

BANGKOK

DAY 12 – 5th July 2008

Today was another travel day – one of those days when we seem to spend time just waiting around for a certain time to arrive so that we can move on to do whatever we have to do!

After breakfast, we packed our suitcases and then we spent the morning doing those last minute things that we wanted to do before checking out of the hotel. Check-out was at 12.00 noon, but we did not intend to head for the airport until about 1.00 pm, so while I did some reading, Dominic went into one of the shopping malls. However he is notorious when it comes to parting with money. His wallet has several combination locks on it just to give him enough time change his mind so that he doesn't have to part with money after all!! So when he returned, he had bought absolutely nothing, but at least he had a smile on his face. That meant that he had managed to get some poor shop-keeper thinking that he was about to make a sale, but then failed at the last moment!

We took a taxi to Kowloon station, where we were able to check our luggage in for the flight. This had the added advantage that we could take the train to the airport without having to lug our baggage around with us. However, at the back of our minds, there was always the possibility that the luggage might not even get to the airport, let alone onto the plane! However, this is Hong Kong, not Terminal 5 at Heathrow!

We cashed in the unused portions of our Octopus transport cards and then spent a while in the VIP lounge. I must admit that there was a very wide choice of food available at no cost whatsoever. Usually there may be some fruit, or nuts or pretzels, but in Hong Kong we had soups, noodles, several chicken, pork or beef dishes, as well as a wide choice of desserts and fruit. It was as if we were in a Chinese take-away, but with no charge at the end! All's the pity, then, because I was not all that hungry, and was satisfied with a bowl of soup!

Our flight left on time. The two hour flight left little to do except eat the meal that was provided there. Again, this was very appetising. The choice of movies, TV programmes and the other entertainment, however, was a repeat of what we had on the flight to Hong Kong, and I think we will be on the same choice on our next flight. It might be a chance of just listening to music. I know the details of the "CSI" episodes inside out by now!!

At Bangkok it took us ages to get from the plane to passport control. The new terminal may be very modern, but it is also very long, and if it weren't for the moving walk-ways, it would certainly be a place to lose weight through the exercise generated by walking!

Our luggage did arrive, and we passed through the green channel and out to the taxi rank. Fortunately, there was someone at the desk who spoke English and wrote the name of our hotel and its location down for the taxi driver. He was a delight – using his limited English to point out items of interest, while speeding along the road. I am

sure that he thought that the “80” signs at the side of the roads meant that he had to keep to a minimum of 80 miles per hour! And he was one of the slower drivers!!!

We arrived at our hotel and checked in. It is amazing how tiring sitting around doing nothing can actually be. The beds were so welcoming, and so for a short while we had a late siesta!

Our evening meal was taken on the banks of the Chao Phraya River, while we watched some local entertainment. By this time I had also contacted Laura Chiles – Clare’s daughter, who is working here in Bangkok. We had planned to meet up for a meal on the Saturday, since her work teaching English usually involves working on a Sunday. However, her class this weekend has been cancelled, and so we will meet up tomorrow, Sunday, instead. When I mentioned that we were watching Thai dancers, she mentioned that she had not seen any such dancing yet, so we decided that we would repeat things tomorrow, for her benefit.

We thought that we were early eating our evening meal, but it seems to be the custom in Asia to eat early, rather than later. I suppose my eating habits were fixed during my training for the priesthood in Italy, and that meant eating late (though not as late as in Spain). However, it is still a little strange to find a restaurant almost empty by 9.30 pm, so we took advantage of the change in the hour (Bangkok is an hour behind Hong Kong – 6 hours ahead of the UK), and had an early night.

DAY 13 – 6th July 2008

Today is Sunday, and so we started the day with a private Mass. Dominic was not very happy when I suggested that we might have a collection!! I reminded him that much of this trip is down to the generosity of parishioners who gave me a generous gift for my 50th birthday last year. So thanks again to everyone!

