

Preliminary Friday, 6th January 2012

Since all but two of the group had arrived at least 24 hours before the start of the safari, Poo had put on a special trip to explore the canals of the Mae Klong area. It began with a bus journey of a couple of hours down to the town of Samut Songram in the province of the same name. With only two breaks, one for iced coffee at a roadhouse and another stop for the driver to stock up on salt being sold along the roadside that had been produced in the many salt farms visible. The trip down to Samut Songram of the trip though was infinitely faster than the return trip where there were many traffic snarls during the peak hour traffic. These jams were mainly when approaching the toll stations.

After a quick look around the market where the main interest was the pomelos and the sticky rice cooked in bamboo, we found our way to the waterfront on the Mae Klong River opposite a grand palace that the wealthy owner refused to sell to a Royal Prince.

Our boat quickly drew up and we were soon all aboard traditional passenger carrying river craft. It was literally "a board" though because that is what we sat on for the fascinating hours we then took to explore the river and canals. The boat was powered by a car engine and had a propeller on a long tail. We later learnt that our helmsman was 75 years old and had been at the helm for more than 50 years and seemed to be familiar with every one of the twists and turns of the canals and river.

On the way interest focussed at various times on several floating markets, many of which were closed because it was not peak season, water monitor a sunbird at tits nest, fish farms, umpteen Wats, bee-eaters, ginger flowers.

Our major stop during the day other than lunch was at a palm sugar factory being operated by a husband and wife team Urai (aged 58) and Wut (aged 61). It was a second generation operation initiated by Urai's parents, Samran and Durian (both aged 84) who accompanied us on the tour.

Urai is the eldest of Samran's six (6) children. Unlike her siblings didn't go to school because she was expected to take over the farm. It is hard work from which her parents have only recently retired but none of Urai's children want to take it over. When the work becomes too hard for them to continue palm sugar production they plan to live off the sale of fresh coconuts to the markets.

The farm consisted of 70 coconut palms and in flowering season they climbed the palms on ladders, each consisting of a single bamboo pole at 6.00 am and 4.00 pm. They cut the tips off the flowers and drained the sap into an aluminium cans with bark chips in the base to kill bacteria. Each cutting collected one litre of syrup each collection for the month that the flower was active. Ten cans were tied together and returned to the factory on a small craft navigating between the rows. The syrup was then passed through a muslim filter to remove bees and extraneous material into a succession of four woks over a tunnel fire fed by coconut shells and fronds collected from their plantation supplemented by purchased fuel.

As the syrup advanced from wok 4 to wok 1 over the hottest fire where a high sided cane cylinder prevented it boiling over. It was then removed from the flames and transferred to a fifth wok where it was whipped with an ingenious beater to cool it. The clear syrup changed to a raw sugar colour becoming very thick. It was then poured into tins with each once containing 30 Kilos that was worth &50 Baht. This gave them an income equivalent of \$3,000 Baht per month. We then enjoyed fresh coconut milk and the flesh that was dipped in palm sugar cut fresh from the plantation tree by our hosts.

We were delivered back down the river to the Amphawa floating market, most of which was on the land but with a few food vendors operating out of their boats in the canal under the bridge. There was a frantic shopping by John and Su in case their missing baggage didn't arrive with their clothing for the trip. Then it was back in the bus for the much slower trip back to the Queens Garden.

Day 1 Saturday 7th January 2012 Bangkok to Mae Chaem

As prearranged we met Poo at Bangkok Airport Departure Gate 4 at 6.20 am after leaving Queens Gardens Resort at 6.00 am. The earlier start paid off because the queue at Bangkok Airways check-in kept growing ever longer while we were moving through. We then followed the lengthy travelators to the Bangkok Airways Lounge where we enjoyed a complimentary breakfast prior to boarding a Nok Air flight to take us to Chiang Mai at 8.30 am.

After arriving at Chiang Mai at 9.35 am we loaded the gear and 12 people inside two 4WDs (although some of the gear had to stay on the outside on the roof securely lashed on). Poo drove his new Hilux and Somboon drove his Nissan Patrol.

Our first stop was the Tesco Supermarket for a quick fix of shopping for the shopaholics until 11.30 and then as we headed south towards Mae Wang we veered off to collect Tanya who was to accompany us to Mae Chaem.

After lunch at a Mae Wang roadside restaurant we went further on to the Elephant Camp. This was a rearrangement of our previously advised program. The elephant ride was brought forward on the itinerary because the ride planned for the Mae Kok River near Chiang Rai is now commercial (maximizing personal profit) operation and not a community development/benefit. Our hosts, Natural Focus, are strongly committed to supporting community-based tourism and so we rode elephants guided by their Karen mahouts around the forested hill and along the river for a unique experience.

Our next novel experience was rafting down the Mae (river) Wang River. We divested ourselves of anything that might get wet and then we stepped gingerly aboard these bamboo rafts, each about six metres long and consisting of ten bamboo poles strapped together with strips of old tyres. The ride was exciting particularly through the rushes where the water boiled and rocked us. However seeing a snake on the bank was more exciting

and became more exciting still when the pole man on our rafter taunted it and it launched into the water to follow us downstream. Unfortunately we were advised to disembark at the steepest and roughest passage and had to walk around to re-join our raft close to the finish where Poo & Co collected us.

As if there wasn't enough excitement for the day, more was to come. After collecting photographic souvenirs we took a short-cut via a scenic route over the foothills surrounding Doi Inthanon, Thailand's highest mountain to Mae Chaem. The route we took was proposed by Somboon on the basis that it was very scenic but it was a 4WD thrill once we turned off the highway and started across the backtrack. Unfortunately it was 3.30 pm when we set off and on the 18 kilometres of very rough track our speed was reduced to less than 10 kph. Thus the last hour on this scenic track was blacked out as far as scenery was concerned. Nonetheless we eventually arrived at the village Pao Pa Kor) and eventually our hosts at 8.00 pm. After dispersing to our respective homes, we enjoyed a splendid and most welcome meal.

Host Families: For Helen, Del Su, John and Poo: Hostess was Campoor, Husband Don, step- daughter Mai.

For Lyn, Mel, Pam and Somboon: Hostess was Kum Pang.

For Renee, Gillian, Simon and Tanya: Hostess was Jod Sritieng 161/1 TAPA Mae Chaem Village Chiang Mai 50270

After dinner bed there was a queue for the bathrooms and an eager desire to retire after a most exciting and fill day of flights, elephant, raft and rough 4WD rides to our destination. There were four other guests in our house because of tomorrow's Buddhist Festival. Before retiring though we were all provided with our appropriate traditional clothing to authentically participate in the Merit Making ceremony.

Day 2 Sunday, 8th January 2012 Mae Chaem

At about 4.30 am the sound of firecrackers started stirring everyone. It wasn't firecrackers though, but just the huge bonfire lit at the Buddhist Temple, (*Wat Bahr Bad*) about a kilometre from our homestays that marked the day. *Hing Fire Pra Jao* is the name of the festival held on the day of the full moon in mid-winter and its literal interpretation is "*Making Fire to warm the Lord Buddha*".

