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White Cloud leads the Paa-Pa

by John Budden, 1996

One of the consequences of having a Thai spouse is that it offers a window - not a door - on Thai culture, customs and religion. I will not even attempt to summarise the beliefs except to observe that it is a unique blend of Buddhism saturated in animism and superstition that has resulted from being at the crossroads of Indian and Chinese influences for two millennia. It was flexible enough to keep both English and French forces at bay for a century and be the only Asian country not to suffer the colonial yoke. It has retained one of the strongest constitutional monarchies in the world - at least while Ramu IX is alive - yet has an ever-present military, with regular painless coups and is superficially a very democratic system that is totally corrupted. All these contradictions seem perfectly comfortable or at least in balance to the outsider who sees the Thai smile that expresses a multitude of feelings from pleasure to humility through embarrassment to a most violent hatred. The point of all this is to let the reader know that I know only that I don't know, but will

All religions have ways of making merit and raising funds and one of the most colourful Buddhist event is a Paa-pa which often in Thailand involves country born residents of Bangkok making pilgrimages back to their home village. As with most things Thai that means a party - even the Thai word for work literally translates as having a party, - and in my wife's case the Paa-pa involves a journey back to the North-East of Thailand near the Laos and Cambodian borders some six hundred kilometres from the City of Angels. Because my wife is married to a Farang (foreigner) and therefore presumed to be rich (!) she was obligated to organise such an event, and I was permitted to participate because I had the cameras and a car!

The main elements of the Paa-pa are the money tree, which is trucked around the market in Bangkok, friends' houses and sometimes left in a shop and to which all and sundry will attach notes - and thank you for the opportunity of so doing (of making merit), - the journey back to the village which will have a few cars and at least one bus all suitably decorated with at least the Thai and Paa-pa flags to a village fair over a long weekend as well as a parade and one or two religious ceremonies in the village Wat (temple).



(The money tree and miscellaneous gifts- will it fit?)

Our last Paa-pa began most auspiciously with a visit of an elephant to our house. This was unplanned but was very welcome as the elephant is probably the second most significant symbol in Thai culture. Even today elephants are seen working around the suburbs of Bangkok, despite attempts by the authorities to ban them from the metropolis' roads and you will often see Thais feeding them for good luck. Have you ever seen an elephant de-top a pineapple? - fruit in mouth - top in trunk and one deft twist! The visit of the elephant lasted for about an hour as the whole neighbourhood descended as well mandarins and almost anything else edible offered him, all in such a gentle manner, with the kids running around under his feet.

I have long since ceased trying to organise anything Thai and limit myself to sitting back and marvelling that any objective is met - the mathematicians think chaos theory! Anyway, after relocating the bus that got lost on its way to our house and marshalling about 50 passengers from various points in the city, the cavalcade got underway at about 9 pm on New Year's Eve. only to grind to a magnificent halt about ten minutes later as we hit the expressway out of Bangkok. Traffic jams in



(How can you pick up a peanut with *that*?)

Bangkok make the return to Sydney from Gosford after a long weekend thirty years ago, seem like Panorama Circuit during Easter and this was no exception and four hours later we had progressed about four kilometres. As the less persistent dropped out at 2 and 3 in the morning, the speed picked up and we passed some of the causes of the havoc three overturned buses, two pick-ups wiped out and numerous motor cycles in the ditches - they never publish statistics in Bangkok, but from various individual reports the death toll was about thirty. By the time we reached the gateway to the Northeast at Korat (Nackon Ratchisima), we were making good time, and the balance of the journey was totally uneventful and to my wife's amazement; she always refers derogatively to my driving speed and compares the car to a turtle - we were first by about one hour.

Most of the Thai rural roads are first-class, even the three digit country roads that I usually travelled on are better graded and surfaced than most of the Pacific Highway, but there are some unusual hazards. This is particularly so at dusk when a combination of buffalos returning to their barns and their two-wheel steel cousins from Japan - the Kulboto - that finds many forms, but at dusk, labours unlit at about 10 km per hour along the highway hauling workers and their produce back to the village, as well as the 10-wheelers whose drivers are drugged on amphetamines, that are racing to reach Bangkok before the morning truck curfew starts and finally, suicidal bike riders sometimes four or five passengers aboard, all require one to have nerves of steel and quick reflexes.

