

Travel Log – Thailand

October 7

We arrived Bangkok early enough in the afternoon to take a stroll and get a feel for the town. We're off to an awkward start. As we started our stroll the skies opened so we took a taxi to a restaurant mom picked up from Fodor. The taxi driver has no clue even when we show him the exact address straight from the book. The food is actually good. Mom goes all out and ordered a deep fried grouper and delights. We stroll in Siam Square and nothing. The streets are full of Shmates and ice cream and grooming and messaging parlours. It reminds us of the not too good sections of Tel Aviv. The town has no character lacks definition no coherent architecture. We may be pre-judging but first impressions never lie. We're headed back to the hotel and the taxi driver asks: how much are you willing to pay? When I said I had no idea and was there no set cost for the ride, he offered 200 to which I responded: you got to be kidding and offered him a 100. He accepted immediately: "Just for you!" (we paid 150 going there). Mom complains that there is no browsing in stores. The moment you stop you're swarmed by sales "kindness" that makes shopping (not that we were going to) a pressuring task (at least for Mom). We may be wrong but it seems that unless you come to Bangkok to bang kok you may be disappointed.



October 8

Today, was only the second day on our Asian tour that we were guide less. But we did O.K. We took the dirty river boat taxi drive to the Grand Palace and grand it is and indeed grandiose. There are endless numbers of palaces and shrines with intricate decorations, different heights and styles which for the first hour keeps you clicking photos in each direction for fear that you may miss some of this awesome display of glitz. Only photos

can describe it better. But then after an hour you get that over-the-top feeling and your eyes are begging for relief. So you walk a few blocks to the Wat Po temple of the "reclining Buddha" and you see this enormous gold (plated) shape of the Buddha the length of half a football field and more temples, shrines and palaces some pagoda shaped, some pointed needles and all covered with precious stones, gold and woodcraft. At some point you put your camera away thinking how many more need I take. On the hallowed grounds of the reclining Buddha I experienced a traditional Thai massage and I mean traditional as opposed to "traditional" . There are no happy endings on these sacred grounds. This parlour is in the original location where Thai massage started. It is now practically an industry in both traditional senses. Mom declined. I told her that in the 30 minutes (you could buy an hour) the massage lady could only do so much and that she gave me some homework. Mom didn't buy it. Bangkok is still what we felt and experienced yesterday if there is a "nice" part of town we haven't seen it yet.







October 9

Today we made history. 2 hours out of Bangkok we went back to see The Bridge on the River Kwai. The first time we saw it was 55 years ago on our official first date. Alec Guinness was not there but tourists from every corner of the world. We have the picture we were picturing to have. 55 years is a long time and we are still whistling the famous tune. Totally unrelated we think that most Thai (men) are gay. It's either their accent (cannot pronounce R) their demeanour or their orientation. We have more trouble understanding them than any English speaking we encountered on this tour. There must be beautiful parts to Thailand and we are still looking. Our pre-organized tour today was an exercise in herding cattle. The guides can't speak

comprehensible English and just herd you from station to station with their unpleasant screaming voices. What a difference from what we experienced so far. We must be spoiled. From what we experienced so far Thailand is all about hawking stuff.



The Money Shot



Afternoon ends with Bamboo rafting, elephant riding and spectacular water fall.



Here is math question for you. On this trip my physical activity (walking, climbing) has not been as intense in many years. I have burned more calories a day than at any time. My food intake has been low to moderate as certified by mom. Yet, I have not shed a pound and my belly has not shrunk an inch. Go figure.

October 10

Now Chiang Mai that is much better. The Fodor guide says it best and validates our impressions after a half day walk and a Northern Thai lunch: "Bangkok is a fundamentally ugly city with relatively non-descript architecture. Chang Mai on the other hand has more treats for the eye". First of all 137 Pillar House is an incredible place in late colonial style and reminds one of a plantation resort. The suite and it is a suite including an outdoor court yard shower (see mom's surprise behind the back photo) is traditional rich with dark chestnut furnishing. But the town itself is so different even though it has 2 million inhabitants. A river runs through it (brown is the colour of choice in Asia), parks, wide boulevards nicely decorated with natural flowers and shrubbery.



An Old (walled) City with so many temples and shrines and monasteries and monks and worshippers. Most of East Asia is very big on religion and I mean Big. The people are also nicer here and are giving tourists more space compared to the pressure selling in Bangkok. It's mostly flat with nice suburban homes, galleries, decent shops and friendly people. Now Japan (Tokyo) is the last bastion to defend Asian food in the eyes and taste buds of the chef. For lunch we went to the best most authentic Northern Thai restaurant only to register another Reish Mem. Thank goodness we are not here for the hunting (food). We're yet to find something mom really likes. No Chinese, Tibetan, Nepalese, Bhutanese and now Thai food for you. Imagine how much I enjoy the food across from Miss Donlikeit.

