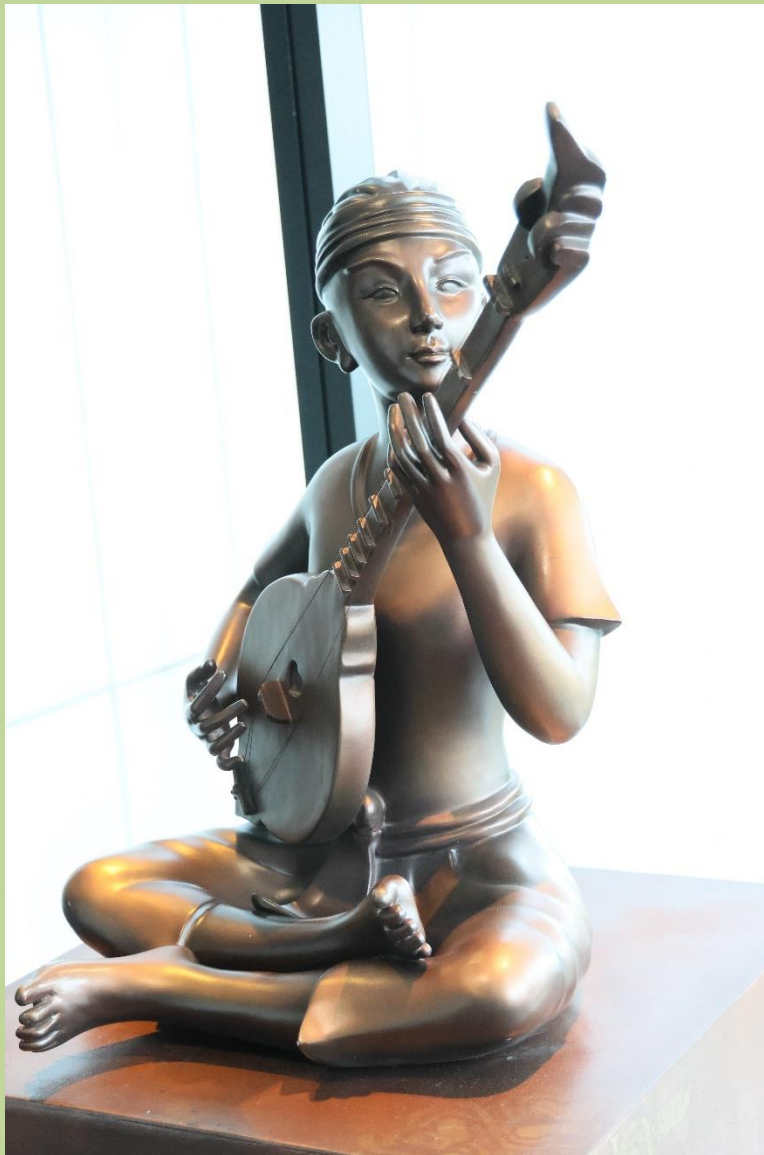


**Thailand Diary
October
2023**



Day 14 Friday October 6th 2023

Day in Bangkok! Well, more truthfully, a day at the hotel, washing clothes, packing and sorting out what to take to Chumphon. We have decided not to put a bag away in storage, just in case we need anything. The WhatsApp on my iPad has worked overtime today. Maureen has a great schedule prepared that has enough variety and leaves enough free time not to exhaust us and it really does look good.



We did wander over to the actual airport in the morning too. We found the walkway, walked those levels that are accessible to the public, had a mango smoothie and watched human behaviour as well as a sparrow feeding off the crumbs of travellers.

We dropped back to the lower level of the airport for a mid-afternoon lunch of Thai street food. Mine was deliciously spicy. Faye managed a bland dish and was not so excited.

I should mention that between the hotel and the airport there are two types of sleeping nooks you can hire. One is the Avagard Capsule Hotel. They look like small coffins but apparently are quite comfortable inside.



Day 15 Saturday October 7th 2023

As planned

Bangkok to Chumphon, departing from Don Mueang Airport (the other side of Bangkok) at 7.25. We meet Maureen Lua at the airport!

