

MEMORIES OF 18 MONTHS IN THAILAND – 2007-2009

I arrived in Thailand December 19, 2007 and immediately became involved with Training of Trainers (our 17 language/cultural facilitators), followed by 10 weeks of pre-service training (PST) for 59 new trainees/volunteers. So, I initially spent most of my time about two hours north of Bangkok in Singburi.

I had wanted to do the job of Program/Training Officer (PTO) instead of Country Director and was delighted when the CD in Thailand was willing to accept me in that position. After serving in seven countries in every region of Peace Corps since 2000, I was eager to settle down for my final years and contribute from my varied experiences.

The largest reclining Buddha in Thailand is located in Singburi - at 65 meters long it is larger than the one in Bangkok! Another reclining Buddha at the same wat (temple) is covered with tiny pieces of gold leaf placed there as tribute by Buddhist visitors.



There are also very beautiful wats everywhere, and a quai along the riverfront for early morning exercise.



This was close to our training center and it was a wonderful way to start the day with a peaceful walk. Along the route there was a wat that hosted Thai women doing meditation retreats. Seeing them arrive in a silent procession, dressed in white, hands in Namaste position, was calming.

Every morning at 8 am the King's anthem was played through ubiquitous loudspeakers. Everyone stopped what they were doing for the minute that it took, and gave their respects. I found it a very moving song.

A former U.S. Ambassador to Thailand said "The best thing about Bangkok is that it is right next door to Thailand!" and it is certainly true that Thailand is not like Bangkok. The countryside was largely agricultural, albeit with modern amenities and products available at least in each provincial capital. The country has about the same area as France without its overseas territories, about the same population – 66 million people – and is similarly divided into 76 provinces (départments in France). Thailand is very proud of the fact that it has never been colonized.

Singburi is in the heart of the central Thailand rice growing area. Much of this particular area is irrigated and so two crops a year are possible. It was beautiful to watch the almost daily change of colors as the seedlings sprouted, matured, ripened and then were ready for harvest. Almost the entire process is back breaking manual labor, with the aid of water buffalos. I noticed a few machines at harvest time, and milling occurs at the community level.



New Year's occurred during our period of training of trainers so we hosted a party including dressing up in costumes, playing games, and eating traditional snacks.



In general, I found the Thais to be a fun-loving people who lived up to their nickname – The Land of Smiles. They are also hard working. Because Thailand has excellent quality medical care,

we always received a good number of >50-year-old trainees. This group was no exception with at least 10 in that category including three married couples.

Here is the group photo of the 59 newly-arrived trainees with the training staff. The trainees



lived with host families who were an important part of their cultural and language training which also included health, safety and security, plus preparation for their area of work. We provided bicycle training including safety, “rules of the road” and maintenance, as a bike

would be a principal means of transport for most of the volunteers. Their work would either be partnering with English teachers in schools to improve the level of English classroom teaching, or working with community-based organizational development. I also worked at learning some Thai language which I found truly challenging since it bore no relation to any other language I had encountered, especially with almost every word having only one syllable, but spoken with different tones to create totally different meanings! I made no attempt to learn the writing and congratulate the volunteers who gained such proficiency during their two years of service.

As part of their cultural training, we arranged for a shadow puppet theater show at the nearby Nang Yai Museum. The shadow puppets are intricately carved from buffalo skin.



Clothing is culturally very important in Thailand. People are always dressed neatly and usually in western-style clothing except for special cultural occasions. In the pre-arrival information sent to invited trainees there were specific clothing instructions included. However, for teachers, the term blouse in Thailand meant a required collar, which was not typical in the U.S. (I remember all those silk “shells” I used to wear with my business suits.) In addition to this challenge, the King’s older sister died on January 2nd, 2008 which initiated a 100-day period of

mourning during which people were expected to wear only black or white. This required an urgent communication regarding clothing to pack as the trainees were arriving in three weeks and black is not normally part of what you wear in Thailand!

The Princess' funeral was not held until November, a long delay which is typical in Thailand. An entire temporary city of temples was constructed on a large park not far from the Peace Corps office. The funeral lasted for six days and over 100,000 Thais gathered to mourn the elder sister of their beloved King. This occurred during a period of intense political strife in Thailand but the political rivals sat together in ceremonial dress on the site where many of their most severe clashes had been taking place.



