

## Thailand - 2005

Introduction - It was a couple months since our last outing (Utah Canyons) so time to go somewhere, fitting it in between a major NASA/SDO meeting in Palo Alto and Christmas. Considering the weather at different places of interest throughout the world, we picked Thailand. Most folks do a bunch of beach stuff when visiting Thailand and maybe a little interior/temple/architecture; we planned the opposite and maybe to not even go to the beach. Considered a couple of possible packaged tours, but ended up deciding to do it on our own (as is so typical of us). This, of course, meant making a fair number of reservations via Internet searchings prior to going. After considering going to Angkor Wat (Cambodia) but deciding against it, we planned a trip that migrated from Bangkok, to the northeast (Khmer ruins similar to Angkor Wat), to the North; using a combination of trains, busses, and a rental car. At the end of the planned trip we left a few days to do whatever, with a beach/island or a river outing the likely candidates.

Thursday-1: Betty took us to the airport for our 1 PM flight. We were traveling on United and had Economy Plus seats since I'm a Premier Member of United; so had extra legroom. Our seat selection was a window (me) and isle (Dawna), hoping for no one to sit between us but even if someone does we like those seats. Luckily no one did sit between us so we had space to spread out. The 10.5 hour flight to Narita went smoothly. A couple hour layover and then a 7.5 hour flight to Bangkok. This time, right before they closed the doors to the plane a chap came and sat between us. He was a United Flight Attendant off on a short holiday so a pretty good person to have in that seat since he was small, quiet, and slept basically the whole way. Arrived Bangkok around midnight, having had enough air time for awhile to put it mildly. I will say, however, that the United service was quite good, the food was OK, and Dawna had several Baileys to help her pass the time away as well as taking some naps. Got money, established how to get a taxi that wouldn't over charge; you must insist they use the meter. The first one refused so we got out of it but the second one did it OK. And we rode the rather long way into the city. Bangkok is big (like 8 million people). We had selected a hotel/guesthouse in the Old City area; actually in an area called Banglampho, which is backpacker heaven. The place was called Buddy Lodge and was an upgraded Guest House that could now be called sort of a boutique lodge. It was on the busiest street in the area (Khao San) and the street was full of people even at 1 AM! Got some needed sleep. We always travel with earplugs and eyemasks and they come in handy both on the plane and at hotels.

Saturday-1: No Friday given the International Date Line. Got up around 8 AM, had figured we'd sleep in more. Nice buffet for breakfast (this was the case nearly everywhere we stayed so I'll try not to repeat it over and over; must admit I was surprised that breakfast almost always came with the room and was often extensive, having both American (eggs, etc) and Asia (noodles, fried rice, etc) food. Meant we started each day with a good meal under our belts. Hit the tourist route on foot. First stop was an Information/Tourist Center over on the main river (mae nam chao phraya), next stop the number one attraction in Bangkok (Wat Phra Kaeo) and was it amazing/spectacular/etc!

Oh, yes, given that this was the weekend for the King's Birthday various celebrations were going on including free foods in a park we walked by and we ate a bit there even though we weren't hungry. One great thing about Thailand is that you can eat from street vendors and feel safe (stomache-wise). Let's see, another stop along the way was at the amulet market (really just a street with dozens of amulet vendors) where Dawna bought a brass elephant to hang on her purse.

We were going to walk from Wat Phra Kaeo to Wat Po and then visit Wat Arun via a ferry across the river. However, talking to folks at the first/great Wat they convinced us these weren't open due to the King's B-Day, so we motored (via a tut-tut to a Wat on the Golden Mount (a hill really). Here you walk up a lot of stairs to get to the temple and also to get good views of Bangkok. Fun but also hazy as Bangkok is a smoggy city to put it mildly. In retrospect I think we fell for a standard trick, which we had even read about in the literature, where folks convince you where you are going isn't open so as to get you to take their tut-tut to some other place and go to a store of their choosing along the way. Well, we fell for it only part way and didn't do any store; but it is hard to imagine why we fell for any of a documented trick. Guess it was the official badges on the couple of folks who talked us into it. But the Wat on the hill is also a ranked tourist hit so we did OK going there, it was just not in our plans/flow. From there we did a rather long walk to the river and caught the water taxi back to Wat Po while it was still open – it contains a wonderful and enormous reclining Buddah. All the Wats were excellent and each was different in its own way and boy did we see lots of Buddahs (some of which were enormous), lots of dragons, lots of nagas (a neat sea serpent), much ceramic and glass work, and wonderful architecture everywhere. Plus many devote people, and a good number of tourists (mostly Asian). Also got to take our shoes off a lot which was fairly easy for Dawna but time consuming for me. Ended the outing by taking the water taxi to a pier not too far from our hotel. After cooling off a bit (thank God for air conditioning) and cleaning up we went back over to the river for dinner at a spot in several of the books. It was OK with my fish having an interesting chili sauce, but a bit disappointing given its hype. Sleep was very welcomed after this long/first day of touring.

