



ISB NETWORK NEWS

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Purpose: The ISB Network Foundation, Inc. is a not-for-profit, 501-C-3 organization, dedicated to bringing Alumni of International School Bangkok together to support, maintain, and create contacts between people who shared similar experiences in Thailand. We serve as the Official Alumni Association for International School Bangkok.

Dues & Benefits: Membership fees are \$40.00 for 2 years and are tax deductible. Our goal is to provide you with three newsletters per year and access to contact information of all known ISB Alumni. You do not have to be a member to be listed on the website/directory or to attend a reunion.

Your paid membership helps support the activities performed by the all-volunteer Board of Directors responsible for maintaining the database, publishing the newsletters, maintaining presence on the web, and planning the biennial reunions.

Join online or by mail. Click on **Join ISBN** on our website <http://isbnetwork.com>. Or write us at the above address. When you join, you will receive a password to gain access to the Members-only areas of the website.

Alumni Mini-Reunion at Gulliver's Pub in Bangkok

By Kate Johnson '76 (isbkate@yahoo.com)

While so many state-side alumni were visiting Thailand for the holidays, Aaron Frankel '86 and Maile McCoskrie Lindley '67 organized an informal get-together for ISB alumni. Aaron is the founder of Groovy Map (www.groovymap.com) and is lucky enough to still live in Bangkok. He suggested we meet at Gulliver's Pub on Sukhumvit Soi 5 – a fun night spot where we could enjoy a Singha and some great company.

It was absolutely wonderful to see old friends and meet new ones. Thanks so much to Maureen Lockhart Salahshoor '75 and Brian Lindley for taking pictures! If you read the July 2006 issue of the ISBN newsletter, then you saw the article by Mian Pinijsakkul '03 about life at ISB and at college in the states. She is back in Bangkok, having recently graduated from Indiana University. I was glad that she was able to join us at Gulliver's and I got to meet her.

More of these get-togethers are being planned, including one on Wednesday, March 7, before this issue is published. Be sure to check the Bulletin Board for news of future get-togethers. They really are a lot of fun!



Maile McCoskrie Lindley '67 with Philip Suradejvibul '86 and his daughter Carolyn, named for her late grandmother, former ISB teacher Mrs. Carolyn Saluja.



Mian Pinijsakkul '03 and Kate Johnson '76.



Mrs. Augusta Gatti and Aaron Frankel '86



Anne Marie Moore '89 and John Heinecke '89



Chira Iamsuri '83 and Jun Ikeda '83



Michael Eaton '67 and Val Philbrick Sherman '67



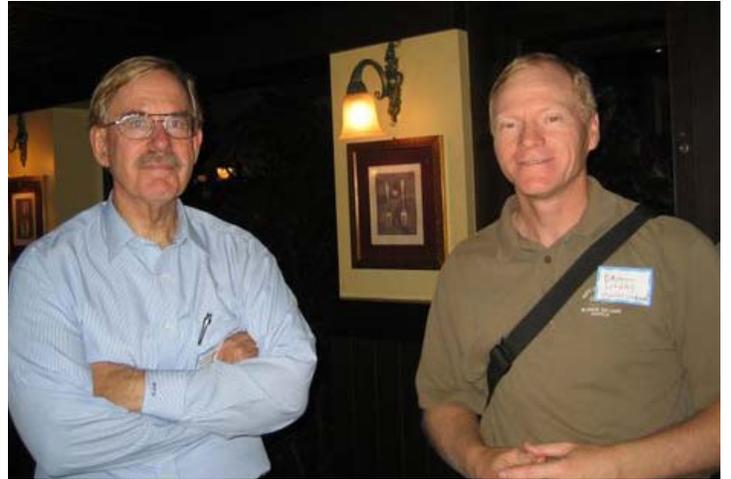
Devin Brougham '73 and Charlie Cosgrove '73



Current Teacher Barbara Kalis and Mark Brougham '70



Esther Chang '65 and Maile



Dr. Bill Gerritz, current ISB Head of School, and Maile's husband Brian Lindley



Urmi Shah '87



Maile with Mrs. Betty Yugala



Leanne Croucher Gryea '95, Pittrapim (Pim) Arora '95, and Kate



Agusta, Betty, Chira, and Jun



Maureen Lockhart Salahshoor '75, John Heinecke, and Philip Suradejvibul

Soi Sisters

By Kate Johnson '76 (isbkate@yahoo.com)

When the term “Soi Sisters” is mentioned to non-Bangkok people, they think it has something to do with a group of women who like Chinese food! Actually, the Soi Sisters are a very small group of early 60’s ISB’ers who were inspired by the YaYa Sisterhood and have taken that concept well beyond its original intent. Further motivation came when one of them was diagnosed with Leukemia, and they used their creativity to expand the bounds of nonsense for her entertainment, as well as their own. Buying outrageous gifts for her and themselves helped assuage their sorrow and eventual loss. Now, they embrace silly for their own pleasure and as a means of support for their “sisters” in times of need. If you see any of them in their tiaras at various events, they are evidence of their love for one another and their incredible joy at being ISB’ers.



The Soi Sisters celebrate a birthday in Eugene, Oregon, in 2005. One sister was missing because she was in Paris! However, she was there in spirit and sent her good wishes by phone.

New Name for Our Hotel in San Diego in 2008

Effective April 1, 2007 The Red Lion Hanalei Hotel, the site of our 2008 reunion, will now be known as Crown Plaza. Please continue to make your reservations in anticipation of this event http://www.isbnetwork.com/read_article.php?id=63. All reservations made prior to the name change will simply convert to the new name – the date, place and prices stay the same, of course.

A New Adventure

By Maile McCoskrie Lindley '67 (isbmaile@sbcglobal.net)

In our large world, mine keeps getting smaller and smaller. Thailand had always seemed so far away when actually it only takes about a day to get there when all of the travel and layover time is taken into account and, gosh!, you get almost all of that time back when you return home.

How lucky I am to get back to Thailand so often. Most would be happy to get back once; I have been back 7 times in the last 10 years. In 1997 I discovered that the Marriott Riverside Resort (one of my favorite hotels in the world and where I was staying with my sister Sandy) is owned by Bill Heinecke from my class of 1967. Who would have guessed that 40 years ago? His Mom and Dad?

In 2002 I returned to ISB for the 50th Anniversary celebration. This was the first time I had been back on campus since I had left in 1967. I got a real feel for Bangkok during that trip since my sister Marsha had been living in Bangkok for more than a year and really knew her way around. By the time my husband Brian and I left, we had a feel for the city that only comes from being there.

In 2004 I returned to ISB to personally present the ISB Network Foundation Scholarship to that year's winner. I also began to become acquainted with the administrative staff and faculty. By 2005 I knew some by name and even more recognized and greeted me as I made my way around the campus. It took another trip back before I could call the High School principal by his first name "Andy" and not "Mr. Davies". It still feels uncomfortable, even though I am pretty sure I am at least 15 years older than he is.

In 2005 I was on hand in early January to discuss how our ISB Network Foundation could get involved with ISB after the Tsunami. To date we have functioned as a USA-based collection point for funds gathered. By sending the monies to us to be sent on to ISB and then used for the school in Khao Lak, all USA taxpayers can take advantage of their donation as a charitable one for tax purposes.

In January 2006 Brian and I traveled to Khao Lak to see how the progress was going at the school ISB is helping to build. I was able to put an article in our newsletter along with photos. A lot remained to be done, but that said, it was amazing how much had been accomplished in such a short time.

