

A Day in the Village

It is six o'clock in the morning and the roosters have already been marking their territories for an hour, with their Indochinese and short versions of the 'farang' cook a doodle doos. They don't wake me up any more as they did before when I came here. They were driving me mad then, as did the village dogs barking at anything, anytime, but most of all at nighttime ☺

My 'mother', Noy, is preparing breakfast already and her children help to clean up before they will go to school. I can already hear them downstairs and feel a pain of guilt for not being there too to help. By now I am used to the local breakfast and even look forward to it, the Khao Niaaw, sticky rice and grilled 'khai', chicken, maybe mixed with some fruits of the season, ramboutang, mangout maybe some 'taeng moo', watermelon too. Though, of course, sometimes I miss my corn flakes and scrambled eggs but then in the nearby town there is a 7/eleven where I can get my yogurt and cereals, some comfort! Though the local omelet is not such a bad substitute to the scrambled eggs.

The bathroom is free, so time to say hello to the local gecko family, and, unfortunately, the mosquitoes, 'yoong' too (geckos are the local lizards who bring good luck and have the bathroom, 'hong nam' (water room) as their mosquito hunting grounds. So with my locally purchased repellent that does help and the geckos I am quite OK, even though it took me a day or two to appreciate the geckos!

Some of the school children already wait in the entrance, eagerly waiting to accompany me to school. 'Hello, hello, how are you!' they say in a chorus as they see me squatting on the kitchen floor for breakfast together with the son and daughter of the house, Tek and Jaeb. Yes, the kids have learnt their first lessons well and now they greet every farang with a hello, how are you, and, of course, their gracious and traditional 'wai', hands raised together in front of their face. Tek is by the way a real little gentleman, always ready to help me out with the local nuisances like the big beetles I would pay dearly not to share my bed with but for which he has got such an appetite ☺

Once we are all are finished having breakfasted, it is off to school, a nice ten-minute walk in the still fresh morning air. Last night there was the typical monsoon thunder and rain with some awesome lightning's crossing the sky. The rain was falling heavily, and quickly filled the gigantic jars, kept outside of the house, with fresh unpolluted water.

'Yen mai?' (Are you cold) my little gentleman companion asks me as he holds my hand on our way to school. I laugh, 'no, ever since I arrived in Thailand I certainly haven't been cold' I say to myself and to him too. I know that by lunchtime the temperature will have risen to the normal 30s C (90s F).



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Passing one of the houses down the village road, Joerg, a German guy and fellow volunteer, web designer by profession joins us. He says he has some computer training ideas he would like to present to the teachers at our planned morning session before classes. "Sounds good" I tell him "as long as our friends turn up. In a country where 'bang tee', maybe, is a key word, you can never be too sure! 'Mai pen rai' smiles Joerg, 'this is Isan (the Northeast of Thailand) OK, so then we discuss it later or try it out anyway'. Then Joerg tells me about his adventures with some of the men from the village last night. They were supposed to go frog hunting and fishing, setting out with torches beaming from their foreheads and armed with their home made bows, arrows and baskets in which to place their catch. 'My host showed me how to make a gun the other day' says Joerg, 'it really looks like it is Davy Crockett century but it works!' 'Did you catch any frogs' I ask him. 'Sure, some', Joerg answers 'but I think that was really not so important because after a while we came to one of the small 'salas' (huts) in the rice fields and then they had some Lao whiskey and sat down drinking, gossiping and joking. They just wanted to get away from their ladies for a while...'

By now we have arrived at school and two teachers greet us with their smiling 'Sawas Dee khap' khun Jennifer and khun Joerg?' They go on to tell us, in their Thai English (using Thai and very logical grammar when speaking English) that 'sorry but must to go to Nonghan town, sorry but you have English class. Children like you play game and sing song.' Not very surprised we realize that we, Joerg and Christine from France who has also joined us by now, probably should talk to Samnyang, the energetic headmaster, again, about the benefits of preparing and having classes together with Thai teachers. 'They could also learn some English grammar' I reflect upon their language, though by now I have also adopted some of the simplified English as practised by Thais. 'Well, bonne chance, Auee is here now' says Christine. Auee is our friend and Thai trainee who acts as a perfect language and culture interpreter apart from being a born teacher too. 'Good thing, we prepared some lessons together with Auee back in Nongkhai at the OPM House' says Joerg the ever patient and 'mai pen rai' German, not at all as orderly and strict on discipline as people have told me that Germans are!