At the temple there was much arrangement and rearrangement of our respective offerings provided by our host families. First we met the monks and made some offerings to them and received blessings. Then we went into the temple which housed some relics over 500 years old and a beautiful Buddha and offered prayers for our deceased friends and relatives. After that we added flowers and incense sticks and some rice (?) to the growing mountain of previous offering by other merit makers. There were at least 200 villagers present. The offerings had to be placed in order — three on the first bowl, five on the second and one on the end. They also

had to be placed in sequence — flower, incense rice and prayer. Then interspersed with observing the warming fire we had a long series of prayers (all in Thai) and some offerings of sticky rice. The huge bowls were soon overflowing but were told that the rice was available for villagers who wanted it. We paused on our way after the ceremony to admire a lovely very ornate smaller temple (*wat*) across the road that was used by the monks for their prayers. It was surrounded by a moat.

After another magnificent breakfast with at least five different dishes we set off to look around the village starting with the home across the street. Here an animal husbandry advisor, officer of the government was establishing one of the most unique and sustainable operations where food was fed to the pigs that provided flies to breed maggots that were fed to the chickens and fish. Almost every source of food for the pigs, chickens and fish other than the corn and rice was waste or recycled from some other process. He is planning when it has demonstrated to be a complete success to sell the concept to others in the village. His property was just one rai (1/3 acre or less than 1/6th hectare).

Then we went for a leisurely stroll down the road to see the valley. Our first major stop was a place where they were fermenting rice to produce rice wine and whisky. Interestingly in the catalysts used to add to the rice and water was mainly lime, (calcium carbonate) with some chilli and galangal to give it a distinctive and pleasant aroma. At 25Baht per beer bottle we were tempted to buy some. That is cheaper than beer, petrol or even bottled water in Australia.

Then it was just a little further to the Community crafts centre that had been recently submerged by a record flood in Mae Chaem. There were some weavers at work in the cool under the house. They were producing the bases for the skirts used by these traditional Thai women as well as other patterns similar to ones we have seen on Thai pillows. However the most interesting aspect was the upstairs where an 85-year-old master-craftsman and his wife reside. Kain Kaew began making hairpins at the age of 8 years and 78 years later he is still selling them at a price of 80 Baht each. We watched him skilfully fashion one despite his arthritis and pain in movement while we sat there entranced. Behind us Tanya was captivated by the spinning demonstration being given by Kain Kaew's wife. However making hat-pins wasn't Kain Kaew's only skill. He had done practically all of the wood carving for every temple in the Mae Chaem area and his front door was a testimony to his skills.

Back at our homestay we enjoyed an exquisite Thai lunch mainly noodles followed by a hot desert of pumpkin in coconut juice before taking nanny naps for an hour and then following the money trees that had been assembled and enriched during the day with hundreds of Baht back down to the Wat where they were added to the coffers after a procession circling the temple three times. However the exercise disproved an old adage that, "*Money doesn't grow on trees!*"

After a sojourn to sample the coffee many people demurred on the sauna that was on offer. Initially, only Su and Del accepted the offer for the Sauna but after Del's

enthusiastic endorsement three more went over after dinner. Almost everyone held up their hand for the hour long Thai Massages. Despite the pain and some groans during the experience everyone felt better for the temporary torture. After dinner it was more self-indulgence and catching our breath after two very full and very exciting days.

Day 3

Monday, 9th January 2012

Mae Chaem to Chiang Mai

The luxury of not a rushed start was appreciated by everyone and after a leisurely breakfast and presenting our gifts and finally having a chance to be sociable with our hosts.

After allowing Somboon to repair his rear-vision mirror and with the cases safely strapped to the roof we set off to find the weavers craft shop. We found it on the other side of the river and some of our shopping addiction was temporarily satisfied. Then it was goodbye to Mae Chaem although not goodbye to the Mae Chaem River that we followed for most of the way to Chiang Mai.

The road to Chian Mai was all bitumen although it had suffered significantly during the very heavy wet season rains last September and October that twice caused the river to seriously overflow. Through the hills we passed many farms operated by the Hilltribe people particularly potatoes and cabbages. There had been a bushfire in one part of the forest but Poo put that down to a fire reduction burn. It seemed to have had no serious impact on the dried out monsoon forest dominated by teak although many introduced Eucalypts were observed. The deciduous forest was in the stage of leaves turning brown and falling and there was thick leaf litter on the dry ground.

We passed the hot springs of the Ob Luang National Park before coming to the main area of the Visitor Centre and Park HQ. After a foray in the restaurant and the loos we set off to walk though the gorge where the Mae Chaem River seemed to turn on to its side to slither through the narrow chasm. Clearly by the sign of the debris there had been much difficulty in squeezing such a vast volume of water through the gap in October and but the Park ad come through in remarkably good shape.

Our interest was in the pre-history because that is Ob Luang's great claim to fame and we saw the grave of a young hunter-gatherer warrior buried there for 2,500 to 3,500 years as well as some interesting but faded rock art in a nearby rock shelter cave. While Simon and Gill continued to walk the circuit some of the more adventurous (or devious) deviated up a scramble to a lookout to see below the canopy of autumn tones in mid winter as the monsoon forest was shedding its dead leaves. Unfortunately the view of the gorge below was marred somewhat by the close proximity of the busy road beside it and the traffic noise marred the serenity of this otherwise grand view.

Back in the 4WDs we then had a long drive to the busy traffic of Chiang Mai arriving close to peak-hour and

finding our comfortable well-hidden guesthouse used to train University students in catering and hospitality programs.

A grand khantoke dinner was provided at the Khum Kantoke restaurant that we shared with hundreds of others as some wonderful traditional Lanna cultural practices were on display. There was some elegant dancing by students of the Chiang Mai Dance School within the university. These included Hilltribe folk dances, elegant elements of traditional Thai dances but the most dramatic was the drum war dance and the sword dance. The whole stage program and music was timed with precision and at exactly 9.00 pm the program came to an end and we adjourned to the outside to watch some fireworks and a fascinating display and release of hot air balloons made from paper from the mulberry bark. IAs we saw the plethora of balloons soaring aloft with their internal fires lighting up the night sky, we wondered how such events would be viewed in Australia with our obsessiveness for OH&S and liability. Yet it looked so spectacular and so grand and apparently none have resulted in any serious fire although there was a public protest when there was an attempt to replace the paper balloons with plastic ones.

Although Poo had offered the option of visiting the Night Market, everyone declined the offer and went back to the Baan Songjum Guest house for a quiet night.

Day 4

Tuesday, 10th January 2012

Chiang Mai to Chiang Rai

This part of Thailand is on the western side of the time zone and also now cursed with the blanket of smog moving down from southern China. So it was still not daylight until almost 7.00 am. After an 8.00 am breakfast and posing for photographs on the bicycle rickshaw, the Fearless Leader left his hat behind as we headed up to see a Royal Project at Doi Saket.

Our Guide was Public interest Kup Pong (Mr Pong) as he showed us around the project after the audio-visual presentation. We were taken to the forest areas, the frog and fish farms so an unnamed person dubbed the F-ing tour. That was most unkind as it was absorbingly interesting to see how this 1,360 ha site had been transformed from a dry, drought-ridden, fire-prone area of poor quality skeletal soil into a most attractive and productive area as a result of model husbandry.