By this past January (2007) when we again returned to Khao Lak to check on progress, we were able to meet with some of the individuals involved with the ESL program that ISB has implemented. Our ISBN newsletter has continued to include updates on the progress being made. However, Brian and I realized we didn't want to just read about it – we want to be part of it. We both came to the realization that we want to make more than just a financial contribution. So in mid-July we will return to help the children with their English skills. They need to hear English spoken by those of us who speak it as a first language. And I feel a real need to simply read stories and play games with those kids who are missing so much personal attention from families who are no longer around to provide it.

A few have asked how I can still remain President of the ISB Network Foundation while I am out of the country. With an Internet connection, which they have, I can stay in touch from Thailand as easily as I can from California. Our plan is to be in Thailand mid-July to mid-November and then come home to spend the holidays with our families. We will then return to Khao Lak after Christmas and stay until school closes in early March for their 2½ month summer (hot season) break. We will then repeat the cycle; returning to Khao Lak after our 2008 reunion in San Diego.

We'll see how it works out. Of course, all are welcome to come and visit. But don't expect a lazy, boring vacation lying on the beach. Come spend time with the children – the survivors of the tsunami – and have the most amazing and fulfilling time of your life!



Tsunami Project Update:

Where Does the Money Go?

By Leanne Chadwick, ISB Tsunami Relief Network Board Member (leannec@isb.ac.th)

([http://www.isb.ac.th/Tsunami Project Update](http://www.isb.ac.th/Tsunami%20Project%20Update))

The fund collected by the ISB Tsunami Relief Network (also known as Network, but not to be confused with the ISB Network, your alumni association) is completely transparent and we have a complete accounting system of money received as well as money spent. 100% of donations received go to the R35 project. We on the Board and ISB donate the overhead and other costs to run this fund. R35 submits a written proposal for any project to us with all pertinent details: cost, vendor or construction company details, and so on. If we feel they don't have enough information, we send it back asking them for more. We only do one to two things at a time. After we have approved the funds and project, we deposit the money in a joint account held by R35 and ISB that is used only for approved projects. The account is reviewed by Dr. Ugo Contessi (Deputy Head of School and Chief Financial Officer) and his assistant every few weeks. All money is held in Bangkok on the ISB books that only Dr. Contessi can approve before it's withdrawn. If it is a very large project with a high baht amount, we deposit the money in stages. We do not allow anyone associated with ISB, the Network, or volunteers to handle cash donations to R35.

Neither the Network nor R35 is set up for donors to send in a \$50 check with a stipulation to it. If alumni would like to pool their donations and come to me with a higher amount, then I can find a specific project for the group. For instance, we have designated specific funds to specific projects, such as the volunteer program, the language lab, and for the playground, only because the amounts were substantial. Otherwise, donors may send their donation to the general fund and trust us to use it accordingly for the project as we have done for the last two years.

I hope this is helpful to you. We are very happy about your partnership with this project and feel it is a wonderful way to build the relationship between the alumni and ISB. We are thrilled about Maile and Brian coming to R35 and the possibilities of other alums volunteering.



ISBN President MaileMcCoskrie Lindley '67 presents a check from the ISBN to ISB for tsunami relief.

From left to right: Tom Baker (Deputy Head of School for Learning), Michael Eaton '67, Kate Johnson '76, Maureen Lockhart Salahshoor '75, Dr. Bill Gerritz (Head of School), Maile, Dr. Contessi, Mrs. Usa Somboon (Headmistress), Betsy Ball Moore '69, Mary Walsh '76, and Alan Munn '75

As of December 1, 2006, the ISB Tsunami Relief Network has received 454 donations. Thousands of students and their parents, individuals and organizations throughout the world – including the ISB Network Foundation – have contributed with their fundraising efforts and activities to the ISB Tsunami Relief Fund.

Here’s a brief summary of how much money has been raised and what it has been spent on. Note that all amounts listed are in **Thai Baht**.

Total funds raised:	42,365,037
Expenditures:	
Transfer to the Rajaprachanugroh Foundation for the construction of a school building	19,880,372
Transfer to the Electricity Authority of Thailand to upgrade the Electricity infrastructure of the R35 School	1,401,785
Transfer to the R35 School to fund the costs of 10 additional teachers and 1 administrative staff for 1 year	1,678,848
<u>ESL volunteers program</u>	1,857,511
<u>Language lab</u>	1,202,000
<u>Washing and drinking water areas</u>	854,318

Many other activities that occurred in the last 21 months, such as visits, exchanges, delivery of materials, chairs, desks have been self-financed through other sources.

Now that the school construction is finished, they will concentrate on the inside of the buildings (language and other labs), and will review new needs. They will provide updates after their next visit around mid February.



Language Lab



Drinking Water Area

As our commitment is a life long commitment, the fundraising efforts will continue.

On behalf of the R35 children, and staff: **THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU**

Children's Day at R35 School in Khao Lak

By Kate Johnson '76 (isbkate@yahoo.com)

Children are considered the most valuable resource of a country. In Thailand, there is a saying that goes, "Children are the future of the nation, if the children are intelligent, the country will be prosperous." To help stimulate children to be aware of their significant role in the country, the National Children's Day was held for the first time on the first Monday of October 1955 and continued like this until 1963. Then it was changed to the second Saturday of January. Thai people celebrate Children's Day by taking their children out to have fun. Many local authorities organize special events, while other places of interests usually let children in for half price or even for free on this day.

In January 2005, there was no Children's Day for the children of Khao Lak. The tsunami had hit just a couple of weeks earlier, so you can imagine what the situation was like. By January 2006, life was slowly returning to normal. At R35, however, any available money was being used just for the basic care of the kids. The mother of Khun Jan (the liaison between R35 and the volunteers) decided to do something for the kids and spent her own money to buy an ice cream for each one.

A couple of ISB Alumni heard about this. They knew they had to do *something* for Children's Day 2007 and donated \$500 to buy treats for the kids. Khun Jan told the school headmaster about the donation and got his permission to look for sponsors to donate even more money and food to make it a truly special day for all the children of R35.

This year, Children's Day was a huge success. As you can see from the pictures, the kids had a fabulous time. They hope to be able to do the same thing next year.





Ice Cream Sandwich Thai Style – a scoop of ice cream on a slice of white bread



Our Small World Keeps Getting Smaller . . .

By Maile McCoskrie Lindley '67 (isbmaile@sbcglobal.net)

Much to the embarrassment of my husband and family, I seem to talk to anyone I am standing near – at the grocery, in line at Disneyland, at the airport – I can't seem to help myself. As much as I try not to, I find myself always hopeful that I will strike up a conversation with someone who turns out to be from ISB.

This past January I was finally minding my own business, reading a book while relaxing at Bill Heinecke's Marriott Resort on Phuket Island, enjoying the last few days of our trip to SE Asia. Brian had gone into the pool to cool off and while resting in the shade at the side of the pool, HE got into a chance conversation with another hotel guest. We were very much aware of a BIG wedding that was taking place on the property over a 3-day period of time, which seems to be the norm in India. Preeja mentioned he was a guest at the hotel for the wedding, Brian explained that we come to Thailand annually so I can present the ISB Network Scholarship at ISB.

Come to find out, Preeja's wife graduated from ISB; he proudly from Ruam Rudee. Their three children currently attend ISB. On top of that, over 100 guests at the wedding were from ISB, maybe more, and it turns out the wedding planner, Devki Daldas (called Noi) an aunt of the bride, graduated from ISB with me. The fathers of both the bride and groom graduated from ISB in the 60s as did the bride and groom themselves in 1997 – what a bonanza of lost alumni!



