

TRIP TO THAILAND AND MYANMAR (BURMA)

Gate 1 Discovery Tours

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Mike and I like to travel to Asian countries...gets pretty hot and humid at times but we find lots of interesting places, people and sights. It was almost the end of rainy season and we lucked out with not much rain on our excursions. This year we picked a trip with Gate 1 Discovery Tours to Myanmar with days spent in Bangkok, Thailand. It was our second trip with Gate 1 Discovery Tours, we took a trip with them this year to Greece in June. We had (3) nights in Bangkok, (2) nights in Yangon, (2) nights in Bagan, (2) nights in Inle Lake and (3) nights in Mandalay. Mike and I stayed (2) more days in Bangkok, Thailand. Our group consisted of 16 people. We had a very nice guide named Kyaw Minn in Myanmar.

We arrived in Bangkok, Thailand's capital city and was met by Parinya Khamchai "Ya" who was our local guide for Bangkok. We stayed at the Ramada Plaza Bangkok Menam Riverside Hotel. The next day we had a short orientation meeting and continued on a city and temple tour. The coach took us through the streets of Chinatown and then to Wat Po, the oldest and largest temple in the city, with the giant reclining Buddha over 150 feet long and almost 40 feet high. The temple complex houses the largest collection of Buddha images in Thailand. The temple was also the earliest centre for public education in Thailand, and houses a school of Thai medicine. It is known as the birthplace of traditional Thai massage which is still taught and practiced at the temple. Before returning to the hotel the coach took us for a ride down Royal Avenue where most of the Government offices are located and the King's Place.

The next day we took our flight to Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon) the largest city in Myanmar (formerly Burma). A mix of British colonial architecture, modern high-rises and gilded Buddhist pagodas define its skyline. Its famed Shwedagon Paya, a huge, shimmering pagoda complex, draws thousands of pilgrims annually. We stayed at the Kandawgyi Palace Hotel, overlooking Kandawgyi Lane and the gilded Shwedagon Pagoda.

Our exploration of Yangon began at the Bogyoke Aung San Museum, former home of the father of Nobel Peace Prize laureate and State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi. The two-story museum was Aung San's last residence before his assassination in July 1947. We continued to visit the Sule Pagoda and complex. The Sule Pagoda is located in the heart of downtown Yangon. According to legend, it was built before the Shwedagon Pagoda during the time of the Buddha, making it more than 2,500 years old. According to Burmese legend the site where the Sule pagoda now stands was once the home of a powerful Nat (spirit) named Sularata (the Sule Nat). The king of the Nats, Sakka, wished to help the legendary King Okkalapa build a shrine for the Buddha's sacred hair-relic on the same site where three previous Buddhas had buried sacred relics in past ages. Unfortunately, these events had happened so long ago that not even Sakra knew exactly where the relics were buried. The Sule Nat, however, who was so old that his eyelids had to be propped up with trees in order for him to stay awake, had witnessed the great event.

The gods, Nats and humans of the court of Okkalapa therefore gathered around the Sule Ogre and asked him the location, which he eventually remembered. Outside the Sule Pagoda were people selling post cards, flowers and one girl had a basket of live finches that for a fee you could release one. So sad as the birds were crowded in the basket and appeared almost dead. We walked through Mahabandoola Gardens (Victoria Park) with its striking white obelisk, the Independence Monument, honoring Burma's freedom from Great Britain in 1948. After lunch we went to the famous Bogyoke Aung San market known for its colonial architecture and inner cobblestone streets. The market is a major tourist destination, dominated by antique, Burmese handicraft and jewelry shops, art galleries, and clothing stores. Mike and I had fun running around taking pictures of a bunch of children monks begging for alms at the market booths. One child had a megaphone announcing his pleas. The market was a maze of isles with shop keepers selling their wares. Amongst the shop keepers were people selling food cooked on the spot. I purchased a few wooden puppets and some wooden buttons. Mike purchased a longyi, a sarong worn by both men and women in Myanmar. Our guide took us for a short walk down a main street to the post office for our group to get postcards and stamps. I ran upstairs to get my postcard handstamped for my collection. As I am a retired postal worker I was reminiscing that the sorting of mail was done the old fashion way by hand and not machines. As we walked down the street our guide stopped our group at a stall selling betel quid a name given to small parcels that typically contain areca nuts, (commonly referred to as betel nut), wrapped in a betel leaf coated with slaked lime. Some contain tobacco. Spices may be added for taste in different parts of Asia, including cardamom, saffron cloves and sweeteners. Around 600 million people worldwide are thought to chew betel quids, making them the fourth most commonly used psychoactive substance after tobacco, alcohol and caffeinated drinks. They're predominantly chewed in Asia, where their use isn't limited to adults. You can see it in the research, and on the teeth of some children. A pack of three costs 100 Burmese kyat, around 10 U.S. cents. Heavy users of betel quids reveal their addiction when they smile. Their teeth are stained a reddish-black, dyed from years of chewing the potent parcels