The key to the transformation seemed to start with the improvement of the soil moisture through improving the infiltration of rainfall and runoff. This was done through a series of small dams, weirs and some larger reservoirs as well as some well designed distributary channels. Thus the forest began to flourish and the soil carbon improved the moisture holding capacity so that the number of species now growing has doubled in just 30 years since the project was initiated. We were fascinated by the array of plants now occurring including pepper vines. The Teak trees were now growing more strongly. We were interested in the other timber producing tree

species they were encouraging that they called "*Madang*". When we saw a Madang specimen it seems to us to all intents and purposes to be identical to Australian Red Cedar. It was a species we hadn't anticipated occurring in a deciduous teak forest. Other trees and plants were encouraged for food production and general utility including pepper vines, celuk and many others. They are also trialling other trees that might be used for fuel-wood and are about to trial rubber trees.

The frog farm was to demonstrate how farmers might be able to farm frogs for the pot in their own smaller projects. Two different Rana species were being demonstrated — a local species and an introduced species from North America that might be more suited to cooler environments in the north of Thailand.

After viewing the fish farm we headed north towards Chiang Mai. Our lunch stop was the home of a national artist of note and in addition to the restaurant there was a gallery of mainly craft items. Outside the restaurant was the story of the city that the restaurant was on the outskirts of. It was Wiang Pa Pao and it was once a banyan forest before it was settled. One finds it hard to imagine a landscape of great banyans similar to those of Lord Howe Island sprawling over it when now the landscape consists only of rice paddies, roads and houses.

We tried to see inside a toy museum that had been established as a community project to gather up the children's toys of past eras and curate them. Unfortunately the museum near the first Thai oil field was closed and one hopes that it isn't because electronic games have resulted in a disinterest in the project

Then it was to Baan Rub Aroon Guest House and settling in, while Poo and Somboon went off to have the vehicles washed and Poo to be temporarily reunited with his family. At 7.00 pm we were picked up for dinner and a foray into the Night Market.

Day 5 Wednesday, 11th January 2012 Chiang Rai

Little did we know when the day dawned it would be the beginning of a new year of life for Lyn who had been previously secretive about the fact that she was born on 11th January ????. But it was a day of many surprises. Not least of the surprises was that we would collectively indulge in two doses of ice-cream in the same day!

The day began at an easy pace with a stroll to the nearby Temple of the Emerald Buddha (Wat Phra Kaew) with its most impressive history collection of Buddhist memorabilia from the region and some wonderful buildings beautifully curated to honour the Lord Buddha. The photographs tell it all. The Emerald Buddha was discovered there in a Buddhist miracle in 1434 and has since moved to Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Luang Prabang before ending up in Bangkok where it currently resides.

Then it was All Aboard for our second temple of the day that just blew us away with its imagination The White Temple of Thailand — Wat Rong Khun — is the product

of the imagination and energy of a single artist of immense talent, Chalermchai Kositpipat. The project began 15 years ago and is scheduled to last at least another decade but it is an imaginative and splendid and very contemporary view of Buddhism. There is a huge team assisting the artist to create one of the architectural marvels in south East Asia and one which is an honorary project for the artist who hopes that when completed (possibly by a protégée of his) it will rival the Taj Mahal as an attraction. It is already drawing significant crowds and deservedly so but the vision of the artist is so bold and so modern yet maintaining and enriching the traditional arts of Thailand.

After a couple of hours of wonder at this spectacle we had lunch in a nearby restaurant before Poo took us to an ice-cream parlour different to any other ice-cream parlour ever experienced. We had the choice of green tea or coconut ice-cream with a choice of 10 toppings: sticky rice, palm seed, corn, taro, tapioca, gourd, sweet potato, black ban, bread and jelly graph?

From there we went to the Hill Area Development Foundation (HADDF) where the CEO, Jutamas (Khun Ju) gave us a presentation and perspective of the hill tribes and the issues in their development. There are 15 employees and their focus is on the headwaters of the Mae Salong and Mae Chan river catchments. There are many different cultures including Mien (Yao) Lahu, Akha, Lisu and Karen. HADF is striving to help them to preserve as much of their language and culture as is possible. Natural Focus and Poo are part of the HADF organization.

Then it was a rush 30-kilometre trip out of town to visit the Huai Kaew Waterfall. The journey there was interesting, following up the Mae Kok River through small villages and tea plantations, climbing steep hills on a very narrow road and rounding many bends to reach falls. Then it was a relatively short scramble to reach the quite spectacular falls in a jungle setting. Of interest were the cuts in the bamboo that had been made to extract the Bamboo Worms that are worth a lot of money in the market.

Because it seemed to be so late when we reached the waterfall, odds were being laid on our probability of bathing in the Psa Sert Hot Springs. It seemed increasingly improbable as we turned back to Chiang Rai. However, Poo, the man of many surprises, delivered us to the luxuriance of immersion in the very clean hot springs and refreshed and relaxed we arrived back in town at 6.30 p.m..

Dinner was the most splendid yet at the Mum Mai Restaurant, which was topped off with an ice-cream cake to help celebrate Lyn's birthday.

Lyn was happy to share a wine and the ice-cream cake with everyone although she did run out of puff before extinguishing the mere dozen candles on it.

Day 6**Thursday, 12th January 2012****Chiang Rai to Mae Salong & Ja Bu Si**

After a scramble to the pharmacy and the Post Office and a stop at a service station we were out of Chiang Rai by about 9.30 and our first stop was "The Black House". This is the home and gallery of another National Artist, Thawan Duchenee who is an extremely talented wood carver who amongst other things is obsessed with horns, particularly buffalo horns. Thousands of them have been fashioned into all forms of furniture. He has a great vision for this site and obviously a large retinue of helpers and apprentices as the site encompasses many buildings and the site is being extended to lakes and new features. He is also a talented painter and we saw two paintings poo said were valued at \$7 million. The place is also a museum of lots of folk art. But it seems that the artist might have spent time in Toraja, judging by some of the artefacts displayed and the focus on buffalo. We spent over an hour wandering around the site and had to be rounded up because there was still so much we didn't see.

Next stop was at the Maechaen Markets where we were fascinated in a half hour stopover to observe the array of wares and food on offer. There were fish and frogs and lots of meat as well as almost every vegetable imaginable. We didn't though bother to explore the retail hardware and clothing areas.

Leaving Maechan at the lower end of the catchment area that HADF serves, we ascended a very steep new shortcut to Mae Salong where we had lunch in a Chinese restaurant. Even the new road was severely impacted and potholed as a result of the heavy La Nina rains in 2011. Lunch was most interesting and the hosts were one of the 20 Islamic Chinese families in the Village

Then after Somboon mad a vain attempt to procure oil for his car it was out to stop at an Akha village where after arming ourselves with tissues we began an interesting cross country walk led by Dusit and accompanied by Nit Mae. Wending our way through the village we followed a motorcycle track (where we had to make way a couple of times) to a buffalo watering point. It was amazing to see such tame domesticated animals in contrast to the wild buffalo of Australia. Then we crossed around the mountain on a slippery slope before coming briefly on to a road. However we soon left the road and followed a firebreak up and down some very steep slopes before after a little over an hour arriving at Ja Bu Si village. On the way the tree ferns and a flowering tree, Jungan, fascinated us.

