

Cultural journey to Thailand

Expatriate survival guide

Social customs & Thai holidays

Tuk-Tuk and long-tail boats

Romantic Thai wedding

Discover Thailand

Living

Code of Conduct

Visa run

Dos and don'ts

Sanook=Fun!

THAI

WAYS

dos and don'ts & short stories

Living the Thai life

Monsoon rain

Shopping at Thai supermarkets

LIVING THAI WAYS - DOs AND DON'Ts

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THAI CULTURE SHOCK

The Diary of the Bewildered Thai Tourist

“My Wonderful Abbreviated Trip to Thailand”

Entries from Khun Joseph's Travel Journal

AUG 3 DEAR DIARY

From Palm Springs to Los Angeles International Airport to the Stratosphere, here I am sitting in a China Airlines 747 bound for my first trip to Siam (people today call the country Thailand). Being just a wee past 55 and retired with a healthy pension, I have the freedom to travel most anywhere in the world. The first leg of my trip will afford me an overnighter in Taipei (nearly 6,780 air miles from LA). Never been to Taipei before, either, so it will give a brief chance to enjoy some of the country's artifacts in the National Palace Museum, or at least to see a Panda at the Taipei Zoo. Leave for Bangkok tomorrow night. Just finished a light meal of Mahi-Mahi in Ponzu sauce and jade rice. Excellent. Time for a nap.

AUG 4 9 ½ hour flight—crossed International Dateline. Because of the time difference, it's now Aug 4. Safe arrival at CKS International Airport Taipei. Rather unnerving to see soldiers toting machine guns here. We In-Transit Passengers—referred to us as “transfers”—passengers were herded into an immigration holding area where our passports were confiscated—“a matter of routine,” the official told us. Passports will be returned tomorrow before boarding flight to Bangkok. Informed in no uncertain terms that armed guards will escort us to hotels by bus, where we are to remain. Incarcerated is a better word! No one is allowed to leave hotel premises. There goes Taipei sightseeing!

AUG 4 This has been the longest AUG 4 on record! Here I sit in the lobby of Chang Kai Shek Airport Hotel with nothing to do but twiddle my thumbs and wait until 10:30 p.m. tomorrow when the plane departs for Bangkok.

AUG 5 Decided to change to Thai International Airways because Thai has a flight at 8:30 p.m. - two hours earlier than does China Airlines. Sitting in the lounge area at Gate 6, the airport loudspeaker announced that my flight was ready for boarding. What happened next was nothing short of pandemonium. The Chinese tourists leapt up en masse and bounded over seats and each other getting to the gate. I was nearly trampled. I've never seen such blind chaos.

After an hour's delay sitting on the runway seated next to a soused, talkative, but jolly Thai commuter-worker, the plane took off on the final 1,555 mile flight. Arrival in Thailand estimated just after midnight. Neither my neighbor passenger nor I could understand one word the other was saying, but no matter. We had a good time "talking" via inventive sign language. If the excellent food, warm service, and polite manner of the trained Thai cabin crew are indications of what to expect, then I'm in for a grand time in "The Land of Smiles."

AUG 6 I was still filling out my required Thai Arrival/Departure Card when the plane landed at Bangkok's Don Muang Airport. When I approached the long orderly queue at Thai Immigration on the upper level of the terminal, I was thrilled to see the big "SAWASDEE WELCOME TO THAILAND" sign down below on the main floor. A smaller sign next to it ominously read: DRUGS—THE PENTALTY IS DEATH. There was just one lone immigration officer in the booth stamping passports—until a helper came to sit beside him and prepared to open a second window. Embarrassed to say this, but a longhaired hippie-looking youth (a fellow American I might add) broke from the orderly line and high-tailed it to the front of the queue hoping to squeeze past the rest of us and be first in line at the second window that was just about to open. My outraged remark, "What the hell do you think you're doing, Buster?" caused an uproar of supporting voices. The chagrined ignoramus sheepishly returned to the back of the line to await his turn, all the while muttering a hex on his interfering fellow travelers.

I passed through immigration with flying colors, and proceeded to the baggage claim area. After searching in vain for my luggage, and finally realizing every passenger on my flight had left the terminal, I had no choice but to inquire at the Baggage Claim Office.

“Ah, yes, Mr. Joseph,” spoke the Baggage Claims Man. “Receive message from Taipei. So sorry to say you forget notify when change plane to Thai Airways. Must sorry tell you luggage come two hours late because still aboard China Airline flight. Must wait. Coming soon.”

It was near to three o'clock in the morning when finally I was able to retrieve my luggage. I went through the “Nothing To Declare” Green Line and exited into the main terminal. There I exchanged a few dollars for Thai Baht, and found my driver, Khun Yat, curled up asleep in a hard plastic seat holding a homemade sign reading, “Sawasdee Khun Joe.” With apologies for keeping the driver waiting, I followed the sleepy fellow to the underground parking area. It was like the inside of a broiling oven down there. He informed me the temperature was 35 degrees Celsius (98° F.).

