



ME AND MERRIE AT THE FRONT OF AN ANKALUN ORCHESTRA. (SEE OVER THE PAGE)

News from up there

A sweat-soaked missive from Greg Sugden as he travels through Thailand with Merrie Hamilton

For the past month [September] we have parked ourselves in Lampang, in the north of Thailand. It is the tail end of the rainy season so every day, and usually several times a day, the sky darkens dramatically and torrential rain like we rarely see in Australia, hammers down for 15-20 minutes. Then it stops and the sun comes out and 10 minutes later the roads are dry and the humidity which is already sitting at 100% goes up another 100%. Since we are getting around on a motorbike, we have to time our runs. On a normal day, we rise about 6am, squeeze a fresh lemon juice, walk down our street to a laneway and then along the muddy, fast-flowing Wang River until we get to one of Lampang's few landmarks — the Ratsada Bridge. A feature of the bridge crossing is the dynamic, aerial display of several hundred black and white swallows that zoom over, under and around the bridge. I always stop and watch them for a few minutes. You could reach out and touch them as they flick by. Immediately on the other side of the bridge is the morning market that teems with food and produce. There is row after row of all manner of fruit and

vegies, some familiar some not, and every part of a chicken and pig — including the gizzards and other innards — are displayed hanging or draped across metal tables without refrigeration. Flies love it in here. There are frogs roasting on skewers, whole fish being barbecued, small eels swimming in plastics bags, large eels gasping in tubs as well as crickets, crabs, molluscs waiting to be boiled alive and caterpillars, beetles and grubs being fried in different sauces. The Thais eat all the way down the food chain and then some. Plus, there is cooking — dozens of stalls are cooking, frying, broiling and roasting vats of curries and soups and pastes for breakfast being served with noodles or rice in a clear plastic bag secured with a rubber band. A dozen monks occupy all the entrances to the market with individual people kneeling in front of them while the monks chant over them in return for alms. The market is packed and closes around 9am. We buy familiar boring items like lemons, apples, broccoli, avocados, fresh coconut juice in the obligatory plastic bag. I usually buy a packet of hot, deep fried doughy things and Merrie buys a sort of waffle toasted

while you wait and wrapped in a banana leaf and a plastic bag. As well as the many visual attractions of the market, the prices are rock bottom.

By the time we walk back to our hotel, even at 7.00 in the morning, my singlet and shirt are totally soaked with perspiration. What am I saying? Before I get to the bridge, my singlet and shirt are soaked. I think I've said it before — Thailand is not a country, it's an oven.

On this trip, we developed friendships initiated on previous trips and found some new people as well.

One couple we had met up with many times before was Neal and Mouy. Neal is an Englishman who teaches English at a school outside of Lampang and Mouy who runs a café in town, is his partner and soon-to-be wife.

Mouy has been married twice before



TRAVEL FEATURE

to men who had abused her and Neal loves her, treats her with respect and is warm-hearted and has a generosity of spirit that he carries easily.

They have been together now for more than three years and Neal has taken on caring for Mouy's two children and grandchild. Neal gives English lessons at a private college in the evening and I sat in on one of them where his students were studying law at uni during the day and wanting to bring their conversational English up to speed at night.

Our last day in Lampang started with our usual trip to the market and then being picked up at our hotel at 10am by Rewutr, Thailand's leading artist potter, and his wife Yao and daughter, Sine. He drives a luxurious big, black van/people-mover with leather seats and blacked out windows. They drove us about 35 kms out of town to a two-storey, teak restaurant on stilts surrounded by forest. This is the fifth time Rewutr has taken us to amazingly unusual eateries and, as usual, he thwarted my attempt to pay the bill. Sine, in her late twenties has good English, her parents have little to none.

After a lengthy brunch of many deli-



THE BAMBOO BRIDGE WE'D BEEN LOOKING FOR.

icious courses, and Sine acting as translator, we hopped back into the van, drove a short distance and pulled off the road where there were many other cars parked. I thought, "Oh no! not another bloody temple" — the Thais have a penchant for showing visitors Buddhist temples.

We climbed up a small hill out of the carpark to a view that had my eyes springing out on stalks. Here was the bamboo bridge across the rice fields that we had heard of, and set out looking for on our motorbike, without finding, several times during our stay.

Unbeknown to Rewutr, he had delivered us our most sought-after location on our last day in Lampang. Walking on the bamboo bridge as it gave beneath you was a strange experience and ultimately it did wind its way to a temple but, hey! We found the bridge that we'd seen only in photos.

It is true that Thailand is known as the land of smiles. On this trip I have realised they have another quality — patience. They are sooo patient. At home, I would consider myself a patient person. If someone cuts in on me or suddenly turns in front of me

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