

**Day 1**  
**Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> January**  
**Bangkok to Sukothai**  
**By Fearless Leader**

Three contingents over-nighted in chaotic Bangkok with its smog, elevated freeways, and free-for all road rules. We are three Victorians, three New South Welshmen (all women) and three Queenslanders.

After negotiating the labyrinths and kilometres of corridors of the new Bangkok Airport we all but one made our respective ways to lounge A4A to await the departure of Flight 211 for Sukothai. The one who never made their way to the waiting lounge was young Phyllis. She didn't even have to make her way. It was made for her with her personal taxi transport around the massive new airport terminal. In fact she never even made it to a hotel, she just spent the night there until she was hoisted onto our flight at Bangkok.

However she didn't have the pleasure of the ride in the open-air commuter bus at Sukothai to the most aesthetically pleasing airport terminal anyone of us has probably ever been in because she was placed in a ute and whisked away before us all.

Here we met Poo, our guide for the next 15 days and he had arranged transport into the hotel. The half hour drive into the city and our huge hotel was mesmerizing as we struggled to come to terms with the various crops, (mostly tobacco) and the lifestyles we were observing.

After settling in to the Pailyn Hotel. Most found a place to indulge in a cup of coffee. (There were cold drinks in the mini-bar but no tea or coffee making facilities). Then it was off to explore the Historical District. However before we went we stopped to have a traditional Thai lunch most selecting Pad Thai while a couple chose soup.

Our three-hour exploration of the historical district consisted of six stops:

1. The Royal Palace and Temple. Here we were introduced to the background and history of Sukothai and its many cultural icons that have earned it World Heritage status. We met some flower gatherers who wanted to put some attractive white pea flowers they pulled off a large tree on to the table but as an edible dish

rather than as an adornment. There were many chedi in a variety of styles reflecting the traditions of the VIPs whose mortal remains are entombed within them. The chedi are the cultural equivalent of the Pharaohs' pyramids.



**Flower gatherers at the Sukothai Royal Temple**

2. Sei Sawai was a very old temple complex. It was originally built under Khmer influence about 1000 years ago but when Buddhism displaced Hinduism it was converted to a Buddhist temple. While the phallic symbols in places were replaced with Buddas and the architecture retained some conspicuous symbols of Hinduism. It was here that we learnt of a wholly new derivation of Holy (or is it holey) water derived from a remnant Hindu icon. Poo pointed out the differences between the various squiggles near the various Buddas' navels that gave a whole new interpretation to "navel gazing".
3. San Sri was characterized by many chedi and a very slim elegant standing budda in a lovely manicured setting surrounded by moats.
4. Wat Si Chum allowed us to buy some local refreshments, see some crochet experts working while trying to find an outlet for their wares and to see an amazing huge but well preserved Buddha



5. Wat Pa Pi is another former Khmer Hindu temple that has been modified to a Buddhist temple. What was most amazing is to realize that unlike Wat Sei Sawai whose towers we made from small bricks, Wat Si Chum's towers were constructed with huge and very lateritic haematite blocks. It is a basis of wonder of early engineering that now hoists huge freeways skywards instead of temple blocks.
6. Wat Chang Lam, our final wat, was most memorable for the 36 elephants that supported its base. While some of these have collapsed after bearing this load for centuries some, particularly the four corners are amazingly well preserved.

Then it was back to some R & R at the Pailyn and a chance to relax before dinner.



A wholly new derivation for Holy Water

**Day 2**  
**Friday 5<sup>th</sup> January**  
**Sukothai to Chiang Mai**  
**By Vivienne & Pam**

Dawn of day two found us all bright eyed and bushytailed after the first good nights sleep for 48hours. After a hearty breakfast it was into two buses and off to Chang Mai.

The scenery was rural with mainly rice paddies, sugar cane bananas, mango and a well-spotted (by John) lychee tree.

Our first stop was Sri Satchunulae National Park where we stopped at a magnificent temple built in the Cambodian style. The entrance gate was made from huge blocks of stone, probably transported by elephants. The steps leading to the prang were VERY steep and narrow and quite a challenge but John, Allan, Millie, Agnus,

Poo and Viv made it to the top. Pam and her friend the yellow “dingo” made it half way! The small market attracted a few customers on the way to their initial pit toilet experience.

Next stop was a row of temples facing East/West and stretching a great distance. Here we met two elephants giving rides and eating copious amounts of bananas, pineapple and sugar cane. One of these was 45 years old. We were told they have a life expectancy of 100 years and are retired at 60.



On to the Sang Kalok kiln to see the excavation of the 800 year old kiln and pottery found there.

After a delicious Thai lunch at a roadside café, the cook was delighted when Vivienne presented her with her beads and followed us out to the bus with gifts in return.

*Heydee, Heeydee ho*  
*The great big elephant is so slow*  
*Heydee, Heydee Ho*  
*Its off to Sanpprang we did go*

At the Elephant Conservation Centre Rescue Hospital we made a bedside visit to an elephant w ho was being treated for an infection. Elephants from all over Thailand are treated here free of charge for conditions such as infection, TB, blindness, leg injuries due to landmines and emaciation from neglect.

After buying cards and T-Shirts to support the hospital it was “all aboard”.....

*A fearless old leader named John*  
*Had no presents to give to his son*  
*Three T-shirts he bought*  
*Then became overwrought*  
*When he found in the bag...only ONE!!!*

We were given a warm welcome by Noi when we arrived at Crystal Spring House. Noi is a



director of REST and will be travelling with us for the rest of the safari.



