

Trek Leader – Thailand 2014

Preliminaries.

I have my flights, travel insurance, transfers and hotels sorted. My plans are to lead the tour and discuss the historical aspects of the Thai Burma Railway (TBR).

As mentioned I didn't keep a blog last year for my last trek and that group tour.

But that will change this year.

I have completed some preliminary work this year on a special grave request visit for one of the clients. I contacted the TBR Centre in Kanchanaburi where I am a Life Member and requested some details on this particular Digger. I have sent that back to the client. This important dossier reveals much more than you can search online. It includes how and where he died which is remarkable.

I am having a long weekend free before the tour starts and going to do some SCUBA Diving in Jomtien Beach in Pattaya. I am diving with Mermaids Diver Centre where 11 years ago I got my Open Water Dive ticket. Will be abit funny to be back over a decade later. I havnt had a dive since the 2012 Bull Shark Dive in Fiji, so will be abit rusty. Have made my booking with Vlad of Mermaids who advised I will be:

- a. collected from my hotel and transferred to the SCUBA Centre,
- b. Have to complete a refresher prior to the dive, (as its been awhile),
- c. 2 Dives in the 'Far End'
- d. returned to my hotel afterwards.

(I highly recommend Mermaids from my experience with then albeit a decade ago; my instructor was a returned 20 year British Navy Diver and boy did he know his stuff).

Ive investigated where at the airport to source a SIM card so I can make calls and SMSs home during the trip; which is good.

Ive also sourced a bar that has the Australia Channel, as the Collingwood Vs Nth Melbourne is on at 10AM local time. I should make it from my hotel to the Roo Bar to watch it. Not too many beers because I have to dive the next day.

Following the dives, back to the hotel (maybe a curry and massage afterwards) and swim in the pool.

11 days to go.

Trek Leader Andrew

Death Railway



Travel Blog. 18 April 2014

At Melbourne Airport. Got through Customs and Check In without incident; even did the bomb trace test; I always seem to get selected for that test.

I had a squiz through Duty Free and wow the place is lit up brighter than McDonalds – I ogre over some of the Duty Free grog particularly the Johnny Walker Blue Label Scotch – wow it is expensive.

The cigarettes are very expensive and I'm so glad I gave the buggers up some 9 years ago. Still partial to the odd cigar once or twice a year – might have a Monte Christo Cigar when I'm in Bangkok.



My Room at the Pius Place Pattaya

I did the Internet pre Check In thing prior to leaving home and selected my seat. I got a window seat which is good to lean on when trying to sleep. My flight is at 2330 hours with Thai Air – I thought this night flight was a good option, so I got up early so I could sleep on the plane. I'll lean against the wall.

The family drove me out to the airport and Zach drove. He has about 92 hours up and driving very well. It's mainly all freeway from my place. On my road: Peninsula Link, to EastLink, to the Monash FWY and then onto (my old road) CityLink to the airport.

I'm mulling over getting a glass of red. Think I might.

I'm reading a top book at the moment folks, 'The Forgotten Highlander' by Alistair Urquhart. The story of a Gordon Highlander from Aberdeen in Scotland who is conscripted into the Army, posted to Singapore and ends up a POW later surviving the Thai-Burma Railway and a Hellship ride to Japan, only to be torpedoed by an American Sub and later picked up by a Japanese Merchant Ship. Very well written book so far and am enjoying it immensely

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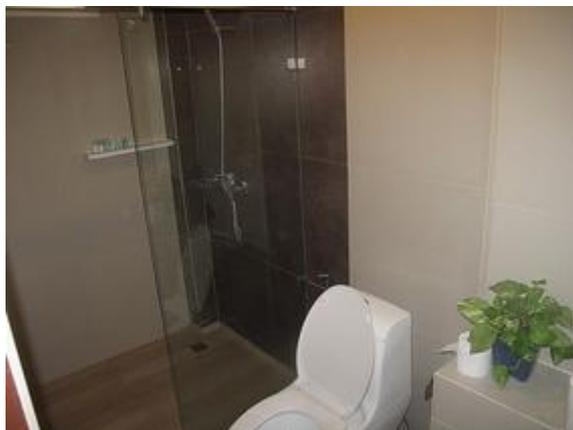
T O U R I S