Sunday-1: After another enjoyable breakfast we headed northward on foot, eventually getting to the Dustin area of town and the huge and important (and world's largest) golden teak house named Phra Thinang Vimanmek, You must do a guided tour of it; and it was quite nice. It is in a (large) park-like setting so we also did a bunch of just wandering around looking at the vegetation and other nice buildings. Went in a huge one (name forgotten) and checked it out. Oh, yes, on the walk over we had checked out Wat Bowornivet since it was on the way. After PTV we walked over to the river and caught the water taxi downward so as to do Wat Arun. The water taxi is a cheap, non-hot, good-viewing way to get around this area. Arun's claim to fame is its ceramic facade. Neat yet again. Some time in all this we had lunch at some local spot - that was typical every day and I'll try not to repeat it over and over; but the nice things was whenever one felt like having something to eat there was a small cafe or just a street vendor with a cart and some good food to eat; along with bottled water and often a beer. Back to "home" via the river and walk and I even had a swim before cleaning up and going to dinner. The noodle

place we tried to go to (out of LP) didn't exist so we ate at a small (Indian I think) place near that location and it was good again. All in all a busy two days of hitting the "right spots" with the only major omission being we didn't see any Thai dancing. The first day we missed it at a couple of places either because they weren't doing it or we were tricked into thinking that was the case and then at the Teak House we got there at a time deliberately planned for such dancing but they truly weren't doing it this weekend due to the King's B-Day.

An aside on transportation. In Bangkok they have regular taxi's with meters (a new addition) but we rapidly learned you had to insist the driver turn on the meter rather than bicker about a price for the trip that would then turn out to be much higher than the meter. Next ""down"" are tut-tuts, basically a 3 wheeler and here you always bargain and establish a price before getting in. These guys really whip through the traffic, albeit you are hot, muggy, and breathing smog. And I've already mentioned the river taxi service and across the river ferries.

Monday-1: The King's B-day. We took a tut-tut to the train station figuring we'd get an afternoon ticket to Ayutthaya, and do some exploring in the area near the train station between buying a ticket and our train time. But as we walked up and went to the lady under the Foreigner Help Desk (or something like that) she said a train was leaving in two minutes and she ran with us to the ticket counter to aid us in getting tickets efficiently and then to the train platform where she pounded on the already-closed train door until they let us in. The train rolled out as we were sitting down. It was a "milk run" but that was fine for A is not very far away (less than 2 hours even by a slow train). Ayutthaya was the "great capital of the fabulous kingdom" from the mid 14th to late 18th century and is now a Historical Park and World Heritage site. The quotes above are from the Michelin Green Book, hereafter called MGB. It plus the Lonely Planet (LP) book were my main bibles on this outing and I'll probably quote more from MGB simply because I happen to have it with me when typing the first draft of this report on the airplane coming home (good old Palm plus foldable keyboard). Most folks visit A as a day trip from Bangkok but we elected to stay a night there to soak it up more. A good decision as the ruins, yes this is an area of mainly ruins from the good old days, covers a very large area and are quite extensive. Even having all afternoon and the next morning we did only a portion of it; but we did that well. We stayed at a hotel (our typical choice being the best of the non-westernized hotels) in the center of town, which worked out excellently because that was where the evening action was and there sure was action. Everyone celebrating the King's Birthday. Street packed with people, food stands, other stands, various bandstands, performers, fireworks, you name it (festival wise) and it was there. We even held lit candles along with everyone else when they turned off all the lights and sang the national anthem (or at least I think that is what they were signing). After trying to find a restaurant from LP in the semi dark we gave up and had some chicken from a street vendor, barely getting a card table chair to sit on. Quite a fun evening and we went to bed long before the locals did. Neat to have had this celebration in a smaller, "more real" town than would have been the case in Bangkok; although I'm sure the festivities there were endless as well. Let's see, besides seeing excellent ruins, we also went to a very nice museum on the

area in the afternoon; where besides the fine displays the air-conditioning was sure welcomed.

