

Commentary...

# Visiting Thailand before pandemic

By Craig F. Eisenbeis  
Columnist

Many readers expressed interest in my previous articles about our Southeast Asia “Ghost Ship” cruise to nowhere. Many, though, asked what the cruise was like before the stop in Hong Kong made people aboard our ship into international pariahs. It was wonderful!

We saw, learned, and experienced things that can never be understood without the first-hand observation of international travel — travel that has since come to a worldwide standstill due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

My wife, Kathi, and I departed Sisters in a dark, January snowstorm. It was a relief to arrive in Singapore on time after more than 20 hours in the air. We flew into the wealthy city-state just after midnight, and my principal impression was of the vast infrastructure supporting the massive metropolitan complex stretched out beneath us. My second impression was of the hundreds, probably thousands, of ships anchored and moored in the harbor. I worked with ships and ports my entire Coast Guard career, and I never saw so many ships in one place.

Singapore is a place that is both familiar and unfamiliar. With an internationally acclaimed airport that looks like a sci-fi movie set, all road signs, and most commercial ones, are in English. Also of note, your visa is prominently marked in red letters “WARNING: DEATH FOR DRUG TRAFFICKERS.” There are also stiff penalties for things like spitting, feeding pigeons, and failure to flush the toilet. Public displays of affection are always frowned upon but, if same-sex, are punishable by stiff fines and jail time.

We saw impressive architectural triumphs and, in the few areas not covered by concrete and steel, dense jungle-like vegetation — Singapore

is, after all, little more than a degree above the equator. Our stay there was brief; and, not long after being transported to Holland America’s Westerdam, we were sailing off into the Gulf of Thailand.

Cruise ships such as these are like floating cities, with eating, shopping, recreation, and entertainment venues scattered throughout. Westerdam is a smaller, mid-size ship carrying fewer than 2,000 passengers. Still, first-rate shows are conducted in the huge theater with illusionists, comics, musicians, and — most notably — elaborate Broadway-style live productions with singers and dancers. Additionally, nightclub-like venues abound, with live shows ranging from classical, to blues, to rock.

The most obvious advantage to cruising is that you take your hotel with you; there is no packing and unpacking. So, after two nights and a relaxing first full day at sea — during which we found a nice couple from Illinois to play bridge with — our “hotel” had moved to Koh Samui, Thailand.

The highlight of Koh Samui was unquestionably riding an elephant on a trail through an eco-safari park. I can’t say that elephant riding is exactly the most comfortable mode of travel we’ve ever used, but it’s certainly the most unusual. Our elephant “operator” (mahout) has had his job for 7 years, and he works with only one elephant. He lives in a nearby home, which he pointed out to us; and he takes the elephant home and lives with it and cares for it. “Lily” is 25 years old and one of 25 elephants in this park.

Before the 30-minute ride, we were treated to a “baby” elephant show. These 2-3 year old “babies” are quite huge and very friendly; they seem to genuinely enjoy what they do and did various tricks and dances. They come right up to you in the hopes of getting treats, such as a bunch of bananas, which they wolf

down, peels and all. Elephants consume 250 pounds or more of food and 50 gallons of water every day.

While there have not yet been any reports of COVID-infected elephants, we have since learned that the pandemic is taking a serious toll on Thailand’s captive elephants. According to a BBC report, thousands of captive elephants are in danger of starving because Thailand has closed its borders to tourists due to the pandemic. Sadly, that closure has dried up the income flow necessary to support these interesting, and enormous, animals. In most areas, there is not enough forest left to turn them loose and let them forage. As a result, the elephant keepers are struggling to help their animals survive.

The elephants we saw seemed happy and well-cared for. Just as we had no idea how the coronavirus would affect our lives, we do not know what fates might be in store for the elephants.

The next day, we awoke to find ourselves in Laem Chabang, gateway to Bangkok, where we would spend the next two days. Although we saw a few stereotypical Thai water buffalos on the trip, Bangkok is a modern city of 10 million and hardly rural. In the morning, we had an expansive boat tour of Bangkok’s waterways, principally the Chao Phraya River, which provided an ideal avenue from which to view this exotic city and its unusual architecture. An unexpected sight, however, were the six-foot long water monitor lizards!

We were served an excellent lunch at the downtown Ramada Inn, where we began what would become a daily litany of superb Asian lager beers. Pre-pandemic traffic in Bangkok was terrible; and, at one point, we took 45 minutes to travel just three downtown blocks, forcing us to miss a drive-through of Bangkok’s Chinatown. We learned that 95 percent of



PHOTO PROVIDED

Craig and Kathi Eisenbeis ride an elephant in Thailand shortly before the pandemic crisis. The animals are now threatened with starvation due to the interruption of the tourist industry caused by the pandemic.

the very friendly and courteous population is Buddhist. Homes and businesses have little shrines outside that look like tiny temples on pedestals; they are referred to as “spirit houses” and are maintained to provide a revered, nearby residence for departed loved ones, as well as spirits that lived at the site before.

Our second day in the area centered around the town of Pattaya and the Wat Benchamabophit, or the Marble Temple, and its elaborate thousand-acre monastic grounds. This is one of the most visited sites in Thailand.

Later, we visited Sala Viharnsien Pavilion, which houses a spectacular collection of ancient Chinese art, principally statuary. The exhibits include the only permanent display of Chinese terra cotta warriors outside of China. I’ve seen many museums all over the world and am not easily impressed; I was very impressed. The final highlight of the day was a visit to a 390-foot image of Buddha etched onto a mountainside. Finally, we returned to the ship for an excellent steak dinner and an evening production show in the theater.

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