

# Riff Raffles

*Days in the Life of a Pattaya Hotel Owner*



**WELCOME**

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# **RIFF-RAFFLES**

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## **DEDICATION**

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This book is dedicated to my wife Sujinda who has stood by my side and been my inspiration since the day we first met. Where I would be and what I would be without her I know not but she has given my life more meaning than I had previously imagined possible.



## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

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I do hope that you enjoy reading about my trials and tribulations here in Thailand, the “Land of Smiles”. Whilst you will quickly come to realise that I have not had a permanent smile upon my face since arriving here, I have to say that I do feel richer as a person for the experience. I have changed and, I believe, changed for the better. I have become more tolerant and I have started to understand a new and very different culture. If I live here another one hundred years, it is unlikely that I will still fully understand ‘Thai Style’ but when something does permeate my brain I count it as another minor victory towards my personal advancement.

You will read episodes of my life that lead me to criticise individuals for their actions or behaviour. I have made fun of them as I have similarly made fun of myself. However, I remain very fulsome in my respect for Thai people in general and their traditions and their history. Yes, there are some things here that baffle me, some that appear just plain daft and some that are, in my opinion, quite wrong given the way that the world is today. Thailand is not a perfect country but then nor is England, the land of my birth that I left behind me in December, 2004. The fact is that nowhere is perfect and if it is perfection that you seek then you are probably on the wrong planet.

All of the tales I have recounted for you are absolutely true. I will admit some have been ever so slightly exaggerated in order to make a point but never so much so that the essence has been lost. On the occasions where I have lost my cool and had a “rant and a rave” those moments should, most definitely, be seen as a reflection of my own inadequacies rather than the inadequacies of those who have been on the receiving end.



## **WITH THANKS**

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In a rather bizarre twist of fate I find myself saying thank you to those customers who have given me no end of grief, to the staff members who were incapable of undertaking even the simplest of tasks properly and everyone else here who has had a role to play in making my life run far less smoothly than I had originally envisaged. It is through your “shortcomings” that I have been able to put together this series of tales. Whilst, at the time, you had me pulling my limited amount of hair out of my head you have ultimately made me a published author and, through such, hopefully helped in amusing a few fellow beings. So, I thank you and say “Well done for a job done badly.”

I also need to thank my family, in particular my dear and loving wife Jin to whom this book is dedicated. Jin puts up with my constant complaining, argumentative nature and general recalcitrance without ever a murmur. She is my soul mate, my best friend, a wonderful mother to my children, my business partner and still, after many years together, I am delighted to say, my lover. How or why such a beautiful and intelligent woman puts up with me is beyond my limited comprehension, however, every day I am genuinely grateful that she does.

Thanks are also due to my children Pakpao, Sam and James. I love you all dearly and equally and I wish you all long and happy lives. I thank you for keeping me young in mind and body. It is through your youthfulness that I still see life so often through a child’s eyes and with that innocence that was almost lost to me forever.

Finally I owe a big thank you to the owners, moderators and members of the web forums of Pattaya Talk; OffBboard; Thaigers; Pattaya Addicts and Pattaya Revealed. You encouraged me to

write and ultimately seek to have this work published and this would never have occurred without you.

Finally I thank you, the readers, and I hope that whatever it was that prompted you to purchase this book that it will prove to have been worthy of your investment.

## INTRODUCTION

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I suppose I am rather a “Jack of all trades” type, a person who over the years has gone into various business enterprises without having any prior knowledge, simply learning the ropes as I went along. I have been fortunate enough to have made a reasonable living from everything I have done. Although creating a multi-million dollar empire has proved to be rather elusive, I have had a good life thus far and much fun along the way.

Running a hotel was never on my employment opportunities radar and, like almost all of my other enterprises, evolved through a chain of events way beyond my control or power to envisage. My darling wife, Jin, had left her home in Thailand to live with me in England where I owned a small real estate chain of offices in Central London—Bayswater, Notting Hill and Paddington to be precise. My line of work had given me the opportunity to acquire a few small apartments as rental investments and these produced a very welcome additional income. As a family we had no immediate plans to move away from London. We had a nice home that had been modernised and designed to our own specifications, a newborn baby boy and another son settled in school.