Tuesday-1: Took a tut-tut to a Wat on the north end of town and checked it out slowly. Very peaceful, friendly folks there, nice relaxing time. Then a t-t to the south of town where we took a ferry (3 Baht) across the river to another must-see Wat. Again quite nice, with another huge/spectacular Buddah. Having introduced the Baht, I should explain. One dollar equals 40 Baht and things are really inexpensive in Thailand; even in Bangkok and especially outside of Bangkok. Throughout our trip we stayed at hotels for from like \$17 to \$45; yet often at the nicest non-western hotel in town; with the price including taxes and breakfast. A typical t-t ride was 30-50 Baht; the starting meter on regular taxi cabs was 35 and it counted up quite slowly from there (the long ride from the BKK airport to our hotel was like \$7. I don't know if we ever spent as much as \$20 for dinner (for both of us). And on it goes what with the bus and train costing almost nothing; albeit the rental car was fairly expensive.

Anyway, it was time to go back to the hotel, checkout, and continue our trip. Walking back to the hotel, however, we did have a very enjoyable lunch at a spot overlooking the river. Our next target was Khao Yai National Park; figured we needed an outdoor, non academic bit to mix into our activities; and it was on the way and one of the major (and actually the oldest) National Parks in Thailand. We had reservations near there for two nights at a lodge run by some Thai people. First, however, we needed to get on the right bus to head that direction. Rather tricky but lots of folks helped us. It was a local bus with many stops; crowded, and hot.

Weather wise, it had been hot and muggy, but basically no rain. The plan was to be in Thailand well after the rainy season and when things had cooled down (maybe they had but it was still hot to us). The hot/muggy combination slowed us down when it came to walking, walking, walking; our usual style of getting around. We had directions from the place we were staying at as to how to take one bus from A to a spot where we would then transfer to another bus to get to them. The transfer was tricky but again various people made sure we did it OK. And the second bus was larger and air conditioned; while still not fancy. At the bus exchange place I had an enjoyable short discussion with a monk who came up to me to chat. This was not uncommon; to have monks who spoke some English come up and give it a try with me. Never with Dawna, however, as they have nothing to do with women it seems. In fact women are not to touch them and this makes for some interesting interactions on crowded buses and other transportation vehicles.

The small place we had chosen was basically just off a cross road from the (semi) main road and there were a couple of store there; hardly qualified as a village. Checked in and the place was quite adequate. Bought some water; a constant activity and it is so great traveling the world now days in that one can buy safe bottled water everywhere. Ate at the "resort" that night and the food was good and the people extremely friendly. Probably only a half dozen rooms and only a couple of them occupied.

Wednesday-1: Started the day by going to the corner store and buying some cold medicine for Dawna who had gotten a cold a couple days into the trip. Actually, getting the medicine was a project (as was most everything given the language barriers). We started to try the night before, nothing was open, and continued that AM with getting a store opened only after several tries and then with help from a young man at the "resort." Next activity was to hit the National Park with that young man as our guide and another fellow as a driver. Only the two of us in the van; although they can take up to 6 no one else was going that day. It was a day long activity involving quite a lot of driving, and a couple of modest hikes in what is one of the largest monsoon forests in this part of Asia. One could sort of say we did a hike up a mountain to a nice waterfall, one down to a river through some jungle to see a couple of crocodiles and to walk the trail that runs along the river, and one hike/walk through savanna-like land to a nature watching tower. Must admit we didn't see a lot of nature, but did see a few good birds and some deer. In signing up for this day outing we had also signed up for the night-safari add on. We thought since the resort was advertised as being 6 km from the National Park we'd be coming back to it between the day and night outing; but we were wrong. The entrance to the park these folks used was a couple dozen kms from the resort and the major walks were a couple dozens kms from there. No big deal except that we hadn't brought clothes for after dark. The way it worked was you got in the back end of a pickup truck with a person with a spotlight and they drove around back roads looking for animals to see with the spot light. Although we'd not seen a lot of people that day, a million (maybe not quite) pickup trucks so outfitted showed up at the visitor center at 7 PM and off we all went. Other than a lot of deer we saw very little (did see one porcupine and one fox), and it was cold (which wasn't good for Dawna or enjoyable for either of us). Rather a farce in our opinion, but a well attended one. We told them to stop earlier than would have been normal. Back to the resort and a warm shower. I think we skipped having a late dinner but rather had some peanuts, drinks, and sleep.

