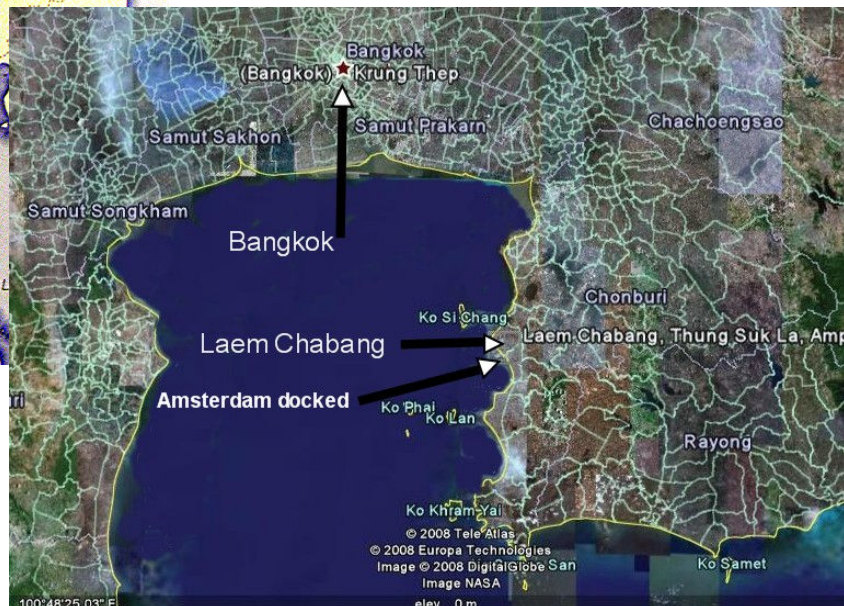


Day 29 (Saturday 10/18/08) Bangkok and Laem Chabang, Thailand

Today we arrived at the port of Laem Chabang in Thailand. Laem Chabang is the largest port in Thailand and is near the inland capital city of Bangkok. This map shown shows where Bangkok and Laem Chabang are located on the globe.



The map below, derived from a Google Earth image, shows more detail where the Amsterdam was located relative to Bangkok. It was about 60 miles by way of the road from the ship to downtown Bangkok.



About 8am the ship eased into its berth which was adjacent to the nice looking cruise ship terminal building shown in the photo below.



We had booked an all day tour called, "The Best of Bangkok". Soon after the ship docked we got our tour stickers and boarded the bus bound for Bangkok. Our guide's name was Tammy and she spoke good English. She said the 12 million population of Bangkok was 90% Buddhist, about 3% Hindu and 3% Muslim. The traffic in Thailand is left hand, like in Britain. The roads were in very good condition but crowded so it took about 2 hours to make the 60 mile trip in to Bangkok. We noticed that gasoline prices posted at service stations showed the equivalent of about \$3 US per gallon.

After about 20 miles of two lane surface streets we pulled on to an elevated freeway that took us all the way in to Bangkok. We took these photos, tinted blue by the bus window, as we went along.

Outside of Laem Chabang there was pampas grass growing by the side of the road. Occasionally we saw what looked like very basic houses that were located close to communities of more expensive homes.



One reason that the freeway was elevated may have been the swampy nature of the land in this region. The photo below shows a residence and the dense growth surrounding it.

Some of the homes shown below were built on pilings surrounded by water. This was the rainy season so perhaps this high water is not an all year situation.



We went by the building with a large crowd in front of it as shown below. The guide said it was the City Convention Hall. It looked like a significant convention was taking place.



We entered Bangkok on the freeway and it looked much like any large city might look in the US.



Soon we took an exit off the freeway and began to negotiate the crowded streets of Bangkok as shown below. We were on our way to the Flower Market.

The vehicle near the center of the photograph is a popular low cost three wheeled taxi that carries two people comfortably and is called a "Tuk-Tuk". We



we were let off the bus and were guided down the crowded sidewalk between street vendors. Tammy held our tour group number 10 sign high in hopes that she would not lose any of us.



Lotus blossoms like these shown above can serve a special purpose in the sprinkling of water onto the pilgrim during prayer.

After touring the Flower Market it was time for lunch. The bus took us to the Royal Princess Hotel which was set up to serve a Thai buffet to about 4 bus loads of Amsterdam passengers on tour. Barbara snapped a couple photos of the attractive presentation that the hotel had provided.



She caught John and MaryAnn enjoying their Thai lunch.



