

Thailand

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The flight to Thailand was a tough ordeal. 16 hours from Boston to Hong Kong, and from there at least 3 more hours to Bangkok. We traveled in the dark for the entire long journey (the same on the way back), and the plane was kept dark. If you (like me) can't sleep and your back hurts, then the dark only adds to the misery. In Bangkok, a taxi pre-ordered by Booking.com took us to the hotel. The contracted company handled this with the organization befitting the heavy airport traffic. They sent me a message with the name of my driver and where I should go in the airport. There were about a hundred signs waiting there, one with my name on it. I pointed it out. The staff took a photo of me and sent it to the driver, who was waiting somewhere. He arrived 15 minutes later, they told me the license plate, I could go out, and we found each other based on the license plate, the driver based on my picture.

Our hotel was simple and friendly, with lots of tourists, and a great breakfast. Close to the big Chao Praya River, and also close to the streets that were very popular with tourists with modest money, which were almost pedestrian, with lots of restaurants, shops, massage and "street food". The atmosphere in the bustling crowd was good. Thais really like to sell to tourists, but only in a nice way and not at all aggressively.

The first day we went by tourist boat to one of the main attractions: the temple complex next to the Royal Palace. Buddhist temples were very new to us. They are very rich, but somehow quantity far dominates quality. They can line up a lot of almost identical Buddha statues, towers, altars, and all sorts of impressive carved monster statues. But we also saw a lot of real old frescoes. The great Chao Praya River is full of boats, most of them a Thai specialty: long boats. This is a graceful, gondola-like boat, but it is powered by a huge, clumsy, noisy and smelly engine. A long shaft extends from the engine at the back, with a propeller at the end, and the boatman steers by moving it. These boats dominate Thai water transport, and they ruined several of our experiences.

On the second day, we fell into a tourist trap. A taxi driver offered to take us cheaply to a so-called “floating market” 70 km away, which is also connected to some other programs (such as a monkey show). The trick was that, as we found out when we got there, the price of the program was twenty times the price of the taxi ride. But it would have been hard to cancel. Moreover, the “floating market” is a small canal where souvenirs and some food are sold, and the aforementioned noisy, smelly long boats are crowded in it. It is true that the boat took us to other places through our program, to interesting small temples and monuments. In the meantime, we passed long canals (they lace the flat parts of Thailand) and the Mae Klong River, so we also saw something of river and canal life. The long trip there and back also gave us a little glimpse into the countryside. There are small temples everywhere, but every house however small, and almost every coconut plantation (usually surrounded by a canal) has a small altar, which I think is called a spirit-house in English. When something new is built, the expelled spirits of the place have to be appeased by building one of these, where they move in and where they regularly receive offerings.

On the third day we went to a nearby city, Ayutthaya. Once upon a time, this was the capital, with a lot of temples and palaces, until the Burmese destroyed it, also a long time ago. But the ruins are also impressive, they are compared to Angkor Wat of Cambodia; there are a couple of other similar ruins in Thailand. We went there by train. At the nice, big, modern Bangkok train station, we only got standing room on the small, crappy train. There were so many passengers in a similar situation that it was a wonder we could fit in. We rented a bike in Ayutthaya (very cheaply), and used it to tour the huge ruin park, and another part of the city, because there are interesting ruins not only in the park. The bike had to be taken across the nearby river by ferry. Getting the heavy bike on and off was a challenge for us. On the way back, our train ticket was not for standing, but despite that, we couldn't get on the train due to the large crowd (the cost of a lost ticket is completely negligible). We called a taxi using an app similar to Uber, which luckily worked. We also picked up an Argentine couple who were in the same situation as us.

The next day we traveled to Chiang Mai. This rather large city further north is incredibly popular with tourists. And it is a really interesting place, again with lots of temples, restaurants, vendors, massage, markets. There are also mountains nearby, we went on two hikes. Unfortunately, my whole trip to Thailand was a bit spoiled by the fact that a week before, one of my hips started to hurt a lot. I did all the longer trips by dragging myself on hiking poles. On the first trip, we visited two temples. One was in the forest, in a place inaccessible by

car, the other on a mountaintop, with many beautiful carvings, and a great view of the city. A taxi to there, and a small, open-back minibus back, of which there are many. It seems that most Thais travel by motorbike. A traditional vehicle, which is probably mainly used by tourists, is a small three-wheeled open car, the tuk-tuk. It's smelly, noisy, but in traffic jams a bit more agile than real cars.

