

Part 5

Bangkok



A Far East Odyssey © Penny Buckley 2013

Day 19

Friday, 1 April

Maekok River Village Resort → Bangkok

Onwards and upwards, actually downwards and southwards, direction Bangkok. Here there will be no memories, no nostalgic prism through which to view the sights and sounds; we are just two members of the tourist pack. Audi, not a car but the name of our guide for the next three days, meets us. He is young, charming and knowledgeable. We have achieved a triumvirate in our guides, a muslim, a christian and now a buddhist. From the itinerary Audi outlines, the next three days will be full-on and we'll scarcely have time to draw breath; for this afternoon, however, we are free to find our bearings on our own.

The Furama, our Bangkok home from home, is in the busy shopping, banking, business district. The city is incredibly noisy and the traffic is apparently in permanent gridlock. The MRT¹⁵ offers the best way of getting about but reading the signs is challenging. Thai script is something else and there does not even seem to be consensus on the number of letters in the alphabet, sometimes 42 sometimes 44. In common with public transport systems the world over, the map is designed on the same lines as the London underground. Wonderfully reassuring for the tourist.



*Thai script is
inscrutable
and remains
a closed
book!*

¹⁵ Metropolitan Rapid Transport

We find a market for 'knock-off' goods, for which Thailand is fabled and electronic heaven nearby, also the dressmakers' quarter. Here women are working away in spaces little bigger than cupboards on sewing machines fashioning clothes, with, possibly, a baby lying in a corner. Children race up and down the alley on tricycles. There are brightly coloured shreds of fabric all over. There is so much to see, hear and smell here.

We plan to eat at Harmonique and have decided to use a tuk-tuk. I wonder if this is wise, they seem nothing more than overgrown mopeds, all sound and fury and industrial quantities of chrome but they are also infinitely manoeuvrable; our driver negotiates a 360° turn in a tiny alley. Harmonique is slightly wacky and reminds us both, of Paper Moon in Baltimore. It appears to major on its 'unspoiltness' which includes a mouse, or worse, scuttling into a barely covered drain at the edge of the verandah - nice! I prefer not to think of the kitchens; Fawlt Towers and Siberian hamsters are not far from my mind. The other plus is that 60s music is playing, very appropriate and in keeping with the whole tenor of this holiday.



***Tuk-tuks
waiting for a
fare***



***Restaurant
Harmonique***

Day 20
Bangkok

Saturday 2 April

Good as his word, Audi is with us by 8.00am and we're off, firstly to the house of Jim Thompson, an american who revitalised the thai silk industry, and who mysteriously disappeared in 1967 in the Cameron Highlands, Malaysia. There is nothing like a mystery to perpetuate a story; it seems only to add value to the experience. He certainly lived in a very beautiful house. These days the guides, delightful thai girls, dressed in the fabric he promoted so enthusiastically, glide around discreetly.

*Jim Thompson's
house*



*Bowl of floating flower
heads*



Next stop, a visit to a thai silk weaver's looms. This is no purpose-built factory on an out-of-town estate but part of his house and next to the river. To access it, we have to pass the goat pen lodged precariously over the river, where the goat's diet seems to be bananas skins. I wonder what manner of cheese this will make!



Thai silk loom

The next stop on this whistle stop tour, is the Royal Barges' Museum down river, for which we take a long tail boat. It is an extraordinary craft, long and low with a propeller mounted on a long pole from the stern of the boat and driven by a lorry engine, mounted high and well inboard. It's super effective and extremely noisy.

*Long tail boat
utilising a lorry
engine*



Great swathes of the river are covered with a thick mat of water hyacinths, which we instantly recognise, having tried to cultivate them on the pond at William Road. Where we met with singular lack of success, here they are almost choking the waterway. I wonder what the missing ingredient is?!

We spend time at the Royal Barges' Museum where the skill and craftsmanship displayed is exquisite. Interestingly, the King of Thailand Bhumibol Adulyadej is the only monarch to have reigned longer than our own Queen. He ascended the throne in 1946 and is deeply loved and respected in Thailand.



