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Chiang Mai, Thailand's Temple Of The Dogs

By Nola Lee Kelsey

Into the Arms of Buddha

It was 5 p.m. and I was stalking an angel on temple grounds. As the rain started, I wondered if she would show herself at all. Chiang Mai's rain patterns are directly correlated with the contents of my purse. The resulting meteorological phenomena means the rain could stop in a matter of seconds or pour down for days, depending on whether or not I'd brought my umbrella. I had not.

Squinting into the droplets, I glared up at the massive Chedi, a Lanna-style stupa which draws in visitors from across Northern Thailand. Sure it's impressive, but what I want to know is: How can you have such a large building sitting there for 700 years and not install any doors? Surely it has rained here before.

Where to hide? No way would I take shelter in the two beautiful little buildings in front of me. Stunningly designed, absolutely! But each houses a wax replica of an elderly monk sitting in a clear box. File them under "way too real looking" to pass time with. What can I say? Lack of blinking disturbs me. Beside, if wax can achieve the lotus position, why can't I?

To escape the deluge, my shelter took the form of a gazebo housing three large Buddhas. I would not be alone. One by one, temple residents trickled in. The first went straight to a mat he obviously kept laid out for these moments. Two more just sat down and licked themselves. By the time the skies opened up completely, three more temple dogs had meandered into the shelter.

Carrying dog cookies is just something I do. I could explain myself, but people either get it or never will. I tossed five treats out and turned to the sixth dog, Lek (Thai for little). She had vanished. Not possible. Would she go back out in the rain? Is there a dog door in the side of the Chedi?

I surrendered Lek's cookie to an antique looking Weimaraner. Predictably, that's when I spotted her. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed her sitting in the right hand of a Buddha. She yawned, nestled perfectly into Buddha's arms and fell fast asleep. After six years of visiting Wat Chedi Luang, the temple still brings a grin to my face. Must be why I keep coming back.

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Angels of Chedi Luang

Actually, as the donation box says, "It all started about ten years ago." Ajarn Rosocon, a teacher at Chiang Mai's Rajabhat University, decided to make the dogs of Wat Chedi Luang and the adjoining Wat Phan Tau her mission. Ajarn is Thai for teacher. Her best lessons were taught at this temple complex. Out of a potential hell these unique Buddhist sites have been transformed into a sort of canine Nirvana.

Initially, students and friends helped Ajarn Rosocon care for the dogs. They fed, sterilized, treated mange, vaccinated... whatever they could manage from the pennies (baht) they scraped together. The group was determined that the dogs of Chedi Luang and Phan Tau not suffer the life faced by so many abandoned and sick temple dogs across SE Asia.

In 2005 Ajarn Rosocon unexpectedly died. A friend, Ann Pierce, and another devoted friend/student Khun Soonthree stepped in. Adopting Rosocon's dream as their own, they went forward, honoring a friend's memory by helping the helpless. Ultimately, Khun Soonthree became in many eyes the "Angel of Chedi Luang."

Touring the Temples

Wat Chedi Luang has become a refuge not just for dogs, but for all animal lovers. If travelers become overwhelmed by the sight and plight of street dogs or simply need a quiet escape they visit this 'feel good' temple. Try it yourself. Play tourist, take photos, pat a willing pup, or bring a picnic - it's all good. Then at 6 p.m. watch for the angel. Over a year after Ajarn Rosocon death, Khun Soonthree still feeds and cares for the temple dogs.

Word has it she never misses a day. She was there in the rainy season when her own home flooded several times. She was there in the storm when Lek and I sought shelter. Her bright yellow rain slicker and massive pot of rice mix carried her through the tempest. If it is 6 o'clock in Chiang Mai, she's there right now.

Most people visit Wat Chedi Luang's temple complex for the impressive ancient Chedi. In addition, its beautiful grounds are perfect for strolling, quietly removed from the city's frenzy. Vendors offer food and cool drink. Trees and benches offer hospitable shade. The adjoining Wat Phan Tau casts a luminous teak glow over the Buddha images it houses.

Better still, the aptly named "Monk Chat" area offer travelers a welcoming invitation to pull up a chair and, quite obviously, chat with monks. A casual atmosphere where international visitors just hang out with Buddhist monks is a fabulous forum for asking questions and learning about one another's lives. In the background the voices of novice monks echo outward from classroom windows.

Who's Who?

Of course, for a few of us the temples house one more special treasure - the dogs. Not all are social. Not all are loyal. Some are downright ornery. But to know the "who's who" of Chedi Luang canines

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adds to the fun of any visit. True most tourists barely notice them - except to do a quick sidestep away. Like many regulars, however, I've given most nicknames.

