

WATCHING THE THAIS



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What others say...

*“The writing is very literate. Tom Tuohy brings together a lot of information from various sources and puts it together to create a very useful orientation to Thailand.” (William Page, author of *The Nirvana Experiments and Other Tales of Asia* and *Thai Lite*)*

*“Watching the Thais is as entertaining as it is informative. At times this book is laugh-aloud funny. A great read - informative and entertaining.” (James Newman - Author of *Bangkok Express* and *Bangkok City*.)*

*“Whether you're in Thailand for only a few days, or planning a longer stay, Tom Tuohy's book will give you a unique insight into the way Thais think, learn, walk, talk, shop, laugh, and love.” (Merlin Lockety, author of *Death in Holy Orders*)*

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Dedication

To my wife, Kornkaew, for her enduring patience.

‘Your gaze scans the street as if they were written pages: the city says everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse, and while you believe you are visiting Tamara you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts...However the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave Tamara without having discovered it. Outside the land stretches empty to the horizon; the sky opens, with speeding clouds. In the shape that chance and wind give the clouds you are already intent on recognizing figures: a sailing ship, a hand, an elephant...’ (Italo Calvino ‘*Invisible Cities*’.)

‘A problem cannot be solved at the same level of thinking in which it was created.’ (Albert Einstein)

“To awaken quite alone in a strange town is one of the pleasantest sensations in the world.” (Freya Stark)

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Introduction

It has been said that each journey of a thousand miles begins with one small step. This book is a collection of many such small steps: a collection of essays and blogs reflecting my last fifteen years in Thailand. Seen in this light, each essay or blog post in this book represents some experience that I have had within my stay here in the kingdom, and tries to show some aspect of Thailand and its people to both the recent visitor and long term resident.

This book is neither long, nor is it meant as a self-help book: too many of them have already been published here in Thailand. My intention has been to steer clear of the style in which many books about visiting new cultures are written; ones which make obviously commonplace statements like ‘X country is beautiful for Y reason’, or ‘X is full of friendly people for Z reason’, or ‘X country is simply X’ (where the X factor is some ethereal entity that is simply not questioned further). The fact of the matter is that no country is perfect, not my own, and not any other, but sometimes it is the imperfection of something that also becomes part of its charm, part of its virtue and enchantment, and goes a long way in explaining why hundreds of thousands if not millions of visitors flock to its shores every year.

What this book is, is a book filled with a mixture of opinions, facts, anecdotes, lived experiences, and a host of other things, some complimentary to Thai culture and some less so. It is written with an insider's knowledge, but from an outsider's perspective. However, I would like to make it clear at the outset, that it is not my intention to show Thai people in a negative light, but rather to show them in a way that reflects their true nature; something that requires a certain degree of critical distance if a western audience is to genuinely better appreciate them as a race of people. If I have failed to achieve this in parts, I apologise to all Thai people in advance for the faults in my writing because I greatly admire their spirit and ingenuity, and love living in their beautiful country.

Indeed, I am painfully aware that any analysis of all things Thailand by me is bound to be wholly subjective and based merely on something I had read, heard about, or simply perceived as true and *not*, as in the case of the rest of the book, based on lived experience. This has been my guide throughout the writing of this book: to comment on something that, wherever possible, directly affected me personally.

I should also point out, however, that, where I offer my own opinion on Thai ways, or Thai life in general, I can promise that, at all junctures, I have made every effort to give my opinion in such a way that is not directly offensive to Thailand, its people, or its culture. I know that Thai people have a wonderful propensity for forgiveness, and if I have said something that upsets my gracious hosts, then I entreat, in advance, their forgiveness.

My principal reason for writing this book is to show that Thailand is a unique place to live in, replete with a magical language and genuinely warm-hearted people. Moreover, Thailand also has a truly amazing abundance of interesting attractions e.g. the food, the beaches, the wonderful climate, the beautiful women, the easy relaxed nature of its people. Indeed, I believe that Bangkok is as cosmopolitan as any Asian city, and is fast becoming a major hub in Asia, especially for my own passion, the Arts, entertainment in general, and especially its nightlife, its cuisine, and its blossoming fashion industry.

Yet, at the same time, I am also aware too that no culture is perfect whatever it's obvious or apparent virtues, and this is also an aspect that I believe the visitor should be aware of when visiting this beautiful country. In fact, because Thailand was never formally colonised by outside forces, it has, in some sense, its own particular way of doing things, peculiar talents that are home-grown because they have evolved exclusively within the context of a Thai landscape, among its people, and therefore cannot be found anywhere else. It is in this overarching context that I hope the reader will be able to form his or her own conception of what Thai people are, what the culture is all about, and how he or she might better understand the customs in this unique place.

I believe it was Charles Darwin who first discovered then formulated his theories based on the observation that certain species of animal (turtles if I'm not mistaken) were unique to the Galapagos Islands, varieties that

could be found nowhere else on earth. I feel that in many ways, Thailand can be thought of and understood in such a light, with its specific mores and social customs. Thai culture is truly unique enough to lure, not only the ambitious botanist, but also the curious visitor and the enchanted tourist, indeed anyone who has the taste for a captivating experience, and who is open-minded enough to enjoy it. There really is something for everyone here, of all ages, races, and creeds; something that awaits those who are prepared to take that first step on a long journey into a strange, yet fascinating and magical land; into a culture that is steeped in history and tradition. Are you ready for that first step?

T.T.