

Thailand Travel Notes

Day 1 & 2: My trip to Thailand began early on Wednesday morning. The flight left the Norfolk, VA airport at 7:45, on the way to DFW. This was a flight on American that I'd taken many times, and it went as smoothly as ever. The layover in Dallas was just long enough to grab a little breakfast, then I boarded the plane for Tokyo's Narita. The route took us Northwest, over the Rockies, British Columbia, and Alaska before turning South towards Japan. The plane was a 777 and I had an aisle seat in coach. We seemed to be following the noon sun all along the route and arrived in Narita ahead of schedule at 3PM. Along the way we crossed the international date line, so it was now Thursday. I had a few hours to kill before my flight to Bangkok so I took advantage of the airports "Day Rooms" and got showered, shaved, and put on fresh clothes.

The leg to Thailand was on JAL, and a 747. There didn't seem to be as much leg room as the American 777, but it was still a comfortable trip. The meal on the flight was excellent. Customs went smoothly, with the agent just waving me thru. My friend Supanee and her friend Ann greeted me at the Bangkok airport. We took a taxi into town and the Royal Hotel. It was a little after 1AM by the time we checked in, making the trip from my house to the Royal somewhere around 33 hours. Time for some much needed sleep!

Day 3: I was up in time for the breakfast buffet at the Royal Hotel, but I did take a short nap afterwards. About noon we caught a Tuk Tuk to a market place for some lunch, then walked to the National Museum and back to the hotel. It rained off and on all day Friday, and we got a little wet running between buildings. Friday evening we met up with Laurie and Susan, from SSDUSA, and Laurie's sister Joy, who were also in Bangkok and staying at the same hotel. The hotel was a good deal at \$25 a night, and catered to a lot of backpackers and budget travel groups. It was right in the middle of downtown, near the museums and the Royal Palace.

Day 4: Saturday we walked all day. After breakfast we headed to the Royal Palace, stopping at a shrine along the way. The palace is extremely beautiful. Every building inside the palace walls was covered with jeweled or gold hand carved trim. The temple of the Emerald Buddha is also inside the palace grounds. All along the walls of the palace is a painting with stories about the history of Thailand. It must wind for a couple thousand feet.

After leaving the palace we got a bite to eat nearby, then took a shuttle bus around the area for a brief tour. Next up was Vimanmek, also known as the Royal Teak Palace. The entire Mansion is made of Royal Teak wood, even the air conditioning vents that were installed during a renovation a few years ago. The mansion has regularly scheduled guided tours in English. The grounds around this palace were gorgeous, too. Several more palaces were on the grounds. We walked from there to the municipal building, the giant swing, a couple more temples, then on to dinner and back to the hotel.

Day 5: Sunday was a little less walking! We picked up Supanee's roommate Mudt, then headed for Phitsanulok. Along the way we stopped at a couple different Buddhist Temples, including the famed reclining Buddha. There we had lunch at one of the many outside vendors. The drive from Bangkok to Phitsanulok takes about 5 hours, so with the stops we arrived around 6 PM. The roads in Thailand are excellent and well marked. All along the way are vendors selling everything you can imagine. We stopped at one stand and I bought a straw hat for 50 baht, about \$1.25.

Day 6: We traveled about an hour north of Phitsanulok to Sukhothai, the ancient capital city of Thailand. This park is very beautiful and well landscaped. Coconut and Banana trees, and flower gardens were everywhere. Sukhothai has many ancient temples and shrines.

Day 7: Not much today, just spent the time around Phitsanulok. We visited another temple and the Folk Art museum, and did some shopping. Later we went to the Tuesday night market place on the Naresuan Campus. This is a large gathering of vendors that takes place every Tuesday. You can buy just about anything there from clothing, to food, to CDs & DVDs.

Day 8: Today was a day of rest and catching up on email and web site stuff. It also gave me time to write up this document. Tomorrow we head to Chang Mai.

Day 9: Thursday we drove to Lampang. The plan was to arrive there early enough to find the hotel and get checked in, then take one of Lampang's famous horse-drawn carriage rides around the city. We find the hotel, after a couple wrong turns, but by the time we got checked in, it had started to rain. The Lampang Wiangthong Hotel was great, only \$25, but definitely a 3 star place. Good breakfast buffet, too.