This was the first Royal Funeral since the death of the King's mother in 1996. However, two recent Royal celebrations had included his 60 years on the throne in June 2006 – at the time the longest-serving monarch in the world - and for the 80 days leading up to his 80th birthday on December 5, 2007, just before my arrival.

This formal photo of royalty from around the world who attended the 60th anniversary celebration was hanging everywhere when I arrived – in the airport, in public buildings, but also in small shops in the rural countryside.



It was also customary for everyone to wear a yellow shirt on Mondays to show support for the King. And there was a further system of colors considered auspicious or not for each day of the week.

Day	Color of the day	Unlucky color	Celestial Body	God of the day
Sunday	red	blue	Sun	Surya
Monday	yellow	red	Moon	Chandra
Tuesday	pink	yellow and white	Mars	Mangala
Wednesday (day)	green	pink	Mercury	Budha
Wednesday (night)	grey	orange-red	None	Rahu
Thursday	orange	purple	Jupiter	Brihaspati
Friday	light blue	black and dark blue	Venus	Shukra
Saturday	purple	green	Saturn	Shani

Earlier in 2007, Peace Corps had celebrated 45 years of uninterrupted service to the people of Thailand. Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn attended the ceremony pictured here with Country Director John Williams and Deputy Peace Corps Director Jody K. Olsen, and Olsen offering a gift to the Princess (photos courtesy of PCV Prema Ray).



The Royal Barges were also on display during the King's 80th birthday celebration with Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn, seen beyond. The role of the King in Thailand since its 1932 Constitution is largely as a symbolic Head of State and the government includes a Prime Minister and a legislature. However, during King

Bhumibol's reign there were at least 18 coups and at the time of my arrival there was not actually an elected government in place.

Bangkok is a vibrant, dynamic city, way less polluted in 2008 than when I first visited in 1999. Since then, the sky train and metro had arrived, taxis converted from gasoline to lpg and although traffic was still intense, the city seemed much more livable with blue skies occasionally visible.



However, as I am writing this in 2021, I realize, sadly, how extremely the air quality has plummeted in the past 10 years. Agricultural burning practices, the extensive canal system with diesel-burning motor boats making 300,000 trips per day, and extreme traffic congestion are all contributors. The PC medical staff strongly discouraged us from jogging and the traffic police all wore protective masks.

Peace Corps provided me with a lovely large apartment in the Ari neighborhood, a quiet older neighborhood inhabited primarily by long-term Bangkok Thai families. The entry to the building was featured the building owners' traditional art and furniture and the view was dramatic.



It was an easy walk to the Ari sky-train stop, a small shopping center, and abundant street-food vendors. I primarily ate from those vendors. Interestingly, you could buy airplane tickets at the local 7-11!



I enjoyed a traditional 2-hour Thai massage every Sunday and took advantage of the large Chatuchak and Queen Sirikit parks nearby.

It was great to go early in the morning (before it was scorchingly hot and humid) and watch people doing Thai Chi, fan dancing, following exercise par courses, or jogging. I found that time of day very relaxing, and felt connected with the Thai people. Each group was doing their exercise to music, so the gentle, intricate, Thai music was also serenading me as I made my way around the park, either race walking or just walking. The park opened at 4 am and sunrise was around 6 am.



Thais believe strongly in physical fitness. Each village I visited had a public aerobics class every evening at 6 pm – and it was not for the novice participant!

One custom in Thailand is spirit houses which are seen everywhere and in every type of style and construction – some quite palatial! The spirit house is placed when someone builds on a property in order for the spirits who have been living there to have a home. They are cared for daily with fresh water and flowers and often candles and incense if there is also a Buddha. These are spirit houses in the park and a miniature replica of the golden stupa found at the palace of the emerald Buddha.



Although Bangkok is modern with high rise buildings and myriads of multi-level shopping malls, the traditional city still predominated. The canals were lined with teak houses and commerce, and buzzing with boat transport for goods and commuting. Street food vendors were everywhere and did a brisk business as Thais eat several small meals per day plus fresh fruit snacks and iced fruit and coffee drinks. Standards of hygiene are very high and even with the heat, 8 million people consuming means the food is sold quickly, so it is quite safe to eat. I am not normally much of a fruit eater but the carts selling pre-cut morsels of tropical fruits in glisene bags with a skewer were too tempting to pass up. Flower vendors for temple offerings also abound.



