

Part 4

Maekok River
Village Resort,
Northern Thailand



A Far East Odyssey © Penny Buckley 2013

Day 15

Monday 28 March

Penang → Bangkok → Chiang Rai, Thailand

The start is as painful as I knew it would be; the wee small hours never have been my strong suit! The flight to Bangkok is easy. Unfortunately, we have a four hour lay-over at BKK, not long enough to leave the airport but I use the time to write up the journal. I cannot bring myself to spend £3.80 on a four day old Telegraph; time passes quickly enough.

This last week will be different. There are no memories here, no black and white photos of the 60s to compare with present day. We are staying with Rosie, my long standing friend from Singapore holidays and her husband, Bryan who have lived in the south east Asia nearly all their married life but, I fancy, we shall revisit happy times when Rosie came out to Singapore for school holidays. For now, we are here as holidaymakers.

Last time Rosie and I met, only two months ago, at The Crown Hotel in Blandford, was for our mothers' birthdays. That was February, cold and damp, now here we are, half way round the world, on the threshold of the next stage of this amazing trip.

After the super-urban landscapes of Singapore, KL and Penang it is a joy to be in countryside. We bowl along empty country roads through a police checkpoint - Rosie suspects drugs - there are children are playing at the roadside.

Maekok River Village Resort¹⁴ is situated on the Maekok River just outside ThaTon, about 3km from the thai / burmese border. It is also right on the edge of the Golden Triangle, infamous for poppy cultivation although these days Thai government encourages much more benign crops.

This is the second enterprise Rosie and Bryan have established. It is both a hotel and student field centre for outdoor activities and community projects. Three years ago it was a blank canvas now all looks well established with beautiful gardens. I am full of admiration for the courage and vision it must have taken to set up such a venture.

¹⁴ www.maekok-river-village-resort.com

Rosie gives us the full conducted tour of their thriving business and we spend a happy evening at their house on the edge of the resort. The stillness is extraordinary, something we have forgotten, living in Bournemouth.



Day 16
Maekok River Village Resort

Tuesday 29 March

Rosie apologises for the unseasonable lack of sun. It is a disappointment but, looking on the bright side, it's not raining. She sets us up with bikes and helmets, suggesting we cross to the other side of the river. This is an eye-opener! Here are women in the fields sowing shallots by hand with twine and dibber - back breaking manual work, which makes my own back cry in sympathy -. and a tractor with front-mounted engine and exhaust forward of that - a strange machine!



***Planting shallots
by hand***

***A strange
tractor***



We make a round trip of it and come back through the back of ThaTon, an area of small shops and houses. I get the impression that life hereabouts is a daily struggle, until I notice many houses have massive satellite dishes in their front yard. Perhaps it's not so much of a struggle, nevertheless high tech looks incongruous in these dusty back roads with chickens scratching for food.



***Worlds collide -
TV satellite dish
and thai dustbin
fashioned from
old rubber tyres.***

Rosie has planned a trip to a hill tribes' village and on to the nearest border post. There are several such villages established for those hill tribes who left China and Tibet a hundred years ago but who have not been granted thai citizenship. This particular village has been the beneficiary of one of Maekok's community projects. Again, it looks as if the living is hard; children run around with no shoes on bare earth. They are grubby and curious about us and both Damian and I feel somewhat awkward peering into their lives but Rosie assures us that we should not and it is no different to walking round any english village. Well, yes, they're both villages but there the similarity begins and ends. A sow and her piglets are lying in the dirt close to the house yet even here there is that symbol of modernity - the satellite dish.



NB the satellite dish

We press on to the border, patrolled by members of the Border Patrol Police, positioned to keep out refugees from Myanmar. I suspect one would not cross these chaps but Rosie is comfortable and speaks to them in fluent Thai, the guard is gently spoken. Despite the fact it should be pleasantly warm, the temperature is only 17 deg, we are, however, high up and, in our light summer clothes, both Rosie and I are feeling the chill. We look over to the 'other' side; it takes us back to the 18 months we lived close to the east German border, as it then was. That was a time of distrust and pain on both sides.

We have to hurry back to the resort for our Thai cookery course, something to which I am really looking forward.



Border police to keep out refugees from Burma



Day 17
Maekok River Village Resort

Wednesday 30 March

Today's plan is a visit to the hill tribe village of Doi Mae Salong, home to the Akha tribe, originally from southern China. The road is steep with buffalo tethered at the side.

Doi Mae Salong gives all the appearances of a thriving community, there are shops, tea and coffee houses, restaurant and tea plantation, this last to diversify from growing opium but all these activities depend on tourism to bring the people to the village in first instance.

We are keen to spend money and bring some wealth into the village but it is impossible to read notices! I buy bead bracelets from the woman who has laid out her wares on a blanket and roasted broad beans as a peanut substitute. However, I draw the line at deep fried grubs which I am assured are a great delicacy; anything deepfried is delicious but my western palate rather baulks at this one!



Akha tribeswoman

*I am sure these
are all delicious
sweets but what
are they?*



*I cannot bring
myself
to buy
these grubs*

On the way down from Doi Mae Salong, we pass three young children herding a dozen or so bullocks. The eldest is perhaps 12 and not only has she charge of the bullocks but also the two younger children. For one so young, she seems to be shouldering a huge responsibility. I hope bullocks are biddable, unfriky sorts of creatures.



Tea is the PC crop to grow now; the hillsides round Doi Mae Salong are covered in plantations. The tea drying shed with giant tumble dryers and (below) a somewhat enigmatic sign to deter unauthorised picking.

On the return, Rosie suggests she drops us off at the temple complex of Wat ThaThon overlooking the town and river and she will come back and pick us up. This seems an excellent idea. It allows her space to get on with the affairs of Maekok and I am a firm believer in the idea that the thoughtful guest gets out on her own sometimes, giving her host some time to get on.

These temples are extraordinarily (to our eyes) gaudy confections venerating the Buddha who is depicted in many ways, standing, smiling enigmatically, laughing, reclining and those are only the images we have seen.

We take about 60 pictures while at this complex, most of which could be usefully included in this journal, but there is just not room and over-abundance may be over-kill. The next two pages give just a taste of a strange interesting mixture.





*Images of the temple
complex at ThaTon*





Day 18

Tuesday 31 March

River trip from Maekok River Village Resort

Rosie has arranged a river trip and elephant ride for us today. I feel lucky to have her 'inside track' on the way to get things done. The weather looks promising.



***Rosie sends us
off from the
Maekok landing
stage***

We shall travel two hours down river, break for an hour's ride on elephant back and two and a half hours back. The boatman, Koon Boon navigates with confidence round the rocks and we are travelling at some speed, even, shooting the rapids. The river is not particularly busy, there are fisherman, children swimming naked, buffalo but also gangs of men and women, it is impossible to differentiate, collecting stones from the river and depositing them in a barge for building materials . This seems the hardest way of all to earn a living.

The elephant rides are the way for local people to earn a living and it's fun, reminding us of our camel ride in Lanzerote! We are slightly disturbed when our driver takes a nap and lets the elephants lead but we guess that is all part of the 'theatre'.



Elephant ride



By the time we are returned to Maekok, Bryan has returned from Chiang Rai. We must pack this evening, ready for departure but we have dinner and spend a happy evening with Bryan and Rosie, Rosie and I relive our teenage years in Singapore but also look to the future when Rosie and Bryan's daughter Alexa, will be getting married at Maekok in December.

We have an early start tomorrow to fly back to Bangkok.