Fly to Chumphon on Thai AirAsia flight FD3148, arriving at 8.30am

Accommodation is at Morakot Hotel

And the plan is to “hang around town” and get to know the place.

As it transpired

We left our hotel at 4.30am, caught an Uber from our hotel across town to Dom Muang airport, paid 430THB, walked into terminal 2 and the first person we saw was Maureen! Maureen showed us where to book our luggage through and we discovered that our cheap flight hid the fact that we had to pay for our luggage. That cost us 2300THB. I guess we’ll pay again on the way back.

Our flight, out of gate 54, was quite full but the A300 was comfortable enough for the hour flight. We left and arrived on time, got our luggage and bought a ticket to Chumphon on a shuttle bus run by the same car company that will drive us around for the next four days.

The trip from the airport to the hotel took us 45 minutes through coconut plantations and rubber plantations. It was a low-lying rural landscape.

The hotel is 7 storeys, and we are on 4, in room 408. It is spacious. We have air conditioning, a wide window out of which we can see Yellow-vented Bulbuls, and a Queen bed. It’s our home for the next five nights at a cost of 4300THB.



After we unpacked, at 10.00am, we headed onto the streets, found a local breakfast eatery, had a pleasant meal and then walked around to the office of the shuttle company, confirmed details for the next few days and also paid for our return pickup to the airport on Thursday.





That done, we had a look around town, including the markets, until I became decidedly dizzy and needed fluid. It was hot and very humid: so hot, in fact, that just after we

entered a Chinese temple, where I burnt incense, the Heavens opened, and a storm bucketed down for some time.

After it eased off, we returned to our hotel for an afternoon nap. Well, a nap interrupted by attempting to identify the swifts flying outside our room in front of a storm. We ducked out for more street food for our dinner. It was a lovely place where we dined under cover but out on the “covered garden edge”. It was a family business, and the food was simple Thai village fare.

When we came home, Maureen helped me through paying for our baggage via the webpage at a much cheaper rate than what we paid today, noting that there will be a foreign transaction fee.

And we chatted long into the night.



Day 16 Sunday October 8th, 2023

What we planned

Birding at Radar Hill, 25km north of Chumphon. After lunch, we head 30 further north to Ban Sa Phan, a beach area. After all that, and if we have time, we stop on the way back, at Pencil Hill for the raptors.

As it Transpired

We got away late and the drive to Radar Hill was much further that stated by Maureen but eventually we arrived, walked to the top and waited. Not one of the promised accipiters made their presence but there were lots of butterflies. Later, several Common Tailorbirds made an appearance. Faye dug in. Rewarded! The first of the raptors, high, high, and often above the clouds. When we could spy through the gaps in the cloud, we counted upwards of 20 plus Oriental Honey-Buzzards.



Honour restored. It was time for lunch, especially as the dark clouds were bringing rain. We had only just got back inside when the rain hit.



Lunch was at a highway pull in place where we had prawn rendang (Faye had chicken) before we drove to the viewpoint behind our lunch spot. It's called Khao Pho and it is clearly being developed as an alternative to Radar Hill. We saw more Honey-Buzzards and one Changeable Hawk-Eagle.



After that, we dropped in to see a variety of beach sites, facing the Gulf of Thailand. At the first we saw a pair of dark morph Pacific Reef Egrets.



We also saw some lovely red cliffs, red sand and fascinating coastal scenery.



At one place, the Great Dune, I got sidetracked trying to photograph a butterfly that looked a cross between a Blue Tiger and a Glasswing. I needed another lens.

We weaved back to the highway through palm oil, coconut and rubber plantations, stopped to buy some bananas and ended up home to duck across the road for a delightful local meal of fish, vegetables and rice. We could watch the girls working at the kitchen while we waited and/or ate and their efficiency left me exhausted. They were tops.





Kim helps us get bananas



Day 17, Monday 9th October 2023

What We Planned

An early start, at 8.30am, for Pencil Hill! That's the big target. It's where Khao Dinsor, the Raptor Centre, can be found.

OK, with Maureen, there is also another agenda. We adjourn for lunch at Tong Ha Luan Beach and some "sightseeing".