Dinner was wonderful at a restaurant where we were serenaded by a five-piece string combo. Some of the party decided to shop at the night markets so after dropping off the sensible ones back at Crystal Spring House we proceeded in a southerly direction. A bustling crowded market proved to be worth the effort and the trip home in a Tuk Tuk was a highlight. Five people squeezed into space for three. A good night was had by all!



**Day 3**  
**Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> January**  
**Chiang Mai to Mae Jaem**  
**By Karin and Milly**

Breakfast at the Crystal Spring House, included fruit, boiled eggs, vegetarian fried rice, roast potato cubes and tiny sausages, and a number of (mostly) female students “Institute for the study of Religion and Culture, Payap University, Chaing Mai”

Noi with us for the remainder of the trip, what a great chick.

Long winding road trip to Doi Suthep, up the mountain at the edge of Chiang Mai, with a great view of city through cloud.

Budda’s guardians protect the entrance and steps to the most visited and sacred and gold filled temple I’ve ever seen. Some of us walked up the steps while others rode the cable cars to the top.

The great White Elephant carried the relic of Budda to the location on Doi Suthep where the Elephant promptly died, like Budda’s mother during his birth.

Jack fruit grow from the trunk.

The story of Budda as explained by Poo, visual aids provided by the monks of the mountain: when Budda was still in the womb his mother made the journey back to her home town. She never arrived as she gave birth early and died in the process. Upon exiting the womb, Budda made seven steps on the lotus leaves. The King didn’t want him to become the Budda so he kept him imprisoned in the palace and forced him to marry and have a child. Budda ran away, he visited his wife before doing so and watched her while she was sleeping. He trained as a monk and found enlightenment in a pan travelling against the river. He started a search for a way to escape suffering and found the answer in a renunciation of wanting. Starting with five original monks his popularity grew and people came from far and wide to be a monk with Budda, including his son, half brother and step-mother. One monk got jealous because everyone was listening to Budda and not him so he enraged an elephant and sent him to ATTACK!! Fortunately for Budda one of his loyal companions saved him and the ground opened up and swallowed the mean monk in a mouthful of flame and mortar. And so Budda lived to a ripe old age with four of his original buddies, one couldn’t make it as he sadly died before he could return home. And the story of Budda lives on beautifully in gold paint and in the hearts of all his Buddhists.

Thousands of visitors, approximately 10,000 people every month, all of whom are Thai; except we Aussies of course, and the few Frenchmen I heard, and the English pair of legs I spotted.

The 25 kilos of gold embedded in the temple and on the Chedi holding the ashes of Budda were rather hard to miss.

We were blessed by the friendly monk in one room. We knelt in front of him and he slashed us with holy water.

We rang the 18 bells before we left to make sure we were officially there.

10:30 back in buses after passing for the second time the aromas of the market on the steps.

11:00 drove through the uni grounds resplendent with colourful gardens, made the more so through competition with neighbours.

11:45 arrive at Mae Klang Luang for lunch. This delightful Karen village fed us and showed us round their eco-tourism centred 200 year old site, where they farm trout to export to Singapore. Thatched huts and roman finishings on pine glazed stairs.

We were welcomed in by Duang Chan, elected member of Administrative Committee (4 year term), and tourism representative for the village. Nice smile.

The forest is managed by villagers in conjunction with the forestry department, using organic farming methods.

Population: 600

Visitors: 70,000 per month in the area; 500 to the village between November and March.

Average family size: 5

Main crop: Rice and Trout and Coffee.

River: 1

Small waterfalls: I didn't see them but they're there.

School: 1 primary. Upper levels sent to Chiang Mai.

Chickens: lots

Pigs: for the marriage supper. Gotta have 'em if you want a bloke.



Married women wear a distinctive (Karen) pink colour but the single maidens wear all white.

Lunch: rice, soup with vegetables (green) and tofu and pork, omlette, salade, bananas and pommels, followed by freshly brewed coffee ground in front of us by the hands of strapping young men...it was all rather...yummy.

Propagating trees and rattan palm – large shade house, long igloos some with flowers ie. Gerbras for the markets. Steep paths crossed with water irrigation channels, pasta grove of coffee trees and pockets of piglets and water buffalo and chickens and dingos, round the top of the village and down again.

The Karen villages are all built in basins and valleys.

Black pigs are fed on organic produced. White pigs with chemicals included. Sow tied up in harness, coffee drying on woven mats. Houses on stilts, 12 happy children. 25 in the school with one teacher.

2 resevoirs and a dam.

Fish and prawn ponds belong to Royal Project. Villagers provide the labour and are paid monetarily and they receive the rejected fish for personal use.

An hour's drive down the mountain.

4:45 arrive at Activists House and meet Noot and Moh and their son Pi. (sic)



Moh built the house, a beautiful open building surrounded by trees and greenery and the smell of wood. Birds chirp, elephants keep you company on the throne and bare feet really make you feel at home.

The couple have been here 20 odd years, re-did a pre-existing house and used the wood from that.



Noot works with the women weavers in the community and Moh studies Buddhism.

Time to get up close and personal with the bedding ladies!! Fourish to a room.

*The naughty town roosters of Mae Jaem  
Quite frankly, they don't give a damn  
They screech and they fight  
They crow all through the night  
Waking all of us up...even Pam!*

Kaz and I went for a walk and saw a pretty gorge sunset on the mountains, dunno what you lot got up to.

6:00 gathered for dinner, soya bean and curry, banana flower curry, mixed vegetables, seaweed and Chinese flower broth, sticky rice in banana leaves and something all meat I forgot.

It was held traditional Thai style on the floor with petite tables and all share bowls of food in the centre of the table. Good grub, but a bit on the spicy side for our sensitive lips. The spicier the food the more expensive the dish. Spicy food is an indicator of wealth and status.

