee and ankle. Blithe Spirits – perhaps not!

After Mum was admitted to RAM2 hospital in Chiang Mai, I really did not expect her to walk again. But twice a day, she was rolled down to ‘Exercise’ – the physiotherapy room, on a gurney, and with a combination of sheer determination and ‘True Grit’ – she managed it. My brother, Tack and I would visit each day, taking along some Thai crepes or banana fritters and the results of Mum’s shopping list. She would ‘tip’ each of the nurse’s assistants and porters with a chocolate Kit-Kat – each time that one of them helped her. You know – I don’t think that any of them actually ate the chocolate but rather saved it and later sold it to supplement their very low incomes. You might imagine that there was no shortage of volunteers to help Mum.

Despite the pain barrier that she went through with the various physio exercises - Mum’s time in the ‘Exercise’ room delighted her. She was able to get out of her hospital room and although none of the girls in ‘Exercise’ spoke much English and Mum certainly no Thai – they were somehow able to communicate. They would watch Thai T.V. soap operas – some of which were pretty gruesome or simply gossip about their lives. One Therapist, in particular, Mum called Pego. A lot later, when I started to learn Thai, I found this out to mean – Pee *older* Gope *Frog* – her nickname. Pee Gope was quite an attractive lady and a very competent physiotherapist. Every day, she would complain to Mum as to how badly her ‘boyfriend’ treated her. Going out, drinking and gambling all night, taking her motorbike and pawning it and generally being a real louse. Mum would say

“Don’t worry dear, remember AMAB. All Men Are Bastards and I can tell you that I have met a few in my time.”

This went on for quite a few weeks, until the ‘boyfriend’ visited Pee Gope in the ‘Exercise’ room. Sorry Mum – double take, Boyfriend turns out to be Girlfriend in cross-dress. Oh Dear!

Quite understandably Mum used to get bored in her room. Although we provided as many home comforts as possible, DVD and Video, kettle and tea making facility – Mum liked to be out and about. She spent much time in the nurse’s station which was next to her room, but as much as they loved chatting to her, they were really too busy.

Eventually, we hired Mum’s first Carer – Joy. She stayed with Mum at the hospital and became her constant companion and person to push her wheelchair. I know that it sound a bit bizarre and macabre but Mum would always like sitting in her wheelchair at the entrance to the hospital, next to the Emergency section. From this vantage point she could watch the ambulances come and go and also the busy intersection, just outside of the hospital. Many days the police had situated themselves there to stop motorbikes of which the driver may not have helmets. Mum

would sit mesmerized.

## Chapter Two

### 'Its Not What You Say – It's The Way That You Say It

During the mid-seventies, I began to travel out to Thailand to visit my brother and his new family. My case was always stuffed full, like a Red Cross Parcel, with all sorts of goodies which were then unavailable in Thailand – Bounty chocolate bars, apples, Dundee Cake and toys for my nephews. The supply was always somewhat depleted by the time I arrived in Chiang Mai, as some of the items always went to 'curious' customs officers. For some reason, apples held an intense fascination for them.

Being a retired airline employee, I traveled on airline employee standby tickets, and getting on a flight was pretty hit and miss. I spent a long time waiting at Don Muang, the old Bangkok Airport. I even had my own seat. Every few minutes there would be an announcement which always began with 'Brostah' *Attention Please, or Please Note* and made at such a loud volume. I must have heard so many thousand announcements that this word was indelibly committed to my memory and became the first Thai word that I learnt. I even used to say it in my sleep.

When I migrated to Thailand, many years later, Tack, my P/A, began the thankless task of starting me down the road to learning Thai. I am not sure if that road will ever end as I am still orally mangling the language today. I have had to redesign my tongue, by attaching exercise weights to it while I sleep, to accommodate the various tones in the Thai language.

Tack would pronounce a word with the correct tone –

“MAiiee”

I would eagerly respond:

“MAIIEe”

No.. “MAiiee”

“Wasn't that what I said?”

No... you said “MAIIEe”

Really? It sounded like “MAiiee” to me !

Taking into account the various tones and whether the vowel is extended or not, there are at least six ways that the word 'Mai' can sound. In fact you can make up a sentence –

“Mai, Mai, Mai, Mai, Mai Mai”

*New wood does not burn well – Right?*

That sentence became my mantra and when we used to go to the temple, when everyone else was chanting Buddhist Pali – I was chanting “Mai, Mai, Mai, Mai, Mai, Mai”.

