

# Summer in **Siam**

Tales of Thai & other lands



**John Borthwick**

## SUMMER IN SIAM

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*Summer in*  
**Siam**

**Tales of Thai and Other Lands**

## INTRODUCTION: OF DIAMONDS, DUST AND WANDERLUST

"I am having bargain diamonds. You are wishing to see?" With jaundiced eyes and a turban to match that sagged about his skull, the gent who sidled up next to me at the Calcutta General Post Office could have been the Bengali version of Old Man Steptoe. Yes, I supposed it wouldn't do any harm to see his cut-rate sparklers — I had just spent almost all my money on an air ticket to Bangkok and thought it might be dignified to not immediately become a beggar on arrival in Thailand. Ducking down an alley with this lurk merchant, I soon received his rapid-fire sales pitch about the great worth of diamonds ("especially if sold in Bangkok") and the equally absolute integrity of his word.

Once we were down an alley, hidden from public view, Steptoe-ji produced a small packet of gems: they twinkled in the sun, their refractions seeming to spell out w-e-a-l-t-h or, at least, e-a-t. To my alarm he placed a diamond between two coins, set them on the ground, then smashed them with a brick. Surely he had just pulverised a small fortune's worth of million-year old carbon. But, *regardez!* He picked up the coins-and-diamond sandwich. I was astonished to see each coin deeply indented with the shape of the diamond, while the sparkler — perfectly unscathed — flashed back at me all the more seductively. Proof positive. Sold.

Standing back-to-back, we effected a ludicrously surreptitious exchange of his hot rocks for my all-but-last twenty dollars. A quick conspiratorial handshake sealed the bargain and we slunk away in opposite directions. Steptoe-ji, laughing all the way to the bhang shop and I, the proud owner of two flash diamonds, sauntering towards the airport. Next morning in Bangkok I strode into a gem merchant's shop on Silom Road, produced my booty and asked, "How much would you say these are worth?" The merchant squinted through his eyepiece and murmured, "About thirty dollars, not that anyone will buy them." My jaw dropped, his kept moving: "They're industrial zircon — artificial diamonds. I hope you got them for a bargain price."

I walked out the door, a bit dazed. I had ten dollars and two not-quite diamonds, and it was summer in Siam.

That was my auspicious introduction to the Land of Smiles — and of wats, guns, coups, tolerance, somtam, songtaews, ravishing beauties, ravished beauty (think, Koh Samui), long-tails, short-times, order, anarchy, Buddhist austerity, shameless avarice, 14 million annual visitors, heat and lust, and still more smiles. Some years later I found that my habit of amateur wandering had turned into the vice of wanderlust, the occupation. I had become a travel writer and photographer. In the course of my research journeys, my flights often passed through Bangkok. And what more agreeable place to break a trip than the Great City of Angels (once described by a Thai novelist as “where feudalism meets futurism”)? Actually,

there are plenty more agreeable places — but fortunately a good number of them are still in Thailand. Thus, over the years I have written a fair swag of Bangkok-and-beyond stories, plus an equally large file of tales from around the wider Asian neighbourhood.

I was once asked to write on “What I like about Thailand?” I couldn’t put my finger on one predominant characteristic of Thailand’s floating, flirting world that, above all others, defines what I like. Sometimes just being here is enough. I think The Pogues came close to the answer/non-answer in four lines of neat tautology:

*When it's Summer in Siam  
Then all I really know  
Is that I truly am  
In the Summer in Siam*

Not so much that cliché, “a land of contrasts” as an empire of paradoxes, Thailand still seems to me inexhaustible. After perhaps 40 visits to the Kingdom over a similar number of years I am still finding new places to photograph, write about and — after all that is done — in which to relax briefly. Thailand seems to have an apparently inexhaustible supply of “new” islands, coastal nooks and upcountry towns in which a visitor is welcome still surprises me. That visitor, however, is advised to appreciate fully, albeit with a light footprint, all such new discoveries while they can. Upon returning — let’s say in 2008, when up to 20 million annual visitors are the national goal — in some cases we will find the formerly

abstract beauties of a place to be more, well, concretely celebrated in the likes of the Sublime Beauty Resort, Spa & Go-Go Bar and the Clearfell Eco Golf Park.

When it's summer in Siam, it is winter in other lands. They too can be realms of smiles, guns, tolerance, beauty — and of numerous other, not necessarily original sins or virtues. I've had the privilege of covering many parts of Asia from Karakoram and Xinjiang to Sapa and Sumba. While I have travelled these places less extensively than Thailand, I hope I've done them some justice. The verdict on this is, as the Thais frequently say, “up to you.”

Since *Summer In Siam* was first published I have continued to explore Thailand's more obscure corners. With this new e-book edition comes the chance put some of the incidents and accidents, good folk and fellow travellers that I've encountered along the way into a new end-section, “Play It Again, Siam”.

Finally, a word on form. With two exceptions, the stories in this book fit the promiscuous literary genre known as “travel writing” — a grab-bag of reportage, memoir, diary, anecdote, white lies and journalism. Two stories, Pattaya Scheherazade (parts one and two) are fiction. When I asked long-time Pattaya resident and author Neil Hutchison to read over a draft of the these two tales, he concluded, somewhat disturbingly, “Yes, I've met most of those guys you've written about.”

John Borthwick  
Bangkok  
July 2010

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## MAGIC DOGS AND BATTERY CLOCKS

“Anomaly is at the heart of all good travel”, said some reductionist. That is, we go in anticipation of the unexpected. And here it is, in a jungle village in the hills of northern Thailand: a Yao tribal woman — dressed in a brilliant vermilion boa and embroidered black turban — handing me a pink, gold-embossed wedding invitation card.

Blue smoke curls languidly above the huts of Khun Haeng, as though from an opium pipe (until a generation ago, the preferred nightcap around here). Pigs squeal uneasily, catching a whiff on the wind not of smoked poppy but fried pork. A four-man band — oboe, drum, gong and cymbal — dins and whines between the huts. And I am trying to read an invitation that might be straight out of Valley Girl land except for its curlicue Thai script.

A quick translation by my Chiang Mai anthropologist traveling companion Dr Chob confirms that, yes, even in Thai, "The parents of the groom and bride invite you to the wedding of ..." In this case, Miss Ching Fo Saejow and Mr San Tiem Saepfan. I am honoured.

"This is a *tom chin ca*, the major wedding of the year for this village," says Chob. "It'll be a three-day ceremony.

Day One. A gold robed Buddhist monk drifts like a marigold amid the woodsmoke and teak of the houses.