We chilled out for a bit and there's a distinct fuzzy part of my memory here that I think involved the bottle of Indian Gooseberry Wine.

8:00 the sharing of the stories. There is far too much detail to write here but you all seem to be very interesting.



**Day 4**  
**Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> January**  
**Mae Jaem**  
**By Alan & Jan**

Being in the country, the cocks crow to announce the dawn. Since nobody believed them the first time, they went back to sleep, and so did we.

6:45am – coffee downstairs

7:00am – guided walk; inspected fruit trees, gardens, whisky brewing (plus a taste), pig servicing (unsuccessful) and spirit offerings.

[Trivia interlude: According to some rubbish picked up in the street, the colours of the days are – Sunday; red – Monday – yellow; Tuesday – pink; Wednesday – green; Thursday – orange; Friday – blue; Saturday – purple (or Indigo if you prefer)]

8:00am – beaut big breakfast

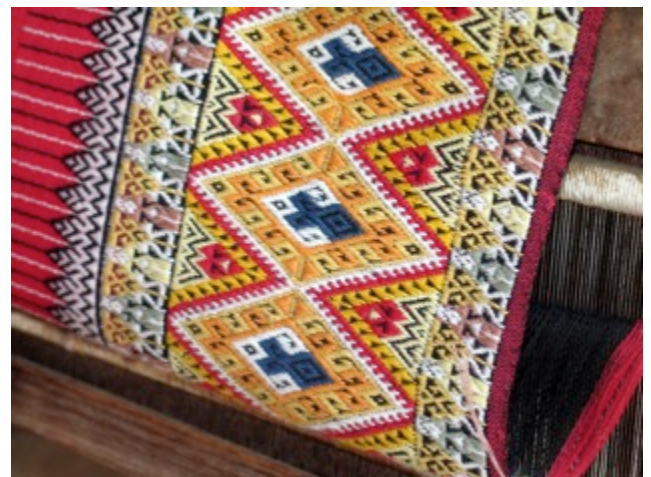
9:00am – off for a temple tour. At the first temple we saw the ashes of the temple bonfire (an ancient custom now maintained only in Mae Jaem), a set of murals (100 years old) that illustrated the life and teachings of the Buddha and the effect of last year's earthquake. We heard about many customs and practices (for example, the covering of the pulpit during sermons, the red lips of the Buddha) and the history of how the huge pillars were obtained for the temple. The temple/monastery complex includes schools, library and bell tower.

[Trivia interlude: *The Buddhist temple normally has monthly services for the laity. However, in "lent" (?) the services are weekly. The day on which the services are held is determined by the phases of the moon.*]

10:30am – demonstrating a high degree of balance we set off across the fields to visit the temple at Ban Yang Luang. Women are not normally allowed in this temple but an exception is made for 'farangs'. This temple featured many attractive 'stairways to heaven'.

11:30am – next door in the community temple one had to kneel to see the Buddha smile.

11:45am – shopping for beautiful articles woven by local women using traditional patterns.



12:15pm – lunch

1:00pm – visit to local market to buy food items to use as merit making offerings to the monks.

1:40pm – visit to local hair-pin maker. This remarkable ancient (86yo) gentleman is a skilled metalworker and carver. He demonstrated the making of a hair-pin.



2:15pm – massage for masochists, rest for the rest. (I didn't know that there are so many ways of causing pain in the human leg.)

4:15pm – sauna for unclean

6:15pm – festival dinner to celebrate the new year. Lovely food and the lighting of very effective string candles. Entertainment by a local youth band using traditional instruments. This band was lead by an enthusiastic multi-talented conservationist. Our hosts son performed a sword dance. In return we did the 'hokey pokey' and sang a couple of Australian folk songs.



**Day 5**  
**Monday 8<sup>th</sup> January**  
**Mae Jaem to Chiang Mai**  
**By Agnes & Phyllis**

The insomniac roistering roosters started their wake up calls at 3.40 am, but we steadfastly rejected their siren song till just before 6am when we rose from our feather down beds to have a quick cuppa before going off to do merit and gain Brownie points.

At 7 am we arrived at the monastery where 11 young novices lined up in their saffron robes and to my mind a very big begging bowl. Not like the Franciscans used in the Middle Ages. Noot provided us each with a plate of hot rice, we had to make balls and drop one into each monk's bowl, along with our own gift. The young in monks then lined up in front of us and chanted a blessing for us.



We admired the reflection of the temple in the surrounding moat, watched the workers in the paddies in the swirling mist before turning our attention to more secular pursuits.

Our next stop was the weekly market with its smells, sounds, hustle & bustle. Big drums of rice along with leaf tobacco; and every imaginable edible thing cooked, raw, naked or demurely hiding in plastic bags. Most of the vendors were ancient crones, but there was the odd young woman with a small child among the vegies.

Shopping is hard work, (not to mention sightseeing) and body and soul have to be held together by some nourishment. Soon everyone was buying local snack food. We sampled freshly baked scones filled with lurid icing; tiny rice flour tarts with a sweet custard filling; watched a young woman deftly frying battered



bananas, crabs and goodness knows what not in a wok about a meter in diameter. There were sweets galore, all brightly coloured, mainly jellies.



Even though we nibbled away in the market we managed another sumptuous breakfast on our return to the house. The menu was different from yesterday, the rice porridge had coriander, fried garlic, and a vegetable soup to flavour it, and the fruit selection included green mango, rose apple and tamarind.



