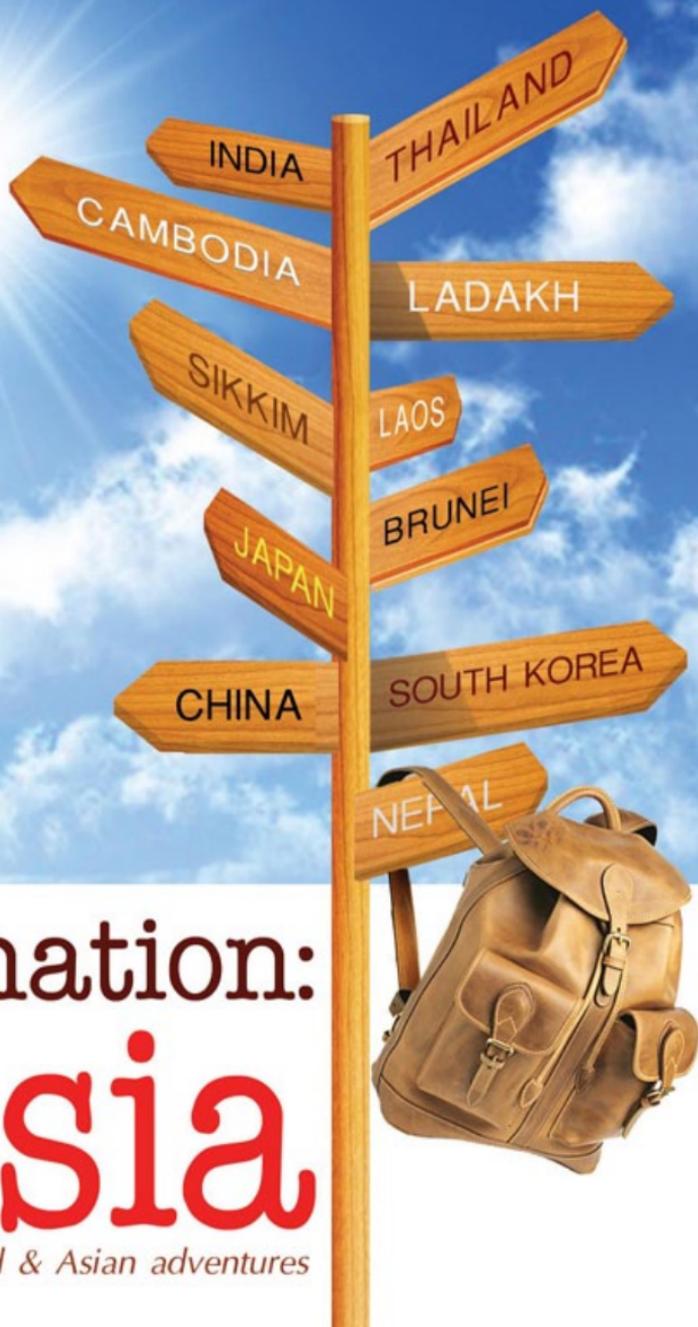


Carleton Cole



Destination: Asia

Coming to Thailand & Asian adventures

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* * *

For my dear wife Sutamon, a partner in all endeavours

All names are real, except when they're not

Introduction

I am a quiet American who has come to love his adopted homeland, the quintessentially Asian kingdom of Thailand.

The historical origins of Thailand's people lie in the hills of southern China. Its religion comes from the plains of northern India. It lies at the heart and cultural crossroads of both Asia and Southeast Asia, not only reflecting the influences of Asia's two magnates—China and India—but of all of its neighbours, in the true Thai tradition of tolerance. Thailand features Burmese temples and traditions in the north, cultural affinity with Laos in the northeast, centuries-old stone temples plus linguistic and religious borrowing from Cambodia in Isaan and elsewhere, and the Muslim tradition of Malaya in Thailand's Deep South. A vibrant history of uninterrupted independence has, however, always ensured the survival and advancement of things uniquely Thai.

With such a vibrant and cultural history, it was no wonder I knew that I had found a home away from home even before I got there.

The icing on the cake has been an assortment of odd and wonderful smells and flavours, and a combination of Western creature comforts (state-of-the-art movie theatres, big English-language bookstores, a great variety of cuisines) and Thai accents such as a tradition of great hospitality, tolerance for various ways of life, and an intriguing way for foreigners to come to know who they really are and even reinvent themselves.

