



*Welcome to Rott's Manor*

Pete & Mary Clukey

## Thailand 2010 Trip Report



**Saturday, December 19, 2009 thru Sunday, December 20, 2009 - ATL to Bangkok**

The first leg of our flight from ATL to NRT (Tokyo) went great. We had a great crew taking care of us. First we were fed a lunch/dinner, then a snack, and then just before landing a breakfast. But we weren't able to sleep as much as we had hoped. We arrived at Tokyo 40 minutes early, only to find that our next leg NRT to BKK (Bangkok) was delayed initially 40 minutes, then a bit longer.

On the final leg we were finally tired enough to sleep some. We arrived at Bangkok around 2 am (Monday, December 21<sup>st</sup>) and then still had the transport of about 45 minutes to the hotel to look forward to. All our luggage arrived and we found immigration to be a breeze. Next we found our tour representative and we were off to the [Tawana Bangkok Hotel](#). We met our tour guide, Angela and got a quick briefing that our wake-up call will be in a short 3 1/2 hours. From door to door a total of 32 hours travel time!

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### Monday, December 21, 2009

Breakfast at the [Tawana Bangkok Hotel](#) was a nice buffet this morning (7 am).

After a morning tour briefing (8:30am), we were off and running for the day. We walked through the floral market at Pakklong Talad. Angela bought everyone a "love flower" garland.

We then boarded a motorboat which took us up the river, then along the canals and through a few locks. At one of the locks we were next to a boat with a young couple from Russia. It was interesting talking with them while we waited for the locks to open. We arrived at a local Thai home for a Thai cooking demonstration. It was a lot of fun and we even got to help out with the cooking. We made a red curry. We had lunch around (1 pm). In addition to the curry we were served a luffa soup, rice, and a few other dishes.

After lunch, we reloaded onto the motorboat which took us to the Royal Barges Museum to see the fantastically ornamented boats used in ceremonial processions on the river. We had a brief stop in front of a temple to feed the Giant Catfish along the way. The beautiful boats at the Royal Barges

Museum are now only used about every 4 years for the King's parade on the river. Some are 200 years old—all covered with gold and cut gemstones.

After our visit at the Royal Barges Museum, we were once again loaded back on the motorboat. We meandered through winding waterways, with a final stop to visit Wat Arun, the Temple of the Dawn. The steps of the temple were steep, but the views were worth the climb. One final time we were back on the motorboat for a short cruise up the river to the pick up point for our tour bus. After a quick stop at one of Bangkok's famous tailors at Thai Square Fashion, we were returned to the hotel. We have just a few hours to nap and clean up before dinner at 7 pm. Dinner this night was very tasty, with several courses being served (chicken rice cup appetizer, mushroom soup, stir fired veggies, cashew chicken, ice cream for dessert). After dinner, Angela led us on a walking tour of the night market that was just down the road from our hotel.

Two interesting things with the group today... First Jenny's camera was malfunctioning, and since we brought two cameras, we let her borrow one of ours for the trip; with the stipulation that the day we do the elephant trekking she takes a few photo's of us (later we jokingly called her our personal paparazzi). And secondly, the entire group was amazed at our apparent lack of jet lag. We used a product called "No Jet-Lag", which we purchased from Magellan's, during our long flights and it really seemed to have worked well.

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**Tuesday, December 22, 2009**

Breakfast at the [Tawana Bangkok Hotel](#) was the same nice buffet this morning (7:45 am).

On today's optional tour (\$70/ea), we left our hotel around 8:30 am to explore Bangkok. We began with a visit to Wat Traimit, where the world's largest golden Buddha resides. Cast in the 13th century using five and a half tons of gold, this 15-foot tall Buddha was later coated with plaster, probably to hide its value and protect it from theft. Generations that followed were not aware of the Buddha's gold content until workers accidentally dislodged some of the plaster while moving the Buddha to Wat Traimit in 1955. Today though, workers were in the final steps of restoring the temple, so it was closed. Our tour leader, Angela, inquired and found out that it will reopen by the time we return to Bangkok, so we hope to be returning to this temple later in the tour.

We continued our explorations with a walk through a traditional fresh market in China Town. There were many colorful shops selling fruit, cakes, incense, and many items used in local rituals. The Chinese burn paper items (photos of shoes, TVs, and cell phones) for their ancestors to use in the next life.

Before lunch we visited Wat Suthat Thepwararam. This temple has a rather large sitting Buddha and very ornately painted wall murals; which while we were there were being restored/cleaned. We witnessed the blessing of a baby by an orange saffron dressed monk.

We then ate lunch at a floating restaurant, called the Riverside, on the Chao Phraya River for a tasty buffet lunch. Angela is doing her best to keep us healthy. She advises us not to eat the fresh salad.

We then visited Bangkok's oldest temple, Wat Po, where we took many pictures of the colossal statue of the reclining Buddha. At one time this temple served as a kind of medical facility where

traditional Thai massage was used to mend the body. During our visit Angela arranged for each of us to have a 5 minute shoulder massage.

We arrived at the Jim Thompson House, former home of the American silk merchant, for a tour of the traditional Teak houses whose pieces were moved here from various parts of the country. Jim Thompson is credited with revitalizing Thailand's silk industry and expanding its international markets. Jim Thompson mysteriously disappeared while on vacation in another country.

We returned to our hotel by Tuk Tuk (three wheeled golf cart like) public transportation arriving at our hotel around 4:30 pm. It was a wild, but fun ride.

Dinner (6:30 pm) was on our own this night and we had pizza at the Italian restaurant in the lobby of our hotel to break up the Thai that was planned for the remaining of the trip.

Tomorrow we leave the [Tawana Bangkok Hotel](#).

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### **Wednesday, December 23, 2009**

Breakfast at the [Tawana Bangkok Hotel](#) was the same nice buffet this morning (7 am). Immediately after breakfast we checked out of our room and loaded up on the bus for one of our long bus travel days.

Not even one hour on the bus and we stop for our first Learning & Discovery lesson of the day. We noticed wind mills on the side of the road and stop to learn about salt harvesting. Sea-water is let into shallow fields then wind pumps move the water from field to field. In the hot sun it takes less than ten days for the salt water to evaporate. All that is left is the brine salt which workers then use a kind of squeegee to push the salt residue into conical piles around the field for later collection.