Some last minute shopping for textiles in Noot's shop before the battle cry of "All aboard" was heard. We did not travel far to Noot's pet project, the weaving school for girls. Initially the local women trained the teacher who is now in charge. The girls attend twice a week for a year, and thus perpetuate the ancient craft. Their work is exquisite.

Then on to the local coop for more retail therapy before the long drive up Mt Doi Inthanon, Thailand's highest peak at 2564m. It was a very steep drive along an excellent road consisting of hairpin bends. At the summit it was only 12 °. The more intrepid went on a short loop walk, others sat around watching the birds outside a little kiosk where money literally grew on trees.

Our next stop was lunch at the Wachrithan waterfall. We all had delicious barbecued chicken followed by various dishes of our choosing. It was fairly tame fare compared what some of the other local stalls were selling, including barbecued pigs' intestines and enormous sausages which looked very spicy.



Looking at the impressive falls was a very civilised affair, circumnavigating them at a snail's pace took all of 10 minutes.

The drive back to Chang Mai and Crystal Springs hostel was uneventful. We got here just after 4 thus avoiding the peak hour traffic.



## Day 6 Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> January Chiang Mai Cooking & Shopping By Fearless Leader

A great night! The roosters didn't crow and no dogs barked although surprisingly ONE rooster was heard from our otherwise quiet sanctuary away from the traffic with the noise shut out by walls and buildings along the Chiang Mai bustling street.

Vivienne & Pam managed to find an auto-teller which cashed them up in Baht and then almost got lost. Others though took advantage of the 9.30 start to catch up on various chores from the internet to the washing.

At 9.30 our songtau driven by Gaan called around and we soon learnt why Thailand is the Land of Smiles as we went to the home of Noi who runs the Home Style Cookery school.

We cooked four dishes — Pad Thai, Green curry chicken, bananas in coconut, and Tom Yum

Goong and then proceeded to indulge ourselves in our own cooked lunch.



After a quick recovery and for Milly a ride on the back of Gaan's motor bike we opted not to go back to the Crystal House but instead going to the new Chiang Mai Airport Plaza shopping centre to get a two hour fix of retail therapy.



After a few hours of relaxation during which Milly managed to suss out a pub for later reference we all assembled at 6.30. Then after Poo had called in a songtau for us he and Milly mounted his motor-bike and took off for a restaurant in the old (moated) part of the city. Here we had to sit on the floor but for more comfort we were left dangling or at least our feet were while we indulged in a variety of sea-foods served up in the most exotic ways. The best was in the carved coconut.

While most were ready to retire after returning to Crystal House Milly had to drag Poo off to check out the Pub.



## Day 7

Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> January

Chiang Mai to Chiang Rai

By Vivienne & Pam

We started our day at 8.18am, travelling along the moat around the old city of Chiang Mai on our way to Chiang Rai.

Bus number one entertained their driver with renditions of childrens songs in anticipation of a concert later in the week. ????

We stopped at a orchard/winery where we admired the unusual fruit, tasted wines ... bought by some to consume with dinner!

We proceeded to Chiang Rai, a city with a population of half a million people, which is 200 kilometres from the Chinese border.

After booking in at The Golden Triangle Hotel it was off to Ruamit to visit a Karen village. On the 40 minute journey by motorised long-tail boats we passed many beautiful houses, fields of sweet corn, sand dredging, restaurants and more modest houses all with a backdrop of scenic mountains.

At Ruamit there were many Burmese pythons, the second largest snake in the world on display plus a monkey.

After climbing a platform to mount the elephants we clambered into the saddle, two by two, with the mahout directing with feet, stick and voice. The route took us past craft stalls, the school, narrow tracks, houses and finally into the river. Nobody suffered from motion sickness.

*They swing their trunks from side to side*

*Taking Go Bush for a ride*

*Rocking gently to and fro*

*Track and river we did go*

Dinner at the night market followed by SHOPPING!!!!!!!!!!





**Day 8**  
**Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> January**  
**Heading to Hilltribes**  
**By Karin & Milly**

A 9:20am departure from Golden Triangle Inn and on our way to our homestay in a hill village. We first discarded our unwanted luggage at Poo's office, the HADF (the Hill Area and Community Development Foundation).

Loaded up with beautiful baskets of picnic makings, we were joined by three beautiful girls; Pornpan Keawchauoom (Nong to those of us who love her), Supattra Seenak (Ta, ever generous and smiley) and finally Junlatida Hanyuth (Jip, the sound made by baby birds not half as great as herself). The girls had prepared all the food that morning starting at 4:30am, they deserve a medal for the cooking and care they have given us since Thursday.

Stopped at a market in Mae Chan and bought more food. The live fish in flat waterless plates and the live frogs hopping around in their own respective containers were a must see and the water-chestnuts and exotic fruits were a must try.



There was a long walk up to see the beautiful Huay Kang Pla Waterfall ("Fish Bone Creek"), quite a scenic walk but something of a hike. The girls prepared a most delightful lunch displayed on banana leaves. The salad with grapes and green mango and avocado was alloi (sic) (delicious).

1:30, left for Lo Yoh village. Long winding road trip up into the hills. First stop was the Ruamjai ("harmony") school where the new principal, Darren, answered our few questions and gave a little information on the school and its 320 odd students. The school has 13 teachers and many trophies for a game very similar to volley ball

except you can use everything but your hands. 5 different tribes attend the school, two tribes are technically one but there was something about them being different colours..? We were there for ages, John brought out his boomerangs and endangered the lives of many young children while causing them large amounts of glee. We witness a dance rehearsal in the dorm and music playing in the field and were stared at like strange beasts with the occasional smile.

Some 40 students board at the school in the four respective rooms.



