

Hello
Everyone—

I hope this finds
you well,
wherever you
are.



A few exciting things have been going on, so let's begin:

Picture a your favorite carnival. Perhaps with a ferris wheel and a merry-go-round, the hit the target-win a stuffed animal games, stages for performance and music, and delicious food everywhere. Now, put in all the people of all ages and sizes, the bands playing and the dancers pirouetting. OK, now put a big Buddhist temple in the middle of it all, with all the orange-robed monks also partaking in the festivities. This is the scene which is taking place not a five minute walk away from my apartment building. Cross the bridge, and you are swamped with flashy neon lights and immersed in Thai music emanating from the temple grounds. This is the temple that I walk through on my way to the ferry every morning, transformed from a tranquil, laid-back temple to a vibrant party atmosphere--it's Makka Bucha Day, a Buddhist holiday. It's a celebration of the day Buddha and his first 1250 monks got together to recite his teachings. Gotta keep an eye on those monks, huh?

So, this holiday happened to fall on Monday, so we had no classes that day! Since last week was midterm week, I decided to celebrate by taking the extra long weekend to [Koh Chang](#), an island southwest of the [Thai-Cambodia border \(still in Thailand\)](#). I was looking forward to gorgeous beaches against the majestic mountainous backdrop, with plenty of waterfalls and sunshine to go around. And it was all there. And then some (tourists). Despite the assurances of my trusty Lonely Planet and Frommer's guides, Koh Chang has become one of the more frequented island getaways. This cast a bit of a shadow on the trip. Nothing against tourists in general--this is a beautiful country which people should want to see--but too many overweight Europeans in speedos--no thank you. And the yuppie tourist culture has combined with Thai culture to make for a very strange atmosphere. Even the food has been affected--perhaps in the Thai's attempts to cater to the western tastebuds (who really wants a club sandwich on a tropical island), something has been lost in their own cooking (the curries were sub-par, at best). What did help was getting on a motorbike and cruising around the island (it's big). We ventured to one of the large waterfalls and got to swim in the pool beneath its 150-foot shower. The days were sunny and the beach was still beautiful, so those pictures can be found [here](#).



I did however, return to Bangkok to get used to some of the cultural things I have either gotten used to or recently discovered. First, is the hospital nearby my apartment building. I walk through it on my way to the ferry in the morning because its generally a peaceful place. They play peaceful music throughout the hospital complex and in the middle of the complex there is a large courtyard for relaxing. It may turn out to be a great place to study. The hospital is also a bustling center of business, as there is a market inside and many, many restaurants. And on the other side of the hospital, there is a huge food market where I've been getting dinner lately on my way home (appetizer, entre, dessert and some fruit for later for only 60 baht--about 1.90). In addition to that, the hospital, Siriraj, is also the best hospital in the nation and it happens to be the place the King goes when he has medical issues. If it's good enough for the King, it's good enough for me, right?

I've also been to a new Thai movie, [Final Score](#), which is a documentary following about a few high school students in their senior year preparing for entrance exams for University. Since I've never had to take one, I thought it would be good to see what these kids go through. In short, it's intense. Hours and hours of studying each day for months on end because this is the most important part of their academic careers. And I gained some insight as to how competitive my own school is--for the engineering school at Thammasat, there are 345 seats each year. Over 26,000 students took the entrance exam! That's just over a 1% acceptance rate...and though the engineering school is good here, the law, economics and political science schools are in even higher demand. It helped me understand more fully why everyone is very impressed when I tell them that I study at Thammasat. But I didn't take an entrance exam...

And finally, a few other random things that have happened lately: In my Thai Rural Development class, my professor has twice decided to answer his cellphone in class; I don't mind,



since we have such a long lecture period anyways. Umbrellas are used for shielding from the sun; it rains too hard here for them to be effective against the rain, and Thai people want to be as light-skinned as possible. In keeping with staying light-skinned, Thai people swim fully clothed; it is rare to see a Thai in a bathing suit. People are also becoming increasingly [dissatisfied with the coup](#) which took place last September.

That is all I have for now. Only other news is that it was over 100 degrees today and that's pretty hot. Tomorrow will be 98 and then relief comes in the form of a 92 degree day. As the Thais say-- raan maak! (it's hot!) I'm going to try studying, I think. Please keep me updated on how you all are doing and what's going on!