Our other trip was a small ridge hike that started at a height of about 1500 m, and ended at a similar height, in a small village. The population of this one belonged to the Hmong ethnic group. It's a pretty poor place, but many people wore traditional costumes, probably for the tourists' sake. Our plan to call a taxi here failed: the Uber-like application would only send a motorbike. We were worried for about an hour; could only hope that a local would take us down for a good price, but we didn't see anyone with whom we could communicate our wish. Perhaps as a last resort, we should have spent the night at one of the places that advertised "home stay", something like a tourist staying with a local family. But finally the locals found us a woman who spoke English. She called someone who gave us a ride in her beat-up truck for a reasonable price. The roads there and back were scary. Not because of their condition, but because they are very narrow and winding, you have to honk at every bend, and this lasts for almost the entire 1500 meter descent. Our kind driver also offered to take us to our accommodation at the end. I turned on the Google Maps navigation and showed him, but unfortunately it spoke in English. Then Fruzsza brought up the Thai version on her phone; the driver was happy with it (event though it was probably not his native language).

In addition to Buddhism, the cult of the king is also completely unavoidable in Thailand. In addition to the many images and altars of the royal family, we also bumped into it itself in Chiang Mai. One day we noticed a lot of preparations around the main temple: many schoolchildren, a crowd of matrons in ceremonial attire, soldiers. We learned that the king would come there to pray in the afternoon. Towards evening we met the royal convoy passing by on the main street, and I even saw the king himself in his car.

Our next stop was a southern resort, Krabi, where Fruzsza's sister, Panka also joined us. The place is mainly famous for its romantic coastal cliffs, a favorite destination for rock climbers. Our hotel was in a bay called Tonsai Bay, which can only be reached by boat, with the already mentioned long boats. There is no pier (perhaps it would be difficult to build a small pier due to the tides), so you can't get on and off the boat with dry feet, you have to take your shoes off. (The boatman carried our luggage for us.) These boats also run between Tonsai Bay and the other beaches. At the hotel, each family got a small house.. The

staff was very nice (as are the Thai people we dealt with in general). The way to our house was a bit long for me, and every time the bellboy saw me limping with my walking sticks, he came and took me up with his (electric) golf cart.

Fruzsza and Panka really like to swim, but I couldn't keep up with them because of my bad hip. For them, swimming in the beautiful landscape and warm sea was somewhat spoiled by two things. One was the many roaring long boats. Another was that they couldn't swim at low tide, because the rocky ground that emerged at that time was prickly, and they didn't have swimming shoes. Fortunately, you could also go and climb to the neighboring larger beach, where there were no motorboats, and the ground was soft and sandy. Apart from swimming, there was a lot of other entertainment: watching the rock climbers, caves, monkeys. Panka also went to an elephant program, where tourists could wash the retired elephants. In this hotel, as in the very first one in Bangkok, the buffet breakfast selection also included several Thai dishes that we would rather have for lunch or dinner.

Finally, we had two more days in Bangkok with Panka. We looked at a very real market, and continued to try Thai food. (Due to various stomach upsets and loss of appetite, we had less of this than expected.) The descriptions always mention "street food". There really is a lot of it everywhere, but we didn't have enough time to try out the exciting places in this regard.

And again we managed to stumble upon an event of the king cult. One afternoon we saw a big preparation in one of the main squares: rows of chairs, lots of dancing actors dressed in fancy costumes, an audience gathered in evening dresses. It turned out that there would be a big performance on the occasion of some obscure anniversary of the king, where the Indian myth of Ramayana and the history of the early Thai kings would be combined with traditional music, dance, and narration (of which we understood nothing, of course). We were able to form some idea from the program booklet with the help of Google Translate. It was free, we watched the more than two-hour performance, which was very exotic for us. Lots of slow, stiff dance-like movements (mostly with the hands). Some of the actors wore monkey masks, and these proved to be acrobats in the mock fights. If a character had to speak, he only did the movements. someone provided the voice from a microphone next to the orchestra.