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An Ole Coyote’s Tale: Life is a Journey, not a Destination

By Brock Barrows

The sea I will set off upon is the sea of humanity, with the intent of reaching the shores of all its inhabitants. Like any voyager, there is a purpose and a hope that drives the will to forge forward. My dreams are full of a world that has not gone flat, a world that knows no boundaries, and suffers no restriction. A world where everyone, everywhere, can live collectively as fellow earthlings and be good to one another. Being civilized is no longer a point on a historical scale determining what is “modern,” it is now a matter of existence. I have heard that the meaning for civilization is to be empathetic toward each other. Maybe it is time for a checkup. Maybe it is time to take the pulse of humanity to see if it is healthy. Maybe it is time to set sail with the hope of discovering a new world where all of mankind’s dreams of a perfect home (Earth) come true.

My last summer as a student at CSUSB offered the opportunity of a lifetime, a chance to leave my life in the United States behind and thoroughly immerse myself in Thai culture for the summer. The result was one of the most enriching experiences I have ever had the honor to experience. When you step outside of your comfort zone, you meet people and experience events that transform the way you view life as a whole. Just by witnessing firsthand how other cultures function on a day to day basis; you can gain new perspectives on how you have lived your own life, and what is expected in your own culture. As you travel the globe and leave your home behind, you must completely immerse yourself in your host culture’s “way” of life if you intend to gain as much insight as possible into the people you find yourself living amongst. Living in such circumstances, you may simultaneously find yourself happily engrossed in foreign culture and feeling cut-off or isolated. As a wise and kind man once told me, “This is how we weave the stitches of humanity.”

If I may have but a moment of your time, I wish to take you on a journey to Thailand, the “land of smiles,” where the vast majority of the population follows Theravada Buddhism. Thailand is an excellent place to experience old-world charm blended with
modern-day influences. Let us see if one is ready for the other. Be aware though, this journey may require you to travel by aircraft, trains, buses, tuk tuks (a three-wheeled cross between a motorcycle and a taxi), scooters, your own two feet, and sometimes by the assistance of an elephant through some of the thickest brush on the planet. Thailand has two seasons—hot and rainy. Landing in the middle of July in Bangkok is like stepping into a steaming sauna, no matter how you dress or what you do, you will sweat, profusely and constantly.

My arrival in Thailand began in a chance meeting with Elisa and Luca a couple of weary travelers from Italy making their way around the world. In the words of Luca, they “wanted to be rid of the rat race in our lives, expand beyond their everyday horizons and go on a walk-a-bout, with hopes of getting out to see the ‘humans’ of the world.” For her part, Elisa was on a mission to give each and every one of the people she met a big hug and dig into the story of their lives. She could pry a story out of anyone better than most professional journalists. At first, I just dismissed them as a couple more digital bloggers hitchhiking their way across the globe, but in time, I came to recognize that Luca was well-known back in Italy, as well as a deep thinker who spoke softly. I was with them in Chiang Mai for about a month before his popularity became apparent to me.

Chiang Mai is situated in the northern region of modern-day Thailand. It lies about 200 miles south of what was once more commonly referred to as the “Golden Triangle,” (where Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos converge upon the mighty Mekong River). The city of Chiang Mai was once the capital of the Kingdom of Lan Na, founded in 1296 by King Mengrai. The old city districts are still marked by the haunting remnants of the once mighty walls of Lan Na, ruins that have long outlived the kingdom that built them. For centuries, the Thai people have been forced to relate to a world that has continually pressed at their gates. It is precisely this pressure that has given shape and form to Thai society, through the Thai people’s ongoing efforts to not be swallowed up and consumed by the encroaching world beyond their borders. Consequently, Thailand has lived a constant duality between monarchs and military, carefully swaying back and forth and maintaining a balance that has withstood many challenges, both foreign and domestic.
The remnants of Chiang Mai’s historic fortifications stand as a testament to the numerous threats that Thailand has faced across its history. Beyond the ruins of its walls lies a large moat that has helped protect the inhabitants of the ancient city for centuries. In ancient times, the city was protected by six gates that would open at sunrise and close at sunset. The contrast between the city’s ancient fortifications and its vibrant nightlife today could not be any starker. Today, as darkness falls, Chiang Mai comes to life.
It is in the old city where you get a real sense of Chiang Mai’s character. The “old city” which is rather ironic, considering the fact that Chiang Mai literally means “new city,” pulsates all around with activity. The smell of the food and the displays of all manner of arts and crafts are simply awe inspiring. The city center is brimming with life. It is a place where people mix and mingle together freely, and conversations in a myriad of languages barrage your ears. It is truly a feast for the senses.

