

Thai Insights



David Spencer

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Thai Insights

by

David Spencer

I dedicate this book to my ex-business partner and friend Ernest who encouraged me to write it, although it is with regret I didn't get around to finishing it during his lifetime.

Preface

In 1982 I visited Thailand for the first time on business, intending to stay for about four weeks but as it turned out I stayed for almost a year, falling in love with both the country and the people.

Over the next 25 years I visited Thailand at least every year getting to know more and more about the culture and this made me decide to eventually retire to Thailand.

During my frequent visits many things happened to me which I recount in this book together as I slowly metamorphosed from a Welshman into a Thai.

I have now realised my dream and am living happily in Ponangdam north of Bangkok with my third wife and step-daughter and I hope that my reminiscences will be of interest to the casual reader who wants some light entertainment and an introduction to Thai ways.

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Hooked

At last! I was standing outside my hotel on Sukhumvit Soi 7 and it was noisy, hot, sticky and the air smelt of a mixture of cooking food and drains but I loved it.

I had arrived at Don Muang airport from London two hours before and travelled by taxi to the hotel.

It was 1982 and the company based in Wales in which I was a major shareholder had signed a technology transfer agreement with a major Thai packaging company located near Bangkok on the road to Pattaya.

I had spent the previous six months making all the arrangements to come to Thailand and the agreement called for me to spend an initial four weeks in Bangkok followed up by a maximum of five, one-week spells as required by the Thai company. I had read about Thai history and culture and was really looking forward to my visit—although no amount of preparation could

have readied me for many of the things that happened over the next year.

We had carried out negotiations via a Thai agent, Chai, who turned out to be not only a good business partner but also a very good friend, and Chai had arranged to meet me at six o'clock to go to dinner with Mr Vee, the Thai factory owner.

Promptly at six o'clock Chai arrived in Mr Vee's chauffeur-driven Mercedes which transported us to a very upmarket restaurant. Chai informed me that although he believed Mr Vee understood English he very rarely spoke it and that we would converse in Thai with Chai as the translator. Chai also warned me that Mr Vee could be, as he put it, 'not always fully cooperate' and to leave any negotiations over problem areas to him. How right he was.

My first impression of Mr Vee was of a thick set man about 5 feet two inches tall with small eyes, a large flat nose and when he smiled, which was a rare occurrence, it was like looking through the doors of Fort Knox. The gold in his mouth almost outweighed that in his watch, necklaces and rings together. In contrast his factory manager, Mr Somchai, was a small, neat man who was obviously nervous in the presence of his boss.

Following the introductions and the ordering of drinks Mr Vee enquired if my journey had

been OK and if my hotel was satisfactory.

He then looked at me without speaking for about 15 seconds and then asked in English:

‘How long you stay here?’

‘Four weeks as agreed,’ I replied.

He looked at me for about another 15 seconds and then said, again in English:

‘Not long enough.’

Chai gripped my knee under the table reminding me to let him negotiate and so I just replied:

‘Mr Vee. My company will abide by the terms of our agreement fully.’

This was the only time Mr Vee spoke English over the next year and I had the feeling that we would not see eye to eye.

The meal was excellent and I commented how pretty the Thai girls were and in particular the restaurant receptionist. Mr Vee only spent about half the time at the table, the other half being on the restaurant telephone or talking to the manager. When Mr Vee was away Mr Somchai talked animatedly and was obviously excited at the prospect of getting access to the new technology but he said nothing in the presence of Mr Vee.

At the end of the meal Mr Vee’s chauffeur took him home and once Mr Somchai left, Chai and I had time to chat. I commented that I thought

I would find it difficult to work with Mr Vee but that I was basically a tolerant and easy-going person and would be guided by Chai who was obviously relieved.

Mr Vee's chauffeur returned and as we left the restaurant the receptionist smiled at Chai and myself and said: 'My name Lucy and I go with you.'

Assuming that she had been offered a lift home we all got in the car and returned to my hotel where I arranged to meet Chai the next morning at 6 am to go to the factory.

Lucy then got out of the car and said goodnight to Chai in English.

'What is happening,' I asked not having grasped the situation.

'You said that you liked her and Mr Vee has paid her to spend the night with you,' replied Chai.

'I am tired and jet lagged,' I protested but Chai took me to one side and told me that not only Lucy but Mr Vee would be offended if I sent her home, so I acquiesced.

Lucy was delightful and spoke enough English for us to converse a little before my tiredness evaporated and words were no longer required. She woke me at 5.30 am and gave me a shower and her telephone number before Chai arrived to pick me up.

Lesson number one:

In Thailand you have to be careful not to say that you like something in public as a comment is often taken as a request and the person you are talking to feels obliged to give you what you like as a gift if it is within their power.

Knowing Mr Vee as I do now I should have said that I liked his watch, a Cartier encrusted with diamonds, just to see the look on his face.