

THAILAND BLOG

-Savannah Kuper

It seemed like we returned home too soon. As we glanced out our plane windows, America brilliantly shined back at us. It was though the cities below us were alive- bursting with tints of gold and white lights. And we were rapt by such a sight. For the week prior, stars were the only things that lit the midnight sky.

We arrived in Thailand on April 3rd. As we ambled off the plane we wiped our brows and tugged up our sleeves- it was approximately 98 degrees with humidity. But if that didn't steal our breaths, the scenery did. The scent of summer rain hung calmly in the air. Wildflowers embellished the sides of the road and accompanied the ivy as it climbed up the fatigued brick walls. A sapphire winged butterfly waltzed past us and through the bustling contenders of the market as we loaded into the bus. Already we were struck by Thailand's enchanting beauty. But as we drove off, little did we know there was so much more that defied the definition of beautiful.

We had to take a boat to reach our initial destination. Jet lagged and tired, we loaded our packs into our *reeua* and perpetually snapped pictures of our novel surroundings- such as citizens enjoying cooled tea on the docks and monkeys capering playfully on the rooftops. Before the boat sped off though, some of us climbed onto its hood and sat in the tire seats so that the wind could sigh on our faces while we admired the distant mountains and brilliant blue water. The hum of the motor and the excitement inside of us kept us from dazing off. We reached our hotel-like bungalows by nightfall.

Over the next couple of days we woke to the sunrise along the beach. The mountains were still behind a light veil of lavender mist, while a subtle hue of blue met a stream of rose at their peaks. As the sun emerged, we walked along the shore and collected seashells, unique bottles, and dried sponges. The only thing that could lure us away was the inviting smell of breakfast.

We were all nervous about the food. Before we left for the trip, our parents and friends told us to expect not to eat much. But their persistent warnings were not needed. The food was amazing. Every meal included white rice, steamed vegetables with sweet and sour sauce, and freshly sliced watermelon and pineapple. At breakfast we gorged ourselves also with one inch thick banana pancakes drizzled with cool honey, scrambled eggs or vegetable stuffed omelets,

sticky rice topped with sweetened fruit, and fluffy Thai donuts (funnel cake without the powdered sugar). At dinner and lunch we enjoyed not only the basics, but warm pumpkin, hot vegetable curry, steamed cabbage with egg, and other luscious dishes. Everything was incredible or as the Thai may say, “*di- mah!*”

For about two days we stayed with a host family. Although they spoke little English and all we knew how to say in Thai was “*sawatdee-kah/kop,*” (hello/ goodbye) we enjoyed our mornings and nights with them. From after breakfast to just before dinner, though, we were engaged in a variety of fun activities with our amazingly “chill” and amiable guides Tiff, Dave, Moo, Andy, and Tom. We rock climbed sixty feet off the ground, surpassed a total of fifteen to twenty miles of kayaking by the end of the trip, painted batiks, hiked through the depths of the jungle, cooked mouthwatering Thai dishes, helped make rubber, swam in the warm, refreshing water, kick boxed with professionals, and learned how to make rice, which is a laboring process of picking, grinding, and hammering. Every activity we participated in was magnificent and culturally eye opening. Unfortunately it all went by too fast, and on day three we said, “*sawadee-kah/kop*” to our host families and left for our next destination.

After a two hour bus ride and an hour of boating, we finally reached the floating bungalows. Constructed from bamboo, our individual huts floated on the bay. As we explored, we discovered that we all had back porches that overlooked the water and mountains. Although the sunset was behind us, at twilight the sky was a fragile pink and pale blue before night settled in. Many of us pulled our mattresses onto the porch, and we all fell asleep to the water’s lullaby beneath the stars.

The next day we saw elephants! Wild elephants! They were probably the most breathtaking things we had seen on the trip. After kayaking for an exhilarating hour, we were about to call it quits on our wildlife search. Suddenly Tom’s hand rose and we fell instantly silent. He waved us over around the bend and pointed to a collapsed ridge. There were three elephants- a mother, father, and baby. Mud and water shot from their trunks as they bathed themselves. The monkeys whistled above them and the king fisher’s laughed out our excitement. Then they spotted us. Quickly two of them hurried into the jungle- the sound of cracking and snapping bamboo erupted behind them. The biggest elephant eyed us suspiciously before he backed out of the water and raised his trunk cautiously. Someone suggested that he was “posing

for us” but the worry in Tom’s voice to “not move” suggested otherwise. Then the elephant disappeared- his gray hide fading into the jungle’s darkness.

Our last two adventures were probably the most exciting. The first one was our journey into a cave. As we trekked through the cold streams and hiked over the rocks, our footsteps and voices echoed off the walls. Then Andy told us all to turn off our head lamps and listen. The cadence of the water, buzz of the lazy bats, grumbles of the toads, scratching of the spiders, and distant hymn of the Boobos flowed into our ears as we stood in absolute darkness. For a split second we had all stopped breathing. However, the most suspenseful and challenging part was swimming through a narrow opening to get to the exit. Tom helped us slip down into the water. With our bags on one arm and our headlamps strapped tightly on, we waded to the rope and pulled ourselves between the looming walls. One by one we descended into the opening. Then we saw sunlight.

The final hike of the trip was the most rigorous, but worth it. After hiking through the jungle and carefully climbing over the eroded limestone, we reached the top. It overlooked everything- the floating, bungalows, the ridge, and the rest of the jungle. We could see as far as the mist let us. Then it was all white- a veil of endless beauty cast over the mountains.

Thailand was one of the most “amazing”, “exciting”, and “inspiring” trips we have ever been on. But not only did we experience a new culture and take part in unbelievable activities and adventures, we also all became friends. Throughout the entire trip we cheered each other on, supported one another, and never complained. It was trip that we will truly never forget. After our plane descended onto the Newark runway, we quickly retrieved our bags, which were stuffed with souvenirs, and scurried through security so that we could see our families again. As we all gave each other one last hug, though, we shouted, “*Sawadee-kah!*” before heading home. It was the best spring break any of us have ever had.