

## Thailand December 5 - 18 2016

Having thoroughly enjoyed our past western Pacific diving trips, we decided that Thailand was a must do and scheduled ourselves for a week on the Thailand Aggressor live-aboard dive boat. And, knowing the effects of jet lag after traveling the number of time zones crossed (14) to get to Thailand, we decided that a few days spent in Bangkok ahead of the diving would be a *required* element of the trip. Steve would be able to chalk up a new country with this trip but it would be a second trip to Thailand for me: I was there in late August of 1980 with my parents – we stopped in Bangkok for a couple of days on our way from Sri Lanka (where we visited with my Dad's cousin in Colombo and then did some upcountry touring) to the Philippines to see my younger sister Portia who was serving in the Peace Corps there.

### Bangkok

We stumbled out of customs and immigration in Bangkok at close to midnight local time on Tuesday, Dec. 6 after starting our travels with an 8am flight from Denver to Los Angeles, on Monday, Dec. 5 with then subsequent flights from LAX to Tokyo and then on to Bangkok – a nearly 26 hour journey. Fortunately, we were able to burn copious amounts of frequent flyer miles and travel business class, making the journey much more comfortable and less stressful than it would have been otherwise. We both agreed though that the “new” *Polaris* service on United didn't come close to matching the service level of Thai Airways.

When planning our Bangkok stay, we were influenced by several factors:

- My stay there in 1980
- Feedback from friends Ann & Hugh who had a marvelous time there in January 2015
- A top 100 hotels of the world list Steve had seen



*My parents at Mandarin Oriental 1980*

Bottom line: we completely splurged and booked ourselves into the Mandarin Oriental Hotel where I had stayed in 1980 ... I remember walking into the lobby and saying to my Dad “I can't afford this place” (I was paying my way); luckily, he responded “My treat”! Located on the banks of the Chao Phraya River, the original structure was the first hotel built in Thailand when it opened as *The*

*Oriental* in 1876 – it is considered the “Grande Dame” of Bangkok hotels.



*Me in Bangkok, 1980*



*Mandarin Oriental Bangkok from my 1980 postcard*



*Mandarin Oriental Bangkok today*

Consequently, as we stumbled out of the customs and immigration area, we were met by a smiling gentleman on staff at the Mandarin Oriental holding a sign with our name on it. He in turn quickly commandeered some of our luggage and guided us to a waiting BMW series 7 car whose chauffeur stowed our luggage in the 'boot' and settled us into the back seat with a cold towel, chilled water, and in-car wi-fi for the approximately 45 min ride into downtown Bangkok. While Bangkok is known for its heavy traffic, we didn't see much at that time of night.

Upon arrival at the hotel, we encountered a lobby full of workers decorating for the holidays, including constructing a Christmas tree decorated with live orchids, mums, and other flowers. We were then whisked to the Garden Wing and escorted to our luxurious room -- a complete renovation of the Garden Wing had been completed earlier in the year. The check-in procedure was completed in-room and before long we had taken quick showers



*Garden Wing Room*

and were in bed and dead to the world -- Steve was out so hard that I ended up putting his nasal strip on him and he was completely unaware of my pinching his nose -- it was either that or try to sleep with his snoring 😊!



*Mandarin Oriental's Lobby Christmas Tree of live orchids, mums, and more!*

Despite the late night, we were both awake by about 7am local time. After admiring the room's many amenities in the daylight -- floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the river, marble bathroom, teak wood toilet seat, silk robes, stocked refrigerator, a piece of birthday cake for me (my birthday had been a few days beforehand), a beautiful flower arrangement with purple roses, etc. -- we headed down to the hotel's Riverside Terrace to enjoy a sumptuous buffet breakfast offering foods appropriate to a wide variety of cultures, from Japanese Miso soup to Chinese bbq pork buns to fully loaded American omelets and everything in between.



The Riverside Terrace abuts the *Chao Phraya* River, sometimes translated into “River of Kings. ” The river is intertwined with the city it flows through. Early settlers came to this area due to its fertility and abundant fish. After the fall of Thailand’s “old” capital of *Ayutthaya* to the Burmese in 1767, a new capital was established on the river’s western banks in an area known today as *Thonburi*. In 1782, King Rama I founded modern Bangkok on the river’s eastern, more favorable banks. He celebrated the occasion by building some of the world’s most beguiling Buddhist temples which remain an important part of today’s Bangkok.

Today, the *Chao Phraya* River continues to be a major conduit for the movement of people and goods around Bangkok. We never tired of watching the constantly changing parade of vessels going up and down the river 24 hours a day, including:

- Large barges carrying construction materials pulled by tug boats
- Long-boat water taxis
- Crowded passenger shuttles bringing school kids and workers of all sorts across the river in the morning and back again in the afternoon/evening
- Express boats (think water buses) which service a 13+ mile section of the river, quickly and cheaply moving people up and down the river
- Garrish dinner cruise boats with flashing lights and loud music
- The hotel’s own shuttle craft which constantly moved hotel guests and staff between the hotel’s facilities located on both the western and eastern banks of the river (main hotel on eastern side but hotel spa & athletic facilities as well as its Thai restaurant on the river’s western banks)

We tore ourselves away from the hypnotic river scene and hopped into a taxi for the short ride through the city to the *Jim Thompson House*. During the 10 min ride we were quickly assaulted with several impressions of the city:

- With a current population estimate of over 10 million and even more commuting in for business, Bangkok is a large and bustling city
- The city was still in visible mourning after the October death of Thailand’s widely revered King Rama IX ... miles & miles of black & white bunting draped government buildings, large portraits of the former king adorned buildings of all shapes and sizes, bereavement displays of white & yellow flowers (yellow is the color associated with the king) were placed both inside and outside, many people wore black clothes, etc.
- The streets are clogged with a variety of motor vehicle traffic including significant numbers of motorbike “taxis” which dart in and out of traffic with their brave passengers often texting away on their cell phones!

