

Thai Journal – Volume 17 – All Things Farang

Expatriate Phobia

During both my time in the Peace Corps and our four year residence here in the 70s, I have rather scrupulously avoided contact with my expat brothers. For the most part I felt that hanging around with other farangs (foreigners) would prevent me from having an authentic Thai experience. So that was pretty much what I did. In retrospect, there was a element of “going native” in there somewhere. Perhaps there was even a bit of an identity crisis. But there is no way I can be more Thai than the Thai, that story from the fortune teller notwithstanding, so I've reached a point where I am comfortable with who I am and I can tell people I don't care for certain things.



That issue was again raised when I learned that an expats club has recently been formed here in Chiang Mai. I attended one of the twice monthly meetings and was surprised at the number of people, roughly 80, Americans, Brits, Aussies, Germans,

and Swiss, among others in attendance. They try to bring someone in each meeting to speak on some of the issues confronting the expat community, such as immigration, health care, legal issues, etc.

What has favorably impressed me was that the officers of the club have a good plan to build it and are not rushing into trying to do everything at the same time. They are also very deferential to the Thai community and stress how welcoming it have been to us. The club is very big on promoting the many charitable activities in the area as a way of giving back to a community that offers so much to us. Check out the website.

<http://www.chiangmaiepatclub.com/>



Some of the things the club offers are hiking trips and tours to various spots in the area. I went on one of them, a trip to Thailand's highest mountain, Doi Intanon, at an elevation of 8,416 feet, a couple of weeks ago. That's about as high as you can get in Thailand without being on a controlled substance. There were 16 of us and though it is only two hours away, we managed to spend most of the day. The weather was perfect. One of the guys who went along, said



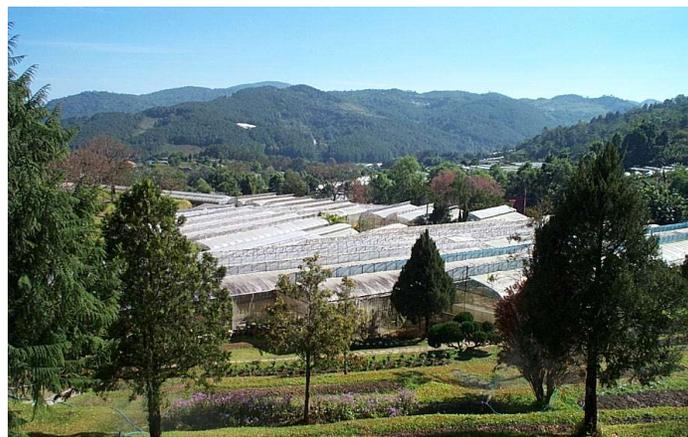
that usually the mountain is socked in or all one can see from the summit as one looks down are clouds.

The views from the top were quite spectacular. You can usually count on a temple, or in this case, a stupa near the summit and this was no exception. A stupa, chedi in Thai, is a dome-shaped structure erected as a Buddhist shrine. There were

two here, one dedicated to and containing relics of a former king, and another adjacent to it, his queen, both of whom ruled the region during the Lannathai period.



The architecture of these particular stupas is distinctly northern Thailand. Instead of being rounded, they are many sided. The upper part of the bell-shaped structure has a flower or lotus design. In addition since this is a royal shrine we see the many tier umbrella type structure at the very top.



We also visited a hill tribe village near the base of the mountain. Thanks in large part to projects sponsored by His Majesty the King, virtually none of these hill tribes grow opium any longer. Instead they use rather sophisticated methods, which produce maximum yields. Land used for opium is particularly destructive. First, slash and burn are used to

clear the land. Because opium crops so deplete the soil, only one crop can be grown on it. Then it's move on to the next piece of land. Due to lack of vegetation, this abandoned land then contributes to flooding during the rainy season.



We also got to see some of the handicraft making in a village. The women produce some very attractive scarfs, bags and other pieces of clothing. Finally we found our way to a picturesque nearby waterfall.

