

“Same same...but different”

By Thuy Rocque

Thirty-nine SCSC participants had a trip of a lifetime visiting the beautiful country Thailand and the Kingdom of Cambodia. Nineteen people were lucky enough to go to Hong Kong before the trip but unlucky for them their luggage decided to take a detour to somewhere else besides Hong Kong for a few days. Our club departed Houston and arrived in Bangkok after 23.75 hours of flying on 3 different planes, went through 5 airports, 3 time zones, and ate 4 meals (we left Thursday night and arrived late Saturday afternoon....did we lose a day somewhere????). Tell that to Andrew Perry who did not count on celebrating his big Four-O birthday one day early due to the time change!!!



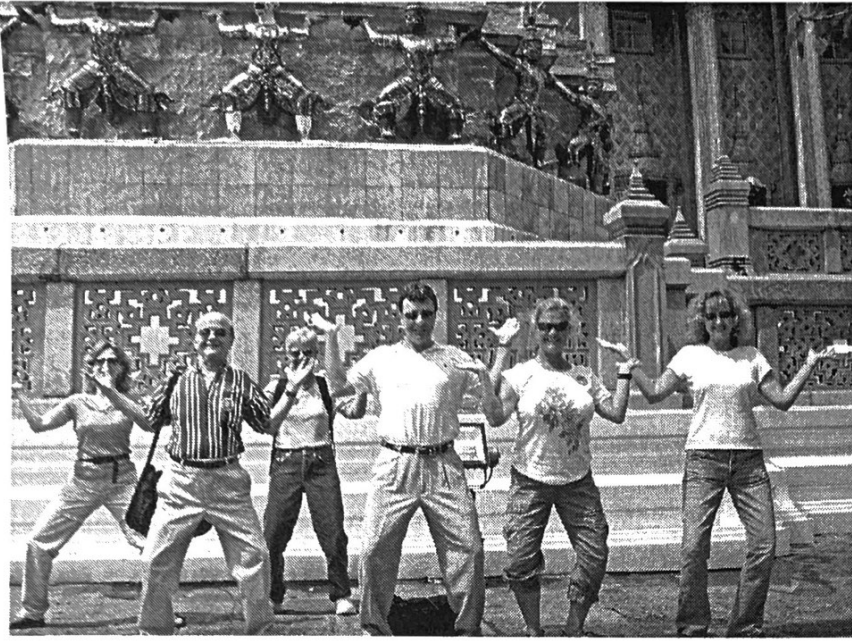
We were greeted at the Bangkok airport by representatives from Destination Asia which was the beginning of a beautiful relationship for the next 10 days since those guys took very good care of us from the moment we set foot on

Thailand to the moment we left. We all checked in to the Bangkok Rembrandt Hotel then everybody took off to do their own thing as our time in Bangkok was pretty limited. Millie Jude, Barb Tuley, Thuy & Richard Rocque, Andrew & Mary Lynn Perry got a van to take them to James Fashion to get some custom tailoring.

It's absolutely amazing that they can make these clothes in a 24 hour period! Roger Holzman, Brenda Soileau, Deb Houska, and Jose Araujo decided to do something a bit more adventurous so they visited the infamous Bangkok “red light district”.

On Sunday the majority of the group went on the Landmarks of Bangkok tour where we visited 3 temples and the Grand Palace. We saw the famous Golden Buddha (yes, he's made of solid 24K gold), the 145 feet long Reclining Buddha and the Emerald Buddha. Bangkok has 413 temples so we only got a small flavor of them by visiting 3. Our guide Nat explained that by the end of the day we will be screaming her name which stands for “Not Another Temple” and she was right. We were all treated to a wonderful Thai lunch at a beautiful restaurant right on the Chao Praya river. The day ended at a jewelry store called Gems Gallery which has the dubious distinction as being the world's largest jewelry store. Our TSC members scattered throughout the store admiring all the beautiful gems & jewelry especially the ones from that region such as the rubies and sapphires. John Brescian decided to take advantage of this shopping stop and bought his wife Barbara some ruby jewelry for her birthday. Lynn Burch, Marsha Kilgore, and Gai-Lynn Marshall all whipped out their

Our annual SCSC Fashion Show will be held during our November meeting. The fabulous fashions will be courtesy of Sun & Ski. We hope you stop by their display to check out the latest and greatest ski and snowboard equipment. Don't miss our own ski club members walk down Vargo's Runway!