Ja Bu Si is the home for 28 Ngi (red) Lahu families and is one of the most isolated villages in this catchment area. They live in houses that are made from local products extracted from the forest mainly round timber, bamboo and grass thatch. They are all built above the ground and have a floor of flattened split bamboo. The house usually has two small rooms at one end for sleeping, and a verandah entrance at the other. The main living area has no furniture but a fan open fire in the floor, which is used for all of the cooking and warmth. The entrance to the house is a ramp that is tricky to negotiate in the middle of

the night without a lot of practice. The domestic animals mainly pigs and chooks wander freely under and around the house. Bathhouses are another thing and on the outside deserving another description for their novelty.

We assembled in one of these houses at 6.30 to watch our dinner being prepared. It was in pork and veges including grated green papaya with mountain rice. However Dusit topped it all by cooking up a frog curry with frogs from his own frog farm. During the discussions we learnt of the long friendship between Somboon and Poo that dates back more than 20 years.

After dinner as we all retired to our respective host homes Poo and Dusit made a trip back to Chiang Rai to procure the urgently needed oil for Somboon's vehicle that is now immobilized until the sump is refilled.

Hosts at Ja Bu Si:

Pam, Renee, Mel, Lyn and Somboon — Jake and Na Law

John, Su and Nit Noi — Ahoo and Na Gwee

Simon, Gill, Del and Helen and the main caterers for our group — Ah See and her eldest daughter Na Ha was the cook.

Day 7**Friday, 13th January 2012****Ja Bu Si to Saen Jai**

The pounding of rice didn't commence until after 7.00am on Poo's instructions so that didn't wake us. Instead it was the other village sounds, the pigs under the house, the roosters and the dogs. However it was a most pleasant and peaceful mix of sounds. However combined with full bladders they had most mobile early.

Overnight there had been a group of 13 Buddhist monks visit the village and very early they provided a breakfast for the community. It was very rich and tasty and the very good-humoured monks marshalled us to partake of their feast that dimmed our appetites for the scheduled breakfast later. It was cause to wonder that a group of Buddhist monks would want to visit this village of predominantly animist Lahu people. After clearing the breakfast setting the monks then distributed bags of recycled clothing that was eagerly sought in good humour. Both breakfasts were really delicious.

After spending some time and energy observing the pounding of rice, our next scheduled engagement was to have the shaman perform a welcome ceremony. John Sinclair had visited this village three years ago and didn't recognize the shaman's house because he was looking for a building over two metres clear of the ground. It transpires that the house had only within the last few months been lowered and remodelled to be unrecognizable. The shaman tested pulse and blood pressure, the tied strings around the left wrists of the women and the right wrists of the men.

Then we assembled to be led down the hill to the village's waterfall accompanied by a few of the village men and a small entourage of children. We arrived at a point above the fall where the men immediately set about harvesting bamboo, large leaves and firewood. With a fire burning

beside the rock they then started wrapping the rice in individual sachets of a large type of ginger's leaves and stuffing them into a bamboo stem to be cooked in the fire. While this was happening the children ran free making dams in the creek and having fun while some scrambled on a goat track to get a better view of the waterfall. Then while the men worked at fashioning out various utensils, cups and preparing other dishes with the help of Nit Noi we drew up rocks and observed with great fascination and helplessness. John Sinclair though was inspired to produce a few Haiku poems:

*By a waterfall
Simple traditional methods
Produces tasty lunch.*

*The fire crackling,
Kids playing, water splashing,
Sounds of contentment*

*Fire, food and friendship
Beside Lahu waterfall
Feeling fulfilment*

Unfortunately while partaking of this feast Gillian slipped off the rock she was parking on and fell headfirst into the river injuring herself. She was saved from worse injury by the lightning reaction of one of the Ja Bu Si men who caught her and softened the fall. The drama forced our program into Plans X, Y and Z as Poo rapidly assessed the situation and priorities.

Gillian was taken into Mae Salong to a clinic where her wounds were dressed and she was well repaired. Somboon who had helped carry Gillian out of the waterfall didn't fare so well. The oil that Poo had procured in Chiang Rai failed to help his vehicle but Alas, it needs further repairs and another village vehicle was substituted to get the group out of Ja Bu Si. Meanwhile the others left behind played with the village kids that had all sorts of innovative games without the need for expensive toys. It was therefore a surprise to discover that they didn't seem to know about hopscotch.

Having already abandoned the proposal to visit a nearby school because we were so late, we went up to the Akha village Ba Ka Sukai to collect Somboon anticipating that we were then going on to the Lo Yoh Akha village for the night. Here the plans changed to BB and we learnt that it would be difficult to make a meaningful and practical visit to Lo Yoh for less than half a day. It was therefore resolved that we go on to spend two nights at Saen Jai. Saen Jai is the home of the Kao Doi (Mountain rice) Band that has a provisional invitation to perform at the 2012 Woodford Dreaming Festival on the Queens Birthday weekend.

Having given our hosts only extremely short notice that we were planning to arrive 24 hours earlier than scheduled, allowed them a little more time for preparation by stopping at a Chinese tea plantation to sample their wares and then it was a longish drive to the village.

Once there we were greeted by two members of the band that evolved from the HADF sponsored Hilltribe Youth Group — Wan (the male leader) and Yoo the dancer and

performer. Soon Poo and Yoo and a few others took off to the market to obtain provisions for our stay. The rest of us were taken by Wan and Somboon on a walk through the village to see the Ahka Gate and learn of its traditional significance to exclude evil spirits from the village. A new gate is erected in front of the old one every year to the strict instructions of the Village shaman. There are fewer and fewer Akha continuing to practice their traditional animists beliefs and many are converting to Christianity that makes much less demands of their time and energies.

Back in the village with the arrival of the provisions there was a flurry of activity to produce a very interesting meal to top off an interesting day when few things went to plan.

Day 8 Saturday, 14th January 2012 Saen Jai (Uloh Ahka) Village

Overnight the cloud cover finally broke and the rain turned the already treacherous tracks to the outside toilets into slippery slopes, and called for a reconsideration of the plans to join the villagers working in the rice paddies over an hour's walk away. It was therefore a more languid start to the day with the skies dulling our mood and enthusiasm.

After a late breakfast and introductions especially to the very unique and much ornamented regalia of the Akha women that they wore daily as a matter of course, there was some introduction to weaving of wristbands. Each of our women chose six coloured strands of wool which we looped and anchored on one toe. Concentration was then tested as we mastered plaiting the strands into a colourful wristband complete with bell (tricky for us, but a simple past time for the Akha women). Mei then opened her 'shop'. Mei (Bubier's sister) was quite a character and very accomplished in all manner of handcrafts. She told us often she was the mother of five, the youngest twins. She'd point to her head to indicate she must have been mad to have so many children. Traditional handcrafts included bags, cowrie shell belts and necklets, wooden bullfrogs and some clothing made by the older women. The women were by now very relaxed with us and comfortable in our company. We laughed and joked and the lack of a common language was no longer a barrier to our mutual enjoyment. Simon went bird watching and John joined Poo for a long trip to the Maechan Markets again.

