

## An Eye Opener

Whilst planning my trip to Thailand, one of the places I had decided to visit was Chiang Mai. The purpose was two-fold: one to visit my friends Marc and Dani whom I have known for many years, right from the time when we all three worked for UBS in Zurich and who in the meantime have given up their jobs to do something useful in this world by founding a charity organisation called “Child’s Dream” and secondly, as one of their sponsors who donates monthly towards this organisation, to see some of the projects on site. They said it was important for me to see how my money is spent!!

I informed Marc and Dani about my plans via e-mail and of course, they agreed immediately that I could stay at their lovely house in Chiang Mai and also visit some of the projects.

Having already spent one week in Bangkok, I flew to Chiang Mai on 12<sup>th</sup> May and was greeted heartily by these two young guys – I say “young” because quite frankly they are old enough to be my sons!! The first question was can you ride a motor-bike? I looked at them very strangely and replied definitely NOT but I could be a passenger on one. Anyway, we didn’t need motorbikes upon arrival because I was chauffeured off by the VW mini-van belonging to Child’s Dream.

Although I had visited Chiang Mai on previous visits, I still couldn’t remember a lot of the city. It just seemed to have grown much bigger with lots of new hotels and shopping centres. Anyway we arrived at the house which is outside the city and although situated on a busy road, one doesn’t hear a lot of the traffic. I was, of course given a room to myself including air-conditioning, which decided to function only on my last night there. As poor Dani was playing chauffeur not only for me but also for a couple of other guys whom I met later in the evening, he left again for the airport. Marc showed me the whole house which is beautifully, but practically furnished and easily kept clean. We then decided to do a bit of sight-seeing, i.e. this was my first experience on the motorbike driving into town with Marc as chauffer, who drove very cautiously.

Due to the heavy traffic and cars/motorbikes overtaking right, left and centre, I didn’t say much to Marc because I was too busy watching the other vehicles and my heart was in my mouth. We then stopped at a restaurant right on the river and I relished my first beer, which was definitely necessary after my experience on the motorbike. As it was beautiful weather, hot and sunny, we just sat there enjoying ourselves and catching up on various topics. During this conversation, Marc mentioned that we would be going up to Mae Hong Son to visit some of the projects and that plane tickets were already available.

Later in the evening we all met up at a Japanese restaurant where one can eat à discretion. The two other guys Dani picked up also joined us. This was my first contact with Carl and Thomas (don’t know their surnames) – two men who also donate their lives by helping the under privileged. Both Carl and Thomas come from Germany and work for an organisation called “Hope for Life”. Conversation during dinner was mostly about the projects which were under way and although I was not directly involved, it was interesting to learn how much energy and devotion had been put and was being put into the various projects by these four gentlemen.

I will not go into details as to how the two organisations are connected, but as far as I could gather, both support each other. This is extremely important especially as one is firstly dealing with a child's future and secondly the funds provided should be spent correctly.

Thursday was an easy day. After breakfast, Dani stayed at home to study for his forthcoming CFA exams and Marc and I decided to spend time or should I say money at one of the shopping centres and again we travelled with the motorbike. Unfortunately the bike was left in the sun so it took quite some time before I sat on it again as otherwise .....

After bringing all our shopping home, we all three on two motorbikes went into town again and met up with Carl and Thomas for a coffee. I was slowly getting used to travelling on the motorbike, but still couldn't get used to them slaloming in-between the cars. This time Dani was my driver and he too drove very carefully.

We decided to have a quiet evening at home and after a good dinner prepared by the two men and a fine bottle of wine, we went early to bed as the next day, my real adventure was to start.

On Friday we left for Mae Hong Son, a 35 minutes flight with a propeller plane from Chiang Mai. This was going to be my start with one of the projects. We drove with a tuk-tuk to the OPC ("Opportunities for Poor Children") shelter. This was my first contact with the children who are original Shans and were being taught the Thai language by two young teenage girls (both taken out of the claws of prostitution). I was also introduced to Kuhn Kham Chuen who is the driving force behind OPC and who also spoke perfect English. This gentleman had such a loving face that you just had to like him. – he seemed to me like a big teddy bear ... all cuddly! Although this trip for me was to get acquainted with the various projects, Marc and Dani still had to catch up on business. So whilst the three gentlemen discussed the various expenses and what was necessary for the on-going projects, I sat there and watched the children. What struck me was that there was no noise, no child disturbing the other one. Each got on with their own work. Unlike the modern schools in Europe the children, including the teachers sat on mats on the floor. There were no desks or chairs, but this didn't hamper the children from listening or doing their work. This impressed me tremendously and also saddened me at the same time. I thought these children know nothing else and are happy. Our kids back home are absolutely spoilt by having and getting everything they want – and if this doesn't happen then they start throwing tantrums.

After a while we went to see the new school which is being built not far from the OPC shelter. This was a short walk through dried ground, over a small stream on a wooden bridge and low and behold there standing were the two buildings with blue roofs. I noticed how excited Marc and Dani were to see how much had been done since their last trip. It must be very satisfying to see progress each time they come. On the other hand, there was still a lot missing, so after making a list of what building materials were required, we left the building site and decided to have lunch.

