

Thai Journal: Volume 21 – Back on Track

Catching Up

Since we've been traveling over the past couple months, before we proceed any further, I need to bring you up to date on what's been going on here in Thailand during our travels. First and foremost, the biggest event of the year, the celebration of His Majesty the King's 60 years on the throne occurred in mid June.



The nation came to a virtual standstill for two weeks as guests and potentates from over 60 countries came to pay their respects to the world's longest serving monarch, His Majesty the King of Thailand. Hundreds of thousands lined the river banks in Bangkok to watch the royal barge procession as millions watched on TV. There were banquets and exhibitions extolling the contributions His Majesty the King has made to the wellbeing of his subjects over these 60 years.

The people clearly showed their affection, by showing up by the tens of thousands to demonstrate their affection for their beloved king. Virtually everyone wore the by now familiar yellow

T-shirts, which mark the color of the day, Monday, on which the king was born. For Americans, there is just no figure who is so universally loved and admired and who has worked so unselfishly for his people. You really have to live here to get a feel for that; It's something that is indescribable.



The first picture above shows the royal court with the king and queen seated. Behind them and to your left is the crown prince, his wife and daughter. Directly behind and to your right are the other royal daughters.

The next picture is of one of the royal barges that sailed down the river and past the Grand Palace. An armada of approximately 20 such vessels were involved in this flotilla. It is only on rare occasions that such a procession takes

place. I believe the last one occurred when I was here as a Peace Corps volunteer in the late 60's.

Are You Ready to Rumble?

The second event centers around the current political situation. When tanks rolled on September 19th, a military coup ended a political standoff which came to a head in April. As you may recall, the Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, dissolved the House of Parliament in order to head off the increasing number of demonstrations and protests (See Thai Journal, Vol 16) that were swirling around him, particularly concerning the \$1.9B no tax sale of his telecommunications empire to a Singapore based conglomerate. In response to the House dissolution, the opposition parties refused to participate in the election and, as a result, his Thai Rak Thai (Thai Love Thai) party was overwhelming re-elected. This caused some constitutional issues, because voter turnout did not exceed 20% of

those eligible in most of the south where the opposition is strong. As a result, there was no quorum in the House of Representatives. Thaksin took a short break from his role as caretaker Prime Minister, but soon returned, further inflaming an already volatile situation.



Finally, His Majesty the King, reminded the judiciary, who had been silent through all of this, that they have a role to play. So after consideration, the courts voided the April election, the election commission, who were seen as sympathetic to Thai Rak Thai resigned, and a new election was scheduled for November. Then the coup cometh. As it stands now, elections are due to be held in October 2007 after certain yet unspecified reforms are put in place.

It's not as though this is an unusual situation. This is the 18th coup d'etat since the first one back in 1932, which established a Constitutional Monarchy over the Absolute Monarchy, which had existed up until then. Most of these have been bloodless, the last one being in 1992, which was violent and ultimately was not allowed to stand.

Elvis has Entered the Building

I frequently go to a sprawling shopping center, which is a ten minute walk from our house, to catch a quick bite to eat when Cindy is out and about. There's a food court in the basement and they serve one of my favorites, chicken and rice.



One of the little extras the food court there provides is a bit of entertainment. When I walked in the other evening, there he was, the King himself --- not His Majesty, the King of Thailand --- but Elvis. There he was working his way through his hits, including, "All Shook Up", "Teddy Bear", "Wear Your Ring Around My Neck", "Blue Suede Shoes" and "It's Now or Never", just to name a few. And you all thought Elvis was dead. Well, I did, too, until the other night. What made this even more convincing was that there is a KFC in this mall and as we all know, there have been persistent rumors that Elvis is alive and well and working in a KFC.

Not exactly the place I'd pick to avoid notoriety, but then I'm not Elvis. And we all know that when you're Elvis, you gotta perform.

And not only was Elvis there, but so were the legendary Jordanaires backing him up. What more proof do you need? There are those who might think that this was just an Elvis impersonator. Sure he looked a little young, but not only did he have the voice, he had the moves. Those of us who recognized him were generous with our applause, because I, for one, have never seen him in person. Yet there he was.

There was only one little oddity. When he stopped singing, he broke into Thai. But, then again, would you not expect him to speak Thai considering he is living and working in Thailand? Hell, yes. It was also obvious that he had had some cosmetic surgery to give him some Thai features. What a perfect deception. Thailand has, after all, some of the best cosmetic surgery facilities in the world. For now, Elvis has left the building. So there you have it. Who else is going to bring you this stuff?

These are a Few of My Favorite Things – Global Warming



In physics, a reaction is defined by Newton's third law: "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction". I now have an incontrovertible example of that law. Lately we have been hearing a lot about global warming. There have been reports of glaciers melting at astonishing rates in Iceland, Greenland and the North Pole. Polar bears are drowning because there are no ice flows for them to occupy. Where is all this ice going? The answer is, our refrigerator. There is a glacier growing in our refrigerator.