“More hot tomorrow,” he promised. “And more hotter next day.”

Yat found his spotless air-conditioned vehicle and we tooted out of the crowded airport in comfort, speeding down the motorway into downtown Bangkok.

“Where you go?” inquired Khun Yat.

I gave him the name and address of the hotel I had booked over the Internet.

“You go WHERE?” he asked again.

I repeated the directions.

“I no think you want go there,” he said, shaking his head.

“Why not? The Internet pictures of the hotel and the room I reserved looked quite nice.”

“Picture lie.”

“Look, Mr. Yat, it's after three in the morning. I'm weary. I just want to relax and get some sleep. I know it's not a first-class

hotel, but I'm only going to be there for a couple of days. After all, a hotel is a hotel. Can't be that bad."

But it was, in fact, a faded dump—but the staff was nice. Although the address was noted when I booked the hotel room over the Internet, I failed to understand that the “budget hotel” was smack dab in the center of The Patpong—a place some people call “seedy.” The building actually leaned askew of its foundation. Even the writing desk in the room fell sideways.

Assuming that there would be hot water, a tub/shower, and air-conditioning, a month ago I paid in advance for the room by credit card. At that late hour, I had no energy to go out and find another hotel.

The only means of bathing was a hand held sprayer hanging from a rusting cold water faucet in the “water closet.” There was no protective shower curtain, so the one moth-eaten thin bath towel, the toilet seat, and nearly empty roll of toilet paper were awash as a result of the spritzing water jets that sprayed everything in sight. Shivering, I turned out the one light hanging above me from a green metal shade and jumped into a rock hard bed. I tried counting sheep, but they refused to jump over the imaginary fence. The unrelenting noise and shrieking laughter filtering up from the crowded street below was ear-splitting. And that wasn't the only thing filtering up from the street. When I peered out the murky window, I discovered my room was right in the jet stream of a greasy vapor trail wafting in from the KFC Chicken place directly across the way.

Unable to sleep, I went into the bathroom to shave. My Gucci shaving kit lay sodden on the shelf above the sink—a result of the fitful water show while taking that unfortunate ice-cold “shower.” Oh well, I couldn't see to shave anyway because there was only one small mirror—not over the sink, but in the next room over the bed.

AUG 6 (Still!) Because of the time difference, this August 6th day seems not to end! But I am eager to see my two best friends who retired in Thailand five years ago. Their letters read

like travelogues—tempting me to visit them. Without their constant urgings, I doubt I ever would have had the patience to endure the long, tedious flight. The last time I saw my erstwhile classmates was at my home in Palm Springs, but at 10:00 a.m. this morning I would at last reunion with them in The Author's Court at The Oriental Hotel. Any Bangkok taxi driver knows how to get there, they said.

When I got into the back seat of the cab, I thought it a bit strange that I didn't see or even hear a meter ticking. That was because there was no meter! While driving through heavy traffic, I suddenly remembered my friend's pre-travel admonition: 'Never ride in a taxi without a meter.' For the brief ride from my poor hotel in The Patpong to the rich Oriental Hotel, the scheming taxi driver charged me a whopping 500 Baht! Being thoughtless and dumb, I had no recourse. I paid the gleeful driver the fare—but no tip.

As promised, there they were waiting in the venerable Author's Court. One could almost sense the spirit of Noel Coward lurking about. Jimmy and John were a bit plumper than I remembered them five years ago, but after all, they're living the quiet "good life" now. All that fried rice—must be fattening. John was reading my judgmental mind, because without so much as a Hello or How are you or Welcome to Thailand, my boon companion gave me my deserved comeuppance.

"What happened to you? You look like a rat!"

I actually had forgotten that I was unshaven because the absence of mirror-mirror on the wall in my hotel room failed to reveal that I was not fairest of all.

"I'm growing a beard," I grinned. They didn't believe a word of it.

A boisterous reunion ensued with hugs, laughter, and gossip from home. The Oriental Hotel's water taxi ferried us up the road a piece to River City, a huge complex of shops and restaurants on the banks of the Chao Phraya River. I enjoyed my first tasty Thai lunch in a balcony restaurant overlooking the exhibit floor below. The entire area was filled with "One Village, One Product" original Thai handicrafts.

I should have known when Jimmy suggested we venture outside and take a ride in something called a “long tailed boat” it would be an adventure. Jimmy insisted the invigorating ride was better than anything Disneyland had to offer. Well, getting into the unstable thing was precarious enough, but getting out almost ended in disaster. Returning to the pier following a brief hair-raising ride upriver, my clothes were drenched from the rushing water spray produced by the torpedo-like speed of the boat. The long-tail boat cut its speed—somewhat—as we approached the dock. With lightning speed, John and Jim leapt out leaving me to fend for myself.