In a bizarre twist of fate the tragic events of 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2001 changed everything. How something that occurred in New York can lead to an Englishman with a thriving business in London upping sticks and moving to Thailand could well be a story on its own. However, the long and the short of it is that, after nine/eleven many Americans based in the UK headed back home. Such was the volume of Americans in Central London rental accommodation that their departure resulted in a significant reduction in rental returns and increased the difficulty in finding tenants. One of my properties became vacant at around this time.

Having seen its value increase significantly in the past few years I decided to sell and use the proceeds to buy an investment property in Thailand, which my wife and I had talked about doing for some time. This led us to a new development in Soi Baukaow, Central Pattaya which we thought would provide us with a good return developed as a small block of rented apartments.

Events again overtook us and six months after agreeing the purchase we returned to Pattaya to see how the development was progressing. In those few months the entire area had been transformed. Rather than the quiet secondary location it had initially appeared Soi Baukaow was on the verge of growing into one of Pattaya's premier streets. New shops, restaurants, bars and hotels were opening all over the place. We very quickly formed the opinion that our investment would be far better suited to being a hotel rather than apartment block.

Moving to Thailand was on the cards for some future date anyway so all that happened was that our plans were moved forward by five years or so. My wife and children moved here permanently during the early part of 2003. I was eventually able to follow in December, 2004 after I had disposed of my UK business interests. I had imagined that I was headed towards an early retirement, a relaxed life of days at the beach and nights on the town. I looked forward to spending time with my children, catching up on all the books I had wanted to read but never had the time, learning to play golf and perhaps even doing a bit of writing. I was fifty-one and I was retiring and moving to live in Paradise!

The story you are about to read will show you just how wrong I was on virtually every count—except, obviously, for the writing bit that is!

## **21<sup>ST</sup> DECEMBER, 2004**

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I am leaving the grey skies and the cold behind me. I am off to Thailand at the age of fifty-one to start a new life and enjoy the benefits an early retirement. From a young age I had promised myself that I would retire when I reached fifty. I am only sixteen months out in respect of this particular goal and I consider that to be quite an achievement.

Jin, my wife, who is from Udon Thani in north east Thailand, together with my two sons, Sam now aged eight and James who is three, moved here in February, 2003. I have spent the best part of two years travelling to and from Thailand every other month and to be embarking on my final voyage is a great relief. I love traveling and cannot spend enough time in airport departure lounges. However, these past two years have made the whole experience more of a commute than a holiday and the travelling experience no longer holds the same allure.

I have missed my wife and have hated seeing my sons grow up without me being there every day. The tears young James sheds every time I have waved farewell have been like a dagger to my heart. Now I can get back to being a proper dad and a full time husband to Jin.

We opened a small hotel in Pattaya in October and the business seems to be going well, although I know Jin is looking forward to having me relieve some of the pressure. She has worked hard overseeing the contractors and having the hotel completed internally to our specifications. She also had to deal with licensing and business registration issues. Once these were completed Jin has been fully responsible for attracting customers to the hotel, recruiting staff and dealing with the day to day problems that arise. All of this has had to be combined with her duties as a

mother of three.

I felt good standing in the airport check-in queue. I really felt very, very good. I cannot recall having ever felt so relaxed and at peace with the world. I was going to be with my family now forever, I was going to live in paradise and I was free from the pressures of work. My suitcases were laden with Christmas presents for the family, the vast majority of which had come from Hamley's toy store in London's Regent Street. Although I cannot abide shopping, I could quite easily pitch a tent and live in Hamley's. They say some people never grow up and I am afraid that this is completely true of me.

On the way out of London and heading towards the airport the taxi driver asked the fairly standard question "Where you going, mate, anywhere nice?" I detest that inane remark always wanting to reply "Well, no actually this year I have decided to go somewhere particularly horrid". However, I contented myself with the reply I had been practicing for the past six months: "I am going home". Obviously this response caused an element of confusion and the taxi driver was now, I presumed, imaging that I lived in Heathrow Terminal Four. Eventually he did manage a "Where is HOME then, mate?", "Pattaya in Thailand. mate" I replied and closed my eyes as a signal that this conversation was now at an end.