My, my !!!

### The Elephant

I decided one day that leaning nursery rhymes in Thai might help me. Full of enthusiasm, I rushed to the office and asked the girls, who I worked with, if they could teach me some Thai nursery rhymes or songs for children. They sat there and shook their heads – “No such thing in Thailand”

A year passed and one evening, an Australian friend of ours came into the office carrying a didgeridoo. He was a nice guy but a little eccentric, intending to entertain the tourists by playing the thing at the Walking Street Market.

He sat down and gave us a rendition. The girls were absolutely amazed, having never seen or

heard a didgeridoo before. They thought it sounded like an elephant. Nick's eyes lit up and he sang a song called –

‘Chang, Chang Chang’ Elephant, Elephant, Elephant.

Chang is also the word for a brand of Thai beer, so I suppose it equally could have been – Beer, Beer, Beer.

I asked the girls what the song meant. They said it was the student song. Great! Why didn't you tell me before? Still I was delighted as the song is short and quite easy to remember. It has become my party piece.

Elephant elephant elephant  
Have you my darling seen an elephant?  
The elephant, it is quite big  
With a long nose called trunk  
It has fangs underneath the trunk called tusks  
It has ears, eyes and a long tail.

And The Frog Song

Latter day my family advised me of another charming song for young people – The Frog song:

“Frog – why must you sing?”  
“I must because I have to – because my stomach hurts!”  
“Why does your stomach hurt?”  
“Because rice is raw!”  
“Why do you eat raw rice?”  
“Because the fire it suppress.”  
“Why must you suppress the fire?”  
“Because the firewood is wet”  
“Why is the firewood wet?”  
“Because the rain must fall.”  
“Why must the rain fall?”  
“Because the frog have to sing!”

Okay, perhaps it loses a lot in the translation but it is still a charming song!

#### A Slight Set-back

So far, so good. I was feeling ridiculously proud of myself. Usually in the office, I would tune out the girls chat until I heard the words ‘Khun Frank’ mentioned (Khun being a polite prefix to a name and holds much respect). Then my big ears would revolve like radar antenna to listen in to what they were saying. They soon caught onto this and would change to local dialect which was totally unintelligible to me. I had learned ‘Central’ Thai as spoken, for example, in Bangkok. Many of the words in Chiang Mai dialect are different:

Nose - Bangkok	Jamouk	Chiang Mai	Whodung
Delicious - Bangkok	Aroy	Chiang Mai	Lam
Goodbye - Bangkok	Sawasdee Kha	Chiang Mai	Sawasdee Goow

The difficulty is that it doesn't end there. Beam, and a number of my other friends come from Khon Kaen in Issan. Same situation. When talking to their families, they change to Issan dialect.

## Delicious - Issan Saap

So three for the price of one.

Something that I have found curious is a case of 'Watch your R's'.

The Thai alphabet has a perfectly good letter for the R sound called 'Ror Rua' *Boat*. For some reason Thais rarely use it. So the word Aroy is spoken Áloy. The word for Westerner Farang, is frequently pronounced Falang.

Now many of my family and friends will tell you with glee, that I am deaf as a post. I always, defensively, reply to them that they mumble – but, hand on heart, there is more than a grain of truth in this. For many years, before compulsorily required Health and Safety ear muffs – I worked on the airport ramp and tarmac, around noisy jet turbine engines. Too stupid or proud to stuff my fingers into my ears, I have lost some 20 per cent of my hearing over certain frequencies. In the early days of mobile telephones, I did not have a clue they were ringing. It was only when Cassie, my sheep dog, became weary of the constant irritating ring and would bark, that I was alerted to a call. Now more modern mobiles have louder ringing tones at audible frequencies – I usually have no problem. But even today Cassie goes crazy when a telephone rings.

Why am I telling you this? Well, Beam has a new friend. When Beam introduced me to her I heard her name as Took Yair *Large Lizard*. Strange, but then most Thai nicknames are peculiar and frequently bear no resemblance to the named person. Time passed, and she never reacted for a month, until one day Beam's friend asked me why I called her *Large Lizard*.