Thursday-2: Their driver took us to the city of Nakhon Ratchasima where we picked up our pre-arranged (with Budget) rental car. A rather long, and actually rather expensive, drive to get there. He had a bit of trouble finding the rental spot but succeeded and we got a nice little Honda City from some very friendly/helpful folks. One drives on the English side of the road, by the way. Off we went with the usual arrangement of Dawna driving and my guiding and yelling words of caution. Had an excellent booklet of maps from Budget that I enjoyed thoroughly for the next few days. The roads were well marked and we never tended to get very lost. They were also wide, compared to England, but the downside was the edges were full of people on mopeds or bicycles or foot or slow carts or whatever so one couldn't take advantage of the wide road to relax one's attention very much. The goals in this northeast portion of Thailand were two famous sites of Khmer temples/grounds; Prasat Hin Rung and Prasat Hin Phimai. This was the first night we didn't have a hotel reservation. That was because we didn't know how long it would take to cover the territory and also with a car we like having more flexibility in where we end up. Basically, we stop at some reasonable place when it gets dark; usually picking the first try hotel via LP. In this case it meant we did the first of our two targets that afternoon. Quite good with an attraction being the long walk up to the primary ruin on a path that

runs due EW (aimed straight at Angor Wat) and the site being at the top of an old volcano so one had quite a view of the countryside; over into Cambodia for example.

Although I've avoided telling you about every meal, I should mention that prior to getting to target one we simply pulled over to one spot where an old lady had a table set up and had some fine soup. The stock was from a large old pot she had going and the adding of noodles and greens and meat were by our finger pointing. Fun driving thought villages, looking at people working the fields; etc. Much rice was being harvested for example. Very picturesque, like one expected for this part of the world. Also, always fun to see all the school kids on the roads. Got to the relatively small town of Phimai at dusk, found their best hotel and stayed there. Nothing fancy, but adequate (and cheap). After cleaning up we ate at a nice place.

Friday-2: Did the Phimai ruins, more extensive than at Rung but not nearly the neat setting. Also did the small museum there; quite enjoyable. By noon we were on the road heading back toward the center of Thailand and northward. Drove all afternoon though fun countryside, then mountains, then more farm land, etc. On one road saw a sign to turn to a Silk Weaving Village and did so. Turned out it was a road with many silk shops (don't know how they can get enough business for all of them). Dawna bought material to recover a chair in our family room although now she is talking about making a wrap-around skirt out of it; we'll see. We were surprised to have just stumbled into this silk selling area but further looking at LP says it is famous for that. Pushed/drove onward with the next target being the old kingdom area of Sukhothai. Was getting dark by the time we hit Phitsanulok so we stayed there. Nicer hotel than the night before but don't remember much about where we ate or what walking around we did.

Saturday-2: Drove the 75 km or so to Sukhothai and spent the morning at those ruins. They are very extensive and having the car to go from site to site was quite efficient. Many fine sites. S was the capital of an empire for a couple hundred years between the 13th and 15th centuries and is now another National Historic and World Heritage Site. It has yet different architecture from the ruins at A and even from the Khmer site of the prior day. Spent the afternoon heading northward on non, or only semi, major roads seeing some fine countryside. Ended up at the city of Prae, even a hour or more before dark. Regular routine of hotel selection, finding, and moving in; followed by some street walking and dinner. The difference this night was we didn't find the place to eat we were looking for, defaulted to eating at the hotel (partially because it was air conditioned), and had a rather uninterested meal.