During one of our various stops, one of the women I struck up a conversation with suggested that I must read a certain book, that it touched on some of the cross-cultural issues between Thai and western views of the world. She said it was both instructive and humorous. She then made the observation that most of the western men she has seen were with Thai women half their age. At this point I piped up and said that actually my wife, who is Thai is older than I, and we had been married for thirty-three years. Furthermore, I said, I have been married three times, to the same woman, once in a civil ceremony in the US, once in a civil ceremony in Thailand and finally in a religious ceremony back in the US.

I was expecting dead silence at this point, but to her credit, almost without skipping a beat she apologized for the remark. I have to give her credit. She could have just sheepishly changed the subject.

A Tweeking We Will Go, A Tweeking We Will Go ...

First off, No, that isn't a misspelling of trekking. You just have to close your eyes and imagine Elmer Fudd singing the song. Got that? Another special interest group within the club, treks during the cool months. This particular trek was to go from a hill tribe village near the top of Doi Suthep. It was rated a category 2, moderate difficulty, with elevation gains up to 1,200 feet, up to 8 miles distance, and running about three hours.



I thought that this would take me beyond what I am doing currently, 2 hours walking or about 6 miles a day. The grade turned out to be a bit steep out-bound, though the photo doesn't do justice to it. I only put on about 17,000 steps which is about 7 miles over about 3 hours, but when it was over I

was pretty much wasted. It was good training, though. After all, I have to keep in shape for the "Walk Across Thailand".

Speaking of that effort, I may have found a place to do the T-shirt design. I saw a shop that does such things, it's only a matter of dropping in with the design one of these days. With the hot season fast approaching, that assault will have to wait the next cool season, in December.

Pick Up That Box of Crayons

We had an author by the name of Christopher Moore as the featured guest at our last expats meeting. He lives in Bangkok and has written a number of books set in Thailand. He talked a little bit about the creative process. He began with a story of a little girl who was drawing with a crayon. When the teacher asked what she was drawing, she said she was drawing a picture of God. The teacher said, "No one knows what God looks like." Her reply, "They will when I get finished."

The point, he explained, was that kids under the age of five are very creative. As they grow, first we tell them they must stay within the lines with that crayon and mind the colors. Those that don't probably end up as artists. Finally we take the crayons away altogether and give them pencils and pens.

He went on to say that we pursue the good job, and the good life even when they are not ultimately very satisfying. Then one day when we think we have more or less "made it", we pick up the newspaper and see a picture of a fellow high school classmate of ours on top of Mt. Everest and we question ourselves.

Moore quit his job as a lawyer ten years ago and has never looked back. His words of advice to us, "Get off the treadmill and pick up a box of crayons."

No Laughing Matter

One of the things we have been looking forward to are the innumerable opportunities to practice meditation. Meditation is an integral part of Buddhist practice, but it is also a stand-alone process. Our landlady and her husband operate a meditation center, where people come to learn and practice for seven days. The reason that Cindy was not with me on the Doi Intanon trip was that she was beginning her seven day stint. She found it a great experience. I plan to do this as well at some point in the future.

Several of the people on the Doi Intanon trip practice what they called a laughing meditation. I found that quite amusing. Nevertheless, Cindy and I decided to attend one of the sessions, which is held virtually next door in that big high rise you saw last time.

There were four other people there when we arrived. Here's how it works. We began with 15 minutes of unprovoked laughter. This is, for the most part, forced laughter and feels a little uncomfortable at first. After 15 minutes my diaphragm was sore, though unquestionably relaxed, which is precisely what is intended. Once relaxed in this manner, phase two is 15 minutes of silent meditation. After attending several sessions, I don't know that the meditative experience was heightened as a result of these preliminaries. I don't know at this point how much longer we will continue to attend these weekly sessions.

You Never Outgrow Your Need for Grease



Sooner or later, even though I am having definite veggie leanings, I was going to have a hankerin' for a good ol' hamburger. Mike's to the rescue. For the princely sum of \$2.00, Mike's will serve you up one of their fresh, juicy (greasy) treats. I must say that I found it quite satisfying and though my visits will not be all that frequent, every now and then I do plan to indulge a little. Sometimes one must adopt an attitude of "Don't hold back!"