Song Taew (the two row truck that drives the country) took us from the Inn all the way to the village of Lo Yoh, we were split up into two houses, one down the hill in a smoke house with interesting things hanging everywhere and a 58 year old grandmother and her family. The other house is on the top of the hill with an amazing view of the surrounding mountains, and high off the ground on bamboo stilts, what a place to live.

The girls (English major students at University and one at College, all in training) prepared yet another spectacular meal for us, despite having risen so early to make our lunch, two of whom slept very sweetly in the Song Taew most of the way back from lunch. The dinner was eaten at the top house with much happiness, on the bamboo balcony which barely seems likely to hold the weight of all us westerners, but it did.

After dinner the hostess at the top house dressed up in traditional attire, the beautiful silver beaded hat of the Akha tribe, the Akha people were originally from Tibet. Their people have only been in the area for 20 odd years so only ten percent are Thai citizens.





**Day 9**  
**Friday 12<sup>th</sup> January**  
**Ban Loh Yo**  
**By Alan & Janet**

6.00am ish – awoken by the roosters

7.00am - Poo's assistants and Millie prepared food and the rest had a welcome coffee or tea. Butcher arrived on a bike.

Delivery persons continued to arrive at intervals.

8.30am – breakfast of rice porridge/soup, pork and banana.

8.45am – Jip took Karen, John, Millie and Pam plus a large retinue of helpers and guides set off to the waterfall.

Poo took the rest on a long walk to the road and an extended wait for the bus.

10.45am – bus arrived and took group to the Raumajai School. The school was holding a 'student day' with dancing displays, greasy pole climbing and pole boxing. It was all very jolly and we joined in a game of musical chairs. The Australians were alas outclassed.

11.45am – walked to the village adjacent to the school (Raumjai – meaning 'mixed' ie the village is a mixture of Akha, Lahu and Chinese. We had noodles for lunch at the village restaurant cum tuck shop. The restaurant was a single story building and an earthen floor.

12.15 pm – set off in the bus on a dirt goat track that ran along ridges to the most isolated of this set of five villages. The village (Saen Mai) was within sight of the Thai/Burma border. The villagers are largely self sufficient, are animist with three shamans. It was a peaceful scene with drying rice, loads of animals (pigs/piglets, dogs/puppies, hens/chickens and a couple of

ducks.) Some of these villagers had solar power units but these persons had to be Thai citizens. The rest of the village was unpowered. This village sees very few tourists and was relatively unspoilt.

2.00pm – returned to the main road and encountered the waterfall group. John had fallen and hurt his shoulder so came with the bus group to the Heygo village (a tea plantation) for assistance. It was decided, however, that John should go to Chiang Rai for a proper medical diagnosis.

3.00pm – the bus group returned to Loh Yo village, the waterfall group having returned about 15 minutes earlier.

The afternoon was spent in washing and generally relaxing.

6.30pm – evening meal.



**Day 10**  
**Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> January**  
**Ban Loh Yo to Learning Centre**  
**By Agnes & Phyllis**

Breakfast was served in the lower establishment, another multi course meal. The menu ranged from hot sardines to pumpkin, vegetables, pork and some mysterious dishes to liven up our rice.

We were then set to work. The second Saturday in January is children's day and it was our privilege to participate in the festivities. First of all the prizes for the victors had to be prepared. These consisted of lollies sewn onto the ends of pieces of cotton thread and hung over a bamboo pole. Then there were the balloons to be blown up, bits of ribbon paper cut up and paper chains manufactured, once again with lollies in the middle.



In the middle of all this a Spanish couple turned up with their own guide to gawk at us followed by two truckloads of very noisy Germans. Mercifully they only stayed for 15 minutes or so, but I really resented them disturbing the homely atmosphere of our home village.

The intruding *farangs* gone the time came for the festivities to begin. This was strictly a women's & children's affair. The village men were all busy up the road building a new house.



Poo proved himself a brilliant organiser of children's activities. A Sunday school picnic would be the best description of activities. We of course were enthusiastic participants in just about every game. The first was a balloon bursting competition. Participants had a balloon attached to an ankle and the object of the exercise was to preserve one's own and bust the opposition's. All tactics, fair and foul were invoked. Next came musical chairs, three legged races and similar. The last thing they did was to entertain us with a dance. We then taught them the hokey-pokey and also sang "If you are happy". A great time was had by all and participants were given prizes, not only the winners.

Then came the feeding of the ten thousand. Henry Ford would have been proud of our assembly line. Two open fires were lit, with boiling pots over each. One contained a pork ball soup, the other just boiling water. Three of us were stuffing wire baskets with noodles, greens hand bean sprouts, which were then dunked by another two people into the boiling water. After a few seconds these were emptied into the bowls of the children queuing. They then proceeded to the next pot, where soup and pork balls were ladled on top. The next station of the Cross was the bench where fish sauce, chillies and other

condiments were laid out for the kids to help themselves. We served well over 100 kids and adults in about half an hour before we had our own well-earned lunch.

John rejoined us about 11.00 am, feeling a lot chirpier than the previous afternoon. His injury is not quite as serious as was feared.

At 2.00 pm we said our farewells and all piled into our trucks on the next leg of our adventure. Over incredibly steep and rutted, windy roads we reached the Chinese Martyrs' Memorial, erected by the Taiwanese. Some Nationalists were apparently trapped in Yunan and had to fight their way to freedom into Northern Thailand. A lot of Chinese refugees were eventually resettled here.

At 4.00 pm we arrived at the Learning Centre and utter bliss. Nice, clean beds, hot showers and a tranquil setting, where we could once again turn ourselves into human beings.