Another hour later and we stop at a roadside family shop for a bathroom break and another L & D. Angela teaches us about coconut and how the family makes coconut sugar. We were given tasty samples of the coconut sugar. Next we toured the shop owner's family house. This is the first of many authentic house tours during this trip. It is customary to remove ones shoes before entering dwellings in Thailand. This house is made of teak. There is little furniture. One entire wall is decorated with portraits of the Royal family. There is electricity and the kitchen has a refrigerator. This is definitely a house of the upper middle class.

Next we arrive at the Floating Market of Damnern Saduk, where we take a boat ride in a sampan through the market. Mary bargains for a silly hat. On our way back to the bus, we run into Angela and when Mary asks about something yummy smelling Angela buys it for us. It is the most sinful pancake folded like a taco, filled with fresh coconut, topped with sweet cream (almost like a Twinkie filling) and toasted coconut.

After the market, back on the bus we travel for a while longer. Angela wants to make sure that no one is hungry as it will be a few hours before we arrive at Kanchanaburi for lunch. So, Angela serves us some fresh mangosteen fruit that she bought at the floating market. The fleshy white center of the mangosteen is very tart, but refreshing. There is a legend about Queen Victoria offering a reward of 100 pounds to anyone who could deliver to her the fresh fruit, thus the fruit is now known as the Queen of fruits.

After about an hour on the bus we make another stop for both L & D and restrooms. We learn about making paper and watch many teak carving artists at work. The showroom had some very large and ornate teak tables, chairs, and other furnishings.

Back on the bus, Angela gives us a Thai alphabet and language lesson. There are 40 consonants and 20 vowels with 5 tones each. Finally we arrive in the Kanchanaburi area. Kanchanaburi is the area portrayed in the World War II film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. It was here in Kanchanaburi that allied POW's were forced to build the infamous WW II Burma railway.

Our location for lunch has scenic views of the Kwai River and the railway trestle now known as the Bridge on the River Kwai. It is not the original bridge which the allies bomb heavily during WW II. Lunch is served family style. Four dishes are presented, along with rice, and a bottle of water. It was yummy and the view was great.

After lunch, we got a much closer look at the Bridge over the River Kwai. There are a lot of plaques to read. We even walked from one side of the trestle to the other. Just before we left the area, a train arrived and people scurried from the track to the safety platforms... it still didn't look very safe.

Next we visited the newest Kanchanaburi War Museum, where we learned more about WW II history in this area. After the War Museum, we had a little time to wander the grounds of the War Cemetery. This cemetery contains the remains of Australians, English, and Dutch soldiers. All US soldiers have been repatriated back into the US.

We arrive at our resort, the [Pavilion Rim Kwai Resort](#), (around 5 pm) with time to enjoy the refreshing pool before watching the sun set behind the mountains on the other side of the Kwai River. Our room had a balcony overlooking the jungle canopy... it was a gorgeous view. Dinner this night was a tasty buffet dinner at the resort. Most of the Thai food that we've had thus far is not very spicy. It's pretty much a lot like Chinese food that we get back in the US.

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#### **Thursday, December 24, 2009**

We start with breakfast at our hotel and then at 8 am we ride to Hell Fire Pass. On the bus, Angela tells us of Thai superstitions. One is that it is good luck if a gecko falls on you (there are a few on our bus that would not find that lucky). Arriving at Hell Fire Pass, we had planned to visit the sobering war museum at Hell Fire Pass and use its clean modern bathroom, but it was closed for the holiday season. So, Angela found a nice vendor who let us use his "outhouse"... our first, but not last, experience with a squat toilet this trip.

After everyone made their happy stop, we walked on a woodland trail for about 45 minutes. The trail had many stairs, but our guide is smart and has us descending them versus climbing up them. The area is now peaceful, but many lives were lost during the World War II construction of one of the most difficult sections of the River Kwai Railway: to lay track here, Allied POWs and Asian conscripts carved through over 325 feet of solid rock—almost entirely by hand, working 24 hours a day by the light of oil lamps—hence the name, Hell Fire Pass, given by the prisoners.

Then, we climbed aboard a songthaew truck for a short ride down to the rivers edge. At the river our group divided into two and we boarded into two longtail speedboats for an hour ride on the

River Kwai. Our boat captain was great. Anytime one of us raised our camera to capture that special Kodak moment, he would slow the boat. At one point we raced along side the other boat, but we were in no hurry and soon they speed away. We disembarked at, according to the brochure Paksang Pier. To call this a pier was a stretch of the imagination. There were lots of butterflies getting a drink from the mud puddles alongside the road here. And many in the group bought sodas from a road stand.

We enjoyed a home-made lunch (chicken, stir fried veggies, sticky rice all wrapped individually in banana leaves). This may have been our favorite lunch of the whole trip. The setting for lunch was actually under a "pavilion" in a rural neighborhood. The lady of the house demonstrated origami by creating a bird out of a palm frond. We were then invited into their house for a tour. This house was raised on stilts and the floor was a bamboo weave that was sturdier than it looked.

After lunch we had a visit at a local school. We actually became English teachers for a while. Then children danced and played music for us. And finally they all waved good-bye as our bus pulled away.

We had just enough time to visit a waterfall, where Angela bought everyone in our group some local snacks; we got some banana chips glazed with coconut sugar (yummy).

Next we boarded a train to experience first hand the famous Burma railway. The local commuter train carried us for about a half-hour along some of the original tracks built in WW II. The benches were hard, but Angela tried to make sure that we were as comfortable as possibly suggesting that we take seats under the fans.

We return to our lodge by bus. Dinner (7 pm) is at the resort this evening served by the pool. After dinner we were invited to join a party. Singha, a local beer company was having its marketing department conference followed by this huge lawn party. We were amazed that we were treated as honored guests and not party crashers! The owner himself guided us to a table up front near the stage. Each of us were brought all three of their beers; Singha, Leo, & Asahi to try. Some of our group even got up on stage to dance.

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### **Friday, December 25, 2009 - Christmas day**

After breakfast this morning we sadly have to check out of the [Pavilion Rim Kwai Resort](#). We set out early this morning (7:30 am), and drive through tapioca and rice-growing country to Uthathani.