Another View of the Room

I am well prepared for the trip where I am tour leader. I have info folders for everyone participating and some extras, as there could be some last minute tourists joining the group. The difference in this year's tour in comparison to last years is the following:

- A number of extra maps including:
 - A map of the journey from Singapore to the railway by boat and train the POWs took.
 - A map of Hellfire Pass from Satellite,
 - A map of the camps around Hellfire Pass.
- Useful phone numbers including the name, address and phone details of the hotels we are staying in.
- Books I recommend on the subject



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Well it's about 'red' time and I've put the bookmark in the book and I'm going for a stroll round the area to stretch the legs and kill some time. Take off is not for another two hours or more.

Would like to get some sleep on board as I hit the ground running in Bangkok



The View outside

Will update the blog as I go. Apologies to the blog readers out there, there was no blog on last year's trip. But this time I will keep a record.

That's it for today. Signing off.

Your Tour Leader,

Andrew



Room at the Park Plaza Hotel – Bangkok

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Pattaya

The flight went quickly enough – I had a window seat which was ok and the lady next to me was tiny so there wasn't issues with space. I managed to sleep about 5 hours so that made the trip go fast.

Chicken curry was served on the plane which was ok. Through Bangkok airport without trouble.

I found the bus on level one bound for Pattaya. It leaves on the hour and I had just missed one. 134 baht one way was pretty good. All expressway and about 1 hour 40 mins. Im over sitting down.

Got into Pattaya and headed straight for the Roo Bar in Walking Street.



The other side View of my Hotel Room Balcony.

Lugging my luggage about was painful and I was definitely 'spot the tourist'. Got to Walking Street and was getting soaked cos it's the tail end of Song Kran – the Thai Water Festival where all and sundry have water pistols and wet every one. I am soaked. Trying to keep my briefcase out of the way because it has my laptop, phone, passport etc in it.

Found the Roo Bar – it was closed – bummer. Found another bar and watched some of the Rugby. Got a motorbike taxi and got to my hotel, coz I was over being wet and didnt want my luggage to continue to be wet. I asked the Receptionist if they had the Australian Channel when I arrived – he was not sure but said, 'We have 120 channels'. So that gave me some hope. Got to the room and the TV wasnt programmed, so I had to sort that out and put it through its automative search for programs.

Flicked on the aircon and I had a quick shower and hung my wet clothes outside on the balcony. My view is of a slum area out the back. The hotel room is nice and fairly modern. I think AUD\$30 is about the right price. The pool is fairly small but looks inviting.

I got the Australian Channel on my TV in the hotel room – you little ripper

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The Hotel Im staying at in Pattaya.

. First quarter of the Collingwood Vs Kangaroos match and we are up. Awesome stuff. During the match I got onto the internet with a password the receptionist gave me – free WIFI; excellent. Facebooked Malani, Jamie and Mick.

At half time in the footy I got dressed and went out to the Family Mart (like a 7/11) and got some Leo Beer – a 4 pack. My dry clothes in a matter of 100 metres got saturated again by the hordes of locals with buckets of water, big arse water pistols and hoses. Anyway back to the footy and the Pies are doing extremely well. I brag on FB that after the match, like the players I will go and get a good massage.

Speaking of Leos – not bottle opener. Bloody annoying; and I know the receptionist is out on the street throwing water and drinking his Scotch and probably wont be keen on delivering me a bottle opener. Have a look in my bag – nothing metal to use to pry of the lid. My pen has metal lapel holder but too weak to pry off the lid. I used the door lock which is metal; one hand angling the lid on the lip of the lock and the other to slap it down. Bingo – beer opened. Did this several times during the match. 38 baht for a beer - Just over AUD \$1 cheaper than the MCG!



Hotel in Pattaya

So the game has finished and we have won – awesome lets take that form into the ANZAC Day match

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against Essendon (me hopes).

