



worked out a way of harvesting the reedy stems and using them to fashion baskets, but it seems they are making little if any impact on the volume of this virulent veggie.

Despite this, the monarchy is still held in the highest esteem in Thailand, and especially Bangkok. Not only are images of the King and Queen displayed in every shop, stall, factory and office, as well as on huge hoardings along roads and across bridges, but the kind folk of Thailand regularly wear special yellow or pink polo shirts with the royal insignia on the breast.



Cars have 'Long live the King' stickers on their back windows and the King's anthem is played twice a day on radio before the news.

This anthem is also played at numerous public events, including the cinema. One stormy afternoon we take the children to a cavernous cinema complex to see 'Kung Fu Panda' (really, the kids want to see it, so Sandy and I go along only to chaperone). After half an hour of shorts, promos and advertisements (yep, some things are universal), an image

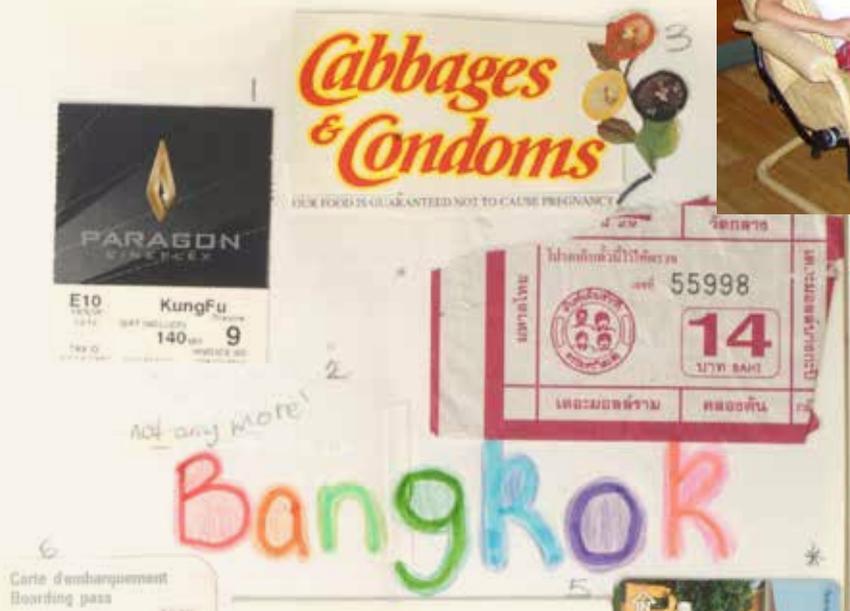
of the King appears on the screen, and everyone stands in the dark and in silence, as the song starts up and further images of the King flash across the screen. Until this moment, we aren't entirely sure about the whole monarchical reverence, given that many people in Australia treat the British monarchy as a tired and quaint anachronism of inherited entitlement populated almost entirely by overly pampered toffs with sallow skin prone to making inappropriate comments in public. Not, it seems, the Thais. They love their King and Queen openly and honestly in a happy symbiotic relationship that nurtures them. However, it seems it can't last forever. Ma and Pa King are getting on, and we're told that the Thais aren't exactly enamoured with their eldest boy, who enjoys gadding about in flash cars, flash bling and flash women on his arm. Apparently the Maoists – recently so successful in banishing the King of Nepal into oblivion – are shaping up for a rumble when the King goes to that great palace in the sky.

Then again, it's highly unlikely one will hear anything negative of the Kingmeister as, let's face it – it's illegal. Even at the time of writing there are journalists and politicians facing charges of *lese majeste* – and a long time in gaol – for allegedly insulting the king personally or the monarchy in general.



We find what turns out to be our favourite restaurant with a name that makes one titter and raise an eyebrow at the same time. 'Cabbages and Condoms' serves brilliant Thai food in an almost fairy-garden atmosphere, with traditional Thai musicians playing, a massage room and proceeds going to the cause of AIDS/HIV prevention. The owner, Mr Mechai Viravaidya, has been so popular in promoting the use of condoms throughout the region that condoms are often known as *Mechai*. A free vasectomy clinic is next door, if you're up for it, and after-dinner mints are replaced with condoms. The kids have fun blowing them up as balloons – naturally.