Day 10: We spent the day at the Elephant Conservation Camp. They have 55 Asian elephants there. First we saw a show with the elephants demonstrating how they are used in logging, and how they are trained. After that we got to ride an elephant around the park. We then watched them being bathed in the river, got to feed them a couple different places, saw two young elephants with their mothers, and watched them making paper out of elephant dung! After that it was on to Chiang Mai. We checked into our hotel. It was another \$25 room, but this was didn't even rate one star. There was a very nice jazz club and restaurant around the corner, so we had a pleasant meal.

Day 11: First thing Saturday we checked out of the cheapo hotel and into the Chiang Mai Orchid. This was definitely a step up. I'd give this hotel almost 4 stars. After checking in we drove up to Doi Suthep, the temple on the mountain. It is a Buddhist temple build on the top of a mountain overlooking Chiang Mai. The temple was breathtaking. The view of Chiang Mai was great, too, except that it was a cloudy. On they way back to the city we stopped off at a park and waterfall, then went to the Chiang Mai Zoo. The Zoo is the home to two Giant Pandas. One of the Pandas was asleep, but the other was eating right down in front, so everyone had a good view. The Zoo is pretty nice, with a lot of

good animal displays. It is a lot bigger than I thought it was and we didn't really have enough time to enjoy it all.

Saturday night I had what was probably my most expensive meal in Thailand. We ate at the Western Sizzler restaurant! The prices were basically American and I paid about \$12 for a good steak dinner.

Day 12: Sunday we headed out towards Mae Rim. We stopped first at the Mae Sa Waterfalls, 10 different waterfalls in a National Park. The charge for getting into the park was only about 75 cents for the car and Supanee, but they charge me \$5 because I wasn't Thai! They didn't accept my Golden Eagle Passport. After spending some time in the park we stopped at the Mai Sa Orchid and Butterfly farm. The orchids were beautiful, but there weren't that many butterflies around. I did get a few good pictures.

After Mae Rim we headed towards the Borsang and Sankampaeng areas. In Borsang we stopped at the Umbrella factory, watching them hand make paper and silk umbrellas and fans. Prices were a little high at their gift shop, as compared to vendors in the market places, but we did pick up a few things. We then stopped at the Shinagawa Silk place. They were handmaking Thai Silk. Prices were really high at their store, too. Both shops were basically American prices for their goods. Sunday evening we ate at the Chiang Mai Orchid's coffee shop. Prices and food were good. Total price for the two of us was well under \$10. After dinner we took a taxi to the Night Bazaar in Chiang Mai. There we bought silk scarves, paper fans, and other souvenirs, all at very cheap prices. At night they close off several streets for vendors to set up in. They had street performers, food, and vendors selling just about everything under the sun.

Day 13: We checked out of the Orchid after breakfast and headed out of town. First we made a quick stop at a computer store. I was looking for some software and found it at a really cheap price. It's probably counterfeit, but I only need it temporarily to augment a couple systems. We stopped at the Thongpool Thai Silk store a little ways out of Chiang Mai, on route 11. This store had a little better quality silk scarves than the market place vendors, and had some nicer designs. From there we drove back to Phitsanulok. Just outside of town we stopped at the Indochina intersection to take a couple pictures of the route markers. Major routes to China and Laos cross at this intersection.

Day 14: Tuesday we rested up from our trip, unpacked, did laundry, shopped, repacked, and got ready to head out of town again. While shopping we stopped for dinner at MK Restaurants. They served the Thai version of fondue – a big soup pot in the middle of the table. You order a bunch of different meats, veggies, etc. and dump what you want in the pot. You can cook up individual meats, or put them all in the pot together. Not bad if there are 3-4 of you. This time we had a couple teenage girls with us, so it worked out better. Total bill for the 4 of us was under \$20, and we ate a lot!