2-hour foot massages.....boy, you can really get used to that. A couple of people from our group relaxed a different way as Warren Schroeder, Bob Mann, Diana Linley, Darla Lemaire, and Bobbie Hood enjoyed a fine culinary experience at the hotel roof top Indian restaurant with spectacular city views. The rest of the group including Nancy Anderson and newlyweds Donna Kidwell and Mike Gibson, enjoyed a dinner cruise. These 3 were also voted the "best dressed" participants of the whole trip since they were always impeccably dressed, looking elegant everywhere we went while the rest of us could barely keep cool in shorts and tank tops sweating our Texan butts off in the squelching tropical Thailand heat.

credit cards for some fine jewelry purchases too.

Allan Simpson, Sue Radoff, and Vivian Ezenwa chose Bangkok's Floating Markets/River Kwai excursion where they experienced the famous "James Bond" boat rides riding in diesel-engine powered boats through the extensive and complex system of narrow canals which was the main way commerce were conducted historically as merchants and farmers used the canals to ferry their goods to the customers all living along the Chao Praya River. The day ended in a visit to the "Bridge over the River Kwai".....hey, didn't they make a movie about that????

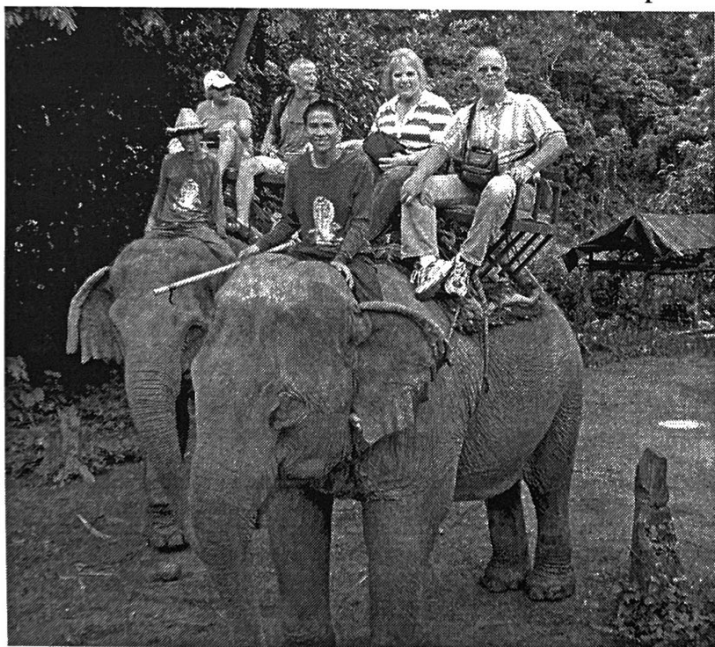
After a full, hot and exhausting but exhilarating day sightseeing around Bangkok, what better way to unwind than to experience a Thai massage. Massages in Thailand are very inexpensive and massage parlors are everywhere around town offering anything from foot massages to "exotic" full body massages... ..although nobody in our group would fess up whether they got one of those. Many of our club's participants could be seen at the little massage shack down the street from our hotel relaxing in recliners while getting

On Monday afternoon the TSC groups said goodbye to Bangkok and headed to Chiang Mai but not before the groups all went around on a frenzied last minute sightseeing tour and shopping sprees around town catching anything they didn't get to see the day before. Sisters Leslie Caldwell and Lynne Shurin joined Ross & Diane Baker on the efficient SkyTrain to the Jim Thompson house & museum. Leslie Caldwell was seen purchasing exquisite silk scarves and fabrics to decorate her Southwestern house in Taos. Diane Baker couldn't resist all the cute T-shirts decorated with elephants and bling-bling! The best find, however, was a carved teak elephant in a street souvenir shop that Richard Rocque decided that he couldn't live without even though he had no idea how he was going to pack the 40 lb. elephant in his already full suitcase and bring it home!

We arrived in Chiang Mai Monday evening and with no planned excursions, it was a free evening to explore but again many people enjoyed an evening massage this time in the comforts of their room. The famous Chiang Mai night market was conveniently located right next to our hotel where many, many vendors sell clothes, sunglasses, shoes, luggages, jewelry, and arts & crafts

at incredibly low prices. Ready-to-wear clothing in Thailand in general and Chiang Mai specifically are extremely good buys due to the low cost of labor there. Of course, there are also many “knock-offs” and you will hear the famous phrase “same same, but different” from all the vendors! This would’ve come in handy to Cindy Van Pelt since her luggage was missing for a day and she thought she had to replace her entire wardrobe with what she can buy at the night market.

