

## Bangkok

Marc H. Mehlman

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The Indochina adventure begins! My first adventure was with my fellow passenger on my 13 hour Korean Air flight to Seoul. I had the aisle seat and a very peculiar man of about 35 years of age sat between me and a perky young Korean woman at the window. My neighbor was not aggressive or threatening in any way, and did not seem to wish any harm, but he was a bit into his own immediate needs and knew no boundaries. Boundaries as in the arms rests between our seats. At one point, he even attempted to

use my Korean Air touch video entertainment system (instead of his own) until I pushed his hands away. He tortured the stewardesses the entire trip, repeatedly paging them while they were attempting to serve meals and demanding special desserts and juices that they did not have. Frequently, when they presented him with a special treat he would handle it so it could not be reused and then page the flight attendants again to take it back and get him something else. When he got up during the flight (numerous times), instead of letting me know so I could get out of his way, he just started to climb over me, literally, disconnecting the wires to my entertainment center and crushing whatever was in my lap. Like when dealing with my sister's cat, I would gently, but firmly push him back into his seat, wave my finger and command "wait". And much like my sister's cat, he would offer no resistance or resentment, but would try to climb over me again five seconds later. I could not detect any short or long term injuries on him, much as one might expect an infantile person of such annoying tendencies might collect. However I would not have been surprised if one of the seemingly infinitely pleasant and patient 45 kilogram stewardesses had grabbed him by the ear and deposited him on a remote North Pacific isle from 40K feet.

The other interesting thing about the LAX–ICN flight was the captain. He informed

us that we would be flying over Japan on our way to Korea, but not to worry – we were flying high enough so there was no need to fret about any radiation from Japan’s recent nuclear catastrophe. He was not joking (but I am sure there is no danger on the ground either).

I met Laura in Incheon. While sitting next to her on the Incheon to Bangkok leg of the journey was not as amusing an experience as with my neighbor on my first leg, it was much more pleasant. Bangkok International is a very modern airport and unlike the US, we made it through customs, had our luggage and were set loose on Thailand all within 40 minutes. We had both been traveling for over 24 hours and it was now 11pm Thai time. We decided to skip the red light district that night and headed straight to our hotel which was about one hour away. Fearing getting ripped off by a taxi driver, we asked a couple (who turned out to be not to be a couple, but boss and employee traveling together on business) on how to handle the taxi. They invited us to share their taxi. We crammed our luggage and the four of us into the small vehicle and had a tight, but pleasant ride into the city. We were dropped off at our new friends’ workplace, where the boss had parked his car and then they drove us to our hotel. They absolutely refused any money for the cab ride. We told them that they had created such a great first impression of Thailand. We have since discovered that their openness and friendliness was not unique to them here in Thailand.



Our \$77-a-night, five star hotel turned out to be, hands down, the nicest place I have ever stayed. Arriving at the hotel we were informed that they had booked up all the double rooms and would have to upgrade us, at no charge, to a junior suite. Biting our tongues, we politely accepted the upgrade. On the 18<sup>th</sup> floor, our bedroom (we had a living room, balcony and kitchen as well) had two floor to ceiling window walls from which we could observe downtown Bangkok and the Chao Phraya River below.

Due to the monsoon, the river was muddy brown with large mats of water hyacinth

floating downstream. On the river was a day and night parade of huge barges filled with, I am assuming, pad Thai noodles, Thai ice tea and tom yum goong soup.

The next morning, after enjoying the included and magnificent breakfast buffet at the hotel, we set off for the Grand Palace. On our way to the Central Pier, we met a friendly young man who informed us that there was a Buddhist ceremony at the Grand Palace and it would not be open to the public until later. He suggested that we take a tuktuk that would stop at a Wat (Buddhist temple) on the way to the Grand Palace, so we would arrive at the Grand Palace when it was opening for the public. Our new friend paged a tuktuk and we arrived at this modest, but nice Wat where we ran into a middle aged worshiper who informed us he worked at in Thai embassy in London and was just home visiting his parents. He mentioned a few places we might want to see and told us that once a year (today) the King of Thailand, opened up his Royal Warehouse to tourists only and sold verified jewels and other treasures at reduced prices to encourage tourism. He then warned us that many of the jewel stores were rip offs and that if we wanted to buy anything on this trip this royal sale was a unique opportunity.

Our tuktuk driver had waited for us and after the Wat he drove us to the river where we took a river ferry upstream to Chang Pier for the Grand Palace. Soon, there was a swarm of helpful Thais, telling us the Buddhist ceremony at the Grand Palace was still going on and they would take us to several other sites for an hour or two as we waited. At this point a Thai policeman intervened, chased away the swarm, and asked us if any of the helpful swarm had tried to mislead us. He warned us that these guys



were just after our money. I asked if there was really a Buddhist ceremony at the Grand Palace and he said yes and suggested that we visit the Royal Wat (open one day a year that just happened to be today) and the King's Warehouse sale while we waited. He then wrote down directions for a tuktuk driver so we would end up in the right place. Soon afterwards we were sitting in the back of another tuktuk and

on our way.