Our hosts Bubier and Yu and the older ladies were enthusiastic to show the women the traditional Akha costumes and kindly allowed some of the group to dress up in the headgear and other traditional items of clothing. There was much hilarity and photo taking, smoking of cigarettes and pipes was encouraged but only Mel was game enough to have a puff. Bubier led Mel, Lynn and Renee in traditional singing and dancing, lamentably, later we could not recall the Akha words to the songs.

After lunch there was time for a sleep and rehearsals (that lamentably we didn't do) and then a time to sleep and catch up. Meanwhile Simon joined Poo and Somboon for

the trip back to Mae Salong to collect Somboon's now repaired vehicle.

The gathering for dinner was enlarged by the addition of the players in the Kao Doi band and spectators including HADF's Khun Ju. The very versatile members of the group were On, the leader of the group, Yu and Wan from the Ahka group and Nutcha, (Khun Ju's Lisu daughter). All sang and danced with On showing particular versatility. The three Akha members are studying at Chiang Rai University. They performed a bamboo welcoming dance, a dance related to the harvest and a dramatic performance of the tragedy of human trafficking for prostitution that is still widespread and rife amongst the hilltribes. HADF has a special project to try to curtail this. There was a haunting musical piece featuring the didgeridoo drum, violin and other percussion accompaniment. Some entertainment was provided by our group including demonstrations of the laugh of the Kookaburra and some not very elegant dancing (by some people who shall remain nameless).

The Kao Doi Band that aims to come to Australia to attend the Woodford Dreaming Festival over the Queens Birthday Weekend in June. Any profit that Natural Focus makes from our tour will assist the group in covering airfares to and from Australia.

Day 9

Sunday, 15th January 2012 Saen Jai to Chiang Kong

Plan ??? said that breakfast at 8.00 and leave Saen Jai at 9.00 am. At 8.00 everything was going to plan but at 9.00 am neither the vehicles nor Poo and Somboon were to be seen. They eventually returned from Chiang Rai with the luggage we had left there and we were finally loaded and on our way at 10.40 am after a sad farewell to our new-found friends in Saen Jai.

It was a dramatic should and contrast to be confronted by the scrambling seething melee of activity and commercialism of Mai Sai after the tranquillity and simplicity of the village life we had just experienced. The shock was lessened somewhat by the entrance to this city bordering Burma. This was the main road from Bangkok to China and we soon discovered that it is being extended to Chiang Kong because the new bridge across the Mekong is to go in near there to allow southern China especially the highly industrialized Yunnan province its closest access to the sea without going through Burma.

Mai Sai was literally seething with vendors selling all kinds of wares from watches to clothing and from chestnuts roasted before our eyes to something called Viagra. It was a border post and a retail outlet for goods (many of them fakes) coming into Thailand from Burma and China and being a Sunday it was attracting lots of Thai bargain hunters. We mixed with that melee for about half an hour. However before that we went to the Temple of the Scorpion on a hill overlooking the City, Burma and the bustle below. After our retail explorations Poo and Somboon picked us up and took us to a Chan

Chinese restaurant for a delightful vegetarian meal and yet another culture and cuisine to be encountered.

It was a sobering note to learn as we left Mae Sai that the Chan and the Ahka are in greatest demand as prostitutes because they are deemed to have the most attractive young women in Thailand. Our next stop was at the Golden Triangle. From a vantage point overlooking the river from Mai Sai and the Mekong we could see the conjunction of three countries. Then down below at the Opium Museum we were to get more background into the trade (now almost extinct here) that gave this region its name.

Chiang Saen is the port on the Mekong where Chinese ships discharge their cargoes for Thailand. There were a couple of ships in as we went past. Then it was on to Chiang Kong, stopping for a few photo opportunities and noting the rubber plantations and the large deciduous red flowering trees that looked like huge *Brachychiton*s.

At Baan Tamilla we said a fond farewell to Somboon who had been our guide, interpreter and driver and good friend for the past 8 days as he returned to Chiang Rai. Poo will leave his vehicle here to be collected in over a week's time.

Dinner was in a restaurant just down river from Baan Tamilla also overlooking the Mekong where there was wide applause for the fare especially the green curry.

Day 10

Monday, 16th January 2012 Chiang Kong to Pak Beng

Most people were up to see the sunrise over the Laotian mountains and the Mekong at about 6.30 am. Then after a simple breakfast of rice soup or fried rice we waited until Poo did some shopping at the market before setting off.

Our gear and some of us were delivered to the Thai Immigration Chiang Khong post by song thaew while a very busy Poo delivered the rest. There was a queue at the immigration post but nothing like the queue awaiting us at Huay Xai on the Lao side of the river where there was a melee to get our visas and to part with our \$US30 (but the \$US had to be new and crisp to be accepted). The water taxi ride across the river was most basic. On arrival in Huay Xai our Laotian guide for the river trip, Nga, met us. While we were seeking visas Poo was having a tougher time negotiating for the song thaew to deliver us the kilometre upstream from the immigration check point to the departure point for the Slow Boats. In the end the extortionate fee of \$US120 had to be paid for a most overloaded and uncomfortable ride.

Gasps of pleasant surprise were issued when we saw the interior of our boat with its polished teak lining on floor and walls and reclining aircraft seats with tables forming alcoves. Not that many people sat in the same seat as we jostled to get various outlooks as we sped down the mighty Mekong. It was 11.30 a.m. by the time we had completed the formalities and were on our way and were advised that it was a six to seven hour run. In the end with only one stop for the Lao checkpoint on the way we

arrived at 5.00 pm passing one other vessel and being passed only by the very expensive (and much faster) French boat. However everyone was glad we weren't on one of the fast boats as we were able to enjoy a feast of sights on either side of the river that were so interesting with comfort. These included:

People: — It was noticeable though that there weren't as many people as one would expect along this section of river and it was quite a contrast from the areas of Thailand where we had been where one was within sight of another human other than our group for most of the time. There were people though. Some were panning for gold, others doing their washing; others were fishing or tending set nets in the river; in places teams of men and trucks were collecting river gravel or construction.

Small groups of cattle and/or buffalo were seen resting or grazing along the banks;

Gardens and various crops: — closer to the villages and the few houses seen almost all arable land right down to the water's edge was used. Vegetables and particularly corn had been planted to take advantage of the new soil and moisture;

Forests: — Almost all of the visible forests had been logged, degraded or cleared at some stage. Corn had been planted on the hillsides as temporary crops before being let to be overtaken by forest regrowth. In a few places there were some teak plantations.

Rapids and rocks: — The most exciting part of this voyage were the rushes of water as it squeezed between reefs of rocks and formed whirlpools in this fast flowing section of river. It took a lot of navigational skills to manoeuvre the vessel almost 50 metres in length through.