After spending 12 years in the kingdom, the people I

have met—starting with my wife Sutamon—and exotic places I have seen have confirmed that I had picked the right country to live in. I have at all times felt welcomed and at ease in Thai society. Thailand simply seemed to be a better fit for my personality, and all the more so as my relationship with the country has grown into a mature love.

As an untypical American, I have come to thrive in the typically East Asian country of Thailand, and appreciate how things get done there with subtlety, not bravado, and how the focus is put on teamwork and sharing, not overt competition or individualism.

While I still considered myself a patriot, appreciating America's great museums, wide open spaces, clean air, sense of freedom, charming small cities like San Francisco and Boston, and a forthright style of communicating, I found myself more attuned to the life of an expatriate in the East.

A love for lesser publicised and quieter facets of Thailand inspired me to write this book.

The first part of this book thematically describes how I grew to be fond of Thailand in my 20s—after not feeling satisfied with the jobs available to me in the US—and how I came to further enjoy living and working in the kingdom. I then take readers back to my earliest interests in Asia as a young child, and then, as my interests in the continent kept increased, as a teenager.

Working in Bangkok as an editor and freelance writer opened the international world of possibilities for me. It was through profiling intriguing people and organisations and telling travellers' tales for *The Nation* newspaper that I came to fully appreciate the opportunities that Thailand presented me.

The second part of this book comprises travel articles published in *The Nation*.

Most of the 20 or so travel articles I have written over the last eight years have been on Asian destinations, as they best matched my own needs for exotic enchantment. I have marveled at the overwhelming scale of Cambodia's Angkor, the dazzling intricacy of Thai and Lao temples, Confucianism's impact on the Vietnamese and Koreans, Brunei's grandiose surprises, the comprehensive Christian/Islamic holiness of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul and above all—literally—the welcoming peoples and Vajrayana Buddhist temples in the Himalayas.

Everyone who comes to Thailand has a unique tale about how they got here. This is my story.

1 The King & I and Mr G

Launched from the tub of a Vietnamese busboy who had tripped coming down the stairs, the shower of ice cubes arched perilously between waitresses, crashed upon the floor and scattered down the hallway, coming to rest around the heels of a hostess draped in resplendent Thai silk. With graceful composure, she turned to the startled couple in the entranceway and smiled: “A table for two?”

Meanwhile, Pi Me, a typically petite, cute Thai woman and the manager at The King & I Thai restaurant in St Louis, turned to the embarrassed busboy and offered the admonition, “*Mai ben rai*” (“Never mind”)—and a friendly reminder for him to be more careful.

I couldn't help but recall the incident's low-key aftermath after a mishap of my own on my first night bussing tables at Giovanni's, a famed Italian restaurant elsewhere in this Midwestern US city in the state of Missouri. Not quite finding the centre of gravity of a large tray laden with crystal wineglasses, I felt everything slowly pitching leftward, just before the shattering inevitability of becoming the unwelcome centre of attention. After leaving the kitchen crew to clean up and skulking back to the dining room, I heard an enraged Mr G, as we called the boss, shouting something in Italian which didn't sound much like “never mind”.

While recognising the obvious difference in value between ice and crystal, I also began to realise how vastly different were the two restaurants where I worked in late 1994, more than a year after I had graduated from Principia College across the Mississippi River in Illinois.

Bus tubs were seen as distinctly uncool at Giovanni's, where the ferrying of dishes in and out of the kitchen was done on large trays. At the Thai restaurant, the practical if humble tub was my preferred tool for clearing away the dishes stained with fish sauce, curry and satay.

For a taste of Thailand before moving there a few months later, I had taken the job at The King & I, working for the last few hundred dollars needed for a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) training course and airfare to Bangkok from San Francisco, where the TEFL course was. With only a daytime shift and Friday night available at the Thai restaurant, I'd found a second bussing job at Giovanni's, a four-star Italian restaurant a few kilometres away, and worlds apart.

On my first day at The King & I, a surprised Thai waiter asked "Do you work here?" when I entered the kitchen through the employee entrance near the back. I stammered a "Yes. I spoke to Pi Me yesterday." He then blinked hard and broke into a smile "Welcome! I'm Nat. I'll show you around."

Entering a Thai kitchen for the first time, I felt humbled, like an explorer gaining access to early 20th century Tibet or the colourful court of characters in some medieval country. All at once the bubbling curries, lemongrass and herbs assaulted my senses. I couldn't be happier, and was already eagerly awaiting the 2pm break when the whole crew ate together like an extended family. Kindly, they accommodated for my vegetarian diet, which I had caught in China after seeing one too many meat markets. Instead of mere first-day-on-the-job butterflies in the stomach, I felt first-day-of-kindergarten feeling—but aside from my

first bite of fiery *prik kee nu* (mouse dropping chilli), there would be no crying.

