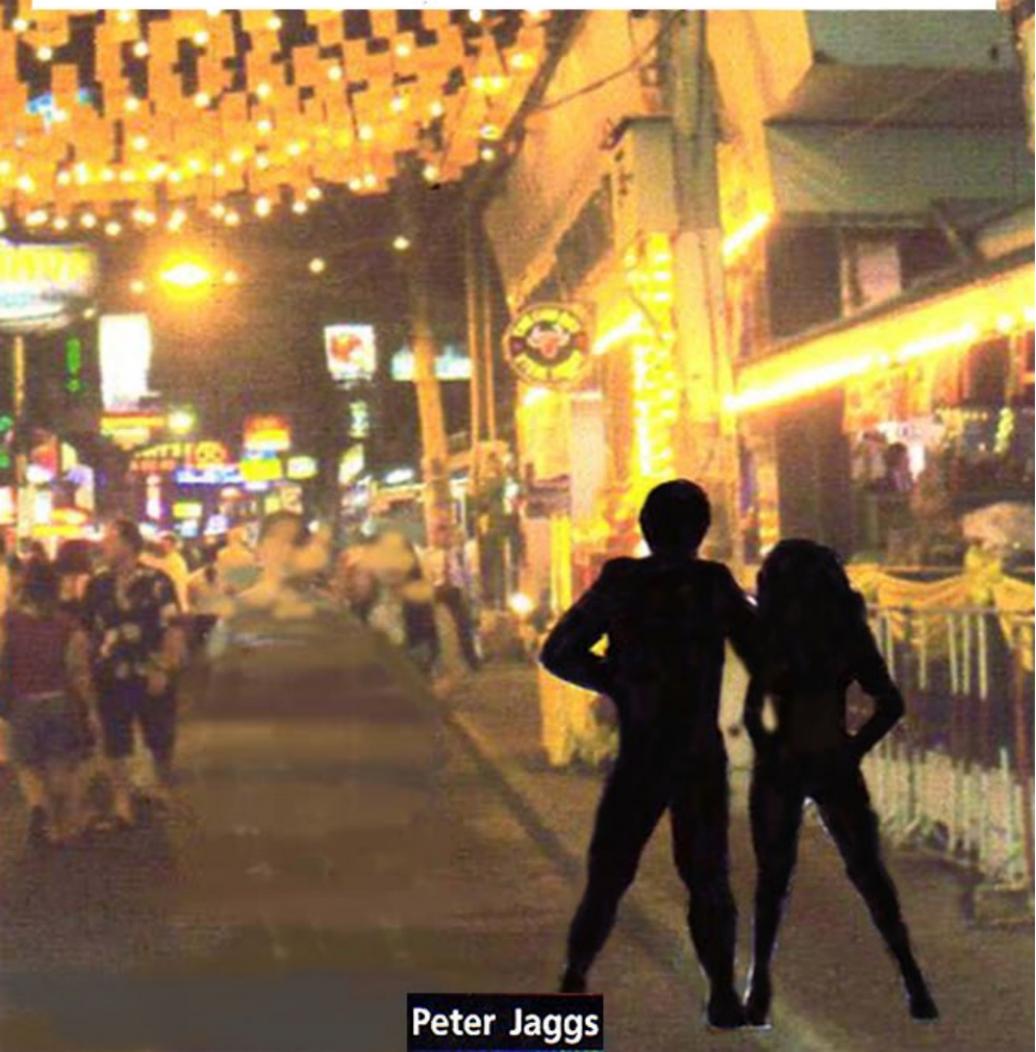


THAILAND OLD HAND

Thirty years around the bars and
backstreets of Asia



Peter Jaggs

THAILAND OLD HAND

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The twenty short stories in this book are all based on true events although some of them happened a very long time ago and the reader may find that things have changed a great deal in Asia since they were first written.

I have also found it necessary to change the names of various people, bars and hotels (although not all) that appear in the book at times, for obvious reasons.

The characters and places in this book are not fictitious and any resemblance to people and places alive, dead, still open for business or now closed down is entirely intentional.