Eating in Thailand is always a pleasure, because there is always a restaurant available in every small village. Not only is the food cheap, but we ate local fish plus one of my favourite dishes (Lab gai – minced chicken salad) and everything was delicious. After lunch we went back to the shelter and were driven into town (by motorbike) so that we could make sleeping arrangements for the evening.

Dani and Marc stayed at the Holiday House and I found a room for myself at Friend House. Having deposited our necessities in the rooms, the next step was organising two motorbikes

because we had to go shopping – no not for clothes, or shoes, but building materials like cement, tiles for the bathrooms, paint for the walls, etc. everything necessary to continue with the finishing of the school.

Going around these different hardware stores, reminded me of my childhood days in Kampala, Uganda. They were similarly built and had everything one wanted. If something was not available one went to the next shop. It was also a case of finding the best prices and not paying too much. I quite enjoyed these trips even though I couldn't help much, but we were always greeted friendly and due to the heat, bottles of cooled water were always provided to quench our thirst.

During one of these shopping sprees, I met Benjamin. A man in his fifties who also comes originally from Burma and whose dream is to have a school to teach the children in his village English so that they can speak to the tourists and also have a better education in their future lives.

After our “shopping trip”, we drove back to our various guesthouses and decided to meet up later in the evening for a drink and then dinner.

Marc, Dani and I went to a Thai restaurant and had a wonderful meal. We naturally ordered a lot, but managed to eat most of it. Not only the view from the restaurant was beautiful, but the young waiters attending to our needs were quite attractive – but we all three decided to have an early night!

Next morning we all met for breakfast. I unfortunately didn't feel too well, maybe it was all those chillies I ate the previous night, but decided to stick to tea and toast. Our trip today was to go to the village where Benjamin lives. This is about a one and a half hours drive on motorbikes from Mai Hong Son, up steep roads with the sun in your face and the wind blowing in one's hair. Having stopped at a gas station to get petrol, I decided to drink a Coke which always helps when I do not feel well. This was great medicine because we could do the rest of the trip without me wanting to make “toilet” stops. Unfortunately, Kham Chuen's motorbike broke down so we left the poor chap to fend for himself and the rest of us continued on two motorbikes.

I must admit sitting at the back of a motorbike also gave me the opportunity to take in the surroundings, which were at times really striking. The versatility of the plants and trees on the way were breathtaking. From very hot temperatures lower down in the valley, we were all of a sudden confronted with cooler temperatures whilst going up these steep roads. At one time I thought to myself I need my winter coat, but all these changes were worthwhile and I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

We reached Benjamin's village called for some reason or the other “Tomato Village”. This village had quaint little wooden houses with friendly people who looked at one with great curiosity. From Benjamin's house you could see another village below which had its own “Wat” (Buddhist Temple). The whole area was very peaceful and besides the sounds of the odd motorbike or jeep driving up the hills, nothing could be heard.

Marc and Dani are helping to build a school behind Benjamin's house. The frame made out of good solid wood was already standing. Plans were made how to get water to the house, where the pipes should be laid, etc. etc.

I left the 3 gentlemen to these discussions. In the meantime Kham Chuen arrived with his motorbike in perfect shape. He too, had a look at the progress made with the school, further discussions took place and after a while we decided to go and have a coffee in a village where coffee is grown and I must admit it was the best coffee I had drunk in a long time.

This village with about 20 houses on both sides of the road is on a longish street which ends at a lake. This village is a project sponsored by the Royal family, so everything is kept very clean and neat and the people are also guarded by the military.

We drove down to the lake where if I had decided to take a walk along the paths would at some stage reached the borders of Burma. It is interesting to know that one is one country but at a stone's throw could very quickly be in another.

After saying our goodbyes to Benjamin, we drove back towards Mae Hong Son because we had to catch a plane late afternoon for Chiang Mai.

The guys, however, decided to show me another lake which is on Thai soil, has a Chinese village set right next to it and if I looked up the hills could even see the Burmese army. The trip to this lake was also fascinating and rich in nature. There was a field with wild horses, or we drove by rice fields. Everything was so peaceful and the air very clean. You really can forget all the troubles which take place in other parts of the world by going through these areas.

After we got back to Mai Hong Son, Kham Chuen invited us to his house to meet his family. Unfortunately his wife was working so I only met his two sons – both very cute. We then returned to our guest houses, checked out, returned the motorbikes and made our way back to the airport.

Whilst waiting at the airport, Marc and Dani suggested that I write about my trip. I said I would do so. This not only gave me the chance to recap and relive all that I did and saw, but it also gives me the chance to say that what these two young men have achieved in such a short time is tremendous and I am proud to be their friend and also proud of them.

Maybe you are wondering about the title “An Eye Opener”. Visiting the various projects and meeting Kham Chuen and Benjamin opened my eyes not only to what is necessary in the future but it also opened my heart to do something for the people, especially the children.

God willing and if at all possible, I will go back to Mae Hong Son and help to teach the children English or just be their friend, whatever is required from me.

Marc and Dani thank you for having given me the opportunity to do something worthwhile in my life.