'Errm... Isn't that your name?'

'No... it's Joop Jang *Great Kiss*'

Whoops! Since then I attend regular courses on Sign Language in Thai.

### My Family and Other Animals

Thai's proper names are long and usually unpronounceable. Hence some bright spark many years ago suggested adopting nicknames by which they use day to day. Sometimes the nickname applies to the person. Other times...your guess is as good as mine. My old girlfriend's name was Gai – *chicken*. Her cousin was Nok – *bird*, one friend was Gope – *frog* and another Gung – *Shrimp*. So there you have it all in one.

Frequently you will meet a Lek – *Small*..... who is rather tall or fat or a Yai – *Big*....who is minute. Dao – *Star* and Meaw – *Cat*..... both work for me.

Thai is a very polite language and the preface Khun will be used to address someone. Hence I am called Khun Frank and will answer... Khun Dao..or Khun Meaw. The address can also be age specific. As they are younger than me. I might say Nong (young) Dao or Nong Meaw. If they address someone older then the preface is Pee. So Dao, who is younger, will call Meaw....Pee Meaw.

The language is gender specific. You will hear the word Khap often if a male speaker and Khah if a female is speaking.

### Farangs - A lot to do about Nothing

Westerners, in Thailand, are called Farang by Thais and my brother detests the word and being called a Farang. He's been in Thailand for nearly forty years and, apart from looking western, probably thinks more like a Thai than... well ... a Thai. Personally I don't have a problem and would rather be called a Farang than a Caucasian – which somehow, to me, always sounds like a relative of a Klingon in Star Trek. I acknowledge that despite semantics, use of various words



may cause much grief to many folk, especially regarding race, disabilities or profanities. Sensitivity Training now features highly in many Western Country's Developmental Training Programmes.

In my own case, I don't think that I am too sensitive. I am old, and prefer that word than to be called a 'Senior'. No disputing that I am fat, and similarly – I have no wish to be referred to as 'Gravitationally Challenged'. Curiously in Thai Language as in English words can be selected and used, either in blunt or more 'polite' ways.

Fat 'Ooan'  
Chubby 'Pom Pui'  
Cuddly 'Sewee-Newee'

There is some dispute as to how and where the word Farang derived. Some will say the word originated from the Indo-Persian word Farangi meaning foreigner. Others that it refers to a French connection. Whichever, it is commonly used when applied to Westerners.

In Chiang Mai, there are a group of Westerners who play softball every Saturday. They call the team – The Farangotans. The collective noun for a group of Ferang or perhaps we will always be primates at heart.

Interestingly, the Thai word Kee may sometimes be used as a link to other words. This word in its base form means.. well.. Poo or Ka-Ka.

Thai language uses it as a link word to produce many other interesting meanings:

Kee Giat *Lazy*  
Kee Neaow *Stingy*  
Kee Ray *Ugly*  
Kee Mah *Dog Shit*  
Kee Kwai *Bull Shit* as in that's a load of

And finally:

Farang Kee Nok *Ferang Bird Shit* or a Pond Life Ferang

Now that is an interesting and an apt expression. Within Thailand, and of course Chiang Mai, there are many 'Who Walk Among Us', but in this case easily seen by their social habits. Frequently seen with a bottle of beer in their hands and mouth at ten o'clock in the morning. Leering at all and sundry who may pass and chanting lurid comments at those who may be of the opposite or in many cases the same sex. Still, at the same sentinel position 12 hours later until finally they collapse into their own resting place to re-group into the early hours.

### Chapter Three

#### 'Take Your Life In Your Hands'

Despite all counsel, I have ended up with three motorbikes. Admittedly I am now older and wiser, bear the scars and rarely ride them, as I have found out the hard way that I should have stuck to owning and driving cars.

I started riding motorbikes as a young man – went the then, usual route of a provisional license and a difficult test to obtain the full license. Bought all of the clobber including a crash helmet,

by which – had I jumped off of the Tower of London, my head would have survived, if nothing else. A full sheepskin first world war airman's jacket, gloves and boots. Was I prepared !!!! I drove a variety of bikes over the years. In the initial days, some of the famous English 'Classics' – BSA – Norton – Bonneville. Then came the Honda invasion. I had no apprehension about driving a motorbike in Thailand. After all, Thais drive on the same side of the road as us. Really? Was I in for a big surprise!