Peter Jaggs, Cha-am, 2011

GLOSSARY OF THAI / ISAAN WORDS AND TERMS

- Ajarn* - Teacher
Akha - Type of hill-tribe
Bar-fine - Money paid to bar to take girl out
Ban nok - Up country or rural Thailand
Chi - Yes
Changwat - District
Dark side - Anywhere across the Sukhumvit Road, Pattaya
Faen - Boy or girlfriend
Farang - Foreigner of Western descent
Jampen - Necessary
Jinjok - Small species of lizard
Jing jing - For sure/really
Kai yat sai - Minced pork omelet
Kanom - Sweets/candies
Katoey - Lady-man, transvestite
Keeniaw - Miserly/mean
Khao pad khai - Chicken fried rice
Khao niaw - Sticky rice
Khor thot - Sorry/to ask forgiveness
Kickapom - Small species of gecko
Kom Faek - popular Thai soap opera
Kwai lek - Iron buffalo (small tractor- like farming vehicle)
Lakorn - Thai soap operas
Lao khao - Strong rice wine/alcohol
Ling - Monkey (also a nickname)
Luuk mu - Baby pig
Maeh - Mother
Mai - No/not
Mai dee - No good
Mai ow - Don't want/like
Mai pen rai - Never mind
Mahout - Elephant trainer

Mia luang - Senior wife
Mia noy - Minor wife
Mamasan - Woman in charge of bar/brothel girls
Mapao - Coconut
Mawlam - Isaan music
Monkey house - Jail/prison
Mor phi - Spirit doctor/fortune teller
Muay Thai - Thai boxing
Nen - Prefix given to novice monks
Nin - Pangolin
Nu - Rat/mouse (also a nickname)
Phaasin - Wraparound garment worn by women
Phakamaa - Wraparound garment worn by men
Phaeng khao mak - Yeast-like tablets used for brewing alcohol
Phik - Chilli
Phoot len - Joking
Phooyai ban - Village headman
Phor - Father
Ping - Leech
Phoot len - Joking
Phooyai ban - Village headman
Pit kotmai - Illegal
Pla Buek - Giant Mekong Catfish
Pla Chon - Snakehead fish
Pla Tapien - Common Silver Barb (fish species)
Priew - Sour
Rai - Unit of land
Rat na - Thai noodle dish
Sabai (dee) - Well/happy
Sai sin - White threads wrapped around wrist during Buddhist ceremonies
Satho - Alcoholic drink made from sticky rice
Sangsom - Brand of Thai whisky
Si Tanya - Hospital for the mentally ill and disturbed

Soi - Street/road
Somtum - Spicy papaya salad
Songthaew - Pick-up truck utilized as a taxi
Ta - Grandfather
Takaw - Thai wicker ball game
Teelac - Sweetheart/darling
Tukeh - Large species of gecko
Wai - Clasped hands together Thai greeting
Wai run - Teenagers/youths
Wan - Sweet
Wat - Temple
Winyaan - Spirit/ghost
Yai - Grandmother/ polite term for any very old lady

YOU WOULDN'T SEE THAT BACK HOME



Pattaya, Thailand, 2007

Fred and Gladys Cotton are an old school, East End couple who made good. Fred's father had been a Prisoner of War of the Japanese and had been killed whilst working on the Death Railway in Kanchanaburi in Thailand during the war. In his early teens, in order to help his mother out, Fred had started off pinching lead sheets and piping from the many derelict houses that stood around the streets of East London back then, which he sold to a local villain who dealt in scrap metal. Although he could barely read or write, Fred possessed an extremely sharp business acumen. By his early twenties he had move on from petty pilfering and owned a small scrap business in Leytonstone, himself. By the time he was forty he had relocated to a village in Essex on the outskirts of London, where he ran a car breaker's yard that turned over more than a million pounds a year.

Gladys had lived just down the road from Fred in a terraced house in a street in East Ham and the childhood sweethearts married when they were both only seventeen. Everybody liked Fred and Gladys and they had many friends. They never managed to produce any children, but the couple were very happy and all their energy went into running the car yard. They had also never had a real holiday; the furthest away from home they had ever travelled was to the Yorkshire Dales, where Fred knew a bloke in the scrap business who lent him his holiday cottage for a long weekend every year. Although she never said as much to her husband, Gladys didn't enjoy these short trips away very much at all. She worried about the business, missed the bustle and brashness of Essex and thought the Northerners talked funny and made soggy chips. When Fred and Gladys were both seventy years old he sold up his car breaker's yard for an enormous sum of money and they bought what some said was a rather vulgar-looking house in Epping, which Gladys chose. The mock Tudor monstrosity was showy enough as well as being close enough to her East End roots and all her family for Gladys to be completely content.

