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"Let's go to St. Somewhere and get out of this cold weather!"
-Jimmy Buffett

St. Sometimes

Merry Christmas from Bangkok!

Another Christmas and New Years away from home. I miss my family and friends, but that is the price I pay as I travel the world. This Christmas season was spent Traveling Thailand.



Mario and I in a Tuk Tuk Taxi.

We had school right up until the 21st of December. Thank God we had planned our trip back in October, otherwise we would have never made it out of Kuwait. Expats leave Kuwait for the "winter break" unless they teach/work in a school that is strictly Muslim. Our school is on the American curriculum so we had almost three weeks vacation.

Mario, Kathleen, Anita, Philip, and I planned a skeleton itinerary to stay in Bangkok from the 23rd to the 26th. Then we all went in separate directions for a few weeks, and would end up in Bangkok for the 10th and 11th of January. The plan stuck for the most part.

The Flight There

Since Kuwait is a dry country, any plane flight leaving Kuwait tends to be a drunken festival. Even some of the Muslims order alcohol on the flight!

That is a hard concept to swallow! We just flagged a stewardess and told her to keep the drinks coming. With the rare exception of a home brew, we had been dry for the last four months.

Thai Airways is a great airline. It is a truly bilingual experience. The first leg of the flight was only an hour and a half to Dubai, where we deplaned into the duty free mall/airport for a quick draft beer in the Irish pub. The second half of the flight was straight to Bangkok for a good six hours. Getting sleep was difficult which made the four hour forward time change even more of a drag. Once we got to Bangkok my body was utterly confused.

Mario and I decided to catch our second wind and stay up for the entire day. We were anxious to see street elephants, Western women, and the sea of electronics. First stop was cell phone action. All we needed was a new SIM card and a phone card. (The world of cell phones is so different overseas. You just buy a local SIM card-a local phone number- and some prepaid minutes, and you have instant communications.) The four of us brought our world phones so we were set to keep in touch.

Wandering around Bangkok was so weird. Once again, I was in a city full of people everywhere. And nobody was wearing Muslim dress. The country is a majority Buddhist.



Technology – Pirated Copies

Amazing. That is about the gist of it. Everywhere you look there is technology. One whole mall was just cell phones. There are pirated copies of any movie you could ever want right on the street sides. You can get a phone SIM card on any street corner without signing anything, showing any ID, or setting up a call plan.

The streets of Bangkok have timed intersections. Sitting at a red light, you can watch a countdown clock to see the light will turn green in 70 seconds. But keep your arms and head inside of the taxi or tuk tuk or they will be kindly removed by a passing motorbike. The traffic is smooth because there is mutual respect. You won't see that in Kuwait.

We stayed the first couple of nights at the Asia Hotel Bangkok. It cost about \$45US per night. Don't ask me how I know, but if you bring a "guest" into the hotel, the front desk will ask you for a 1000 bht non-refundable payment per "guest". Don't get any ideas. I wasn't the one accompanied by two hookers that night. (that's someone else's story)

Since I am a guy, I did have to see what the red light district was all about. Wow. I didn't know that strippers could be so imaginative. Let's leave it at that.

Pataya- A Modern Pirate's Cove

Like I mentioned earlier, we only had a skeleton itinerary. I had not made any reservations to get to the islands in the south. I only made reservations to dive and stay overnight. We figured, with 15

flights a day from Bangkok to Kho Samui, it would not be difficult to get a flight. How wrong we were. We ended up taking a taxi for a 2 1/2 hour trip to the coastal town of Pataya, where we had to stay overnight in order to make the next day flight. What a city of sin! This town made Bangkok look like Disneyland.



Dr, Phil plays connect 4 with a local

Every bar was a strip joint. The ladies were willing to do anything from a ravishing game of connect 4 to a Thai massage with a "happy ending". I am proud to say all three of us guys stayed clean and stuck to connect 4, for the most part. Ask me sometime and I might give a few more details- even those details would be considered G-rated by the local pirates, but they aren't suitable for all of my readers.

We spent one night amongst pirates and then flew to Kho Samui. The island of Kho Samui made the CNN headlines because a westerner was murdered there over New Year's. It was a watered down, Island version of Pataya.

