

At the cave temple (*Krabi, Thailand*)

Celebrating the joy of wildness amid the southern Thai karsts:



With the bescabbed pate, and stiffened knees of an 80-year-old, I gingerly touch the ungrounded keyboard (susceptible to shocks) of my laptop to peck out a summary of events of the last 48 hours:

After nearly fumbling my new Pentax into a gutter alongside the riverfront, I was off on a '*sangtheuw*' (open-backed mini-truck) for Wat Tham Seua. A delicious moment it was—arriving so early without a fellow tourist in sight! Walking up the 1000 steps spiraling around the karst towards the summit temple, even in temple-pounding hot-sweating exertion the heart soared with the emerald beauty of the landscape. How wonderfully the artifice—statuary and Buddhist temple, stone steps and '*kukis*' (monastic cells)—all harmonized with the natural landscape. Did such harmony not manifest the essence of Buddhist sensibility?

This Thai Buddhist aesthetic in which artifice blends with natural setting richly contrasts with the Western Christian tradition in which churches were the pillars at the center of 'civilized' conquered spaces. Yet here, where there is no apparent fear of wildness, a sanctified space lay within the what early Christians would regard as the 'demonic' space of a cave. Those early Christians took refuge in catacombs, but they and their descendants came to regard wild and untamed places as the realm of Satan...

In crawling through a narrow passage to the inner grotto, I resisted the usual throat-swelling claustrophobia. What greater satisfaction can there be than overcoming a phobia?

On the way down from the summit, I was suddenly surrounded by a troop of monkeys. For an instant, it felt like a set up for a mugging. Then each of them in turn nuzzled against my bare legs, pulling the hair and nibbling at my skin. A strange communion it was with the monkeys on the stone steps in the midst of tangled forest!

Most inspiring of all was the enormous banyan tree wrapped with red and white prayer flags right at the foot of a sheer cliff of a towering karst. Some deeper more ancient memory was there stirred into awareness, perhaps that of the Norse Ydrassil, the World Tree...

However disappointing the first few days in Malaysia: those 2 hours of this morning alone surely justifies the entire week.



Back in Krabi town in late afternoon waiting for the *songtheaw* to Ai Nang beach, I stood aghast in witnessing one porky red-headed fellow leering after the little girl who served his Coca Cola... Just because she was Thai, did he assume her exploitable? It was a reminder that the reptilian tourist types recognized on the first trip to Thailand 18 year ago, have increased exponentially.

Then there were the 2 English boys (Leo DiCaprio lookalikes) who balanced daringly on the back step of the lurching *songthaew*. Hard it was, not to admire their joyful abandonment of maternal warning as hair blowing in the wind, they practiced their one finger toehold rock-climbing skills. No fear in their hearts of wheelchairs!

Then on the return journey from the beach, there was the middle-aged and red-nosed German, clinging half-drunk to a passive Thai woman. Was she his squeeze just for the day, for the week—or was theirs a longer deal? Indeed, just as feminists seethe—the spectacle was sleazy and pathetic. Still, presuming that the woman was complicit, and both were of age—it could possibly be viewed as a *quid pro quo* transaction—however hard-nosed ...

-1999, January 24