“Better hurry!” my chums cautioned, offering a hand.

I managed to get one leg up onto the dock, but the boat kept inching away. I found myself doing the splits—one leg out, one leg still anchored in the boat. The seam in the crotch of my shorts ripped apart just as my friends yanked me to the safety of the pier.

“Time for a nap,” I uttered, breathlessly.

John suggested that I move in with them at their hotel. Sleeping on a roll-away bed is not like sleeping on a cloud, but at that point I would sleep on a bed of nails just to escape that odoriferous Patpong hotel.

Properly showered, shaved, and at last feeling once again like a real human being, I listed to the stimulating itinerary Jimmy and John had planned for the rest of my day—a tour of the Grand Palace, a visit to observe the revered Emerald Buddha, Wat Po to see the immense Reclining Buddha, and finish the day’s explorations at Vimanmek Teakwood Mansion (now a museum, but once the royal residence of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). It was nightfall when they dragged me back to the hotel.

AUG 7 Next morning, we three checked out of the hotel. A hotel mini-van drove us to a busy bus terminal. The bus loaded up—every seat taken. Scheduled to depart at 9:00 a.m. it was now past 9:30 and no bus driver. The grumbling passengers sat in stifling heat waiting for someone to take us to Pattaya. Just before ten o’clock, the errant bus driver, who appeared to be wearing bright-red silk

pajamas, jumped into the driver's seat. Turning about, the man grinned and offered a succinct apology.

“So sorry. Oversleep. We go now.”

We go, but not very far. A few miles down the express motorway the bus had a flat tire. We arrived in Pattaya two hours later than expected.

The interior of Jimmy and John's Thai-style retirement country home in Pattaya was showstopper elegant. Even had a crystal clear pool where I could take my exercise laps. I was cautioned not to drink water directly from the tap. John taught me how to siphon safe water from huge plastic containers and funnel it into water pitchers. While standing at the kitchen window, I nearly choked on an ice cube when two mammoth elephants waddled by in the roadway. None of my neighbors in The Springs is going to believe this unless I have proof! I ran for my camera.

When I woke up from my afternoon nap, I thought it would be an ideal time to jog around the block. It turned out there is no “block”—just a dusty road leading into the next village. I put on my running shoes and headed out at a healthy pace. Ahead, I glimpsed a long hazardous stick protruding into the road from the field. It moved! My tired old legs leapt over the thing. Adrenaline surging, I turned around and faced a scaly green snake slithering from one side of the road to the other. Looking like the cartoon Roadrunner, I fled down the potholed soi by leaps and bounds and disappeared around the bend in the road.

That evening following a marvelous Thai dinner and show at a local Pattaya restaurant called Ruan Thai, we sat together on the couch in Jimmy and John's living room watching The History Channel. Something moving on the ground outside on the patio caught my eye. In the darkness, it moved to the screen door and peeked in.

Turning to Jimmy, I said, “What is that?”

“Oh, oh... ‘Rex the Rat’ is back! John, get out the rat traps!” came the matter-of-fact reply.

Time for a nap!

AUG 8 The next morning while enjoying breakfast at the pool, I was offered a litany of “things to do and places to go.” Tourist Choice: rent a motorbike and go exploring, spend the day at Jomtien beach, go to the Speedway and rent a Go-Kart, enjoy a thrilling Bungee Jump from Pattaya Tower, make a pilgrimage to the Big Buddha on the Hill, or cross the nearby border into Cambodia and gamble the night away in a casino.

I opted for Jomtien Beach. Toting a box of Dunkin’ Donuts, we walked up to the main road and flagged down a Pattaya taxi called a song-taew. Going to the beach turned out to be a good choice despite the drunken Indian With the Lopsided Turban who insisted he read my fortune. Vendors and hawkers all over the place eager to make a baht or two. Do you believe I was able to just sit there and relax in a beach chair while a nice old lady gave me a pedicure? Later I lay on a towel in the sand while a beach boy administered a bone-crunching back massage. Afterwards when I managed to creak upright, I must admit I felt like a million dollars.

AUG 9 The next day I went alone into Pattaya and rented a motorbike and the required safety gear. To me the oddly shaped black crash helmet looked like something one would see on a World War II Nazi battlefield. Even had a small swastika painted on it. I would have preferred something a bit more seemly, but that’s all the operator offered. I had no particular place to go. Just wanted to sightsee. First, I had to go to an ATM and withdraw a little baht to see me through the day. I parked the motorbike in front of the Royal Garden Shopping mall and quickly spied a nearby ATM. While performing the transaction, a message appeared saying, “Sorry. Your transaction cannot be completed at this time. Telephone your bank for information.” Click-Click! The ATM whirred and sputtered and ate my bank card. It remained stuck inside the ATM machine. It took over an hour inside the bank for scrupulous banking personnel to authenticate who I was and return my bank card.

Unnerved, I returned curbside and discovered my rented