First we stopped along side the road at a tapioca field. Angela pulled up a plant and showed us the root. Tapioca growing is one of the Kings projects, intended to give rice farmers additional crops that can be grown for a profit. Tapioca can be used to make ethanol fuel.

We even get hands on experience of our own harvesting rice when our driver spots some farmers working their fields. Imagine a big bus just stopping along side the road and unloading its tourist.

We also were given the opportunity to try some local roadside specialties of the area. There are many rats and cobras in the rice fields and enterprising roadside vendors serve them up as a tasty treat... or so we are told, none in our group opted to sample the barbequed rat. But we sure did get a kick out photographing the owner with his critters.



Back on the road again, and we stopped at a “rest area” for a bathroom break. Here there are no flushing western style toilets. It’s not quite outhouse hole in the floor, but close. We also took time to go into the 7-Eleven to pick up some snacks. This was a lot of fun as many of the items we were guessing as to the contents of the package. Pete ended up with some dried smoked fish flavored thing that he enjoyed but Mary thought that it smelled quite foul.

Just before lunch we made two stops. First a real quick stop at a post office where many in our group picked up stamps and mailed postcards. Next we visited a market in town where local farmers offer various kinds of live fish (frogs, toad, & eels too) and vegetables fresh from their farms for sale. Angela picked up a few items for our lunch.

We then boarded the Khiri Nava, a large traditional wooden rice barge, and cruised past peaceful scenes of river life. Many local people live on the raft houses that line both sides of the Sakae Krang River. We witnessed fisherman casting/dropping nets. We ate lunch as we cruised on the river for about an hour and a half. I have given up describing our lunches and dinners because they are all delicious and different, but always consist of a mound of rice and at least 4 meat/vegetable/curry combinations to put around it. And of course almost always with a soup course as well! Desserts are almost always fresh fruits—pineapple, watermelon, papaya, and sometimes dragon fruit, longan, or a tapioca thing.

We then continued to Phitsanulok, stopping along the way at Wat Tha Sung, a very unusual temple built to honor a famous monk. It is full of mirrored pillars which must be 30’ high to a ceiling that is also all mirrors. The monk was not cremated (unusual) but lies there in a coffin covered with diamonds and real gold. The temple is known as the diamond temple. It is decorated as though Liberace lived there.... Mirror and glitz everywhere.

The ride was a long one and we had one more “happy stop” (bathroom break) at a shopping mart. There were lots of trinkets here for purchase and our group helped the local economy.

Late in the afternoon/early evening, we checked into the [Amarin Lagoon Hotel](#). The lobby of the hotel had a gingerbread-like Christmas house made with crackers. Our room had a nice picture window and right outside was a tree with a birds nest.

We had dinner (7 pm) at the hotel. This night we gave friendship pins, flags of both the US and Thailand crossed, as Christmas gifts to everyone.

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### **Saturday, December 26, 2009**

Another early start, buffet breakfast at the hotel and then we checked out of the [Amarin Lagoon Hotel](#). We’re on the bus by 7:30 am this morning. Angela gave us a history lesson, which was appropriate since we were on our way to visit the ancient city of Sukhothai.

There are some very nice ruins here! Sukhothai is Thailand’s largest collection of historic ruins. This is the place where the Thai nation was born, the kingdom’s magical and spiritual center. With its cache of remarkably preserved columns, shrines, temples, and palaces, it epitomizes old Siam. We ride a tram through the well-kept and attractive grounds of this historical park to see the monuments, and learn about its most famous king, Ramkamhaeng. Not only did this legendary ruler leave a great legacy of art and architecture—he left stones inscribed with a chronicle of his achievement. King Ramkamhaeng is credited with inventing Thai script, as well as with amazing

skill at hand-to-hand combat on elephant back, the spread of Theravada Buddhism, and developing relations with China. Angela tries in vain to tell us all about the history here, but almost all in our group are mesmerized by one Kodak moment after another (we're a bunch of shutterbugs). Just before leaving Sukhotail, Angela buys some fruit for our group from an old lady.

For lunch today, we ate at Sinvana Resort located somewhere along the road to Phrae. It was peaceful by a pond and garden with soft music. We were served a soup. And then four dishes were shared family style. Dessert was wrapped in banana leaves; a ball of coconut, sesame seeds and cane syrup coated with a rice flour paste.

After lunch, Angela took us to an "Elephant Temple", Wat Sorasak, for a 5 minute photo stop. Constructed in 1412 this chedi is supported by 24 elephants. The chedi is another type of Sri Lankan stupa, which was prevalent during the Sukhothai period.

Back on the bus, Angela is keen on teaching us about Thai culture and goes into a lesson about marriage rituals. According to Thai customs, a couple traditionally becomes engaged during a ceremony known as *thong mun*. This is literally the giving of gold by the prospective groom to his fiancée. Parents, friends and relatives will attend this ceremony. It is customary also for the groom to pay a dowry, *sinsod*, to the bride's family. There is no set amount for *sinsod*, the sum is typically determined on the one hand by suitor's wealth, and on the other hand by the "value" of the future wife; her beauty, personality, background, education and other qualifications, if she is a virgin, or has got a child and so forth. Thai Traditional wedding ceremonies and rituals need not be conducted in the presence of monk and are usually performed at someone's home.

We had reached information saturation... time for Mary to take a nap and Pete to chill listening to his MP3 player.

We had one more "happy stop" (bathroom break) at a convenience store. The new iron buffalo in the back of a pickup in the parking lot had all the guys interested. While we enjoyed our ice cream, we asked questions of the new owner about his iron buffalo.

Before arriving at our hotel in Phrae, we visited, "Auntie" Leung's, a local indigo dyeing-workshop. She grows her own indigo and showed us the whole process of dyeing the cloth and making the clothing which is popular there. The fabric is put into water that has been filtered through ashes, had the branches of indigo soaking in it for 3 or 4 days, and lime added. With the first bath the fabric (cotton) turns green, but exposure to air while it dries gradually darkens the indigo color to a deep blue. This must be repeated 3 or 4 times for a real dark shade. Then we are shown how patterns are made by wax (batik process). We even got to make our own souvenir; a small batik indigo dyed piece of cloth. We both chose to make an elephant print. And of course, no stop would be complete without a chance for shopping. Mary even got into the act and with the assistance of the more fashion conscious members of our group, bought a shirt.

