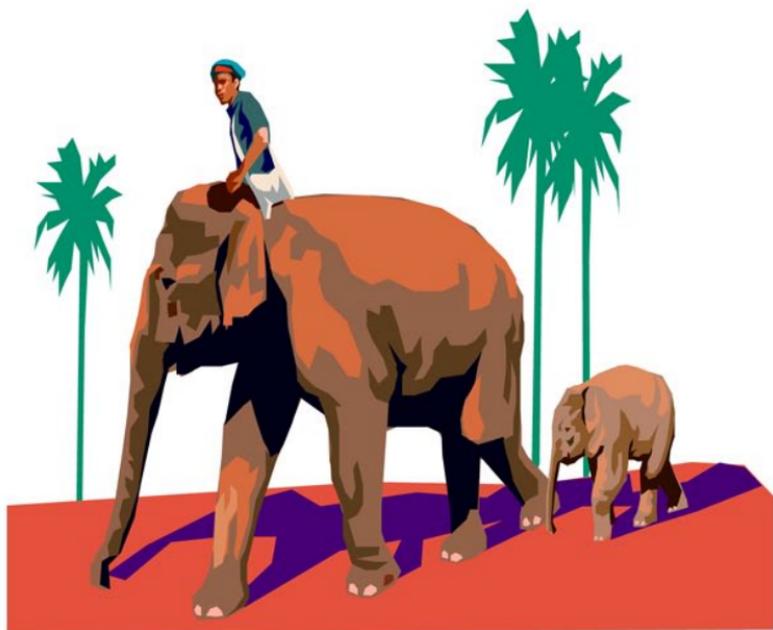


This Is Thailand



by Jeffrey Johnson

THIS IS THAILAND

1st edition 2011; ebook

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eISBN 978-616-245-095-2

Published by www.bangkokbooks.com

E-mail: info@bangkokbooks.com

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These are a collection of my experiences while living in Thailand.

They may not be your experiences or reflect something else that you read.

But they are my experiences.

Photos are a courtesy of Jeffrey Johnson photo collection and personal history.

In Memory of my Best Friend

He was never tied down and was always chasing a great
adventure.

Life was at his disposal to do with as he saw fit.

My dog Spot

CONTENTS

Preface	4
Life's Great Adventure	6
Wonderfully Strange Things About Thailand	8
Tales From Thailand	19
The Fried Squid Reports	123
Driver's License And Motorcycle License Information	142
Thailand Emergency And The 50-Year Flood	144
About The Author	196

PREFACE

My life has always been full of great adventures. I don't know why exactly?

It just is.

Even as a young boy I always wandered out into the woods whenever I got a chance. It gave me a feeling of being free and away from the constrictions of society. I loved walking about and climbing trees. I liked the feel of green tree leaves being pulled through the grip of my hand and fingers. In the summer I spent a lot of time in the back woods of West Virginia. It was such a relief to lay in the waters of a cool creek winding its way through the mountains, on a hot summer day. Or laying in a field of blue grass and not thinking about an encounter with a snake that might be having the same idea.

I love to watch things that work like big trucks and high rise cranes. I love watching cultures far removed from my own and take great interest in seeing how different things are done from such alien perspectives. And I love to see the rich beauty of the earth and its endless form in a natural state of growth and development.

My experiences always seemed to have greater depth when I went out by myself and was able to explore at my own pace and not be held back by someone else's regiment. So in my own way I have gone, here, there, and everywhere. And eventually I even developed an eye for capturing camera images.

It's easy for me to see why many Thais will say, "I prefer to live in Thailand rather than anywhere else." And 12,000,000 visitors a year will attest to that. Many of whom have returned more than once. Thailand is like this giant asteroid revolving around a planet more distant than Pluto. There is no other place like it in the universe. It is a wonderfully strange place full of contradictions. Some people will come here and hate Thailand because it is not for everyone. Pretty much like fishing. Some will come to Thailand over and over again and love Thailand while hating it at the same time. And then

there are those like me who come to Thailand and love it. We can give you a thousand reasons why we love the life here.

When you encounter something quirky in relation to your own cultural standards or expectations you will be advised that, “*This Is Thailand.*” That’s the standard answer.

There are probably more Scandinavians and Europeans here than anyone else. But there is also a huge mix from everywhere. Most retired people will come to escape the ice and the snow. And those who are returning visitors will come for a variety of reasons. I expect that It’s mostly the constantly warm (okay, hot!) weather.

Like many Asians the Thais are generally surface thinkers. They don’t usually think things out before making a clear decision. On the other hand this may be due to their cultural upbringing where children are handled with *Kid Gloves* until they graduate from high school.

The Thais are a likable bunch of people and I find their children to be adorable. For those Thais who travel outside the country for a while they return more analytical and have a broader understanding of the world. I guess you could say they are like world travelers everywhere. Upon returning they don’t share a lot with the domesticated residents probably because of the class system here, and partially because they don’t expect their homeys to understand.

Thailand is for the Thais. We come to Thailand wishing to change some things or wanting to help but many of the Thais will think we are interfering. To us foreigners we think that’s a pretty odd way of accepting a gift. But in the end, “*This is Thailand.*”

LIFE'S GREAT ADVENTURE

From time to time I consider the adventures of Huckleberry Finn or Robinson Crusoe. As a young man it was such a great fantasy to live in the life of someone who has appeared to have already lived a great adventure. Oh how I longed to be there and live what I thought would be a fulfilling dream. But as exciting as those stories are they are still fable or fiction.