After lunch the bus took us to the Royal Palace and the Emerald Buddha. At the entrance to the site was a large sign showing the picture of Princess Galyani Vadhana who last November eleventh died as a result of breast cancer. The Buddhist tradition in Thailand is to keep the body of royalty preserved in a casket, lying in-state, for exactly one year from the day of death. Then the body is cremated and the urn containing the ashes is placed in the royal mausoleum. The body of Princess Galyani Vadhana will be cremated next month on November eleventh.

As you approach the grounds of the Royal Palace and Temple of the Emerald Buddha the spires of three large structures are visible above the wall. The first one is the gold covered stupa containing relics sacred to Buddhists. The second monument contains is a library of sacred Buddhist scriptures. The third is the Royal Pantheon where statues of past sovereigns of the ruling Chakri dynasty are enshrined.



After obtaining the tickets for our group our guide, Tammy, led us onto the terrace of the Emerald Buddha. In addition to the three structures described above, the courtyard contains

fascinating statues of demons related to the Buddhist religion. They all have names in Thai Buddhist lore but the brochure we had calls them "mythical beings". From other information we obtained it appears that, like most religions, Buddhism has many sects. From our superficial observations it is clear that the Buddhism practiced in Thailand differs from that of China. Here are some of the demons we saw portrayed on the terrace.



In the picture below the demons are the three guys with pointy hats.



Our friend, MaryLou, came by sporting a new sarong she had just bought for a dollar in order to cover her shorts which are banned in the Emerald Buddha Temple.

Taking a risk that this new fashion statement may catch on, a picture of MaryLou, Barbara, and demon are shown below.

Very aware of world customs they are showing the traditional Thai "welcome" gesture with hands held in prayer position.



In front of the temple of the Emerald Buddha was a place where Buddhist pilgrims could make their offerings. There were religious officials there to help in the procedure as flowers and gold leaf fragments were placed on the altars.



The statue of Buddha on the left was covered with gold leaf fragments.

The main objective of the visit was to see the famous and revered Emerald Buddha. The Emerald Buddha was in fact carved from a block of green jade. It was discovered in 1434 in a stupa in Chiang Rai. It was covered with plaster but a little bit of the green jade was showing where the plaster had chipped off. A Buddhist abbot thought the green stone was emerald and thus the legend of the Emerald Buddha image began.

It was necessary to take off your shoes before entering the temple of the Emerald Buddha. There were signs saying the management was not responsible for lost shoes but we went ahead and put ours on a rack provided.



Before we entered the temple our guide showed us a picture of the three seasonal costumes worn by the Emerald Buddha. There are separate costumes for summer, the rainy season (which we are in), and winter. There was also a last minute sign saying we should show respect by not pointing our feet directly at the Emerald Buddha.

After all this fanfare we were not allowed to take pictures and he was up on a pedestal about 25 feet from us. All we can say about the Emerald Buddha is that he was about 2 feet tall and 1.5 feet

wide at the knees with a green head and body covered on the left side with a gold cloth which is the rainy season costume. We filed by with the others, put our shoes back on and went on with the tour which led us to the Royal Palace. For anyone wanting pictures check out the website at <http://wat-thai-temple.blogspot.com/2007/04/emerald-buddha-in-wat-phra-kaew.html>.

The King of Siam (Rama the 9th) does not live in the Royal Palace. The king moved to more desirable surroundings years ago when Bangkok became too crowded and polluted. Nevertheless, the Royal Palace is a thing of beauty as shown below.



We left the grounds of the Royal Palace and Emerald Buddha Temple and the bus took us to the Gem Gallery. The Gem Gallery is touted as "The World's Biggest Jewelry Store". They have developed a great marketing scheme where tour buses drop off their passengers before taking them back to wherever they came from. A smartly dressed sales person greets each person or couple and proceeds to escort the guests through the expansive store.

On the right is a view of the sales room filled with trapped shoppers.



We were adopted by a pleasant lady who introduced us to a display case filled with ruby and sapphire necklaces, and rings. One item caught our eye but our interest quickly dropped off when we got the price of \$6000 US. That's not the kind of expense we were looking for with the stock market and economy in-general crashing down around the world. She stuck with us through beautiful products but with steadily decreasing value. We ended up buying \$40US worth of silk pillow covers and some yardage. Hiding her disappointment she let us take her picture.



After the allotted 45 minutes in the Gem Gallery we boarded our bus and headed back to Laem Chabang and the Amsterdam. On the way back through Bangkok on the elevated freeway we got another view of downtown Bangkok. The guide pointed out what she said was the tallest building in the world at one time. Now she said it is number eight. It didn't look tall enough to qualify for what she claimed but we took this picture through the tinted bus window for the record.

After a two hour ride we made it back to the Amsterdam. We were a few minutes late but managed to get to our early dinner seating.