Thais drive in a very different way, are quite happy about it and don't see it as a problem. They see the problem as the Farang.

In many rural areas the motorbike is the family's sole transport and the entire family will somehow seat themselves on a motorbike, including the doggy in the front basket. It follows then, that the children, from a very early age, are accustomed and 'confident' of being on the bike. They are quite happy from the age of eight years up to jump on the bike, start up and off they go. And that is the crunch, pun intended. Thai road statistics show that nearly thirty people die from motorbike accidents, every day. They receive no formal training either in driving discipline or regulations and pick it up as they go along. Although things are gradually changing with more police road blocks – many Thais do not hold a driving license.

Driving against the flow of traffic, along the pavement, on the wrong side of the road and the wrong way up one way streets, is par for the course. So is pulling out into the traffic, from a side street, without checking for oncoming vehicles. Use of directional indicators is optional, as is stopping for a red light or performing U-Turns, where none are permitted. Use of mobile telephones while driving, both making and receiving calls and texting is common practice.

Car drivers present different challenges. Most Thais would regard, braking distance, if described to them, as nuclear physics.

One of their favourite tricks is to come roaring up behind you, while you are keeping the braking distance between yourself and the car in front, and flash their lights. Should you not wish to, or be unable to move over, they will get into the left hand lane and at the first opportunity, they will shoot forward and cut straight in front of you. Ironically, in world of bizarre 'Grand Prix', ambulances on emergency call are totally disregarded –despite sirens and flashing lights.

Being a pedestrian has its own hazards. Chiang Mai has installed many pedestrian crossings, complete with timed traffic lights. Even with a red light to halt traffic and a green for the pedestrian to cross – many bikes and cars ignore these totally and continue gung-ho. Matador training in weaving and dodging is a definite benefit for survival.

Not sure as to what it achieves but its all part of the game.

Many Farang become quite upset about this situation, but the bottom line is we are as guests in Thailand, and although some things may gradually change, like more frequent use of helmets. Others will take far longer to change – if ever.

Interesting though is the custom for many young ladies who are in the pillion seat. Frequently they ride side-saddle with grace and elegance. When I first saw this I was terrified on their behalf but it is if they are super-glued to the saddle!

#### Police Road Blocks

Now here is a strange thing. The police in Chiang Mai are rather like lions, in that if they are hungry – they will feed. If they are full, then you can usually walk or ride by them. More and more frequently we are seeing police road blocks. Some would say in support of the stricter driving regulations. The more cynical would say this usually occurs at the end of the month when they want 'Tea Money'. The police are very clever in where they set up the road blocks.

Sometimes around the Klong *Canal* of the Old City – immediately around the turn in the road, so there is no escape. All riders of motorbikes without helmets are stopped and ‘fined’. Having said that, I have seen many a pretty girl ride off after an exchange of a telephone number. Once away from the road block, I have rarely seen an individual policeman stop a motorbike. Frequently the police, themselves will drive without helmets. Even more curious is that once the sun sets, most of the police disappear and most motorbike drivers take off their helmets.

The day that my luck ran out I had been living for a year or so down by the beach, some 18 kilometres past Rayong, on the Eastern side of the Gulf of Thailand. I didn’t always want to drive down from Chiang Mai, so I looked around for another motorbike to buy. At that time all of the big supermarkets were only in Rayong town – so it made sense to find one with a sidecar attached to bring back the shopping.

I eventually found what I was looking for and Vince, a good mate and ex-motorbike mechanic, gave the bike the once over before I bought it to make sure that it was a good deal. It was. Vince asked me if I had ever ridden a Combo (Motorbike Combination with Sidecar) before. I told him that I hadn’t but fully understood the principle of careful cornering when turning right – to prevent a turn-over. Vince gave me the thumbs up and off I went, very carefully getting used to the handling and cornering technique.

All went fine until the day I returned to the Condo car park. I couldn’t have been driving more than a few miles an hour, with an empty sidecar. But it is always the long shots that catch you out and the sidecar wheel went up the curb and up and over went the sidecar and bike with me underneath.