All his life, Fred had wanted to visit his father's grave in the Allied War Cemetery in Kanchanaburi in Thailand. Although he could not even remember his Dad because he had only been a baby when he had died, he thought it was the right thing to do. Now there was nothing to stop them. They were rich, healthy and had time on their hands. Gladys wasn't too keen on the idea and thought about putting the blocks on, but Fred had been the perfect husband and she loved him, so she thought she ought to allow him this one bit of foolishness.

Fred booked up a tour with a local travel agent that would include Bangkok, Ayuttaya, Kanchanaburi and a couple of days by the sea at Pattaya. He was extremely excited about the trip for months and bored all his mates down at the Red Lion to tears. Shortly before they were due to leave, for fear of the cut-throat Asian bandits she was sure they would encounter on their travels,

Gladys took off all the gold rings, chains and bracelets that Fred had bought her over the years and put them out of harm's way into her safety deposit box at the bank. She packed up their new leather matching suitcases; being sure to include a big box of Tetley Tea bags as she was convinced she wouldn't be able to get a good cuppa in Thailand. She threw in several more clean pairs of white Y-fronts for Fred as an afterthought, and a week later they were on a plane to Bangkok.

Fred loved Thailand but Gladys had already convinced herself it was going to be a hotbed of vice and poverty and reckoned she had already seen enough Chinkies around East London to last her a lifetime. She was a good, loving wife though, and she certainly didn't want to spoil Fred's big trip, so she although she was unable to keep from making the occasional cutting comment to her husband, she mostly kept her preconceived opinions to herself.

On her first night in Bangkok they dined on an expensive floating restaurant that drifted down the Chao Phraya River. Whilst they ate, beautiful Thai girls with flowers in their hair and long brass fingernails danced on a small stage in front of them. As the boat travelled along the water, bouncing a little on the gentle swell, the lights of the city along the banks of the river flashed and blinked like thousands of multi-colored stars. Amongst the lights, the spires of gaudy, golden temples reached up into the black tropical night. Fred was entranced.

"You wouldn't see that back home," he said.

"It's even dirtier than the bleedin' Thames," noticed Gladys.

In Ayuttaya they visited the crumbling ruins of temples many hundreds of years old, where the twisted roots of Banyan trees had grown in amongst the red crumbling bricks and Buddha heads. Other ancient Buddhist images sitting serenely on the walls watched Fred and Gladys as they plodded by arm-in-arm, around grassy courtyards, where the monks of old had once walked centuries ago. At Wat Phanan Choeng they gazed upon a nineteen meter high Buddha image in a fourteenth century *wihaan* that Thai devotees

had draped with garlands of flowers and thousands of pieces of saffron colored cloth. Fred thought it magnificent.

“You wouldn’t see that back home,” he said.

“You think they’d fix it up a bit,” sniffed Gladys.

Whilst they were in Kanchanaburi, Fred and Gladys took a train ride across the River Kwai over the Death Railway Bridge and walked through Hellfire Pass where hundreds of Allied Prisoners of War were worked to death by the Japanese as they cut their way through tons of soil and solid rock. They visited the Allied War Cemetery where the graves of seven thousand Allied POW’s are placed in perfectly straight lines amongst the verdant green lawns and colorful plants in the beautifully tended grounds. After all those years of waiting, Fred finally found his father’s grave and although he had no memory of the man lying beneath the small granite headstone he was immensely moved.

“You wouldn’t see that back home,” he said, wiping a tear away from his cheek.

“They keep the flowers nice and tidy, don’t they?” allowed Gladys.

In Pattaya, Fred and Gladys sat on the beach and relaxed on stripy deckchairs under a thatched umbrella. Fred had forgotten his hat so he tied four knots into his handkerchief and placed it on his head to keep off the sun. He removed his leather brogues and rolled up his trousers to his knees and let the warm tropical sun warm his hairy white legs. Fred loved to watch the jet-skis and the speedboats pulling the para-sailors behind them high over the bay, and he wished he was younger so he could give it a go himself. As they sat there, Thai vendors came up to the old couple and offered them King prawns in batter and tropical fruits they had never seen before, including one variety that looked exactly like the tiny head of a buffalo. Fred was astonished.

“You wouldn’t see that back home,” he marveled.

“Pity they ain’t got no whelks,” complained Gladys.

At the Elephant Farm just outside of town, Gladys and Fred