Inside the city’s moat and walls are endless *wats*, the name given to the hundreds of Buddhist monasteries found within the city’s walls by the Thai people. Some of the more notable ones, and most visited, are fourteenth-century Wat Phra Singh, within it lies a spectacular Reclining Buddha sculpture, and fifteenth-century Wat Chedi Luang, famed for the iconic elephants that emerge from the ancient chedi, a place used for meditation. Walking around the city’s wats, taking in the scenery and serenity, one feels somehow transported in time. Yet, despite its rich history, Chiang Mai is as modern as any other cosmopolitan city in the world; a fact illustrated immediately by all the power lines strung loosely, sometimes at eye level. Chiang Mai represents the physical, and cultural synthesis of “old” and “new,” joining together to create a truly beautiful and unique city.
For centuries Buddhist monks from the Kingdom of Siam (modern-day Thailand) have taken refuge within the monasteries during the wet season, while spreading the teachings of Buddha. Every morning at the crack of dawn, hundreds of monks clad in orange/saffron robes make their way through the streets with a basket strung to their sides so people can put food offerings in them for the holy men making their way to the local *wat* or monastery that they are associated with. The robes the monks wear date back centuries and are seen all over Southeast Asia. The robes themselves are meant to symbolize simplicity and detachment from materialism. One can only imagine what the current condition of the world must appear like to these holy men who are bound to the ground they walk upon, not the riches that can be extracted from it. One should not be shocked to encounter a few of them with the newest iPhone; it is a common sight. After all, this is the new millennium. In Thailand, the vast majority are Theravada followers of Buddhism, and orange was mainly chosen because of the dye available at the time. The tradition stuck, and orange is now the color of choice for the monks of Thailand. I distinguish the term Theravada Buddhism, specifically to bring awareness to the fact that there is more than one particular sect of the religion. There is also Mahayana, which makes up the majority of Buddhists, and the Vajrayana that is most prevalent in the Tibetan Buddhist community.
Wat Sri Suphan, sits outside the ancient walls. Author’s photo.
While planning my trip to Chiang Mai, I investigated the prospect of teaching English to impoverished and/or orphaned children taken in by the monasteries. Many children in Thailand are forced to follow a different path due to unforeseeable and unfortunate circumstances and find themselves living in the compounds of the *wats*. However, within the *wats* they are able to obtain an education to which they may otherwise have never had access. Many of them have lost one or both parents to border wars, drug smuggling, and human trafficking. Yet, the constant smiles and happiness these children continue to possess are extraordinary to say the least. During my search for organizations looking for English teachers, the “Friends for Asia” caught my interest. Friends of Asia is a volunteer organization based in Chiang Mai, administered by Todd Cikraji. His mentorship and guidance were instrumental in preparing me to teach English in Thailand. The center he runs is located inside the old city walls, and due to its central location offers participants an opportunity to immerse themselves fully within the cultural heart of the city. In addition to its academic programs, the facility offers many opportunities for recreation, including elephant camp classes. Friends of Asia is an excellent program for anyone who desires to help make a difference but cannot commit to a lifetime of doing so. Unfortunately for me, I was unable to partake fully in the program.
due to a sudden and unforeseen medical issue. It would be another full year before I would be able to begin my journey.

After a long-awaited year, I had my opportunity to make my way to Chiang Mai where I was able to volunteer my time to help the young children at Wat Papao. One of the kids I would see near my living accommodations provided me with enough information to get my foot in the door, leading to a chance that would allow me to teach students for the first time in my life. What an exciting feeling that was, to be halfway around the world fusing two widely diverse cultures together with one of the most primitive of early human needs: the ability to communicate. And there I was in the middle of it, in Southeast Asia.

For reasons of anonymity, I will refer to this young man by the nickname I called him, “Rocky.” He was one of the many kids who tried to improve their social standing through the art of Muay Thai boxing. In addition to his martial arts prowess, Rocky’s English was impressive for his age. Through my interactions with Rocky, I would later learn that he owed his considerably English skills to his elder sister Pim, who spent any free time she had sitting in a library or bookstore trying to master the English language so that she could improve her worth in the community.

In America, societal expectations are highly individualistic. Every child is expected to go to school, get a good job, buy that home with a ‘white picket’ fence and a dog to go along with it. Thai culture expects the opposite; most families work together to provide an opportunity for one child to become educated, and in return, the child lifts the family up the social ladder. This dynamic was obvious in the relationship between Rocky and his sister Pim. Whenever Pim was in town, she would take Rocky to school every day, but she would often depart for weeks at a time in search of job opportunities to support the family.

