

GEM TOUR TO THAILAND, NOVEMBER 2005

Ten club members and one from Redcliffe club made up the group who went to Thailand. These were Wendy and Ben Hope, Maureen and John Benfer, Cheryl Newing, Peter Moller, Lindsay Elliott, Angel Jiang and Val Grant, with Glenys and Ross Chapman as tour leaders.

We stayed in a small hotel in Silom Road which is the gem trade district of Bangkok. Our first foray was to buy gemmological equipment such as loupes, spectrosopes and polariscopes, which meant daily gemmology lessons, usually over breakfast, for the rest of the trip. Lessons learned were practiced in the markets and shops on our travels. There were a few traders who were taken aback when faced with a row of spectroscopewielding people inspecting their wares very closely! Much of what is offered in the markets and streets is synthetic or glass, so buyer has to beware! But there were bargains to be had, and with three qualified gemmologists in the group, all were happy with their purchases, whether it was rough material, cut gemstones or jewellery.

Early arrivals enjoyed sightseeing, and a day trip to Chantaburi which is one of the main gem markets in Thailand. On Fridays and Saturdays, the town is transformed into a sea of desks, with buyers and sellers taking up their positions, both in the main building and in the streets and small shops around. Once word got out that our group was interested in buying, the crowd became quite overwhelming, with people surrounding Ross and the group four deep at times, all trying to push parcels of stone for them to look at. Angel still regrets not buying the 16 carat rubellite tourmaline which she was shown! One dealer followed Cheryl for four blocks with a parcel of mixed briolettes which we'd showed some interest in, but would not drop the price enough.



The Tour Group Lake Phayao

With all the group assembled, we set off on Sunday morning for Chatachuk market in Bangkok, 35 acres of stalls selling everything and anything, where we did mainly the gem, jewellery and bead sections. In two minibuses, with our guides and Thai friends Sakchai and Chort, we then travelled north to Phitsanalok for an overnight stay. After dinner on a floating

restaurant, some members of the group went for trishaw rides and found themselves briefly abandoned at a noodle bar! Communication is not always easy in Thailand!

On Monday, we continued on up into the hills to 6,000 acre Lake Phayao, and visited Wat Analayo temple high on the ridge above, and the modern White Temple. We arrived at our base for the next five days, The Chiangrai Hill Resort owned by Sakchai and Wiladda, and were made very welcome. The guest house is on a farm out in the country near Chiangrai, a beautiful peaceful place, with our dining area a short stroll through the lychee orchards. We could not ignore the loudspeakers calling workers at 6 am each morning, but the magical sight of mist over the mountains and lagoons was worth rising early for. That evening, we had Thai cooking lessons, with Wendy, Cheryl and Val cooking up delicious soup and noodles (and we all saw the cook sneaking more chilli in behind Cheryl's back!) Afterwards we were entertained by local school children playing traditional music and performing hilltribe dances in their beautiful costumes.



Our Digs at Changrai Hill Resort

On Tuesday, we visited the Wieng Kalong temple with its white crow statue, then went across to the pottery where Angel tried her hand on the wheel. We took part in a traditional Thai tea ceremony, tasting the local Oolong teas for which the area is noted. Ross and Maureen decided to join a group of rice harvesters working in the paddies nearby, a rather muddy task, with pay rate of \$3 per day. After lunch, the group enjoyed a Thai massage, then checked out the local village market. In the evening, we were entertained by local Mong dancers, and released our first candle hot air balloons. We also helped John and Maureen celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary.



Thai Cooking Lessons

Next day we set off for the Queen Mother's Palace and the beautiful gardens surrounding it, and on up to Mae Sai on the Burmese Border. Here we checked out the gem markets, and made a few purchases. We all crossed into Burma, just to say we'd been there, with some interesting experiences with touts and traders (ask Ben about his rechargeable batteries!). We returned to Chiangrai where we dined and shopped at the night markets, and Lindsay daringly ate a fried silkworm.

