

Chiang Mai

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The Bangkok to Chiang Mai train was no Shinkansen – if it was we would not have arrived three hours late and we would not have had required a sleeper compartment. However, it was reasonably comfortable. We spent the 16 hours sleeping and appreciating the Thai countryside. We arrived at our Chiang Mai hotel, the Bodhi Serene, refreshed. The Bodhi tree was the tree that Buddha sat under as he gained enlightenment. The hotel was aptly named as it was a very elegant and quiet oasis in the old city. This conformed with our first impressions of Chiang Mai – cooler weather and more laid back than Bangkok. We have been

amazed at how little it has cost us to stay in such nice hotels. It turns out that it is low season here due to the monsoon. However, we have experienced very little rain and not too many centigrades.

Chiang Mai is Thailand's second largest city, but at 1.5 million it is a distant second to Bangkok's 10 million. The city is quite dispersed in a large valley with mountains visible from the city. When residing in the old part of the city, Chiang Mai feels more like a large town than a small city. Chiang Mai is a gateway to many destinations in North Thailand and the old city is full of tourist agencies offering advice along with optional guides to a myriad of sites, cities, nature attractions, adventures and Wats.

Laura and I started off on foot to explore the old city including the Wats Chedi Luang and Phra Singh (both worth seeing). Unfortunately, after a few blocks, the skies opened up and started monsooning on us. Quickly drenched, we took refuge in a nearby Mediterranean

cafe/coffee house. Knowing that rain can be intense, but does not last long, we each decided to order a “spicy beef salad”. Both of us like spicy food and neither of us found anything too fierce in Bangkok. However, unlike Bangkok, Chiang Mai is in Northern Thailand. Twenty minutes after finishing our salads the temperature of our mouths finally returned to sub 100 Fahrenheit. Who would think that eating a salad could be a bloodsport? Later that evening, eating in a restaurant at the Night Market, we were careful to only order items without the word “spicy” in their description.

The night market was pretty nice and filled with great bargains. For instance, one can pick up a Rolex watch or a Montblanc pen set for about \$20. I bought a great Deuter Cerrotorre 40 day pack for only \$25 (normally a pack such this costs about \$100). The only thing wrong with it is that somehow it had “The North Face” stitched into it instead Deuter (I am sure I can get that fixed with the included unconditional North Face warranty). The amazing thing is that counterfeit products are so common here, there are even internet reviews of them – I found a “The North Face Cerrotorre 40” review that was quite favorable. My guess is the Night Market Rolex was quite good too.



The next day was the first of two magical days. We hired Tak, a guide/driver from the hotel and we took off for a day of adventure. First stop was Puping Palace on the top of Doi Suthep mountain. The king has not been here in years, but just the same an army of gardeners work full time to maintain the hundreds of acres of absolutely beautiful grounds. No one here seems to resent the king’s ostentatious wealth. On the other hand, for a fee these grounds (not the palace) are opened for the public.

Luckily Tak had a four wheel drive SUV for we needed it after Puping Palace. We drove several miles on a single lane dirt (mud) road on the side of the mountain through the jungle until we came upon a hill tribe village that Tak told us he had never been to before. We were in the middle of nowhere with no phones, no electricity and no plumbing or sewage system. Tak tried to talk to some of the villagers, but he told us that only a few could speak a language he could understand (and that language was not English). We wandered around the village and Tak assured us that it was OK to photograph anyone or anything, but Laura and I felt we were intruding. We noticed that all the toilets were outside of the houses, located off the ground on stilts. It seemed that many of them were communal. Each home was assembled from material at hand and each had a corrugated metal roof. Every so

often we would come upon a small solar panel that seemed wildly out of place. Many homes had either a motorcycle or pickup truck parked nearby. A year or so earlier a Christian missionary came to live with this village and as a result most of the village is now Christian. Because the villagers had a lot of time on their hands, it seemed like they had much more a sense of community than we have nowadays in the States. Many of the houses had no doors and many people were sitting around talking with each other. Small groups of kids were playing marbles and other games that American kids don't seem to play anymore. In the center of the village there was a funeral ceremony. Tak assured us it was fine if we observed and took photographs. Much of the community was assembled – men, women and children. There was a lot of cooking taking place while a tribal leader was speaking and chanting over portable loudspeakers. All outside, of course. The village was fairly large – maybe a thousand souls – and had its own school for the children. Several of the houses sold staples through open windows. Everyone, including the numerous dogs and chickens seemed to know each other quite well. While all the native villagers were quite polite and seemingly oblivious of us, one of the dogs figured out we were from a different, distant tribe and followed us around, barking all the time, in a nonaggression way.



The time Tak gave us with the village was highly appreciated by Laura and me. Tak again assured us afterwards that the villagers did not mind our presence and that they received nothing in return for allowing foreigners to gawk at them. I honestly am not sure what to think. I would imagine that the villagers are being reimbursed by tour guides for sharing their village and having their privacy invaded. One would like to think that all, or at least most of our experiences here are legit, but one has to consider if our experiences were like Arnold Schwarzenegger's in *Total Recall*. It seems that as we get deeper and deeper into

Thailand the less we really know of it. Was the Bangkok policeman really a policeman? Heck, I don't even know if my new North Face day pack is North Face, Deuter or "other." Like Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness* (but without "The horror! The horror!"), I found the familiar rules of civilization have somehow faded away and I am not quite sure what has taken its place. Buddha must have had it easier. At least he did not have to worry if his Boddhi tree was really a Guava tree made to look like a Boddhi tree. I have begin to empathize with the barking dog in the hill tribe village, who knows something is not right but is not quite sure what.

