

Post



Scott Farnsworth

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The elephant limbo - March 10, 2023

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As so frequently of late, we rise early, have breakfast, pack and check out. Breakfast is nothing fancy, but it's fun watching the Mae Kok river flowing along near by, with a local farmer setting up some irrigation in a field on the bank. On the road again, we off to tour another hilltribe village. Arm drops us off a ways away and we hike to the village. It's quite, but we hear birds and a local tribesman chanting. There are, at most, a dozen buildings. They're all on stilts and each is just one room. We learn later most families will have one room (ie a small building on stilts) for storage and cooking, one where the adults sleep, and one for the children.

We come upon an old smiling tribesman quickly wielding a large machete to fashion bamboo drinking cups. He sells them for 20 baht each (though I'd wager he'd haggle). He spits betel nut juice into a small cup, the liquid is dark black, as (we're sure) his teeth are. His wife hears our guide describing village life and invites us to tour their house. It's very sturdy, but dark. Cooking is done on a small fire on a large stone built into the floor. It's in the middle of the small room, so we surmise it's quite smokey when cooking. She proudly shows off a dozen squirming worms that she shakes out of a short piece of bamboo. Nat tells us they raise, fry and eat the worms. Our driver Arm later assures us they're really tasty and crunchy!

The floors and walls are teak, but with generous cracks between each. The wood is lacquered and very clean. We've taken off our shoes. The building is small but solid and sturdy. In another room, across the open hall, is the main living/sleeping room. There are thin mattresses tilted against the wall. Sleeping room by night, living room by day. There's a small CRT TV from the '70s in the corner. We can see the wires leading to the one outlet in the room. Back outside our host shows off the wares she hopes we'll buy. We decline but Nat gives her some money for her kindness.

We continue through the town and a man hurries up the hill after us to quickly open his 'store'. It's a small platform behind a cloth. The cloth pulled aside, we can see a few traditional hats, necklaces, and other jewelry. We visit a coffee shop/resort. The owner explains how he built the impressive 20 or so one-room accommodations himself.

We order a coffee and it's good. We had passed some coffee plants on the way in. Most likely our coffee was from one of those. The owner points out other fruits and vegetables growing around. He explains that there are fruits available year-round. After some confusion we understand there are a variety of fruits which become ripe throughout the year. Down the hill we can see his young, bored son, in local costume, swinging on a very tall traditional swing.

Our next stop is an Oolong tea plantation, the 101. As we get close we can see the endless rows of manicured tea bushes winding across the hillsides off into the distance. We stop and walk the rows, taking note of the small new growth that will be the next crop of tea. Inside the process is explained to us, in Thai, and translated by Nat. We try some Oolong 12, and 17, and Black, and some Oolong flower tea.

It's a complicated and precise process to brew it and to transfer it — in multiple steps — into the cup from which we will eventually be drinking. The drinking is much faster than the making. It's fine. We're obviously not connoisseurs and we have two more months of travel before we head home, so we don't buy any. We also do not rent the basket, jacket and headdress that the pickers wear. For 100 Baht (US\$3) we could do that and take pictures of ourselves (pretending to be) picking the tea.

A short ways down the road we dig into a delicious lunch of pork dumplings, Lao yellow noodles with chicken, and a fun dessert of shaved ice, flavoring, and bubble tea bubbles. After some more driving we're at the Golden Triangle. This is where the Mekong and Ruak rivers come together, both joining, and keeping separate, Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. We can see the other two countries just across the water.

In a slim, long-tailed boat, with one of those oversized car engines, we head out onto the swiftly flowing river. We debate whether we'd wash ashore in Myanmar or Laos if we were to capsize. On our short ride around we don't see any bodies but we do see examples of the poverty of Myanmar and the excesses of where Chinese Investment has created a pocket of great wealth in the otherwise not rich country. Apparently the Chinese like driving the short 200 miles down here to enjoy their condominiums and casinos.

After the boat ride we wander around the features of the shoreline. Being the Golden Triangle, it's a big draw for tourists, both foreign (as evidenced by us) but more so by the Thai. There are many Buddha and other statues. There are a couple of huge elephants you can walk under, which is supposed to bring good luck.

We do the requisite elephant limbo and soon we're back in our vehicle headed towards our hotel for the evening, The Legend of Chiang Rai. Nat offered to guide us around the night market in town, which is supposedly quite lively, but we opt instead to hang at the hotel. The place is huge, with buildings spread out over a huge piece of property. There are gardens and rivers everywhere. They're setting up for a big wedding tomorrow.

We do their happy hour and Italian dinner at their Lacasa (sic) restaurant. It's good and a price performer, being in Thailand. And eventually off to bed.

Photos



Breakfast at the hotel, the Me Kok river in the background.



Most of the hillside village we visited



A local woman and her one year old son



A man from the village making bamboo drinking cups



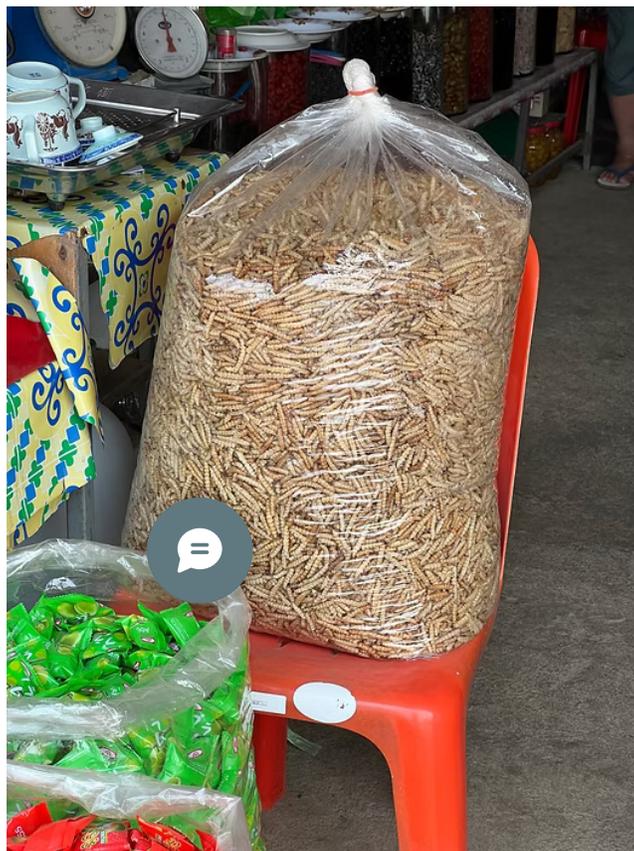
Bamboo worms they raise as part of their diet.



Their kitchen. Fairly rustic.

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A larger quantity of the same bamboo worms, but dried and from China



Walking in the Oolong tea fields



Preparing to sample some Oolong tea



Understanding the Golden Triangle



On our way to get closer to Myanmar and Laos than we'd planned



A casino in Myanmar, one of the few buildings in that country we could see



A fairly impressive new Chinese funded
condominium in Laos. One of many many

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