We continued to the Shwedagon Pagoda, the most sacred Buddhist pagoda in Myanmar, as it is believed to contain relics of the four previous Buddhas of the present kalpa. These relics include the staff of Kakusandha the water filter of Konagamana, a piece of the robe of Kassapa, and eight strands of hair from the head of Gautama. In addition to that, just the stupa alone of the pagoda is covered with 8,688 solid gold blocks. The top of the stupa holds 5,448 diamonds and a combination of 2,317 sapphires, rubies and topaz. There is an emerald placed in the middle. It is there to capture the sun's rays, and does that best at sunrise and sunset. Below the golden stupa are 7 more gold blocks, which are attached to 1,485 bells. Of those bells, 420 are made of pure silver, and 1,065 are made out of gold. It is important for Burmese Buddhists to know on which day of the week they were born, as this determines their planetary post. I was born on a Saturday and Mike was born on a Thursday. We went around the complex to find our planetary post. There are eight planetary posts, as Wednesday is split in two (a.m. and p.m.). They are marked by animals that represent the day — garuda for Sunday, tiger for Monday, lion for Tuesday, tusked elephant for Wednesday morning, tuskless elephant for Wednesday afternoon, rat for Thursday, guinea pig for Friday and naga (form of a snake) for

Saturday. Each planetary post has a Buddha image and devotees offer flowers and prayer flags and pour water on the image with a prayer and a wish. At the base of the post behind the image is a guardian angel, and underneath the image is the animal representing that particular day. The base of the stupa is octagonal and also surrounded by eight small shrines (one for each planetary post). It is customary to circumnavigate Buddhist stupas in a clockwise direction. I simply loved this place. We walked around on the tiles with bare feet looking at all the golden shrines shining in the sun. On top of the shrines were bells ringing in the soft breeze. Each planetary post had a long row of small metal dishes to put oil in to burn as an offering. Could have spent more time at this place as it was so interesting...one of our favorite places in Myanmar. In the evening our group had dinner at Karaweik Palace on the eastern shore of Kandawgyi Lake. The barge was designed by Burmese architect U Ngwe Hlaing, who based it on the Pyigyimon royal barge. Construction began in June 1972 and it was finished in October 1974. The barge is a two-storied construction of concrete and stucco, reinforced by iron rods, with a pyatthat-topped roof, and two reception halls and a conference room.

After a short flight we landed in Bagan, southwest of Mandalay. Standing on the eastern banks of the Ayeyarwady River, it's known for the Bagan Archaeological Area, where more than 2,000 Buddhist monuments tower over green plains. We stayed at the lovely Thiripyitsaya Sanctuary Resort in our own bungalow in a garden setting. The outdoor pool was wonderful overlooking the gardens and the river. The breakfast and lunch at this resort was excellent. After breakfast we went to visit the golden stupa of the Shwezigon Pagoda, a prototype of Burmese stupas, it consists of a circular gold leaf-gilded stupa surrounded by smaller temples and shrines. We left to go to explore the cave temple of Gubyaukgyi, Gu meaning "cave" in Myanmar dates from the early 13th century and has a pyramidal spire. It is interesting for the fine frescoes of scenes from the Jatakas. We continued on to Dhammayangyi Temple the most massive structure in Bagan. After murdering his own king father, Narathu ascended the throne of Bagan and due to that, he built this temple. It is said that Narathu oversaw the construction himself and that masons were executed if a needle could be pushed between bricks they had laid. But he never completed the construction because he was assassinated before the completion. Next stop was at the Manuha Temple, the building contains three images of seated Buddhas and an image of Buddha entering Nirvana. Manuha Temple is one of the oldest temples in Bagan. We also visited the Ananda Temple, this Buddhist temple houses four standing Buddhas, each one facing the cardinal direction of East, North, West and South. The original South facing Buddha (called the Kassapa) has a unique architectural display, as, when it is viewed from close quarters depicts a sad look, however, the same image viewed from a distance gives an expression of mirthfulness. Our last stop of the day was to the Shwesandaw (means 'golden holy hair') Pagoda for sunset. The pagoda contains a series of five terraces, topped with a cylindrical stupa. Mike and I took the stairway to the top and to our delight it was the most beautiful 360-degree views of the landscape dotted with thousands of Buddhist monuments. There were hundreds of locals and tourist crowded on the five terraces by the time the sun set. You had to climb the stairway barefooted with legs and arms covered as was customary at all the Buddhist temples.