The then-King Bhumibol (Rama IX, his photos here projected onto a Bangkok high rise) placed a strong emphasis on upholding Thai traditions and values. One of his initiatives involved



preserving and enhancing Thai handicrafts. His project One Tambon (village) One Product resulted in over 36,000 community handicrafts organizations. On my occasional visits to volunteer current or potential work sites I was able to enjoy meeting some of these artisans. In the northeast I saw mask-

makers of the local types (Dan Sai, Loei province), women making silver jewelry, and beautiful artificial flowers made from soy-bean paste. The flower-makers worked assembly-line style with each woman specializing in a part of the process from shaping leaves and stems to incredibly realistic hand-painting. Here are a pitcher plant I bought and a Phitsanulok festival mask.



I for the first time saw how Ikat weaving thread is bound in bundles and pre-dyed such pre-set pattern emerges perfectly!

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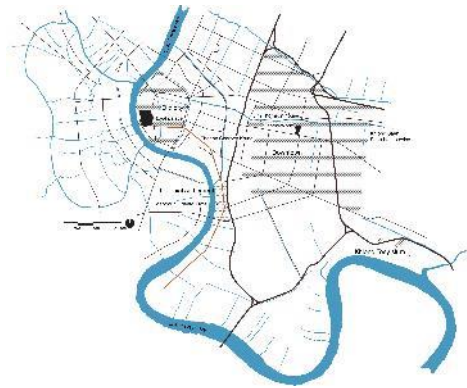


In Bangkok there remains one community, Ban Baat, where the traditional monks' alms bowls are still hand-crafted, a process which requires two days. Eight pieces of steel, representing Buddhism's eightfold path, are fused with melted copper wire, then beaten, polished and lacquered. I was fortunate to acquire one of them.





I particularly love cities with working rivers and for me Bangkok was heaven with the Chao Phraya river as a major transport artery and the extensive network of major and minor canals, known in Thai as klongs.



Various boat types serve the different parts of the network but the so-called express boats on the river serve most of the major Bangkok sites and are fast, frequent and inexpensive. They barely stopped at the pier, you just jumped on or off quickly! The Peace Corps office was walking distance from the river so one of my commuting routes was to take a river commuter boat to Sathorn Pier which connected with the sky-train system.



One of the benefits of living in a major regional capital with a large apartment (three bedrooms, three baths, small pool and garden) is that one can host lots of visitors. And visitors encourage you to step away from work and do some exploring!



One such guest resulted in my using the water network to visit Ko Kret with its Mon potters' village and Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn.

With another visitor we did the Mahasawat Canal community-based rural tourism day trip from Bangkok. Taking a long-tail boat from Bangkok about 50 km west, you then spend the day traveling by canal boat during which you visit a lotus flower farm, ride a tractor through a rice field and/or organic fruit orchard, visit a rice-cracker-making workshop and an orchid farm. Orchids are big business in Thailand as

they are displayed everywhere, from temples and shrines to hotels, business and museum lobbies and, of course, are a major export.



In the “It’s a small world.” category, the brother of one of my French women friends is married to a Thai. And she has a twin sister, a pharmacist, still living in their hometown near Kanchanaburi. Joom introduced me to a tour guide, joined me with some of her friends for



traditional Thai food (see the steamed fish and Tom Yam soup, my all-time favorite) and, later in the year introduced me to another friend in Chiang Mai who gave me and my visitor an insider’s visit to the town where she and Joom had both attended University. Jemmy, the twin, visited from London where she was based and we enjoyed yet another sumptuous Thai meal together and a Moroccan meal at my home.