At the wedding reception at the Marriott Resort in Phuket.

Left to right: Franz Huber '97, Jonathan Lor '99, Maile McCoskrie Lindley '67, Sirous Thampi '97, Danielle Green '97



Noi and Maile

Most are living in Bangkok; however, one lives in our town of Newport Beach, California – the rest all over the world. Noi's daughter, Lavinia Hemlan, is also married to an ISB alum and they live in San Diego. I am hopeful she will attend our reunion in 2008.

We were invited to attend the wedding reception on the final night of the celebration. We hardly had the right clothes, but I just couldn't miss this opportunity. We dressed in the best we had and slipped in. I introduced myself to all who Preeja pointed out to us, collected email addresses and phone numbers, took photos, and gave them slips of paper with our website listed. Next time I'll be prepared and have business cards to hand out.

I have started the process of contacting all the email addresses. Over time we will see how many lost alumni we can add to our database. I know they are out there – we just all need to keep looking. So the next time you're standing in line at the grocery or relaxing by the pool on vacation, don't hesitate to start chatting with whoever is nearby. You just never know who you'll meet!

Return to the River Kwae Camp

By Sandy McCoskrie Blanchette '72 (Sandy.blanchette@umb.edu)

For me, a trip to Thailand cannot be complete without a stay at the River Kwae Family Camp in Kanchanaburi. This is the third time I've made my way back to camp since leaving as a 12 year old in 1967. The fond memories brought me back, and the joy of reliving those keeps me returning. My husband, Rolly, and I arrived by car on Friday afternoon, Jan. 11, 2007. Verna met us at the big tree near the entrance gate and directed our driver to the house where we'd be staying for the weekend. Rolly loves the place almost as much as I do. It is unassuming to say the least and the people are very special.

I was thrilled that a camp would be taking place for the weekend and looked forward to the arrival of the kids and their parents. They were leaving Bangkok right after school and were expected for dinner. As it turned out, the mother who organized the trip had car trouble and showed up well after dinner.

The group consisted of an international group of families from the NIST, the other International School in Bangkok, located where our old ISB had been on Soi 15. The families were Dutch, English, Norwegian, Finnish, and Indian; we were the only Americans. The kids ranged in age from 3 years old to 13, but the bulk of them were between 8 and 10. Just the age I was when I first went to camp. They played on the wooden horse in the eating area, at the ping pong table that has aged with its owners, and chased each other around. Their laughter, chatter, and obvious delight were refreshing in an age when people think that the only way to have fun involves plugging something in.

I love coming back to the River Kwae Camp because so little changes. For those of you who were lucky enough to spend time there, let me remind you of some of the things that continue to this day: table duty, bunk house duty, night check at the stables, recording your soda intake on the clipboard, cold dipper baths (now augmented by portable heated showers), anxiously awaiting for your pony assignment and disappointment when you didn't get your mount of choice.

Scenes from around the camp:



The big tree in the background as seen from the dining area



Our lodging for the visit



The stables



The grounds on the way to the stables



Bamboo forest in the back outside riding area



Great tree in the wooded area behind the riding ring



Nini, the camp gibbon



Nini's house between the dining hall and the big tree



The bulls in the stable yard

The major concerns at the camp these days, besides making ends meet, are keeping the animals healthy and the buildings safe and waterproof. Since I last visited in 2005, former riders and animal lovers around the world have donated over \$6000 to help support the animals and the operation. Continuing to offer this type of experience for kids is priceless and I'm thrilled to have been able to help. Much of our donations have gone towards buying medication for the horses, dogs, cats, and even for some cattle and a gibbon that populate the camp. Since medication is constantly required, the need for it never subsides. Now they are supplementing the horses feed with calcium to improve their health. New roofs have appeared and stables repaired, but the constant influx of retired animals in need continue to add to the operating costs.



Mrs. Rhodes presiding over a riding lesson from her customized buggy



Weekly Sunday afternoon riding lesson for Mrs. Rhodes' great-grandchildren

The newest project at the Camp is a riding program for autistic children. Every Thursday, a group of children come from a nearby school for riding lessons. Riding has been shown to give these children more confidence in themselves and helps them develop a positive relationship with the ponies. Each child is assisted by two stable hands, one to lead the pony and one to make sure the child stays in the saddle. As Mrs. Rhodes and Verna described this to us, they were so pleased that the riding helped these children progress developmentally. One of them said proudly, “. . . and it doesn't even cost us much.”

Since the children's school doesn't have the resources to pay the meager \$12.50 (500 Baht) per hour lesson for each student, the Camp program is provided free of charge. They said that since the ponies aren't being used on Thursdays anyway, the only cost is to pay the stable hands.

The work these women do is incredible. Mrs. Rhodes is now 91 and Verna is 90, they have the energy and enthusiasm of people half their age. Puki, 67, manages the camp staff and the kitchen and keeps an eye on her eight grandchildren. The River Kwae family camp is a one-of-a-kind and I'm so glad to have been able to experience it.



Puki with grandchildren, Sandy and Rolly, Mrs. Rhodes, and Verna Volz



Miss Verna and Mrs. Rhodes heading out to the riding ring.

I will continue to accept donations to keep this place going and to support the wonderful women who work hard so that kids can experience some of the simpler ways of life.

Checks, **made out to Verna Volz**, can be sent to me at:

89 West High Street
Avon, MA 02322

And by the way, Verna plans to be on the east coast in September 2007, so I may be planning another reunion in the Boston area for former Polo Clubbers and their friends and families.



Journal from the *Smilin' Maile Tour* of Thailand and Laos

By Rolly Blanchette (husband of Sandy McCoskrie Blanchette '72)

"Long live the King!" The signs were everywhere in gilded golden frames. There were portraits of the King and Queen, portraits of the royal family, and a formal portrait of the world's visiting royalty celebrating the birthday of the King. Pictures, slogans, and good wishes were in every public building. They were on every road, big as billboards, small as street signs. The King of Thailand, Bhumibol Adulyadej, was celebrating his 80th birthday and his 60th anniversary as the world's longest reigning monarch. Tributes were coming in from everywhere, but the lasting and most fitting tribute came from the Thais themselves. Simply put, the people love their king. And we had the privilege of being there.

Saturday, December 30, 2006

Sandy and Rolly arrived alone at Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok at 2:00 PM. Having flown with Maile and Brian from LA to Taipei, we were surprised to be booked on separate flights from Taipei to Bangkok. While waiting for their later arrival, we tried unsuccessfully to use the ATMs. Later we would discover that our bank "turned off" Thailand and we would not be able to access our money while in the country. No money for the trip, no problem. We located Maile and Brian, found our driver, and drove to the Pathumwan Princess Hotel. Nice place. I looked for Luke Skywalker and Obi-wan Kanobi but they were not around. We did meet Lisa Pope, however, and that was nice. She did kinda look like Padme in Episode III but we won't get into that. Lisa, not Padme, would be one of our companions for the next three weeks and Brian would be our banker.

At 6:00 PM, we (Lisa, Sandy, Rolly, Maile, and Brian) made it to the Sky Train. Our destination was the Oriental Hotel for a drink at the bar, and after a lengthy walk through some very seedy-looking neighborhoods, we made it to the lobby only to be rebuffed at the door. Brian and I were wearing shorts and that fashion faux pas barred our entry. Even Maile couldn't talk our way through this one, so with heavy hearts, we walked back to the Water Taxi, motored down the Chao Phraya River to the Sky Train and back to the hotel. We ate in the Pathumwan Princess Korean Restaurant and called it a night. ISBers are starting to appear.