The *Jim Thompson House* is a museum in central Bangkok, Thailand, housing the art collection of American businessman and architect Jim Thompson. Thompson was one of the 6 post-WWII investors in the Oriental Hotel and he established the Thai Silk Company Limited in 1948 (some consider that he almost singlehandedly saved the Thai silk industry from extinction). He became a major collector of Southeast Asian art; he built a large collection of historical Buddhist statues and traditional Thai paintings made of wood, cloth, and paper that depicted the life of Buddha and the legend of Vessantara Jataka. He collected secular art not only

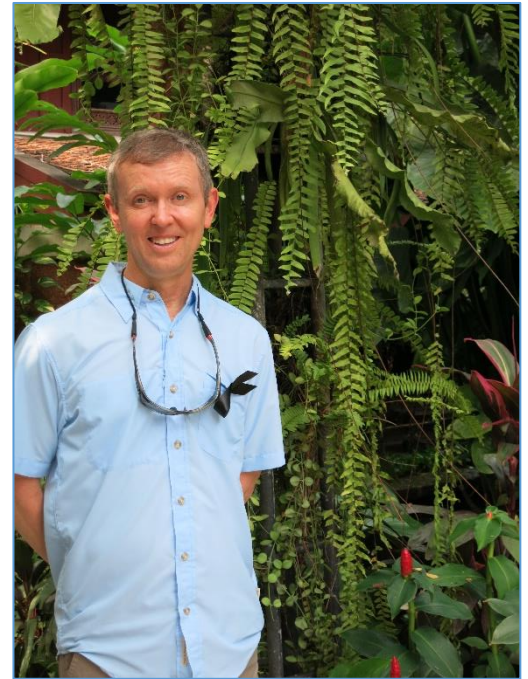


*Jim Thompson House*

from Thailand but from Burma, Cambodia, and Laos, frequently travelling to those countries on buying trips. His collection also consists of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century white and blue porcelain from China.

The Jim Thompson “House,” begun in 1958, is actually a combination of six traditional Thai-styled houses, primarily constructed of wood – some of the houses sit alone and some have been combined to create a more western-style home. The “house” sits on a canal across from the neighborhood of Bangkruea where, at that time, his silk company weavers lived. Jim Thompson disappeared in 1967 in Malaysia’s Cameron Highlands – a mystery that has never been solved.

We enjoyed a delicious dim sum lunch at the *China House* restaurant back at the hotel before embarking on a river & canal tour to get a perspective of the city from the water.



*Steve and lush grounds of the Jim Thompson House*



*Long Boat: plastic along sides helps protect passengers from spray*



*Greek style River Park Condos*

canals (ugh, as the water doesn’t look that clean). We saw pieces of thick styrofoam being used as “rafts” to move about the canal. The local districts

and the ubiquitous Buddhist temples (Bangkok alone has over 400 temples). Some of the architecture was quite interesting (e.g., Thailand’s tallest building, the 77-story MahaNakhon tower, aka the Lego building) and some of it seemed inappropriate in style (e.g., Greek style River Park Condo building).

From the main river we turned into one of the offshoot canals. The canals are a major means of traveling about the city and a wide spectrum of residences can be seen – from obviously expensive modern homes to ramshackle corrugated metal and wood shacks. We saw kids swimming the

A long boat picked us and our guide up at the hotel dock and spirited us up river. The long boat was powered by a repurposed pick-up truck engine. From the river we spied a diverse city skyline dotted with modern skyscrapers



*“Lego Building” - MahaNakhon Tower – Bangkok’s Tallest*



are responsible for maintaining the canal walls and for providing such services as trash pick-ups – residents leave their trash bags sitting out on their “dock” for pick-up by boat.

After canal viewing in the long boat, we transferred to a converted rice barge where we enjoyed a mid-afternoon tea of mango sticky rice and other Thai sweets as well as some fresh tropical fruits.

By late afternoon/early evening jetlag was definitely catching up with us, so we were content to enjoy dinner at the hotel’s *Verandah* restaurant and call it an early night.



*Along a Bangkok canal*



*Aboard a Converted Rice Barge for afternoon tea*



*Converted Rice Barge*

A good night’s sleep does wonders and we were raring to go Thursday morning at 7:30AM when we met up with our tour guide for the day, Nok, who in turn introduced us to our driver, Mr. Anon. Nok, 32, is an independent licensed tour guide (we learned there are stringent exams required) and Mr. Anon owned the van he drove (as opposed to leasing it from a big company). We headed north out of Bangkok for about 1 hour. We quickly left the metropolitan area and passed rice paddies and a great many wooden pallet makers (obviously a key local business).