As it Transpired

We did get away at 8.30am and we went direct to Khao Dinsor. That raptor centre is quite new but up on Pencil Hill there are several platforms from which to watch the raptors. After a brief look at the centre, we all climbed to the first platform. Another birder, a local, was in occupation, but it soon transpired that he and Maureen had mutual contacts. The birding world is not so big!

He was useful, pointing out the subtle differences between Japanese and Chinese Sparrowhawks and Shikras. All three plus many Oriental Honey Buzzards were flying overhead and even below us at this stage. We were also seeing quite a few Blue-tailed Bee-eaters, hearing a Barbet and glimpsing a Flowerpecker.





When the thermals drove the raptors higher, we also climbed higher. My fitness has been definitely affected by the bout of COVID (plus heat and humidity) and I struggled. However, we saw some interesting vegetation, including two species of orchids.



Lunch was duly eaten. It was accompanied by a cute lizard and a black palm squirrel. Of course, we admired the beach before heading back up to the raptor centre to look for more birds. I focused on butterflies and bee-eaters.





We returned home to our hotel not long after 3.30pm for an afternoon nap. In my case, a cooling shower, clothes washing and some reading!

By 5.30pm we were out again, walking down to the railway station, weaving through the street stalls, going onto the station platform and watching the engine shunt into carriages and take them away.







We found a place to eat but Maureen's translator failed us badly, so we came back to a place near the hotel and ordered a simple, cheap meal. Mine was a simple fried rice and pork, enlivened by chilli and lime.

And we were entertained by a young girl who danced, Korean style, with no thought of anyone else, just for the delight of movement. She was so immersed in her own world; it brought us joy.

So, too, did another family sitting near us. Husband and wife and two girls, about one year apart. Daddy took care of the oldest girl and Mum looked after the youngster. Their interactions were so loving. The family looked so close. It warms the heart. The way the biggest girl, about 3 or 4, cuddled dad from behind, slipped around him and magically ended in his lap, to better reach her drink, was one of those parenting moments that are eternal.

Day 18; Tuesday October 10th, 2023

What We Planned

Day trip to Ranong. That's on the west coast, facing the Andaman Sea. It is the least populated of all Thailand's provinces. It's on the Kra peninsula, which is a mere 45km wide. It is also reputed to be the wettest place, has a lot of forest (53%) and mountainous.

As it Transpired

When we woke today it was sunny. It did not stay that way. Living up to the reputation of Ranong, we faced rain on several occasions and some was heavy. None was quite so heavy, however, as what hit us as we returned to Chumphon. The roads were awash, the drains flooded, and the movement of cars created waves that could have been ridden on a surfboard. Kim did well, driving under such conditions.



But it began dry and there are a number of things to note, starting with the roads. This was a main divided road, running from Bangkok, through Chumphon and on right down to Phuket. It is as yet not choked with traffic so rather than build flyovers, every so many km there is a right-hand lane that enables U turns. If the traffic becomes greater this engineering solution will cause chaos and accidents.

The SE arterial road took us along a more modern edge of Chumphon. Shops were built back, and side roads separated the main traffic from the through traffic. It then merged

into the rural hinterland and lots of commercial plant nurseries. This is linked to the increased clearance of native lowland forest for more and more monoculture.

I need to mention that in both directions, as on the northern side of Chumphon, we had to stop for border police checks. They looked inside our vehicle, presumably to check for illegal migrants, but I also noticed they checked inside a grocery van. I am assuming they were also checking for contraband goods.

As an aside, every so often Maureen shakes her phone vigorously. I was told it is linked to an app on her phone called “Shopee”. It’s a Singapore company that lets you “shake” your phone, get “free” money to buy goods, etc online and, as an incentive, even use points to pay bills. Watching Maureen in operation, makes me suspect it is a touch addictive.

Once we arrived in Ranong, we visited three sites for Namtok Ngao National Park. The first, a waterfall, had all its regular walks closed as a result of rain.





The second, a series of hot springs, was even sadder. The hot springs were there but the best of them were set aside for “private” use to paying customers at the chalets. At least we all had great views of an Orange-bellied Flowerpecker and a Brahminy Kite.