***The Royal
Barges'
Museum***

***The shopping
is delivered***



In Bangkok, the river serves many functions. It is the highway, a playground for the children, a place to wash bodies, clothes, crockery, somewhere to catch a fish for supper and to cap it all, Audi tells me that it is where water spinach is cultivated! Surely this cannot be, I would have thought a stomach pump would be imperative after any encounter with the river water. Note to self: avoid the water spinach on the menu. We spend some considerable time cruising in the klongs¹⁶ before stopping at a temple with a giant reclining Buddha, apparently the largest in southern Thailand. These are truly immense images, portrayed with winningly enigmatic expressions.



***Giant
reclining
Buddha***

***Many young
boys spend
some time at
the monastery***



¹⁶ Canal

Audi explains that many young boys will spend some time in the monastery, he did so himself in his childhood. I do not discover if this would only be for the boys of enlightened parents. The lads we saw were larking about much as any nine year old might in England.

To arrive at our lunch in Chinatown, we must walk through the dried fish market; here the smells are all pungent and fairly disagreeable, the flies hovering over the boxes of these strange, desiccated creatures add nothing to the appeal.



***The dried
fish market***

We cross the river to Wat Arun, an amazing confection of buildings decorated with ceramic and porcelain fragments. Think Les Vaux Belets, Guernsey even, the former Shell house, Southbourne.

Suddenly we have 'Wat overload' and are happy to make our own way back to the hotel. We are greeted by the most charming of hotel staff; petite, just like a doll, and vivacious, she gives the impression that all she wants is to look after our every wish. This unself-conscious service seems to be hard-wired into the DNA of this nation. Audi has recommended a restaurant for our supper, happily, we can walk to it.

Images of Wat Arun on the Chao Phraya River



Reveille is even earlier today! We're catching the 8.20 am train to Ayutthaya but all made easier for the air-conditioned car which takes us to the station where Audi buys the tickets, so much easier than our many encounters with foreign railway stations where one has to learn the protocols before obtaining the ticket.

The station is huge and lofty and at 8.00 am we must all stand whilst the national anthem is broadcast over the tannoy. To our slightly jaded, though nevertheless, monarchist inclinations, this seems delightful - it is many a long year since we have stood for our national anthem at the end of the cinema but as previously noted, thais love and revere their king; it is an offence to show disrespect to the royal family - try that in England! In fact, the king seems only second in the reverence stakes to the Buddha.

Our tickets cost 20 baht¹⁷ for a one hour twenty minute journey but they are 'standing' tickets. Should someone get on who has paid for a seat we must relinquish ours. It's a fair deal! All human life is on this train, families, young and old weighed down by boxes and bags, all that is missing is the crate of chickens. We are able to sit for half the journey, which is punctuated by vendors selling cool drinks, fresh peeled fruits and sundry bits of barbequed meat. The smell is occasionally stomach turning.

Bangkok station.
NB. the picture
of the young
King Bhumibol



¹⁷ 38p

The short transfer from the Ayutthaya station to the historic former capital city is by tuk-tuk. I wonder if Audi has ordered this one particularly for its 'old-worlde' charm aka complete decrepitude and seeming un-roadworthiness. Where once there were dash panel instruments, is now a series of gaping holes. It is nothing so much like the toothless grin of a very old man with a mouth of lost teeth; the door is fastened by a chain. I feel even more vulnerable but we buzz along at high speed weaving in and out of traffic.



The temple complex, built of brick in the 13th century, covers many acres. Guide books cover the subject better and in greater detail than I. It is not the purpose of this journal to try to improve on them.

Back to the tuk-tuk and we're off to a market and another temple. Here there are traders of every sort. I can't resist buying some locust-type creature crafted from palm fronds from a lad scarcely older than Alastair and Noah. Is he the family bread winner? Who knows, I don't even know if he has made them.

Images of Ayuttahaya



Then on to a temple influenced by chinese buddhism. Now to a boat and a neo-gothic temple, reassuringly familiar though incongruous in Thailand. To access the temple we have to cross the river in a hanging basket and at all temples we must take off shoes.