Our first destination was the Bang Pa-In Royal Palace, also known as the *Summer Palace*. The original complex was constructed in 1632, but it fell into disrepair in the late 18th and early



*At the “Summer Palace” (Bang Pa-In Palace)*



19th centuries. Restoration began in the mid-19th century but most of the present buildings were constructed between 1872 and 1889 by King Chulalongkorn, aka Rama V, who is known for modernizing Thailand (known as “Siam” until 1939 and then again for a short period in 1945-49) and ensuring the country wouldn’t be colonized by a western power. It was King Chulalongkorn’s father, King Mongkut, Rama IV, on whom the book/musical “The King and I” is based. King Chulalongkorn was the first Thai king to visit Europe and the Summer Palace reflects the impact European architecture had on the King. The Royal family still uses the Summer Palace occasionally.



*Blue & white Chinese porcelain floor tile in the Chinese-style Royal Residence at the Summer Palace*

We then traveled further back in time by visiting the “old” capital area of Ayutthaya, now a UNESCO world heritage site. Founded in 1350, the Historic City of *Ayutthaya* the second capital of the Siamese Kingdom. It was strategically located on an island surrounded by three rivers connecting the city to the sea. It flourished from the 14th to the 18th centuries until in 1767 the city was attacked and razed by the Burmese army (now known as Myanmar). The city was burned to the ground and its inhabitants were forced to abandon it. Today, the area is an extensive historical park and archaeological site, filled with hundreds of “wats” (aka temples) in various states of ruin and/or restoration. Nok explained about the area’s history as well as about the wats themselves as we toured various parts of this extensive area by visiting just a few of the more famous wats. We learned there are 3 basic elements of a temple compound:



*In Ayutthaya*

1. The *Prang* style tower which is adapted from Khmer architecture from Cambodia
2. The chedi or *stupa* is the bell-shaped Sri Lankan style tower which is used to hold Buddha relics
3. The Thai style *Ubosot* or Coronation Hall with its winged roofline

The temples were constructed of brick and then covered with a stucco/plaster-like material made from lime mixed with molasses or animal skin which was then decorated.



*Prang or Cambodian Style Temple Tower in Ayutthaya*





*Buddhas line walkway in Ayutthaya*



*Stupa or Sri Lankan Style Temple Tower in Ayutthaya*



*Reclining Buddha at Wat Lokayasutharam in Ayutthaya - 37 meters (121') long and 8 meters(26') high*



A late lunch of minced chicken and onions at a riverside restaurant refueled us and we took a *long boat* around the island and fed bread to schools of catfish which churn the river's surface as they fought over our handouts. Mr. Anon drove us back towards Bangkok in his air-conditioned van stocked with ice-chilled bottles of water and chilled wet clothes with which we cooled our faces, necks, and hands. The fascinating ancient city of Ayutthaya was soon replaced with numerous newly constructed walled housing developments of like-style homes and the horrendous traffic leaving the city proper.

We were back at the hotel in plenty of time for me to take one of the hotel shuttle boats across the river to the hotel's spa for the *Signature Treatment*, a 1hr 45min massage using a combination of European and Thai massage techniques – quite the experience and a much needed one. Afterwards, Steve and I enjoyed the “International BBQ” dinner riverside at the hotel.

Dao was our tour guide for our Friday morning outing to the Grand Palace. Our mode of transportation was again a *long boat* which picked us up at the hotel dock. Before we headed to the Grand Palace, Dao took us on a tour of some of the local canals ...

- We saw large patches of water hyacinths as well as the water morning glory (sometimes called water spinach)
- We spotted 2 large monitor lizards dropping into the canal for a swim
- We learned that houses along the canals have septic tanks underneath them
- Given that it is often much faster to travel via the canals than it is by road, the canals see a lot of traffic (and given the amount of road traffic in Bangkok this comes as no surprise!)
- From the water we saw some of Bangkok's more than 400 Buddhist *Wats* (aka temples)
- We passed by the *Royal Barge Museum* and got a glimpse of the 8 unique and very ornately decorated barges that are reserved for special ceremonies



