Travels in Thailand

Scribe staffer recounts his winter break voyage across the Pacific and into the unknown

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Part I

For some, winter break brought ski trips to the mountains, a short time home with the parents or forty hours of hellish work in a pathetic retail environment. For me, I saw all three in addition to a little warmer climate you might know as Thailand.

This is the Thailand you've heard about in the news, on the Travel channel, and in Meet the Parents ("Oh, Jack does talk Thai.") I had an opportunity to teach English Second Language (ESL) curriculum to English teachers in Bangkok through one of my friends. Her dad has a ministry that paired up with International Bible Society (IBS) to get us over there and teach teachers in that area.

Two of the four of us (we were to meet the others in Bangkok) left the Springs airport at 7:50 Wednesday morning, stopped in Denver, Seattle, Tokyo, and finally arriving in Bangkok at 11:50 Thursday night. This type of travel is not good for the body. Our actual in-flight time was around 21 hours, but the layovers and time changes (Bangkok to Denver, 15 hours) wreak havoc on one's biological clock.

It seemed odd and frustrating at the same time that I could not sleep that night, but could not desire anything else but sleep at the same hour the sun arose. To my sleepy eyed dismay, we were picked up the net day by Pracha, the Thailand director of IBS and were to be taken to Bangkok Theological Seminary where we would teach and sleep for a few days.

Driving across Bangkok, my eyes couldn't help being glued to the window and the sights beyond. My first time overseas, I was curious to see what the other side of the world was like. The buildings rose high above the local streets and the highway we were on lay out before us just as high. It turns out that the reason the highway is so high up is because the whole city of Bangkok is sinking very slowly. I didn't feel anything.

Teaching that evening and for the next two days was an experience. We were teaching English teachers how to teach English, but Pracha still translated into Thai so the Thai natives could understand. And Thai isn't like Spanish, where you can pick up a "Como estas?" so easily. It took me the two weeks I was there to remember three phrases.

Talking with those few teachers that could speak English, I found for the first time the glorification of America. Granted this is a great place and all, but I had to wonder where some of their ideas about this country came from. However, such idealism drove them to succeed in their studies so that one-day they could visit. That was admirable and humbling, for I also saw how much Americans take our given positions and birthplaces for granted.

Our first morning before the sessions we walked to a little cart by the side of the street with various dead animals hanging over a large bowl of rice. This is the kind of place tourist books encourage you to shun at all costs, but Pracha ate here almost every morning for his 15 years as dean of the seminary. I'd never seen anyone eat octopus for breakfast before. Wow.

At night we would walk downtown, past the skate park, past the Catholic church with Britany-esque music we couldn't understand, finally to the mall known as MBK - seven stories packed with random vendors of obvious black-market goods who could almost manage a very broken form of "Hello, you buy?" or some other similarly sales-oriented phrase.

It still amazes me how influential American culture is over there. 7-11's on almost every block and right across the street from each other, the advertisements, the style, all of which are very different from traditional Thai culture, so the way the two collided was awkward at best, but undeniable at least.

To get an experience of the real Thai culture, our group decided to take a tour through the hotel that we were staying in. The tour guide, Boonsomo, took us first to the Floating Market, a market one goes through on a boat that somewhat resembles the gondolas in Italy, except these had V8 engines on the back instead of some re-white clad guy with a stick. Old ladies coming in from their banana fields with their morning sow

Above, traditional Thai dancing at the Rose Garden.Below, the Floating Market in Bangkok. (Photos by Tyler Hilker, pictured above center)

competed with the loaded-wallet tourists for the attention of vendors and vied for position is the narrow canals.

After we toured some of the surrounding canals and saw native Thai houses and people and people bathing in the same river they (and others upriver) do dishes and their "business" in, we drove to an attraction called the Rose Garden. We ate lunch in a fancy-schmancy restaurant named after the first known Siamese twins who each married a different girl and between the two of them had 23 children (a little awkward I'd say). It was one of the best meals I've ever had for $5.

Now what do you get when you mix an elephant and a rhino? Elephino! But we did get to ride a real elephant. So excited to do so we neglected to watch the others before us taking the 2-minute ride around the cement patio. It was about as long of a ride as those horses at the supermarket, but instead of paying a penny we paid 40 baht (43 baht=$1). And it was a real elephant. Did I mention it was real?

Following the eleph-incident, we along with the rest of the lemming-esque tourists filed into a large room filled with traditional Thai décor for a demonstration of traditional Thai culture. This consisted of some guy kicking and balancing and other random impressive feats with a few wicker balls, Thai ladies dancing (which I was invited to participate in), Thai music, super intense sword fights, and muay thai a.k.a. kickboxing. Though it was staged it was still cool to watch a flying elbow to the head.

After such a long day it was decided that infamous Thai massages were in order. We took the masseuses to be reputable (very much unlike many "independent operators") seeing as how it was through our very reputable hotel. I won't go into details because The Scribe is a family show, but I will say it was a sketchy situation. This was very evident when the girl changed the TV from the English Premier League soccer game I was watching to a cheesy Thai soap opera with which she was very involved. Sketchy, sketchy, sketchy.

Editor's note: Next week, Tyler details the city of Chiang Mai, where the hotels are cheap and the nightlife is, well, at night.