Sunday-2: Checked out a large Teak House (quite nice) with a few shops now inside it; the teak flooring was with like 20 inch planks. We then headed westward towards Chiang Mai. First detour/stop was to see Wat Phrat That Lampang Luang. Excellent. By the way, if one takes a Michelin book and looks at their color scheme for "places worth a journey", "places worth a detour" and "interesting places" you can see our route rather clearly in that most of our stops were for the first of these three categories. Next stop was an elephant conservation/training center. Saw a well done elephant show, checked out

various other items on the extensive grounds, had lunch, etc. Dawna enjoyed feeding sugar cane to the elephants. From there it was into Chiang Mai and finding our accommodations - yes we were now back to a reserved accommodation. Lots of traffic, one-way streets and other confusions but we found it down a small off road and properly next to the river (given that the name was Riverview Lodge). Put the unharmed car, with 1200 new km on it, into a small parking lot and called Budget who came and took it away. As much as we enjoy the independence of having a car it is also always nice to give it back and be without that responsibility.

Chiang Mai is the second largest city in Thailand and capital of the north. Most folks like it much better than Bangkok because it is 10% the size, has less smog, sits near some nice mountains, is cooler, is more laid back, etc. It has over 300 temples as it has been an important center for a longer time than Bangkok. We had reserved 4 nights there at a relatively small (76 rooms) place that had nice writeups as being in a quite setting with a garden although only a few blocks from the bustle of the city. I'd say it was just that and that the folks running it were laid back, green (as in conservation - no smoking, etc). A good choice. In case I haven't mentioned it, everywhere we stayed was quite clean; in fact I'd say Thailand is quite clean everywhere (both inside and out), little trash, etc. We ate at a nearby place that night and had some interesting/good local food. It was definitely cooler than other places had been and we ate outside under a tree with some enjoyable live local music. Darn good living.

Monday-2: Breakfast in the garden with a view of the river. Nice. Then we hit the town at our usual slow walking pace primarily going to the major Wats while also stopping at some silk places; at one Dawna came very close to having a skirt made but didn't. That night we to a Thai Boxing series of matches; I had wanted to take one of these in somewhere in the same manner as wanting to see some Thai Dancing somewhere. Definitely interesting both the ceremony/ritual before each match, the match itself what with feet and elbows and knees being more important weapons than fists, and the general setting (those in the know hooted and shouted and did their betting on the matches while a bunch of we tourists sat there and watched and drank our beer or whatall). The competitors were young and the weight classes were 70, 85, 95, 102, 105, 112, and 126 pounds so not big folks; but quick. Fun but they also start out (at 8 PM) with the least capable folks and work their way up through 11 matches. We left after #6 or #7 so didn't see the most skilled ones, and got home before midnight.

Tuesday-2: Today's outing was to go to the Wat that is up a mountain a few thousand feet (in elevation) about 15 km out of the city to the west. Caught a sawngthaew, these are red pickups with benches along both sides of the back and a cover over the back. They prowl the streets and take many people short straight distances for small money, but also like to get tourists like ourselves to do more major trips. After some bargaining with a couple of them, off we went - up the mountain. Then we did the Wat (Phra That Doi Suthep). It begins with going higher via some 300 steps; quite a grand entrance especially since the steps are broad and the "banisters" on both sides are long nagas (sea serpents) with wonderful heads at the start and tails that undulate along all the way up to the top. Made

of bright tile pieces and quite spectacular. The temples and buildings and Buddha's at the top were all fine items as were the views. Spent a fair amount of time there including a bite for lunch (pad thai). We then explored the surrounding area looking for the National Park that is right next door according to LP. First item of interest was a jade shop/factory along with orchids. Needless to say we spent some time there, but did not end up with a purchase. They probably had a dozen folks carving jade and several rooms of stuff for sale, but Dawna didn't bite. After a few misstarts we figured out that the park was up the road 400 meters or so and walked to it and then into it, checking things out as we went of course. Found a trail to a waterfall but after 20 minutes or so of walking, some of which was rather muddy, we circled back via a service road. Was nice to get out and stretch one's legs, however, and no other people were there. Great trees but not many birds (that we could see that is).