*In Long Boat around Ayutthaya*



*Bangkok Canal with aquatic plants*



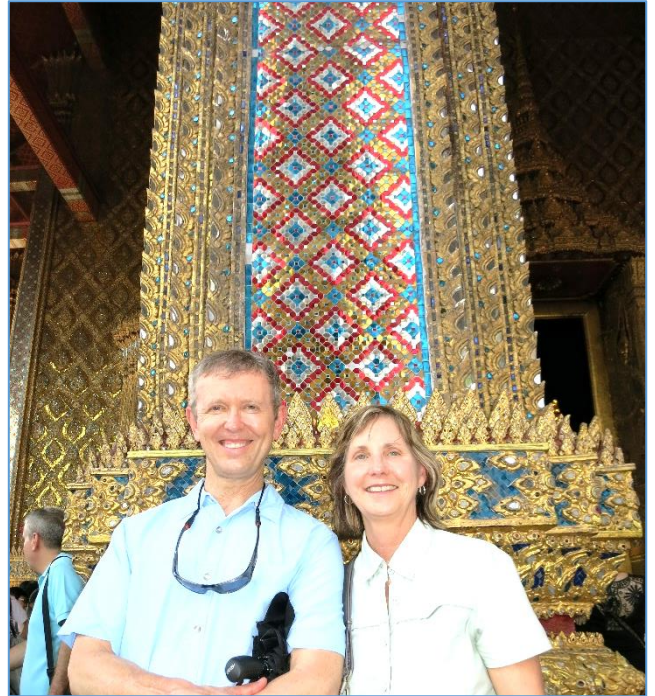
*Royal Barge*



We returned to the river and disembarked at the Grand Palace pier. The *Grand Palace* is a complex of buildings and has been the 'official' residence of the Kings of Siam/Thailand since 1872. As we made our way to the entrance of the complex as well as within, we encountered long lines of Thais dressed in black who were waiting to pay their respects to the country's former head, King Rama IX (there will be a year-long mourning period until Oct 2017). The current King was crowned just a few days earlier on December 1<sup>st</sup>. Fortunately we were with Dao, who quickly navigated us through the throngs of people.



*Grand Palace as seen from the river Chao*



*At the Temple of the Emerald Buddha*



*Sri Lankan, Thai and Cambodian styles within Wat Phra Kaew*

The *Temple of the Emerald Buddha* or *Wat Phra Kaew* compound was our primary destination within the Grand Palace complex. The complex is home to many elaborately decorated buildings and elements adorned with lots of gold leaf and colorful & complicated mosaics made out of broken Chinese porcelain or colored/mirrored tiles or mother of pearl. We witnessed some of the bi-annual (every 2 years) maintenance being done on some of the glass mosaic.

Inside the Chapel of the Emerald Buddha (no pictures allowed) we viewed the many centuries old statue for which the temple was named – a 26" Buddha carved from a solid piece of jade (*emerald* in Thai refers to a dark green color not the specific stone). The King changes the cloak around the statue three times a year, corresponding to the summer, winter, and rainy seasons, an important ritual performed to usher good fortune to the country during each season.



*Broken Chinese porcelain style décor came about when pottery pieces brought in from China didn't survive the journey in one piece – the broken pieces were too beautiful to discard so they were used to make decorative elements*

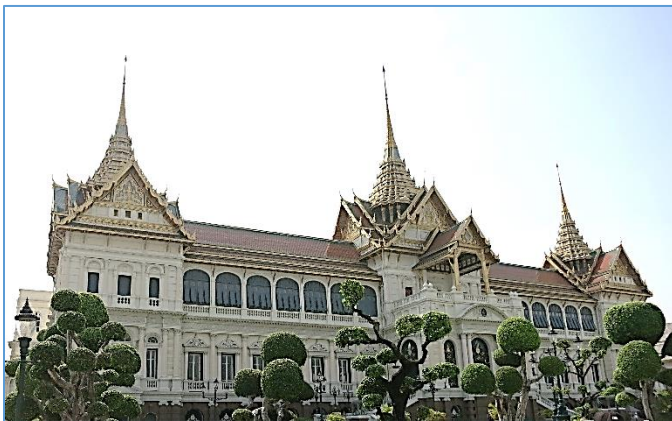


We learned the difference between Thai “demons” and “monkeys” – monkeys are always shown with open mouths and no shoes. In one corner of the compound is a complete model of the *Angkor Wat temple* in what is now Cambodia (the model was built only AFTER a royal-directed attempt to dismantle and bring the real (i.e. actual-sized) Angkor Wat to Bangkok spectacularly failed in 1860!).

The entire Temple of the Emerald Buddha compound is an explosion of shiny gold and vivid colors in intricate designs – it overwhelms but is definitely a sight to see!



*Demon and Monkey holding up a stupa in Temple of the Emerald Buddha*



*1882 built Chakri Maha Prasat hall with gilded gold Thai style roof within the Grand Palace*

On our way out of the Grand Palace compound we passed by the *Chakri Maha Prasat* hall. This building was designed by the British architect as its builder, King Rama V wanted an entirely western style residence and throne hall. However, not all his court agreed so the building’s originally planned domed roof was replaced with a Thai style roof instead. Thus, the Thai have nicknamed the building as “westerner with a Thai hat”!

It was a short drive through the city to our next destination, the Temple of the Reclining Buddha. Our route took us through several different areas of commerce within a very small portion of the city:

- The flower neighborhood is ablaze with the bright colors of flowers in all shapes and sizes – we saw shop after shop spilling out their brilliant offerings onto the sidewalk. Flowers have an important place in Thai Buddhism and Thai culture in general. The Thai form of creating amazing floral garlands is called *phuang malai* and is often given as offerings or kept for good luck. Bowls of flowers are also a common form of offering at temples. With the recent passing of King Rama IV there are beautiful floral tributes to him all over the city. At one point we passed a motor scooter whose driver was carrying a large floral wreath – quite the sight!
- One area is lined with shops featuring clothing for all though as in most of the world, women’s clothing is most prominently displayed.