I have referred to the derivation of the word Thai earlier - free - and nowhere is the attitude given more meaning than in their road manners. Full and double yellow lines are there for their aesthetic value and red lights are optional. Ten-year-old drivers are common and licences the exception and obtained by graft anyway.

The accidents when they happen are often spectacular as a result and this long weekend was no exception as the alcohol took its toll and that night, we just missed seeing three motor cyclists get decapitated on the road into town, but the bodies were on display next day at the hospital-morgue.

Thai language newspapers do not spare any sensitivities, with full colour photos so one gets a little blase about accidents and murders and there is no doubt that life is cheap and often short in that part of the world.



(Journey's end; the village Wat at Batin Koomorang)

When all have arrived at the village a procession to the Wat, which is encircled three times, starts the religious component. The Paa-pa ceremony itself seems endless particularly to such as myself who cannot sit cross-legged for any length of time without cramps and do not understand the chants but, as usual, the Thai is flexible and polite, and my problem is avoiding pointing my extended feet at anyone (a major indiscretion!). At these events I usually end up with the only chair and sitting higher than the monks, but my protestations are ignored, and I don't think our relations are impaired. The ceremony concludes with the presentation of the tree and counting - much ego hangs on the outcome - and the reciprocation by the monks (I have enough Thai Silk to make ten shirts). The fair included Thai boxing, dancing, lucky dips, games of skill and chance and finally outdoor theatre (unfortunately there is an increasing tendency to substitute films for theatre) and goes until the next dawn. I passed at about 2:am and slept with about thirty others in the monk's audience rooms on the floor.

On the Thai-Cambodian border are a number of old Khmère sites and one of these that predates Ankor is the Kow Pa Wihahn. We thought we would take the opportunity of visiting this thousand-year-old temple. Travelling south on trunk road 221 we crossed the Main North-Eastern Highway and started into the No Man's Land bordering Cambodia. As the vegetation became more like an abandoned minefield and the command posts were camouflaged it became clear we may not succeed and when I had to surrender my passport at the next checkpoint, I was getting a little concerned. After about a steady 10 kilometre climb, we reached the summit and the final roadblock, sandbagged and barbed-wired and heavily armed. The site had been open, up 'til about two years ago, but was now in KR hands and off-limits from the Thai side (I found when I got back to Bangkok that two UN staff had

disappeared at that time there) and we could only see the site from across the two hundred meter valley. It is a pity as the Khmer influence in this part of Thailand is much more than many Thais are prepared to admit but the views into Cambodia and back to Sisaket were worth the trip, however. I still have my dream of being able to drive to Angkor and Pagan from Bangkok before I stop touring.

I wish I could say the trip home was uneventful but was not to be thanks to a bus load of revellers who threw three double bangers at the Car. After the shock had worn off and rage set in I chased and pulled the bus over and gave the miscreants a piece of my mind in the hest Thai. They got the message and when they recognised the significance of the number plates, I was given an apology that only could come from a Thai, so I let the bus pass with a "mai pen rai" (it doesn't



(White Cloud in front of the reclining Bhudda at Ayuthya)

matter); however it did matter as the bungers had blown off a heater hose and we shortly ran out of water. I stopped before any damage was done, and the proverbial fencing wire and spare inner tube made adequate running repairs. Fresh water was not as easy, so I did my best with the adjacent rice paddy, and we limped back to Korat and drained the radiator. Between Korat and the ancient capital of Thailand at Ayuthya we stopped for the necessary "photo opportunities". The Cloud always looks the part, but I am admittedly very biased.

When I was younger, we always used to joke about being able to tell whether a car had an electric fuel pump if the driver kept a hammer near the driver's seat, and while the double pump of the Cloud has proved to be reliable, the wet in Bangkok tests the robustness of anything in the lowest half meter. As I pumped the horns after the last wet, I should have dismantled the petrol pump as a precaution but didn't and paid the price. A little "gentle persuasion" was sufficient encouragement, and she made the last hour back to Bangkok with only one or two more stops.

All-in-all about one thousand miles this trip and in the last ten years now, has always got me there and back!

Postscript: White Cloud has now returned to Australia (as my tour of duty has ended) and is about to start a new career after she is given a new suit that hopefully last the next forty years.