Epilogue: The next day, on our way to Patara Elephant Farm, another tourist told us that

the previous day her guide had taken her to a remote mountain village that had seldom seen an outsider. There she had witnessed a funeral ceremony. I thought it best to let her believe her experience was unique.



On the way back to Chiang Mai we stopped at Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep, the most important Wat in Northern Thailand. As the legend goes, long ago an elephant carrying a holy relic climbed the 3,542 foot Doi Suthep mountain and came to rest (perished) on the present site of the Wat. The Wat, being perched on top of the mountain, requires either a incline tram or 309 steps from the road to get to it. Before the road was built in 1935, pilgrims hiked up from the base of the mountain. Stairs or incline tram, either way it is well worth seeing. There is something quite impressive about Buddhism. Judaism has its Book and his-

tory, Christianity has its faith and cathedrals, Islam has its distinctive mosques and Koran, and Buddhism has its Dharma and aesthetics. And quite appealing aesthetics too. The temple was exquisite and the incredible view of Chiang Mai from above was a nice bonus.

With the onset of evening our adventures with Tak came to an end and he dropped us off at the Chiang Mai Night Safari. We both scarfed down some fast food before heading off to see the animals. I made the mistake of ordering “*spicy* seafood soup.” Fortunately, my mouth stopped glowing the orange color of freshly melted iron by the time we made first contact with the animals and I was finally able to close my mouth and stop panting. While I prefer the night safari in the Singapore zoo better, this one was excellent too. Zebras, giraffes, wild pigs and various types of wild deer would stick their heads into our tram to



take the bananas and carrots we offered them. Lions, tigers and bears might have been confused about what the intended food was so they were kept in enclosures. Later that evening, I leaned on a yellow plastic replica of a ten foot long snake only to discover it was

not plastic – it was real and alive. Not only can I not trust what appears to be real to be real, but I can not trust what appears false to be false.

Our next day we were mahouts (elephant trainers) for a day at Patara Elephant Farm. We each brushed our own elephant, gave it a health check, including inspecting its dung, and bathed it in a nearby stream (their skin requires a lot of maintenance). The rest of the day we spent riding our elephant through the jungle to a waterfall. After swimming with the elephants and eating lunch, we rode them back to where we started. We were carefully matched with our pachyderms and able to create a personal relationship with our new outsized friends. One definitely wants your elephant to be in a good mood. A wagging tail and flapping ears are a sign of a happy elephant (extended, non-flapping ears means an elephant feels threatened and a droopy look to the elephant means it is not feeling well). All our elephants passed their health exams and were in a good mood.

One of the first things you learn about elephants is that friendship and food are closely related. Fifty bananas was a good introduction (though only a small snack for five ton animal that eats 550 pounds a day). Physically an elephant is a giant and powerful engine that requires large amounts of fuel almost hourly for sixty to seventy years. The fires of these engines have to be fed eighteen hours a day. Fast-ing kills. Anything that interferes with the powerful engine that is an elephant's stomach is life threatening. Gas, emotional stress, badly chewed food or agricultural chemicals all threaten the digestion assembly line that powers an elephant.



Emotionally, the elephant is friendly and not prone to the passive aggressive tendencies of horses. Elephants are honest and not prone to deception. In this way elephants are preferable to tuktuk drivers. An elephant is faithful 100%. When riding an elephant over rough terrain, the elephant will hold your legs with its ears so you will not fall off. Elephants, like humans, are social animals. They have complex relationships with other elephants based on family ties, friendship and most of the other factors that determine relationships between humans. They enjoy each other's company and love to play. And 400 pound elephant babies are incredibly cute.

Elephants are ridden bare back, sitting on necks or heads. Despite looking so clumsy, elephants can travel through mud and jungle, up and down steep slippery terrain that would challenge a man. Because they weigh so much, three legs are on the ground at all times so they are very stable. And because a fall can be fatal to an elephant, they are very careful

about where they put their feet. An adult elephant will not step on you because it will sense you with the bottom of its foot before putting weight on it. Being elephants, they will consume small trees, bamboo, grass and anything else vegetarian nearby as your ride them. They are picky about where they will drink, but when they find a suitable water, they will drink vast amounts. I think the elephants enjoyed our jungle trek as much as Laura and I did. We developed a strong affection for the elephants and we were happy that Patara Elephant Farm takes such good care of our new friends.



Laura and I had only four days in Chiang Mai and they went quickly. Packing up the last day for our flight to Cambodia, we found that we both had taken a strong liking toward Thailand. The people are friendly, the food is fantastic and the countryside is beautiful. This is an interesting country with a vibrant economy and complicated politics internally and with its neighbors. On the flight to Cambodia, I found myself already missing the Kingdom of Siam.