*Thai style floral garlands*



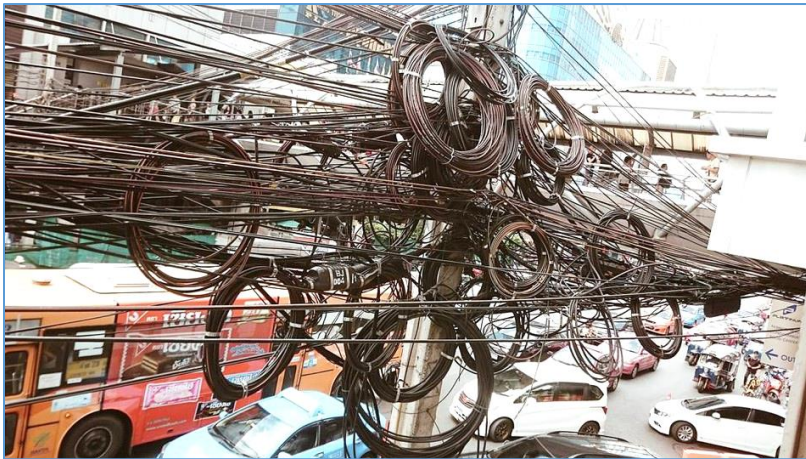
- The Buddhist “supply” area of Bangkok features store-after-store filled to the brim with golden Buddhas of all styles and shapes as well as other temple-related supplies.
- The electronics neighborhood is filled with shops peddling electronics of all sorts.

Speaking of the electrical portion of electronics ... the power lines along the streets of Bangkok are often an interesting sight – they present more as a “spaghetti” of cables ...

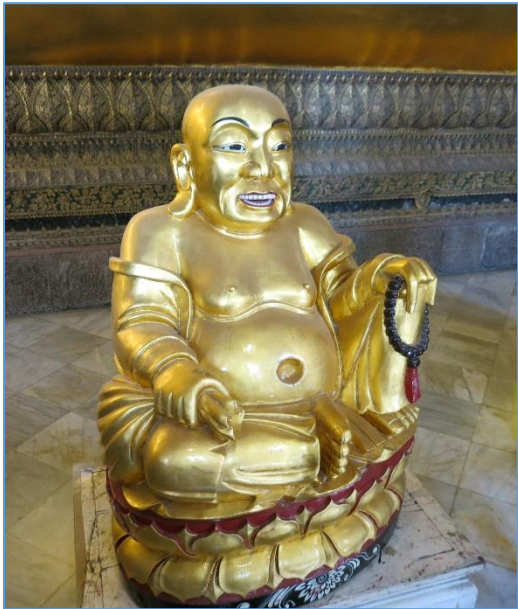


*Buddhist supply shop in Bangkok*

Our final stop with Dao was at *Wat Pho*, the *Temple of the Reclining Buddha*. This temple complex, the oldest and largest in Bangkok, houses the largest collection of Buddha images in Thailand, including a 46 m (150') long reclining Buddha. It also houses a school of Thai medicine, and is also known as the birthplace of traditional Thai massage (a definite reason to pay our respects).



*Bangkok power lines*



*At the Temple of the Reclining Buddha*

We learned from Dao that it is quite typical for Thai men to become a Buddhist monk for just a few weeks or months during their lifetime – he himself spent a couple of months as a monk a few years ago (he’s currently 38 year old). He explains that there are differences between “city” and “country” monks – the city monks are the ones walking around with cell phones!



We said goodbye to Dao as he dropped us off at the *Mango Tree* restaurant where we enjoyed a late lunch beside a koi-filled pond – including some mango components of course! Since the restaurant was close to our hotel, we enjoyed a leisurely stroll back and enjoyed another example of the Thai love of topiaries of all types (geometric shapes to whimsical animals) ... you see them all about: in the medians of roads, in temple complexes, in parks, etc.



*Topiary at the Summer Palace*



*Topiary along street in Bangkok*

Once back at the hotel, I decided a little reading time by the pool was in order. As I approached a cushioned chaise lounge, a pool assistant hurried over to cover it with a large towel (neatly tucking in all the corners of course) and promptly provided me with an unrequested glass of ice water. A bit later, another assistant brought around a “trolley” to each poolside guest and offered us all the makings of a vanilla ice cream sundae! The level of service at the Mandarin Oriental is exceptional ... just ask Steve to tell you about his “grape wars” with the housekeeping staff and their ninja-like replacement of the grapes in our room’s fruit bowl!

The hotel’s riverside Italian restaurant *Ciao* was our choice for Friday night dinner, and a delicious dinner it was, topped off with mouthwatering gelato. Saturday morning we had a final riverside breakfast buffet and watched with amusement when a fellow guest accidentally ended up with some of his breakfast in his lap – our amusement came from watching the number of staff who instantaneously appeared to not only assist the guest directly, but then multiple levels of management who appeared to monitor those staff.

Mid-morning, a Mandarin Oriental driver whisked us and our luggage away to the airport so that we could catch a mid-day flight to Phuket and begin the next chapter of our Thailand adventure. We both thoroughly enjoyed our time in Bangkok (though neither of us would miss its air pollution) and will forever be spoiled by our experience at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel.

### **Diving the Andaman Sea**

Our Bangkok Air flight to Phuket was only a bit over an hour but we, as were all the passengers, served a full chicken curry lunch. This after having access to a pre-flight airline lounge where snacks and drinks were available at no charge! Quite a change from the level of “service” we usually get in the US.

Phuket is one of Thailand’s southern provinces; it consists of the island of Phuket, the country's largest island, and another 32 smaller islands off its coast. This area suffered tremendous damage and loss of life as a result of a 2004 tsunami caused by an earthquake in the Indian Ocean (the Hollywood movie *The Impossible* chronicled one family’s experience from this time).



