

A bit of California in this Thai hotel

When we last left Brad, he was looking out his bedroom window in Sri Lanka at a 12-foot elephant dragging a coconut palm down the road.

We catch up with him now in Bangkok Thailand, where the Grace Hotel reminds him of the Eagles.

This is the fourth instalment of Passport, the tales of travel and adventure from ex-York student, ex-Radio York disc jockey, Brad Meslin. At least it's the fourth we've received, three of his articles are still unaccounted for, lost perhaps in the mail.

Anyway, here's Brad's tales of Thailand, and some observations on what happens when East meets West.



"Sure are a lot of dope fiends in this part of the world"

Her beautiful almond-shaped eyes smiled as she handed me an orchid and welcomed me with the traditional Sawasnee Thai greeting. Thai Airways flight TG608 accelerated smoothly into the sky over the Bay of Bengal while the captain intoned, first in Thai, then English, and finally in Mandarin; "Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen, our flying time to Bangkok will be three hours and five minutes. We shall be cruising at an altitude of 33,000 feet and in approximately one hour we will be passing the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, before turning north towards Bangkok. The temperature in Bangkok is 33 degrees celsius with 98% humidity — I hope you enjoy your flight".

As his voice was replaced by a glass of champagne placed in front of me, I settled back to enjoy the flight and decide what our next move was to be. Stretching my legs I was reminded of our recent visit to Adams Peak, 100 miles from Colombo in Sri Lanka's hill country. At the top of the mountain, 7,700 feet above sea level rests a preserved (don't ask me how they did it) footprint, supposedly left by Lord Buddha during one of his visits to the island Paradise, Serendib. Each night several hundred people attempt the seven mile climb to the top in order to pay homage to "The Great Teacher", and to experience one of the most breathtaking sunrises in the world.

Several nights ago we were among those who climbed 5,000 steps to reach the top, arriving, after four and a half hours of walking, at 3:00 a.m., in time to freeze for two and a half hours before witnessing a sunrise unlike any I had ever seen before. A collective gasp went up from the onlookers as the first streaks of red illuminated faint wisps of cloud stretched out across the horizon, and the mist slowly melted to reveal a carpet of tea in the valleys below. I can imagine that the coming of morning atop Adams Peak must be inspirational for the Buddhist pilgrims fortunate enough to make the visit: for us it was merely incredible.

Interrupting my reverie, the stewardess arrives with lunch. An hour later, and we are beginning our descent into Bangkok, while I contemplate random impressions of this city of four million people: gateway to the Orient, ultra-modern; efficient; congested axis of the golden triangle which supplies most of the world with heroin; home for thousands of expatriate Burmese, Laotians, Cambodians and Malays. For us Bangkok is a way-station — a rest stop on the way to Australia.

My friend with the beautiful eyes is wishing me good luck as the cabin door opens and I am hit with a blast of hot Bangkok air.

Minutes later, disgorged onto the sidewalk in front of the terminal building, we make a beeline (a hard thing to do in Bangkok traffic) for a hotel recommended to us by a fellow traveller in India. In 90 minutes, settled into a very nice room with a large garden and swimming pool for

Himalayas; the surfing colony in Hikkaduwa, Ceylon; the opium dens in Thailand — the list goes on.

The Grace Hotel, which we'd been hearing about since we arrived in Ceylon, seven weeks ago, epitomizes the downfall of decadent western culture, made all the more obvious after nine months in "the East". Entering its air-conditioned nightclub I am reminded of the Eagles' Hotel California and its not-so-subtle, cynical treatment of the desperation of contemporary "hip" society. The club is absolutely packed with perhaps 200 Thai women, most between 18 and 25 years old and most very beautiful. Of course, the Grace turns out to be a glorified pick-up bar, but with a twist. Here, unlike North America, or even France, the women are considered quite honourable and are in fact encouraged by their parents to come to the Grace to support their families.

A male chauvinist dream, the

meat market as it's called by initiates struck me as a pitiable comment. When a woman runs up and throws her arms around your neck, you think that maybe she mistook you for someone else, but after disentangling yourself from the fourth such encounter in 15 minutes, you begin to wonder what motivates these women.

I finally persuaded one woman to just sit down and talk to me. Our conversation, very frustrating at the beginning was finally very revealing: "You like me?", she asked. "Sure I like you", I said. "You take me?" "What? No I won't 'take you', I just want to talk," I said.

When she finally became convinced that someone could like her, without wanting to "take her", she slowly began to talk. I learned that in this country, if a woman is beautiful, she is given the chance to come to Bangkok, as an alternative to picking rice in the fields 12 hours a day.

"What would you have done?", she asked me. She had a point. Unfortunately the men are often so rude and rough with the women that I find it amazing that they can still be so sincerely friendly and open when they meet a new man, but as far as they're concerned, anything is better than working in the rice fields.

To be fair however, many men meet one of these women and feel genuine pity for her in these situations. While a woman may be getting paid by her 'boyfriend', there is a much deeper emotional attachment then in a corresponding situation in North America. I suppose the Grace Hotel is an inevitable product of a rapidly westernizing society, but from what I've heard, if it weren't for the influence of the American GI's here during Vietnam, this situation wouldn't exist.

Enjoy your lunch — until the next time...

Passport

by Brad Meslin



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