Day 15: Today we headed south and west towards Kanchanaburi and the Bridge on the River Kwai. Along the way we stopped at the Bungchawak Zoo. This was a nice zoo laid out along the shore of a lake. They had a good varied display of animals, but not as

nice as the Chiang Mai Zoo. We stopped mainly to see the Aquarium, but never made it that far. After a couple hours in the Zoo we had to hit the road again. The aviary at Bungchawak was really large and nicely laid out. I'd seen a walkway bridge over to an island in the lake, but skipped it because I thought it was just a picnic ground. On the way out I noticed a sign that said it was "Rabbit Island" and full of rabbits.

The Bridge over the Kwai river is still an active railway bridge. There is a sign posted on it to avoid the railway when a train is crossing. That didn't seem to stop many tourists from walking along the railway to the other side. There were several tour busses stopped a bout the same time we were there. No trains came across then, but there was an excursion train later in the evening. We ate dinner at a floating restaurant beside the bridge (a plate of Kwai River Giant Prawns - \$7.50!). Finding the hotel was a chore. We stayed at the Pung-Waan River Kwai resort. It was quite a nice resort type place, and only about \$75.00. I'd give this place about 3 ½ stars. The facility and grounds were 4 star, but there were a few minor problems. Also the directions were vague and they said it was 200 meters from the Bridge, but it was more like 2000.

Day 16: Thursday AM we headed to the cemetery where 6500 British and Dutch military are buried. The Thai keep this cemetery immaculately groomed. After leaving the cemetery we headed to the Samphran Elephant and Crocodile show, in the Nakon Pathom province. First, they listed the price as 300 baht for us foreigners, 70 for Thai. They ended up charging me 450 – and said the printed price was wrong. My Thai friend was not happy with them! The elephant show was good, especially the elephants playing soccer and one of them getting a red card. Still, I preferred the elephant experience at the Elephant Conservation Park, in Lampang. There you got to spend a lot of time with the elephants, riding them into the lake, watching them get a bath in the river, a parade, and a show. That show was more a demonstration of how they trained elephants for logging, not a circus type show.

The croc show at Samphran was OK, too. The trainers did put their heads in the crocs. Another trainer there had been bitten doing that a couple days before we went. He ended up with 18 stitches in his head. There were many large pits of different types of crocs around the park, and some caged zoo animals. They also had a nice orchid display.

Thursday night we stayed at the Rose Garden. This was definitely the nicest place I stayed in Thailand, and one of the best places I've ever stayed. The price was around \$100 for us Farangs, but still a bargain. There was a basket of fruit in the room when we checked in and complimentary drinks in the piano bar. The grounds there are quite large, and include a golf course, shooting range (air rifle), Thai cultural village, and several restaurants. We chose to eat at the floating Thai restaurant and it was quite good. The roses were past their prime, but the hotel also had a very large orchid garden, including a pond full of flamingos.

Day 17: Time to head back to Phitsanulok, but first a trip to what was listed as a floating market. It turns out it is now a "landed" market, but still had a lot of vendors and bargains. This was mainly a market full of food. Lot's of good smells and tastes there.

In a way it was still a floating market, though. The river was high because of flooding up north, and a lot of the vendors were standing ankle deep in water! There were pallets and plywood down the middle for us shoppers.

After leaving the market we stopped at Ayutthaya, the old capital city of Thailand. We didn't stay too long, but I got a chance to visit a few of the ruins and one temple. The old ruins appeared to be quite larger than those at Sukhotai. It was a hot day and we had one more stop to make on the way home, so we left about 2. We stopped in Nakon Sawan, at Supanee's parents home, for a short visit, then dinner at a restaurant in town, before continuing on to Phitsanulok.

Day 18: Another day of rest, unpacking, repacking, etc.

Day 19: We caught the 14:40 flight to Bangkok. Smooth flight and only \$45. At the airport we check a couple bags until Tuesday morning, then took a taxi to the KU Home. This is a hotel on the University campus, run by students. Not a bad place to stay and only about \$30 a night. The restaurant food was great, but the service was slow. No excuse for that, since we were the only guests! Each time we needed a server, we had to call them away from their conversation.

Day 20: Last full day in Thailand. Didn't do much, just hit a couple shopping malls and rode the new Bangkok Subway. The subway is pretty nice.

Day 21: Hop on the 8:45 JAL flight to Tokyo and say goodbye to Thailand.