Kanchanaburi, near the Myanmar (Burma) border, is home to the famous River Kwai Bridge. During WW II, Japan constructed the meter-gauge railway line from Ban Pong, Thailand to Thanbyuzayat, Burma. The line, passing through the scenic Three Pagodas Pass, runs for 250 miles. It is now known as the Death Railway. The railway line was meant to

transport cargo daily to support Japan's forces in Burma and its planned attack on India. The construction was done using Commonwealth, Dutch and American POWs and Asian slave laborers, all working in abominable conditions. An estimated 80,000 to 100,000 civilian laborers died in the course of the project due to the difficult terrain, 18-hour work days and diseases. It is believed that one life was lost for each cross-tie laid in the track. The work started in October 1942 and was completed in a year. At the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, around 7,000 POWs are buried. Another 2,000 are laid to rest at the Chungkai War Cemetery.



Allied Forces bombed the iron bridge in 1944 destroying three sections. The cliff-hugging tracks and the natural beauty of the surrounding mountains and valleys are well captured in the David Lean 1957 movie *Bridge Over the River Kwai*. The railway bridge can be crossed on foot and a small tourist train runs back and forth across the re-built bridge.



Approximately 50 miles further north, the Hellfire Pass cut was one of the most fatal areas of construction. One can walk in this area and visit the Hellfire Pass Museum created jointly by the Thai and Australian governments. Needless to say, these are very emotional visits.

Also near Kanchanaburi, a friend and I visited Taweechai Elephant Camp, one of the largest elephant camps in Thailand. In operation since 1999, the camp is a place where elephants are trained and domesticated. They often supply the pachyderms for use in Hollywood and Hong Kong movie productions. I do not enjoy the sight of elephants trained to do tricks, but did 'enjoy' a ride down to the river. I will say that the seat didn't feel terribly secure as the elephant walked with its normal gait, and you are quite high up!





Another Kanchanaburi tourist site was Tiger Temple, or Wat Pha Luang Ta Bua Yanasampanno, a Theravada Buddhist temple. It was founded in 1994 as a temple and sanctuary for wild animals, among them tigers, mostly Indochinese. A "commercial" temple, Tiger Temple charged an admission fee. The temple had long been accused by animal rights activists of mistreating the tigers for commercial gain and even trafficking some of its animals. In May 2016, the Thailand Wildlife Conservation Office (WCO) began capturing and relocating the tigers, intending to close the facility.



As part of that guided day, we also visited Khao Poon Cave with its many Buddhas.



I took advantage of the visit of a Morocco RPCV friend to prepare a traditional Moroccan dinner for the programming/training staff. We taught them how to eat the tajine using only fingers and morsels of bread - note there are no plates or cutlery on the table.



My friend made great couscous as our second course and we served fresh fruit for dessert as is typical. We also, as is typical, used plastic table cloths which we changed after each course. Note the three different ones in the photos.



A must-visit in Bangkok is the Jim Thompson House, a beautiful example of traditional Thai teak construction, with its many artifacts, Asian art, garden, and excellent café and boutique. Thompson, an American who was probably a member of the intelligence

community during WWII, stayed on in Thailand and is credited with re-invigorating the



production of high-quality Thai silk. I took the tour so many times that I could have given it and occasionally added in an item that the tour guide omitted. It was in this café during my first visit to Bangkok, in 1999, that I was taught to combat heat and humidity by eating hot, spicy food, such as Tom Yam soup, rather than drinking iced tea! Thompson disappeared in 1967 when vacationing with friends in the mountains of Malaysia. The company he founded is famous worldwide for the designs and quality of its silk products.

Another favorite visit was to take afternoon tea in the Authors' Lounge at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel. As I have written about elsewhere, I love these old colonial hotels in Asia with their opulence and history. The historic photos not only of authors but of Thai/Siam history are worth the visit to say nothing of the quality of the tea, especially the home-made scones.



Due to the excellent facilities available and its central location, Bangkok also served as a site for periodic staff training for the Peace Corps countries in the EMA (Europe, Mediterranean, Asia) region. This was great for us as we met staff from all over the region working in a wide variety

of positions, from administration, to drivers, to medical staff. These photos are from a Continuing Medical Education training for PC medical staff. We always planned at least one special evening Thai event and the opportunity to tour at night, as shown with Wat Arun and the Grand Palais.



Here I am with two of our Thai medical staff on such an evening. We also were privileged to host training staff from headquarters whom I could put up chez moi.