The day before, I had spoken to Pi Me, who greeted me graciously and asked if I was there for lunch. I told her, no thank you, but asked if there were any job openings. This produced a look of confusion, so I hastily added that I was planning to go to Thailand in a few months, after I had learned more about Thailand.

But simply put, I didn't look the part, in a culture where having face was important and where image, if not everything, was certainly very important, even though I was more into Thai culture than the restaurant's group of mostly Thai-looking Vietnamese busboys.

"Well, many of the busboys will be back in high school soon," she conceded, perhaps as a delaying tactic to avoid coming to a conclusion. But in the end, my earnestness and a big smile won the day. "Can you start tomorrow morning?" she asked.

"Of course!" I beamed.

"Wear a white shirt. We have a maroon jacket," she said.

"See you then!" I said, and quickly turned to leave before she could change her mind.

If the jacket, which reminded me of the red-wine-colour of Tibetan monks' robes, looked a bit ratty, this didn't deter my utter enthusiasm for being accepted into the world of things Thai. And it stands worth mentioning that, as in kitchens in restaurants across the US, some of the cooking was done by Mexicans, immigrants whose legal status in the country was uncertain. Overseeing the kitchen were two pleasantly plump Thai women.

The Vietnamese busboys would give me looks when they

saw me carrying five glasses in one hand, with one digit in one glass each, and pressing the whole mass together, but it was effective and American in practicality! I didn't want to go totally international, after all.

Eventually I came to be more indirect in speaking, and less overtly American, as blurting out opinions didn't work as well at the Thai restaurant.

If the classic phases of expat life are enchantment, disillusionment, and mature acceptance, my King & I experience perfectly previewed the enchantment to come. After a year of temping in the bland white-collar world of Boatman's Bank and the Mark Twain Mortgage Co, I enthusiastically took to being the only *farang* (Caucasian) in a Thai restaurant in December 1994, taking the next step on an exploration of Asian cultures through college and beyond.

At the restaurant, which to my delight took on the airs of a temple, I learned my first Thai words: *tikia bori* (ashtray), *nam kaeng* (ice) and that wondrously sweet elixir *gafair yen* (iced coffee) from my co-workers, whose nicknames, easily enough, were Ae, Be, C and Tammy.

The fresh smells that wafted through the morning air in the restaurant—jasmine rice, curries and coconut milk—were extraordinary.

"Be careful about Patpong," offered Nat, referring to Bangkok's notorious red-light district. "Why?" I asked with naive curiosity. "Who's he?" Nat then raised his eyebrows and looked away, mumbling, "Oh nothing, you'll find out when you're there." At the beginning of each day, he would gracefully sweep the floor in the Thai style (with one hand), carefully stooped over and gliding like a ice-skate speeder, with a short Thai broom fashioned from bamboo.

To the gentle strains of soft classical Thai music, which I love for its mysterious, less-is-more pentatonic scale, and which created the perfect atmosphere for doing tasks I thought more as meditative than menial, I swung down chairs from their night-time perch atop tables and folded royal-blue cloth napkins. I poured Thai iced coffee from motif-beaten silver pitchers, and helped waiters carry steaming bowls of *tom yam* soup. It all took on a mystical quality. The smell of satay and curries flirted with the incense smoke streaming from what I will always remember as a perfect Thai shrine, attended to by Pi Me every morning: a small golden Buddha against a blue wall with a pyramid of three oranges before it. Facing East, the shrine caught a glimmer of early-morning sunlight.

The lunchtime shift was a subdued affair of business-type regulars, with time for many breaks sitting on the foyer stairs reading books on Thai history and culture, and getting to know my polite teenaged colleagues from upcountry Thailand. Many were shy, mousy students of business at local community colleges. Accumulating a Thai vocabulary and contemplating the hierarchical artistry of *wai-ing* among employees, I became increasingly intrigued, though the learning was uneven at times.

“What does ‘Chao Phraya’ mean?” I once asked Pi Me. She thought for a moment and then said, “Lord”. I followed with a clarifying question that didn’t elicit clarity, though showed me how saving face often counts more than merely learning new facts or being precise. I would later find that the Maenam Chao Phraya was the “River of Kings”, but for the moment I was still left wondering why “God’s River” was flowing through a Buddhist country.