We had a little time this night to wander around town. We wandered down a street and found a small fair just getting set up. We're not sure if we are suppose to be wander around the grounds but everyone smiles and waves, so we guessed that we were OK. Then before the sun set, we wandered down the street to a small temple. One monk was watering the plants and an alley cat was hunting for its dinner.

Dinner was at our hotel this night. It is another tasty buffet.

After dinner, Mary got an hour long traditional Thai foot massage. She had some sore calf muscles from all the walking we were doing followed by hours on the bus. Thai massage is done with a lot of firm pressure to say the least... and the masseuse found those sore muscles and went right to work... Mary learned that she could levitate. After the massage, Mary was not sure if her legs felt better or worse.

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### **Sunday, December 27, 2009**

Early on the bus this morning (7:30 am), and Mary's legs did feeling better. This morning we traveled on to Phayao. It was a bit of a drive.

Angela started the day with some geographical information... provinces, districts (Um-Pur), sub-district (Tonn Bann), village (Moo Bann).

To break up the long bus day, we stopped at a reservoir and had an opportunity to try dancing shrimp salad... well, actually Angela wouldn't let us try it as this is not a good season for shrimp, but we did get to watch the salad with the live brine shrimp being made; a recipe that we won't try at home. We were given some time to shop and use the happy room of a local shop. The little stop on the corner seemed to have everything. We bought a music CD, sodas, and some snacks (chocolate not fish flavored whatever it was).

Angela was not done yet with today's L & D. The bus had now become a moving classroom. Angela instructed us on the ordination ceremony for a novice monk. First thing the hair and eyebrows of a novice monk are shaved off. Family members take turns to cut a piece of the child's hair. Then a monk will finish shaving it off. Then they go to the main chapel for the ordination ceremony. During the ceremony the monk says some things that the novice must repeat. The novice also has to say the 10 Precepts: don't kill, steal, have sex, lie, drink beer and wine, eat after noon, sing and dance, wear hats or watches, sleep on a soft bed and accept a lot of money. Then the novice monk is taken outside to change into the monks robes with the assistance of the monk. Then they go back into the main chapel to finish the ceremony.

All this learning makes us a hungry group, so Angela found a roadside stand selling bamboo-tube sticky rice. The bamboo is peeled like a banana, inside is a cylinder of sticky rice. We had one flavored with sesame seeds. It was a yummy snack.

We had lunch in Chiang Rai, the city of the "Golden Triangle" at a hotel. It was a very nice buffet with a huge variety of choices. And it even had ice cream for dessert.

We learned a little about the history of the "Golden Triangle". Due to the sheltering hills, navigable rivers, and fiercely independent tribal cultures, the region was once infamous as a center for renegades and drug smuggling. There are many legends and stories about the opium warlords who once held sway here. Later we would have a chance to visit an Opium Museum (but we chose to explore a nearby temple instead). Once the hill tribes did indeed turn to the cultivation of opium for survival—including several bands of Chinese nationalist followers of Chiang Kai Shek, who have been living here (somewhat in hiding and in dwindling numbers) since the Revolution! But times have changed. The Thai government has established many programs to introduce more viable crops, and most of the people are law-abiding farmers. Tourism has become a more profitable and safer alternative than drug smuggling. The hill tribes are more concerned about



preserving their old traditions. And life in the Golden Triangle is much gentler and more peaceful than in the old days!

In early afternoon, we continued on to the small village of Mae Chan. Here we switched to open songthaew taxi trucks to climb a narrow mountain road to Mae Salong (about 3,000 feet above sea level), a rural town where we visited a hill tribe. We visited several compact huts, seeing the women in their traditional clothing, and glimpsing a way of life that has changed little in centuries.

More than 20 distinct, semi-nomadic tribes inhabit northern Thailand and the borderlands of Myanmar and Laos. Some have obscure origins, most have their own language, and all have unique customs. We visit the Akha, who wear elaborate headdresses and put carved fertility figures at the gates to their villages-sacred objects that as a visitor one should not touch.

Not included in the OAT tour is a visit to other tribes in the area. However, we had the good fortune of visiting with members of the Mok tribe. Women in this tribe chew a mixture of areca nut and betel leaf which makes their teeth black; it's a tradition, custom or ritual which dates back thousands of years from South Asia to the Pacific. We also saw members of the Kayan tribe, from Burma. Their custom is a belief that long neck women are beautiful. So women in this tribe wear brass rings around their necks; which each year they add length to stretch their neck longer.

In late afternoon, we transferred to our hotel, the [Imperial Golden Triangle Hotel](#) in Chiang Rai. Free wireless internet in the lobby is one great thing about the [Imperial Golden Triangle Hotel](#). Actually, we find a lot to like about this hotel. From our balcony, we have a stunning view of the river at the golden triangle where the three countries of Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), and Laos meet.

This night dinner (7:30 pm) was at the hotel and was served family style.

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### **Monday, December 28, 2009**

Early this morning (7:30 am) after another buffet breakfast, we traveled by bus to the Myanmar border on the optional Myanmar Excursion (\$80). On the way we passed a school where the children were all dressed in team colors for athletics. Angela stopped the bus so we could take some photos of the children.

The scene at the border was something right out of National Geographic; farmers with their carts overloaded on their way to market interspersed with tourists. Angela oversaw our border crossing, giving each of us a crisp unmarked \$10 US bill which was a necessary toll for the border crossing. Pete & I were giving a crisp \$20 bill and we thought it was unmarked, but the "agent" found one little tiny mark and rejected that bill. Pete quickly pulled out another bill avoiding an international incident.

Once in Myanmar, we were loaded into tuk tuks and delivered a short distance where we toured the border market. It was a mixture of items; flowers, food, and trinkets. Angela pointed out many foods and explained them to us. At the end of the "fresh" market there was a temple. Many Burmese citizens had gathered for the upcoming New Years celebration. One lady in our group was invited to take part in having her face "painted". In this area of the country, women wear a light paste on their face made from rubbing the bark of the Tanaka tree on a stone with some water. This paste is not only a sign of beauty but is supposedly good for their complexion and a natural

sunscreen. The visit to this temple was something out of National Geographic, and Mary snapped what could be a cover photo of an old woman on the steps of this temple.