So Im off into the Pattaya afternoon. I get a motorbike taxi into town which costs me 50Baht. The locals are going nuts, seriously I have never seen them like this before, seriously enjoying themselves and having real (not put on) fun. People with giant water pistols and buckets of water throwing it over everyone with others smearing talcum powder over you and some other type of grey sludge. I understand Song Kran is the celebration of the Thai new Year over a 5 day period from 11-17 April. I read in the news later that during that 5 days celebration across the country there were 248 killed and 2,643 people injured, mainly regarding motorcycle incidents. Its certainly off its face with fun and frivolity. I did notice the locals drinking lots more than I usually see them drinking. Even my Receptionist was drinking Johnny Walker and wet me as I walked to the Family Mart to get the Leos as mentioned. Also they use ice cold water - damn its a shock when you get some of that freezing water on you. Particularly if you havnt been wet for a while - its damn cold.

Happy New Year Thailand



A car in the street after Songkran

So I ventured out and thought first of a massage. Walked past the first place – ‘Closed 1 Day’. Hmmm Ok plenty more fish in the sea...every place I went walked by was: ‘Closed 1 Day’. Bugga. Not one joint open – I suppose that is Karma. Shouldnt have bragged.

Found a bar to escape the constant water pistols and cups of water thrown on you. I am saturated and so is my wallet with wet Thai Baht. I continue with drinking Leos and watching the activities of the locals and some of the more drunken Farangs. I get speaking to several people. The first was a Brit from Manchester. His name was Zach and he was 24. A gold worker who loved Australia even though he had never been there before – he was keen to visit next year. He was telling me he about some of his ‘conquests’ here and was quite proud and chuffed about it. He had to cut off our conversation for a dalliance he had organised previously...ok see ya Zach.

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The other gent I spoke with at the bar was a Doctor from Chicago. He had Maori tattoos up and down both legs. Quite odd for an American Doctor.



The hotel again

He was about 60 and had a Thai girlfriend who was about 30. Anyway seemed like a nice guy, but confused on his direction in life and what he wanted to do. Seemed odd that a Doctor would have those unsure/life directional issues. I wonder if he was really a Doctor, because his tats and conversation didn't really fit the stereotype.

Couldn't find too many restaurants open either...so I walked into the next place I saw and it was an Italian Restaurant. I had a Hawaiian pizza. Not bad for Thailand although I forgot the Pineapple here is the super sweet variety which tended to dominate the pizza taste. Thin crust and good size - I ate the lot and enjoyed it even if the pineapple dominated.

I got over being wet and the antics of the water festival participants and decided it was time to go back to the room. Hmmm trying to explain to the motor bike taxi dude the name of my hotel room was painful. I ended up using his phone on google and showing him that way (Yes I usually carry the card of the hotel in my pocket - as I did this time - but it got wet and was a heap of mush). So did the google maps things - and he said to me as plain as day, 'Ahhh why not you say Pius Place'. (Its what I had been saying all along and I even tried it in several accents...alas I got back to the hotel).

I had the intentions of heading back out with my waterproof camera case and camera - but decided a quick lay down was required and rest. I woke up at 1AM - so there went going out again with the camera. So being in bed so early Im up at 5AM.

SCUBA

I was up reasonably early as I had a fairly early night - not too much booze either.

I think many people had hangovers from the New Years Party the night before and many shops were closed. I had good intentions of eating well whilst over here with the goal of losing a couple of kilos. Nothing was open in my immediate area and after blogging I am pressed for time. So I ducked into the Family Mart and got a Coke and a Snickers Bar - good healthy breakfast - NOT.

The Mermaids Dive Vehicle came and collected me (drove past me first) and we got to the Dive Centre. I think it has changed locations from when I dived with them last. I paid my 4,000 baht for 2 dives and a refresher which is good value

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The Dive Centre Billboard



Pre dive briefing – Pattaya.

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My buddy and Instructor in our SCUBA dive.

I selected my gear with one of the the Dive Leaders and hopped on the bus. We then drove out to Pattaya Port and got on board the Mermaids boat - a large double decker beast with deck chairs for the paying customers. Very comfy way to travel.