The car park security man thought that it was a stunt in a movie, but helped get the bike off of me. I stood there dazed but, at that time, feeling no pain. Apart from bruising, the only injury that I seemed to have was gravel rash on my leg. It really didn’t look that serious and I had lost enthusiasm for driving the bike with sidecar to the clinic - so I decided to treat myself, and clean, disinfect and dress the wound. Big mistake. Several days later the wound had turned septic which involved a daily trip to the clinic, for two weeks, to have the infection scraped and cleaned. Sometimes I never learn. I removed the sidecar from the bike and have kept the bike to this day as a run around.

The funny thing is that bike is an old Suzuki two-stroke, which billows blue smoke when driven and has literally been round the block many, many times. However, even if I leave it standing for a few months, on full choke it will still kick-start, first time every time. That’s more than can be said for my automatic, electric start, auto choke Yamaha Novo. After a week of non-use, it takes a team of mechanics using electric shock defibrillation to revive it back to life.

Thai Tattoo – This was a shock to the system. I had often wondered as to why so many Thais had some sort of ‘scar’, usually on the calf of their leg. I had put this down to some kind of vaccination they had received when they were young. Then came the day that I too was branded. A lot of folk, including myself, ride in shorts, with bare legs. It doesn’t take a lot of common sense to be careful of not getting too close to a hot exhaust pipe. Guess I wasn’t in school the day they gave out common sense. To this day I can recall the sound of sizzling and a smell of roast meat.

To receive one Thai Tattoo is unlucky and unfortunate. To receive two – is plain stupid. Guess who has two? One, on the front of my right leg and one on the back.

Young Ben were some Thai words which I learnt fairly quickly after starting to drive the motorbikes, These words mean *Flat Tyre*. Not sure if it’s the heat, the pot holes or poor quality of inner tube manufacture but the tubes usually deteriorate at the rubber joint around the valve

and the inner tube is shredded by the time you can stop,

Flat tyres become a way of life if you ride motorbikes in Thailand. Fortunately, in the towns there is a motorbike repair shop on every corner. Out of town – it can be a hot, dusty walk down a long winding road.

I was fairly lucky when it happened to me once, in the middle of nowhere. I started the long trudge to a repair shop some miles away, when a pick-up truck pulled up. The Thai guy and his girlfriend didn't even ask. They lifted the bike into the back of the pick-up, then lifted me in after it, and drove me and the bike to the repair shop. They wouldn't even let me buy them a cold drink.

See - there is a God and a Buddha!

#### Chapter Four - 'If You're Hungry – You'll Eat It'

Part of my childhood was spent at my Dad's home in the southern part of the United States. Although, my Dad was a military man, the family was very poor farmers who lived in the foothills of the Smokey Mountains. I learnt very early, in life to eat what was put in front of me – or go hungry. Possum, Okra - fried and oozing slime, Grits with breakfast and so on. So I am no stranger to eating very basic and different kinds of food. Still I had a few surprises in store for me when I came to Thailand.

One day Tack, my then P/A, had taken Phil, an old English friend, and me to a lake close to Chiang Mai – Huay Tung Thao. It is a beautiful place with small wooden *Salas* and a restaurant literally by the beach. Lunch time came and we were all hungry. Phil and I stuck to well known paths and ordered the usual, unadventurous chicken with cashew nuts and Kow Pad – Fried Rice. Tack ordered Gung Tehn. I was curious.

“Tack... what's Gung Tehn?”

“Dancing Shrimp”

“Really?”

The food came to the table and Tack's order was in an earthenware pot, which she kept shaking. It sounded like Popcorn cooking. I went to take the lid off and peek inside. “No... don't do that!” Too late, I lifted the lid. Out came some of the shrimp, whizzing past my ear. I looked at Tack.

“Now you know why they call them Dancing Shrimp”

The small freshwater shrimp are put into the pot with some oil, Nam Bpla – *Fish Sauce* and some chili and spices. When the pot is shaken – the shrimp very quickly expire. It took me a little while to get my mind around it – but eventually I asked Tack for a bite of the shrimp. They were delicious.

I suppose that it is similar to going to a fresh fish restaurant and making your selection. Neither the fish nor these shrimp could come any fresher.

When one of us from the office, has a birthday – we always go out in the evening to eat and celebrate. This particular evening we went to a restaurant some way out of Chiang Mai which is located by a fresh water shrimp farm and specializes in Northern Thai cuisine. The food that night was very tasty and halfway through, Khun Meaw, one of the girls from the office, passed me a bowl, of what I thought were sautéed shrimps – well, you would :wouldn't you if you were eating next door to a shrimp farm ?