Next we toured a local village, visiting a family home. In this village many of the ladies weave fabric while the men roast peanuts which are apparently very popular in this area. Then we were loaded once again into our tuk tuks and were whisked away up a hill to a famous temple at the top of the town that was built as a replica of Yangon's famous Shwedagon Pagoda. Here we were divided into groups by the day of the week that we were born. Pete was born on a Sunday, and Mary was born on a Saturday. Then each group was assigned a Burmese guide who led them around the pagoda teaching them the traditional practices of Buddhism at this temple. Burmese walk around the stupa clockwise. The day of the week a person was born determines their planetary post, eight in all as Wednesday is split in two, a.m. and p.m. They are marked by animals that represent the day, galon (garuda) for Sunday (*ta nin ganway*), tiger for Monday (*ta nin la*), lion for Tuesday (*in ga*), tusked elephant for Wednesday a.m. (*bouddahu*), tuskless elephant for Wednesday p.m. (*yahu*), mouse for Thursday (*kyatha baday*), guinea pig for Friday (*thaukkyia*) and *naga* (mythical dragon/serpent) for Saturday (*sanay*). Each planetary post has a Buddha image and devotees offer flowers, incense and prayer flags while pouring water on the Buddha image with a prayer and a wish. It was a very educational visit.

After the temple visit, we were returned to the border market where we were given 30 minutes free time for shopping. Pete was offered many interesting products; cigarets, viagra, and porn magazines to name a few.

The crossing back into Thailand was without incident... no money exchanged. We boarded our bus and were taken back to a location near our hotel where we boarded E-taan trucks. The E-taan truck took us an ½ hour drive on dirt roads back in to the countryside to a rice farm for lunch. The restaurant is called "La Vallée" and is co-owned by a French lady and a local woman. There we were served a typical farmers lunch under a bamboo awning. BBQ chicken, sticky rice flavored with turmeric and wrapped in a banana leaf package, rice noodles and herbs in another leaf packet. The dessert was a banana served on a crepe with a coconut sugar sauce... don't think that is part of a typical farmers lunch. Lunch was very yummy. After lunch, we got back on the E-taan and headed back into town. On the way we passed many rice fields, and even got to see up close an iron buffalo on it's way to work the fields.

Back in town with no time to spare, we were loaded up onto a ferry for a river cruise. We cruised up and down the river before crossing and landing in Laos. In Laos, there was no border control. We arrived at a "tourist" market. Angela gave us an L & D on the famous Laos whiskey which gets its "power" from the critter that is pickled in the bottle with the liquor. Most famous is the king cobra whiskey, but other critters are stewed as well. We are given some free time for shopping, before we boarded the boat for more cruising before returning to Thailand. How about that, three countries in one day!

Back in Thailand, Angela led the group to the opium museum. Since the War Museum was closed at Hell Fire Pass, Angela wants to take our group to the opium museum. It was getting late in the afternoon and the sun was setting fast, so we opted out of the opium museum visit choosing instead to climb to the temple, Wat Phratat Phukao, which is on a hill overlooking the town and river. The view was worth the effort. After snapping some photos, we meander back through town. In town we found a familiar face, a Rottweiler. We snapped a few more photos in town

around the ornate big Buddha border “temple”. It was difficult to get a picture of the elephant statues without people in it.

Back at our hotel, we cleaned up and spent a little time in the lobby using the free wireless internet access before dinner. Dinner was a nice buffet. Dessert at this hotel is better than most. At dinner, Jenny arrived late because she was getting a Thai massage. And that turned into a humorous dinner conversation.

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## **Tuesday, December 29, 2009**

Everyone was a little bit sad this morning to be leaving the [Imperial Golden Triangle Hotel](#). It has been a lovely place to stay.

This day would be another long day on the bus, so we relaxed and enjoyed the passing landscapes as we traveled from Chiang Rai to Chiang Mai—the principal city of the north, a major cultural center, and a favorite with visitors.

If we’re on the bus, it must be time for Angela to give us something to learn about Thailand. This day’s lessons; music & food differences between regions, respecting elders by bowing down lower when greeting an elder, and Thai children are always given a nickname - fruit, animal, etc.

Our first stop mid-morning was at this bakery famous for its “cakes”. We call them pies, while Thai’s call them cakes. Angela buys each one of us a slice of our choice. Mary had blueberry cheesecake and Pete had a chocolate brownie. This was a nice place to stop to use the bathroom and stretch our legs wandering the grounds. There were many colorful birds in cages and a peaceful river with a bamboo bridge that Pete walked across.

Our next stop for a bathroom break was at the C & C Store. The Cabbages and Condoms Foundation operates several of these stores in Thailand and the profits go to birth control education. The old belief was that a man would not be able to father a child if he ate lots of cabbage! So the new education is better. Many humorous items were for sale, including appropriately shaped candles, key chains, and “flower bouquets” of colored condoms on stems. Of course lots of T-shirts. There was a mini zoo behind the store that we wandered around. It had rabbits, deer, and peacocks. Just before getting back onto the bus, Pete noticed a VW in the parking lot. He snapped a few pictures of it.

For lunch we stopped at a small local restaurant. Dinner was served family style with several dishes being offered; breaded chicken, sweet & sour chicken, egg/onion/bok-choy, red & white rice, and sherbet for dessert.

Next was the part of the tour that we had been dreading... shopping... OK first a “factory” tour then shopping opportunities. Our first stop was at a Gem Gallery. We watched a film about various mining operations in Thailand and the wide variety of gems produced in Thailand. Mary doesn’t wear a lot of jewelry so this was not our favorite stop. The rest of our group really got into it though. So, we wandered around the showroom looking at the lovely tropical fish aquariums, and trying not to make eye contact with any sales staff. Mary was disappointed that we were not allowed to take photos inside the gallery. There really was a lot of pretty, though expensive, jewelry in the gallery.

Next we visited a bronze factory. Pete was a little disappointed with the demo. Just one guy pouring molten bronze into molds for cutlery. We really wanted to see how some of the large sculptures were made. In the showroom, we were shadowed by a sales rep. There was lots of pretty stuff in here to look at and take photos of.

After a long day of travel, we arrived at the [Centara Duangtawan Hotel](#) in Chiang Mai. We were excited because we actually would get to stay in one place for three nights! This hotel is a big fancy city hotel with expensive internet. The view from our 16<sup>th</sup> floor bay window was over the city.