Sunday, December 31, 2006

Sandy and I got up dreadfully early and had coffee and breakfast at the hotel restaurant. There we met Sylvia, our sixth and final participant on the Smilin' Maile Tour of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Sylvia is another Corona del Martian. The first excursion of the day was to the Chatuchak Market. Commerce is the heart of Bangkok and it is hard to define the endless array of alleyways and stalls and consumer goods that is Chatuchak. Where else can you buy a wooden image of the Buddha, a kitchen sink with mounting hardware, a puppy, and cheap T-shirts with indecipherable jokes in sixteen languages? Maile loves the place. I bought some lacquer cups and then Sandy and I sat and watched humanity walk by: every size, shape, skin color, language, hair style, dressed up, dressed down, singles, pairs, families, babies, toddlers, grandparents, rich, poor. And every one of them had a cell phone. After a couple of hours of shopping madness, we regrouped, sky trained, and walked to Jim Thompson's House.

Jim Thompson's red wood frame house is an interesting tourist attraction located in the heart of the city. Thompson introduced the world to Thai silk. The fact that he disappeared years ago in some remote part of Malaysia adds to the man's fame. We walked around the grounds, visited the gift shop (of course), and sat out by the koi pond for lunch. The Gang of Six had its first meal. We heard a little French boy at the next table call out, "Regarde Papa! Les poissons!"

Later in the evening we met the ISBers in the lobby of the hotel; there would be 17 for supper. This was to be Maile's New Year's Eve bash at an Italian Restaurant. So we taxied to the Sorrento Restaurant and sat in a room of long tables. We were joined in our little corner by Lisa, Sylvia, Maile, Brian, and Paul Noyes, which was very nice. Paul is a pleasant guy to talk to and it was good to see him. The food was very good, but expensive, the kind that comes with little sprigs of horticulture,

vaguely similar to the debris you find in your trunk after a weekend camping trip. Waiters hovered everywhere, perhaps that was because we were the only customers in the restaurant.

After many bottles of wine, dinner was over and ISBers were getting ready to go. Valerie was standing across the table talking to Maile when a large cockroach crawled up the white tablecloth and cantered toward our heroine. Sandy, Lisa, and Paul saw the six-legged marauder but said nothing as Maile calmly picked up a dinner plate and placed it over the interloper while the conversation continued without a break. Eventually, we all bunched up for taxi rides back to the hotel. Sandy, Sylvia, and I paid an exorbitant amount to ride a tuk-tuk—200 baht, almost six dollars. All gathered into the hotel lounge as midnight approached, but I was feverish and went to bed, missing the New Year celebration by five minutes. Oh well, it wouldn't be the last time that one of us was sick on the trip. None of us heard the explosions that rocked the city.

Monday, January 1, 2007

Happy New Year. After a hearty breakfast, the Gang of Six (L, S, M, B, S, and R) piled into a taxi to return to the airport, destination: Laos. We are beginning to realize the immensity of the new Bangkok airport. The life-sized display of Vishnu, lording over the gods and demons as they churned the milky ocean with a giant serpent, was quite impressive, as was the virtual mall full of shops on the way to the gates.

We finally boarded a small turboprop, Brian could tell you what kind, and flew to Luang Prabang, one of the old provincial capitals of French Indo-China and now a World Heritage site in the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic. The Lao PDR is the old communist regime brought to us by the Pathet Lao, but with a new awakening since 1992. We were the only flight that afternoon and it was disconcerting to be walking across the tarmac to an empty airport terminal. When we got inside, however, the bureaucracy swung into high gear. We got at the end of Line 1 to show our passports and get them stamped. On to Line 2 we paid 35 dollars American for a visa. Then to Line 3 where we turned in our immigration form and had our passports stamped again.

As we left the terminal, we were greeted by our tour guide. Lae was a quite small, 23-year-old, androgynous Laotian who spoke very little English, but turned out to be a very sweet guy. He piled us into a van and we drove through the city of Luang Prabang en route to our hotel, Villa Santi. This was once a small palace owned by a princess and built in the French colonial style. Santi means “peace,” and the place was peaceful; the rooms were small but rustic and just what we wanted. We had five minutes to settle in and then we met Lae to begin the tour. He brought us to Wat Xieng Thong, the first of many temple complexes we would visit. There was a large courtyard, a temple covering the royal funeral carriage, a sacred temple housing the Buddhas, and several stupas, and, of course, a monastery with several young monks. At the back of the courtyard was a very long set of steep stairs leading down to the Mekong River. As we walked back to the van, I kept correcting the women as they continued to refer to Lae as “she.”

Our next stop was Wat Pha Baat Tai, a Vietnamese temple complex with another large courtyard. We walked to the back at an observation point overlooking the Mekong River and watched the last golden rays reflect on the water as the sun set behind the mountains. It was beautiful. On the way back across the courtyard, we stopped to listen to the monks chant their evening prayers. Back on the van and on to the third temple; Wat Wisunalat and its ancient stupas we pretty much had to see in the dark. Fortunately, the moon would be full the next night.

Lae (that's “he,” not “she,” ladies) brought us to an open air restaurant for supper. Since the weather was cooler than we expected, we asked to sit further inside and that created a minor stir, which we could not understand since it was about six o'clock and the place was empty. Nonetheless, they set a table for us and we muddled through the order with a lot of broken English and much pointing at the Lao/English menu. Somehow the rice wine* I ordered (Sylvia told me to put an



The “Gang of Six”: Sandy, Sylvia, Maile, Rolly, Lisa, and Brian

asterisk on the “wine.”) turned out to be rice whiskey, and there went a layer of enamel from my teeth. We also ordered BeerLao which would be our beverage of choice for the duration of our stay in Laos. The soups, stews, and sticky rice were fine and we ate well. Back to the Villa Santi, it was an early night.

Tuesday, January 2, 2007

I woke up before dawn, reset my internal clock, took a long shower, and then went out into the street. As the sky was getting lighter, hundreds of people were milling about in the cool morning air. A near equal number were kneeling-sitting in a line along the sidewalk on blankets and reed mats with baskets of food. At 6:30 AM, a long procession of 350 monks, mostly young barefooted boys, walked slowly and silently in line with their begging bowls and saffron robes. As they passed, the people would put food in their bowls while no one said a word. Scores of people were there taking photographs and there were so many monks that the procession took about an hour to pass the blocks of kneeling people offering them food. I felt fortunate to have blundered on to this event, but then read later in the brochures that this was a highlight to any trip to Luang Prabang. In fact, I was quite fortunate to have witnessed that particular morning because it was the onset of the full moon and a particularly sacred day. We'd watch the monks every morning after that, but never that many.



By now the troops had awakened and we gathered in the Princess Restaurant at Villa Santi for authentic Royal Lao cuisine. The full breakfast of congee, fried rice, eggs, cereal, breads, and fresh fruit was very good. We ate and we talked about the monks. Lae came to get us and we walked down the street to the foot of a great set of stairs with Naga balustrades. At the top of the hill, a rocky outcrop called Phu Si, was Wat Chom Si set high above the city. As we began to walk up the 380 steps, Brian bought a small bird in a bamboo cage. The idea was to set it free when we reached the top. Lisa named it “Rice Cake” and releasing the little finch was going to be our path toward nirvana. We stood in a small courtyard at the top and let Rice Cake fly. The bodhisattva says, “Sentient beings are numberless; I vow to save them all.” Thus, our noble deed freed us from the burdens of the empirical world, one bird at a time. From the courtyard we could see the confluence of the Mekong and the Nam Khan rivers. Luang Prabang is on the tip of a peninsula and we had a spectacular view.