The highlight of the day, however, was a recently (2019) opened walk to and from the Ngao Waterfall. The falls drop 300 feet and can be seen at a distance, but the walk there showed us orchids, pitcher plants and numerous rainforest plants, even if we saw or heard no birds. It was so peaceful.







Lunch was a local specialty of fried “chicken rice” and I confess that I enjoyed it.



But I think the ultimate highlight today was to stand on the banks of the Kra Buri, look across the river and just over there, less than 100metres away, was Myanmar.



Myanmar on the other side



Meto Dema has told me a little about herself today. She is one of six siblings to her parents who are both alive and living in a village. She has two brothers and three more sisters. Her parents have certainly raised her to be a really special young lady. I responded with details about my wife and me.

Maureen decided to take us to a shopping mall for dinner. It was a clever idea. The food was more predictable for Faye too. We ate in a chain restaurant called MK. The young girl who took our order was so keen to do everything right, she double checked everything. She deserves to go a long way in life. But most importantly, to many tables, the food was delivered by a robot. Food was on plates, on shelves, and the robot was programmed to go to a specific table. The diner would open the shelf, remove the items and press a button, whereby “MyBOT” would return to the kitchen for the next order. If there was anything in the way, it would wait patiently until all clear.



Day 19, Wednesday October 11th 2023

What we decided to do!

We had not planned anything for today but we did get a vehicle. And, with Faye taking a day out to be alone, Maureen and I headed north. Maureen's pronunciation of Kapo came out as Khao Pho and when we had twigged about that all three, in our driver, Kim, had a good laugh. Well, what else could we do.

Once we backtracked to Kapo Waterfall we discovered a rather lovely stream running through lowland rainforest and a series of cascades that were quite attractive.









There were also some fascinating plants within and amongst the bamboo that kept the botanist satisfied.



But the birds, though audible, stayed hidden except for one plump, brown bird that flew from one side to the other and dropped immediately into the understory.

After that lovely walk, dripping with the humidity, we headed back around Chumphon to emerge at the coast at Khao Matsee Viewpoint. There was a sunbird and a flock of Blue-tailed Bee-eaters, at least two species of swift and several other bush birds that did not stay to be identified. But there was also a coffee lounge, Thamsing Café, that received our patronage.







We then dropped down to Pharadonphap Beach for lunch right on the waterfront and while we had our meal, Maureen and I enjoyed a Whimbrel, a Pacific Reef Egret and four White-vented Mynas.

Our final stop was at the Krom Luang Chumphon, the shrine to Admiral Chumphon, the founder of the Thai Navy. Apart from the firecrackers, the shrine of naval memorabilia also included a temple to the Admiral and to Buddha to which locals “prayed”, gave thanks, sought blessing.





And so, we returned. The holiday is rushing to a close now. And the highlight of the day must be seeing a ute laden with coconuts. There were two humans in the cab. In the back, along with the coconuts, were two Macaque monkeys. They are workers, the ones who

climb up and get the coconuts. I do hope the monkeys belong to the Monkeys Workers Union (MWU) and receive adequate payment for their labours.

Reflections

Hi all

We are waking up to another hot, humid day in southern Thailand, that skinny bit known as the Kra isthmus that links Thailand to Malaysia.

We managed to get ourselves across Bangkok from one airport to the other at an unearthly hour, find Maureen, book in, discover that the cheap airfares were because it was a budget airline and we had to pay for luggage (still cheap), got ourselves (now a party of three) to Chumphon and settled into our rooms (adjoining) and plunge out into the streets of this town.

Well, it is most definitely hot and humid. Thankfully I managed to prise Maureen and Faye from the markets to visit a lovely old Chinese Buddhist temple and as I wandered around, burning incense, the heavens opened. The large undercover area for Association activities became our refuge as the storm dumped rain down in a torrential, tropical downpour. Faye and Maureen claimed I had asked for rain!

We are finding the nicest local family stalls to eat at. Nice, cheap and wholesome.