I had the privilege of finally meeting Pim face to face under rather strange and unpleasant circumstances. While returning from observing a celebration in town, I stopped to pick up street food. I had two choices, one where there were dozens of folks waiting, and the other where an elderly lady sat idly without a single customer. The next morning, I discovered why when I became violently ill with a serious case of food poisoning. For nearly an entire week, I was unable to eat due to crippling stomach pain. I could not even make it to the drugstore to purchase medicine. On the fifth day, Rocky and Pim brought me a set of charcoal tablets. I
took the medication and within a few short days, my health returned. From the minute, they arrived neither wanted to leave my side. Pim would watch over me while Rocky attended school, and he would take over when she had to leave.

It was then I learned firsthand about some of the horrific things one hears happen in the world to which we normally turn a blind eye. Pim and I talked extensively when I was awake, and when I was not, she would read. She was very inquisitive and took every opportunity to expand her vocabulary. It was clear where Rocky got his tenacity. While I lay bed-ridden, Pim explained the economic breakdown of Thai society from the ground level, complete with the ins and outs of Thailand’s labyrinthine patron-client relationships, which underpins both society and economics throughout the country. In short, it came down to capitalism, with a twist of Buddhism; as odd and contradictory as those two terms may sound.

I could not help but notice a hint of sorrow in Pim’s eyes as she told me her story. Even though Thailand’s economic structure has undergone tremendous restructuring over the past few decades, extreme poverty remains a threat that anyone could fall into depending on one’s ability to work. Unfortunately, the peasant farmers that sustain most of Thailand’s crops for export, which incorporates most of Thailand’s GDP, rank among the most underpaid of its citizens. Pim explained that it is possible to travel into Bangkok and make in one weekend, what it would take agricultural workers toiling in the paddy fields a month to generate. This dramatic economic disparity has helped perpetuate the growing rift between urban and rural communities throughout Thailand; young Thai workers are increasingly drawn to Bangkok in order to support their rural families. According to the Trading Economics Agency, wages in Thailand increased to 13877.70 THB by the third quarter of 2017, from the average high of 9282.25 between the years 1999 until 2016. A record low of 6344 THB/Month came in the first quarter of 2001.¹

Statistically speaking, the situation looks good; but from the perspective of the average Thai worker, the disproportionate growth of inequity in the nation is deeply concerning. Thailand’s gross domestic product has quadrupled in size since the dawn of

the new millennium, and yet wages have only doubled. This discrepancy alone indicates that the improvement in working wages for the average Thai has not kept pace with the nation’s economic growth. The lion’s share of profits have accumulated in the hands of the business classes, and the growing inequity between rich and poor does not appear to be stabilizing. Considering Thailand’s traditionally collectivist, Buddhist culture, the nation’s economic transformation calls into question whether the Buddhist-Capitalist fusion that governs Thai society can be maintained forever. The comments of Vice Minister Kobsak Pootrakool shed light on the current Thai government’s plans for the nation’s future: “to remain competitive, Thailand has to embark on extensive reform of the economy to lay down a future for the country in areas such as infrastructure and advanced manufacturing. At the same time, ensuring that the grassroots can reap benefits of development.” The winds of change can be felt in Thailand, but only time will tell whether or not the consciousness of the people will give way to the benefactor of materialism.

After recovering from my illness, I made my way to Bangkok, Thailand’s capital and central hub for the entire nation, to which all roads in the country inevitably lead. From Bangkok, I boarded a flight to the southern region of Thailand, which is full of sun-drenched beaches with a plethora of opportunities for snorkeling, diving, and sun sports. The purpose of my trip to Koh Phi Don was twofold. One, I desperately desired to feel the sun again after so much rain in Chiang Mai, and secondly to see my Italian friends off. I had only intended a day trip over to the island, but while there, I chanced upon an opportunity to lend a helping-hand at a school that had been severely devastated by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. They needed help in an English-language class due to the loss of a teacher they had hired for the school year. Although I could not commit to an entire year, I told them that I would be more than willing to fill the role until they could find a more permanent replacement, which ended up being only a few weeks. Although my time on that tiny island was brief, it felt as if time stood still long enough for me to notice truly how simple life can be, and how the spirit of that life can overcome and recover from any tragedy.
Loh Dalum Bay, author’s photo.

A ‘home away from home,’ author’s photo.