We started the next day at the humming Nyaung-U riverside market where locals go to get fresh produce and vegetables. We stopped at a palm tree workshop; to learn more about collecting toddy (palm tree juice), an ingredient used for many diverse products, including liquor, molasses and oils. We were served tea and a plate of snacks consisting of puffed rice, peanuts, chick peas, minced tea leaves and roasted sesame seeds. Our lunch was at a local family's home. The family cooked our lunch of local Burmese cuisine. The ladies were excited as I gave them each handmade button bracelets I had brought from home as gifts for appreciation of opening up their home for our lunch break. We stopped at a lacquer shop where lacquer boxes, vases and furniture were being made. In the showroom were lots of items to buy. I purchased (3) lacquer boxes decorated with gold leaf designs. To end the day we went on a sunset cruise to enjoy the sweeping views of the city and its temples.

We had an early morning flight to Heho (Inle Lake). Upon arrival we traveled to Pindaya famous for its ancient limestone caves at the Shwe U Min Cave Temple. This was another of our favorite places to visit. Shwe U Min is a huge, convoluted complex of limestone grottoes crammed with Buddha images made of gold, silver, marble, lacquer, teak and ivory. The southernmost Pindaya cave can be entered and extends for about 490 feet along a well-worn path. It is known for its interior which contains over 8,000 images of Buddha. Some of the older statues and images in the cave had inscriptions dating to the late 18th century, or early Konbaung period, and the earliest one dates from 1773. There were some images without inscriptions that are older, but based on the style elements, Than Tun believes that none of them is older than the early 18th century and even suggests 1750 as the earliest possible date. Within the cave, there are about seventy unique images of the Bhisakkaguru tradition dating to the late 18th century. They are unique in that the styling of hair, eyes, nose, ears and robes, they are different from most other images from Burma. The salient feature of this type of image is the holding of a seed in the upturned right palm. Than Tun reports that such images are found nowhere else in Burma, and based on Buddhist iconography, that these images are from the Mahayana tradition, and the conjecture is that the Pindaya cave at one time served the Mahayana Bhisakkaguru cult. We stopped later at a shop that made the Shan-paper used for many products; paper umbrellas to sheets of paper used to line windows giving the look of stain glass. We stopped at a winery for a glass of wine with a plate of cheeses and then on to Inle Lake for dinner and overnight. We stayed at the Myanmar Treasure Resorts, Maing Thauk Village. To get to the resort our group boarded several long flat-bottomed boats that sat (4) passengers and our luggage. The boat propelled with great speed through the passage of Inle Lake to our resort. It was quite the ride...with boats coming back from the other direction, people fishing and stilt houses lining the shores. At our resort we all got our own bungalow on stilts. The room was very nice with a porch to sit out back and look at the lake and watch the water birds. It had two nice beds with mosquito nets to pull around each bed. A nice sitting room with safe and refrigerator. The bathroom had a bathtub-shower combo inside and the other shower led to an enclosed area outside with a shower with no roof so you could look at the stars while taking your shower. Nice gift shop at the resort with items made by locals. Entertainment was a man and his guitar singing country songs. Our guide had a good time singing out loud the American songs.