For the four full days after the initial reconnoitre we have hired a vehicle and a driver to take us to various places. Yesterday we were out from 10 to 5, visiting Radar Hill and Khao Pho (known lookout points from which to watch and count raptors flying overhead). Not so successful. The clouds meant many were above them and out of sight but we did get upwards of 20-30 Oriental Honey Buzzards and one Changeable Hawk-Eagle. Plus, a handful of bush birds but the middle of the day is bad for birding in the tropics. It's siesta time.

The afternoon cruise along the Gulf of Thailand, through palm oil, coconut and rubber plantations, was green but too much lowland rainforest has gone. While there are small remnants, it is as sorry a state of affairs as is so much of Australia.

But the beaches along that strip were attractive and reminded me a little of some of the landscape in Halong Bay.

We are heading out again today: an earlier start and an earlier finish. More birds. Definitely lots of butterflies. And, without a doubt, lots of food.

Unless something out of the ordinary comes up, assume we are on the flight back to Bangkok on Thursday and on the flight to Sydney on Saturday.





Day 20, Thursday October 12th 2023

We returned to Bangkok on Thai AirAsia, leaving Chumphon at 9.00am and arriving at Don Mueang International Airport, Terminal 2, at 10.00. And that's where we left Maureen, who heads home again! We were up and out of our room a little after 6.00am, having rearranged our suitcases to get the two under 25kg (and a much cheaper payment. Downstairs breakfast was ready for us, a quick one, because we were picked up just after 6.40 to be taken to the airport.

A note here must be in order about our car hire (Fame). It was effective and efficient and reliable every day and our driver, Kim, was exceedingly pleasant. Fame also operates the shuttle to the airport, and it was equally reliable.

We arrived at Chumphon airport and as we drove in, we saw nearly a dozen Red-wattled Lapwings. That was a nice parting gift.

Inside, luggage sent on, seats allocated, wait. The plane landed on time, took off on time, arrived on time and very soon afterwards we had our luggage off the conveyor belt.

Maureen, Faye and I then walked through from Terminal 2 to Terminal 1. That was where Maureen would be leaving for KL later today. it was also where we had to go to get the free shuttle bus across town to the other airport and our hotel. It pulled in as we got there. A quick show of passports, of air tickets, a hurried hug with Maureen, and we were on our way.

By midday we were in our hotel room (2410), overlooking the pool and by 12.30 we were having a rather large buffet lunch in lieu of breakfast. It's better value for money.

An afternoon nap followed. Quiet time. Then a quick check of level 2 (pool, bar, gym, massage and sauna) before going over to the airport to find takeaway food. Instant noodles for me, a ham and cheese paste sandwich for Faye, a shared milk and my own little luxury, a can of Singha lager. Oh, Faye had a chocolate cake thingy. We also bought two yoghurts and two bananas for breakfast. All up, 282THB.

Day 21, Friday, October 13th 2023

We braved the rail trip from the airport to Makassan, the changeover to the Blue Line, MRT from Phetchaburi (Stop 21) to Si Lin (Stop 26) and emerged in Lumpini Park.



That was inspired! It is the first public park in Bangkok. Its central feature is a large lake, but it is also an exercise space (jogging, cycling, weights, etc). It also has some beautiful large trees, shrubs, lawns, orchids and lots of benches on which to sit, to soak it in and to listen to birds.







Asian Pied Starling



Yes, it was one of the better places to see birds of all the places we have been to. Both male and female Koel, quite a few Little Egret, a flock of Black-headed Ibis overhead, Common Tailorbirds, Scaly-breasted Munias feeding on grass seed, Oriental Magpie Robins, Zebra Doves and Spotted Doves, White-vented Myna, Common Myna, Asian Pied Starling and even a Little Heron.

It was also very hot and humid and quite often I felt dizzy and needed to sit. I might have low blood pressure, possibly short of water, definitely weary. Kit was not helped by a very sharp insect bite on the back of my right leg close to my buttocks. I have quite a swollen rash from that indignation.

One curious feature in the park was the number of Water Monitors. Some were exceedingly large. *Varanus salvator* is quite common across much of Asia, one of the largest of the monitors and looks quite capable of cleaning up the carrion.