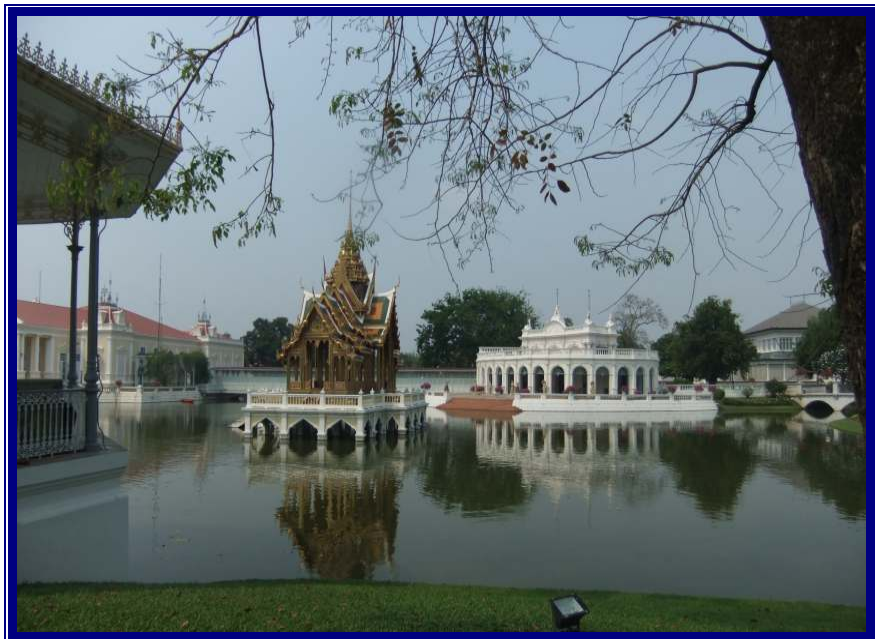


***Two temples to the
Buddha: two totally
different styles***

Wat Nivet Thammpravat



Onwards and upwards to the summer palace. Here all is peace, and tranquillity and I must wear a sarong: to wear trousers is obviously unseemly for a woman and again we must take off shoes. The king may not be a god but he is venerated as one, witness the party of thais who join us and prostrate themselves before the empty throne.



Bang Pa In - The Summer Palace

We are now melting with the heat. Audi goes off to find the tuk-tuk but instead of returning by train we use a minibus. This will be marginally more comfortable despite being packed to capacity; the conductor must stand, for most of the journey, in the step well. This troubles him not a jot and allows him to signal by pushing the window back and thrusting his arm out

Tonight we are scheduled to visit Patpong night market. It will be the last-chance saloon for a 'knock-off' handbag - a 'Gucci' or a 'Louis Vuitton' perhaps! It's 45 years since my visits to the night market on the Ayer Rajah, Singapore and I find not much has changed, the fundamental remains, haggle for all you're worth! Also known for its bars and sex shows, it is profoundly saddening to see pretty young girls in this seedy area. In dark and dingey caverns disturbing music throbs and Damian is offered all sorts of 'entertainment'.

I could spend for England here - and Thailand - but discretion and all that There are stalls devoted to Thomas the Tank Engine (our grandsons are past that stage) several Hello Kitty heavens and a full range of branded goods.

Thus ends a frenetic day. Audi assures us tomorrow will be a little easier, this sounds like music to the ear!

Day 22
Bangkok

Monday, 4 April

We have a relaxed start heading off to the food market. The heat is extreme and we're truly grateful for the luxury of an air-conditioned car.

Thais are obsessed with food and shopping and combine both enthusiastically. The market is in the old part of Bangkok and next door to old style shop houses. To us, used to buying food in fairly sanitised surroundings, some of the displays are challenging to say the least!



Typical old shop house

Typical market kitchen





***Pigs' heads
complete with
teeth!***

A kitchen can be set up in the smallest space and the most unlikely location, typically on the edge of the pavement or in a alley way. No space is too small or unsuitable and the fire can be a flower pot on which is balanced a wok. With so much food about and waste generated, it is no surprise to see the odd rat: cats and dogs seem equally at home curled up on metal tables warmed conveniently by the sun.