Early next morning some of the group ventured down to the local village market near the resort, for hot soymilk and Thai donuts. Later we were guests of the local primary school and kindergarten where we gave donations for repairing their library roof, and toys for the children. A little goes a long way in this country, and was much appreciated. Back into the buses and we headed for the nearby Karen village, where we all climbed onto elephants for a ride through the village. Glenys and Lindsay suffered some "elephant-sickness"!



We then drove up to the Golden Triangle, where Burma, Thailand and Laos meet at the

Mekong River, and the Golden Buddha is quite a sight to see. We visited the new Hall of Opium, a very interesting and thought-provoking experience for all. Back to the resort for dinner, and cooking lessons where Ross and Ben whipped up a tasty Thai salad. After dinner, we all joined the children with the music and dancing, Maureen and Cheryl accompanied by Peter on guitar.

On Friday, we visited local sights and hilltribe villages. At the end of a rutted dirt road, one village had an NGO project running, where there was a hut full of people at computers building websites for companies throughout the world. Saturday we said our farewells to Wiladda and the staff who had looked after us so well during our stay, and headed for Chiangmai, where we visited an umbrella making factory, a silver factory and a silk warehouse. We visited Wat Phrathat at Doi Suthep, a beautiful temple complex which gives a spectacular view over Chiangrai. We had an overnight stay here and visited the night markets for dinner and more shopping.

Next day, we headed for Mae Sot on the western Thai border with Burma. We spent the afternoon at the markets at the Friendship Bridge, some bargains in gemstones there, but our gem instruments were put to good use! Next morning, we visited the town market and found the jade market just opening. On to Kanchanaburi, arriving in the evening, and we walked across the bridge. Our guide Toto found us the perfect place where we could have dinner and watch the spectacular Sound and Light show around the bridge to commemorate 60 years of peace.

Next morning, after a delay due to a message not being passed on (again, a communication problem!), we finally gained entrance to the Blue Sapphire Mine at Bo Ploi, north of Kanchanaburi. The area has been extensively mined under cane farms, quite a large operation, where we were shown over the separation plant, then the sorting area, and finally the area where parcels were being sorted ready for auction. The sapphires are superb colour and valuable, and a small parcel of ten fine blue stones were worth 1 million baht (\$30,000). We then visited the JEATH museum and war cemetery in Kanchanaburi, before returning to our hotel in Bangkok that evening.



During our last three days, we visited our favourite pearl wholesale shop where a good strand of pearls could be purchased and strung for less than \$10. We also went to tool and lapidary supply shops, as well as a jewellery factory and local gem dealers. One brought his stock for us to look at in the hotel dining room which we regularly commandeered as our own meeting place, as we took to heart the motto of the hotel “Make a house a home”! (We saw many a strange sign in English on our trip, and are still wondering about “Heaven 4 th Floor”!).

On Friday, Ross and Ben presented a lecture on Australian opal to a group of students at the Asian Institute of Gemmology. We enjoyed more sightseeing, Peter and Lindsay in a tuktuk and others in a longtail boat on the river, and for our final evening were joined by all our Thai guides and friends for a farewell dinner.

The shopping in Thailand is one of the most rewarding experiences, and many a “feeding frenzy” was frequently seen in markets, particularly where bead supplies were on sale. Cheryl operated a bead jewellery factory from the back seat of the bus, so all could be adorned. With all the jewellery, clothing and accessories purchased, every day was “dress-up” day, but Val outdid us all with her colour co-ordination! A stall outside our hotel carried good quality cotton shirts that could be purchased for about \$5 – Shirt Man must have sold more than 50 shirts to the group, as it was easier than washing! Lindsay held the record for 16!

The delight of Thai food was also a great experience, with different regional cuisines to taste and enjoy, both with and without chilli! . The group patronized many of the local food stalls where a good meal could be had for \$1. We won't mention the devious plot hatched to swipe the banana supply on the other bus, but we think Wendy may know something about it!



One of the many Feasts