



Hello again from Muang-Thai (the Thai way of saying Thailand). Happy Waitangi Day for anyone who happens to be in New Zealand. For those of you not, I suppose we'll have to settle for a happy post-Superbowl recovery or, in Malinn's case, happy travels in Prague!

I gave you the education run-down before, so I'll make this one brief--I gave a presentation on King Ashoka the Great in my Buddhist Institutions class yesterday and it went pretty well. Luckily, the acts I had to follow were one student who didn't put much work in and another who had no choice but to read off notecards. I managed to make my presentation at least semi-interesting. I even found out that King Ashoka (circa 300 BCE) was not attractive ("rather ungainly in personal looks"), had too many kids to remember their names, enjoyed good food, and eventually became a vegetarian. Neat, huh? Oh, and he has also been the biggest supporter of Buddhism ever, as well as the model for all Kings of Buddhist countries (like Thailand) since his reign.

But enough of that. This weekend I just returned from a trip to Samut Songkram Province (southwest of Bangkok) in Plai Pong Pang village. It was pretty sweet. First, we check out a floating market. Crazy, huh? you get in a boat and the driver takes you along the market, which is also in mostly boats. If you see something you like, then you stop your boat next to it and begin the bargaining. If you're too slow to stop



your boat, however, you just grab the vendor's boat and drag it along with you! An interesting experience, for sure!

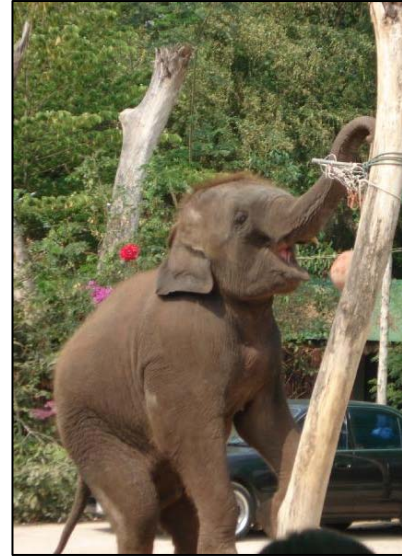


After we got off the boat and were heading back to the bus, one of our guides thought it was necessary to show us his pet. His pet happened to be a 12-15 foot snake. It was huge. It probably weighed about 140 pounds. You have got to check out the pictures of this. Especially since there are pictures of me with it wrapped around my shoulders. I don't think I have ever been so inclined as to touch a snake, let alone carry around a monster snake on my shoulders. But it was pretty awesome, post-holding.

From there, we continued on to an elephant camp. We could take elephant rides, feed them and then see a short show. This is when we met JoJo, the 5 year old elephant. After feeding him countless bananas, he showed us how to hula-hoop and play a

harmonica. Following that, he proceeded to play basketball (boy can he dunk!) and then give a few people his version of a Thai massage. It was a great time.

After the elephant camp, we went to our homestay where we practiced our paddling skills. The boats were a bit unstable, but I managed to tame one and after a while Mena and I had it down. Following dinner, we were on a boat ride on the web of rivers to see the fireflies at night. This area happens to be prime firefly territory and there are tons of them. Now, I've seen fireflies before, so it wasn't the biggest deal for me...or many other people, but it was nice being out on the water and in the peaceful area of the forest. Keep in mind that the area that we were in was where the Chao Praya river (the big one in Thailand) turns into a delta. That's why the main mode of transportation is by boat. Even the monks travel by boat. The



only problem we had with this homestay, however, was that we didn't get to sleep inside. There was a large house that had one large enclosed room for the owner, but everything else was open air. They provided us with large mosquito tents of sorts which were great. But they didn't fight off the cold very well. I know you in the midwest have it bad...but when you're used to 90 degrees during the day and you have to sleep in 40 degree weather, it's not pleasant. The blankets were helpful, but we all cuddled together to help each other stay warm. In addition, the mosquito tents failed to quiet the sounds of dogs barking at 3 in the morning, or the birds calling throughout the night. There was even a bird nearby that wouldn't shut up, but would shriek like a monkey every couple minutes (we confirmed in the morning it was not a monkey). Needless to say, combining the noise with the cold, nobody got much sleep that night.

We were relieved as the sun came up and it was time to arise to feed the monks. It is common practice for Buddhists to feed monks (a good merit-accruing act) and you'll see it everywhere early in the morning as people put food in monks' baskets while kneeling on the sidewalk. This time, however, it was us doing it as the monks came by each in their personal boats. Once I was done giving the food to the monks (some rice, soup, vegetables, a lotus flower and a desert of some sort), they would give me a prayer as I knelt before them. It was very calming early in the morning.

During the day, we, again, got into boats and were off to see the temples around the area. There was a place that happened to have a house which was converted into a small museum. It was formerly built in Ayutthaya, the old capital, over 230 years ago by King Rama II (now we are on Rama IX) for a monk who had done him a great service (convincing the most beautiful woman in the province to marry him). Following this temple, we went to another which was one of the most beautiful I have seen yet. Outside was normal, but inside was all wood. It was all made

from a single tree (teak, I think), including the floor (only 7 huge pieces for the floor). On the sides were immense carvings of the Buddhist traditions. Usually they are murals painted along the walls...but these are carved in gorgeous wood and are done to perfection. See the pictures!

The last temple of the day was one which used to be a fort built over 400 years ago to build resistance to the Burmese. During the time it was built, the Burmese had taken over most of Thailand, but in this area an army was trained. When the Burmese came to attack it, they could not take it over. Following this, the Thai's repeatedly defeated the Burmese and sent them home packing.

Then we returned home. So far this week has been giving the presentation, going to classes and also finding my way on to the Faculty of Economics basketball team for inter-faculty play. I missed the first game against the BAS Faculty (Asian studies), but will play tomorrow in a game between the juniors/seniors and freshman/sophomores of the economics faculty. Then Saturday will be a game against the Engineering faculty. Needless to say probably, but I am the tallest person on the team. And probably the tallest person of any team. The guys play a zone defense, but they aren't very good at filling the holes. I helped that. And there are actually a few good players on the team. We'll see how things go.



Beyond that, there has been some sad news about. The first concerns a bird which had taken to sleeping on my balcony until about 11 in the morning. He/She had been doing it for about a week, and I had thought it was because it was getting cooler at night around here. After a few days, I named it Eddie and Eddie continued to hang out on my balcony...even if I was out there. Then Friday morning I found Eddie upside down, legs straight in the air. It was a sad morning.

More seriously, however, it turns out that two Thammasat University students (Thai students, not international) died over the weekend. They were freshmen and died in a car crash. The driver, a sophomore, lived. All three of the students were drunk at the time. The campus was a bit shaken up and I guess there are funeral services this coming Saturday. I didn't know them and probably won't be going, but many of the Thai students in the business administration faculty will be going. A sad day, indeed.

Sorry to end this on such sad news, but that is all the information I have right now. I hope everyone is surviving the cold and that classes, work, and life are going as well there as they are here! I have posted many new pictures on the [webshots site](#), including ones I talked about in a previous email about Ayutthaya (part 2) and Lopburi (the monkey place), as well as new ones featuring my apartment (sorry for the mess, Mom), the ever exciting 63rd annual Thammasat-Chulalongkorn football game (tied, 1-1, but Thammasat still leads the 63 year series), the trip I just took and others! Keep me updated on how you guys are doing!

Chon Kaeo--Aaron