At the Phuket airport, we were picked up in a van for about a 45min ride to the *Tap Lamu Pier* where we boarded the Thailand Aggressor. So while Phuket is known for many high-end resorts, spas, and restaurants, we basically bypassed such amenities and headed straight north out of town. We were joined in the van by some of our fellow Aggressor passengers. A brief stop at a local grocery store allowed those who needed any supplies to stock up ... although the “spicy chili squid” flavored potato chips look really tempting, I managed not to acquire any.

Zodiac tenders moved us and our luggage/dive gear from the Tap Lamu Pier to our home for the next week, the *Thailand Aggressor*. After unpacking and rigging dive gear, and settling in to our stateroom, it was time for the boat’s pre-voyage tradition: the crew made an offering and then lit strings of firecrackers to bring us good luck. About a 3-hour ride, in minimal to moderate swells, would get us to our anchorage for the night. During a good dinner of local Thai cuisine, we started to get to know our fellow 10 passengers ... an interesting international mix:



- Jerry (Virginia) and Dennis (Arizona)
- Jean Pierre, aka JP (Canada)
- Ilonka (Netherlands)
- Vincent (Hong Kong)
- Steve (Canada) and Tuk (Thailand)
- Alex (Canada now living in Thailand)
- Tom (Norway) and Miyhe (S. Korea)

We also met our full crew of 10, all of whom were Thai with the exception of our “cruise director” Clive from the UK:

- Captain: Tui - Cruise Director: Clive - Engineer: Pom - Second Captain: Rong - Deck hand: Hem
- Chef: P. Phorn - Chef: Toi - Dive instructor: Bank - Dive master: Sam - Steward: Jinny

In the daylight of Sunday morning, we viewed our first dive area of the trip: The *Similan Islands*, an archipelago consisting of eleven islands and all part of *Mu Koh Similan National Park*. "Similan" in the local Yawi language means "nine" (two additional islands were added to the original nine island National Park in 1998). As the National Geographic Society has ranked the Similan Islands as “One of the Top 10 dive destinations to visit in the World” we were anxious to begin our dives there!



Our diving area in the North Andaman Sea





All of our diving would involve gearing up on the main boat (sans fins), climbing down into one of the Zodiac tenders, motoring out to a dive site, and then on the count of “3” rolling backward into the sea (aka doing a “combat roll”).

Our first dive was at a site called “West of Eden.” The site offered interesting large granite boulders, canyons and swim-thrus as well as a variety of sea life to explore. While floating beneath a massive granite boulder I could wish for “no earthquakes please”! There was a nice variety of fish including some new ones (“new” for me that is) such as *Andaman Sweetlips* (also saw the more familiar *Oriental Sweetlips*).



Steve & I and other divers heading out to a dive site in a Zodiac from the Thailand Aggressor



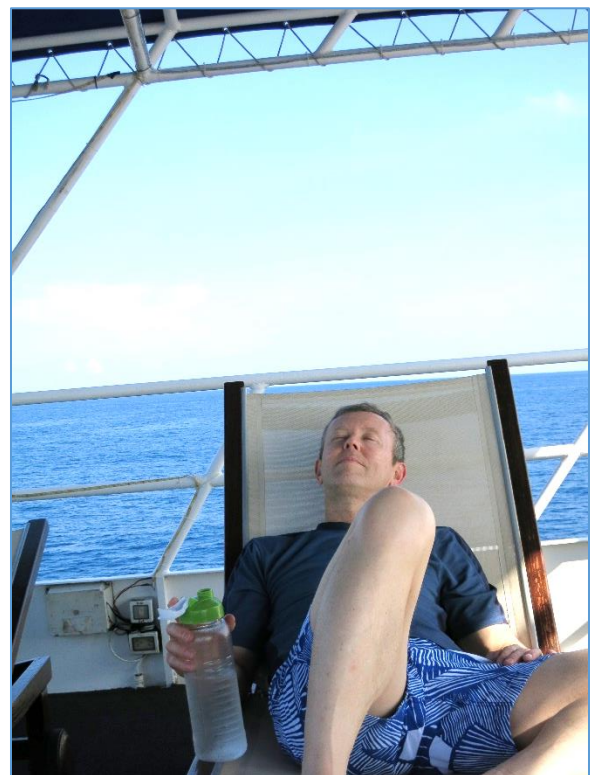
*Andaman Sweetlips*



*Oriental Sweetlips*

Additional Sunday dives were at *Anita’s Reef*, *Elephant Head*, and *Deep Six*. At *Anita’s Reef* we are “attacked” by *Cleaner Wrasse* in one coral area – they went after my mouth area and their nips were rather uncomfortable (reminded me of the time we were attacked by Cleaner Wrasse in Yap – not a good memory ☹).

With the water temperature about 82 degrees, both Steve and I were very comfortable in our full 3mm wetsuits plus our 3mm core warmers (sleeveless short wetsuits that cover one’s “core”). Of course the good thing about diving in cooler water is that you burn more calories trying to keep your body temperature up – always a good thing when there is abundant good food about!



Steve hydrating between dives!