We thought of but couldn't retire the camera from taking photos of Wat after Wat. They are all so different and so expansive.



This evening we did the obligatory dinner and culture show combo (we also bought the photograph) . No shoes, sitting on a mat with a bit of a back support (perfect for my Lotus position and my bloody twisted back) and eating good (surprise) Northern Thai food. The dancers wee cute, the music was great and the dances seem authentic. What more can you ask for.



October 11

today The attraction was supposed to be visiting the Long Neck tribe in their village up on the mountains North of Chiang Mai. Little did we know that it starts with yet another Elephant ride albeit in the real jungle and much longer than the one near Bangkok Not another bamboo river rafting?! But this one is real, beautiful, no life jackets, cool breeze. In hindsight the other rides where like Disney World. Originally I was very upset. Jump in a car and go. No explanation, itinerary expectation setting and once again little if any comprehensible English. Come on this is tourist country. We are in the company of a young couple from Manchester and a young guy from Southampton (5th place in the premiership 4 ahead Man. United) river rafting in Thailand and talking football with Brits what a combination. The day is turning into a nature adventure. We are on an exciting hike in the jungle to a mid-size but powerful waterfall. Jumped into the water and swam in a fresh watering hole. Finally we also got to see the Long Neck village. What a gip.





History does repeat itself. Mom makes a point of not going to the washroom anywhere but the hotel. When we were 16 and on a date I escorted mom back to her home. The house was locked and by that time it was too late for number 1. Today by the time I had the key in the door when we arrived back history repeated itself some 55 years later. This time I was not as embarrassed. (No photos allowed)



October 12

People like mom (and Alon) who are intuitively always right, shove aside logical arguments and patiently await the inevitable apology for putting up a vigorous counter argument - really piss me off. How many times can you say: "you know what? You were right". I woke up thinking: No temples for you today! Now we are on our way back from the most ancient and spectacular shrine in Chiang Mai province. We did reach a consensus though on not climbing the 304 stairs up the mountain in favour of an elevator ride but did come down the temple validating the number 304. If the world were to melt all the gold and sell the precious metals decorating just the shrines we visited, it will be the end of world hunger and every kid in Africa will have an iPhone. One huge impression on this trip: Religion is big business not only in Asia but world-wide. I bet you they have much more money than JP Morgan's total deposits of a trillion something dollars.





We keep raving about the 137 Pillars House. The standards here are Perfection in every aspect of hospitality, service, food, landscaping, concierge services, you name it. Anything lower than perfect, requires attention and correction. So much so that I had to ask the staff who owns the place? Only then did we realize that the old house on the property, the one with the 137 pillars (hence the name) was the house where Anna the English tutor of the King of Siam and his children lived. Remember Debra Carr and Yul Briner in the King and I? In 2008 a wealthy Bangkok family came to Chiang Mai for a few days holiday. They Fell in love with the place for its charm, slow pace (compared to Bangkok) and fascinating history. The next year they came back to buy a retirement home and ended up buying the 137 Pillars House and the land around it and built this resort/spa garden villas.



October 13

We are back in Bangkok. Finally hit the jackpot and had an excellent Thai meal in Silom at the Pen restaurant. We gave Bangkok one more chance on Silom Rd. and the riverside Namal Tel-Aviv called Asiatique. The latter is more upscale but the river doesn't smell any better. For the traffic jams, the thousands of little shops, booths and street stands, pollution, dirt, smog, sleaze- you can have Bangkok. Yet Bangkok was chosen by Travel & Leisure magazine four years in a row as the "most interesting city" in the world. Define "interesting".



October 14

Once again mom was right on insisting on booking a private tour of Erwan National Park back in Toronto and today when we had an option to avoid the 3.5 hour drive out of Bangkok. Erwan is known for the 7 waterfalls that are fed by a powerful river in Burma (it's on the border and by the way nobody here refers to it as Myanmar) we climbed 6 of the 7 falls which are all spectacular (see photos). Most visitors do not do more than 5. We could have made it to the top. After all we've been through a climbing/trekking boot camp for over a month now. We decided not to because it meant walking in shallow water and getting our shoes all wet just before we leave Thailand. Besides we have nothing to prove. On the way down we went swimming in the natural pool of fall number 2 and re-enacted the Ein Gedi under the fall shower scene from an old movie. As a bonus we (I) received a free pedicure from the skin eating fish in the pool. what a weird feeling they bite you gently for what in the West I gather you have to pay a hefty price. We are getting psyched to get up at 3 O'clock in the morning to catch our 6 hours and 15 minutes flight to Tokyo that is scheduled to get hit by a hurricane just when we arrive. We shall see.