At 6.00 pm we made our way up to a grassed area for dinner. David a Norwegian doing volunteer work in his gap year between school and uni greeted us. We sat in groups of four around low tables getting the usual meal of rice & trimmings. Then we were entertained by the village youth group. Various Akha songs and dances were performed by girls in colourful costumes, which I found strangely reminiscent of Lapp traditional dress; especially the leggings and Pom-pommed hats. Three girls then enacted a little sung drama, but the highlight for me was the orchestral performance that followed. Two girls in full Akha rig played the digeridoo, a fair dinkum one donated by John a seven years ago, the other locally manufactured out of bamboo. Guitar, flute, and things I could not identify completed the ensemble. The last item was their teacher singing and playing the flute. Our group's rendition of Waltzing Matilda and leading an interactive Hokey Pokey was an anti-climax.





## Day 11

Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> January

### Learning Centre to Chiang Khong

By John Sinclair

The morning dawned redder than usual enriched by the smog from Yunnan (China) industries spreading ever more widely and more thickly over northern Thailand. Then it was an interesting and comfortable breakfast where we could sit on chairs with our feet on the floor.

Even while we were eating children were arriving to celebrate Students Day which is a very big celebration every year in Thailand. The tents were erected, the PA system reinstalled and countless balloons inflated. Unfortunately they wouldn't experience the unique blend of didgeridoo and Asian sounds we experienced from the HASF youth group. It was impressive to see how creatively the didgeridoo I had left HADF as a symbolic gift was being used.

Then it was off to the Akha village for a short foray. Ba Ka Suktai, the name of the village, refers to the elephant grass which was growing in abundance when the village was established about 30 years ago. When asked a question as to whether the elephant grass was then a recent replacement for the opium poppies resulted in a lengthy interaction between Poo and the Youth Group leader last night. So it is a while since the forest was first cleared and this area at least wasn't cleared by the migrating hill tribes which came later.

With gear loaded on to our sturdy mini-buses we then left the bustling Learning centre to take the torturous twisting and steep mountain track through tea plantations, passing some brilliantly set resorts to reach the Super Highway which led us then speedily northwards to the chaotic Mae Sai at the northernmost point of Thailand.

The usual chaos of Mae Sai was exacerbated by the influx of Thais who were using this Sunday

as a chance to pick up bargains from the imports flowing just across the border from southern China. We limited our shopping to just forty minutes during which time considerable bartering was done with the vendors never being the losers.

After lunch we headed about half an hour south east to the Golden Triangle where the borders of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos meet at the Mekong River we posed for photos near a temple overlooking the river which provided a great view-point for the borders before descending to visit the Opium Museum which was just below. This was a wonderful exhibition despite its theme but one left with a feeling that it was funded by the former Opium King and now Burmese businessman, Khun Sa, who was treated in here as a patriot and philanthropist who was trying to save the world and his people.

Then we followed the Mekong downstream passing the Chinese fleet of cargo ships and the convoy of Thai trucks waiting to exchange wares at this currently southern limit of navigation for larger shipping on the Mekong. We were later to learn that there are ambitious plans to blast away the many reefs of rocks and to install navigation locks to enable the ships to go right through to Vietnam.

There were views of the river while we travelled for an hour on to Chiang Khong. There was not much river flat ground and lots of hills to climb before we descended to Chiang Khong.

Waiting for us at Baan Tamilla Guest House were Noi and Senator Tuenjai Deetes, who was the founder of HADF. After settling in relaxing exploring or whatever we did we had dinner at 6.00 pm on the small restaurant overlooking the Mekong.

After dinner we went off down the street to meet the local conservation group led by "T" who are campaigning to protect the integrity of the Mekong and trying to stop the degradation which has so far resulted in the loss of scores of fish species from the river.





**Day 12**  
**Monday 15<sup>th</sup> January**  
**Chiang Khong to Had Tor**  
**By Vivienne & Pam**

We arrived in Chiang Khong and made our way to the guest house.

What a luvrly place was Baan Tamilla

Hot showers and delicious Thai dinna

Alarm rooster at dawning

Tag bags in the morning

Eggs, toast, coffee and jam...what a winna

And whiu

IMMIGRATION...Thai side

Don't you hate it when you get in the wrong queue?

Sweet revenge: Forgetful safarists who failed to fill in form...go to the back of the line.

Seniors discount...in fact NO CHARGE...for one member.

CROSSING ...to Lao

Heard one member comment as we boarded our boat to cross to Lao...

Are we really on the river for 8 hours in THIS boat?

The entry into Lao went very smoothly considering the large number of tourists to process. Then it was on the bus (local) to meet our slow boat to Luang Prabang, *The NAWACIKUNHEW* with our Captain Si.

The Mekong River is the tenth largest river in the world, 4909 km originating in the Tibetan Plateau and travels through China, Burma, Lao, Thailand and Cambodia and flows into the sea at the delta in Vietnam. We travelled 300 kilometres and the river fell one metre each kilometre. The activity on the river was constant, from people tending gardens, fishing buffalo wading, and many fast boats roaring past. The majestic backdrop of rugged mountains and forest and the constantly changing river flow from rapids and whirlpools around amazing rock formations to sand beaches with children swimming.

**Comments overheard on the boat**

*Is there a lock on this toilet?*

*Is there only Earl Grey Tea?*

*I ordered sandwiches!*

*I can't see my luggage!*

*I think we should have had a boat like that!*

*(French boat passing)*

*It's cold!*

*It's hot!*

*It's too sunny!*

These two safarists thought this boat trip was AMAZING! The fact that this mighty river is in danger is alarming. We all need to recognise the importance of the Mekong to the local people of the countries it flows through and to the rest of the world. The needs of the people and the environment must come before commercial interests no matter how tempting to the Governments to the contrary. How lucky we are to be able to experience the beauty and richness of this river, and in doing so become aware of the need to save it.