The Aggressor Fleet's tag line "Eat Sleep Dive" held true for the Thailand Aggressor. Our daily schedule was usually close to the following:

6:30 AM	Light breakfast	1:30 PM	Dive #3 Briefing
7:00 AM	Dive #1 briefing	2:00 PM	Dive #3
7:30 AM	Dive #1	4:00 PM	Dive #4 Briefing
9:00 AM	Full breakfast	4:30 PM	Dive #4
10:00 AM	Dive #2 Briefing	6:00 PM	Dinner
10:30 AM	Dive #2	7:00 PM	Dive #5 Briefing
12:00 PM	Lunch	7:30 PM	Dive #5

As always aboard an Aggressor, you choose how many dives you want to do each day. Over the course of 5 ½ days of diving Steve ended up doing a total of 20 dives and I did 17.

In addition to the scrumptious meals, we had access to unlimited beverages and snacks. Diving is incredibly dehydrating so it is important to stay well hydrated. We were constantly chugging down liquids – and what goes in must come out -- so luckily when diving, you never have to worry about where the nearest restroom is!

I'll let the *Captain's Log* provide a summary of our dives ... but first a few personal observations/remembrances:

- Overall, the clarity of the water was only so-so and at times, it became almost "soupy" but we still saw lots!
- The current could be quite strong -- even at depths of over 70' we often felt a lot of surge (adding to the difficulty of taking pixs or videos). The downside of current is when you have to swim against it (which we kept to a minimum). One of the plus sides is that with a strong current "diving" becomes more like "personal flying" – getting to be an underwater *Superman* while flying alongside and over granite rock ridges is an amazing feeling!
- *Richelieu Rock* is often called the best dive site in Thailand and we would heartily agree. This site sits about 125 miles northwest of Phuket and is part of the Mu Koh Surin marine park. Fortunately, we were able to make multiple dives at *Richelieu Rock* and enjoyed its abundance in both types and quantities of aquatic life ...
  - Cuttlefish are such interesting creatures to observe and they were a common sight at *Richelieu Rock* (at one point I counted 13 in sight)
  - Seeing a baby eel swimming in circles was adorable (not a term usually associated with eels but it was about the size of our dive master Sam's finger)
  - Watching our dive master Bank alertly prevent a diver (from another boat) from settling down onto a piece of coral covered with at least 5 scorpion fish (their spines are very toxic and they are masters of blending into their environment – the unknowing diver was obviously a novice and not paying attention to her surroundings)
- It wasn't just creatures below sea level that captured our attention ...
  - Sitting top side and watching the Koh Bon Kites (birds) soar above the islands in the Andaman Sea was great fun



*Cuttlefish with me in the background*



- From the boat's deck we spotted a *Lion's Mane Jellyfish* just hanging out on the surface (it is the largest jellyfish species in the world)
- Watching the monkeys frolic on the sandy shore as we returned to Tap Lamu Pier at the end of the trip was an unexpected treat!
- Besides the many visual memories our Andaman Sea diving created, we also came back with some unique auditory memories ...
  - Hearing the multi-ton granite boulders being "moved" against one another by the pressure of the ocean was both eerie and fascinating
  - Experiencing the sound of dynamite fishing while underwater at Richelieu Rock was unnerving to say the least. It sounded as if one of the dive boats above us had exploded and we expected to see boat parts come raining down on us. Instead, we later learned it was illegal dynamite fishing about 20 km away off the coast of Myanmar (a single blast can kill thousands of fish).
- We added the term "tea bagging" to our dive-related vocabulary: In diving, "tea bagging" means holding students by the tank and basically dragging them about underwater. We learned about this term from our dive master Bank who mentioned it in reference to some past experiences with *discover scuba* divers (a non-certification program where people try out scuba diving).

For more dive pictures and a video from our diving, please visit:

- [Steve's Thailand Pictures](#)
- [Thailand Dive Video](#)

#### Thailand Aggressor's Captain's Log for Dec. 11-16, 2017

Sunday 12/11 – West of Eden, Anita's Reef, Head, Deep Six, Anita's reef.

We started our week's diving at the south Similans. After sleeping around islands 5 and 6 we had our safety briefing and dive site briefing then our guests eagerly got kitted up and we decided to head for West of Eden. We had our check dive and everyone was super confident. We saw some cool stuff including spearing mantis shrimp and also a peacock mantis shrimp. Our second dive was at Anita's Reef. We all got our ears cleaned by the resident cleaner wrasse, and our guests also saw an Octopus in the sand. We headed to Elephant head for our 3rd dive and were greeted by huge schools of fusiliers and we saw a Great barracuda and some Giant Trevallies cruising in the blue. We



*Island in Andaman Sea*

headed back to island 7 for our final day dive and had a good drift dive with lots of Banner fish and many Goatfish hunting in the sand. Our night dive was good. We had a nice encounter with a moray and also another Octopus. We had a nice meal of Italian Chicken and chatted about our day's diving.

Monday 12/12 – Sharkfin Reef, Elephant Head, 3Trees, North Point, Beacon reef.