Tuesday in Chiang Mai was probably one of the most memorable days of our trip since almost everybody went on the elephant jungle trek and bamboo raft floating trip. Asian elephants are very much beloved in Thailand and they are also the patron animal of Chiang Mai so there are elephant statues at nearly every major intersection in the city. Elephants have been abused by some people in the past but the Thai government has established a foundation to study and train Asian elephants. So, hopefully the mistreatment of these gentle giants can be eliminated. We were treated to an exciting show where the trained elephants (including some very young babies) performed some astonishing feats. One of the crowd favorites was the elephant



soccer ball kick. But the most unbelievable was seeing an elephant paint with his trunk....move over Picasso! Two-by-two we all mounted a 2-person platform on top of the elephant backs as the mahout (elephant guide) navigated. Elephant rides, as we all found out, are not exactly the most comfortable and stable rides but it was still so much fun as we bounced around hanging on to our seats while trekking through the jungles. Carrying humans is hard work and the elephants get hungry so during the hour long ride, many of the highland hilltribe people set up little shacks on stilts selling bundles of sugar cane & bananas to the tourists to feed the elephants for 20 bahts (which is about 60 cents). The elephants are well trained because whether the riders had money or not, they were stopping at every shack to get their snacks as Terry O’Neel & Gail Rogers found out. Christie Burke must’ve had a “mature” elephant since her ride seemed pretty smooth or else she was just better at balancing herself than the rest of us. After the elephant jungle trek and talent show, we cooled down by floating down the river to our lunch stop on long bamboo rafts. It was so relaxing with the cool breeze but with the sun shining down on us, we all donned our conical straw hats to protect ourselves so we all looked like a bunch of refugees floating down the river. No day in Thailand is complete without a stop at another Buddhist temple so after lunch we visited one but this temple was very different from all the ones before since it is inside a cave! Reminiscent of Carlsbad caverns full of stalagmites and stalagmites, we all trekked through the cool tunnels in the caves where many natural niches were filled with altars and statues of Buddha. It was actually a nice retreat from the heat outside. Our next stop was an orchid and butterfly farm filled with rows and rows of beautiful and colorful varieties of blooming orchids surrounded by butterflies.

Chiang Mai is home to some world-class handicrafts including silk, teak carvings, pottery, and silver. There was not enough time to visit every one of these shops so our guides had to split us into 2 groups visiting silver &

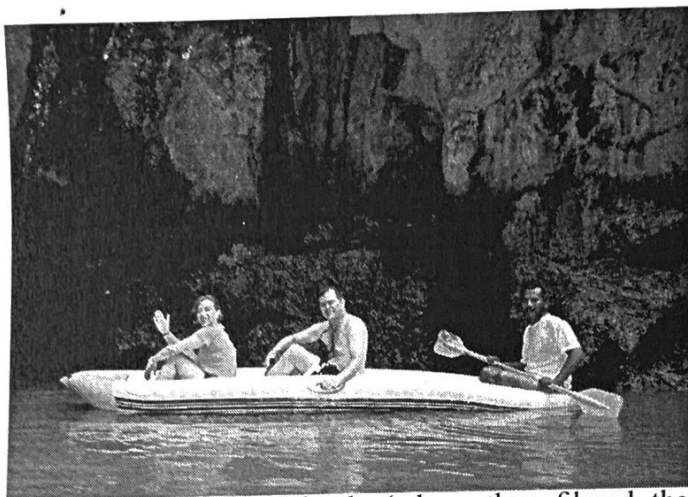
silk or teak & pottery....decisions, decisions. However, you could not go wrong as there are treasures at any of the shops. Many ladies purchased sterling silver jewelry at the silver shop while everybody found some thing to buy at the silk shop. Warren Schroeder was seen browsing through the silk scarves searching for that perfect gift for his mom. Darla Lemaire couldn't believe her luck in finding what she has been looking for which is a portable bar/entertainment center made out of teak with gorgeous carvings. Sold!...and now this piece is being shipped all the way from Chiang Mai to the port of Houston. Gai-Lynn Marshall and Marsha Kilgore basically cleaned out the world-renowned Celadon Pottery store and had their delicate purchases shipped home as there were too many to hand carry. Their shipments of pottery beat them home to Houston and were already waiting for them when they arrived home. How's that for a homecoming present?

