

## Thai Journal (Vol 19) – Australia: Life's a Beach

### A Little Preparation Helps – A Lot of Prep is Even Better

There's nothing like indecision to wreck the planning process. That's a good characterization of our recently concluded vacation. Both Australia and New Zealand were possible destination venues. My first choice would have been New Zealand, but there were other distractions, as you will soon learn. Australia was our fall back destination.

Once I got around to looking at New Zealand, it soon became apparent that the way to go was not to just restrict ourselves to the South Island, which prides itself as the “Alps of Asia”, but to hit the North Island as well. How else were we going to find Mr. Frodo? One of the best ways to do this is to rent a motor home. These come in varying sizes, the smallest of which is a little larger than a mini-van. These are fully-equipped, including bathroom. As the weather on the South Island was in the upper 50's or lower 60's at the time, the thought of chilly nights in one of those vehicles was not very pleasant. We've shivered many a night in Chiang Mai at these same temperatures. A little email correspondence with a motor home provider assured us that these vehicles were heated and perfectly livable anywhere we were planning on going.

The hitch now was that in order to reserve one of these vehicles, we had to reserve it and make a deposit 30 days before arrival. As we were probably around 3 weeks from our intended departure and hadn't made our airline reservations yet, the timing just wasn't going to work out. So much for New Zealand this year.

That put Australia on the front burner. So I hot footed it down to Central Department Store and bought a copy of the Lonely Planet Guide to Australia. After reviewing the many attractions of Australia, I decided that we'd spend 5 or 6 days in Sydney and the rest of the time traveling up what is known as the Sunshine Coast, the eastern coast, to Cairns in the northeast, an area known for its rain forests and the Great Barrier Reef. Since we would be driving, I figured we would see the sights along the way and stop where ever we happened to be. What a wonderful, yet flexible plan.

It was this flexibility that was our undoing. Since the Lonely Planet said that because of the excellent public transportation, there was no need to rent a car while in Sydney, my plan was to hold off renting one until we were ready to depart for the Sunshine Coast. In emails with a rental agency several weeks before our trip, I asked Customer Service if I should go ahead and rent the car now and adjust the date once we had better idea of when we would need it, or wait until we were “on the ground” in Australia, so to speak. The advice was to wait until we were there. Big Mistake. Big, big Mistake.

We arrived Tuesday morning, April 11<sup>th</sup> and by Thursday we figured we'd leave Sunday morning. But Sunday morning was not going to be an ordinary Sunday; It was Easter. When I called to see about a rental, the answer was, “Nothing available”. It was also spring break --- in Australia it actually still occurs at Easter. Customer Service said to check back Tuesday ... no, not the Tuesday two days after Easter, but a week from the Tuesday two days after Easter. That had some serious repercussions as you will see.

## Songkran – Water Throwing Free-For-All

You might be wondering why we chose this particular week to travel to Australia. One reason is to get out of Thailand during the hottest month of the year. The second was to get out of Chiang Mai during Songkran, the traditional Thai New Year. Thais are equal opportunity celebrants; They do not discriminate; They will celebrate anyone's New Year. Thais celebrate the western New Year on January 1<sup>st</sup>. They celebrate the Lunar New Year, also known as Chinese New Year, which typically occurs mid to late January, and they celebrate the traditional Thai New Year, which occurs in mid April.



I don't want to go into this too much right now, but Chiang Mai is *the* place to celebrate Songkran. This place is packed out for a solid 10 days. What's all the hubbub? Songkran is a water throwing free-for-all; It's one happy-go-lucky water fight. One of my expat friends described it as quite exhilarating to be traveling on a motor bike at 40 mph and getting hit by 10 deciliters of water. Some curmudgeons stock up on food and don't go out at all because they know they're going to get wet. How would you like to come face to face with one of these bazookas?



