



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. . .?)

Laos

I have just had the hideous experience of writing an email and then, just before sending it, having it disappear because I hit a wrong key, I guess.

I am in Luang Prabang, Laos, and the keyboard and systems are not familiar to me, along with an Internet connection that is about 28 K. It is slow going, and thus the serious disappointment when my message disappeared.

Any way, I will try to recap some of what I had written. Laos is the next door neighbor of Thailand, but it is hugely, hugely different. Bangkok was huge and buzzing like Hong Kong, full of traffic and very busy people working like crazy. The Lao PDR is very different, first of all, the Lao PDR, were told, stands for "Lao, Please don't rush." The pace is much slower than in Thailand. I am now in Luang Prabang, the ancient capital of the country, but the capital was moved to Vientienne in the 16th Century. LP is about 25,000 people. Many of the streets are not paved, and there are no buildings of more than three stories. There are, though, 32 significant Buddhist temples, and tomorrow, before dawn, we will arise to go see the giving of alms to the monks, although we are forbidden to participate. The monks do not beg, and that is strongly emphasized. They simple gather on the streets, and people bring them food.

Before alms begin, the monks have arisen at 4:00

AM, eaten a very small breakfast and then chanted for an hour, prayed for an hour, and then leave to receive alms. At noon they will eat again for the last time that day. They are largely prevented from eating very much, and certainly from eating very nutritious food. They cannot eat brown rice, for instance, only white rice. Lao Buddhism is very similar to the Buddhism of Thailand and Cambodia.

Today we went to a village that has no access except by the Mekong. There are no roads, no electricity, no gas, and nothing we would think of as modern and even essential. We visited a school there, and Elderhostel donated some books and paper. I left unsure as to whether I had just witnessed terrible poverty or, and I am not joking, perhaps paradise.

I have nothing but praise for Elderhostel. They are conducting a wonderful education for us, and the staff is very kind, knowledgeable, and helpful.

I must close now, but I will add that one aspect of the trip which has been particularly interesting and exciting is the food. We ate Thai food, and I think I cauterized my mouth. We are now eating only Lao food, which is much milder, but it gives us further insight into the people and how they live.

Blessings on everyone at home!