We had arrived with plenty of time to explore the nearby area before dark and dinner at our hotel. So we went out in search of the city's medieval wall. On our way we found a used book store and stopped in for a look around. Most books were in English and Pete picked up a few books. We passed several temples before finding the city's brick wall and the famous "Tha Phae Gate". Its origin dates back to 1296 when King Mengrai of Lannathai put the capital in Chiangmai. The gate was called "Chiang Ruak Gate" after a village's name nearby but it was gradually called "Inner Tha Phae Gate" because the gate outside of the city was called "Outer Tha Phae Gate". After the outside gate was gone, the gate became just simply "Tha Phae Gate". The current gate was rebuilt around 1985 to 1986. By the way "Tha Phae" means "raft".

We took our time and a slightly different route back to the hotel. Our hotel was easy to find as it is the tallest building. We passed a McDonalds and for a moment considered going in, but without Angela to tell us what would be OK to eat, we decide instead just to take a few photos of the Ronald statue outside next to the menu.

Dinner was a buffet at the hotel. But there was a special treat on the buffet, pasta made to order with your choice of sauce. We also got a visit from Angela's boss. OAT really seems to put a lot of pressure on their guides, drivers, and attendants to provide the most outstanding service to their customers. And Angela has delivered... far exceeding our expectations.

After dinner, Angela led us on an exploration of the Night Bazaar on foot to experience the sights, sounds, and smells. There was everything under the sun here; costumed dolls, beautiful cotton garments and hill tribe crafts-all things Thai converge in Chiang Mai's bustling Night Bazaar. This was a much nicer bazaar than the one near the hotel in Bangkok.

Back at the hotel we tried to upload more of our photos but the internet here was not cooperating, dropping our connection every 15 - 20 minutes... it was very frustrating.

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### **Wednesday, December 30, 2009**

Breakfast was another buffet at the hotel. So, far the breakfast buffets have been quite good and this one did not disappoint either.

This morning we visited the Mae Taeng Elephant Camp for an elephant show. The elephants demonstrated how once they were used in the logging industry. They also danced and painted... yes painted. Before our eyes, Suda not only painted a picture of herself, an elephant, but then signed it. The painting was for sale and Jenny bought it. We then embarked on a forest trek by elephant back! Each elephant is owned by its own mahout who lives with it, trains it and rides on its head while we ride in a basket on its back. We rode for an hour, 2 people to the seat on the

elephant's back—waded across the river and over some hills through the jungle. Several places along the way there were bamboo stands (refueling stations) where hill tribe people were selling bunches of bananas and sticks of sugar cane for us to feed our elephant. And our elephant was not going to pass a single refueling station. At one point, our mahout hopped off our elephant and took our camera to get pictures of us. Seizing the opportunity our elephant began feeding on a tree, and pulled a branch right down on top of us... our poor mahout was so worried that we were OK. Our mahout even took some rather unique pictures of our elephant's anatomy.

After our elephant trek, we were given 20 minutes to shop before we boarded small bamboo rafts for a peaceful ½ hour float downstream. Each raft had two guides, one in the front and one in the back, each with long bamboo poles for steering us down stream. Four tourists we guided onto each raft and carefully seated on the benches. We each were giving an opportunity to help steer our raft down stream. Thankfully we did not encounter any rapids while Mary was at the helm. Actually there were no rapids on this river. As we disembarked our raft, we were shown a photo that was taken of us. It was a nice framed photo and only \$5, which goes to support the elephants, so we bought it.

After departing the camp, we had lunch at the restaurant of a fancy golf course. This meal was served family style. The entrees were placed on a large lazy Suzanne in the middle of the table. There were many tasty dishes served for lunch. We ate too much, but it was quite good... or maybe we were just hungry.

This afternoon we actually had free time scheduled into the tour. So, we decided that we wanted to visit a place called [Tiger Kingdom](#). Here they breed mostly the subspecies of Indo-China tigers, which are native to Thailand, for the purpose of populating Ubon Zoo, as well as other conservation facilities. Angela had arranged for a tuk tuk to pick us up at the golf course since it is closer to [Tiger Kingdom](#) than our hotel. Actually, Angela had arranged for the tuk tuk driver to stay with us all afternoon and deliver us back to the hotel when we were finished with our exploration. She had his cell phone so that she could check on us... yup, it's official, she was our Thailand mother.

At [Tiger Kingdom](#) visitors are guided into the enclosures of the cubs for a close up encounter. It's a popular place and there are several busses in the parking lot when we arrived. We just hoped that the encounters weren't sold out. We got to the counter and ordered our packaged encounters; 15 minutes with 6 month old tiger cubs, 15 minutes with 8 month old lion cubs, 15 minutes with 13 month old tiger cubs, and 15 minutes with a photographer (and photo CD) in with the 20 month old tiger cubs. This package cost \$97 for the both of us... try finding that in the US.

We only waited 20 minutes before we were guided to the first enclosure. Our visit started in the enclosure with the 13 month old tigers. In the wild, tigers would spend the night hunting and the daytime napping. They can sleep up to 18 hours a day. So, it's not surprising that we found most of the well feed cubs here napping during most of our visit. What does surprise us is that the keepers encourage us to rub their bellies and the tiger cubs like it; rolling on their backs so that we can find just the right spot to rub. The keepers showed us the tiger's claws and fangs, as guest we were not allowed to touch the cats on their heads or paws. These guys were not full grown and already have a powerful arsenal of weapons to use. The keepers were nice and took a few pictures of us with the cubs using our camera. We put a little extra \$\$ in the tip box outside the enclosure.

Next we were taken into the lion enclosure. The first lion that we visited with gives us a clear indication that there would be no tummy rubbing this lion. We respected his wishes and let him

get back to his afternoon nap. The second lion cub was a lot more receptive to our attention. Even so, we tried not to interrupt their naps too much, even though the whole time the keepers were encouraging us to pat the lions, we were just happy to sit near them and respect their space. These keepers also took our camera to take pictures of us with the lion cubs.

Next was probably the most exciting encounter... the 20 month old tigers. These cats were big and they were playing, leaping into a pool chasing a bunch of palm fronds on a string. The photographer goes nuts and in 15 minutes takes nearly 150 photos of us with the big cats leaping in and out of the water in front of us.