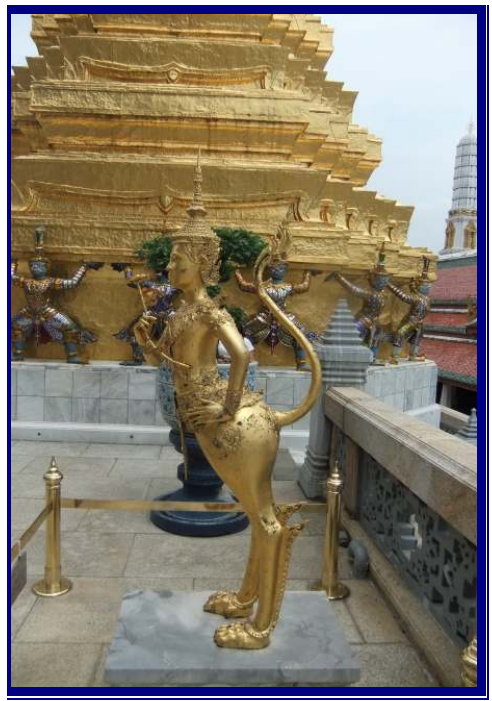
Next stop the Grand Palace. We are quite overwhelmed by the incredible beauty and artistry of these buildings.

All around are mythical creatures, strangely fearsome demons, images of the Buddha, many are generously decorated with gold leaf. The whole picture will be one of my great and lasting memories of Thailand.

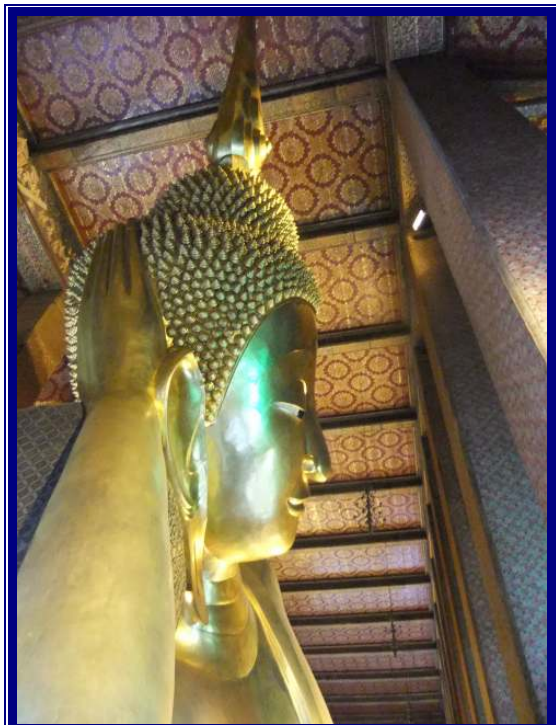


Penny and Audi at the Grand Palace

Images of the Grand Palace



From the Grand Palace, we move on Wat Po home of another giant reclining Buddha. I've used all the superlatives I can think of and we are rapidly becoming 'watted' out. ABW comes to mind 'Another Bloody Wat'. This seems rather churlish; we should have had another day here and spread the wats out a little more.



Reclining Buddha of Wat Po



There is no time to lose and we move on to the wholesale flower market, the air is loaded with the perfume of jasmine, thick, heavy and delicious; I can smell it even now as I write this journal. Here are bunches of orchids as if they were just spray carnations. It is also chilli central.