Take Ren and Stumpy for example. Ren, a diminutive twig of a dog, is the duo's personality. Stumpy, who has a front leg contorted up underneath, provides a bit of size (a valuable asset in the world of temple dog politics) to the team. Side by side the pair can be found on a building patio overlooking the Chedi's north face.

Ren works her magic, charming the visitors with enthusiastic greetings. Then Stumpy shows his handicap, Abracadabra! Any traveler with half a heart makes a beeline for the ubiquitous `5 baht meat-on-a-stick' vendor. "No need to heat it sir."

Next, is Lady. She works with a local artist by delicately charming customers to his postcard rack. From there they get a close-up look at his lovely hand sketched works. I suspect Lady pulls in a commission.

Friendly Little Lek hovers at ordinary in the looks department. But every dog is beautiful when they sleep in Buddha's arms.

Not all is perfect. When I first saw Hiccup, I thought he had just been poisoned. Now I know the perpetual hack must be a medical problem. A bone lodged somewhere or... I can not say. While not overly social, Hiccup is stunningly photogenic.

At the front entrance of Chedi Luang are the three Golden Boys. At least I think they are boys. They rarely stand. This is the first place Khun Soonthree feeds each evening. Looking at the girth of the Golden Boys, it's a tad surprising there is any food left for any other temple dogs.

Across from them lives Lucy - the Teddy Bear dog. Had you seen her before her haircut, you would have expected to find seams and a price tag.

No one knows exactly how many dogs live at Chedi Luang, 60+ perhaps. Other notable characters include Cookie Monster, whose cantankerous attitude and dull looks are well compensated for by the fact that he is the only one who actually likes the dull old dry dog cookies I bring. Apparently others prefer Khun Soonthree's cooking to mine.

Living on the north face of the Chedi is Scar and her three puppies. Some dogs turn up at the temple pregnant. Still, her puppies Goldie, Blackie, and Coco Puff are well cared for.

The latest I have notice is named, "Oh Crap, Where Are My Ears?" Oh Crap..., or Ears for short, must be an abandoned pet. He is way too forlorn looking. It's as though he desperately wants a master. However, he's willing to settle for jerky treats - or bigger ears.

Chubby, a pseudo red Chow, and Pigeon Chaser top off the list of charmers over at Wat Phan Tau. Pigeon Chaser will pass any domestic chicken, but heaven help the wild birds if he ever sprouts wings. The young monks at Phan Tau are especially loving toward their smaller population of temple dogs. It

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is truly a joy to watch them interact. Saffron robes and happy tails flourish side by side.

The influence Chedi Luang has on animal lovers is best summed up by Ann Pierce. A former volunteer with the dogs, Ann has returned to California, but wrote this in an email interview:

"I cannot begin to articulate the impact the dogs, Ajarn Rosocon, Khun Soonthree, Wat Chedi Luang and all the other people I met through my time in Chiang Mai has had on me. I'm a very different person because of my experiences. My dream is to one day move back to Chiang Mai and continue helping the animals, no matter how frustrating it is at times."

Getting There

You can take a Tuk Tuk to visit Wat Chedi Luang. Most drivers know of this popular temple. On foot enter the old city from the famous Tha Phae Gate (east moat gate) and continue straight up Ratchadamnoen Road about four blocks to the first street light - Phra Pokklao Rd. Turn left. You'll immediately see the spectacular Teak Wood Temple of Wat Phan Tau on your right. Take a look inside. Wat Chedi Luang's larger complex is located next door.

Please remember Wats are Buddhist Temples first and foremost. Dress conservatively and behave respectfully. They don't have to let the visitors or the dogs stay. Honor yourself by the example you set.

How Can You Help?

Visit Chedi Luang, have a great time, then spread the word.

Feeding starts at the main entrance between 5:30 and 6:00 each night. Stop by and show Khun Soonthree your appreciation of her work.

Please make a donation in one of the temples three Dog Donation Boxes, set up around the Chedi. Your money goes to food, vaccinations, mange treatment, sterilization of females (and males when it can be afforded), and general care.

The main Wat is currently undergoing a massive restoration. Making a donation to support the construction work, the temple and the temple's school is good for all the residents - two and four legged (or 3.5 - sorry Stumpy).

Getting the Most from Your Visit!

Never approach any dog that seems reluctant. Get acquainted slowly with the friendly animals. Their continued socialization, or at least apathy to people, keeps them from wearing out their welcome at the temple.