Frankly I was a little surprised when I learned that our refrigerator was not a self defrosting model. At first I thought that that might be because it is rather old. But when I checked in a number of stores, I found that the manual defrost refrigerator is far from extinct. So maybe it is that it is these refrigerators that are helping maintain the delicate balance that is Newton's third law.



And while we're at it, you can see another of my favorite things, just beneath the ice tray. The ice cream is called Chocolate Heaven and it sure is. They do a pretty good job with ice cream products around here. There are also a goodly number of Swensen and Hagan Das stores. I even saw Ben and Jerry's in one of the big box stores. You're probably thinking this isn't a very healthy lifestyle, all that fat and such. I do, however, eat in moderation and I do, after all, get plenty of exercise during my seven or eight miles of walking every day, so it all works out.

What's in a Name?

What's in a name? An awful lot here in Thailand. Over the centuries, there has been a lot of immigration from China into Thailand. Traditionally you would see that reflected in the surnames of those immigrants. Then back in the 1850's, the king decreed that immigrants should adopt Thai surnames. People pretty much complied and names like Sae Woon soon became very flowery and pretty Thai names such as Watcharasin, Cindy's family name from her grandfather.

In a culture where there is a lot of reliance of fortune tellers and astrologers for significant life events, it should come as no surprise that this applies to names as well. So it was, that my lovely wife,

whose given name is Saisamorn decided, for reasons yet unclear to me, that it was time for a name change. Fortunately that change does not, as yet anyway, involve changing husbands. Perhaps after she reads this it will. So, it's bye-bye Saisamorn, hello Naiyarat. Actually the fortune teller gave her a list of four possible names, which she ran by me. I thought Naiyarat was the most lyrical of the lot. Not only has she changed her name, but she got her brother to change his as well. No telling where this is all going to end. One thing I do know, I ain't changing mine!

Down and Out in LA

One of the lessons learned from our recent trip to the US was to book the return flight with the fewest possible connections (that would be one). I had booked two because I wanted to fly Taiwan based China Airlines on the return flight, since they fly directly into Chiang Mai. I had not actually booked us into Chiang Mai this time around because that was not an option at the time of the reservation. If it was a good experience, then, in the future we would book from Chiang Mai and avoid that whole rigmarole of traveling to Bangkok.

Unfortunately China Airlines doesn't fly to DFW, so we booked our return on a United flight to LA, where we expected to spend about 2½ hours before catching the CAL flight to Taipei and another two hour layover for our flight to Bangkok. You can probably see this coming, but our United flight was better than an hour late leaving DFW and we got to LAX with a scant 45 minutes to spare, which included making our way to another terminal. We showed up at the CAL counter with a scant 15 minutes to spare and were told that our reservation had been canceled at the 45 minute mark. Attempts to book us on a later flight that day were unsuccessful because it was full as well.

As the old commercial featuring Karl Malden went (Was that for American Express?) says, "What would you do? What would you do?" Visions of spending the next 24 hours at LAX danced in our heads. The friendly folks at CAL said that since this was one of those code share flights, in conjunction with Delta, that we needed to have them reticket us. So we went to yet another terminal --- we were getting this scoped out by now. Delta made arrangements for us to get on the next available flight, the following afternoon. I asked the guy what we were supposed to do in the meantime. He said we might want to have that discussion with United, since that's why we were late in the first place. It was back to the terminal we landed at. United was forthcoming and without much prodding gave us vouchers for accommodation and meals at the Marriot Courtyard, just off the airport. We caught a shuttle there and settled in for a good sleep.

You would have thought that that was the end of it. Guess again. Though we made the CAL flight out of LAX, when we got to Taipei, we were booked on EVA for our final leg to Bangkok. When we showed up at their counter they said that although we had a ticket, Delta's reservation system did not confirm our reservation with them, so they dropped us. They said that the flight was full. I was beginning to see another overnight stay, but there is no Delta desk in Taipei. After a lot of back and forth among the reservations staff, we were handed a boarding pass and sent on our way. As we were sitting in the waiting area, I looked down at our boarding passes and it seemed to me like we weren't in economy class. The good folks at EVA had upgraded us to business class. What a difference that was. We were in the nose of the 747, two abreast, with plenty of leg room, wonderful food and lots of attention. This is the way to fly. It's too bad that the flight was only three hours. We were tempted to just remain on the plane.

The original proposition was that we could fly from Chiang Mai and make only one stop. That appears not to be possible and given the experience we had this time around, I don't think it's a good idea. Then, again, ask me 18 months from now when we are ready to do this again.