

Klaus Meyer: A letter from Bangkok
Prepared for the website in September 2006

December 9, 2002, 5 am

Dear friend,

The jet-lag does not let me sleep, so I am up early even though I somehow still feel tired. Last night, I arrived in Bangkok, and since it is the first time in another country, so it is always interesting to record the first impressions, how this place different from other places that I have been too – or where is it just the same in different colours, or language for that matter.

My first impression driving in the taxi to the hotel was actually rather reminiscent of Shanghai. The impression of the suburbs with some skyscrapers and many lower houses, with billboards, and, well, buildings everywhere was quite similar to what I recall from driving into Shanghai from the domestic airport. Also, the grey sky added to that impression, but it was much warmer.

The difference however is that at many places there were blocs of old historical buildings, build from wood, probably monasteries, but also some residential homes. They gave the skyline a distinct character. They include large central buildings with a very steep roof, probably housing a Buddha and some side buildings, some with curved steeples. Of course, I had seen such places on pictures, yet what surprised me was how many there are. Not all as fancy, but still they give the city an atmosphere.

I did not experience the infamous Bangkok traffic jams; in fact compared to Shanghai the ride into town was much shorter and smoother. But since I started already with comparisons, the light railway build on pillars on one of the main roads, and creating a kind of roof over the street reminded me of Seoul. I read that it made a substantive difference to the traffic jams here. Yet, it does not go all the way to the old city centre, only to the area with the big hotels and shopping malls.



I also noticed the omnipresence of the king – and virtually every public building starting from elementary school to ministries and royal palaces, there is a picture of the king, sometime with his wife. The picture seems to different at each place, he is always benevolently smiling, young man. Hard to believe he is turning 75 next year, or so I heard. I had read about this ever present reference to the king, but it took me still a little by surprise to see him so much. The pictures usually are framed in gold, with some other decorations attached to it, sometimes a whole altar. Later, I saw in a monastery people praying to

an altar with a statue of presumably king's father or grandfather. The admiration for the royal family seems to be almost religious.

After checking in the hotel, and taking a bath and a rest, and set off to explore the city. By then it was almost 6 pm and it was getting dark (especially near or under the light railway). In the immediate vicinity of the hotel, there were the usual tourist traders, then shopping centres like you see them anywhere in Asia, not much surprise.

The next surprise, really, was the elephants. There was an elephant standing in the middle of the pavement! An attendant was looking after him, and tourists took pictures (usually from a certain distance). Two people were holding out something for sale, which I guess must be some kind of sugar to feed to elephant. I haven't seen anyone feeding the elephant, though. But especially the Japanese tourists were quite curious while at the same time keeping safe distance ...

The elephant was smaller than the African elephants I had seen in Kruger National Park a few weeks ago, but much more tame. I am not aware of elephants being tamed in Africa, and used for farming (traditional) or to play tricks for the tourists in the cities. It's quite a different relationship between human and elephants here. This particular elephant was a bit over 2 meters tall. Later on my walk I saw two more who seemed to be more or less bored while there attendant had dinner, or chatted with his friends. The attendants, or whatever they ought to be called, seemed to be rather poor.



The third elephant was actually standing at a bus stop ...I wish I had my camera ready in that moment. But then he was moved on. I had actually left my camera in the hotel during my initial and exploratory excursion in the city, a usual precaution.

I kept walking through good areas and not so good ones. After passing through the area around Siam square the road passes through rather ordinary areas with small shops, most of which were closed, and residential buildings, no high rise. Some places, there were food stalls where people were eating by the roadside or in side avenues. These small houses and shops, and food stalls by the street resemble what I have seen it in many places in China, especially in Taiwan, but people here appear considerably poorer than Taiwan, Hong Kong or even Shanghai (though my image of the latter is very partial indeed).

Eventually, I came near the old centre, and stepped into a large Buddhist temple that was still open. There were no tourists, just locals praying. So, I stepped into the grounds, but stayed by the door not to disturb the locals in their prayers. I could glimpse a big golden Buddha several meters tall in the centre of the main building where the singing was coming from. The whole compound was surrounded by a wall, and inside the wall were Buddha's sitting facing the main building – they were smaller but still larger than man-size.