Walked back to the Wat and then caught a ride in one of those sawngthaews, this time with many other folks. It went to the bottom of the mountain near the zoo and stopped at which time several of us caught a different one into town and we got out near our hotel. The first leg of this travel was interesting as when about 8-10 of us were already in the back end a monk came up and the driver immediately had the folks across from us change seats so the lady was not next to where the monk would be sitting but rather her guy was. Another monk sat next to me and we did a bit of chatting. I think that night we were going to eat off the street in the night market but when we walked over there it wasn't blocked off from traffic like it had been the prior two nights so those stalls weren't functioning. Ended up eating at a close-by tiny Indian place and although we were disappointed that the lamb was all gone, we had chicken and the curry sauce was quite good. Oh, yes, this may have been the day that I stopped at an Internet Spot and did my thing while Dawna got a Thai massage. She says it was quite a bit better than the one she had gotten in Turkey, and of course much less expensive. After those activities I also had a swim. Surprisingly I didn't go for a dip each night, the pool just wasn't that interesting and a shower (no bath tub here) did the same refreshing sort of function.

Wednesday-2 The first activity of the day (after the usual casual breakfast) was to decide if we were going to go somewhere adventuresome for the next couple days and if so, where. We decided we'd just hang out and do more in the local area; so arranged to keep our room for a couple days longer than originally booked - actually, we could keep it only one extra day and had to take a different room (without a balcony and view of the garden and river) for the second extra day. We booked a local one-day adventure for the following day as well as a plane to Bangkok for Saturday and then set out on our own activity for this day. The activity was to rent bikes and ride to the zoo; across town but before the climb up the mountain begins. Was quite a bike ride in terms of massive traffic to deal with but the people were very good about not running us over or off the road. For the most part we simply rode where all the mopeds travel but when it came to major intersections it was a real challenge to get across them because of the way they were laid out. But we made it. Part of our path to the zoo went through the grounds of a major university, and that was fun to see. The zoo itself was reasonable but not outstanding. We were, however, very impressed with the dozen or so different types of pheasants we got to

see and in general all the animals were well cared for and in environmentally proper "pens." English signs on all the spots let us know what we were seeing and that was nice; while on the other hand the maps/directions of/for the zoo layout were poor so it was difficult to navigate around. Dawna enjoyed feeding the giraffees. Also, it was warm, but not hot. I should have mentioned that along about these days winter had come to Chiang Mai and made the breakfast table temperature actually cool and the day time temperatures much nicer than they had been. On the way back from the zoo we went to yet another grand Wat (had white stuppas, dual buddahs, a wonderful hugh wooden hall, etc). We hit the Indian place again that night in order to have the lamb this time and it was good, although not a lot different from the chicken.

Thursday-3: The one-day outing we had booked went as follows. A chap picked us up at 8:30, drove to a spot to pick up some others, switched to a van, drove to a spot to pick up two more, and then left the city. Turned out some of the folks were on a two-day outing, some on a three-day outing, and even those on a one-day outing (like us) were not all doing the same thing. Oh, yes, the more than one day outings are called treks and you spend the night(s) in a home of a tribe person. We had decided to not go for this when deciding to not go on the couple of planned tours mentioned at the start of this epistle. Anyway, our trip amounted to driving an hour or so northward and a bit westward into the mountains to a spot where item-1 was an elephant ride in the jungle. Dawna and I sat in the basket and a young fellow from the UK sat on the neck; Dawna was jealous of him. Off we went, slow and rocking and very impressed with how carefully the elephant walked including down steep slopes, through slippery mud, and across a river, etc. About a half hour ride to nowhere; that is, to a spot where a car can also go and there was our van with a couple of folks who would ride back to the beginning site while we went back by van. Dawna however took advantage of the situation and numbers and said "hey, let me ride on the neck since these two are now in the basket" and after various efforts to get that idea across she did. She thought it was great compared to the basket and was able to help steer and prod the giant fellow. Tim, the UK kid, and I went back to the starting point by the van. The elephant gang arrived awhile later. Had a picnic lunch and then off to item-2. This was a hike in the jungle to a waterfall. Relatively steep and slippery but not long; perhaps 30 minutes. A nice waterfall at the end. Meanwhile, to get to it we had to go across a stream which meant taking off one's shoes and wadding and almost slipping into the brink a couple of times - of course had to repeat this going back. Then another drive to item-3; which was going down a river on a bamboo raft.