We did then go on to Sanam Chai, looked at the flower market (really just a fruit and vegetable market) and went down to the Pier where boat rides on the Chao Phraya and various klongs could be purchased. They did not impress. We caught the MRT and the airport train back. They were jam-packed with humanity. And, let me note, Thai people are no longer small. They, too, have an obesity problem.



Day 22, Saturday October 14th 2023

On the day of the referendum for the Voice, we leave Thailand on Thai Airways (TG475) at 8.30am, arriving in Sydney at 21.30pm. It's a Boeing 777-300ER and we are in business class! Or we should have! Our flight was rescheduled, and our notification was sent at 12.35am. Now not many people stay awake to receive such a notice when due to be at the airport three hours before departure. Needless to say, we only found out when I opened emails, already inside the lounge. Our boarding time was now 8.40am. A good 70 minutes after we should have been in the air.

In addition, Thai Airways could not get Faye and I together. She is allocated a middle seat in row 16. I have a B seat in 12. And to add to my annoyance with Thai Airlines, signage to their lounge was appalling. The day has not started well.

I do note that I have a cold sore and feel terrible and Faye is overtired and irritable! Let the journey begin.

Our seat allocation issue was not touched by staff at the gate but once on board we humans fixed it instantly. I moved from the window seat, 16B to the middle, row 12G, next to Faye. Both parties were happy and I settled back with a glass of champagne, feeling just a little better.

Meals ordered were: -

1. Breakfast

Seasonal fruit and yoghurt

Thai-style Smoked Fish Ochazuke (with Thai Jasmine rice, fresh assorted vegetables and Ibsen Egg with chicken hot broth)

Croissant, soft roll or apricot Danish

2. Second Serving

Amuse Bouche

Tuna with mango salsa on cucumber slice

Minced chicken and prawn with mixed UTS on pineapple (Major)

Starters

Thai-style Eggplant Salad

Green Hokkaido Scallop with Red Capsicum Sauce

The Main

Chicken thigh in red curry, served with Betel Leaves

Served with Thai Jasmine rice, sautéed Oriental vegetables and Thai omelette

Garlic bread, assorted cheeses and fruits with crackers

And a mango sticky rice tart or steamed flour with coconut filling.

We were in the air by 9.35am. Soon after, we were fed. And by then I had tuned in to listen to jazz music, beginning with an album by Nina Amy's and the UMO Helsinki Jazz Orchestra entitled "Searching my Soul". The album was released in April 2023.

And given that album, it was obvious that the next album should be "Jazz Under the Midnight Sun" by the Lars Lystedt Sextet.

We flew into Sydney at 9.53, got out of the airport as quickly as we could, got a taxi home and were inside, unpacking, by 11.00pm. Exhausted!



Bird List; Thailand

1. Little Cormorant
2. Grey Heron
3. Cattle Egret
4. Pacific Reef Egret
5. Great Egret
6. Little Egret
7. Little Heron
8. Black-headed Ibis
9. White-bellied Sea Eagle
10. Oriental Honey Buzzard. (Crested Honey Buzzard)
11. Changeable Hawk-Eagle
12. Japanese Sparrowhawk
13. Chinese Sparrowhawk
14. Shikra
15. Brahminy Kite
16. Red-Wattled Lapwing
17. Rock Pigeon
18. Spotted Dove
19. Common Koel
20. Zebra Dove
21. Banded Kingfisher
22. Gold-whiskered Barbet
23. Himalayan Swiftlet
24. Asian Palm Swift
25. Barn Swallow
26. Yellow-vented Bulbul
27. Black Drongo
28. Greater Raquet-tailed Drongo
29. Large-billed Crow
30. Blue-tailed Bee-Eater
31. Common Tailorbird
32. Oriental Magpie Robin
33. Philippine Glossy Starling
34. Asian Pied Starling
35. Common Myna
36. White-vented Myna
37. Orange-bellied Flowerpecker
38. Eurasian Tree Sparrow
39. House Sparrow
40. Scaly-breasted Munia

In addition, there was an unidentified Sunbird.