Mountains: — The most attractive part of this landscape was the steep terrain and the layers of mountains reaching right down to the river and stretching off into the distance.

Settlements: — There were relatively few settlements and most were on the left hand side of the river, which is where the Lu people, a Laotian minority group elect to have their settlements. However there were a couple of temporary villages well below the flood level made by fishermen to take advantage of sections of the river available to them in the dry season.

River Traffic: — There was an interesting assortment of craft plying the river from the river ferry in Chiang Kong that took four fully loaded fuel tankers at a time across the river to Laos to small one person fishing boat. There were lots of long slow boats like ours, "026" and a few Fast Boats that we were very glad we weren't on.

We reached Pak Beng in plenty of daylight to do a stroll down the main street and gain some idea of the village life. What was clear is that Laos is generally much poorer than Thailand and generally a little less tidy but the people seemed happy despite the shabbiness around them.

It was a cool night and most were happy to retreat to their rooms after dinner that wasn't remarkable except for the excess proportion of bones in the fish soup.

Day 11 Tuesday, 17th January 2012 Pak Beng to Luang Prabang

The voyage down the river resumed in much cooler conditions at 7.00 am. We had breakfast on the boat as we proceeded down the mist-covered river with a blanket of fog not too far above us in the inversion layer. It was quite cool and got cooler until about 10.00 am when the sun finally broke through. Everyone had every layer on they could manage although nobody had to use the sleeping bags they carried.

At about 11.00 am we arrived at a Lu village which has many spellings. We will use the simplest and seemingly the most phonetic — Had Tor. Lu are a minority group in Laos that elect to live beside rivers on the left hand bank. This quite large village had no road access at all and could only be entered and left from the river.

We did a walk of the town. Our aim was to deliver some of our leftover gifts for children to the school. However the school was dismissed for lunch at 11.30 am just minutes before we arrived and wasn't due to resume until 1.00 pm just after we were on our way again. Thus as we walked through the village we felt like pied pipers attracting kids as we went up to the school to ring the school bell and see the standard of the new school building that had been built with Australian aid. After seeing the school we continued our loop of the settlement to the Principal's house where we learnt that there are 17 teachers and 220 children attending the school. We handed over our gifts and returned to our boat where the captain was still proudly wearing his newly acquired Australian cap.

Our next stop down river was the Pak Ou Cave which is a Buddhist shrine and where we had to be jostled by tourists, most of whom had come up the river from Luang Prabang to see this tourist trap although it was one without any vendors on site. Surrounding Pak Ou were some dramatic limestone mountains and these were a major feature of the landscape into and around Luang Prabang.

The final leg was as part of a flotilla of vessels heading into port against the lowering sun. It certainly wasn't far from boat to bed because our guest house, ?? was just across the esplanade from our landing point. Similarly it wasn't far from our rooms to dinner because our outdoor restaurant overlooked the river and was just opposite the guesthouse. Here we enjoyed much more pleasant Lao food than in Pak Beng. Proximity also wasn't a problem to visit the Night Market. That attracted everyone. Although it was only a block away, it extended for blocks along the main street and the temptations of shopping gripped most of the group during the stroll down the street with thoughts of how to get these new acquisitions back home.

Day 12
Wednesday, 18th January 2012
Luang Prabang

The morning dawned cool and foggy. The fog didn't clear until almost 10.00 am when it finally started to warm up. Few succumbed to the temptation to explore the morning food market. After a 7.30 open-air breakfast beside the river at the same restaurant (although it was hard to know that the river was there as it was such a dense mist) we were collected by a bus. It was a nippy morning to mark Gillian's 75th birthday. Mel's previous absence at the night market meant that Gill couldn't deliver her sleeping bag and Mel had the shivers. Our Lao guide for Luang Prabang was Luk, an attractive young woman who is accredited by the Lao Tourist Authority. .

We headed out of town passing all of the fascinating Asian lifestyles that we are growing increasingly familiar with and stopped at a Hmong village, Na Wam, to see the lifestyles of yet another Hill-tribe group. Here though the village was geared up for tourism with a cement path winding through the settlement lined with vendors stalls. Most of the stalls sold only fabric wares that had been embroidered with cross-stitching. Young girls in traditional costume who pleaded us to buy from them staffed most stalls. The temptation to buy couldn't be resisted.

Then it was on to the Kwagsi Waterfall, where clear aqua coloured water flowed over the limestone. It was difficult to believe that the Nam Xi River had its source only 5 kilometres above the falls where it tumbled 80 metres over the edge of an escarpment in a series of spectacular falls and pools. The Nam Xi river then only runs a further 4 kilometres before it joins the Mekong yet in that short journey the water has created a stunning visual impression. Apart from the many tufa weirs formed by the limestone from the water the sound and colour and the rich jungle backdrop make this a most memorable waterfall. The vegetation was notable for the ginger flowers and the naming of the "red cedar" tree as *Toona febrifuga*. An *Alstonia rostrata* was also identified.

At Noon re assembled to load into the mini bus and travel back into town for lunch on the banks of the Nam Kaun River. From there we proceeded to a small Lu village upstream on the Nam Khun, Ban Phanom. This village was once famous for its weaving and making of mulberry bark paper. Alas, the papermaking has become a casualty of market forces and the villagers now devote their energy into weaving and seem to have abandoned paper making altogether.

John Sinclair made a visit to the river to see the punishing work being undertaken by young men to recover the gravel from the bed of the river. Standing shoulder deep they dived and gathered up large buckets of gravel and then tipped them into a small craft beside their head. When they filled the craft to the point of sinking it, they push it to the shore and then unload it by shovels before returning to the neck deep water for more dredging. The heaps on the shore were subsequently loaded into trucks by shovel. It is typical of the physical work these people undertake yet they continue to smile good-humouredly.

Poo had walked an hour seeking an appropriate restaurant for the night. In the end the one he found gave us very small servings very slowly. However his search meant he overlooked the Birthday cake to celebrate Gillian's birthday. After dinner there was another search for bargains in the Night Market.

Day 13
Thursday, 18th January 2012
Luang Prabang

The night was warmer and the fog was much thinner and lifted early. It was also a slightly later 8.00 am breakfast so we enjoyed the slower start except for Helen and Del wanted to be the most meritorious in the group by going to the temple with Poo to make merit with the monks. Mel was again sparking and recovered from her indisposition last night after a good night's sleep. We had a very enjoyable breakfast once more on the riverbank opposite our guesthouse watching the passing traffic especially the commuters coming across the river to be picked up by skylabs.

We had breakfast again on the riverbank restaurant and it was more interesting with some variations of the menu. We set off at 9.00 am to walk to the nearby Vat Mat temple but as Luk would have it, we went through the busy and fascinating morning market and a stroll that should have taken only a few minutes seemed to take over half an hour as stragglers stopped for countless photographs and posed Poo with endless questions about what the produce on display was. Mel and Renee were overcome at the plight of the small birds captured for releasing in the temple and insisted on parting with lots of kip to buy these small finches their freedom.