We arrived at our village, Baan Had Tor, to be met by happy children running down very steep steps eager to help up carry our luggage. After settling in with our host families, a quick tour of the village was followed by a wonderful welcoming meal and ceremony. The ceremony began with a tray topped with a cone of flowers, biscuits, whiskey and bundles of white cotton. A blessing was chanted by the men of the village, we placed our hands around the tray and the head man wet our hands with water. Strings were placed on our wrists as a sign of good fortune and safe journey. It is thought that these strings will protect you until you reach your home. Whiskey was rubbed on our hair and then the singing from the children and our group began. The men drank whiskey well after we had all retired to our beds.

The day was most memorable and one of the highlights of our trip.



**Day 13**  
**Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> January**  
**Had Tor to Luang Prabang**  
**By Karin & Milly**

Overnight in Baan Had Teu in four separate houses. Up at 6am for coffee. Then to the Monastery to give cooked rice to 2 monks and a novice. Our breakfast of rice and chicken broth; bread; marmalade and peanut butter; Yugoslavian museli or cornflakes (bought by Noi).

Tour of the village, flanked by children.

1951, Monastery built but damaged by fire during the “American” war – observed village life.



Weaving, children playing, pigs, dogs, cats, outside cooking fires, chooks, de-seeding cotton, drying bedding fillers, making boats for local fishing (easily capsized), making bricks out of cement and others out of mud, seed and dung, grass-plant-thing for insulation of buildings, vegetable garden enclosed by bamboo fence, one garden open to us: beans peas, lettuce, onions, kale, mint. Thatch making with elephant-grass, a de-headed snake ready to be cooked, cement building blocks to be used on the school stored under many houses.

A large school area, teacher’s house near-by, a school building under construction to replace the old decrepit one. Funding from Australia but the local labour is donated once a month on a Buddhist day so the construction process is slow. 11 teachers, three rooms for secondary and 6 for primary school children. There is also an adult education area situated near the temple where night classes are held for the adults who missed out on the education as a children.

Followed to the boat by all the children, many of whom carried our belongings. Left at 10am and our lot sang a few songs as a farewell.

Sunny day with a slight haze and a cold southerly breeze.

Travelling speed: slow.

Occasional fishing boats on the sand banks; some vegetable gardens and cattle, ‘speed’ boats sometimes, a few villages on the hillsides growing peanuts and bean sprouts.

Lunch at 12: noodles and vegetables cooked and prepared on board. **NB:** *When cooking with Thais, bring own peeler.*

12.30: two caves turned temples. Tam Ting. 3000 Buddas in the bottom cave. Reconstruction in 1992 with further Australian aid. Upper cave up a very long stairway. A largish cave, dark at rear. Supposedly, Kings Pha Ngum and Potisararat spent a few nights sleeping in these caves and that is why they are sacred. King Pha Nugm left his spirit in the cave and King Potisararat brought Buddhism to Laos. There is a separate cooking cave to prevent the sleeping cave being smoked out.

Made a hot short stop at a riverside market town whose name we neglected to write down but it translates into English as “mouth of the river”.

A pleasant rest of the journey to Luang Prabang.

2:30: arrive in Luang Prabang, the Laos version of a Song Taew (sic) took our bags to our Guest House ‘Xien Mouane’. Has an interesting courtyard garden with fake orchids and an over-enthusiastic lawn waterer and beautiful butterflies and bird life.

Some went to Main Street with John and Poo the Champion to get Kip (the local currency.) I changed me 3000 Baht into 78,000 kip and had to get straight home to discard it without losing my bounty.

Dinner at a gecko infested restaurant on the main street with out own personal local waiters, nicely attired, and local whet “Beer Lao”. Good grub.

Ended the evening at the night market where many a commercial wonder can be found and bought.





**Day 14**  
**Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> January**  
**Luang Prabang**  
**By Alan & Janet**

4:00am Drum wake up call from monks at Wat Xieng Mouane opposite the guest house.

6:30am A procession of 33 monks and novices left Wat Xieng Mouane for their daily round of merit making.

7:30am Fresh Lao 8:00am Into the mini-vans and Phyllis managed to scrape her leg so Noi took her off to the local health clinic for treatment. The rest of us went off to breakfast by the Mekong River.

9:15am Visited the National Museum, formerly a Royal Palace built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century for the last ruling dynasty of Laos. This was a glorious colonial style building with wide verandas and high ceilings containing relics of the last Laotian royals and a copy of the golden Buddha after which the town is named.



Also included was a collection of gifts to Laos from other countries, and in the midst of all the silver and crystal was a (broken) boomerang from Australia.

We then visited the Golden Royal Pagoda which was in the grounds of the Museum. This building was only 10 years old and not quite finished.

10:30am Into the buses for a visit to Wat Xieng Thong monastery, a large and very old complex of buildings and temples.

The temple, built in 1560, is deemed particularly sacred but was in need of some TLC.

One of the pagodas in the grounds houses a huge catafalque



once used for the funeral of the king and another contained marvellous murals either painted or made from Japanese glass. Mr Pang implied that many of the buddhas on display were ones recovered after having been stolen from other temples throughout the country.

12:00pm Lunch at a pleasant café overlooking the Khan River.

1:00pm Visited villages just outside Luang Prabang to view paper making, silk production and silk products.

