



Wednesday, June 13, 2012

### On assignment: Week 1

On Monday I meet Ralf and Thomas from Raintree for lunch. Ralf is the founder of Raintree. He relocated from Germany in the 80s. Thomas moved here from Stuttgart about 6 years ago. They both speak Thai and together with Stefan have driven the expanding foundation into one of the most effective NGOs in Chiang Mai. After lunch I visit the office in a large leafy compound by a river just south of the City. I meet Khun Pe (the accountant) and Kruu Noi (the office manager). Like most people from this part of the world they are very welcoming, polite and friendly. I spend the afternoon learning about the Foundation's activities. Its staggering how much energy you need to run this NGO. Raintree has only a handful of staff in the central office supporting a plethora of projects over a large geographical area. 8 projects, 20 odd staff and volunteers, almost 200 children and then they still got to find time to raise donations.



The Raintree Foundation



Kruu Noi & Khun Pe

My first week is spent information gathering and talking to the guys and Pe. I am the second AFD volunteer. Luckily for me, Stephen the first volunteer, did some excellent work in his 3 week stint at the start of the year. I can hopefully continue in a similar vein and build upon his blueprint. I arrive in the office about 9am each day. The offices are large and roomy but still get hot in the tropical climate. Air con is necessary. I share an office with Thomas and Stefan and they suffer as I launch question after question at them about Raintree and Thailand in general. They good naturedly answer each and every one. I know I asked the same question more than once and even yet they never fail in providing a full answer and hide their irritation admirably. I then go and visit Pe and Noi on their side of the office and do the same. Again, they are exemplary in their accommodation of the intruder. We eat lunch together. One of the great joys of Thailand is the food. So tasty and creative. A little too spicy sometimes but always cheap. I pay THB 25 for lunch. That's 50p and its not an insignificant portion. Like many office workers in London I used to queue to buy an overpriced sandwich and forced it down me as soon as possible before returning to my desk. Sometimes I ate at my desk. That behaviour is hardly acceptable here. After lunch I use the Foundation's bike to cycle around the grounds. Raintree shares the area with the McKean Rehabilitation Center. The area is lush and green and surrounded by a river and canal. The Rehabilitation Center is a collection of large white buildings, churches and a collection of small cottages. It was founded in 1908 by Dr James McKean, an American Presbyterian missionary, as a hospice for leprosy sufferers. He acquired the land from the ruler of Chiang Mai who used the land as a corral for his elephants.



Hospice cottages, McKean

Apparently the locals used to believe that the spirit of a wild white elephant haunts the place. Now the hospice provides care to the disabled and elderly. As I cycle around I am warmly greeted with a "Sawadee krap/kha" and the famous Thai smile. One thing in particular amazes me. They have hitched a cart to the side of a motorbike. A patient sits in his wheelchair that has been lifted and secured onto the cart. The bikes handle bars have been relocated from the front of the bike to the cart. The patient is mobile and happily drives his bike from the sidecar.



I return to Chiang Mai at about 5pm each day. I spend my evenings wandering around town, trying a new restaurant each night (the street stalls have so far been the best- and a dish only costs around £1.20), reading and watching DVDs. Thailand is famous for its pirated DVDs. I have been good and become a respectable member of the local DVD rental shop.

Posted by Ruari at 6:35 AM

No comments:

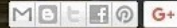


## First impressions of Chiang Mai

Having spent the last 4 weeks in the chaos of Manila and the quiet paradise of the Filipino islands, I feel like I have arrived in a modern country. The centre of Chiang Mai – the old town – is clean and orderly. The infrastructure is seemingly more advanced. In Manila the pavements are broken and you have to duck your head to avoid walking into sagging electricity lines. There is less poverty on display and I think a telling barometer of its greater wealth is represented by the greater number of cars on the streets (although the scooter is still king). This is my impression of the city centre. Another notable difference is the vast numbers of *falang* walking the streets (*falang* is the Thai word for foreigner). I am sure the further you go out from the centre and certainly in the hills the scene is very different. I check into a guest house charging £5 a night but even so I get a big room, cable TV and hot water.

Posted by Ruari at 6:31 AM

No comments:



## Night Train to Chiang Mai

I arrived in Chiang Mai at midday Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> June. I took the overnight train from Bangkok. The train was due to arrive at 8.15am- but at 6am the train stopped, reversed for 20 minutes and then remained stationary for 2 hours. Once on the move we gently rolled towards Chiang Mai arriving 4 hours late. Thankfully the journey was kept interesting by the mountainous jungle landscape and the crossing of several bridges over deep ravines with nerve tingling drops either side of the carriage. It was an interesting night too. I had a Korean businessman in the berth next to me and two Spanish backpackers opposite. The businessman looked bored and disgruntled sighing frequently and crossing his arms in abject boredom. He disappeared and reappeared a few hours later obviously the worse for wear. He was on a roll. He cajoled the Spaniards and me until we eventually relented into returning to the restaurant car with him. He spoke virtually no English. We had some beers with him. No idea what he was talking about and he held court for a good hour or so. Even better the restaurant car turned into a tacky kind of nightclub. Disco lights and trashy 90s pop. The waitresses stood up in the aisle between the tables to perform the Macarena in cowboy hats. I bet that doesn't happen on the overnight from London to Edinburgh. Anyway it was fun. Next morning as we crawled towards Chiang Mai the businessman began huffing and puffing again; he had his first beer at 9.

Posted by Ruari at 6:29 AM

No comments:

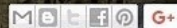


## Raintree Foundation in the Kingdom of Thailand

My 4 weeks in the Philippines is over and I have now moved onto The Kingdom of Thailand. I was genuinely upset to leave the Philippines. I had a great time on the assignment in Manila and my two weeks travelling on the islands have left a very strong impression. I will be back. However I have swapped one beautiful SE Asian country for another. I am here in Thailand to support the Raintree Foundation through the gospel of sound accounting practice (I do feel a little bit like a missionary); Raintree is an NGO that runs community projects in the hills of Northern Thailand. The NGO does some great work running children homes and providing foster care for hill tribe children who come from tough backgrounds of poverty and domestic strife. Raintree also supports hill villages through the installation of water pumps and Bio-Sand filters to ensure safe and clean water supplies. <http://www.raintree-foundation.org/>

Posted by Ruari at 6:25 AM

No comments:



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