On Wednesday afternoon, July 4th, we left the northern province of Chiang Mai to go to south Thailand and the famous beaches of Phuket. Of course, many people were diehards and went on yet another temple tour before going to the airport. This jaunt took them to a "temple in the clouds" where participants had to climb up 386 steps to the top. They visited a jade shop afterwards. Roger Holzman thought the temple tour was worthwhile although he was disappointed that the guides gave them more time in the jade shop than at the temple!!! We all flew to Phuket and arrived at the Phuket Graceland Resort with barely enough time to leave for our evening event which was the FantaSea Show & Dinner. We had no idea what this was like but it turned out to be Disneyland in Thailand, a huge theme park complete with rides, arcades, shops, restaurants, and stage shows. There was a huge Thai-Asian-Western buffet followed by a glitzy show complete with exotic animals, magic tricks, lasers, acrobats, and dancers in traditional Thai costumes. It was such a long day that Diane Baker fell asleep during the show - that is until they fired the cannons which not only woke her up but sent her about 2 feet into the air off her seat!!

Thursday July 5th was a free day to do whatever. Frank Adams hired his own driver and toured all around the island of Phuket probably visiting such places that cannot be printed here! John Brescian and Thuy & Richard Rocque spent the day golfing at the Phuket Country Club experiencing what it's like golfing in Thailand with all female caddies! Kelly Rucker & Michelle Janese spent most of the day near the pool recovering from their late night partying with other club members and our wild guide JJ. Omie Ferguson enjoyed the day sightseeing around Phuket while her husband Leonard went on a deep-sea fishing trip.....rumor has it he hooked a big one! The evening was filled with a dinner sunset cruise which provided awesome views of the outlying small islands, the Phuket coastline and mountains. Although the dinner was not very good, the unlimited good wine made up for it. Right, Roger?

On Friday July 6th, we went on yet another memorable excursions of the trip where we kayaked and explored the sea caves off the coast of Phuket. Several big boats took us across the Andaman Sea to several islands in the archipelago complex. There was a slight rain so the mist actually gave the excursion a very mystic ambience. We anchored near the islands and two-by-two, we boarded inflatable kayaks with a guide who expertly paddled us toward the islands. From afar, we wondered where the caves were and how we get to them. It turned out that the cave entrance was very narrow and we had to lay completely flat in our kayak. Otherwise, the cave opening is not high enough to get through. The enclosed area is only a few hundred feet long but it's pitch black so we had to use a flashlight to navigate through. This scary experience was worth it as the reward at the end of the dark cave tunnel was a beautifully lush lagoon complete with monkeys, birds, mangroves, and a lush tropical forest. We were in awe. Along with the clouds, the mist and thunder which echoed in the lagoon, we thought for sure King Kong was going to part the tall canopy of trees and come out at any second.

Saturday July 6th, we were treated to snorkeling around



the famous Phi Phi Islands (where they filmed the movie *The Beach* with Leonardo diCaprio). I am not sure the word "treat" fits here as it was one of the most harrowing boat rides many of us had ever had. The seas were really rough with 4-5 foot swells so we could not snorkel in some spots. However, it calmed enough for a few hours when we were able to anchor and snorkel for about an hour. Of course, as we are heading to our lunch spot on Phi Phi Don island, the sunny skies turned to black and a storm moved in almost instantly. Our lunch was eaten in the rain. Then we had to get back on the boat for the long ride back to shore. Several of us sat in the open air at the front of the boat as it was very crowded in the main area since people were hiding from the rain. Rather than a spine tingling boat ride, it was more of a "spine compressing" one. Nancy Anderson, Brenda Soileau, Andrew & Mary Lynn Perry, Richard & Thuy Rocque were all about an inch shorter after the boat ride!!! There were 6-8 foot seas and the ride was so rough that many of us were airborne each time the boat ran across a wave. Deb Houska and Jose Araujo toughed it out in the back of the boat where it was supposedly covered but evidently the water was splashing in from the sides too. We were so beat up when we got back to the hotel that we couldn't even have a birthday drink with Roger Holzman at the bar. However, Leslie Caldwell & Lynne Shurin celebrated Roger's birthday at dinner that night in the hotel restaurant!

