



# Rain, Thunder & Lightning

my recent visit to Thailand

IT IS some 14 years since an earlier visit to Thailand and in that time photography has been turned on its head by the advent of the digital camera. I remember returning from that previous visit with 9 Fuji films of 36 exposures and having to develop each film separately then of course make the prints, all 320 of them; a tedious and time consuming exercise during which little else got done. In actual fact I think that I may have opted out and given them all to the lab because of other work but you get the general idea.

On my latest trip, things were different. Instead of film I took memory chips. My camera is basically the same, a Canon EOS single lens reflex with many of the settings that my old film camera had but now, the film has been replaced by an electronic sensor. I managed to take 1,800 pictures but at this stage this represents quantity rather than quality; only after some distillation will I know how many 'keepers' there are; hopefully, more than one or two!

Apart from taking photos the prime objective of my trip was to take up an invitation to spend time with my old friend from Saudi days, Peter Simmonds. A close friend of Eva's and mine, Peter left his university teaching post in the middle east in 1996, some 6 years before we did and I was curious to see what he was doing with his life since that time. He is best remembered as an intrepid explorer of the Arabian deserts and took us both on camping weekends in his 4 x 4 Chevy Blazer, a vehicle that I was to subsequently buy from him. The visit to Thailand would prove valuable in giving me an opportunity to reflect on my own situation in a 'neutral' environment; one that was not coloured by outside forces.

The visit started at immigration in Bangkok's new (to me anyway) out of town airport where, after a lengthy

and very slow moving queue, I was given an immediate one month visa without questions. The airport complex is enormous so I headed for the meeting point and Peter quickly spotted me amongst the melé. Having recently sold his own pickup, he was using his brother Chris's Mazda pickup for the 3 hour trip along fast and wide highways to the school where we were to stay for the first couple of nights before visiting his farm. We stopped on the way at a Scottish restaurant, as Peter put it; this was McDonald's run by the McThai Co. Ltd. There was little Scottish about the cheeseburgers but they certainly did what they were supposed to. For 2 Cokes and 2 double cheeseburgers we paid 250 Baht (about £5). Some things are international.

It was dark when we arrived at the school staff accommodation and I could only imagine what the place would look like the following morning. In fact, it was far prettier and looked like a tropical paradise with the bamboo houses on stilts being surrounded by hibiscus, bougainvillea, orchids and with white squirrels leaping from tree to tree and house to house.

That first morning Peter had a parents' day so had to go into school and be grilled whilst I relaxed, got my bearings and took some photos in his garden then made a shopping list for a barbecue planned for later. In the afternoon we did the shopping at the nearby Tesco Lotus at Pak Chong (known as "cowboy city" for some strange reason). Tesco have been in Thailand for many years but it is still strange to see the name here, in green rather than the more familiar red and blue of the UK shops. The barbecue, expertly prepared by Peter followed was attended by a couple of South Africans with their wives who happened to be sisters, and an American friend. A good evening was spent by all, well except that is for the Afrikaaners who were dragged off by their wives well before they wanted to leave!



*Staff accommodation at St. Stephen's*

For as long as I have known Peter he has always been a teacher and I'm told a very good one at that being methodical and patient. It was clear that he planned his move to Thailand with a lot of thought, learning to speak the language before he had even left Saudi and he is now able to converse with whoever he wishes in Thai. Until he reaches his retirement age, he will continue to teach CDT, maths and physics at St Stephen's International School ("where east meets west") about 2½ hours northeast of Bangkok. This is quite a well established school, the first international boarding school in Thailand and built at a time when there were just a handful of international schools in Bangkok. It has an English female co-principal and it's capacity is for 500 boys and girls from 8 to 18 years of age. Unfortunately there are now hundreds of international schools many closer to Bangkok and St Stephen's has just 80 students at this campus at Khao Yai. So, there are small classes (3-14) which must result in a higher quality of

education per child although as a commercial enterprise it must be losing money. The international curriculum of England and Wales is adhered to at the school up to Cambridge IGCSE A-level examinations but with the school fees (about £12,000 p.a. for boarded students) and exam costs being quite high, the students are inevitably from well to do Thai families. Its facilities include basketball, badminton, tennis, cricket, golf, football, swimming and the staff accommodation set in a tranquil and colourful garden setting nearby, giving the campus a resort feel rather than a place of work and as Peter commented, some people spend money to visit such places, but he gets paid to stay there.