Next morning our group participated in a cooking class with a chef at the Thahara Inle Heritage. We boarded the long flat-bottomed boats and headed out into the lake. Our boat got stuck in the vegetation of the lake till we finally got out of the muck. The ride was very nice passing many homes, restaurants and shops on stilts. When we got to Thahara Inle Heritage's cooking class we were greeted by the top chef. We each were given a cooking station and an assistant. The Hospitality Vocational Training Center trains young men and women how to prepare food so they can get a job when they graduate. We were to prepare Intha style green bean salad with roasted peanut powder, fish soup with roasted rice powder and fresh mint leaf, fried spring onion with tamarind sauce, Shan style chicken curry with potato and stir fried seasonal vegetables. Our desert was made by the staff with a choice of banana or chocolate cake. Mike and I had never done a cooking class before believing it would be boring, but it was pretty fun. Our group first went to the gardens at the facility that had the vegetables we were going to use in our recipes. We picked our vegetables and put them in our individual baskets. Then we went back to our stations and the chef told us what ingredients to use to make our dishes. We chopped, cooked and prepared the many dishes and when we were finished we were led to the dining room to eat our food...which turned out delicious. After lunch we boarded our boats and the guides took us to a silver shop and a silk shop where goods were had for sale. I purchased (3) silk scarves and Mike got (2) silk shirts. I also purchased (2) lotus silk purses. There is only one place in the world where the fibers of the lotus plant are woven into scarves and shawls. It is a form of weaving that is entirely unique to Myanmar (Burma) and specifically to Inle Lake. Extracting the fiber, a few strands at a time and combing the strands is serious craftsmanship. As we watched the lady extracting the fine fibers of the lotus plant we could here the constant clacking of the looms in the background. We went to watch the weavers do their craft. The Shan-bags, used daily by many Burmese as a tote-bag, are produced in large quantities here. We again boarded our boats and went for a ride through the lake to the stilt-house villages and to the beautiful floating gardens of the Intha tribe. The farmers gather up lake-bottom weeds from the deeper parts of the lake, bring them back in boats and make them into floating beds in the lake. Their garden areas are then anchored by bamboo poles. These gardens rise and fall with changes in the water level, and so are resistant to flooding. The constant availability of nutrient-laden water results in these gardens being incredibly fertile. Rice cultivation is also significant. On our trips up and down the lake we got to see the Intha "leg-rowing" fishermen, members of a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group living around Inle Lake, who propel themselves across the lake's surface by wrapping one leg around oars fixed to the stern of their flat-bottomed canoes. Their upright position has a number of advantages – they can see across the lake to spot the dense hyacinth weeds that are scattered just below the surface of the lake. At the same time they can keep watch for the tell-tale bubbles of shoals of fish. The deceptively simple looking basket net has a spear sticking through the top of the frame. The spear is used to stir the weed below, exposing the fish. The fisherman can feel the fish bumping against the frame and releases the net to capture the fish. It was an amazing site to see. Before heading back to the resort we stopped at the Shah-style Nga-Phe-Chaung Monastery. A wooden monastery built on stilts over the lake at the end of the 1850s. Cats living at that monastery jump through hoops. The monastery is also known for a collection of old Myanmar's Buddha images from different areas that are worth seeing.

Saw lots of cats but none of them were jumping through hoops. Mike took a walk later to the neighboring village next to our resort. He found a nice temple where two women were sitting in front. One had stained red teeth from chewing betel quids. They were pointing at Mike's legs as he had on shorts and his legs exposed. He thought maybe they were interested in the color of his legs but they were interested in the fact that he had lots of hair on his legs..lol. Good thing Mike didn't show them his chest! On the way back Mike saw a beautiful lunar moth on the walkway and took me back later and the lunar moth was still there.

Today we took our flight to Mandalay. We settled into Mandalay Hill Resort for the night. We went to visit Kuthodaw Pagoda at the base of Mandalay Hill. The 729 whitewashed pagodas that surround it were erected in 1872 during the Fifth Buddhist Synod to individually house the marble tablets upon which, for the first time, the entire Tipitaka was recorded in Pali, veneered with gold leaf. When first unveiled, it took, 2,400 monks six months to recite the text, which is often dubbed "the world's largest book". The Kuthodaw Pagoda was comprehensively plundered during the annexation of 1885. British looters stripped the hti (umbrella) of its precious stones, peeled the gold leaf from the pagoda, carried off 6,570 brass bells from the subsidiary stupas, disfigured statues and used the stone tablets of the Tipitaka to build a military road. It took over a decade to repair the damage. We continued to visit Shwe Nandaw Kyaung at one time part of the royal place, the only building from Mindon's "Golden City" to have come through World War II bombing intact. It was dismantled and moved, piece by piece, to its present site by Thibaw after his father died inside it. Thibaw initially used the building for private meditation, but later gave it to the monks as a monastery. The great teak palace complex has intricate woodcarvings of ornamental figures or flowers on most of its surfaces. Although the monastery was once gold-plated and adorned with glass mosaic, both inside and out, all that's left of the gold today is layered on the imposing ceiling. Thibaw's couch and a pelican of the royal throne are displayed inside. Only males are allowed to view closeup that display.

