

## Thai Journal: Vol 20 – The Year of Living Dangerously

We have been here just over a year now and I think a good characterization of that time would be the title of the 1982 Mel Gibson film, "The Year of Living Dangerously". Also ringing in our ears this whole time were the words of Robbie the Robot from the 1956 sci-fi epic, "Forbidden Planet", "Danger, Will Robinson!"

We uprooted ourselves from our comfortable surroundings in Richardson, Texas, and set out for Thailand. Once here we fought heat, dodged buses, taxis, and trucks in the Bangkok traffic, got lost in translation, risked the "black water" of the canal system, taunted scorpions in Singapore, went virtually homeless in Bangkok, visited such places as Ayutthaya, Saraburi, Pattaya and Prachuab, the later to scope out the path for the first ever "Walk Across Thailand". I experienced an indelible moment in a train station, been diagnosed with epilepsy, have gotten dangerously close to a vegetarian diet and I gave up a promising movie career (Ya, right!). We finally settled into our little bungalow in Chiang Mai, experienced pandemonium at the Chiang Mai zoo, listened to hits on TITS radio, got into shape, witnessed a political crisis, gathered on occasion with fellow expats, and visited the land down under, Australia.

That's a lot for one year. I expect this next year to be a bit tamer, but one never knows. Perhaps it will be more reflective. There is, nevertheless, a lot of material from this first year that I haven't gotten to yet and it may be difficult to tell the new from the old. Also, the "Walk Across Thailand" is on for December. So stay tuned. Thailand is always an exciting place to be.

### These Are a Few of My Favorite Things



Over the past year, I've collected a bunch or photos which were odd in one way or another. Volume 6 listed a number of these, including bottles lined up on the curb, hand dryers, the UFO meditation center, the elephant building, and T-shirt sizes just to mention a few. I've been saving a whole bunch more with the intention of doing a sequel of sorts. I've had some second thoughts about devoting another whole volume to that and instead will just add a section to each journal and throw in a couple each time.

Here are two of my favorite things right off the bat. My most favorite thing (person), of course, is Cindy. Let's call this, "Look ma, no hands." This was taken at one of the "big box" stores here, a British outfit called Tesco Lotus. It's kind of the Target of Thailand. There is also a Walmart of sorts, a French outfit, called Carrefour (pronounced Cafoo). Both of these places are in multi level buildings, with the street



level dedicated to restaurants and other small shops and the upper floor containing the “Big Box” store. On the upper floor people use a shopping cart and so there needs to be a way for them to get their purchases back down to their cars on the first level parking lot.

To do this they make use of a unique escalator, one that doesn't have the familiar steps that we are used to, but is, essentially, a flat conveyor belt. What's great about this adaptation is that there needed to be some way of keeping the carts from getting away from you as one descends on a nearly 45 degree angle. To accomplish this, they have added a metal disk to the inside of the wheel. It has a slightly beveled edge, which seats itself into the grooved, metal escalator and secures the cart. There is one of these disks on each rear wheel. Once engaged, how does one disengage it? When you get to the bottom of the escalator, there is a little lip, which raises the wheel just enough to free it from the groove. Ingenious!



Here are two more items, which are not all that strange, but a few of my favorite things. It's a constant battle with insects here, especially mosquitoes, virtually year around. The first picture is designed to discourage ants from getting on the table and stealing your lunch. The little cup-like devices that enclose the bottom of the legs of the table are filled with water. In this case there seems to be a

double barrier, though it seems at low tide. Since ants are not good swimmers, this kind of obstacle discourages them from proceeding further and reaching the leg. One would have thought, however, that being co-operative little creatures, that several might spread themselves on the water and allow the others to pass over them, something like a pontoon bridge. Fortunately they don't appear to be that highly evolved, and given that they are virtually blind, they don't know whether the trail picks up again within an inch or two or whether they have reached the Pacific ocean.