On a morning when Peter had to organise the sending by courier of his British passport for renewal in Hong Kong, I spent a couple of hours photographing the entire school campus since the students and staff were all on a week's holiday. The resulting pictures, although not outstanding as there was no human element, may prove of interest to those connected to the school or to others in the same game.

After his retirement from teaching, Peter will become a full time farmer. He has a partner *Dao*, meaning star, and together they have a sizeable farm of about 50 acres located some 1½ hours from the school. Dao has 3 lovely daughters: *Fon* is the eldest at almost 18, followed by *Farh* at 14 and the youngest is 11 year old *Fai*. Their names translate as rain, thunder and lightning respectively which I thought was very nice and also appropriate since there is



one essential ingredient necessary for this farm, and that is water.

Brother Chris is also involved with the farm which produces sugar cane, rice, cassava, maize, tobacco and other crops. They also have fish ponds and raise Tilapia. Depending on prices, it is more likely that the sugar cane will end up as ethanol



*Lightning Fai*

bio-fuel for vehicles than as actual sugar but the growing and harvesting process remains as it has for years, a manual task handled in the main by the older generation. Here, as with many countries in the world, the younger generation do

not see agriculture as a vocation and seek their future elsewhere particularly in the towns and cities. For this reason future farming methods will inevitably need to be more mechanised if they are to be profitable. Peter has his own small Kubota tractor and other motorised devices but hankers after a larger four wheel drive tractor to handle the bigger jobs that he now contracts out. I think it is only a matter of time before he is self-sufficient in this respect.

The farm and its surrounds is a quiet

place once the tractors and other powered agricultural vehicles have gone to bed. The sounds of the many single cylinder engines, mostly without silencers then change to those from spooky hooting owls and comical chatter from the Tokay Geckos that live around the houses. The dogs occasionally bark especially when the moon is full and the cockerels have no sense of timing whatsoever.

During my 2 days at the farm it was time to harvest some of the sugar cane. This was being burned when we arrived in order to remove the sharp leaves and make the cane easier to cut and harvest. I was able to see first hand what was involved in this arduous task and believe me, those flames are very real with insects escaping from the heat and flying high above the burning cane only to be gobbled up by the swifts that were flying above them. The experience was a 'baptism by fire' for my new camera which became very hot during the shoot as did I but the Canon did its job and I was very happy with the results. The day following the burning the cane was all collected and placed in neat piles ready for collection by the hauliers. They worked through the next night loading their lorries and trailers for the long journey



to the processing plant. Haulage cost are terribly high and can knock a hole in expected profits. Sugar cane is not the only commodity that is being converted to fuel. Another of the farm's crops, cassava is used increasingly not traditionally as a staple food but for bio-fuel. Market forces are driving up the cost of food as competition intensifies between the need for energy and for food. As my farmer friend says "you will either eat it or drive it".

During my visit in this Thai year 2554 - over half a century ahead of us in the west - I was taken back in time to see one of the most impressive Khmer sites in Thailand in the little town of Phimai. The restored temple complex of Prasat Hin Phimai probably dates back to 11<sup>th</sup> century and the Khmer king Suriyavarman's reign between 1002 and 1049 but nobody knows for sure. To put this into perspective, King Canute died in 1035 and by 1048 the Chinese had invented moveable type for printing. Certainly it was a Hindu place of worship before being used by the Buddhists. The archaeological and artistic features at Phimai differ from those found in other stone sanctuaries. While most face east, Phimai faces southeast, the direction of Angkor, the capital of the ancient Khmer Empire. Made of rose pink and greyish white sandstone, it constantly changes colour as the position of the sun alters. It



is now showing its age and no attempt

is made to stop visitors from clambering over whatever they please although one or two signs do say "No climber". There is little attempt to disguise the electrical and water installations and these modern necessities stick out like sore thumbs from the ruins which are now home to many pigeons. Cultural light and sound events are frequently held here but we were not destined to see anything on the 2 days we were there.

In order to photograph the site, we not only took photos in the late afternoon when we were joined (invaded?) by hundreds of school children who seemed more interested in me than the (other) history around them, but also the following morning in order to make the best use of the uncertain sun. We spent the night in the only hotel we could find in the town, the almost new Paradise Apartments. This could not have been handier as it was

literally around the corner from our historical site and each double room, complete with TV, refrigerator and excellent air conditioning cost us 450 Baht for the night (about £9). As we checked in we were each given TV and air conditioning remote controls together with the key in a bright green Winnie the Pooh bag. Secure parking on the ground floor was thrown in. We spent some time that evening in search of a riverside restaurant that had been recommended by the lady at the hotel. Clutching her hand drawn map we drove around in circles for ages and received lots of further conflicting advice from friendly Thais as to which way we ought to drive. We arrived at the elusive location starving but the wait for dinner was well worth the effort as it was one of the tastiest meals I have enjoyed for a long time. The beer was nice too.