So I sat in one of the deckchairs - said hello to some other dive people and had a coffee. My Dive Master introduced himself and we got down to the business of talking SCUBA. I was with 2 newbie divers, so it was good for me because it was refreshing the knowledge on important subjects. The main dive brief came and went and we geared up.

Down on the bottom level we entered the water and swam towards the shallows. There we did some emergency drills and got on with it. Diving around we saw many different types of coral and small fish. Visibility was ok and the water very warm. The newbies went up the ladder following their dive and I stayed in the water. Had 70 bar left in the tank so the Instructor and I went back down to do some 'out of air' drills. Which we did without issue.

On board we packed down our gear had a quick shower and headed back up to the Deck Chair area. The Deckies had prepared lunch which was Fried Chicken, Fried rice and a cabbage type salad along with pineapple and water melon

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A great feast on board. Delish.

After about an hour we headed back down and geared up again. This time it was a 'one way' dive - as there was a fairly strong current we used it to move us around a large coral corner where the dive boat would rendezvous with us. Saw a turtle and a Sting Ray and got some pics.

After the dive geared down again and washed my camera. A couple of people on board are sea-sick which is bad for them - they look terrible and the colour gone from their face. On Japanese girl had it bad. A great day out albeit a long day out - we got back into the Port about 5pm. I returned to the Dive Centre and bought a shirt and their driver returned us all back to our hotels which was excellent service I thought.

I was feeling peckish so went out for dinner. Had a Penang Chicken Curry for my first main meal out. Was nice - for entree I had 'Porpia' or Spring Rolls. After tea I went and got a haircut - which was really just a trim.

I went for a walk about after the haircut and went and got a two hour massage.



The Instructor pointing out a coral fish

The Massage Lady I think was in her 50's if I was to guess - but very strong. She dug those elbows right into my shoulders and deep down into the muscle. Im feeling it - a deep massage first up off the bat.

Houston - I think theres a problem. I think Songkran and the Water Festival is playing up with me. I got some water thrown over me and of course water gets into your mouth - as some is thrown at great velocity - Im not sure the origin of this water and I did see the locals filling up their bins etc with tap water. I am now regretting the curry with chilli I had as it burns on the other side - ouch. Anyway I'll stop off at a Drug Store and see what they have for me - Imodium or similar. Im tender to sit down after many trips to the toilet.

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I was up early and sorted my stuff out. Checked out of the hotel and thanked the Receptionist who was always helpful and friendly. He organised me a Songthaew to get to Pattaya North Bus Station that cost B200.

I bought a ticket to Morchit Bangkok for B134. I thought brekkie would be a good idea whilst waiting for the bus - so ate a local bus station restaurant. I had Thai Green Chicken Curry - yes I will pay for that later. Very nice curry - I like the local cucumber the Thai's use in it along with the Thai Peas, they give it that crunch. Delish dish.

Got on the bus and reviewed all my notes in preparation for tomorrows departure for Kanchanaburi. So Im up on all my info, data, facts and figures.

Got a taxi from Morchit Bus Station to the hotel in Bangkok - it was only 16 kms, but in BKK traffic it took about 45 minutes. Cost B155 which was fairly reasonable. I picked the cab because it was a new Toyota Corolla and the guy was very neat and the cab was immaculate inside.

Checkd into the hotel - Park Plaza and wow is it nice inside. An Executive type set up with desk, double bed, beautiful shower/toilet area and a big wall mounted LCD TV. Awesome.

Bangkok – Kanchanaburi – Tuesday 22 April 2014

Today was a big day. I met with my tour group for breakfast at 0630 hours. I was up earlier than that to get ready, have a shower, shave and sort out my gear. So not a late night.

We formed up in the lobby and boarded the bus. A large bus for our group with plenty of room.

I got onto the microphone pretty quickly and discussed the following topics:

- Why the Thai-Burma Railway,
- Non Pladuk Railway Station,
- Ban Pong Railway Station and
- Nakhom Pathom Railway Station Junction



At the Chedi at Nathon Pathom

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T O U R I S

We visited those sites (except Ban Pong) and the tourists thought it was excellent. We visited the Mudras Chedi at Nakhom Pathom that was built by King Rama IV in 1853 (or built by his people) it is a big golden dome Buddhist Temple surrounded by Buddha with different Mudras (or hand symbols).