I will provide full coverage next year. I just figured we've already had enough excitement for one year. Let me conclude this reference by saying that Songkran started off tame enough. Traditionally one sprinkles ... that's sprinkles ... a few drops of water, primarily on one's elders, as a sign of respect, but this has gotten out of control over the years and has degenerated into a fun-filled battle zone. Being the hottest month of the year, however, one might welcome getting doused. BTW, No, it's not raining in the picture, it just looks like it's raining.

## The Tax Man Cometh

You can run, but you can't hide. You can leave the country, but you can't escape taxes. When I said earlier that there were some other distractions which interfered with my planning for the trip, this is what I was talking about. By mid March I had started to work on this. My taxes are always straight forward, but because Cindy did her own thing as a Realtor, there have always been complications, which would take the services of an accountant to figure out. We weren't going to have that luxury here. It might not have been so bad except I knew we owed quite a bit. Near the end of March, as is our option as tax payers living abroad, I filled for the automatic 60 day extension. Though the extension is automatic, interest and penalties continue to mount until payment is made. Even with 60 days, we would still be over here when the new deadline was reached.

It was then that I started to look at some of these on-line tax prep services. Our son, Derek, had used it and said they were pretty good. Nevertheless, it took several sessions over many days to collect and enter all the data. I finished it on 4/8. The question then was how to pay. The IRS has a service, EFTPS, whereby you can authorize payment through your bank account. Unfortunately, though one can register on-line, you have to wait until a letter comes in the mail to actually do it. Since we were on the verge of leaving for Australia, that wasn't going to happen. So, despite my plan to file electronically, I printed the return, wrote a check (I had brought my checkbook with me) and popped the whole thing in the mail. I was still counting on the electronic filing to occur. I submitted it and we left the next day.

Once in Sydney, I checked my email at an Internet cafe only to find out --- this is now 4/13 --- that the electronic filing did not happen, because one of the checks the system makes is that you must enter your net taxable income from the year before. I knew mine, but I didn't know Cindy's (we had filed separately). Since I didn't bring last years returns with us to Thailand, I figured our goose was cooked. Ever hopeful, I dashed off emails both to our son, Warren, and our accountant to find out Cindy's net taxable income. Over the next couple of days and after several emails, the electronic filing was accepted on 4/15, actually two days ahead of the filing deadline for this year, which was 4/17. Great way to star a vacation, what? So with all these preliminaries out of the way, let's get on with it.

## **Sydney – Exceeding Our Expectations**



Sydney is an absolutely delightful place to visit, particularly during the time of the year when we were there, which is their Fall, with temperatures in the lower 70s. Sydney's signature view, which we have all seen, is the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Sydney Opera House. Sydney was founded at the site of one of the world's best natural harbors in 1788 ostensibly as a penal colony. See what convicts can do if you give them a chance.

The bridge, affectionately called the 'old coat hanger' was completed in 1932 at a cost of \$17 million. It joins the downtown area with the growing communities to the north. If you're looking for a thrill and you're willing to shell out about \$120 a head, you can do the BridgeClimb where groups of 12-15 don special jump suits, lash themselves together and ascent the arc of the bridge. Because of the small groups, you must schedule in advance and our ad hoc status prevented us from doing so, though I am certain Cindy would not have accompanied me on this one.



The Sydney Opera House has a rather checkered history of its own. Its construction was an operatic blend of personal vision, long delays, bitter feuding, budget blowouts, and long, righteous politicking. What was originally to cost \$6 million in 1959 when Danish architect Jorn Utzon began it, ended up costing \$78 million when completed in 1973. Today some 3000 events are staged there annually.

Transportation is a breeze in Sydney. There are buses a plenty plying the streets, there is a monorail that runs through China town, where we stayed, through the central business district and across Darling Harbor to the convention center. There is also a light rail system which winds its way from the central railway station, through China Town, past the convention center and onto one of the outlying districts.



There are ferries, water taxis and man-eating, or in this case, woman eating catamarans to whisk you around the various harbors that make up the bay area known as Port Jackson.