I then walked back through the city, at night. It seemed easy to find, but then I took a wrong turn, and was no way turn left again – which was because I was walking parallel to the railway tracks, and there was no bridge to cross them. Somewhere a dog barked and actually followed me for a hundred meters, which was rather annoying to say the least. There are very many ugly dogs hanging around town, apparently living off the rubbish thrown out of the people, and lying lazily on the pavement, one has to be careful not to step on them.

Then I passed through the railway station, with loads of people sitting and waiting for their train. Nothing really special to report further ... and walk along dark roads of small shops, later through fancy shopping malls, and back to the hotel. In total, I walked for almost three hours, and so I was both tired and sweating. My shirt was completely wet – this is not a place to do much outdoor exercise, even in the evening. I don't actually mind the sweating, though it is not nice if you are with other people...



I had dinner in the hotel, which may sound a bit boring given all the food I had seen on the streets. But I am a bit risk-averse when it comes to food stalls and hawkers on the street, especially if I speak neither the language nor can judge the quality of what they cook or sell. Also, as tall foreigner I naturally attract more attention, if I look at some displays, with people expecting me to pay a lot more than a local would. That's why I prefer to hang around with locals who can do the bargaining for me – or at least ensure that I don't pay too much over the local price.

Today, I will spend some time on traditional tourism, and take my camera along. My Laptop says it is midnight now for you in Europe, which is 6 am local time here. I think, I'll take a little nap first.

December 9, 11 pm

My dear friend,

I started the day rather later. I took breakfast early, but because of jet lag, and having been up last night it still took quite a while to get going.

I spend most of the day at Wat Pho – which is the largest Wat (monastery) here. It is amazingly large, with several huge Buddha statues – including the famous reclining one. They are all gilded, and just look impressive. Quite a few tourists hang around, both locals and foreigners. The foreigners pay admission charge, the local pretend to be praying, or really do. It is hard to describe this Wat – it is several wooded buildings, including the large ones for the Buddha statues and various side buildings. And then they have the funnily shaped spiral steeples, which if I understood it right are memorials for people – and the largest one are for kings Rama I, II, III and IV.

In one corner there were performances by school children, some dancing and some theatre playing, where one student would read out the story and the others would illustrate what was happening – so much I could guess without understanding Thai.

I was actually also surprised that at quite a few smaller shops I saw both Thai and Chinese characters, less frequently also English. May be this is the local Chinese minority – though I was told that they actually are integrated and mostly speak Thai rather their native tongues from Hokkien, Guandong etc.

December 11, 5 am

Good morning my friend,

I still haven't found an internet café from where to write to you, probably I have been hanging out in the wrong part of town. I am sure there are some in the shopping mall and hotel area, but I spend most of the day walking through older parts of town, and looking at historical places. There were one or two very suspicious looking places advertising 'e-mail' but they didn't seem to have more than a half dozen filthy computers...

Bangkok is very unequal, and by hanging out the old parts one get the impression that it is quite poor. But then, taking the sky-train and looking over the town towards North and East, it looked more like Singapore – first I wondered why I reminded of Singapore, of all cities in Asia. But then it dawned on me: it is the trees between the skyscrapers! Like Singapore, Bangkok is actually quite green, and flat (in contrast to Hong Kong where the trees are on the hillside, if at all).

The most amazing sight yesterday was the National Palace, and the associated Wat (Buddhist monastery / temple). So much gold!!! And so richly decorated. I just walked around in wonder ... it is really amazing – and I don't use such superlatives very often!. The outside of several of the buildings appear to be entirely decorated in gold, including shrines and chedis (what I early described as spiral steeples, they apparently contain



relics of revered persons, like a shrine. I am still not quite clear of their religious meaning, but they give these Wat's a distinct Thai flair, which is very different from anywhere else in Asia). The most famous place in the national palace compound is the emerald Buddha, which is actually from Jade and only 75 cm tall. But he is sitting on essentially a mountain of golden objects putting him high above the worshippers and tourists sitting at the feet.

Architecturally, the oldest buildings show very distinct Thai features – which makes them interesting from a tourist point of view. The more modern buildings are heavily Western influenced, which is not always to their advantage. Yet I was amazed about one 19th century palace in that National Palace compound that looked like it had been transplanted from England or France. The

main palace, which is used for certain ceremonies only, looks Western at the bottom and Thai on the roof, which makes for an interesting combination.