They also have traditional Thai foot massages, and Raffy entertains the masseurs by imitating their technique on his mum – so much so that upon our return a week later





with my cousin Gaby the masseurs' faces light up at the sight of him. In fact, Raf has been an all-round hit with the Thais, to the extent that he becomes quite sick of being touched, patted and stroked. It is all well intended, but quite confronting for the boy.

We have some terrific Thai and Chinese meals, and of course spend time trawling some of the markets gawking at all manner of cheap souvenirs and designer brands with spelling mistakes. We aren't averse to stocking up on some clothes or electronic gizmos, but the sheer volume of the merchandise on offer almost repulses us. By the end our eyes just glaze over and we move on (although we linger over the sight of two women in full burqas rummaging through some timber statues and trinkets who don't seem to either notice or care that most of them are somewhat intentionally phallic by design).

Sometimes, however, it's not that easy to just move on. One man in a turban stops me in the street, his arm outstretched offering me his hand and, of course, asks me where I'm from. Naturally, his 'best customers are from Australia!' Naturally. Indeed, he tells me that my face promises untold wealth and fortune, including 'many, many ladies', even though my partner and the mother of my children is standing next to me, and I tell him I'm not interested.



Getting the truck off to Los Angeles will, theoretically, be a relatively straightforward process, but as we have now learned, nothing is that simple. Our first major hurdle is the repercussions of the inaccurate customs form we received when entering Thailand from Malaysia. It seems that Thai customs are not willing to allow us to export our truck when the documents have incorrect information. It is fixable, but will take time.

After numerous faxes to the shipping agent of copies of the truck's registration, our passport, visa details and sundry data, we finally get the go-ahead. Initially we are to hand the truck over five working days before it is to depart by sea, but our paperwork palaver makes us miss several deadlines. We were supposed to take the truck down to a local shipping agent where it would be loaded into a container, sealed, taken by truck to the port and loaded onto the ship. Missing that deadline means we have to take the truck directly to the port. The shipping company will send a representative to our apartment at 8am and I will drive with him to the port. No problem.

Raffy is up for the adventure, and it's estimated that the entire process shouldn't take more than two or three hours. The back seat of the truck has been loaded with all the gear from the roof again, but Raf squeezes in while the Thai shipping rep sits in the passenger seat. We know that Bangkok is a port city and we aren't too far from the coast, so it should be a quick dash to the port, and away we go.

Our shipping agent guides us along some major roads until we're driving down a narrow, busy road lined with containers, and ships in the distance. This should be it.

'Now turn left,' he instructs, and we're on a more major road again. 'And we drive now for maybe 100 kilometres.'

Whaa? I start to get nervous. To clarify I draw '100' with my finger on the inside

of the windscreen, and he beams. Where is he taking me? And how are we going to return to Bangkok if it is that far away? After some more questions and improvised language, he assures me it's right. Sure enough, 90 minutes later, after a rather hair-raising drive doing the South-East Asian slalom and dodging slow-moving vehicles and pedestrians, we get to an enormous port area.

Unfortunately, our guide doesn't know his way around the port, so it means another half hour of asking passers-by and making phone calls, until another bloke collects us and we follow him to the shipping terminal.

And then we wait.

And wait some more.

I can't fathom what he, or his people, are doing. The shipping container is there, open, and ready for the truck. I have handed over the Carnet, my passport and other documents, and we hang around.

We are directed to a canteen not unlike the one Sandy and I experienced in Singapore. We have some food and water, and hang around. Chunky, heavy rain comes, and goes. Dock workers wander in and out, eat, sleep, banter and stare at the local soap opera on the TV in the corner.