Ton Sai Bay, Koh Phi Don, author’s photo
Upon completing my brief term as a teacher in Koh Phi Don, I set my sights on returning to the wonderful city of Chiang Mai. However, I was once again interrupted by another opportunity. Vandee, the mother of one of my students, invited me to visit on my way back to Chiang Mai. I carried with me a folder with copies of her child’s work, a report card, and a letter for her. I thought it was going to be a quick visit, but that was not the case. When I arrived, it seemed I had shown up to an elaborate gathering. I soon learned that it was quite an honor in Thai culture for a student’s teacher to make an appearance and being a foreigner did not make my presence any less conspicuous. So many people were in attendance, I was unable to memorize the procession of new faces. Thankfully, I could show my respect in the way of a “wai,” a communication practice involving a hand gesture to give greetings and respect. Put simply in a wai, you press your two hands together as though to pray, in front of your chest, while at the same time giving a slight bow. The higher the movement of the hands and lower the bow delineates the level of respect being given. It is customary to give a wai when entering someone’s home in Thailand, as well as upon departure. Needless to say, the wai was a very effective tool for me to use in that situation. The proper salutation can make the difference of how you are looked upon in many societies and in Thailand, it is no different.

One of the more particular things I observed during the gathering was that many of the families I met are very close knit. So much so that they tended to congregate in the same neighborhood for several generations. After the festivities came to an end, Vandee and I had the opportunity to talk about her life in Thailand. Strangely enough, her story echoed of Pim’s experiences. Vandee was in her early forties and had her own bar in town. She too spent her early childhood around the Chiang Mai area in northern Thailand. Her parents, who were not at the gathering, lived in Lamphun, the province a few miles directly south of Chiang Mai. She explained to me how she had made a living for herself running a pub and bar known as the “One Bar” in Chiang Mai. It was successful enough that many times she tried to persuade her aging parents to settle down closer to her. Her parents, however, were tied to the land that they farmed for not only their generation, but their parents’ generation as well. She told me that soon, she would take a husband, pass the business over to
her younger sister, then buy a property close to her parents so that she may care and provide for them as they move into their twilight years. She cast her decision in terms of filial piety, but behind it, I saw in her eyes the same thing I saw in Pim’s. I saw someone else who just wanted to find their way home.

You may ask yourself “why Chiang Mai,” of all the places in the world? I would like to tell you that it was some kind of epiphany or dream that guided me to this foreign land. But, alas it was quite simply an advertisement from many years ago when I was ten years old. A Coca-Cola commercial showed the city of Chiang Mai during a festival where thousands of lanterns were released into the sky. While the image was being shown, a “jingle” played with the clip that went something like “I'd like to teach the world to sing, in perfect harmony. I’d like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company.” That stuck with me all my life and when an opportunity came to travel to Southeast Asia, of course it had to be Chiang Mai, Thailand. I believed whatever it was I felt that day existed in that magical land, and I was right.

My thoughts and best wishes will always be with the wonderful people that I had the honor of getting to know as they sheltered, fed, and enlightened me with their serene culture, and tranquil perspective of life in Thailand. I picture in my mind a million paddies (“Lan na” in Thai). As I take in the beauty, I see a home described to me by Vandee in such intricate detail, and I hope that one day Pim and Rocky may find their way there as well. One of the difficult things about traveling and meeting people is that you form bonds with them, but you may never see them again or know where the road may lead them. It is simultaneously an exhilarating, and yet hollow feeling for the weary traveler once they have returned home.
I wish to return to Chiang Mai one day to be present for a couple of the most celebrated and vibrant events in northern Thailand, including Songkran, Thailand's New Year, as well as the Loi Krathong and Yi Peng Festivals, which coincide with each other. Loi Krathong takes place on the evening of the twelfth month in the traditional Thai lunar calendar and lasts for three days. The Ping River is transformed into a sea of fiery luminescence as local residents give thanks to the water goddess, Pra Mai Khongka. One of the major highlights of the Loi Krathong festival is the release of thousands of sky lanterns into the evening where they flood the night with beauty and nostalgia for the Lan Na people. Because of the recent popularity in the celebration, the Thai government has had to place restrictions on the release of the lanterns due to commercial and environmental hazards. As a result, this event is now sanctioned by the authorities and only takes place at specific locations. Although I did not get the opportunity to see or create the memory of Chiang Mai that I was so enchanted by in the Coca Cola commercial from my youth; instead, I was given an opportunity to cherish the lives of those I would have never met had I not gone. From my encounters with these amazing people, I feel more enlightened in my heart than any lantern could ever illuminate.

All I ask for now, is that you reflect on this Ole Coyote's travels in Thailand. I would hope to be a worthy ambassador of our great institution, as I laid down my paw-print across the land of smiles, stamped with civil mannerism in every step of the way. I
leave you with the same words that were left to me by a nameless monk: “Be good to each other.”

Bibliography


Author Bio

In June of 2017, after many hurdles and setbacks, Brock obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree with an emphasis on Chinese history. At the time of writing, he is teaching part-time at a high school on the Big Island of Hawaii and also teaches English online to students in Beijing, China. When the school year is over Brock intends to head back out to Southeast Asia to explore many new horizons, while at the same time spreading the Coyote spirit of civility.