Judging from the Royal Wat, the King of Siam is quite a modest man (later we found out modesty not what he was known for). The Royal Wat was empty, despite the fact it was open but one day a year to the public. We met there a very pleasant middle aged man who was a captain in the Thai army. He gave us a nice tour of the Wat and was quite helpful. He asked how we got to the Wat and asked if we knew about the famous Royal Warehouse sale. We told him that the policeman had recommended it and showed him the policeman's notes.

¿From there our tuktuk driver took us to the Royal Warehouse. Once again I was stuck about how modest a warehouse the king had and how few tourists were there. We were shown a slick, well made, video on the formation of and quality of jewels. I learned many things I did not know before (for instance, did you know volcanoes are caused by the rotation of the earth?).

¿From there we were given a tour of the royal workshops, where, unfortunately, the workers were on break, but we able to see on each desk large piles of priceless rubies and emeralds the workers had left unguarded while they were away. Also, it was interesting that all the signs in the Kings Warehouse were in English. Pictures of Nicholas Cage and other American movie stars adored the walls, implying that they fly in once a year to buy their jewels at this one day sale. Despite the bargain prices and great investment value of the jewels, Laura and I decided we preferred to remain poor and unadorned and had our tuktuk driver drive us back to the Grand Palace.

Before getting to “Royal Warehouse” we were suspicious and shortly after arriving we knew something was up. Laura was wondering if there had really been a Buddhist ceremony at the Grand Palace that morning. Being the more paranoid of the two, I was wondering if the policeman was a real policeman, if there was there really was a Royal Warehouse sale, if everybody we had met everywhere in the city and every tuktuk driver were members of a criminal gang. Later, when Laura checked on the web, it turned out that I was not paranoid enough. The policeman was a real policeman, but was simultaneously part of the gang. The “diplomat” and the “army captain” were also fakes. There was no Buddhist ceremony at the Grand Palace nor sale at a Royal Warehouse. Since Laura and I were on our own a lot of the time the gang had no idea where we would be next. It is just that their network of “trustworthy” people and police officers is so vast that newly arrived tourists invariably end up in one of many of the “King's Warehouses”.

The average take in this ruse is estimated to be \$2,000 with some tourists losing more. I believe the crooks lost interest in us after I asked them if they had anything for under \$25 for my thirteen year old niece. In our case, Laura and I enjoyed delightful conversations with the “diplomat” and “army captain”, and were cheap enough (and smart enough) so that we were out only about four dollars total in tuktuk fare. It is hard to believe that many people, many who did not know each other, some who were policemen, could be so organized and so convincing. It was the most elaborate con game I have ever witnessed. Who would guess that Nicholas Cage was part of a Bangkok crime syndicate? However, this raises an interesting question: Instead of going to such extremes to fool tourists, why don't these criminals (well, they would be criminals under American law) just mug their marks at the “Royal Warehouses”? I have seen this before, in Greece and Turkey, where it was OK to rob tourists using elaborate deceit, but violence was not one of the criminal's preferred tools. Perhaps the criminals realize that while the authorities can well tolerate corruption and con games, actually violence would dry up the supply of tourists and ultimately put a dent into the King's actual jewel warehouse. More likely, these crooks think of themselves as businessmen who employ enhanced business techniques to encourage kinetic shopping among wealthy foreigners. Bangkok is incredibly inexpensive and many of the numerous multi-person con jobs were simply efforts of the nature to get us to pay six dollars for a cross city cab instead of the more normal three bucks.

Now for a little Thai history. In 1238 the Thai people kicked their Khmer (Cambodian) rulers out of the area of Sukhothai (265 miles north of present day Bangkok), and made Sukhothai the capital of the new Thai kingdom. In 1375 the capital moved to Ayutthaya (45 miles upstream from present day Bangkok on the Chao Phraya River). Ayutthaya was one of leading cities of Asia at that time, but in 1767 the Burmese sacked Ayutthaya. General Phraya Taksin recaptured Ayutthaya two years later and moved the capital to Bangkok. General Taksin then made himself king, but was relieved of power and executed in 1782. Afterwards, a Thai lord with the name of Buddha Yadfa Chulakoke the Great made himself king. King Rama I to be exact. After that it has King Ramas all the way. Thailand is now under King Rama IX, the world's longest serving head of state. The current king is held in uniform high regard by the Thai people. Besides the fact his picture is on about every building and temple, his face is on every denomination of Thai paper money.

