

A little ‘Sanuk’ on Ko Chang (Ko Chang island, Thailand)

A night’s unexpected departure from the guidebook itinerary:



Strolling along the road behind the bungalows after dusk looking for a restaurant, I stopped at the bar near the kiosk selling Hawaiian shirts (my dear son’s request) and to take a ‘cute’ picture a dog lying on a café table. In the table behind, a pair of *farangs* sipped whiskey and soda.

As I stooped over to check the menu, the huskier of the two struck up a friendly conversation.

“Hi, I’ve seen you around today. Where you from, man?”

A little reluctantly, I sat down and ordered from the Bugs Bunny menu. Noting three girls lingering in the background, it also occurred that there may be more on the menu than fried rice. Still, it was the friendly American accents that enticed me to order a small beer and gradually submit to acting as a conversation springboard for a pair of drunks seemingly bored with one another’s company.

Quite unexpectedly for the next few hours, I remained in the company of Roger, a fisherman from Marin Country, California; and Johnny, a building contractor from the Bay area. Both in their late 30’s were Thai addicts: Johnny, wrapped in a Thai loincloth, claimed up to 6 flights annually to Thailand over the last decade. By recently taking advantage of super-cheap UPS Courier flights, he said that his current airfare from ‘Frisco to Bangkok cost only \$200.

The pair were accompanied by a Thai man who drank quietly, catching only snatches of the English chatter. While the Thai smiled softly, Johnny introduced him as his comrade, Pin, whom he’d first met on his first trip to Thailand nearly two decades before. Apparently on this trip, Pin was not only Johnny’s guide but his silent business partner in a scheme to set up a small bungalow operation in the southern beach of Ko Chang.

“If anything happened to me— I’d trust Pin to take care of my 8-year-old daughter.” Johnny avowed.

As Johnny and Roger polished off more mickeys of Thai whiskey, I finished my plate of rice and ordered another beer. We then talked briefly about families. I revealed that I was recently separated and had joint custody of 3 kids. I confessed that this vacation—however expensive—was taken in the hopes of clearing my head to move forward from the wreckage...

Hearing that I was a teacher, Johnny, the drunker of the pair, talked about his childhood dyslexia which led to him quitting high school and travelling with his father in the South Pacific. He also claimed his stint in the Airborne Rangers landed him in the midst of the Grenada invasion.

For his part, Roger, a chubby teddy bear, let Johnny chatter while he exchanged quips in pidgin Thai with the two girls.

“Hey, I’d like to spank your ass,” he said to one of the girls beckoning her to the back of his chair for a playful back rub. “They just love the white skin!” he said in a winking aside.

After Johnny revealed how came by the livid scars across this neck (coral scrapes while diving in Fiji) he held up his hand with a missing middle finger.

“It’s numb and useless—it just ends there,” he said. He went on to tell how the finger was torn off in a construction site accident after which he brought it in his pocket to the emergency ward. It was apparently too mashed up to be sewn back on.

Sensing the expectation for me to segue into a story about my prosthetic arm, I was inclined— as customary— to resist. Still, disposed to openness by the beers and the moment of fellowship, I complied—emphasizing that the only ‘handicap’ was in dealing with awkward reactions.

“You seem to cover it a lot,” said Roger, with no trace of malice.

With the elephant of the way, Roger talked of his anxieties about being fat.

“The way people sometimes look at me I feel like shit.”

Only near midnight did I remember the snorkeling trip scheduled for 10:00 AM in the morning. I also waved off another beer, with the legitimate excuse of having just finished a course of antibiotics for dysentery contracted in Cambodia. Just as I was about to take my leave, Johnny announced that he and Roger were heading for an after-hours club a few kilometers back on the beach road.

“Hey, com’on, man, you’re on vacation— have some fun— *sanuk!*” urged Roger.

Charmed by this boozy camaraderie and disposed to throw caution to the wind, I climbed on the back of Johnny’s bike while Roger with the silent Pin rode on ahead. A lovely moment it was swishing through the warm wind under the stars along the nearly pitch-black road.

The Lucky Seven bar was initially empty. I insisted on paying for the pricey beers (300 baht) for the three others but again mentioned the antibiotics in not getting one for myself. Meanwhile, the barman fired up techno on the tape machine and within minutes the bar began to fill up with young local girls and expat customers. Among them were the 3 girls from the restaurant who all arrived squeezed on the back of a single motorcycle.

In the soft luminescent glow of a bald Buddha figure above the bar, a few couples began to dance to the throbbing boom-box beat.

“*Sanuk, sanuk,*” said the shortest of the three Thai girls, proffering her drink. I took a token sip from her glass. She then grabbed my hand and ignoring my protest, pulled me out among the dancers.

