



## Jim Drummond Reports from Southeast Asia

*Jim Drummond is a regular attender at Crossroads Friends Worship Group, and lives in Flint, Michigan. He is traveling in Southeast Asia during Second Month 2006, and is sending back reports by thee-mail as way opens. (He is a retired college dean, and the necktie has pictures of the actor James Dean. James Dean. . . James the Dean. . .?)*

### Bangkok

I am now in downtown Bangkok, and although there have been a couple of problems, on the whole the trip is going magnificently. I really, really impressed with how Elderhostel handles everything. My luggage was lost by NWA somewhere between Detroit and the connection to Cathay Pacific in Los Angeles. I also forgot to bring the last item I purchased, the electric receptacle adaptors -- dumb! The flights were pleasant, and the difference between service on NWA and CP is just enormous.

But, let me tell you a little bit about we have been doing and some of my impressions thus far. Thailand is by far the most prosperous country in SE Asia. Its annual per capita income is around \$2,500 US. That, of course, is tiny compared to the annual income in the USA, but it is twice as much as China or Viet Nam, and it is ten times that of Laos and Cambodia. It is almost twenty times that of Myanmar (Burma). The Thai elected government is fairly corrupt, which makes it by far the most honest regime in SE Asia. Once I leave Thailand, I will not see such an advanced economy or political situation.

In Thailand, especially in Bangkok, there is great dissatisfaction with the elected government, and there was a demonstration of about 100,000 people last Sunday, and another demonstration is planned for this Sunday. I leave Saturday, so won't impact us. Thailand is, however, the only country in the region where a demonstration would be permitted. Trying to do so in other countries would be fatal. Thailand has multiple political parties, but one has achieved a majority, and this is the first time that has ever happened. With their majority, they have become pretty crooked. But legitimate elections do take place, and there is talk of impeaching the PM.

On the other hand, Thailand is a constitutional monarchy. King Rama IX has been on the throne for 60 years, the longest in Thai history. He has no real authority at all, but he is profoundly influential because he is loved by everyone. All the folks here freely criticize the elected parliament. No one, and I mean no one, criticizes the King and Queen. They are simply revered.

Bangkok is an enormous city of about 8,000,000, and traffic gridlock here at non-rush hour times is horrific. At rush hour, there is no traffic as the roads become parking lots. Getting to the hotel by bus yesterday took about 20 minutes -- and we were a few hundred yards away.

Thus far, I have visited the Jim Thompson museum and home. Jim was not there -- or anywhere else for that matter. We have been to the royal palaces, to the Temple of the Reclining Buddha (around 150 long and 60 feet high), the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, the Na-

tional Museum and various other places. I am beginning to adjust to taking my shoes off when I enter a shrine.

Our culinary experience has involved Thai and western food. We ate at a very fancy restaurant the first evening and saw some Thai dancing. We had lunch yesterday at a riverside restaurant that was elegant and very pleasant. Last night we had dinner aboard a boat that took us quite a way on the river at night.

Breakfasts thus far have been at the hotel, and I choose to eat the western breakfasts. All of our meals so far have been buffets (usually wonderful) that allow me to eat stuff that won't ruin my guts. Thai food tends to be very hot, so I must be careful.

We have had an orientation meeting and two lectures. The third is coming this afternoon. The lecturers have both been scholars and excellent presenters. The one who discussed Theravada Buddhism this morning then accompanied us to the museum and explained a great deal. Ninety-five percent of the Thai population is Buddhist, but the people are absolutely tolerant of others and do no missionary work, other than to do good things for people. The population, ethnically, is very diverse. It has been said that the "native Thai peoples" represent at least 60 different ethnic groups. There is also a significant Chinese population.

Education is quite effective here in terms of literacy. Thailand was more literate than Europe when the two regions first made contact, or more accurately, when the Europeans showed up here and began trying to take over. It was alarming to the intruders to find that the local people were ignorant and illiterate.

I have already written more than I intended, but I am not sure I can get to the Internet in Laos or Cambodia as they are profoundly less developed and there is much greater control over communications into the countries and out of the countries.

Thus far, I have found the Thai people very pleasant and friendly. Bangkok does not have huge slums, but it has many, many pockets of awful poverty amidst the building of skyscrapers and industry. Tonight we go to dinner at a restaurant named Cabbages and Condoms. It originated here and has several branches now in other parts of Thailand. It is a non-profit outfit that runs restaurants in order to make money to support family planning and anti-AIDS efforts. The US, the World Bank, etc. will not say or do anything regarding family planning or contraceptive possibilities.

I am having a great time thus far, and I hope, even though you must be very tired of my ramblings, that I can shoot you another email or two before I leave Asia.