Besides strippers and rowdy bars, Kho Samui nightlife was a place where the nightlife got weird. Men were walking around with rare animals. For example, a guy would come up with a monkey, lizard, snake, or bald eagle, and ask if you wanted a picture with the animal. Strange. Then we saw two monkey vendors get into a street brawl. The monkeys got into it to. We hopped the ferry the next morning!

The Bangkok Top Ten

10. Everyone is smiling
9. Dogs are everywhere, and they are usually wearing shirts.
8. The five calls to prayer are replaced by five invitations by hookers.
7. The only sand you can find is on the beach.
6. Thai food is delicious and everywhere. (Of course it takes a certain bravery to eat the grilled crickets, grasshoppers, and other assorted bugs from the roadside vendors.)
5. Motorbike heaven. The traffic is amazingly cohesive.
4. Tuk Tuk taxis are cheap on the wallet but the drivers take you to get a suit made, set up an expensive water taxi city tour, and try to sell you the famous Thai "massage"- all via their friends. The driver gets a cut off of everything he gets you to do.
3. Thai "Massage"
2. Beer
1. The only sand you find is on the beach.

The Island of Kho Tao Top Ten

10. No one keeps track of time.
9. Motorbike accidents cause 99% of all injuries.
8. The pancake man happens to be busiest around 1-2am daily.
7. Bars don't close.
6. The five calls to prayer are replaced by five times to scuba dive.
5. It can cost as low as 200 Bbaht (\$5.00US) to stay overnight.
4. Clothing is optional, especially during New Year's.
3. For those of you looking for hippy lettuce, it's not hard to find.
2. You can sleep wherever you fall (beware of Katoois taking advantage)
1. Everyone is smiling.



Kho Tao Diving

Kho Tao is a small island in the Gulf of Thailand. It is on the Eastern side of Thailand, across from Phuket (most of you know Phuket from the Tsunami last year). Kho Samui is a bigger resort island that has an airport, so we flew there and ferried over to Kho Tao. Why Kho Tao? I happened upon it via the internet and a few diver friends of mine had mentioned it to me. Little did I know, the dive shop we had signed up with is the third largest in the world. Ban's Diving certifies about 25,000 new divers each year. (according to the bartender I became friends with there)

Living on the island was an easy life. I spent just over \$400 US on diving and hotel for the entire two and a half weeks I was there. The food was inexpensive, the drinks were relative too. We lived like kings on vacation. I could never live that way in Kuwait. For example, in Kuwait, a taxi ride costs about \$15 US for one way into the city (20min ride). A taxi ride in Bangkok was about \$2US for the same time. On the island, it cost about a dollar to jump in the back of a pick-up truck for a ride into town.

We really didn't go into the town much. The resort had everything we needed; a store, a bar, a restaurant, diving, boats, and motorbike rental. A motorbike rental was \$5 US for the entire day. Mario and I rented bikes on New Year's day, but we were scared to ride them after I nearly killed Mario. Hey, I never ride those things and he stopped abruptly in front of me. The trails along

the island are quite small and full of pedestrians. We parked the bikes outside of the rental shop for the entire day they were rented for. Hah!

The days went like this for me:

- Wake up whenever and order a bacon sandwich at the restaurant
- Read or sit on the beach or both until diving at noon
- Get on the dive boat at 12:45 for two dives
- Take a cold shower and wipe down the gear, dress, take a nap
- Get proof of life from Philip (usually Mario would call him)
- Enjoy the sunset with new diving friends
- Meet Mario at the Bar for a few hours
- Visit the pancake man (until we made the connection between pancakes and diarrhea)
- Read in bed and fall asleep

The island existence is basically life without a clock, relaxing, and diving. There isn't much more to do. Kathleen arranged for a spa afternoon while Mario and I visited several local establishments and watched the Rose Bowl while drinking German beers and ate Thai dishes.

There are a lot of book exchanges so I read about 6 paperbacks. There are a lot of tattoo shops if you are so inclined. Snorkeling is exquisite, according to Kathleen. (I just cannot do the snorkeling thing after learning how to scuba. It is too much work.) There are uninhabited parts of the island you can only get to by boat. Several secluded bungalows are out there for anyone wanting seclusion or romantic time. There is waterskiing, kayaking, and numerous other water sports. You can take a high-speed ferry to the other islands too. But that is all a lot of work.