Phimai is also well known for its Sai Ngam (Beautiful



Banyan) which is reputedly the largest banyan tree in Thailand. This was a fascinating area with the 350 year old fig tree covering more than 35,000 square feet on an island in a lake. Under its canopy of twisted roots and gnarled branches were secluded spirit houses where offerings of coloured garlands and other objects had been made. It was here that I discovered that Buddah is partial to not only bottles of drinking water but also fizzy red drinks as well as these were amongst the things offered. On a central island of the surrounding lake was an interesting display of black and white photographs showing a young King and his wife visiting the attraction back in the 30's. He is now in his eighties. Nearby the tree are places to eat and also stalls where you can buy fishes to be released into the wild. Buddhists consider it good karma to release creatures and depending on the type of fish or other animal, you can expect some good in return. The fact that the creatures are captured in the first place and confined to quarters, often unfed, seems to be missed. The Banyan tree is also

respected in the Philippines where it is known as the 'Balite' and also considered to be a place where the spirits live. It is considered highly unlucky to point at such a tree with ones finger for fear of upsetting something or someone. Another day was taken up with a visit closer to the



school, to the Khao Yai National Park. The second largest of Thailand's parks, this enormous area covers over two thousand square kilometers and is home to elephants, monkeys, bears, tigers and lots of other creatures including some very large snakes. As a Thai resident, Peter was only charged 40 baht to enter but as a tourist, I paid 400. The Mazda paid 50! Our main objective was to photograph a waterfall but with the rainy season still a couple of months away we were not sure if there would be enough water to fall, but we were not disappointed when we reached the Haew Suwat fall and I was able to play around with filters and stuff for some time. For much of this time there were only a few other visitors there. The location along with the island of Phuket was featured in the film "The Beach" starring Leonardo DiCaprio. Well, we didn't see any celebrities there but Peter spotted a large monitor lizard



and I was able to get some good shots of this as well. The lizard and some monkeys were the only wildlife we got to see, many of the creatures possibly appearing early in the morning or after dark.

When not sightseeing or spending time at the farm we relaxed at Peter's bamboo villa provided by the school. The house is a bit of a time capsule and the shelves are lined with books by Neville Shute and video tapes and discs of Father Ted, Only Fools and Horses, Fawlty Towers and Lawrence of Arabia and the like. The real Lawrence was of course Peter himself galloping across the Rub al Khali and there is a tape of that as well just to prove it. Brother Chris, Peter and I watched the news on BBC World Service or to get a different perspective, Al Jazeera or Russia Today, fed by an enormous motorised satellite dish outside Peter's window nestling amongst the banana plants. The world was our oyster and we sure did put it to rights. Seeing the destabilisation of Gadaffi and the debates about Egypt, Tunisia, and the Yemen made us feel slightly comfortable about the fact that we were no longer in that part of the world. A jolt back to reality came when we unexpectedly saw the earthquake damage from Christchurch, New Zealand. A text arrived on my cell phone from Eva's sister Claire in Manila; mother was worried about me and asked if I was anywhere near Libya, Bahrain or New Zealand.



On my last night in Thailand, I prepared one of my Indian style curries for the boys, cooked the day before amid much heckling about the "Leo" beer I was getting through at the same time although the gin and tonics were free flowing as well. I think the curry went down well but they did not eat it all. Half was kept back for them to consume after my departure. Well, depart I nearly didn't. Thai International needed a lot of persuading that I would be permitted to enter the Philippines and as I did not have an onward ticket out of that country. They were not to know that as a British passport holder I would automatically be given a 21 day visa, as I was when I finally arrived. Unfortunately I failed to get the Filipino immigration officer to grant me a continuance of the year's visa I had been granted just a few weeks earlier which means that plans to get some sort of residence status here in Manila will now have to be taken up a notch. I have 21 days to sort it however long I plan to stay.

I thoroughly enjoyed my short stay in this non-commercial area of a beautiful country and I am indebted to Peter for giving up his week's holiday to attend to my needs and his thoughtfulness in keeping me amused. His brother Chris was also invaluable in providing the wheels in the form of his handy little Mazda pickup for without that, we would not have been able to roam around as far. I just hope that he and Peter remember to park it the right way round when it rains!

# The Players...