In taking a few tentative steps, I was momentarily thrust back to the last time I had been momentarily thrust onto a dance floor: that was in 1982 at the Playboy Night Club, in Harare. But this time lacking the self-consciousness stifling haze of alcohol, I was jerked almost immediately back to sobriety.

Amid the sting of shame (ridiculous for a man of my age behaving so!) came a jolt of alarm: I had recklessly left my shoulder bag on the table behind. In it was passport and camera. Was I deliberately courting disaster? Smiling awkwardly at the short girl, I stepped away. Mercifully, the bag was on the table— with Roger standing with closed arms smiling behind.

“How ya doin’, F.?” He called affably above the din.

“Hey, that’s some tee-shirt that guy’s wearing,” I said with a Nixonesque smile, nodding towards a shaven-headed *farang*, careening across the floor with his Thai escort. Emblazoned across the shirt was the image of Osama Bin Laden.

“I just noticed that,” said Roger.

Without warning, Roger stepped menacingly in front of the *farang*. The *farang* tried to smile. Through the din, a British accent was vaguely discernable.

“Fuckhead!” Roger’s shout was barely audible but there was no mistaking his menacing gesticulations.

The Brit cocked his ear for a second before pulling the shirt off over his head and tossing it onto the nearby table. “*Sanuk, sanuk,*” he said, stepping backwards with a ‘*wai*’ bow.

“I won’t put up with that bullshit,” said Roger coming back to my side “It’s an insult to all our people who died.”

“I understand,” I said, grateful that in the course of the evening I had revealed nothing of my own views about Bush’s war on terrorism.

“Same thing happened in Bangkok,” shouted Roger above the din, “Another asshole wearing an Osama Bin Laden hat. That fucker was lucky to get away with a black eye. Hey, ya know I’m not worried because I got Johnny as a backup. Johnny’s a boxer.”

Just then, the Brit’s Thai squeeze sidled over, pulling on Roger’s arm, trying to urge him onto the dance floor. It seems that she was either attempting to make her man jealous or playing her part

in a set-up to give the Brit his excuse for payback. In a flash, the Brit was nose to nose with Roger in the middle of the floor.

“What the fuck did you call me?” bellowed the Brit.

Right on cue, there was Johnny sliding off his barstool, stepping up between his buddy, Roger, and the Brit. Without warning Johnny butted his head into the Brit’s face. As the Brit reached out to grapple back, the music stopped, and the light came on.

“Time to go,” said Roger.

I moved outside and stood beside Johnny as he cranked the motorbike.

“Did you see what the fuck I did to that guy?” he said. “I broke his fuckin’ nose. It was bleedin’ all over the place.”

I hopped on the back of the moto, looking nervously backwards. Fortunately, before the Brit or any potential supporters came storming forth, Johnny revved up the engine, clutched and jerked us away into the darkness.

On the ride back to Kai Bai, cradling a beer on his lap, Johnny delivered a slurring monologue: half confession, half boast.

“I fucked up again. I feel like shit. I hate to be violent. Violence solves nothing, man. I’m 38 years old. I have an 8-year-old daughter. I thought all that shit was past. I was a boxer man—I was an Airborne Ranger when I was 18.”

As we wobbled along, grinding gears, the 3 Thai girls straddling on the single Suzuki, zipped past waving.

“I think you’re down that way.”

No doubt the girls were booked by Roger to rendezvous in their posh guesthouse, 5 minutes down the beach. Uninvited to continue the adventure, I got off in the pitch black near the Hai Bae huts. In the wavering head lamp, I scribbled my e-mail address on the receipt Johnny cupped on his hand—ostensibly so that Roger can send me more information on UPS Courier Flights.

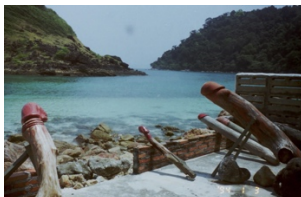
“Nice to meet you.”

“My pleasure, man!” said Johnny. “Sorry for the bullshit.” With grinding gears he weaved away into the pitch-blackness.

I made my way in the dark to the Bungalow—the only one conspicuously lit up with the outside light. Inside, I swung the bag onto the floor, cringing in the risk I’d taken in leaving it for 5 minutes unattended. I glanced at the clock. It was 3:30 AM—just 5 hours before the scheduled

snorkeling trip. I shuddered in the anticipation of blazing sun and diesel fumes after a sleepless night.

Still, maybe there was nothing to regret about running into Johnny and Roger... Maybe a little spontaneous *sanuk* was needed to complete the recovery from the Battambang amoebas. Then shutting eyes, I thought of how similar the night had been to spontaneous ‘adventures’ in Harare nights, *circa* 1982... Of course, in throwing caution to the wind back then—I had no kids of my own to worry about...



-2002, March 15

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