I bit into the shrimp with great relish, I love them. Whoa... something was wrong, this tasted like no shrimp that I had ever eaten. Still the taste wasn't bad... just different. I looked back at the bowl. They did not resemble any shrimp that I had ever seen.

Khun Meaw was still chomping away on her own plate of delicacies. I asked her what type of shrimps these were.

“Shrimps? – they are not shrimps, Khun Frank. They are Grasshoppers”

“Grasshoppers? ...HmMMM!”

I considered this for a while. I had heard of many people who thought that honeyed locusts were a delicacy – but with eating insects, where do you draw the line? Cockroaches for example?

Khun Meaw explained for me. You are what you eat. Grasshoppers are vegetarian and primarily eat grass. Okay? Cockroaches, to put it bluntly, are shit eaters. Do you want to eat shit?

No. Very logical. Thank you. But I still couldn't eat the grasshoppers. One night Beam and I were driving home to our house at Darawadee. The rain had stopped but some type of winged insects kept hitting the windscreen in increasing numbers, eventually a blizzard of insects. I asked Beam what they were –Malang Mow *Drunk Insects*. After a long season of being hot and dry, at the first rains – these insects, which have lied dormant in the soil, emerge in vast numbers. They are mesmerized by light and fly around and around until they crash to the floor – hence the name *Drunk Insects*. Their life span is very, very short only a few hours.

When we approached the house, my neighbours were running around with very large fish nets, waving them in the air.

“Okay Beam – what's up? Has someone escaped from the hospital?”

“No – They are catching the Malang Mow, so they can eat them.”

We pulled into the driveway, and Beam went to get some bowls to collect the flying insects which had crashed onto the ground. I asked her what she was going to do with them, as for sure I wasn't going to eat them. She said she would sell them at the market, the following day. And you know – that's just what she did. Every Thai is a natural entrepreneur. Since then I have often seen the Vendor making the round of the bars selling just about every insect under the sun, fried crisp, for consumption by many of the girls who work in the bars

A few months later we were driving south down Superhighway Number One. Along this route are many roadside vendors who sell just about everything under the sun. I was intrigued by a run-up of signs which featured what appeared to be several black steer skulls. As usual, I turned to Beam – the oracle from Khon Kaen as to what they meant. She replied that it was “The Rat Vendor”.

“The what?”

“The Rat Vendor.”

And sure enough after several more signs, there he was with many plastic bags of prepared rats.

“Don’t tell me that Thais eat them?”

“Sure – they are rice barn rats, they only eat rice.”

I was a little concerned at this and asked Beam how Thais knew they were Rice Barn Rats. Did they wear little signs that said: “Its okay to eat me... I live in a barn.” A look of scorn, but no reply.

When I returned to the office I checked with the girls. Yep, for sure, when they were younger, they had all sampled rice barn rats.

Looking further into this – it seems that many of these rats are farmed. Bamboo cages with lightening quick traps are made and placed either in the rice barns or at the various exits at a rice paddy. Somebody goes in and makes a noise and out come the rats straight into the traps. The rats are cleaned, skinned and prepared and cooked with:

Recipe for ground rat meat and chili paste:

Ingredients:

1/4 cup fish oil

1/4 cup vegetable oil

1-1/2 cups of dried red chili peppers

4 long green pepper

8 large bay leaves

1/2 cup holy basil leaf

1 tablespoon salt

4 chopped garlic cloves

4 small rats

And that, along with grasshoppers, was where I drew the line.

I used to keep a little room on the hill at Pattaya, close to the yacht club and the same thing applied, including a fruit and vegetable seller and, late in the evening – the barbeque man.

On one trip down, after I had been trying to explain to Beam, for some time, what a ‘Donner Kebab’ was – what did we see driving around but a motorcycle vendor with attached sidecar, with a big slab of rotating chicken – selling Donner Kebabs.

Very excited, I pointed out the vendor to Beam and explained how he made the kebabs. Much later, who should turn up outside our room, but the Donner Kebab vendor. Eager to try them out, I asked Beam to buy me a couple. I have to tell you – they were great, wrapped in tin foil, great chicken, salad and sauce. I pigged out, and with an attitude of ‘all is well with the world’, I went

to bed.