Do not bring too many good tasting cookies: bacon, pork rings, a side of beef... The bigger dogs will follow and fights can ensue with defenseless smaller ones. Dry old dog cookies rate low on the taste scale. In other words, they are a perfect cheap way to give snacks to those that will eat them

eventually. If in doubt, donate the money instead. It goes to the right place.

Helping Dogs in Chiang Mai

If you live in Thailand, consider helping change the world one temple at a time. Get advice from angels and/or adopt your own temple - with permission of the monks. Make it a family, business, class or club project. Work with a reputable vet. Dr. Nook in Chiang Mai is ace!

Other organizations that help pets in the Chiangmai area temples include Lanna Dog Rescue and Care for Dogs. Both have web sites and are always looking for volunteers or donations of funds, foods and materials.

In addition, Care for Dogs also has a wonderful shelter offering adoptions of healthy rescued dogs and puppies to good homes. Remember, for each new pet that finds a family, space is made for a suffering dog to be brought into their facility. What a beautiful way to help one – dog at a time.

Nola L. Kelsey is the author of *Bitch Unleashed: The Harsh Realities of Goin' Country* and coauthor of the scathing political satire *Keeping the Masses Down*. She is currently wandering SE Asia for two years while she pretends to write her next book. Read more of Kelsey's work at,

<http://www.nolakelsey>

Travelling Thailand: 5 Top Destinations

By Robert Thatcher

With several sights to see and surprises to offer, Thailand could be one of the best locations you should not miss to visit. Culture, beaches, people, and heritage sites are some of the things you can expect when you travel to Thailand.

Bangkok - Traveling Thailand would not be complete without visiting Bangkok. As the nation's capital with an estimated population of over 10 million (including the neighboring provinces), this city is by far the largest in the country. The city is divided into 50 districts or khet but for tourists and those who are new in the place, 6 divisions would be more useful. These are Ratchadaphisek in the northeast section of the city, Sukhumvit in the southeast, Silom in the south, Thonburi in the west, Rattanakosin in the central north, and Phahanyothin in the north. The whole Bangkok district would give you a diverse taste of culture, history, religion, modernity, and fast-phase life. You can actually witness how all these blend together to comprise the whole Bangkok package. Buddhist temples, historical museums, towering buildings, contemporary restaurants and hotels, shopping centers, canals and rivers, and food make Bangkok a one of a kind city in Southeast Asia.

Phuket - Down south, Phuket features magnificent beaches, tropical sunsets, white sands, blue seas, and breathtaking sceneries. No wonder it is the most popular vacation destination in Asia beating every beaches of the neighboring countries. It has several beaches like Kata Beach, Karon Beach, Patong Beach, Kamala Beach, and Surin Beach. The island showcases several water sports and activities

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including parasailing, jet-skiing, and scuba diving. By day, Phuket is alive with beachgoers and shoppers and by night, lights, sounds, and party people dominate the whole island.

Chiang Mai - The second largest city in Thailand with an estimated population of more than 200,000. This city located in the northern part of the country offers greener and quieter city. Chiang Mai's tourism is becoming more and more popular and permanently settling at this city is very common. When you travel Thailand and visit Chiang Mai, you surely would want to see museums such as Hilltribe Research Institute Museum and the Chiang Mai City Arts & Cultural Center. With religion and history enriching the city, you can see several Buddhist temples such as Wat Chiang Mun, Wat Chiang Mun, Wat Phra Singh, Wat Oo-Mong, Wat Phra Jao Mengrai, Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep, and Wat Chedi Luang. The oldest temple dates back in the 11th century. Chiang Mai features attractions such as Chiang Mai Flower Festival in February, Bo Sang Umbrella & Sankampang Handicrafts Festival in January, The 2nd Orchid Fair also in January, and the Loi Krathong Festival usually falls in November.

Pattaya - Located 150 km. north of Bangkok, Pattaya is one of the most popular tourist destinations, which offers great beaches, beer and go-go bars, and a wide array of sport activities. Visit Pattaya when you travel Thailand is a must. Although it is the most overdeveloped part of the country in terms of tourism, prices in Pattaya still remains with reach. In fact, prices of foods, accommodation, and transportations are very affordable.

Krabi - In a small province of Krabi lies a small town with the same name. Paying a visit Krabi town when you travel Thailand is worth the time. Located south of Bangkok near Phuket and Phi Phi island, the town features great beaches along with high end hotels and not so expensive hotel that cater tourists of different classes.

Robert Thatcher is a freelance publisher based in Cupertino, California. He publishes articles and reports in various ezines and provides thailand travel resources on

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