Our final visit was with the 6 month old tiger cubs. These guys were cute, fat and happy. They really were enjoying their naps. The keepers showed us their claws and teeth. It looks like they were at the age where they loose their baby teeth. The keepers here also took some pictures of us with the cubs. So, maybe it wasn't necessary to get the professional photographer... but once we got home and saw the photo's we were glad that we did. The pro caught some moments that we just wouldn't have been able to get.

Before picking up our photo CD and leaving, we walked around to inspect the rest of [Tiger Kingdom](#). There was one enclosure that was not included in our package ticket, and that was with the smallest tiger cubs of 2-5 months... we walked near the enclosure and these guys were tiny, awake, active, and busy exploring their world. We almost thought about buying a ticket to go see them too, but it was getting late. [Tiger Kingdom](#) has a restaurant with balcony viewing of the large cat enclosure. It seemed that most of the visitors from the busses were dining. During our visit we noticed that [Tiger Kingdom](#) is building at least one more exercise enclosure.

Our tuk tuk driver offered to take us to a snake "zoo" before returning us to our hotel, but it had been a long day and we opted to go back to the hotel. If we got there early enough we could join the group taking an optional sunset cruise along the Ping River. On the way back to our hotel we passed another section of the old city wall.

We were in luck. We arrived in plenty of time to join the group on the optional cruise (\$25/ea). Before the actual cruise, we visited a Chiang Mai farm house to learn about traditional herbs, herb gardening and their roles in Thai culture and cuisine. We sampled various teas and got some hands on experience processing some rice.

This cruise was suppose to have snacks, what we were served was enough for dinner; chicken wings, chips, dumplings, and little pies. We cruised along the river as the sun set and the moon rose munching on our snacks. Angela had a surprise for us when we docked and got off the boat. She had arranged for the group to launch paper lanterns. These lanterns are known as "Khood Loy". Traditional Northern Thai (Lanna) people use lanterns all year round, for Spiritual celebrations and other special occasions. It is considered good luck to release a "Khood Loy". It was a lot of fun for our group.

We were back at the hotel by 7:45 pm, enough time to walk to the night bazaar so that Pete could get some coffee for his sister and a t-shirt for himself.

We arrived back at our hotel, tired from a long fun-filled exciting day. It didn't take long to fall asleep and it was a good thing too, tomorrow would be an early day!



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## Thursday, December 31, 2009 - New Years Eve

Before breakfast this morning, we had the option of visiting a local temple to witness traditional Buddhist alms giving. Of course, we got up at O'dark-thirty for this, but it was worth it! Angela arranged alms plates for each of us to give to a novice monk. Our alms plates included bread, meat, water, milk and some pocket change. We had to place the items one at a time, and in a particular order (heavy items first), into the alms bowls. And women were to avoid touching the monks, even their robe, as one of the monk's Precepts forbids physical contact with women (even their own mother).

After breakfast we went to Wat Chedi Luang (Giant Pagoda Temple) to hear a Buddhist lecture by the senior monk. This is the Lanna College of the Mahamakut Buddhist University. The Grand Circle Foundation (OAT's parent company) supports this school for monks and one of its projects. They have given computers, etc.

At the school they teach comparative religions, philosophy, psychology, English, computers, etc. City monks devote their lives to education. "Forest monks", those in the countryside, spend their lives in meditation and take only one meal a day. They all shave their heads each month on the full moon day. Temple boys are novices who go to school in the temple. They play no sports, but get their exercise by walking for alms (food in their alms bowl) for 45 minutes each morning. They only eat 2 meals a day, never anything after noon. They all work cleaning and maintaining the temple and teaching the people about health care. 92% of the Thai are Buddhist. They are free to choose, but the culture is strong. The King must be Buddhist by the Constitution.

Some notes from our monk's talk: Buddhism is a philosophy of life. Thai's do not practice pure Buddhism but a mix. They believe in Karma; cause and effect or action and reaction. We are the owner of our Karma. We cannot change our past Karma, but we can seek improvement by our present Karma. 1- avoid bad, 2 - do good, 3 - purify the mind. Metta means loving kindness and compassion—two of the prime virtues, according to Buddha. Elements: earth, fire, water, & soul. They practice wisdom training, moral training, and mental training. The nature of all religions is one of happiness and peace. Our monk told us that sugar has a different name in another country but it is still sugar, still as sweet there as here. Religions are like the sugar, same "root" beliefs just different names. There is enough in the world for everybody's needs, but not enough for everyone's desires... don't be wasteful or greedy. Have positive thoughts, positive speech, and positive actions. Our monk covered a lot of "ground" in his talk.

His final point was a lesson in controlling the "monkey mind". We all tend to "jump" from one thought to another. To train/control our "monkey minds", he gave us a lesson in meditation, discussed 3 of the 40 different kinds. 1. Use a candle flame to focus your mind. 2. Use your breathing, count 1, 12, 123, 1234, etc. and keep your mindfulness until 10. 3. For walking meditation, hold R hand above L on stomach, keep eyes on the ground 5 steps ahead. Focus mind on L,R,L,R, slowly. Walk straight 10-20 steps, back and forth.

Next we attempted to visit the most magnificent of the city's temples, Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep, but being New Years Eve was causing traffic problems at this temple and it was closed for a few hours. So, Angela regrouped and we were off to lunch first. Lunch was at a small local restaurant. We were served several dishes family style, including a lovely roasted chicken that the chef finished cooking tableside.

After lunch Angela confirmed that the temple was once again open. We were loaded in the back of a couple of songthaew trucks (known in Chiang Mai as “red limos”) for Mr. Toad’s wild ride. To reach Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep we ride up a mountain slope negotiating hairpin turns and inhaling exhaust fumes when stopped in the worst traffic yet of this vacation. The traffic only mirrors the crowds we find once we reached Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep. Angela secured tickets for the group to ride up to the top of the temple in a funicular... the lines were so very long. Angela once again pulled out some magic trick and gets our group escorted to the shortest of the lines. Once at the top it was nearly a carnival atmosphere; a sea of worshipers. We had to take off our shoes and place them into lockers before entering the temple grounds. With so many people and all that is going on, it is difficult to hear everything that Angela was telling us. Angela guided us around until we came to the view of Chiang Mai which seems minute below. It was crazy up here, but we are glad to see it all.