With our karma cleansed, the trip down the steps was considerably easier than the trip up and that left us with enough energy to visit Wat Mai across the street. In the large courtyard we watched a young monk knock nuts out of a tree with a stick. We enjoyed watching some of the monks act like children, which they were. Lisa would later tell us how odd it felt to sit at the Internet Café and watch the monks downloading music and emailing their friends.

Lae located our van and driver and we went to, surprise, another wat. Wat Paa Phon Phao was a short drive up the hills on the edge of the city. We arrived to a scene of busy preparation. Music was playing loudly and the nuns were in full gear preparing the banners and flags that would decorate Santi Chedi, the bright yellow Peace Pagoda that dominated the landscape. We walked through all the floors and on the way out, the nuns tied small cotton thread bracelets on the ladies for good fortune. We were parked beside a pick-up truck with a Laotian family sitting in the bed of the truck on wooden kitchen chairs. After many friendly waves, we drove away wondering if those chairs were fastened down. Probably not.

Our next stop was, for Lisa, a descent into some Indo-Chinese version of hell: the That Luang Open Market. It started innocently enough as we walked through the innumerable stalls full of clothes and sundry goods. Then we hit the butchery: wall-eyed lifeless fish of all sizes, chicken pieces, meat parts, and organs sitting in their own juices, all peppered with a confetti of flies. Dante's Inferno for sure. While Lisa was clutching the remains of her stomach, we stepped outside only to witness three men trying to lift a reluctant and squealing 400-pound sow into the back of a pickup truck. We are not in

Kansas. Our path along the maelstrom did eventually bring us past the live fowl and into the vegetable and fruit stands. Never did a young banana look so good.

Having completed our baptism in local culture, where does Lae bring us next but to lunch, of course. Actually, The Lemongrass was a very pleasant outdoor café on the banks of the Mekong. Bellies back to normal; the BeerLao put us back on track for the afternoon drive to the Kuang Si Waterfalls south of the city. Along the way we stopped at a Hmong village, our first chance to see the hill tribes people. Sandy bought some pillow cases and Maile gave a donation to the village headman. The waterfalls were very nice. Brian and I hiked to the top, a little hazardous but worth the effort. Later we walked along the river and came to some cages with an Asian tiger named Phet and three Asian sun bears. Okay. The drive home was an excellent ride through natural hills and many, many terraced rice paddies. We even had to stop to let the water buffalo cross the road.

After naps and showers we met at the Villa Santi Jazz Bar which was little more than a few tables in the courtyard. Lisa brought bags of BBQ and sweet basil flavored chips and we had BeerLao. Lae completed the night with a trip to a restaurant with puppies and bad music. G'night.

Wednesday, January 3, 2007



We woke up and saw the monks and, after breakfast, Brian and I walked to the post office to buy stamps. That turned out to be quite an experience. Brian is always a good companion for excursions. He is intently aware of his surroundings, nonjudgmental, and easy to talk to. Getting the stamps I wanted turned out to be an exercise in linguistics and numerology. We were finally successful, thanks to a persistent smile and a calculator, and as we sat outside at the tables affixing stamps to postcards, there was a flurry of activity around us. English-speaking Farang would come up to talk, friendly and animated, and nowhere else in Laos did I get such a strong feeling of camaraderie with fellow expatriates.

While I sat there with Brian, looking like Hemingway, Sandy was taking a walk along the Nam Khan River. She had good stories about the quaint neighborhoods and beautiful vistas she passed in her stroll around town.

The van brought us back to our hotel and we went out to eat supper. We couldn't get into the Three Nagas, so we ate at the Three Elephants across the street. We had a bottle of French wine – \$20, and a full course Lao meal for six – \$25, or 920 Baht, or 230,000 Kip. After dinner we took an evening stroll around the town and discovered the night market. Up and down the narrow main street, vendors had their blankets and small stands laden with tourist items, such as the ever present scarves and tapestries, T-shirts, small wooden carvings, and paintings. Sandy bought some small paintings of the monks. The girl who sold them assured us that she painted them herself. All those vendors, all those goods: “same same.”



Thursday, January 4, 2007

The Gang got up and made it to the monks, I slept in. Lae met us at 9:00 AM and we walked to the National Museum, making several side trips at the gift shops along the way. Lae had correctly deduced what Americans want. The National Museum was a former royal palace located on the main road across from Phu Si, the rocky hill which we climbed two days before. Shoes and cameras were off as we strolled through the residence halls of the last king, Sisavang Vong. There were lots of Buddha images, diplomatic gifts, and finally a chance to see the Pha Bang Buddha, the most important relic in the country from which Luang Prabang derives its name. It is a solid gold Buddha about 33 inches tall and heavily guarded, a gift from Thailand long ago. We wandered the grounds for a bit, saw a photography exhibit of some monks, and then walked to the banks of the Mekong.

Lae put us in a small river boat headed for the Pak Ou caves and we motored up the river for about two hours past terraced gardens, fishermen, and water buffalo sunning themselves along the banks. We pulled in to a small village and had lunch in an outdoor café overlooking the confluence of the Mekong and the River Ou. The view was awesome. A few tables over, Brian discovered a little boy playing with a box full of puppies. Everyone watched as this little toddler lifted a puppy by the hips and hind legs, dropped it on its noggin' in the box, and then tumbled in after. All we could see was puppy noses and baby feet. The food was okay. We shared the curry and the rice dishes, but I didn't get a lot of play on the water buffalo soup. The meat was tough but flavorful and the BeerLao helped wash it down, but there were no takers. We walked through the village looking at the vendors' wares. Brian had a blast playing with the puppies. In fact, we found puppies at every village we visited, something that is now a rare sight in America.

After lunch we motored across the river to the Pak Ou caves. We broke our lungs hiking up the staircase to the upper cave, Tham Phum, rented a flashlight for one thousand kip, saw nothing, and wondered why we couldn't have been satisfied seeing the lower cave, Tham Ting. There were thousands of Buddha images at the lower cave and this was clearly an important site for pilgrimages.

On the way back down the river, we stopped at Ban Xang Hai, a small village where lao-lao, a local moonshine rice whisky is made in primitive stills. We sampled the beverages (blechh), played with the puppies and looked at the goods. When we arrived back in Luang Prabang, Lae had us stop at one last little village market where paper was made from pounded wood pulp. Sandy liked the paper and bought a small notebook. We also watched the weavers make an intricate silk and cotton tapestry. And then, the van appeared and we rode back to the hotel.

We went to supper at the 3 Nagas—a fine French restaurant—so, of course, we had two bottles of Chilean wine. After the tomato salad I ordered the medallions of water buffalo. Sylvia was quite impressed, but I couldn't get her to try any. Sandy had the Camembert quiche and we all had crème brûlée for dessert. This was easily our best meal in the Lao.

Friday, January 5, 2007

Missed the monks again, but had a leisurely breakfast with the gang. I think this is Maile's favorite meal. Eventually I went across the street to the internet café. I sat between two young monks, one was emailing friends while the other was listening to music, Lisa was right. Then Sandy, Lisa, and I went for a walk. We wanted to see some of the interesting places that Sandy had encountered a couple of days earlier and so we walked along the banks of the Nam Kahn. This was a most relaxing and pleasant stroll. There really were some lovely neighborhoods.