"WHAT?" I roared as my last minutes in "Blighty" were just about to be blighted? I had been jolted from my reverie by the airlines check-in clerk informing me my luggage was twenty five kilograms over the limit and the surcharge would be five hundred pounds. I stuttered and stammered. I had not even thought about this possibility and I had been in relaxed mode. You just do not ask relaxed people for five hundred pounds that they were not expecting to have to pay. It really is not the done thing! My credit cards had all been cancelled weeks ago. I no longer had any U.K bank accounts therefore offering payment by cheque was also out of the question. Whilst I had several thousands of pounds secreted on my person stripping to my underwear, or beyond, to get to it

was not something I had any intention of doing.

A long, very long series of discussions with airline representatives was commenced. This involved having the same conversation with ever more senior persons. It had quickly become clear that the more senior the representative the larger the allowance they could authorise. I simply secured a small increase in the allowance and then requested to speak with a person of more seniority. The check-in clerk had reduced the deficit to twenty kilos and after four further conversations I was down to twelve kilos over the limit. This, though, was still around two hundred and fifty pounds in surcharges and more than I was prepared to pay. I had eventually reached the most senior person I was ever likely to be granted an audience with. He had more stripes on his smart blazer than adorn the average Zebra! I knew now was my last chance to do a deal. All alternative suggestions of carriage had been rejected as I needed the suitcases to travel with me to ensure the Christmas presents were there for the opening on Christmas Day. I played the sympathy card, I wilted under the pressure, I was heart broken by the thought of disappointing the kids—had I known how to cry I would have tried even that. Common sense eventually prevailed. I always see things that go my way as being common sense! A payment of one hundred pounds was agreed and paid from my wallet thus avoiding exposing myself to the assembled masses of Terminal Four. I gleefully clutched my ticket and headed off to the departure lounge.

I wandered around the airport collecting my Duty Free and other last minute purchases. I had a bite to eat and sat relaxing with a large mug of coffee contemplating my new life. I never drink alcohol at airports or on planes. One episode of riding around a luggage carousel mooning my fellow travellers at Tenerife Airport some twenty years ago had put an end to my “drinking and flying” days! Anyway, I mentally practiced a golf swing, a good drive off the tee. I wandered along fairways and I holed thirty foot putts. I sat by the sea and read books. I imagined myself turning up to the hotel watching numerous staff running around doing every chore and simply chatting away to customers being

“mine host”. I would be taking regular vacations with my wife and I thought about the places we could go with relative ease. Myanmar, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam were all up there on my list of soon to visit destinations.

Wow, this was going to be the life. I was relaxed again and once more I was in the land of dreams and off to live in the place they call the “Land of Smiles”. Even a trip to the airport bathroom where my rather portly, or to be accurate, grossly overweight body stared back at me. Fifteen and a half stone, how did I get so big? I was four stone overweight and only my sense of smell assured me I still had feet. Of course I knew the answer. Two years of eating takeaway meals late at night, then collapsing on the sofa in front of the television or going straight to bed had been my undoing. I worked, or rather I used to work, twelve hours or more a day and six days a week. I had that schedule for the last four years and for the seven years prior it was twelve hours a day and seven days a week.

The last few months in the U.K had been the most stressful as I negotiated the sale of my business and found myself being messed about at every turn. Eventually I lost it and told the buyers to go screw themselves. I gave my sixty per cent shareholding away to my fellow director at a fraction of its value and I lost over quarter of a million pounds by so doing. The fact is that the end had come and I just had to get out. If you could have seen me only a few weeks ago you would have understood better. I was, quite literally, stressed to the point of breaking; I was ill, seriously so, and much more of the same would have seen me doing the last tango with the Grim Reaper!

As we flew away from England, I glanced out of the window once. I looked down and I silently bade the place farewell. There was no sadness, no remorse, no recriminating. I did not wonder whether or not I was making the right choice. I was off and although I knew that I had to return in a few months to complete some final loose ends, my return would be as a visitor, and I would be an altogether different person.