Three o'clock in the morning, I knew that something was wrong.

My stomach had been rumbling for an hour or so and now I started to have cramps. It was touch or go, as to whether I would make the toilet in time – then all hell broke loose. Literally. And that continued all over the New Year Holiday. Upon reflection- I should have realized. Unlike, most restaurants making kebabs, in more or less, hygienic conditions, the kebab vendor's meat is exposed to the heat and the insects for nearly 24 hours per day. It is unlikely that he covers it up when he goes into sleep. Some people learn the hard way.

### Chapter Five -Encounters with Monks, Spirit Houses and Hill Tribes

'WAT'S' The Monk Going To Say?

Quite often, I teach English at the Monk's school at the Wat Phra Sing. This is a very large and beautiful Wat *Buddhist Temple* in the old City of Chiang Mai with some 800 Nayn, *Novice Student Monks*.

Monks are not ordained until they are twenty years old. Although times are changing, every male Thai Buddhist of twenty years or over is expected to become a monk for a period of time. For how long is up to them and their families.

Letting their sons become *Novice Student Monks* is an attractive proposition for many Thai families. The level of education the students receive is normally much higher than the family would be able to afford and may not be available in their home town or village.

For that reason, many of the young Monks come from different places in Thailand. Most of them are very shy of their Yak Ferang *Western Giant* teacher. Teachers, in Thailand are usually much respected and even awed. The young Monks standard of English is not all that good, but gradually, as they became more used to me – they begin to participate in the various learning games. The students are fascinated to learn both of my life outside the Wat in Chiang Mai and of my life before coming to Thailand. They would ask me about what I ate, if I was married and what I believed in.

I, in turn, would ask them about their daily routine, what and when they could eat and where they went and what they did when they went outside of the Wat for a walk-around. The lessons frequently end up as funny chat sessions, which is ironic as they are conducted in 'The Chat Room' – where Monk Chat takes place.

Many Wats now promote Monk Chat. Several times a week, Farangs can go along to the Wat and find out more about Thai Monks and life in a Wat. This works well as it can be very interesting for visitors to Thailand and the Monks get to practice their English.

I have been lucky in my life to meet some very interesting people with special talents and skills. Although there are some charlatans – some monks have the gift of seeing and perceiving things that others can not. My first experience of this was some thirty five years ago, when I brought a friend with me, to Thailand, who was a complete skeptic. My sister-in-law encouraged her to go along and see a 'Fortune Teller Monk who had developed this sense since early childhood. She was ashen when she emerged from the Wat. The Mordu *Fortune Teller* Monk had not only predicted her future (accurately as it turned out) but also related her past life to her in specific detail. My sister-in-law asked if I wished to see the Monk. I nervously declined.

Years passed. I used to rent a house close to Wat Gew Kam, adjacent to Arcade Bus Station. I was quite interested in the life of Monks and frequently used to visit the Wat to make Tamboon *Merit*. Every morning at 6 o'clock I used to stand outside my house with food for the Monks making their rounds for Bintabat *Alms Giving*. This involves a Monk and some young helpers making the rounds of the surrounding neighbourhood of the Wat during the very early morning. They carry a special bowl with a removable lid. The faithful kneel before the Monk who lifts the lid and the food for the Wat is placed in the bowl. The Monk should not look at the food or comment on it. Finally the Monk will intone a blessing and move on to the next alms giver. This food is eaten during the morning as the Monks cannot eat after 12 noon until the following day. The Monks may have been surprised by some of the food I put into their bowls – chili con carne, spaghetti bolognaise, apples, chocolate bars... anything I could lay my hands on in the house. But they always came back the next day!

I discovered that one of the Monks in the Wat was a Mordu. Over the years I had become brave and asked Khun Meaw, from my office, if she would take me to see the Monk. She agreed and on the first visit, he recorded the time, date and place of my birth – and asked us to return the next day. We returned the following day and sat before the Monk. He had a complicated diagram in front of him of various squares rectangles and symbols, which I assumed referred to my destiny. Before beginning he said something to Khun Meaw and smiled forlornly.

Khun Meaw said –

“The Monk wants to know if you are brave and have a strong heart?”

