

Thai Story

By Rodney Topor

In November, following in the footsteps of Ann and Gordon and many others, and with several other Club members, I went on Julie Geldard's 12 day tour (aka experience, extravaganza) to northern Thailand, and would like to tell you something about it.

In summary, the tour was wonderful. We were introduced to a wide range of Thai peoples, cultures, performances, landscapes, nature, cuisine and experiences. Photo opportunities abounded at every turn. Julie provided expert advice on how best to take advantage of each type of opportunity. The twin share guesthouse accommodation (in 4 different locations) was simple, clean, well-equipped and most importantly had free wifi. The food at local cafes and restaurants was wonderful, as you'd expect in Thailand, including the cafe where we sat on platforms above a raging river. (But I still struggle to understand those of my fellow travellers who refused or were unable to eat spicy food—what a loss!) The price of the tour was very modest for what was provided, specially in comparison with most other photography tours.

The tour was timed to start during the Loy Krathong (*) lantern festival, during which members of the public gather throughout the city but specially near our first guesthouse to launch lanterns (small orange hot air balloons) which fill the sky, to launch floating candles on the river, to participate in and watch parades, to enjoy fireworks, to eat, and generally to party. This lasts several days...or nights...and is a special experience.

Thailand is a buddhist country and there are temples on every corner. The temples serve as places of worship, community centres and schools. Many young men serve as monks for one or two years and then return to normal life. So you see them buying cameras and iPhones in stores and generally taking an interest in consumer as well as spiritual things. Our local guide and driver Ravi Fong used his local contacts to find out when interesting events were occurring such as the inauguration of a new temple and the mass launch of larger lanterns by school children. The temple at Doi Suthep was particularly interesting and busy (despite the rain we had that day, and only that day). At the Silver Temple, monks were working silver. At another temple, monks were making lanterns.

Although there are modern supermarkets in the (outer) suburbs of Chiang Mai, we stayed in the centre where almost all shopping is done in bustling indoor and outdoor markets. It was interesting to see the wide variety of foodstuffs that were being sold. E.g., there was some dispute about whether the frogs were being sold for food or for good luck. We saw monks collecting daily alms outside the markets. Some of us bought a lot of cheap goods at the markets, and cheap camera accessories in the electronic stores, though avoiding cheap quality was a challenge.

We were taken to a Hmong (a northern hill tribe) village outside Chiang Mai, introduced to the Mayor and a couple of local residents, given a home-cooked meal, and entertained by the local children. It's a bit hard to know what to make of this visit. The homes were certainly simple, but most had



electricity and TV sets and so on. The children were genuinely excited by our visit but took a bus daily to a nearby school.

We spent several days outside Chiang Mai. I thought the highlight was driving along a good 2-lane road to the summit of Doi Inthanon, the tallest mountain in Thailand, and taller than Mt Kosciusko, in order to photograph sunrise over the clouds below summit. Tricky photography challenge, even using bracketing. Immediately afterwards we visited the summit temple (whose name I can't find right now) for more cloud photography, and walked the beautiful 3km Kew Mae Pan Nature Trail near the summit (which some of my fellow travellers found a challenge but still succeeded).

We visited the beautiful Queen Sirikit Botanic Gardens to practice flower and macro photography (where I gained confidence at focus stacking), the orchid farm, the Thai Insect Zoo (to practise butterfly and insect photography), Tiger Kingdom (to pat and photograph baby and adult tigers, though I think this stop should be omitted from future tours because it's ethically dubious), and the Elephant Nature Park (Gordon's



favourite location, where mistreated elephants from the logging, tourist and begging trades are rehabilitated). We also visited silk, silver, jade and umbrella factories.

We took a Thai cooking class from the famous Pom and produced beautiful dishes, but whether the knowledge I gained sticks will be another story. Some of us went to the famous Chiang Mai ladyboy cabaret!

The pace was mostly leisurely with opportunities to rest and recover (e.g., from the heat) on most days. Julie, Suzanne and Ravi ensured that everything went smoothly. I made some new friends.

Activities continued after our return, with meetings to share photos, to eat more Thai food, and to prepare photo books of our experience.

Julie is offering the tour again this year, and also a new tour to Laos, a country that is equally beautiful but much less developed than Thailand.

(*) Please excuse my spelling of Thai names. The Thai alphabet is completely incomprehensible to me, and Thai names are transcribed into English apparently randomly, as the same name appears in different spelling at every occurrence.

