

Day 31 (Monday 10/20/08) Ko Samui, Thailand

At daybreak the Amsterdam was coasting slowly through the water 300 miles south of Bangkok near the island of Ko Samui, Thailand. The map on the right shows where Ko Samui is located on the globe. At 8am the ship dropped anchor about 3 miles off the coast with the village of Na Thon visible on the Ko Samui shore.

We disrupted the day's schedule for a local fisherman who had been anchored nearby. A Thai Police boat, there to welcome us, visited the fisherman and shortly he got underway to a different location. The fishing boat was one of the classic designs that our guide later claimed are unique to this part of the world. Here is a photo of the disrupted fisherman heading to a different spot. Note the direct drive propeller shaft that avoids the need for a complicated gear box but protrudes far out from the tilted motor.



Since we were anchored rather than tied up to a pier, it was necessary for the ship to put some of the tender boats in the water to carry passengers ashore. This was the first port on the cruise where tender boats were to be used. The boats were hauled out from their storage place and lowered into the water.

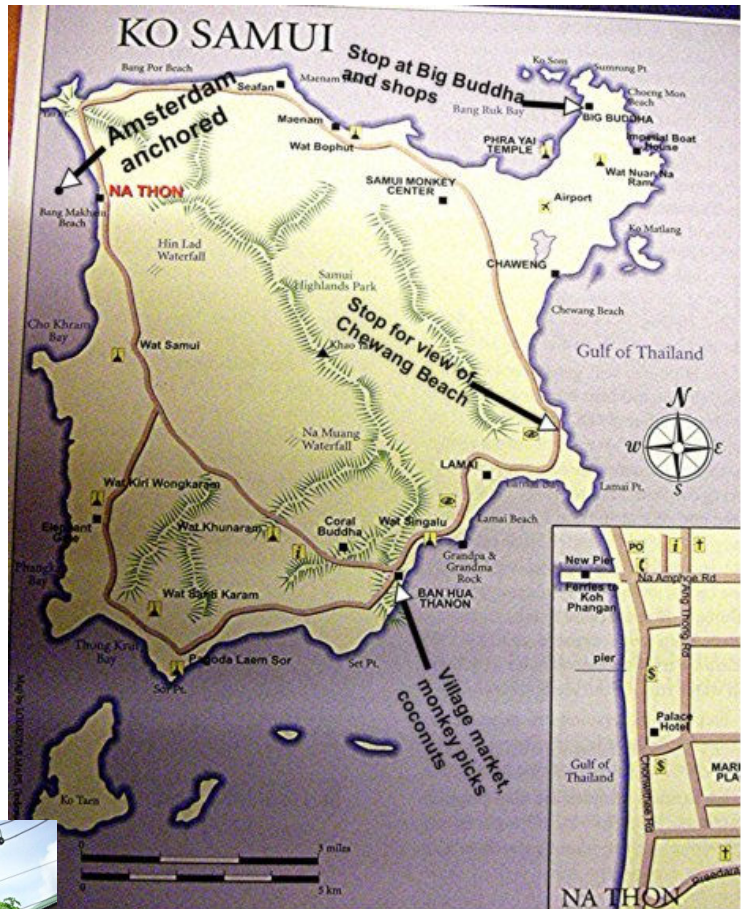


Ko Samui island which is 15 miles long and 13 miles wide is Thailand's third largest island (after Phuket and Ko Chang). The beautiful Chewang Beach area has seen some upscale condo and hotel development but much of the island is at a low economic level. We suspected this port was selected by Holland America at the request of the Thailand Tourist Bureau as an assistance to the local economy.

About 9am we picked up the identification stickers for our tour of Ko Sumui and we boarded a boat to take us to shore. We were surprised that the boat that took us to shore was not one of the Amsterdam's tender boats but a larger, well worn passenger ferry type boat, probably from the port of Na Thon. The ride to the port of Na Thon took about 30 minutes and we were dropped off at the dock where the busses were lined up for us. We found our bus #6 and climbed on board. The tour we had purchased was scheduled to take us around the island with several stops. The map on the right shows our starting point at Na Thon and the three stops we made.