We stopped in a laneway on the way to the Temple to be shown two houses side by side showing the old and new style of building in Luang Prabang illustrating the French colonial influence on Laotian building styles. Luk explained that this fusion of two different cultures was the reason for Luang Prabang's World Heritage status, a status the city is very proud of. Rubbish bins are placed every 50 metres apart down the main street and each features the World Heritage symbol.

We arrived at Vat May Souvanha Phoumaram to be given lots more information by Luk on Laos generally as well as its strong roots in Buddhism and the fact that there were 49 ethnic groups in Laos and that they were classified into three categories based on skin colour -Dark, Lao 1_and Lao 2 the lightest colour. After that we heard a lot more on Buddhism and the significance of Vat My that we entered.

The temple was almost next door to the former Royal Palace that is now a National museum and our next stop. It was intriguing to see the splendour of the previous royal family but there was absolutely nothing to indicate what became of the Royal family in 1975 after the Communists took control of the country. Discussion of this subject in Laos is almost as taboo as discussing the future of the Royal family in Thailand.

Wikipedia reports: *In 1975, the Pathet Lao, led by another royal, Souphanouvong, overthrew the Royal Government and arrested many members of the Royal family. The King, The Queen, Crown Prince and the King's brothers were taken to a remote location to a re-education camp, where they died.*

We then walked past the post office to a Vietnamese restaurant in a side street near the esplanade where the whole meal was prepared over open wood fires. These included some delightfully different Vietnamese spring rolls. Then we found it hard to pass the silversmith's shop in the lane without our group parting with hundreds of dollars for various items to add to their luggage.

Poo had promised us a ride in a sky lab. Little did we know that the Lao name for a Tuk-tuk is a "sky-lab". This is because they came on the marker at the same time as the sky-lab space junk fell to Earth with bits of it raining down on Laos and Thailand. It as an experience for all twelve of us including Luk plus the driver as we went to the western end of town to Vat Xieng Thong which is currently undergoing extensive renovation. Much of the work seems to be being carried out by monks with the help of God as they were perched very precariously on bamboo scaffolding at the very top of this tall structure cleaning up Naga and the adornments in the centre if the ridge line. Many photos were taken of the wagon to carry the Royal urn of the deceased king although the last king wasn't allowed to use it.

The group then dispersed to pursue their appreciation of this city in their own way. Su took a Sky-lab to a shop where she acquired a new iPhone for \$50.

Our dinner that night did belatedly feature a birthday cake for Gillian. It was as at nice restaurant on the main road with live music. A trio playing on a native xylophone, drum and two stringed Asian violin provided an ambience that suited the setting although the red flag with the hammer and sickle didn't seem to quite fit in with the setting. Gill blew out all of the candles on her 75th Birthday cake in one breath and a great night was enjoyed with nobody wanting to follow up with the night market.

Day 14

Friday, 20th January 2012 Luang Prabang to Siem Reap

It was another leisurely start with breakfast overlooking the Mekong River and then packing before assembling for the trip to the airport. That trip was a bit of an adventure with two sky labs with luggage for 11 piled on the top and the passengers sat on the bench seats below. Once inside there was the usual melee to get through luggage check in and immigration and then the wait in the lounge for the flight.

The flight was uneventful as we generally followed the meandering Mekong River in a SSE direction to Pakse, still in Laos. Generally the land on the left was very mountainous with forest cover while the land to the west of the Mekong was part of a great floodplain. We had to disembark at Pakse while more fuelling and loading operations etc. was carried out. Then it was another 50-

minute flight to Siem Reap mainly west of the Mekong over umpteen dry paddy fields.

We arrived in Siem Reap early and had to wait for our transport into the city and where we stayed in a very comfortable centrally located hotel, the Reaksmeay Chanreas, that was in close walking distance to the night market and general activity of the CBD. On our trip into the city we were told by our driver Makara ("Ra") of the terrible legacy Pol Pot inflicted on Cambodia. We also passed many four and five star hotels that made most of us squirm as it exaggerated the level of inequality in the world. This was particularly evident a couple of days later when we could observe the poverty in the houses lining the Siem Reap river on the way down to Tonle Sap Lake and in the floating village there.

The exaggeration of the inequality by such ostentatious opulence might have suited the clients who could make up many versions of the song, "I've been everywhere" because these globetrotting travellers seemed to have come from everywhere and been everywhere and Angkor Wat was just another place to be ticked off. Soon after settling, in the women were off to a pottery to experience some of the basics of ceramics. This had to be undertaken to allow the creations to dry, be fired and glazed so that we could take the finished product home with us

That evening Poo led us on a march to a restaurant where it was our choice of dishes. However numbers were thin as a bug /virus started afflicting some. Helen stayed home and Pam disappeared early while Lyn succumbed later in the evening but not before she had at least explored the streets of Siem Reap.

Day 15

Saturday, 21st January 2012 Angkor Wat and other Temples

After a light continental breakfast at the hotel we set off with Ra driving for a tour of some of the magnificent temples in the Angkor Wat area. The Province of Siem Reap (one of 54 provinces of Cambodia has 300 temples. Cambodia itself has more than 1,000.

First of all we had to get our ID passes. This was very unique because we lined up very quickly and had our photographs taken and imprinted on to the day passes. Each day pass cost \$US20. There were inspectors at the access to every temple site to ensure that everyone carried a valid pass

We crossed a bridge across the Siem Reap River with many images but we couldn't stop due to the pressure of the traffic that had not only to cross the bridge but then squeeze through a narrow gate that provided the entry point to Angkor Thom a city created by many Khmer Rulers over several generations with each one adding some new temples or features.

First stop was Bayon Temple with its numerous Face towers with smiles to the four cardinal points. It is part of the Angkor Thom complex and created by the king who liberated the Khmer Empire. Unfortunately Bayon has been added to by a succession of kings with the result that it is extremely heavy and having no moat surrounding it is

slowly sinking at 2 cms annually according to our guide Tiger. The rocks for the construction, sandstone and volcanics were drawn from Mt Koulen, some 50 kilometres away and the source of the Siem Reap River. It is a holy place and a sacred mountain.

Bayon Temple has two libraries, one of which has just been partially restored and three galleries full of the most exquisite carvings that tell much of the story of the people back in the 13th Century. Originally created as a Buddhist temple it had much of the gallery defaced when the first king's son converted to Hinduism and removed all of the Buddha images from the galleries.

Second stop was Bantreay Srei Temple about 20 kilometres north of Angkor. It was an interesting drive through the countryside. The temple is one of the oldest and most complete in the whole series of temples. It is also one of the smallest. Perhaps the grandiosity grew with subsequent rulers trying to out do their predecessors. It was certainly a temple of great and delicate beauty. The temple complex is surrounded by a moat which itself is surrounded by a wall. The temple has three galleries.

Lunch at nearby village there was lunch where the price of drinks some distance from Siem Reap was exactly half of what we had to pay in the Kuelen Restaurant later that day.

After lunch we went to the Ta Prohm Temple, which is still over-grown by jungle and where the temple continues to disintegrate due to the ever-expanding roots in the brickwork. Unfortunately the Western influence of the Angela Jolie film has caused the Cambodians to popularly refer to this as the "Tomb Raiders Temple".