The second item is a mosquito coil, of which many of you are familiar. I used to think that the smoke released actually killed the mosquitoes, but that and the aroma merely drives them away. This is perhaps best for a Buddhist society that frowns on taking a life, even that of an insect. I don't have any such inhibitions, given the chances of dengue fever, I figure it's self defense; It's either them or me. As far as other bugs, it's pretty much live and let live. I go out of my way not to squash any little crawlers.



Cindy is far more reticent than I when it comes to this. Many a time as we were sitting downstairs eating, a mosquito would land on her arm. She wouldn't smack it, but would merely point to it and thereby draw my attention to it, at which point I would smack it. She would then accuse me of taking a life, but at the same time let me off the hook by telling me that I have also saved a life. It just goes to show that it's not too hard to justify a lot of things. We all do it more times than we would like to admit.

### Nature – Too Close for Comfort?



It seems that we live a lot closer to nature here than we did in the US. On one side of our little bungalow, just over the wall is a rather large swampy area festooned with elephant ears that rise to the level of a --- well, an elephant's ear. When it rains we are sere-

naded by a cacophony of frogs calling out to their friends and lovers. I had once read that the declining amphibian population in various parts of the world was a precursor of some environmental catastrophe. Well, by the sound of things, all is well here in Thailand.

In addition to the frogs, there is a lizard, one that runs about a foot long, and one we have never seen, called a Tukae. It is so named because of the sound it emits. Virtually every evening just after sunset, we hear its cry just beyond and behind our bungalow. It will cry out anywhere from one to twelve times. It's gotten to the point where we will be sitting around and as soon as it cries out for the first time, we will stop everything and start counting the number of cries on our fingers. It's a pretty weird sight as we silently count off. We have yet to hear it exceed twelve cries, but should it ever do so, I expect there will be smiles and celebrations all around.

## A Game of Cat and Owl

Since we seem to be focusing on nature a lot this time around, let me mention one other little caveat. Somewhere out in that jungle next to our bungalow lives a number of owls. I have never seen them, mind you, but I know they are out there because I hear them. I have come to imitate their “who ... who ... who ... who ... who ... who “ sounds in hopes of drawing them out.



Well, one day I was up on our balcony with camera in hand and attempted to lure one out by mimicking their sounds. Suddenly there was the sound of fluttering wings and I saw something coming at me. I raised my camera just as I ducked and came up with this incredible shot as he swept by me. Actually, that's not true, the picture part, I mean. I just had to pass on this great photo my friend, Matt, sent me. The part about the owls and not ever having seen one at our house is true,

however. I did see a baby owl one day during my walk at the Huay Kaew Fitness Park. He was as cute as this guy. How would you like to see this guy coming at you in a dark alley? I always thought owls were nocturnal, but in our neighborhood, anyway, they are early risers, or perhaps they are still up from the night before.

## Podcasts – A Real Godsend

When we arrived here 15 months ago, I was heartened to find a radio station that played a lot of oldies from the 60's and 70's. That worked out quite well while we were in Bangkok, but once we moved to Chiang Mai, radio listening soon became untenable. I had bought a little iPod Shuffle before we left with the idea of being able to listen to music while traveling. It worked well for that purpose.

Then I became familiar with podcasting, which can be defined as “a digital recording of a radio broadcast or a similar program made available on the Internet for downloading to a personal audio player.” I used Apple's iTunes to check out the top 100 podcasts and started to sample some of them, mostly technical in nature. I soon became aware of a variety of podcasts ranging from entertainment, to news, to features. There was a good selection of NPR programs and one from the local affiliate, KERA, in Dallas.

I now have enough material to tide me over during my two hour morning jog/walk six days a week. Not all programs are produced daily --- some are only available once a week --- so I download what I want the night before or the morning of my walk and I'm good to go. A couple of good friends of Cindy's gave her an identical iPod Shuffle while we were in the US and now she listens to her favorite songs when she joins me on the morning routine. This is just another instance of being able to seamlessly utilize ubiquitous modern technology here in Thailand.