Our first stop was at a village where we would tour a market place and see a demonstration of a monkey trained to pick coconuts in support of the local industry.

Our guide took us down the village



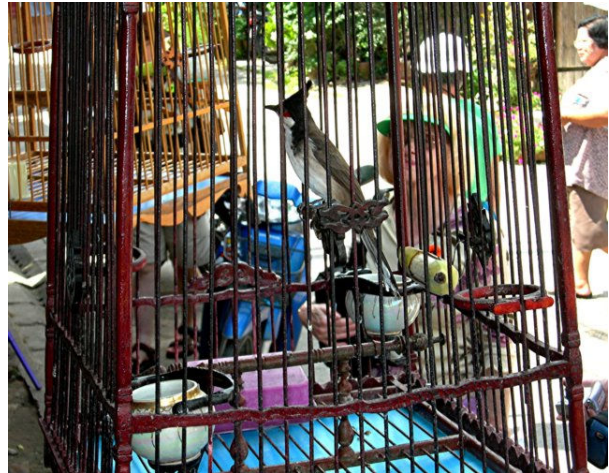
street which was pleasantly uncrowded compared with the conditions we had just experienced in downtown Bangkok.

We arrived at a thriving food market which had all the wares out on display. We took a few photos of some offerings that would be unusual in a typical US market. For example some skinned frogs caught our eye, and what looked like small sting rays were also there.

There were plenty of chili peppers and other spices, so loved by people from this part of the world.



Proceeding further down the street we came upon a small bird in a cage. The guide said that the bird was called a "Top Knot" bird and most families had one in their home. Here is a photo of one of the "Top Knot" bird.



Before we left the marketplace our guide showed us how one merchant was catering to the large number of people who drive motor cycles. These people don't burn much gas on the small island and visits to the filling station are inconvenient so they can buy their gas in these used glass beverage bottles. These bottles of gasoline sell for 25 baht (\$0.75 US).



After a short walk from the market we arrived at the sea shore and a community of fishermen. Our guide showed us where the boats were moored for the day. These small boats were of the classical Thai design pointed on both ends and with a high bow. It was small boats like these that we had been spotting at night far out to sea. They would be lined up on the horizon with their lights glowing brightly. We were told the lights attract fish at night.

Finally we could see up close where the bright light was coming from. In this photo on the right the heavy duty light fixtures can be seen at the top of a pole standing near the center of the boat.

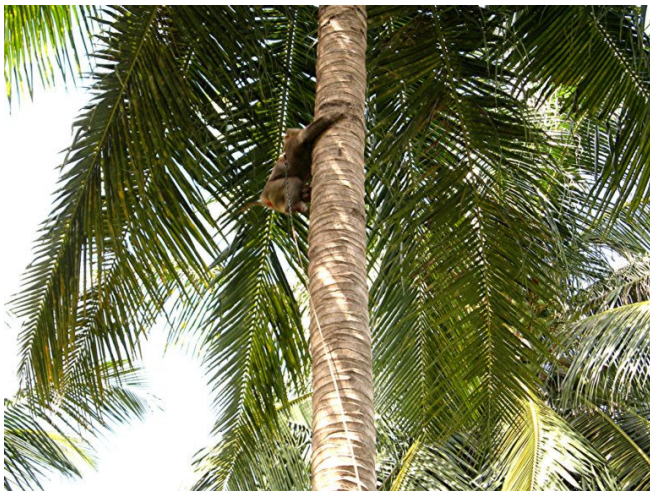
Note the propeller drive shaft extending far out from the stern of the boats.