The Grand Palace, including Wat Phra Koew, was built in 1782 by King Rama I in the same year that he was crowned. Ramas I through VIII resided here until 1946. It was into this Grand Palace that Laura and I now found ourselves after our adventures with the Bangkok underworld, just making the last English tour of the day. The Grand Palace was – grand. Given the choice, I would prefer it to Buckingham Palace. To me the most interesting part of the Grand Palace was the Wat Phra Koew, a large complex of buildings including the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. The ornateness, the architectural beauty and the details of this Buddhist complex are truly unbelievable and totally unique (to me). The Emerald Buddha is actually a jade Buddha, 31 inches in height, that has had significance to the Thai people throughout the history of Siam. The statue has different outfits for each season, and only the king is allowed to dress and undress the Emerald Buddha.



In Thailand, the Theravada sect of Buddhism is practiced and it is much stricter than the Mahayana sect practiced in China, Korea and Japan. Ninety-five percent of Thailand is Buddhist with over 40,000 Wats (another four percent is Muslim, residing mostly in the South near the Malaysian border). In 1997 Buddhism became the official state religion of Thailand as it is in Bhutan, Cambodia and Sri Lanka.

After the Grand Palace, we visited the nearby Wat Po, Temple of the Reclining Buddha (Buddha before dying and reaching nirvana) and the Wat Arun, the Temple of the Dawn (best seen at sunset). Both of these temples were also, in fact, large temple complexes and well worth visiting.

The next morning we visited Chatuchak Weekend Market (one of the world's largest outdoor markets) and then headed off for Bangkok's famous canals. I was thinking "Venice of the East" as Bangkok is sometimes referred to. Foolish me. The "gondoliers" of the East are actually speeding cattle car boats behind the gigantic wave crests of rancid water that they push in front of their bows. To claim that the ride is "at least cheap" is like claiming a sardine need "pay only a little" to visit a canning factory. It's Worth doing, once.



The following day we took a tour of Ayutthaya, returning to Bangkok by river cruise and enjoying a lunch buffet on-board. Our first stop was the king's 146 acre Bang Pa-in Summer Palace. This is one of many of the king's residences, each with armies of gardeners, servants and military personnel for security. This particular estate could cause pangs of jealousy in other kings worldwide (and harsh taxes on their subjects for upgrades to their estates). Many of the buildings are architectural masterpieces.

The next stop was the most impressive of the day. Over 600 years old, Wat Maha That was once the very center of Buddhism in the ancient capital of Ayutthaya, but when the Burmese took the city in 1767, they all but destroyed this large complex of Buddhist shrines and temples. However, the remaining ruins are truly magnificent. Among countless headless Buddhas, is the famous Buddha head now locked in place by overgrown tree roots. Numerous partially destroyed stupas lean this way and that due to waterlogged foundations. The scale of grandeur that Wat Maha That once was and the amount of destruction that was let loose on it is incredible (and very photogenic). I asked our tour guide why the Burmese would destroy such an important Wat. Were they not Theravada Buddhist too? If France was to conquer Rome, would they destroy the Vatican? The guide informed me that while the Burmese were Buddhist, their armies consisted of poor tribal people who for the most part had their own religions based on spirits of the jungle and its various animals. War is often about senseless destruction, and those who come to see Wat Maha That know this first hand.



Ayutthaya included many other interesting ruins worthy of our time and some ancient Wats that were not ransacked only because the Burmese army headquartered there. However, it was a hot and muggy day (not unusual here), so no one was displeased when we finally arrived at the air conditioned river boat with its fancy Thai buffet.

While eating good food, we observed squalid houses on stilts, piers and factories all perched on the river banks as we floated toward Bangkok. Residences worthy of Beverly Hills were quite numerous also. It was a great finale to a worthy day tour. Thailand is a country of 63 million people of which 10 million call Bangkok home. It was as if Washington DC and New York City were one city of 50 million of our 300 million Americans. The city itself is quite picturesque and modern looking. There is both obvious wealth and poverty here, though overall Bangkok is a prosperous place. It is hard to gauge how bad off the underclass are. We saw hovels, yet were surprised when we observed TV satellite dishes and front loading washing and drying machines inside. This is not to say there is not real desperation here too. One only has to remember how hard tuktuk and taxi drivers worked at prying two or three extra dollars from our wallets. Many poor families from the countryside survive by “giving” a son to a Buddhist monastery (getting payments in return) or a daughter to a brothel in one of Bangkok’s world famous sex districts.

The next evening we took the rickety overnight sleeper train to Chiang Mai. We had found Bangkokians cheerful, pleasant, happy and friendly. We could not help liking this place, its people, its sights, its food and its affordability. We hope to return.