Non Pladuk Railway Station was next on the agenda and inside the current Signals building. There is a big rock memorial to the railway workers that is new and was not there last year. It signifies the start of the Thai-Burma Railway also known as the:

- Siam –Burma Railway,
- Death Railway,
- The Railway etc.

Lunch on the river was next where we had sweet n sour pork, a chicken dish, and a vegetable soup with rice on the side.



Nong Pladuk Station

Finished off with pineapple and watermelon and coffee. Yumola. The view across the river is an excellent vantage point for a great first Siam lunch.

On the bus on the way to Kanchanaburi I took a rest on the microphone and put on a documentary about the build-up to hostilities and the Fall of Singapore – a good 'back story' introduction about further events to happen. That gave me about 5 minutes before we got to the next destination.

The JEATH War museum an acronym for Japan, England, America, Australia, Thailand and Holland.

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I must say the JEATH is getting a bit dated. It is set out as a POW style Atap hut with thatch roof and bamboo style 'beds'. On the walls are faded and dated pictures and stories of the railway. On one side of the JEATH is a sentry box and on the river side is a statue with succinct story about Nagase – a Japanese Interpreter who was featured in the movie, 'The Railway Man' the story of Eric Lomax. After the war Nagase became a Buddhist Monk and regretted his actions on the railway, living a life of reconciliation.

After the JEATH we went to Kanchanaburi War Cemetery (KWC)



At the JEATH War Museum

I gave an introduction and history of KWC and the layout from the vantage point of the bus. We visited the following graves many graves of diggers in the cemetery.

We visited the two plots for the 300 cremated from the cholera epidemics, the Stone of Remembrance and the Cross of Sacrifice.

Following the sweltering sun we ventured over to the Thai Burma Railway Centre where I am a Life Member. We toured around the centre, bumped into Terry the General Manager and had a coffee on the 2nd floor café overlooking the KWC. Some of the clients went to the research room to get print outs of family members and friends who were in the cemetery.

We were going to visit the Bridge Over the River Kwai (BRK) but the day was fast getting away from us and we are all fairly knackered

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T O U R I S



Visiting friends at Kanburi War Cemetery

So we can tack on the BRK tomorrow as it is a shorter day without the 2 hours of bus travel.

Checked into the Felix Hotel and I'm glad from first impressions I convinced the Travel Company to change hotels from the one way down the road – this is right on the Kwai Noi River and 500m from the BRK – so an easy walk into the bridge area for shopping and bars etc.

Checked into the third floor room that is massive. Did my washing in the hand basin and hung it out on the balcony – will be easily dried in several hours in this heat. The view from the balcony is spectacular and full of green colours, buffalo grass, palms and exotic flora including Thai Orchids. Wow very lucky to be here.

Had a swim in the massive tropical swimming pool – wow its big and beautifully warm – ahhh the serenity. I did a lap or two and went back and showered, refreshed and got a new change of clothes. All my previously worn clothes are now hanging out to dry, both over the balcony and in the bathroom. Who needs a dryer here!

Quick shower and off to dinner.

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T O U R I S



The Thai Burma Railway Centre

We had all Thai food which consisted of plates of:

- Steamed vegetables,
- Sweet n sour port,
- Chicken with cashew nut,
- Mussaman Curry,
- Steamed vegetables,
- Rice,
- Plates of fresh fruit.

I raced back to the room and grabbed my bottle of Port. I brought along a bottle of Stanton and Killeen Vintage Port (1999). I arranged some small glasses for everyone and we did the military 'Pass the Port'. Everybody circled their glass even those who did not drink (the latter just didn't pour any into the glass). Went well with the coffee.

Back to the room, sorted out some of my gear and had a couple of beers I brought with me from Pattaya. I finished off reading a manuscript about a POW on the Railway that one of the clients loaned me which was an excellent read. I then took up Alistair Urquart's book again and continued reading that – I am nearly finished the book and enjoying it.

The change of hotel is an excellent choice and I'm glad we are staying at the Felix Hotel in Kanchanaburi.