We were then led through a picturesque coconut palm tree grove. We came to where a man waited for us with his Macaque monkey in tow. The claim was made that climbing the coconut palms was

dangerous for men so they trained the monkeys to do the job. It costs 6000 baht (\$180 US) and several months time to have a monkey trained for picking coconuts but it is worth the money.



With a few short commands from his handler, the monkey scampered up a nearby coconut tree dragging his leash behind him.

There was a cluster of coconuts at the top of the tree as shown on the right. The monkey twisted and pulled on several of the coconuts which fell to the ground below.



He then returned triumphantly to his owner carrying one of the fallen coconuts. We all gave a round of applause for a job well done.

At this point several people in our group took a well deserved "rest" at a nearby brick facility built for that purpose.



The temperature was warm and humid but with a slight breeze it was not unbearable. We were led back to the bus which,

thankfully, had some air conditioning going. The bus took us along the main road around the island. We noticed that all the roads and even driveways and alleys were all paved with concrete rather than less expensive asphalt. The reason for this material selection would be interesting to know but we failed to ask the guide. Even though the road surface appeared to be in good condition the expansion gaps in the concrete road resulted in a rather rough ride.

Our next stop was at a high point on the highway where a wide turnout had been provided. The viewpoint looked out over the Chewang Beach and the resort development behind the beach. This is the upscale part of the island that is being promoted as a good "get away" spot for South East Asia and other international vacationers. This picture gives a view of this appealing looking bit of real estate.



The bus then took us by some nice looking houses in the Chewang Beach area. The photos below illustrate some of what we saw.



We were now in the neighborhood of the "Big Buddha" Temple that is near the tip of a small peninsula. Our bus joined many others in the parking lot and we all got out to do our exploring.

The Big Buddha in shiny gold color with a wide stairway access dominated the scene



Shoes must come off before climbing the stairs to the Big Buddha Terrace.



It was possible to make an offering by attaching a gold leaf fragment to the Buddha statue in this tent-like side room.



A reclining Buddha statue was nearby.



A fierce looking demon, as shown below, was guarding the Big Buddha Temple as shown below. This demon was similar to those we saw at the Emerald Buddha Temple in Bangkok.



More playful demons were emerging from the water a short distance from the Big Buddha. Our typical Western lack of knowledge of Buddhist lore was a severe disadvantage in the interpretation of what we saw.



It wasn't necessary to be a specialist in Buddhist theology to understand the purpose of this pile of bricks shown below. One universal need of human institutions that is found where ever you may roam is economic funding. In the case of the Big Buddha Temple they were trying to raise some cash by selling bricks for a new facility. Each of these bricks, presumably had been purchased by a devout person whose name was written in blue ink on the brick.



As mentioned, the Big Buddhist Temple was surrounded by tourist souvenir shops. Barbara was caught here admiring this carved wooden elephant with uplifted trunk signifying "Welcome". The 150 pound shipping weight and 33,000 baht (\$1000 US) price tag killed the deal.



It was time to leave so we got back on the bus and headed back to the port at Na Thon. We got back safely and boarded the same local ferry boat that had brought us from the Amsterdam. It was crowded on the boat but we were glad to be getting back to the ship.



About 5:30 the ship pulled up anchor and got underway. We are now headed for Singapore and should arrive the day after tomorrow.

Bangkok visit, additional comment:

Before we visited Bangkok there were news reports of riots by people upset with the current government of Thailand. We didn't get many details on the riots but after evaluation of the situation Holland America decided the risk was acceptable and went ahead with the visit to the area. Apparently the focus of the rioters was the Thai government and not outsiders like US tourists. While our tour bus was taking us around Bangkok we passed by the government headquarters. There were concrete barricades and piles of truck tires blocking the entrance. Concertina razor wire was also strung out around the entrance. There were no rioters, soldiers or police officers in evidence.



We went by the facility too fast to get a picture of the scene but Barbara, with her quick trigger finger, was able to get this photo of a guard house that had windows broken out and some sign damage that may have been a result of the riots.