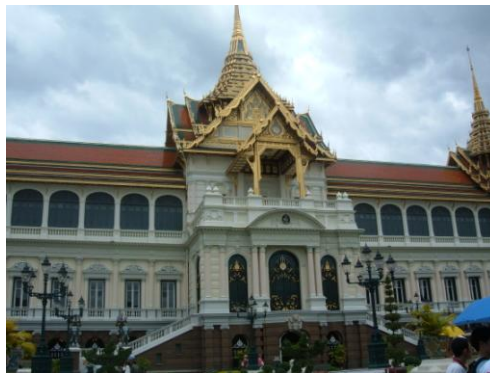
After breakfast we made use of the hotel’s shuttle boat to take us across the river to the terminus of the Skytrain, the main overland railway in Bangkok. There is also an underground, but we decided that we would take the tourist boat route along the river. This is similar to what is found in many cities throughout the world, but usually in the form of a bus – once you have purchased your ticket, you can get on and get off anywhere along the route, and go around the route as often as you like.

The boat that we first went on had a Thai guide who wanted to explain his city to everyone on the boat. It was useful for orientation to have the various buildings along the banks of the river pointed out and explained.



As a result, we decided to stay on the boat from the beginning to the end of the route. As soon as it turned round, however, and started heading down-river we made use of the facility to get on and get off.

Our first port was the hospital, where the museum was also a teaching aid in anatomy, using the various organs etc taken from prisoners executed in the 19th century. However, being a Sunday, the museum was closed, so we missed out!



We then got back on the boat at got off at the Royal Palace. Although not presently occupied, (since the king now has his residence in the north of the city), it is still used for ceremonial occasions. For those of you with memories as old as mine, this is the palace where the King of Siam hired Anna to teach him and his court English and English customs (cf. “The King and I”).



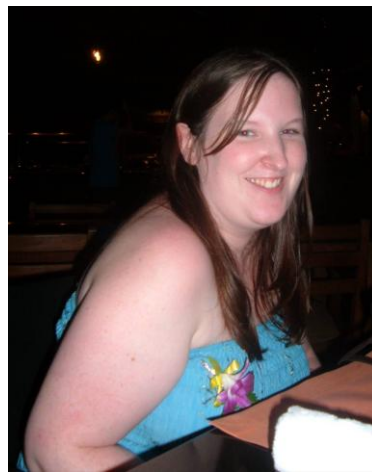
The palace also contains the Wat Phra Kaew (a Wat means a monastery) where the Emerald Buddha can be found. We spent quite a bit of time looking around these places before moving on to the Wat Pho, where the longest reclining Buddha in

Thailand can be found. Much of what we saw is difficult to describe in words, but a photo or two can help.



[The above photo shows the soles and toes of the Buddha!]

Later this afternoon we returned to the hotel, only to cross the river once again in order to collect Laura Chiles. She is living on the east side of the city and had taken the Skytrain in order to meet us for dinner. She had suggested 6.30 pm, so, ever the thoughtful one, I thought we would arrive early, only to find Laura waiting for us!



It was a delight to see her, and to see her looking so well. She had had a nasty encounter with a mosquito soon after her arrival in Thailand, which hospitalised her for some time. The same happened again a few weeks later, but now she seems to have built up a resistance and is looking well.

We treated her to dinner and the show of Thai music and dancing, which I think she enjoyed. Although we had seen some dancing the previous evening, this was a completely different show, and we tried to work out the various characters from traditional Thai folklore, but failed.



After a wonderful evening, we accompanied Laura to the boat and she left to pick up the Skytrain again. Since we have an early start tomorrow morning, we went straight to bed.

DAY 14 – 7th July 2008

This morning Dominic's alarm did go off at the right time, though the clocks in the room were five minutes fast, so that I blamed him, unnecessarily, for not setting his alarm for 5.30 am.

