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Hanging around in Thailand

By Gary Mortimer

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by: **Gary Mortimer**

Our trip to Thailand had been long awaited, originally planned for the winter of 94/95. My wife Karin had bought the maps and books and even packed; we were off. The balloon was ready at Thunder and Colt with a heavy duty basket tailor made for hard use overseas. And then they went bust. The delay meant that we missed the relatively short window available for flying in Thailand. So it was rainy old England for most of the winter and a rethink of the plan for us. I had been asked to go out there by Jon Nunns having previously worked for him in South Africa flying passenger ride balloons.

Jon's interest in Thailand comes from several commercial tours he's probably had the most experience of flying in Thailand. Sky balloons agent in Thailand managed to sell one of the first balloons to roll off the production line to a pair of business men who wanted to learn to fly and fly advertising banners in I come again, this time to train and point them the right way.

So after a fantastic summer passenger flying in England, it was off on a Qantas Jumbo from a snowy December Heathrow. We caught a connecting flight from Bangkok to Chaing Mai, a city in the North which was hosting the South East Asia Games, (SEA games) our first port of call. Jon, returning from SAGA, was there for three days to ease us into things.

Our hosts had managed to find sponsor's a cell phone company and we had a busy schedule ahead. The city was humming with activity related to the games and it was great fun to be there. We generally flew across the city in the mornings and over the main stadium in the evenings.

The stadium itself was about 10km from the centre of the city and lay under an east facing slope which of course moved into shade in the evening allowing us to fly over the stadium and away into open countryside, the mornings had the ability to take us up the slope and away to the west which was not a good idea as there was about 50km of forest and national park before the next road.

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It was always fairly calm and finding places to land was not a problem. We were not alone in the air a Carlsburg balloon had been shipped in from Europe and a Cameron Gas airship from America. Strangely neither thought to visit or call the international airport 8km south of the stadium. This caused some amount of trouble as Thai's love complicated permissions to fly and neither had any. As we did have permission we were contactable and received some amount of flack from their CAA. We smoothed the path quite well for them, prison was mentioned on more than one occasion!

The airship did a fantastic job seemingly never out of the air and carrying a TV camera beaming live pictures from the stadium. During the evening we tethered next to the stadium and the airship still plodded around dropping leaflets.

Thai's are football fanatics and the Asian cup was also held during the games in the evening. Our tethers coincided with all the home team games. As Thailand progressed through the ranks tickets sold out and it started to get ugly at the gates. For the semi final the fans burnt down the ticket tents in protest and several thousand extra tried to get in causing an outbreak of police brutality.

We tethered high allowing us to see the matches and carried PR people, they tended to want to stay up a while as we had the best view in the house!

On the first and last day of the games we flew into the stadium itself, the first flight by Jon, with me on board and the last by myself. What a fantastic feeling when you drop over the edge of the stadium roof and come to a dead stop amid all that noise and then pile out again, really good fun, it comes highly recommended!

The flights over the city were also commendable. The airport required us to stay below 1000' and if we required to fly higher then we had to call them on VHF. It worked well and of course flying across temples at low level was fascinating. Chaing Mai old city lies within a square canel and contains some 300 temples in total. It was here that we aimed to overfly every day. The River Ping winds it's way to the east of the old city and was very handy for big direction changes. As a rule most wind directions could be found and staying over the city centre for an hour or so and then climbing and departing was fairly easy.

I have to say that Northern Thai's seemed more fun loving than their Southern countrymen. To this end they enjoy letting off fireworks and tissue balloons carrying balls of burning rag to keep them aloft. Not uncommon to see 10 or so cross the night sky glowing red when drinking a beer. They climb quite high as well I flew with some at 3000'. On a couple of occasions, on landing villagers let off tissue balloons in our honour. They also flew bigger ones with strings of fireworks blasting away underneath. All good stuff for balloonists to watch. The last night of the games saw the launch of in excess of 1000 of these balloons in about 10 minutes from all around the stadium, and as it was a calm night it was the prettiest balloon thing I've ever seen.

So once that was all over it was off to Bangkok eight hours South by road. Unbeknown to myself we had come to the notice of the Prime Ministers office and were sought out for a job!

The deputy Prime Minister, Thakasin Shinawat, had said on coming into office early in 1995, that by

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the middle of January 1996 (or 2539 as it is over there) he would sort out Bangkok's traffic problems. He has been pouring millions of Baht of his own money into what is basically an impossible task. He has also been doing all sorts of stunts to show the people that he is trying to remedy the situation.

We were asked to fly him over Bangkok to observe the traffic from the air, this being in their words, a low cost solution. Permissions obviously had to be sought. We were summoned for our first meeting with the CAA on Christmas Day, at 10 O'clock, everybody apparently finding it amusing that I was missing my Christmas day. On arriving it transpired that they didn't really want us to fly as it is a military state and they didn't want me to see anything I shouldn't. The Kings Palace is a no no to fly over as you should never have your head higher than his! However the civilian run Prime ministers office had put big pressure on and they felt they had to relent and by the way, what could we tell them about the other balloon and airship in Chaing Mai (are you getting the picture that this is a warning). It transpired that we held the winning hand but they really had to tell us they did not like it first. There one and only request was that I didn't fly higher than 500'. Now what! a pleasure. Royal helicopters fly at 800' so that was that. I walked away on Christmas days with a piece of paper that ordered me to fly not above 500 AGL wherever I liked! A trip then to the tower at Bangkok International to let them know what was happening and pick up an air chart. They already knew all about us and wouldn't give me an air chart: military secrets and all that. If I'd known I could have brought them in England before we left!