The next day our group broke into 3: one group flew back to Houston, one group went to Cambodia, and one group went back to Bangkok for 2 more days. Sadly we said goodbye to John & Barbara Brescian, Leslie Caldwell & Lynne Shurin, Vivian Ezenwa, Mike Gibson & Donna Kidwell, Roger Holzman, Deb Houska, Jose Araujo, Allan Simpson, Sue Radoff, and Cindy Van Pelt who flew back home to Houston. Andrew & Mary Lynn Perry joined the other TSC clubs and went to Cambodia. The rest of us went back to Bangkok for another 2 days of sightseeing and shopping! Some people went on tours that they missed the first time we were in Bangkok such as the Floating Market/River Kwai tour. The heat must've gotten to Millie Jude since she asked the group during lunch while they were on the River Kwai "What river are we on, the Mekong???" This group of 15 participants then left Bangkok and went to Cambodia.

Wow - talk about saving the best for last. Our hotel in Cambodia was absolutely fabulous and all our meals were fantastic. The hotel pool was simply gorgeous. Christie Burke could be found on many occasions enjoying it. Siem Riep is a quaint little town which has two nearby open-air markets that we all frequented during our stay. We bought lots and lots of souvenirs because they were even cheaper than Thailand. Gai-Lynn Marshall, Lynn Burch, Marsha Kilgore, Michelle Janese, and Thuy Rocque shopped at the Old Market. Walking through the meat/seafood and fruits/vegetables stands, the rank smells really got to us. However, it was worthwhile to find treasures such as silk purses, antique opium pots, and silver jewelry. Marsha Kilgore bought some of the famous Apsara silver charms while Michelle Janese sported a new silver elephant necklace! Many in the group experienced the 4-hands 2-hour massage. The best part was it only cost \$18 US. Thuy, Michelle and Kelly were thoroughly kneaded and rubbed by 6 giggly Cambodian girls for 2 hours.

The next day we spent touring the famous ruins at Ta Phrom, Angkor Wat, and Angkor Thom. There is one

word to describe what we saw....."exquisite". These are some of the finest Buddhist temples in the world. The level of detail and workmanship evident in the temples was mind-boggling. Our guide Roath was fantastic and so knowledgeable about the ruins. It was a joy to listen to him tell us the facts and history. He was also infinitely patient with us as we took so many pictures and wanted several "unplanned" shopping stops. Each time we stop to shop, a hoard of Cambodian kids would come running to sell souvenirs. It's as if 2 kids were assigned to each adult tourist since we all had one kid hanging on to each arm. If you don't buy and tell them that you already bought some then they all chanted the phrase "Madame, madame.....it's same same, but different". Frank Adams started the trend when he bought a teak wood mobile and bamboo toy from one kid. Then, of course, the whole village comes running out. Kelly Rucker lost her heart to an adorable Cambodian little girl who was selling bracelets. So, Kelly will not run out of bead bracelets even if she wore a different one every day for the next 6 months! Michelle Janese saw an old man selling a sword he made out of water buffalo horn that she had to get. All of us bought books of the temples full of glossy photos for a few dollars each.

Ta Phrom is where they filmed the famous Lara Croft: Tomb Raider movie. The temple has been left alone "as is" with all the large banyan tree roots growing in/around/ between the temples. Angkor Wat is the largest Buddhist temple in the world and is even more impressive in person. The Khmer culture is preserved in excruciating detail in the wall panels located throughout the temple. Lastly, we toured Angkor Thom on elephant backs. Nancy Anderson & Michelle Janese thoroughly enjoyed their elephant ride through the ancient city of Angkor Thom while Mille Jude

decided to tour in a seat of a van instead. Not everybody toured Angkor Thom in the afternoon and chose to do something different. Barb Tuley visited 2 orphanages while Frank Adams & Warren Schroeder rented a car with a driver to visit the nearby village on the water.

Alas, our Thailand & Cambodia trip had come to an end after 12 days. We left these two countries full of beautiful memories and, of course, incredible souvenirs. These countries remind us of what good service, graciousness, and inner beauty is all about. These people were happy to serve us and appreciated our business. We all got used to being greeted by people with their hands clasped in front of their heart and their heads bowed everywhere we went. Soon, we were all doing it too and liked it. If it wasn't so far to travel, we all would visit these countries again in a heartbeat. Suwadee-ka and Kapun-ka everybody!