Filled with dread I replied -

“Certainly”

Khun Meaw said that the Monk wishes to sing the prediction as a poem in Northern Thai Dialect. “Fine” I said. The Monk sang. Khun Meaw wrote down the prediction.

When he had finished we both asked for his blessing and left. In the car, I asked Khun Meaw as to what the Monk had said. Khun Meaw said that the next year would not be a good one for me. I would be at the mercy of a thief and spend much time in hospital and nearly die. “Oh?”

The following morning in the office I wanted to show the other girls the prediction to see what they thought. Khun Meaw said

“Sorry Khun Frank, I threw it away.”

“What?”

It turns out that it is a Thai custom when receiving bad news, as in the form of a fortune telling, perhaps with the fortune telling, shake and quake sticks in a Wat – in which you shake a container until one ‘stick’ falls out with a number. You then associate this number with a written forecast of your future. If the news is not good then you leave the written prediction there, to leave the bad luck behind.

Well that wasn't what happened in my case. My General Manager embezzled two million baht from me and I spent nearly a year in hospital with a life-threatening condition. That's all history now and no consolation, but I later found out that the Fortune Telling Monk also nearly died in hospital. Maybe that accounted for why his smile was so forlorn.

When I moved into my next house – I was surprised that there was no Spirit House in the garden. One of the first things I did was to buy one and Tack arranged for a Brahmin Priest to visit and correctly position the Spirit House and perform the initiation ceremony. Paradoxically, Spirit Houses are related to Brahmin and not Buddhism but Thais quite happily accept both concepts and pay respective homage to both.



The initiation ceremony is very curious and intricate and amongst other things involves the Brahmin Priest 'eating flames' from candles. I became so involved in taking photos of this ritual that Tack had to come and rope me in to participate. Not eating candle flames anyway – I am happy to say.

### 'Monks That Walk'

During the Buddhist Lent, which coincides with the rice seedlings growing in the paddies, Monks are committed to stay in their assigned Wat or Temple, unless they have special dispensation to be away. Once the Lent is over, Monks can and do travel either to other Wats for pilgrimages or other reasons perhaps to visit sick and ailing parents.

A few years ago, I was driving from Chiang Mai to visit my Mum, who lived some 18 Kilometres outside of town. The weather was abysmal and it was raining 'cats and dogs'. Three Monks were walking along the canal road, but, despite the volume of traffic - no one pulled over to offer them a lift. 'Okay - why not?' – I thought and I pulled up. Their feet did not touch the ground in getting into the pick-up.. The head Monk asked me where I was going. I replied I was going to visit my Mum who lived a few kilometres down the road. Silence ensued for a few minutes.

I asked - 'Where are you going?' He replied "To Mae Hong Song" nearly 200 kilometres away. "Oh...."

The kilometres dragged on and eventually, we reached the market town of San Patong. The monks indicated for me to pull over as they wished to go to the bus station. They blessed me and attached a holy Sai-Sin bracelet to my wrist. Then, they asked for the bus fare to Mae Hong Song. Not entirely sure of what to do, I pulled out my wallet, which only had 500 baht in, and gave it to them. Off, they went into the rain.

When I returned to my office the girls I worked with were astounded and angry and said that should never have happened as Monks should never ask for money.

The epilogue to this story is that a few years later, my wife Beam and I were driving south to Rayong. As we came around the bend, we encountered a monk walking a long the side of the road. Beam asked me to stop and ask the Monk where he was going. 'To Khon Kaen', he replied. She apologized profusely and advised him that we were going in another direction. She turned to me and asked for 300 Baht to give to him, and bent down so that he could bless her. Off we drove.

When we drove a round the next bend, there in a single file - stretched out, were presumably, the rest of the group of Monks travelling to Khon Kaen. Beam pointed out the scenery on the other side of the road, as we drove by.

### The Tribe That Lives On the Hill

Shortly after coming to live in Chiang Mai, I noticed some colourfully dressed women walking around in the evening – selling various artifacts. It turned out that they were from the Akha Hill Tribe. The women wear very plain shirts which are covered with what seems to be the contents of a pirates treasure chest. The women are also very visible because of a type of silver 'helmet', and many can be seen at the Night Bazaar selling their wares of intricate silver jewelry. Another

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