The hike and been just we two, Tim, and a guide as was the raft. The guide this time was a young kid and his task was to work with a pole to guide where the raft is going (via river current) and also help it along through spots where the water wasn't flowing rapidly enough. He seemed inexperienced and our raft was not the best; it rode semi underwater so we got plenty wet. We had removed our shoes and left them in the van and also had put things like our billfolds and cameras in plastic bags but we really should have left everything in the van as it turned out. There were a couple of other rafts (different tourists) on the river and it looked like their rafts were more substantial and rode higher than ours. So, down the river we went in a quiet environment, looking at the farm land

adjacent to us and the mountains beyond. Nice. A few rapids but nothing like would have been the case a month earlier. At one point the "driver"/kid got his pole stuck in the mud and the raft kept moving so he lost the pole. Now we had no control, but he was able to hop out and pull us to the river's edge where he sort of tied us up and we also held on to the bushes while he went back upstream to get the pole. He couldn't do it, however, due to strength of the current and his modest swimming ability. So, he went into the jungle and found another piece of bamboo to use. Oh, yes, even prior to this episode he had beached us one time to do some raft repair. The rafts are just a dozen or so bamboo pieces lashed together and then a couple pieces tied perpendicular to them and above them to act like seats. His adjustments were probably to get us to ride higher in the water and keep drier but I'm not sure they accomplished anything. Anyway, on we went with our now inferior pole. Next happening was the pole broke when semi stuck in the mud again so now he only had control of things when it was shallow enough to do so with a too-short pole. A bit unnerving. He managed to beach us at a place where there were some partially built rafts and poles and got a better one to finish our trip. The finish came shortly thereafter when we beached at a spot where our trusty van was sitting. So, soaked from about the waist down we got in the van and drove to item-4 - a visit to a village. I had thought this would be to a spot where the natives were in costume and ready to have you take their picture for money and to sell you stuff they made. Instead it truly was a small village where they were just doing their normal life. The guide's background was from this tribe and he did a fine job of walking us around and showing us things. Although it was embarrassing to walk through their private areas it was also very interesting and real. We had no interaction with the people other than smiles and bows. By village I mean a dozen or so huts/houses. There was a hot spring nearby and the locals used it to fill tubs/tanks and do washings and take bathes and some were doing the latter. The guide invited us to take "a swim" but no one took him up on it. Then it was an hour drive back to Chiang Mai. An immediate warm shower and change of clothing got us warmed up (we were cool from getting wet and the general temperature now that winter had arrived). Went to dinner at the same nice place we had gone to the first night and had several good local items along with the live music in the background. This time we sat at a table just inside the main teak house rather than out in the garden. All in all the day's outing had been more active/real than I anticipated for such a routine tourist activity.

Friday-3: As noted we had chosen to hang around Chiang Mai and do the one-day outing just described so today was a day to primarily just hangout and do a few more local activities. First was a trip on the river that ran right by our hotel. An organization has repaired some old scorpion-tailed river boats and stuck a motor on the back. They were into recreating history and drove down stream a ways with a fellow giving a talk on how it used to be using many old photographs and other visual aids while he did this; and he also pointed out the new things along the river. Oh, yes, we had walked to where the boats would take off from and when we asked what times a "cruise" would take place we were told a group of 15 or so would be there in a couple minutes and we could join them - good/lucky timing. The boat turned around before a dam and headed upstream with the "lecture" still continuing. Past our starting point we went and say 15 minutes later we docked to have some snacks - fruit, drinks, banana chips, etc. Dawna and I got off the

boat last for the short walk to the picnic site and thus got talking with the guide. Interesting chap who learned English in the Vietnam war and was now into this recreating history tourist item. He also had built some huts at the picnic site. On the interior they had weaved mats for walls and ceiling so looked like the old original ones of the area except these new ones had brick exterior, AC, tile floors, etc. Turned out the major group that was with us were staying there for the night - we picked up his card "for the next time" as it was really quite charming. We three plus boat driver then went back to the starting point where he dropped us off and we took off on foot – across the river and back toward the old city.