***Wholesale
flower market***

***Bunches of roses
for less than £1!***



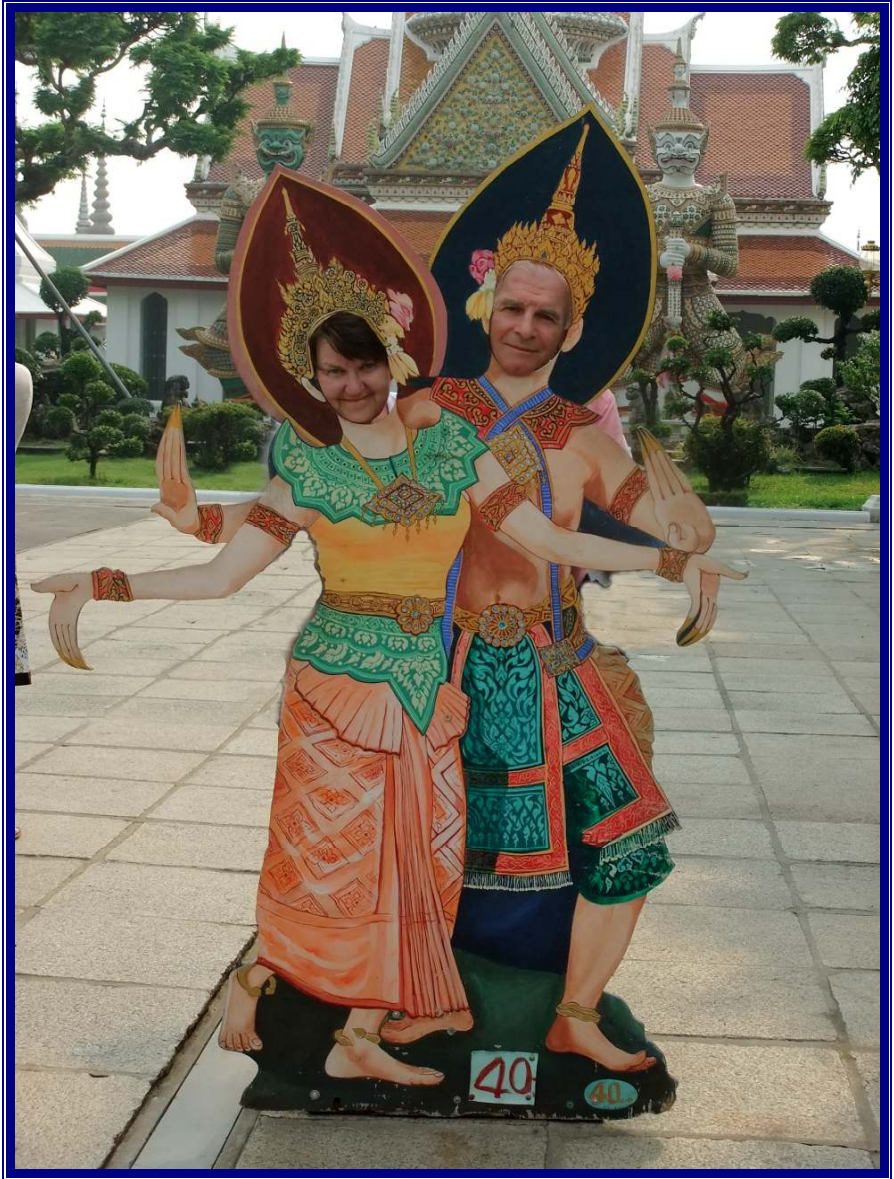
***Chillies to blow off the
roof of your head!***

Despite Audi's assurances to the contrary, today has felt quite as frenetic as the previous one. We have seen enough to fill two weeks but better to have seen it, because I don't imagine we shall come back. Audi returns us to the Furama to pack, have supper and ready ourselves for the return to England. Our lovely little thai receptionist is on duty again all charm and smiles and suggests we have a massage before we leave - seems a good idea, why not?

After 22 days in the Far East it is time to return home. It has been a amazing, not to say emotional trip, fulfilling and exceeding all my expectations. When I left Singapore in June 1967, immediately after finishing my last 'O' level, I did not imagine ever returning. The years of being an Army daughter and accompanying my parents were coming to an end, just as it was becoming clear that the days of British Forces in South East Asia were equally numbered.

In the last ten years, I have visited several websites set up by members and families of British forces personnel; in particular www.singas.co.uk, also Friends Reunited. The internet proved invaluable when we were planning the holiday, facilitating the meetings with the United World College of South East Asia, Nellie Tan, the Colonels in KL and the management of the Selangor Club, KL. All these made our Far East Odyssey the most wonderful and unforgettable trip down memory lane.

We took over 2,000 photos, those selected for this journal are but a small selection. More importantly, I have a stack of memories and feel lucky and privileged a second time round.



ลาก่อน! ด้วยความปรารถนาดีจากประเทศไทย
(Goodbye! Best Wishes from Thailand!)