The sun is shining and the clouds have disappeared. The heat is on by lunchtime. Classes went well, though the 'good morning teacher', the first greeting when we come to class, all kids standing up, still feels a bit strange. But it is nice in its own way!

'Even the most naughty, cheeky and restless boys enjoyed and participated in our games. So we did OK', I think, being responsible for the English lessons. I can relax now as Joerg will take charge in the afternoon when we have computer classes.

As we walk back on the muddy road after the afternoon classes, some boys and girls want us to come and say hello to their parents. 'Mai krai', they say, not far, they smile and beg, so we agree, though by now we are totally exhausted. We have sweated through a hot afternoon with lots of demos of PowerPoint, some English spelling games and also a little PhotoShop. Some kids borrowed Christine's

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sophisticated digital camera and will try to make something nice with the help of PhotoShop and volunteers. I am happy Joerg demonstrated PhotoShop, some other programs and games to me already at the OPM House in Nongkhai so by now I feel more confident when I am alone with the kids. And it was really good to have Auee tell us about the village, school and teaching before going to the village too.

It turns out that maybe the children's 'mai krai' did not mean not far but rather not near ('krai' can mean far or near in Thai depending on the tone!) since by now we have been walking for 20 minutes!

Some three hours later, it is dark, and we can already hear thunder in the distance, as we start back towards our host houses, afraid that we have missed dinner. 'I will remember that when somebody, old or young takes me somewhere, it will always take at least twice as long as they say and I believe', I think for myself, slightly annoyed for having such a difficulty saying no. But these people have a way of making you do as they want! Their smile and the look in their faces.... So we ended up eating something at every house and we are by now quite 'im', full. 'Im laeo' is an important expression to know, full already, or else one will end up eating all the time! Thank heaven food is 'lite, low on calories in this country'!

On my return to the house, my host mother smiles welcome and soon dinner is served. The kids have already eaten and as usual the mother does not eat with me. Now I know why but before I would be polite and wait in vain for her to join before I started eating. The sticky rice is fresh, nice and hot, not like when it is hard and cold, and not so nice in the morning. The minced and fried meat and the vegetables are all typical of Isan too, spicier and less curried than the normal Thai food. I have learnt to avoid the very hot chili in the Lao 'samtam', papaya salad, not to have my dinner spoiled. And yet I am already addicted to the 'samtam'! Like all other volunteers before me.

After dinner Auee, Joerg and Christine come to say hello and to discuss next day's classes and also how to arrange for a new teachers' meeting. After a while we change subject to the upcoming weekend. What to do? You all plan on going back to spend the weekend in Nongkhai with other volunteers? There are some lively pubs with local bands singing Isan, Thai and Western songs on request. 'Could be a fun contrast to life in the village' we agree or maybe to cross over the Mekong River into Laos and spend a day or two in Vientiane, the Lao capital? Later, next month, I have already planned a trip upcountry into Laos towards Luang Prabang, the ancient Lao capital, a world cultural heritage, and people have told me about the breathtakingly beautiful trip there along the river, waterfalls, mountains and caves. But then there is also the Phou Khao Khouai Mountains with wild elephants where some other volunteers went to make a website and Animal Planet made a program. Or the Phu Wua Mountains by the Mekong, in Thailand, another of OpenmindProjects eco projects and also with wild elephants. Would be very exciting too.

By now, it is ten o'clock and my mother is already sleeping in front of the television, tuned into one of the ubiquitous Thai soaps, featuring wealthy and constantly quarreling Bangkok Thais.

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Time for 'ab mam', shower, I say to the others as they leave. And not until now do I realize how exhausted I am, so that hour of planned reading before sleep is quickly reduced to ten minutes only, once in bed.

It has been a long day, a full day, another amazing day in the village!