Diving Highlights

The Visibility? Basically it sucked. How was I to know that the best time for diving in Thailand is during the summer months? I know now. Most of my dives were crappy at best.

The Sites? I am willing to believe the dive shops take their fun divers to many more of the dive sites than I experienced. There are about 25 different sites listed on the map. Ban's only took me to 6! The fact that I dove 16 tanks means I went to 6 of the most dived sites several times.

So Why Dive So Much?

I admit it. I am addicted. Last April was the last time I made bubbles prior to this trip. I would have been happy in a bathtub.

The worst part of diving turned out to be the fact that the dive masters in training (DMT's) that led my dives tended to be very nervous. Since there were 40 different DMT's working there, I to dove with a new DMT each day. Usually on the boat, between dives, I would chat with the DMT and explain I was not grading them on their performance. As a DMT, I was always more comfortable knowing I was leading an instructor. I felt it made a dive more safe to have the added experience. That explanation helped to relax the DMT for the second dive.

By the end of the first week, I was leading a few of my own dives, chatting it up with the captain, and helping the head DM with the boat. Overall, I was taking notes and setting up a relationship with the crew so I can work there sometime in the near future.



Bonfire on New Year's 2006

New Years on Kho Tao

It was truly an amazing vacation on the island. I want to go back. New Year's consisted of a night to remember. Each

beach bar had some kind of fire display like the one to the left. Many of the beach bars had candles set out with lounging cushions.

I have to apologize to my dad for New Year's. Mario and I were stumbling around on the beach and Mario had the urge to call my dad. Mario got my dad's office on the phone and told the receptionist "Is Dr. LeMoine there? This is about his son, Greg in Thailand. It's an emergency." I slugged him in the arm and he explained that he just wanted to make sure the lady knew it was an important call. Oops! I am surprised my father didn't have a heart



attack. Of course, once dad started talking to two drunken fools he couldn't stop laughing. Hah. Sorry Dad!

That's pretty much it for Thailand. I will definitely go back!

Death of the Sheik

It is tough to be back in Kuwait. Nobody is smiling! Everything is expensive again. Nothing is green. The water trucks are loud and 24/.

We were scheduled to go back for an entire week of school but the Sheik died on Sunday, our second day back to school. According to Muslim tradition, he had to be buried the same day, and there is a three day mourning period. The entire country shut down! No school.

So for the first week of school, most kids had skipped the first day back. The majority just claimed ignorance and gave the excuse of thinking that school started on Sunday. Nope! There was about a 45% attendance for that first day. Then we had three days off. There was about a 20% attendance for Wednesday, the first

day back to school after the three day mourning period. What a shame. I sat in my apartment and watched movies for three days straight. I had no urge to get off of the couch.

The idea that the Sheik died brings a lot of confusion and probabilities to this country. Many of the citizens believe alcohol will be made legal. The old Sheik was conservative, but almost all of the restraints and local establishments already have bars set up for business. All they need is the alcohol. No kidding! I even saw shot glasses at the grocery store. Only time will tell. Personally, I think legalizing alcohol will make this a very dangerous place to live. The highways are already deadly due to the way everyone drives. Put alcohol into the equation and it spells out a high death toll.

No matter what, this country is

headed for changes. It will be interesting to see what the future will bring.

What matters is that we are safe and sound here in Kuwait. A lot of you worry, watch too much CNN, and say "Kuwait? You must be crazy! With all those terrorists and all that shooting going on?"

Actually, there is no shooting going on here. Just shopping. That's all anyone does here.

See you next issue.

I urge all of you to go Thailand sometime. See the nightlife, stay away from Monkeys, eat some delicious food, buy some movies or software, but don't, and I mean DON'T get on a plane to Kuwait. It took a lot of self control to get on that plane. I want to go back to the land of smiles! **Happy New Year Readers!**

ZEN SARCASM

Do not walk behind me, for I may not lead. Do not walk ahead of me, for I may not follow. Do not walk beside me either. Just pretty much leave me the hell alone.