2:00pm Trip along dusty road to an outlet selling cotton products. The group felt rather harassed by the insistence of the stall vendors.

3:30pm Arrived back at guesthouse for a rest. However, as this was a Buddhist holy day, the monks in the two Vats across the road had a drum competition at 4pm.

5:00pm Alan and John climbed the Phusi hill in the centre of the town and saw the sun set.



5:30pm As an alternate to the above excursion, most of the group went back to a building in the National Museum/Royal Palace grounds to view traditional Laotian opera.

7:30pm Walked to a pleasant restaurant on the Mekong River for tea.



**Day 15**  
**Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> January**  
**Luang Prabang**  
**By Agnes & Phyllis**

No feathered alarm clocks in this old imperial capital, but there is still no rest for the wicked. The monks make sure that sloth does not triumph by beating their drums at 4.00 am. It reminds the populace that they will be out on the streets with their begging bowls before 7.00 am and the faithful gather with their offerings of sticky rice and fruit awaiting the saffron robed procession. Being of a more heathen disposition I gained no merit as I set off at first light in search of more sensual pleasures.

Markets draw me like a magnet and the morning market proved irresistible. It is only a block away from our hotel and is a feast for the eyes. It was a slow start, with what appeared to be the

wholesale market for mandarins, which were being delivered piled high in the backs of utes. But as soon as we turned the corner the full glory of the market was revealed in all its splendour. Everything imaginable, from fast food to livestock. Live bats, cooked bats, live chooks and ducks in their bamboo baskets to crabs the size of the nail on my pinky. Huge containers of rice, black, brown, white, all neatly smoothed into pyramids, vegetables and fruits colourfully displayed; a lady busy filling baguettes with meat and salad; meat being butchered, chicken and fish grilled to crispy perfection. I could have danced all night... I mean I could have gawked all day, but hunger pangs drove me back to the hotel where breakfast was promised for 8.00 am.

Poo and his cohorts returned with a marvellous selection of fast food from the markets which was eagerly devoured. Each meal is an adventure, you never know what to expect.

At 9.00 we drove off to visit a Hmong village to look at the local handicraft. I found it most depressing. What gets me is the dust and the look of hopelessness about the place. Maybe I'm wrong, but I feel the plight of the Hill Tribes here in Laos is a lot worse than in Thailand. The infrastructure of this country is woeful.

After all the dust, the visit to the waterfall was a refreshing change. There were several cascades beyond the main falls and a very pleasant stroll along the creek that widened into 4 or 5 swimming holes. Not that we saw anyone take the plunge.



There was an enclosure which housed Phet, a 6 year old tigress and several Asian black bears which were rescued from the illegal wild life trade. The bears seemed happy enough, but the tiger was pacing up and down along the fence, it was heartbreaking to see her in such distress. At least she is alive, but what sort of life is it?



We had a picnic lunch at the waterfall, returned home for a short rest then went out again to see a textile center, Ock Pop Tok, which is endeavouring to get village women establish cottage industry in silk & cotton weaving, raising silk worms, spinning, dyeing the silk, designing the fabrics, etc. The work is quite exquisite.

We had our last supper at the Tamarind, a superb restaurant run by a Melbourne girl and her Lao partner. The meal was sumptuous and a fitting end to our trip.



**Day 16**  
**Friday 19<sup>th</sup> January**  
**Luang Prabang to Bangkok**  
**By John Sinclair**

6.30 and Poo is already astir preparing to go off the Morning Market to buy breakfast. I am to go with him but when I am out of the shower he has gone. No disaster he hasn't yet left for the market. So at 7.00 Milly and I trudge along to this seething place of barter and trade and a symbol of free enterprise in the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic.

There was the usual infinite variety of Asian foodstuffs and the things that go towards making it. Unusual items included more than one lot of bats which were squirming alive and which I suspect were very small flying foxes. There was a bucket of fur balls which Poo said were Bamboo Mice which lived underground amongst the bamboo which he accurately described as mini-wombats. There was a dead pheasant, a dead wild cat and other off-putting forms of animal protien in abundance.

At the main intersection near Mount Phousi Poo brought bread rolls from a street vendor. While she as making them up she disclosed that she

had recently mover from the Phusy Market to her current location because the Market rental for her small stall space was K30,000 compare with K4,000 on the street. Here she was able to charge K8000 K for the bread-rolls that she and her daughter prepared because there were many tourists. The markets are run as a business by the successful tenderer who pays the Government a fee and then collects from the stall holders. The street rentals go to the local government.

Back in the mainstream of the market the bread-rolls had a stronger spicier flavour and were half the price.

Back at the Guest House after a pleasant breakfast while others were concluding their packing Pam, Vivienne and I went off to explore the Phusy Market. I love this market because it reveals the whole pulse of the city and the demands and needs of its people. It wasn't a place for tourists but it was stimulating. On sale here was everything from barbeque, motorcycle carburettors and tampons to every kind of food, apparel cosmetic or consumer good one could imagine. Most were only component parts and they were assembled and cooked together in thousands of homes. The overwhelming impression was just how much of the work was undertaken by the women who rushed past us with bulging heavy sacks on their backs to be deposited at some stall or another. It was a stimulating place and an experience worth repeating.

Back at Xiang Muane at 9.45 my oversize nose was still running and my voice was becoming croaky as we completed packing.

Everyone was so ready we left before 10.30 which was probably just as well because at the airport I found that I was missing my air ticket to Bangkok and I had to purchase another for \$US147. They couldn't accept Visa or Amex and it had to be in American currency. Luckily as ever it was Noi to the rescues and we were able to make our flight where we had a second lunch on the plane before arriving in Bangkok and dispersing.





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