Now that I appear to be aging and feeling the aches and pains of long experiences I can also see that I have been blessed with true life adventures greater than that of Marco Polo. This is so amazing and I cannot wait to see what one more day will bring to me. In my journey of taking just one more step I must confess that in my secret thoughts I have to thank God every moment for my every breath. And then I wonder what is it that I did before the world was to have been born into such rich blessings?



I have flown across China and felt as if I had flown through a time warp. Somehow I found myself to be the only one who looked

like an Alien in a familiar craft occupied by an extraordinary and obviously different looking populous.

Or there was that eerie feeling when I stepped into the Coral Sea to toss one of the rings that belonged to my dear departed Father, and thinking all the time that I could suffer the attack of a great white shark.

I suffered in the frigid weather of Alaska and feared that I would pass out any moment only to be saved by the efforts of a passing friend, Duff Ray.

My life was spared in the jungles of Cambodia as my Khmer brother, Theary Leab, made a snap judgment to keep us from being shot.

These aging eyes have been graced by the history of the ruins of Ayutthaya, where I viewed the near destruction of great temples built five hundred years ago.

And today I find myself unexpectedly living in Thailand. Learning the language of an ancient culture, eating a spicy food so hot it would leave the soles of your shoes at the table, and seeing first hand a culture over run by a statistically lop-sided ratio of women so beautiful you are left a bit stunned. And this is all dwarfed by the innocents and smiles of beautiful children who smile at me as if they might think I resemble Santa Claus.

WONDERFULLY STRANGE THINGS ABOUT THAILAND

MYSTERY AND SUPERSTITION

Five people died in one family, in one week.

This is not just hear-say. Apple and I usually watch a little morning news before she drives me off to work. We both watched with a great deal of curiosity and speculation as this strange tale was reported.

A lot of old Thai families and Thai people are superstitious. The younger and less traditional Thais don't hold much stock in such things. So the morning news was quite objective in this report and wanted you to decide for yourself if this story had some merit or not.

It seems that some Thai people believe that the cobra affords some protection over the land that it occupies. Unfortunately for this cobra a family killed it probably for a couple of reasons.

For one, I don't care to have a deadly cobra squirming around on the same turf I occupy. So I expect that was one reason this family cut the cobra up. Secondly the family obviously saw it as a food source because when they cut it up there were five cobra eggs inside the pregnant mother.

First the mother of the family died from having high blood pressure and sugar diabetes. Then four other family members died quickly and mysteriously in the same week.

The father of the family went to a temple where he encountered a voodoo practitioner that was not solicited for any reason. Without any knowledge of the families sudden demise the voodoo practitioner volunteered the following information to the father of the family.

The practitioner said your family died because they killed a snake that was protecting your land. And when you cut the snake open there were five eggs in the snake. That is why five members of your family died.

The father of the family said the practitioner was nuts and left.

On the way home the father was in an accident while riding his motorcycle. The father lies in a coma and is completely incapacitated.

So... is there a morsel of truth to all of this or is it just coincidence?

WHERE COBRAS COME FROM

My first trip to Thailand was in 1993. It was really my first trip off of my home continent so I did have some reservations like, "What the Hell are you doing?"

But that feeling quickly dissipated as I wasted no time in seeing what a great new adventure was ahead for me.

Somewhere around the third day of my first trip I found myself six hours north of Bangkok. Now that was a place I did not want to walk around in, in the dark. This was the real jungle. You know the one you read about in novels or the one you see in the movies.

I stopped at a Guest House, at some stop, that had only a dozen or so homes built side by side. I suppose today we might see it as some sort of primitive townhouse. There were miles and miles of nothing to behold where I stopped; so why where twelve homes build so close together? I suppose it was for some kind of self preservation in the jungle.

Standing back in my mind I felt as if I had walked through some kind of a time warp. I had no idea what the next moment would be like for me.

The front of the house was opened to the world as if someone intended it to be an antique garage. Two very big doors, made of wood, were hinged and split in the middle. The family that lived there sold cloths and sandals. I found it rater puzzling to see cloths and foot ware being sold that looked as though it was made for the 1950's era.

Behind the garage was kitchen. It was nothing like the modern day kitchens I was used to in the west. The walls and the floor were concrete. The upper part of the back wall was constructed of

ornamental concrete blocks, and had the jungle growing right on through it. Nothing was built into the kitchen. I did recognize a free standing refrigerator. Everything else was modern miscellaneous. There was an open barbeque grill sitting in the middle of the floor and chairs scattered about. Not one of the chairs was a match.

I guess I felt bad that these people had to live in such primitive and poor conditions. I never flinched and acted as if this was an everyday occurrence. The best I could do was smile and be polite.

Then I was led up the stairs where I could hear the television playing. The family was sitting around on the floor because there was no sofa or stuffed chair. No one in the family spoke English, and my tour guide spoke only enough to get by on. So being the only white man around I felt like the new puppy that no one was quite sure what to do with.

Behind the family gathering were two mattresses on the floor. They were neatly placed into position and both had a canopy made of mosquito netting. I could see into the other room where the father and son each had a mat or mattress to sleep on. They were also covered with mosquito netting.

There was no air conditioning. I could see that there were several fans available. They looked as if they were borrowed from an old Clark Gable movie.

I was given a bed of my own and made to feel as comfortable as possible. The fan was blowing on me but it was still uncomfortably hot. When it was time for bed I laid awake trying to digest all that I was seeing and experiencing. I could see geckos running up the wall and across the ceiling. I made sure that my mosquito netting was tucked in all the way around my mattress for fear that something might try to crawl into bed with me.

“Wow,” I was thinking! Most of the world is never going to experience this.

Eventually I drifted off to sleep and slept as well as I could in the heat. By morning I was wide awake and ready for my next adventure.