Thus it came to pass that I was doing balloon traffic reports over the city of Bangkok with the deputy

Prime Minister on board and a film crew and five TV crews following through the traffic. We flew two days doing four flights. The flights themselves were pretty exciting to the point that I wouldn't rush to do them again. The tallest building is getting on for 1000' and we flew right between a bunch of them of course stopping all the traffic as we went. For those that know we launched from just above Siam Square and flew across generally towards the Queen Sirikit Convention centre and then over the river. The 500' level became a real pain in the afternoons as the OAT was some 37C and thermals were popping off all over the place I may or may not actually flown quite a bit higher at the beginning of these flights and came down when it cooled down, but perhaps I'd set the altimeter incorrectly!

So after all the fun and games it was off to train three people in total: our agent and the two business men. To start with we went off to Rayong a Province to the SE of Bangkok renowned for it's beach resort Pattaya. The guys for some reason where keen to train there. Unfortunately it proved too coastal and the sea breeze knocked out the evening flights and the land breeze in the mornings. Our permission was only for a 25 km square so we couldn't go any further inland.

Not a problem as one of the guys had relatives with a farm near Kanchanaburi, home of the bridge over the river Kwai in the west of the country. It was here that most of the training was done. It was an ideal area for ballooning, being generally flat with occasional 5–600 foot hills popping up like islands. The fields are mainly of Sugar Cane roughly three quarters and the rest are rice paddies. Everything went fine and after three return trips to Bangkok on business the guys where ready. They will be travelling to England to take their PPL's shortly.

One more surprise lay in store. Seeing as the flying into the stadium in Chaing Mai had gone so well I was asked to fly into another with a football to start The Thai football league. Not such a big deal but

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the stadium as 500 metres from the sea with houses all the way to it. Luck was on our side once more and after two days of strong monsoon winds on the day in question it was calm. We inflated behind a five story building which was right next to the stadium and bang on for the wind direction. The signal for us to launch was a series of fireworks the ninth being our go. At the practices which we couldn't fly into because of the wind we made sure that the marching bands had left and we had a clear stage. You know whats coming next. 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9 Go, we rose from behind the building to see that everybody was still stood there, down between them all I came our official hopped out with the football and handed it to the President of Yamaha and we quickly deflated the balloon,! no way was I going to fly out of that one!

So thats briefly it, I haven't touched on the really infuriating stuff, the stuff thats supposed to add character afterwards. I'll let you find out all those bits for yourselves.

If you are interested in going out there then the man to contact In fact the head man of the brand new Balloon Club Of Thailand is:-

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To update the story in June 04, the deputy Prime Minister became the Prime Minister and is poised to

buy a share of Liverpool Football club in the UK. I have since flown in Australia, Kenya and am now back in South Africa with my own ride business.

<http://www.airborneadventuresafrica.com>

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Visit Thailand - The Land Of Buddha

By Barney Garcia

Thailand is the perfect tourist destination for nature lovers, shopping lovers and for the followers of

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Buddhism. Thailand is all these teemed together and much more. Situated in the heart of South East Asia, Thailand has some of the best Buddhist temples, which offer peace, serenity and tranquility.

The Grand Palace and the Emerald Buddha

The temples and monasteries of Thailand date back to a few hundred years. The Emerald Buddha Temple is one of the most sacred sites in Thailand and requires visitors to be properly dressed before they can enter the holy place. The Jade statue of the Lord, which is elevated off the ground is a visual treat for visitors. This temple occupies just one corner of the court of the grand Palace.

Magnificent Bangkok

You must be out of your mind, if you visit Thailand and leave without visiting Bangkok. The capital of Thailand has everything that a tourist can dream of. Shopping plazas, Temples, Museums, Hotels offering exquisite Thai food, Islands, Beaches, Tall high-rises and a sprawling nightlife, Bangkok has it all. Be it the largest building in the world to be made of Teak wood, in Vinmanmek Teak Mansion, or the 46 meter long statue of reclining Buddha in the Wat Pho temple, you will never ceased to be stunned by the beauty of Thailand.

Shopping enthusiasts can head off to Siam Square, which is one of the most popular shopper's destinations in Thailand. Ma Boon Krong and Siam Center are two of the biggest shopping centers here. You can spend an entire day here and yet comeback unsatisfied. There are so many restaurants, theatres and shops to keep you busy. Thailand also has cheap roadside shopping opportunities for tourists who do not wish to blow away much money on shopping.

For Nature Lovers

Nature lovers can head straight to the Ko Chang national park that has many activities. Apart from the wildlife, tourists can also pursue diving, snorkeling or elephant riding over here. The place usually overflows with tourists all the time. Beach lovers can head off to Pataya, which is a pretty serene beach. It is located just 150 kms away from Bangkok.

Go discover Thailand!!

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