I also kept walking through the town, looking at different places, mainly soaking up the atmosphere rather than studying anything in detail. Again I was amazed about how many Wat's there are, and most of them (not all) well maintained. Buddhist religion seems to be important to the people here. I also saw some palaces in what elsewhere would probably be called colonial style, i.e. wooded architecture with strong European influences from the 19th century. Yet these buildings were hiding behind high walls. One palace was particularly recommended, so I took the skytrain and walked quite a bit to reach it, only to find out that it was closed until 3 pm (it really was – see below) – and I didn't want to hang around for several hours to wait for that.

One negative experience I made is that there are friendly people approaching with apparently less friendly intentions. They try and convince you to visit certain places, where they apparently get a commission – and they do resort to lies to help their cause. Like telling that the Wat I intend to visit was closed until 2 pm, and wouldn't I want to visit another place in the meantime. But it wasn't closed at all. Or the 'teacher' who spend his honeymoon in Denmark, and apparently had picked up a few words, and how to say 'how are you in Danish', and who tried to convince me to visit some jewellery shops with 'much cheaper prices', and "today last day sale". When he hailed a tuk-tuk for me to send me there, I stopped the conversation abruptly, and walked off. Recalling the conversation later, I realized some inconsistencies, like he spend he visited Denmark on his honeymoon last year, but he bought some special jewellery for his 10th wedding anniversary at the shop he so warmly recommended. Anyway, I did the right thing by walking off. This was both yesterday, and today I just ignored any 'friendly strangers' completely, or signalled very firmly that I didn't want to talk to them at all. Last night I read in the Lonely Planet about the types of scams they use to screw tourists, and they mentioned that they specifically target single male travellers. It's not nice if one has to be so suspicious towards other people who abuse the fact that people in general a quite friendly.



Last night I had dinner at a beer festival near the World Trade Center. The apparently four biggest brands had set up an area where they served their beer and food, and offered live music plus a video screen with the latest football matches (which don't start until late at night because they are in Europe). The atmosphere was quite nice, if you ignore the fact that most of the local audience were teenagers (as were the girls serving), and the music was too loud. But the food was decent value for money. I expected that by hanging around the Carlsberg area, I might see other Danes, but I

didn't. From a marking point, I noticed that Carlsberg was positioned further ways from the main street and train stop, and was thus less visible than Heineken and the two local brands (Klassik and Singha). Heineken also put up the biggest show in terms of advertising, lightning, music, and food. Also at other places, Heineken seemed always to have a higher profile than Carlsberg. The two of

them are most successful throughout Asia in bringing Western brands, I don't recall other brands being really popular anywhere. Actually, I recall one menu that distinguished local and imported beer, and had both Heineken and Carlsberg as "local". It is probably correct as they are brewed under license most places, but I am not sure the marketing managers would be so happy. I think most people, including the tourists, try the local beers and find them just as good.

December 13, 2 am

Good morning my friend,

Last night I actually slept through, so I didn't write any message for you. So, I am slowly getting over the jet lag. Tonight, may be I went to bed too early, I a wake up in the night again – to write to you ☺

Your recommendation to visit Jim Thompson's home was a good idea. I went there Wednesday morning. He had built himself quite a nice house combining Thai and Western ideas about architecture. It has lots of interesting little corners and historical items to display ... and a romantic garden to walk and hide in. And it is quite well maintained and managed – I guess that contributes to his brand name.



From Wednesday afternoon onwards I have been involved in conference related activities that are less interesting to write about. Last night we had a welcome dinner and cultural evening with performances of traditional dances by students from the local university. Quite nice, and very different from our European traditions. I had seen some kind of religious dance being performed at a shrine before. The girls were wearing a high pseudo-golden headgear, and slowly moving to a rhythmic music. The performances yesterday involved different types of dances with other kinds of costumes, but all played to a similar kind of music, which is mainly rhythmic and not melodic, and



the movements are slow and elegant ... with the hands and fingers often bend backwards and spread in peculiar ways. At the end the audience was called upon to join in, and I guess the locals had a good laugh about us foreigners imitating the movements. I took some pictures of the dancers...