Tried to see if we could get some eel (grilled) at a stand in the market area but failed; however did enjoy all the fresh fish stalls, vegetables, spices, flowers, etc, etc. And did eat some BBQd chicken that was mostly all bones. Gradually wandered through a couple market areas and back into the old town/city. Went to a fine Wat and then to the Chiang Mai Arts & Culture Center. Good exhibits about how that area evolved over the (many) centuries, somewhat distracted by all the noisy school children (but they are fun to watch in themselves). Eventually walked back to the hotel and into our new/different room. Just fine. About 6 PM we caught a tut-tut and went to Old Chiangmai Cultural Center, which is entirely different from the afternoon spot and a bit out of town near the airport actually. The purpose here was to have a “Khantoke Dinner and Hill Tribe Show” – our final chance to see Thai dancing and also hill-tribe dancing. One of those spots for tourists but the food (Khantoke Style) was actually quite reasonable with an endless supply of it and the show(s) quite enjoyable. It was a bit tricky getting a tut-tut back to the hotel after the last performance, but we managed it.

Saturday-3: Up slowly, chilly breakfast, finished packing, cab to the airport, killed some time, and then took a somewhat-late leaving plane to Bangkok. Taxi to our hotel which was out near the airport deliberately. After settling in we then took a taxi to a spot both where the major Chatuchak Weekend Market takes place as well as being the furthest out spot on their Skytrain; we always have to checkout rapid transit systems for Sabina. This market has a couple thousand stalls if I remember the hype correctly. Spent a couple hours and did make a couple small purchases plus ate some stuff from a stand or two. Weather was pretty reasonable for Bangkok. Then took the Skytrain to its end point near the river and back to a middle point to try for a restaurant out of LP. Took awhile to find it and then it wasn't quite what we expected but it was still Thai and good and a peaceful break. From there it was Skytrain back to Chatuchak and taxi to the hotel. Getting a taxi was not easy and in fact a local lady ended up getting one to stop for her and then handing it over to us! Next step was to bed early because we would be getting up early.

Sunday-4 (actually two Sundays due to that date line): Up at 3:30 AM, coffee, van to the airport that left at 4 AM, 15 minute ride or so; flight left at 6:40. This gave us lots of time to shop (Dawna) and read (Jake). She got a cute elephant ring with small diamonds and a ruby; properly getting rid of all our remaining Bahts without having to go to the exchange spot. Had two seats of three for the flight to Narita so could spread out, and I did a lot of typing on the trip letter and Dawna did a bunch of resting. At Narita we had nearly 3

hours to kill but did some of that killing by finding a restaurant that served unangi or however you say the broiled eel over rice that we like so much. Good. Next was the flight to SFO which was over a shortened night between our two Sundays. Again were lucky enough to have the aisle and window with an empty seat between us, which helped for spreading out and getting some sleep or at least rest. Arrived SFO a tad late due to weather in the Bay area and then it took forever to get our one checked bag, but eventually we did so and Fridel had not quite given up on us so we got our ride home. Probably got home by 10 AM which meant we had much of the day to unpack, do laundry, read e-mail, and generally catchup on the world before Monday.

Summary: Twas a good trip. Saw lots and at our (slow) pace for the most part. The people were very friendly with very little hassle on anything. Always something good to eat and it plus lodging were extremely inexpensive. Having the car for those few days was a good move, as was not having it much more than that. Lots of elephants be they real or on silk or jewelry or wood or whatever. Magnificent Wats and fine ruins. Scenic countryside and fun school children. Right time of year although maybe even better a month or two later. Would have been nice to have seen more wildlife. Perhaps should have done more on a river; and the beaches/islands are supposed to be great but we just weren't in the mood for that this time – Dawna will get more than she really likes/needs of that sort of thing when we go to Fiji.

The LP book was poor (out of date?) in terms of places to eat but great on maps as usual and the MGB was a nice thing for doing a bit more academic reading on spots and also for really calling out highlights (in their view) vs “just interesting.” And the new camera worked fine.