We headed south for our first dive. Sharkfin reef is one of the most southerly dive sites in this chain of islands. It's a long reef consisting of huge granite boulders. The reef is more protected on the southern side, so has more soft coral. We briefed a drift dive as the current was pushing east. One of our groups saw a White tip sleeping in a crack. This pleased our group of avid photographers. We headed back to



Elephant head for our next dive. The current was pushing us west so we decided to turn and head for the west side. There was a big school of banner fish and we also saw some parrot fish chomping on the coral. Our third dive was a drift at 3Trees. We saw some Bumphead parrotfish and some huge Barrel sponges in the deeper part. Our night dive was conducted at Beacon Reef. We saw morays hunting and some nice Nudibranchs

Tuesday 12/13 – Christmas Point, Koh Bon North, Koh Bon West, Koh Bon Wall x2

We started the day at the very north of the 9 islands at a dive site called Christmas Point. We descended and almost immediately saw the Great Barracuda that seems to live at this site. We also saw some Smashing mantis shrimp and the small very shy fire gobies. For our second dive we decided to head further north to the Island of Koh Bon. We planned to do the rest of the day's diving here. The visibility was great at around 30m and on the first dive we had a great drift. We had encounters with a turtle and a sea snake. One of our guests also found a Devil Scorpion fish. On dives three and four we saw the same turtle again and we videoed it swimming to the surface and taking a breath and descending right past us as if we were not there. There was a large school of jacks patrolling the west ridge. On the night dive, we found a Spanish dancer and also a very big lobster out scavenging the reef. There was also a very nice octopus out and about changing colors very quickly.



*Bank, one of our dive masters, was almost always smiling*

Wednesday 12/14 – Koh Tachai North, Richelieu Rock x3

We had slept the night at the island north west of Koh Bon. Koh Tachai is a granite boulder dive site and the ridge in the north goes down to around 100ft so a good dive to start the day with. We found Stingrays in the sand and also many garden eels swaying in the current. After the dive we upped anchor and headed to Richelieu Rock for the rest of the day. This is the premier dive site in Thailand's waters and it did not disappoint us. We saw a napoleon wrasse and the school of barracuda along with many different species of shrimp. There is marine life in every crack and crevice here and we saw a very rare type of moray. The Honeycomb moray is not encountered that often in our region but we were fortunate to see one out free swimming during the day. After the day's diving we all compared the photographs and movies we had taken during this great day's diving.

Thursday 12/15 - Richelieu Rock x2, Koh Tachai pinnacle, Koh Tachai reef.

After a good night's sleep at the Surin Islands we made our way back to Richelieu rock for our first 2 dives today. The current was slack as we entered the water and we almost instantly encountered 4 mating cuttlefish. They were drifting in the current and the female was laying eggs while being protected by the male. We also found a group of flabelina nudibranchs and while we were checking these critters out a Napoleon wrasse cruised on by. The current picked up for our second dive and this brought in big schools of trevally and also a few yellowtail Barracuda. After the 2 dives we upped anchor to head back to Koh Tachai. The current was minimal at this dive site and we saw schools of snapper and also some large Malabar Groupers were seen in the deeper parts of this site. For our next dive we headed for the smaller inner pinnacle and what a good choice it was. We saw 3 mating octopus and they just stayed put not caring about our snap happy photographers. On our night dive we saw a free swimming moray eel and a very large lobster out patrolling the reef.



Friday 12/16 – Koh Bon Ridge x2

Just two dives today, although we slept at Koh Tachai island. We upped anchor early and headed back to Koh Bon in the hope of seeing Mantas. There was one sighted yesterday so we jumped in the water with much anticipation. We were greeted by a juvenile Napoleon Wrasse and also a school of goatfish were cruising the reef. For our second dive we headed for the pinnacle that lays 400m north of the ridge. Sadly when we got there the dive guide saw the current had picked up so we headed for the north ridge. We found an octopus as soon as we began our drift along the reef. We also found a couple of sponge snails, these were a favorite find for 2 of our guests. The Napoleon returned at the end of the dive and we made some great video for our guests... after taking care of our guest's eqpt we packed all eqpt away and headed back to our home port and our special bbq night.



*Fishing boats near Tap Lamu Pier*



*High Speed Day Boats near Tap Lamu Pier*

Saturday morning we bid farewell to our wonderful crew and 2 vans carried ourselves and gear back to Phuket. It is hard to travel light when diving as we bring our own wetsuit(s), BCD (buoyancy compensator device), regulator, fins, mask, dive light, reef stick, etc. Steve's camera gear alone requires its own pelican case.

The ride back to Phuket is a great reminder of the non-tourist Thailand as we viewed endless acres of planted rubber trees. In the late 19th century, rubber seeds were smuggled out of the Amazon to Britain where high-yielding strains were developed and subsequently brought to Southeast Asia, in particular Malaysia, to be grown. Seeds were smuggled north once again into Thailand, which is now the world's largest producer of natural rubber.



*Rubber trees near Phuket.*

*Thailand #1 producer of rubber in the world*

We took the short flight from Phuket to Bangkok and had a final afternoon/evening at the very nice Novotel airport hotel before the set of long flights back to Denver. I took advantage of the time by immediately booking myself for a Thai massage which I greatly enjoyed and highly recommend if you have the chance!

Thailand is a fascinating country and if we ever get back to the area I'd love to explore it some more. We both also highly recommend *Richelieu Rock* as a diving destination. As with many great travel/dive locations it is a bit of a pain to get there but oh, the sights you'll see once you're there!