At 11:00 AM, we checked out of the hotel and took the shuttle bus to the Villa Santi Resort Spa south of the city. The place is deluxe with beautiful scenery, but the colonial charm is gone. No matter, we were having a great time. Lunch on the veranda included some rice dishes, curry, Lao sausages, and watercress soup. Then Sandy and Lisa made a beeline for the pool. The spa beckoned, however, and massages and facials were spread around. Sylvia and Maile were enjoying the pampered life and even Sandy got a facial. Remembering my dislocated joints, I opted for the oil massage. Yikes, my Laotian dominatrix showed me no mercy.

Lae met us at 6:30 for a special supper at the Indo-Chine restaurant, paid for by his company. We had BeerLao and were served family style. It was almost a relief to not have to decide what to order. The soup, spring rolls, vegetables, pork, and sweet and sour fish were very good and a nice finale to our meals in Luang Prabang. Lae gave us a flower offering to bring

to the Pak Ou caves and then he tied an orange cotton bracelet on each of us while reciting a prayer wishing us a good trip, good luck in our jobs, and a return to Laos. We're going to miss this guy.

Saturday, January 6, 2007

It was way too early when the Gang of Six said goodbye to Lae at the boat dock. The sun was fighting to get up and the air was downright cold. Bundled in our warmest jackets, we boarded the Luang Say river barge, and headed up the Mekong. The barge was already full with eight Italians, about eight French people, and a few Americans, including one strange guy from Wyoming. Since we were the last to arrive on the boat, we had some trouble locating seats and never did get to sit together. Nonetheless, we located blankets to wrap around ourselves as the barge, some ninety feet long and narrow, cruised at about 10 knots, cutting a wake going north against the current.

The first stop was the Pak Ou caves. Our guide on the river was Si, an engaging young Lao who spoke good English. There was another guide who spoke French and while it was fun to listen to him, we didn't get much out of the conversation. Si was our guy. There was no need for a forced march to the upper cave, so we settled on the lower cave and presented our flower offering to the Buddha in proper ritual style. Merit gained, we returned to the barge and continued the excursion.

Despite the cold, the best seat in the house was on a little bench on the bow in front of the pilot house. The blanket around the shoulders was mandatory but the view was beautiful. The Wyoming guy sat there a lot. He had a ton of stories about winters in Wyoming and summers in Rio, but my favorite was about flying solo in the Rockies and shooting coyotes from a small bush plane. For two days we cruised up river seeing jungle-covered mountains, steep embankments, exposed rocky outcrops, and the brown murky water of the Mekong. January is the middle of the dry season and the river was low, in places as much as 30 feet below the high-water mark. This meant some dangerous navigation up river as the pilot had to negotiate through clusters of sharp rocks that broke through the surface of the river. Of course, the rocks that you could not see were equally treacherous, and on occasion the pilot would slow the barge to a crawl and deck hands would stand out on the bow with long bamboo poles feeling the river bottom for a safe passage through the turbulent river. Finding a safe route along the currents would sometimes bring us several hundred yards out in the middle of the river and sometimes the rocks narrowed the bends in the river and we would find ourselves within ten feet of the steep banks.



The tranquility of this natural setting was occasionally broken up by the sighting of a small village located high above the waterline. Small bungalows built on stilts with thatched roofs blended with the coconut palms and teak trees that covered the hills. A village meant children and dogs, and as we cruised, we would get an occasional wave from the youngsters in their raggedy T-shirts who came down to the water's edge to watch us go by. Near a village, the rocky outcrops would give way to long silt deposits along the banks. These nutrient-rich sand bars, deposited by last year's monsoon season, were now exposed and frequently dotted with peanut and soy bean plants as the Lao people cultivated the naturally terraced banks of the mighty river. Fishermen in flat-bottomed skiffs would cast their nets into that impenetrable water and as we passed, the pilot would slow the river boat in order to cut the wake and not disturb their fishing. Lao women would be found waist deep in the water panning for gold with great saucer-shaped bowls sloshing the muddy sediments at their feet. We saw a lot of water buffalo sunning themselves along the banks of the river as well as the occasional herd of goats. These visual scenes continued unabated for two whole days as we began to adjust to the rhythm of river life. The experience was peaceful and as I sat on the little bench watching Laos flow by me I found myself in no particular hurry to get anywhere.

Around noon we were served lunch buffet style. The cook on board did a nice job of serving us stir-fried vegetables, curry, and chicken. After lunch we stopped at the Hill tribe whisky village, Ban Songh. Like all the small villages along the Mekong, there was no road in and out of the village. River travel is the only way in and out. The Mekong truly is the artery of life and the local people call it "the mother of waters." Wandering through the village, we saw how they made whisky

from sticky rice. The rice is left in large bowls covered with water, and allowed to naturally ferment. One old villager encouraged me to taste this mash and I found it to be surprisingly sweet. She also seemed especially pleased that I would dare to scoop my fingers into that creamy mess and bring it to my mouth. The mash was then put in old oil drums that simmered over a charcoal fire. A metal lid covers the top and as the mash gently boils, cool water is poured over the lid. The alcohol condenses on the bottom of the lid and flows through a small pipe into a bottle. When the bottle is filled, the whisky is ready for sale. As Si said, the whisky was aged for at least a few minutes.

As we got back on the river, the weather changed. The cold jacket and blanket morning gave way to a warm midday as the sun felt good falling on your shoulders. The air was pleasant and the ride very comfortable, but that didn't last long, however, as the overhead sun became oppressive and the deck hands closed the roof of the barge. Now people were seeking out the shade and the deck hands would bring out cool bottles of water. By late afternoon, the sun was getting low in the sky and the weather was pleasant again, that is, until the sun went behind the mountains bringing the promise of a cool evening.

We arrived at Pak Beng for the evening. This was a fairly large village and from the barge we could see the Luang Say Lodge, a series of very pretty bungalows overlooking the river. After dropping our stuff into the assigned rooms, we went back to the open-air restaurant for some supper and entertainment. Sylvia bought a few bottles of wine and we sat and watched the native Lao dancers and musicians put on a show of traditional music in native costumes. Eventually the audience was recruited to dance and I danced somewhat awkwardly with a beautiful little Lao girl. Unfortunately, I think Brian has several photographs of that pitiful display and yet, the delete button is probably furthest from his consideration. The buffet supper was very good and Maile showed me how to eat tamarind. The stuff was delicious; now, where am I going to find tamarind?

Sunday, January 7, 2007

The blankets came back out as we continued to cruise up the Mekong and after a couple of hours, we put in at a good-sized village to see the cotton weavers. Dozens of children greeted us at the river's edge and an Italian woman, straight out of a Fellini movie, brought out a big bag of candy and started giving it out to the children. This was not a popular idea and the Lao women openly complained to our guide that giving candy to children encourages begging. Si was equally displeased and told us, but nothing was said to the clueless Italian woman who continued to dole out the treats. As we walked through the village, the Pied Piper of Italy was followed by scores of children with big soft brown eyes and open palms.



Long after lunch with the sun warming us again, the river changed. After a day and a half of tight bends, treacherous rock outcrops, and river currents, the lush mountains that bordered both sides of the river gave way to an open valley. The river widened out as we came upon Thailand to our west. The broad river plain also brought civilization. While the Lao side remained the same, on the Thai side more western style houses appeared. We could see pickup trucks and eventually power lines.