On the agenda for the rest of this afternoon, what little is left, were some more factory tours. The first of which was a silk factory. Many of us were ready for a bathroom stop and skipped the demo. About half of the group were very tired from the day’s activity (us included) and Angela kindly arranged for transport back to our hotel. So, we skipped the umbrella factory and one other factory.

We got back to the hotel with barely enough time for both of us to shower and get cleaned up for this night’s special dinner (6 pm); making personal contact with Thais as we had dinner in the home of local residents. Seven of us were driven by taxi about 30 minutes north of town to a new “suburban” neighborhood. Our hostess was very kind and patient with our questions. One in our group opened up the topic of religion, making some in our group uncomfortable because of the direct manor in which questions were asked. That aside, dinner was enjoyable. Several dishes were served family style and fruit was offered for dessert.

On the way back to our hotel, we began to notice hundreds of paper lanterns being launched. From an open window at the end of the hallway back at our hotel, we were able to witness the launching of what seemed like a thousand lanterns. Some lanterns had tails with fireworks. The New Years Eve party was in full swing in the plaza many stories below our room... but we still could hear it quite well; especially at midnight when the countdown was shouted out followed by some really nice fireworks.

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### **Friday, January 1, 2010**

This morning, after breakfast, we checked out of the [Centara Duangtawan Hotel](#) and headed to the airport to board our flight for Bangkok. This would be a bit of a sad day as we say good bye to our driver; Nop, and attendant; Saan. In Bangkok, later today two new guys would be taking care of us.

At the airport, Angela was on hand to guide us through the whole process. We had just a little time before boarding to enjoy the amenities of Bangkok Airway’s private airport lounge; free wireless, juices, and snacks... wow, we are so not flying Delta!

We arrived in Bangkok and got a new driver and attendant. Once again we were at the [Tawana Bangkok Hotel](#). We were on our own for the afternoon and evening. We had a late lunch at the noodle restaurant next to the hotel. And we decided to meet up with the group to walk to the

skyway station (a raised subway). The group was going to the shopping mall and we were going to an aquarium in the same area. Angela guided us through the whole subway process; figuring out what ticket we needed to purchase, buying it from a vending machine, train schedules, routes and stops.

The [Siam Ocean World](#) is in what seems to be the basement of a mall, the Siam Paragon. We were not alone at the [Siam Ocean World](#). It seemed that it was a very busy day for the aquarium. This aquarium has a lot of optional activities; scuba diving in the tank, walking around the wearing a helmet, and a glass bottom boat ride over the aquarium. So, we choose to add another mode of transportation to our list (more about this list later). This is a neat aquarium and we enjoyed our visit enough to buy the souvenir photo. After our aquarium visit, we meandered through the mall. We passed by the food court and tried to figure it out... boy, we had become quite helpless without Angela. It looked very complicated and we weren't sure what was "safe", so we headed back to our hotel.

For dinner on our own, we had pizza at the Italian restaurant in the lobby of our hotel. It was yummy.

\* Note \* We asked Angela about the food court and she explained to us that first you purchase a stored value card from the counter and use this to make payments for your meals in the food court. The remaining value on the card is fully refundable.

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### **Saturday, January 2, 2010**

After breakfast at our hotel, we stepped into the Old Kingdom of Siam at the Grand Palace of Thailand, a sprawling compound of ceremonial halls, gilded spires, and ornate buildings. The ancient city's defining landmark since 1782, the palace became the centerpiece of a new Thai capital called Krung Thep (city of angels), known outside of Thailand as Bangkok. It was King Mongkut (or Rama IV) who ruled from this palace, expanded trade with the West and was romanticized in the musical *The King and I*.

The focal point of the palace is the Emerald Buddha. Carved out of jade and adorned with gold, the Emerald Buddha made a dramatic appearance in 1434, when it was found hidden in a temple stupa. Since 1785, the Emerald Buddha—the most highly revered image of the Buddha—has resided in the Royal Chapel of the Grand Palace.

The Grand Palace was crazy. It seemed that everyone in Bangkok was here that day. Angela did an amazing job keeping us all together. And she spent a lot of time explaining not only the rituals that we were witnessing but the historical significance of this location. Much like in Sukhothai, all in our group were mesmerized by one Kodak moment after another (shutterbugs remember). In one area our group really got into posing funny; like the demons holding up the stupa. It's the touristy thing to do.

After the madness of the crowds, we were glad that we had the afternoon at leisure. We once again had lunch at the noodle restaurant next to our hotel. Inside we met Angela and several others in our group. Angela was going take anyone who wanted to go to a house museum. We have visited so many houses this trip that we decided instead to use the tourist map and walk to a "technology" museums that was nearby. As it turns out, it was closed this day. But along the way a couple of local Thais walked with us and chatted a bit. Thais are really friendly people, they

must think that we (Americans) are really rude when they come to the US and no one speaks to them on the streets.

This night, we gathered early (6 pm) for a farewell dinner cruise on a river barge. The food and the company were great. We took many group photos. We returned to our hotel for the evening; saying good-bye to our travel mates. Angela would be getting up early to see us off... How early 2:30 am!

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### **Sunday, January 3, 2010**

We got a 1:30 am wakeup call. By the time we got to the lobby Angela had our transportation waiting for us... would you believe it was a big bus for just the two of us?!?!? The hotel had provided a box breakfast for us.

There was added security thanks to an attempted terrorist event. This had us concerned because of our 1 ½ hour connection time in Tokyo. Our flight from Bangkok to Tokyo departed a little early and arrived early, easing our connection concerns. Meals were served on this segment as well as the next segment to ATL. We landed in ATL and all of our bags made it too (always a good thing)! On our way home, we had dinner at McDonalds - something that we would regret later, as we believe we caught the stomach bug here. We were at home by 5 pm.

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Modes of transportation:

1. jet airplanes
2. mini van
3. tour bus
4. river boat
5. tuk tuk
6. sam pan
7. songthaew pick-up truck taxi
8. longtail boat
9. train
10. rice barge
11. tram
12. rickshaw
13. e-taan truck
14. ferry-boat
15. elephant
16. bamboo raft
17. funicular
18. skytrain
19. glass bottom boat

and, of course by foot!

We have uploaded our photos so check out our online album. Enjoy.

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