My favorite festival in Thailand is Loi Krathong, or Festival of Lights, which is celebrated on the full moon night of the 12th month of the Thai lunar calendar which usually occurs in November. Traditionally one makes a floating basket (bio of course) in which are placed leaves, a candle and incense sticks. These are then lit and floated on a water body. The candle venerates the Buddha and the floating away symbolizes letting go of one's anger and negativities. Here are photos from a small gathering of friends to which I was



thrilled to be invited! Note the large Krathong prepared for launch by the host and the beautiful individual ones for we guests. And, of course, no Thai party is complete without dancing and singing entertainment.



The famous lantern release in Chiang Mai for Loi Krathong is very impressive!



Thanks to the visit of another friend, I visited Sukothai, meaning Dawn of Happiness (from the Sanskrit), the earliest capital of Thailand (then-Siam) from the mid-13th to late 14th C. The remains of the old city are preserved in a UNESCO World Heritage site.

During this period the first Thai language script was created, borrowing heavily from the nearby Khmer kingdom. The architecture is highly varied with stupas of the Thai conical spire called prang (Wat Mahathat) and those reminiscent of the Sri Lankan bell shape or Khmer (Wat Si Sawai). There are 193 ruins on this 45 sq km site near the headwaters of the Chao Phraya river.



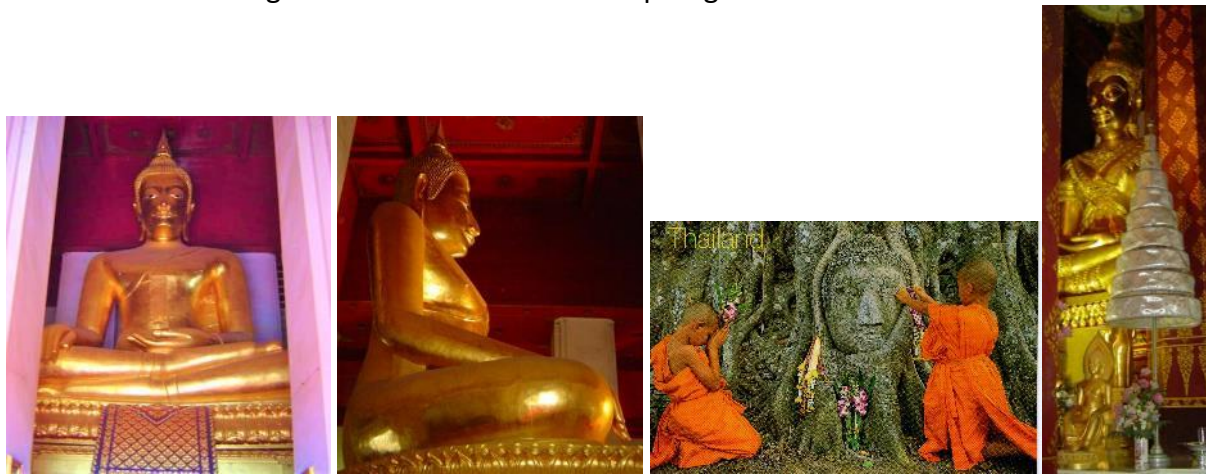
I'm afraid I was not (and am not) nearly as svelte as this goddess.

Ayutthaya, founded in 1350, was the second capital of the Siamese Kingdom. It flourished until the 18th century, during which time it grew to be one of the world's largest and most cosmopolitan urban areas and a center of global diplomacy and commerce. Ayutthaya was

strategically located on an island surrounded by three rivers connecting the city to the sea. The site was chosen because it was located above the tidal bore of the Gulf of Siam as it existed at that time, thus preventing attack of the city by the sea-going warships of other nations. The location also helped to protect the city from seasonal flooding.



The city was attacked by the Burmese army in 1767 who burned the city to the ground and forced the inhabitants to abandon it. The city was never rebuilt and remains known today as an extensive archaeological site with remains of tall prangs and Buddhist monasteries of



monumental proportions. A visit is an easy day trip by boat on the Chao Phraya River from Bangkok. Across the river from the historic site lies the Bang Pa-In palace which is worth a visit.



The topiary elephants are reminiscent of a series of topiary animals that were under the sky-train near my Ari station.