A minibus picked us up from the hotel a little later than planned. It delivered us, along with other people from across the city who had been picked up in a similar fashion, and we all boarded a large comfortable coach and set off for the river Kwai.

I don't particularly like going on organised tours, preferring to do my own thing, and the reason was blatantly obvious on this tour. No sooner had we set off, than the guide suggested that we might like to upgrade our train tickets, order a souvenir book, various hats and T shirts – even before we had left Bangkok. When she had finished this little duty, we then stopped for an opportunity to buy tea or coffee and a toilet stop.

Finally, however, we set off on the long journey to the north-west of Bangkok. It took us until about 10.00 am. We were dropped off at the Death Railway museum, and fortunately, left to ourselves to wander through and read the accounts of the horrific situation in south-east Asia during the Second World War, and particularly the building of the so called "Death Railway", including the Bridge over the River Kwai. It earns its notorious name since 38 prisoners of war died per kilometre in constructing the railway. It was a sombre and disturbing moment.



Outside there is a Catholic Church, so we briefly paid a visit before going into the Allied Cemetery next door. I always find the sight of war graves deeply moving, especially when one reads the names and the ages of the soldiers who died. I could find none who were of my age or older, but most were of Dominic's age. I think that he found that a sobering reminder of what happens in war-time.



Sadly, being on a semi-organised tour meant that we were controlled by the clock. In our case, it meant that we had to be in certain places at certain times so that the tour flowed neatly.



So, after just an hour we piled onto the coach again, and set off deeper into the town to the actual Bridge over the River Kwai. We were given the opportunity to take photographs (or the steel bridge – the wooden one has long gone, of course) and to walk out onto the bridge itself. However, we were warned that a train was likely to come through while we were on the bridge (there is actually only one train per day, but the guide knew the time, and that is why she insisted that we “be on the coach on time”). So, while the train slowly made its way across the bridge, those of us who

were still stuck on the bridge had to move onto the safety areas. It was wonderful to feel the whole bridge vibrate as the train crossed just inches away from us!

The next stop was further up the line, where we actually caught the train. Having upgraded, we were guaranteed a seat, along with tea or coffee and a cookie! The journey through the jungle though, was worth it, and ninety minutes later, as we neared our journey's end, the heaven's opened and we had a typical jungle monsoon downpour.



The tour ticket included a beautiful Thai lunch at a nearby hotel, and then we were told that we had a boat ride. However, no-one had warned us what sort of boat ride. At the water's edge we were ushered into a longtail boat, or, a "James Bond Boat", as they are now more commonly known, after Bond used one in one of the Bond movies. However, with the rain pouring down, it meant crawling under a rain cover, and settling onto the bottom of the boat to sit on a cushion. Several people decided that it was just too much, but yours truly did manage to get in the boat – even with a life-jacket making him look bigger than normal!!

The experience of travelling up river in the jungle was worth it, though we were quite wet – not from the river, but from the driving rain – when we got back. And of course, true to form, as soon as we got back onto the coach, the rain stopped!



It took about 4 hours to return to Bangkok. I would say that most people who went on this tour went out of a sense of duty to someone in their family, or at least loyalty, respect and the honour due to those who had given their lives in the building of the railway. However, there were two families who took their children along for a fun day out. In some ways, children running about, laughing and shouting spoil the occasion for many people, including myself. Since the families concerned come from Australia, I hope this is not a sign of things to come. Believe me, as anyone who

knows me will attest, I enjoy having fun – but at the appropriate time and in the appropriate place. A cemetery for the war-dead is not such a place!

When we returned to Bangkok, the reversal system of mini-bus deliveries was enacted, but this time we were told to stay on the coach, since the driver was going through the city and would be able to drop off at several hotels on his way home. Needless to say, our hotel was the very last one!

Once back at the hotel I took the opportunity to have a Thai massage. It was the perfect way to unwind and relax – not just after today, but also after the travelling so far. Dominic felt like some Japanese food afterwards, and so we made use of the one in the hotel.