Some time ago a decision was made to leave Ta Prohm in the state in which it was rediscovered. However despite this work has been underway for years to reconstruct the "Dancing Hall". It is an eerie but fascinating place but the trees, particularly the strangler figs and "sprong" and other trees that seemed to be enveloping parts of the temple with octopus like tentacles ready to swallow it up.

Then it was on to the greatest relic of the millennia of Khmer building, Angkor Wat. It took 4,000 elephants, a million men and 35 years to build and it is amazing in scale. Being 1.5 kilometres by 1.3 kilometres in extent surrounded by a moat that is 200 metres wide. It has four galleries and while the higher ones were not adorned the upper levels but the gallery on the second level was truly great and the engraving that almost appeared as smooth as bronze extended for hundreds of metres on each of the four faces. In the middle were now empty pools with stairs descending into them that were obviously used like Roman baths. Each could have been metres deep and about 50 metres square.

We arrived just before 5.00 pm and just in time to join the jostling throng ascending the very steep stairs to the upper level. The view was magnificent and one could imagine the sweat from a million workers, some slaves and many being drawn one from each family in the kingdom. Looking at the vast armies that the kings assembled in the galleries, one wonders what lese each family had to contribute.

We left Angkor Wat full of awe at the creativity and opulence of a bygone generation and drove back into the mix of wealth and poverty of the modern Cambodia in a sobering mood.

During the day we learnt so much about Cambodia's recent troubled past including Pol Pot's killing fields from Tiger who was able to show us the scars he acquired as a result of a bullet in the stomach as a child during the Civil War. What was a revelation was to learn more of Pol Pot's personal background. He had trained as a Buddhist monk for two years. Been very bright and won a scholarship to France for three years. He had returned to Cambodia and taught in a university. It left us wondering how with such a background, he could have turned into such a brutal anti-intellectual monster who caused such chaos and saw over 3 million people killed or die of starvation during his three year reign of terror from 1975 to the beginning of 1979 or as Tiger said with such emphasis "*three years, 8 months and 20 days*". During that period there was no religion and no education allowed. Pol Pot even used Angkor Wat as his bunker. Then the Cambodians were still not free of him as there was then a bloody civil war for more years between government forces, the forces loyal to the King and the forces loyal to Pol Pot. Finally Pol Pot retreated to the border with Thailand where he remained free for 21 years and he was never forced to account for his crimes against his people.

We learnt that the official name for the rickshaws towed by motor cycles are "*Broomoors*" although it seemed that they were very widely known as tuk-tuks even though they were quite different in concept to the Tuk-tuks of Thailand or the Skylabs of Laos.

Dinner that night was in the Kuelen Restaurant where there were at least 200 others dining on mainly Western food and being entertained by Cambodian dancers beautifully costumed and with well-choreographed dances. It was mainly though a spectacle for the tourists.

Day 16

Sunday, 22nd January 2012 Siem Reap to Bangkok

Having done our pottery on arrival the group resolved to use the otherwise "free" morning with a visit to Tonle Sap Lake, the largest lake in South East Asia and the source of a bounty of food that allowed the Khmer Kingdoms to prosper for so long although they were always subject to attacks from the Champa (a kingdom in the lower Mekong in what is now southern Vietnam) and the Thais and Burmese from the West.

The road out of town to the lake followed the Siem Reap River and between the very potholed road and the river was a variety of dwellings ranging from adequate to shanty standard. The shanties though were not the only signs of poverty we saw because at the lake the floating village was another experience.

There seemed to be an armada of boats carrying tourists down the canal to the lake and the canal was lined with all kinds of industry to support the life afloat that had evolved there.

There were a few illustrations of plain begging and more subtle pleadings for money by kids in small boats (and one in a round aluminium washing tub) all armed with small (two metre) Burmese pythons. We were deposited on a floating restaurant /souvenir shop that had many caged crocodiles as an attraction. We were however able to truncate this visit and get the boat to take us across to the Vietnamese school where we were able to leave some small gifts for the students of stateless and paperless (and therefore unemployable) parents.

Back in town we loaded our luggage (and Poo) into a Tuk-tuk while the rest of us rode out to the airport in the minibus. We were amazed at Poo's capacity to even find space for part of his bottom on the overloaded tuk-tuk but he and the luggage arrived safely at the airport where, after a long wait in the queue we managed to get aboard our flight to Bangkok base that was becoming more familiar.

At Bangkok there was a sad farewell as our group split and travelled in many different directions but half returned to the Queens Gardens to discover much more of the environs near this Bangkok base that was becoming more interesting and familiar.

Post Script: Four of the group were able to meet Poo's mother, Pat, his daughter, Pop, and sister-in-law, Zoyee at the Bangkok railway station before embarking on a new adventure to reach Singapore.

Natural Focus Ecotours

The adventures and experiences enjoyed by our group are available to anyone. Our amazing guide, Poo was the superb "fixer" of almost every problem. He has organized tailor made trips on advance request for groups ranging in size from one to 20. The duration of the trips has ranged from 1-17 days. Although Poo is based in Chiang Rai in the northernmost province of Thailand he has organized international tours to places India, China and Vietnam. Poo's main mission though is in helping advance the community development work of HADF, the Hill Area Development Foundation. Poo has a superb network of friends and associates who are able to help deliver community based tourism and help English speakers overcome the language barrier.

People wanting to experience a more authentic, less touristy aspect of South East Asia should contact Poo by Email setting out the preferences and negotiating a price by Email. These are not Five Star tours but budget tours for people who are prepared to experience a little of the environmental lifestyles of the areas being travelled through.

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Natural Focus

Natural Focus was formed in 2000 by the Hill Area and Community Development Foundation (HADF) in collaboration with hill tribe people for community-based, sustainable ecotourism.

HADF is a non-profit development organisation that has worked with hill people in Northern Thailand particularly in the catchment areas of the Mae Salong and Mae Chan Rivers since 1985. It has implemented projects in this area for community education, strengthening community organisations, sustainable agriculture, environmental conservation, participation of women and the prevention and control of drug abuse.

Natural focus is based on the concept that community-based ecotourism provides an opportunity to exchange knowledge and understanding between visitors and the local community, and promotes local cultures and the natural environment. It provides encouragement and empowerment within communities and an awareness of the need to live in harmony with each other and nature.

Profits are used in community development activities for the ethnic minority people. The villagers benefit from this program by earning an alternative income through providing accommodation, meals and handicrafts and by taking on the roles of guides and local experts.

Initially Natural Focus programs were based in Chiang Rai "The Golden Triangle area" where there are many different minority groups or tribes of traditional hill and mountain dwellers. These groups are commonly referred to as Hill Tribes of Thailand.

The Natural Focus office is located in the city of Chiang Rai and works with others CBT networks all around Thailand.

HADF operates the 'Natural and Cultural Learning Center for Indigenous People' or "Mountain top home", which can be used for conferences, workshops, youth camps, or for a rest center from which to explore the surrounding areas.

Web Site: www.naturalfocus-cbt.com

Natural Focus has been hosting Australian eco-tour-groups including GO BUSH Safaris in the Hilltribe area as well as other parts of Thailand and other countries since 2001.