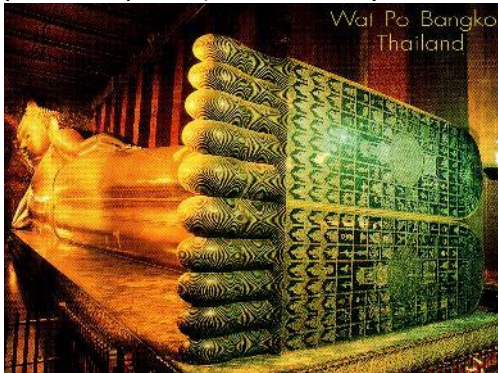
As I love working rivers, here are some nearby river photos as well.



After the fall of Ayutthaya, the kingdom fractured into competing city-states. The next unifier to emerge was General Taksin who established his base in Thonburi on the western bank of the Chao Phraya River. However, he was deposed by Chao Phraya Chakri who moved the capital across the river in 1782 and founded today's Bangkok. The

succession of his son in 1809 established the present-day dynasty of which the current king is Rama X, his father, King Bhumpal (Rama IX) having died in 2016.

On the grounds of the Grand Palais are found a huge number of temples but I found the two most fascinating Buddha's to be the very large reclining Buddha with its jeweled feet (see postcard photo) and the very small Emerald Buddha (slightly over 2' tall) carved from green



jade.

It was probably carved in northern Thailand around the 15th C and was brought to Thonburi and then Bangkok by King Rama I. King Rama I had two costumes made for the statue, one for summer and one for the rainy season. King Rama III (1824-1851) added another one for winter. The ceremony of the changing of the costumes takes place three times per year and is done by the current King. These photos show the Buddha

unrobed and in his three seasonal costumes.



Thailand is a rich destination for tourism with incredible beaches, islands, and scuba diving along with rubber plantations in the south, dramatic mountains and coffee plantations in the north, an abundance of opulent temples, and traditional artisan production throughout the country.



I made only one trip south, for a training session with volunteers who served as their area safety/security wardens. Beach-side catering was a special treat.



I am able to still daily enjoy my time in Thailand using products such as handsome stainless-steel utensils and glassware that I had no idea Thailand made, as well as artisan work such as this floor lamp and a shadow box



of Thai dancers.

In January we welcomed a new group of 42 dynamic trainees, nine of whom were over 50 years of age! And, in the spring, I finally took some vacation, with trips to Japan and southern India which are written about on my web site <https://60after60.com>.

My eighteen months in Thailand literally flew by and in June it was time for that happy/sad day of the retirement party with gifts and of course food, held in the beautiful PC Thailand office.





Looking again at the photos I realized another small world event. Missing from the photos is Rumpai, PC Thailand's Training Manager who had departed earlier in June for a new career with Hermes as the directress of their tannery (alligator skins) in Lafayette,

Louisiana. In her prior life she was trained as a chemical engineer and had tannery experience. But her summer was to be spent in and around Paris

for training, so we were able to get together both in Paris and Le Mans and a couple of years later I had a great visit with her in Lafayette, visiting the tannery, plantations, and New Orleans.



Also not present at the retirement party was Suvimon, the manager for the English language program. I've happily had a

couple of reunions with her in Paris and one with her, her husband and friends in Marrakech, Morocco.



such as when Nipiwan passed through Paris in 2017.

The rich memories of Peace Corps staff and volunteers as well as the Thai people remain always with me, and occasionally we are again able to cross paths in our global travels,

Rit London, PC Thailand's Medical Officer and his family passed through Paris also in the summer of 2017 and we had a lovely reunion in the



Tuileries garden. I don't have a photo of Rit from that visit but do have one of me with his wife, talented designer, Ellen London. <https://ellenlondonstudio.com>.



I love those reunions. I like to make them happen when I make my occasional (about every four years) visits to the U.S., trying to connect with any RPCV friends located in the cities I am visiting. And, living in Paris, one of the most often visited tourist sites in the world, makes them often happen here as well.

I'll close with a few more candid shots of me: on the street under the sky train, dining out, and at home in my beautiful apartment, enjoying life in Bangkok and Thailand, thanks to Peace Corps.



