

Exotic Thailand

I wanted no limits to my opportunities so for the first time I travelled just with a backpack. I had borrowed Camilla's 60 l Haglöfs – specially tailored for women – which contained all my basic necessities for the next 3 weeks.

During the grey Danish winter I developed a latent need of sunshine and adventures. The travel pages of the Sunday newspaper became irresistible and something had to be done. Benthe and the girls were busy with their work and school, but some inner voice had long before made me keep some weeks in February open.

As no emergencies from work or otherwise seemed apparent, I booked a ticket with short notice, and on the 27th January 2000, a typical grey and misty afternoon, my brother Bjarne drove me to the airport. The following morning the KLM Jumbo landed softly in sunny Bangkok.

My old colleague Holger, who has been living in Thailand for 10 years, met me in the airport. After many years of not seeing each other we both looked forward to the opportunity of updating the situation – and Holger, the good food lover, definitely also looked forward to get the heavy bag of Danish Salami, red sausages and remoulade.

The tourist trap Pattaya

Holger and his sweet Thai wife Sumchit had arranged a weekend trip to the nearby resort in Pattaya – a former sleepy fishing village, which was transformed into a great recreation centre for the worn out American soldiers during the Vietnam War.

While I have been in Bangkok a few times before, I have always avoided places like Pattaya, and I certainly now got all my prejudices confirmed: Lots of seedy, nail biting Europeans, some of them enjoying the warm weather and exotic life while others were probably involved in more shady activities. The restaurants outdid each other with billboards in English, German and even Danish in advertising their selection of sauerkraut, fish & chips and frikadeller, so that no one should miss the specialities from the homeland. While Holger enjoyed frikadeller with cold potato salad like his mother used to make it, Sumchit and I were allowed to bring in a most delicious dish of sticky rice with chicken and fresh vegetables – packed in banana leaves - from a street vendor.

In preparation for the upcoming survival trip into the jungle, I had a haircut and then we all signed up for foot massage, which according to the big window painting should alleviate problems from all parts of your body. I did not have any acute sore spots but thought that it might do my feet good before setting out in the heavy hiking boots.

We were placed in soft reclining chairs and were supposed to relax and even sleep during the one-hour session. I dare say that neither was possible. Actually my jet lag was calling for rest, but instead I was kept very much awake. The small massage woman had an enormous strength in her fingers and on top of that she used both round sticks for pressing deep into my feet as well as two wooden hammers, running like a drumstick solo over my feet soles.

We now needed to relax and went to the umbrella-covered beach. Sitting in the deck chairs we were soon surrounded by vendors carrying their small buckets with glowing charcoal and freshly grilled king prawns, squid or fish. Others supplied salad, beer and other necessities. And most amazingly, by every few sitting groups were baskets for the waste. A very uncommon but highly appreciated facility in those latitudes.

Jungle Expedition

I then left Pattaya and Holger & Sumchit to continue – or rather to start – my Thai adventure. I paid 2\$ for the two hour bus ride to Bangkok and then 7\$ for a 20 min taxi trip from the BKK bus station to the hotel, where 2 days before I had booked the jungle trip.

Two girls from Copenhagen and a young man from Vejle, DK, were already there, and we were thus going to be a team of 4 for the next 5 days. By de luxe night bus with stewardess and lunchbox (with a jam roll) we entered into the dark Thai night. Actually the bus ride was by far more comfortable than the jumbo jet sardine tin. Except for a few stops for provisions and toilet visits we thundered through the night with the occasional street lamps indicating that we passed through a village.

At around five in the morning the bus stopped apparently in the middle of nowhere and we were indicated to leave. Outside an old man who pointed at a moped with a built-on cabin met us. We squeezed inside with our rather big backpacks and he puffed away with us. We were too sleepy to analyse the situation and after 10 min he stopped in front of a rather big wooden house apparently in the outskirts of a town Mae Sot. We were asked to step out and I was by now enough awake to take a photo of the old man, his moped and our group. Then he just left.

The roosters were by now ready to wake up the entire town including the tour supervisor, who suddenly turned up and let us inside. Please remember to always leave your boots and shoes at the doorstep of a Thai house. The house consisted of one large room downstairs and another equally large room upstairs. We went up the stairs and two by two crawled inside the mosquito net where the floor was covered by some very thin and very hard mattresses. I slept immediate-

ly and woke up around 10 o'clock.

After a refreshing cold shower and shave we were ready for breakfast with omelette, vegetables and plenty of sun ripe and juicy mandarins. We still had a couple of hours before departing into the jungle, so the supervisor drove us to the nearby border with Myanmar (Burma). A trading post had been developed, where the Burmese openly waded across the river into Thailand with produce on their head.

In contrast to most other countries in the region Thailand has never had communist rule or other types of dictatorship, and has therefore been quick to develop an open market economy. This has also resulted in the cutting of almost the entire Thai forest of teak and other valuable tropical trees. This development has mostly bypassed the neighboring countries, which hopefully now can learn from the late Thai efforts to save what is still left.

On the market were plenty of teak furniture and carvings, gems, silver like jewelry and all the daily commodities. The prices were unbelievable low, but unfortunately the room in the backpack was already fully booked so it became no great shopping event. However to protect us again the glazing sun we invested in bamboo 4 hats, total costs around 1 \$.

Then it was time for departure into the hills and the remote jungle at the end of the road. A Toyota pick-up came up to the house, and we jumped into the back, which was covered by a tarpaulin. On each side of the back was a wooden bench and the four of us took up all the space, unaware that on the way back we would have to accommodate around 20 people in a similar pick-up.

The drive took us through the scenic highlands, I believe, although my memories of the trip are somewhat less pleasant. After the first hour with full speed on very curved and not always paved roads my tendency to seasickness were felt and only a break after two hours saved my breakfast. However we had another two hours to go, and my concentration was fully occupied by finding a quit spot to put my eyes on. Fortunately the rise leveled off so that by arrival to Umphang jungle village we all had an almost normal colour again.

We were offloaded at Trekkers Hill, a group of wooden houses, where mr. T and his assistants provided for food, a floor to sleep on and a beautiful view of the surrounding hills.