Finally we arrived at Huai Say and disembarked for customs. We were piled into ancient tuk-tuks and brought to the customs house as our luggage was piled into the long boats. We turned in our exit visas, paid our fees, and said good-bye to Si. This was the end of Lao. We jumped into the water taxis to cross the Mekong to Chiang Kong in Thailand.

We were met by our new guide, Onnie, who helped us through Thai customs, which took quite a while, and then, loaded into the van, we headed for the Chiang Rai Airport where Maile and Brian were scheduled to separate from us and fly to Bangkok. Onnie knew a short cut which became a long, long twisty ride to the airport. That was hair raising enough, but as time burned away and we seemed no closer to our destination, things became nerve wracking as the frequent time hacks ("we have an hour still") were outnumbered by the ubiquitous road signs that said, "Sharp Curve." As we rode in near silence in the dark, the occasional U-turns and back trackings and stops for directions did not inspire confidence. Maile's assurance that, "We can make it, we still have a half hour," had a touch of desperation to it. And even though we were

seasoned river travelers, the bends in the road were tougher than the bends in the river and Lisa gamely held on. And then, suddenly there was the airport. With hurried good-byes, Maile and Brian were gone and now we were the Gang of Four.

Onnie brought us, without difficulty, to the Wiang Inn in Chiang Rai. After checking in, Sandy and I went for a walk down the main street of the city. After having been in Laos for so long, it was jarring to see a modern city with electric lights, modern shops, and commercialism everywhere. We found a sidewalk restaurant and sat and ate baguettes with ham and cheese. It seemed appropriate.

Monday, January 8, 2007

We (that's Sylvia, Lisa, Sandy, and Rolly; for you who are scoring at home) met Onnie at 9:00 AM and headed north. We stopped at Wat Phra Singh to pay homage to the Buddha. There was a nice grove of teak trees there and one very old chedi. Onnie was very pleasant and not the person who couldn't find our way to the airport. We came to enjoy her company very much. From the wat we drove through farm country and saw lots of sugar cane going to market.

We arrived in Chiang Saen and were impressed to see a huge golden Buddha towering over the trees. The town also had a large Chinese style Buddha and we enjoyed dropping coins down a chute that landed in the Buddha's belly. It seemed to be rather garish and commercialized, until we saw people come up and pray before this sacred image.

We stood at an observation point looking down on the Golden Triangle: a fork in the Mekong River where Myanmar (Burma), Laos, and Thailand came together. This was the former transportation point for the opium trade. Even today the bulk of the world's opium is produced in Myanmar but the traffic follows other routes. Thailand has worked hard to bring tourism to the area in an effort to drive out the illegal opium trafficking. We did our part by purchasing scarves, T-shirts, and pillow cases.

After lunch we went to the Hall of Opium museum which was sponsored by Queen Sirikit. It has to be one of the finest small museums anywhere. We spent quite a while looking at the exhibits. From there we traveled to Mae Sai, the northernmost city in Thailand where there is a border crossing into the Myanmar Republic. We stood for a while and watched the busy foot traffic cross the bridge in and out of Burma. There were shops there, of course, and Lisa managed to find some BeerLao T-shirts which we had neglected to buy while we were in Laos.



The ride back to Chiang Rai brought us to some hill tribe villages. We first met the Akha and paid the elderly women so we could take photos of them in their native costumes. Onnie said they wear those exotic clothes all the time and not just for tourists. We walked through their village and saw the community swing and then we proceeded through the sacred village gate. Onnie warned us not to touch or we would pollute the gate and the Akha would have to build another. There was a huge wooden phallic symbol by the gate entrance, so they must have some pretty big spirits. From there we walked to the Yao "village" which was really a bazaar. The Yao were better dressed and obviously wealthier. They were clearly into business and looked quite successful.

Back in Chiang Rai, we went to the night market for supper. We sat at a big open air restaurant but only had some Singha beer and cashews. We agreed with Lisa that we really didn't want to eat at a restaurant whose menu shows all the dishes in little photographs. So on to the baguette restaurant where we had laarp, curried vegetables, rice, wine, and more beer while we listened to a Thai folk singer play old American standards. He was pretty good, too. G'night.

Tuesday, January 9, 2007

After breakfast, we checked out of the Wiang Inn and went to the PDA Hill Tribe museum. They had an excellent slide show, but unfortunately, I couldn't buy a copy. Sandy did get a really pretty jacket hand woven by the hill tribes, however, that looks very nice on her. Sandy has a way with Asian garments.

On the country road to Chiang Mai, Onnie stopped at a roadside vendor. She asked, "Would anyone like some sticky rice? It is cooked in a bamboo tube; there are two kinds, rice with red beans and rice with yogurt."

"How much is it, Onnie?"

"Twenty-five baht each."

So, I purchased some and then came a Sylvia moment. Onnie asked Sylvia, who was sitting behind me watching the whole transaction:

"Would you like any?"

"What is it?"

"It's sticky rice that has been cooked in a bamboo tube."

"What is it like?"

"There are two kinds, rice with red beans and rice with yogurt. They are very good."

"How much does it cost?"

"Twenty-five baht each. Would you like some?"

"No."

Nuff said; we moved on. The Hot Springs were next. The water there was very sulphurous and seriously hot. We watched the Thais purchase quail eggs in little baskets and drop them in the hot spring to cook. We opted for tea and coffee. Sylvia discovered that the vendors could make cappuccino and she was all set for the rest of the trip. Sandy bought some peanut brittle and pomelo and we rode contentedly to the Royal Princess hotel in Chiang Mai.

We checked in about 4:00 PM and quickly called a cab to bring us out to the Royal Flora Ratchaphruck: "An International Horticultural Exposition for His Majesty the King." This was the world's fair of flowers. The place was enormous and we opted for walking the 3-4 hour route as opposed to the 6-8 hour route. So, following the white footsteps on the pavement, we walked through the Orchid Pavilion which was gorgeous and, I would guess, Lisa's favorite spot. We saw Bug World, an insect museum with butterflies as big as small dinner plates, and explored the many exhibits sponsored by the various countries with royalty: The Netherlands, Belgium, India, Japan, Qatar, Morocco, Sudan, and a dozen others. We walked through Thailand's own exhibit, the Royal Pavilion, and stayed on the street to see the Electric Parade, an evening musical play and light show to celebrate the King's birthday. Fireworks, beautiful girls in costume, music, live elephants, all done in quintessential Thai style and we didn't understand a bit of it. However, we did build an appetite and the four of us walked over to the To-Sit restaurant and, in our usual fashion, ordered too much food. The cab rides to and fro were a bit of a mystery and although this was one of the first times that we went out on our own without a guide, our biggest faux pas was overpaying the drivers.

Wednesday, January 10, 2007

Chiang Mai is Onnie's hometown and she was ready to show it off. Our first journey was to the top of Mount Doi Suthep to visit the famous wat of the same name. According to legend, an ancient king followed his white elephant up the mountain and when it stopped the wat was built on that site. No doubt the elephant was tired of walking around a mountain. In any case, when we reached the base of the wat, we took the funicular to the top rather than climb the 306 steps. We didn't have the energy of an elephant. As we walked around the temple complex, Onnie told us a little about herself. She has one Indian, one Chinese, and two Thai grandparents. Her mother was raised as a Buddhist and, when her children were older, she became a Muslim and even completed the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). She died on Christmas Day which Onnie interprets as the intersection of three great religions. Onnie is also a Muslim, but in typical Thai fashion, she seems open to all religious interpretations.

