

Drive Across Thailand

Following on the heels of the by now famous Walk Across Thailand, we set out from Khanom on a drive across Thailand, a somewhat longer but more relaxing journey. We were going to travel from the Gulf of Thailand on the east to the Andaman Sea on the west, a journey of about four hours. The first surprise we had, and a very pleasant one indeed, was the road, newly constructed highway 44, one of the best highways I've ever driven on. At first I thought we were on a two lane road because I could not see any traffic coming from the other direction. In fact the median was wide and often covered with trees, so the only time we would see any indication there were other cars going in the opposite direction out there was when one of them made a long looping U-turn and merged with us.



Not only was the road exquisite, but the scenery was spectacular. All around were acre after acre of palm trees and rubber trees. I keep on wondering how big the rubber market must be because we saw plantation after plantation all over southern Thailand and Thailand isn't even the only rubber producing country in the world. We also saw limestone formations jutting out of nowhere and we had to pull over, stop and marvel at them on several occasions.

Angle on My Shoulder

After driving on such a fine stretch of highway, Thailand Route 44, our fortunes changed quickly when we reached the west coast and began heading south to the island of Phuket. Before long we found ourselves on a very precarious stretch, which was under construction. What we had essentially was a four lane black top, with parts yet to be paved and no functioning lighting. It wasn't dark yet, but I knew that on our return we would probably be traveling this same section. Even though the road was almost completed, there weren't any lines painted on it yet and the lighting had yet to be installed. To mark sections on which the blacktop had not yet been poured, there were small branches placed along the roadway. Apparently the intent was that you would hit the branches and that would alert you to be careful. As is typical, there are scant signs warning of any obstacles.

Sure enough, on our way back we took the same road after dark. Without lines on the road or any surface lighting, the headlights didn't provide a lot of illumination on a blacktop road. I had to take my visual clues from the cars coming toward me. I never knew if we were on a one-lane, two-lane, three-lane or four-lane highway at any particular time. I pretty much avoided the extreme left lane because I knew of those unfinished sections. It was hairy and there were times when I was clearly in the oncoming lane and had to veer to my left to avoid oncoming traffic.

Tsunami Two Years Later

Our next stop was to visit some friends in the province of Phangna. This area along Thailand's western coast was hit by the devastating tsunami in 2004. The two year anniversary of that horrific event was commemorated while we were there. Upwards of 8,000 people, including the son of a Thai princess perished that day. Whole families were wiped out. After two years the area was just getting back to some sense of normalcy. Schools were being rebuilt on higher ground.



Although things pretty much looked normal at first glance, there are still some very visible reminders of the tragedy. There seems to be a lot of new housing. The police boat that was washed nearly a mile inland still sits in the middle of an open field. A fishing boat rests in the middle of the fishing village where it was formerly docked. Though the government repainted it, it is still where it came to rest and the person who owns the land wants the government to either pay him rent for the land or move it.



We also attended a ceremony at the Tsunami Victim Cemetery. Here is where the remains of some 445 unidentified persons are being kept in the hope that through DNA or other means, they will someday be identified and their remains returned to their families. It's been two years now and I don't think the chances of this happening are all that good. Certainly most of the foreigners and people from the area have been accounted for, but this region is very close to Myanmar and there is a lot of illegal immigration from there. Burmese around there fill a roll similar to the undocumented

Latin immigrants in the US, doing odd jobs or working as day laborers. Chances are they are not well known in the community and their families, who are in Myanmar, are unlikely to be able to come and search for them. Those so buried have been placed in special sealed coffins designed to preserve their DNA, so that it might be available in the future. Each grave site is also marked by its GPS coordinates so that it may be quickly and accurately located.

During this second anniversary there were many who have come back to take part in the various remembrances. At the ceremony in front of the Tsunami Victim Cemetery, representatives from each of the countries whose citizens died received a commemorative. Aside from the formal ceremonies, relatives and friends of the victims held their own remembrances on the beach. There were scenes of incredible sadness as people continued to grieve for their lost loved ones.



In the evening, as they did last year, people meet on the beaches, those same beaches which enticed so many to the area and in a couple moments took better than 8,000 lives. People lit candles on makeshift mounds of sand to commemorate those who had perished and the night sky was ablaze with floating lanterns, one for each of the departed. It was quite a moving sight.

On a Wing and a Prayer

On our way back to Bangkok we broke our journey in Prachuap, not to retrace the Walk Across Thailand, but to spend the night. The next day we off for the 5 hour drive to Bangkok. I dread driving in Bangkok, because with the exception of a couple of areas, I don't know my way around very well. Maps are not of much use either. There are a myriad of freeways around and through Bangkok and it is quite an ordeal to navigate them.

When we left for the south we had three other people with us who could direct us, but it was only the two of us that on the way back. I tried to remember as best I could the way that we came, but as we were going to a different place from which we left, as we reached the outskirts of Bangkok, we were pretty much on our own. We were headed to what I have dubbed "The Bermuda Triangle" based on a previous nightmare experience a year ago when we went round and around for nearly four hours before we finally escaped. The signage in Bangkok is confusing or nonexistent and I pretty much just headed in a direction based on areas of Bangkok which I recognized. At one point, I just through up my hands and said to Cindy, "Which way?" in exasperation she just said, "That way". It turned out to be the right way and before too long I recognized some landmarks, which lead us to our destination. That to me was like hitting a target from a mile away.