I finally get to drive the truck into the container and some stevedores go to work securing it inside. I know that the truck has to be secured inside the container, as there are too many stories of pristine cars being backed out of a container after a sea voyage, battered and bruised from being knocked around. I've come prepared with a few ratchet tie-downs, but the dockworkers aren't impressed. They present a bunch of ropes, some timber, a hammer and nails. The ropes are tied to each corner of the truck, and to the corners of the container. The timber is inserted into the doubled rope and twisted tight. One end of the timber is then nailed to the floor of the container. Primitive, but effective. With some trepidation, Raffy and I farewell our truck and wish it a bon voyage, hoping all goes well until we are reunited on the other side of the North Pacific Ocean.

We eventually get a lift with another shipping guy in his dodgy ute to the bus station at around 5pm. Raffy can't believe that the ute has nineteen stereo speakers and flashing lights on various amplifiers, yet the music the man plays sounds even more crappy than the original producers of bad Thai pop intended.

Our bus terminates (and not a bad thing too) at a bus station about four kilometres from our apartment. From there we catch a cab – which takes an hour. For most of it we sit, motionless, in teeming traffic, all honking and tooting at each other, and not going anywhere at all. It would have been quicker and more interesting to walk.

But it's done.

Raffy has been a trooper the entire day. What was supposed to be a couple of hours dropping off the truck has ended up being eleven hours of tedious frustration.

We spend our final days in Bangkok doing a little shopping and exploring, eating and sheltering in the apartment from the heat, humidity, dodgy overhead cables that sometimes fall from the sky, and pollution. Maddy and Raffy do a decent amount of schoolwork and Sandy and I are able to plan some more of our trip.

S Maddy sets up ‘Café 7’ (referring to our apartment number) – complete with menu and bills. She is enterprising and earning way over and above her pocket money, and parents are banned from any activity in the kitchen. Having our own space where we can hang out, prepare meals and unwind is so satisfying for us all. Especially as a foil to the chaos around us.

The laptop and albeit haphazard internet connections makes this voyage markedly different from previous trips, particularly overseas. Through search engines and links from other sites we’re able to find recommendations and advice at the touch of a few buttons. And, of course, we can stay in touch with loved ones instantly through Skype.

Beyond the apartment, the kids are entranced by the wats we visit, especially Way Phra Kaew (Temple of the Emerald Buddha) and Wat Pho (Temple of the Reclining Buddha). Finding regular respite from the harsh sun inside or in the shade of temples and awnings when we can, sweat often stings our eyes. Raffy is keen to understand the notion of offerings and wants to participate in the Buddhist rituals. Maddy and Raffy also express their awareness of the contradictions of the opulence of the venues, the austerity of the monks and the crazy number of tourists who swarm all over the places like rats, whose experiences are often only through the viewfinders of their digital cameras.

The children are moved by the plight of beggars (mothers with small children, people maimed, injured or disfigured). They are generous with their money, and Raffy often remembers to bring his wallet when we go out, only for the purpose of sharing what *babt* he has with the people less fortunate on the streets.

Our children are also interested in the Buddhist shrines that dot shops, streets and offices. Ordinarily, the shrines portray an image of Buddha and have some offerings and joss-sticks burning. However, the offerings are not always traditional food but also cans of soft drink, junk food and cigarettes. After reviewing the evidence, Raffy decides that Buddha must like Fanta more than Coke.

D One of the other startling and yet common scenes on the streets is that of ‘mixed relationships’. Or, more to the point, white men hand in hand with Thai women; the dynamic of the couple always makes me edgy. Why is it that nearly every man is white, overweight, over 50 and often badly tattooed, and the women are Thai, young and have a look of fear in their eyes? References to ‘sexpats’ and ‘mail-order brides’ abound, yet while I wouldn’t suggest that every ‘mixed relationship’ in Thailand is inappropriate, the notion of western men bringing hard currency and promises of a better life to young women in developing nations smacks of cultural invasion and opportunism of the worst kind.

As it seems we have some days up our collective sleeve, we head to an island for a bit of fun. But soon after arriving rain becomes more regular and intense, and our attempt at an idyllic break on a Thai island is all but a washout. Koh Samet would probably ordinarily be a fun place, but there’s not a huge amount to do when it rains. Well, that’s not entirely true, as the British teachers there for a long weekend demonstrate with copious amounts of Singha beer and cackling laughs. The rain doesn’t daunt the