Along with the Thais, we walked around the chedi three times and did our prayers; we also pealed the bells and walked down the stairs. At the base, we played with an elephant, feeding it bananas and sugar cane, and walked over to the Jade Market. We got the deluxe, would-you-like-to-buy-a-time-share treatment and looked over the glass cases of beautiful jewelry in the showroom. Not knowing my nephrite from my jadeite, I avoided temptation, but Lisa was there on a mission and bought a very pretty lavender jade pendant.

The Royal Princess hotel had a pool (Sandy's *raison d'être*) and we sat in the shade and had a lot of lunch. Lisa was Sandy's stalwart pool companion and I left them to luxuriate in the sunshine as I wandered off to find a bookstore.



A most eventful evening began with us four suited up for a promenade across town; map in hand, to find the Gallery Restaurant. We walked past the night market, stepped into a little antique store full of wooden Buddhas, and then strolled across the bridge with flowers. When we got to the other end, we saw something remarkable. A man on a scooter pulled over to the curb and his little white terrier leaped off the back of the scooter, went over and sniffed the bushes, and peed. And then, without a word being said, the dog ran and jumped back onto the back of the scooter and stuck there as if he had glue on his paws. The man turned around and drove into traffic with the dog perched on the seat behind him.

We were still talking about that as we found ourselves on a dark and bumpy road. The cabs and tuk-tuks crowded us onto the side of the road and Sylvia lost her footing and stumbled toward a cement wall. She was just out of my reach and I watched in dismay as the whole unfortunate event unveiled itself in slow motion. Sylvia's face and shoulder smacked the wall, and as she went down, her nose immediately opened up and began to bleed. Lisa and Sandy quickly attended to her and, as we were in front of a little coffee shop, I went in to get some bandages. Of course, the three Thai girls working there spoke very little English, but somehow my skill at Charades secured some cotton batting, kleenex, and a bottle of water. Sylvia was really good about this as her attitude was to apologize for making such a bother over a silly cut. We, however, were looking at a car wreck and mentally calculated the logistics of a trip to the hospital. The coffee shop bathroom turned out to be a sink on an outside wall, but nevertheless, Lisa and Sandy helped Sylvia clean up as I sat inside and had an espresso. I felt I had to order something in response to all the sympathetic clucks from the little Thai girls.

Sylvia came out, kleenex to her nose, and we soldiered on to the Gallery Restaurant which was two blocks away. Once there, I left to go buy bandages and an antibiotic and I walked and walked down side streets, through dark alleyways and over a bridge where I could see our bridge of flowers in the way distance. Eventually my trek led me to a gas station and some band-aids. By the time I got back, Sylvia had been put on a tuk-tuk and sent back to the hotel. The Gallery Restaurant was lovely and the food was lousy. The martinis had no gin and the duck sucked. Lisa sent back her undercooked steak and we watched the waiter poke the steak with his finger, always a good way to test if a steak is done to order.

After the tuk-tuk back to the Royal Princess, there was nothing left to cap this night except to sit up in bed and watch an episode of Star Wars with Thai subtitles.



Thursday, January 11, 2007

This was our big day to the elephant camp. Sylvia's nose was salved up and ready for the trip. I never once heard her whine about anything and she was always ready to ask questions. We first stopped out of town at an orchid farm where Onnie showed us how orchids are cultivated. A lot of damn work, I'll tell you.

At last we arrived at the Mae Taeng Elephant Park, just in time for the elephant show. Six or so elephants and their mahouts entertained the capacity crowd sitting in wooden bleachers. The star was a big male elephant named Orachai who picked up logs with his tusks and trunk, kicked soccer balls around, and painted a picture of flowers. He even signed the painting which is how I came to spell his name correctly. The Thai announcer was a hoot with her broken English and infectious enthusiasm.

And then we got to take a ride. Lisa and Sylvia were up first on the platform and off they went in a big elephant chair firmly attached to a large pachyderm. We didn't see them again until we arrived back at the lodge. Sandy and I rode a big female who had a young juvenile following along. As a result, we went rather slowly but that was fine because we were greatly entertained by the young miss who received all the oohs and aahs from our fellow riders. Every few hundred yards, our elephant would sidle up to a platform where bunches of sugar cane and bananas were sold for twenty baht each. While we fed Mama, we noticed that the vendors would make sure that the little one got her share. Once we passed the river and came to a level spot on the trail, the mahout dismounted and gave us a chance to ride on the elephant's neck. He even took pictures of us, but I liked the time when he turned and urinated on the trail in full view of the other riders. None of the elephants seemed offended.

After a long enjoyable ride through the hills and trails, mothers and a baby elephant brought us to the oxcarts. Off the elephant and onto the oxcart, our driver, Yeung, said hello and introduced us to Moo and Cow, our humped and placid bullocks pulling the cart. Yeung announced that he was 45 years old and then proceeded to ask our ages. We answered honestly and he seemed pretty satisfied with that. As we continued to bounce and slog along the dirt road past the fields and farms, we came upon a humble little house on stilts next to a rice paddy with lots of standing water. Yeung pointed and mimed that he slept there. We finally arrived back at the village and regrouped with Sylvia, Lisa, and Onnie. Time for lunch.

Next was the raft ride down the river. The "raft" was a bunch of bamboo poles, maybe three inches in diameter, lashed together with rope. We were provided wooden blocks to sit on and I thought to myself that you just can't get this kind of entertainment in the United States. Two guys with poles pushed the raft away from the bank and away we went. The guy in front was quite charming and speaking no English he still managed to entertain us. He worked that pole to maneuver the raft and managed to put us beside the two women who were standing waist deep in the river holding a cooler and selling refreshments. Eventually we got to pole the raft ourselves, but we never did see Huckleberry Finn.

Onnie met us where the rafts came in and off we went to the Hill Tribes Village. This was a Plimoth Plantation/Colonial Williamsburg living museum kind of place and it was the first time I was consciously aware of being a tourist. It was all too pat as the tribes people were trucked into the area to show how they live their rustic ways of life. We walked through the Hmong village and watched the women pound rice and weave cloth on their complicated little hand looms. The Lahu village was fairly busy and we actually got to see some men working in the fields. And then we came to the long-necked Padaung. It was quite dramatic to see these very pretty young women trussed with 20-40 pounds of brass rings around their necks and their legs. The long necks are the Padaung's attempt to create the graceful beauty of the swan and to that end coils of heavy brass are encircled around a young girl's neck. This usually begins in childhood and rings are continually added as the girl ages. Of course the neck doesn't really stretch, but rather the shoulders and collar bones are compressed within the coils and that provides the look of a long graceful neck. It is quite remarkable but somewhat troubling to discover that the deforming and disabling practice would have disappeared except the girls on display are a source of income because of the tourist trade. And they start at six years old. I started to take their pictures and my camera crapped out, perhaps that was fitting in a land where karma matters.

Supper was at the Whole Earth Restaurant. We had a very nice garden spot and ordered a week's supply of Indian food. Star Wars was still on TV.

Friday, January 12, 2007

Onnie and our driver, Sannit, drove us to the airport in Chiang Mai. We said our goodbyes in the terminal and Onnie gave each of us a hug. We flew to Bangkok and here is where the Gang of Four separated. Sylvia and Lisa were reconnecting with Maile and Brian for a trip to Cambodia. Sandy and I were heading out to the River Kwae Family Riding Camp in Kanchanaburi. Goodbyes all around. Two weeks together: two weeks of walking and shopping, two weeks of Singha and BeerLao, sticky vans and sticky rice, monks and buffaloes, and the mighty Mekong. May the Buddha watch over us all.