After breakfast the next morning we boarded a boat for a cruise on the Ayeyarwaddy river to the ancient city of Mingun. We walked the plank to depart our boat and greeting us in the muddy bank were people hawking their postcards, stone necklaces and bracelets. You hear the familiar phrases: "You are so pretty", "what's your name" and "buy my stuff". You usually get a person that follows you the whole time. Our guide said that the hawkers started about three years ago and now tourist are stuck with them. Once on land we visited the Mingun Temple started by King Bodawpaya in 1790 but never completed and its 90 ton ringing Mingun bell, once the world's largest until being superseded by the 116-ton Bell of Good Luck at the Foquan Temple, Henan, China, in 2000. By the time the construction of the Mingun Temple was abandoned, the pagoda had attained a height of 50 meters, one third of the intended height. King Bodawpaya died in 1819, aged 75, having ruled for 38 years. He left 122 children and 208 grandchildren – but none of them continued his work on the great pagoda. An earthquake on 23 March 1839 caused huge cracks to appear on the face of the remaining structure. An enormous pair of chinthe, also damaged in the quake, guarded the riverfront view. The temple serves more as an attraction than a religious site. However, a small shrine

with a Buddha image still serves its purpose as a place of worship and meditation. The Mingun Temple was quite the site to see. Mingun's prettiest stupa, however, stands at the far north of the village. The Hsinbyume or Myatheindan Pagoda was built by Bodawpay's grandson, Bagyidaw, in 1816, three years before he ascended the throne, as a memorial to his favorite wife, Princess Hsinbyume. Severally damaged in the 1838 earthquake, it was rebuilt by King Mindon in 1874. The building's design is a rendition of the Sulamani Pagoda, believed to rest atop Mount Meru in the centre of the universe.

A "day off" from sightseeing temples we traveled today to the popular town of Pyin Oo Lwin, founded by the British. Designed as a place to escape the Mandalay summer heat. Our guide hired several horse driven carriages to take us around town. The horse carts were designed similar to the old type stage coaches of our west. Two customers per carriage inside the coach. Some of our group liked to ride up top with the driver. We went passed buildings designed by the British now used as private residences and hotels. We stopped and reboarded our coach that took us to the National Kandawgyi Botanical Gardens a 177 hectare botanical garden complex. The Botanical Gardens has 514 species of indigenous trees and 74 foreign species, 75 species of bamboo, and 75 species of crotons. Of the 300 species of indigenous orchids, 178 were already collected in 1942. There are 25 rose species, and 6 land lily species. Medicinal plants for traditional medicines are also grown. The National Botanical Gardens is managed by the Ministry of Forestry. We only had 45 minutes to run through the gardens...not nearly enough time to enjoy the sites. Mike and I did go to the orchid section of the gardens and to the walk-through bird aviary. After lunch at a local restaurant we continued our trip back to Mandalay. We had an exciting stop at one of the flower markets. This was worth the trip to Pyin Oo Lwin. We jumped off the coach and found ourselves surrounded by cars, truck and motorcycles heavily loaded with bunches of flowers that were being transported to towns and cities for personal and religious purposes. Several of us just started running to the stalls sandwiched very close together filled with flowers and vendors quickly putting them in trucks and loading them heavily on motorcycles. The drivers of the motorcycles were in their seats holding up their bikes while vendors were strapping the mounds of flowers onto the back of the bike. By the time they were done you could hardly see the driver. As he sped off loaded he looked like a big ball of flowers heading down the road. It was like we were in the middle of a dream running through the stalls taking pictures as fast as we could and popping out at the end wondering "what did we just see"!! Great feeling, quite exuberating!!! Our next stop was at a government backed store that sold gold jewelry with Burma ruby earrings, pendants and more and bracelets and pendants made of jade. Of course I had to buy some ruby earrings, and a beautiful jug shaped lavender faded to green jade pendant.

Our last day in Myanmar was a drive to Amarapura, a former capital of Burma. To the south of Amarapura lies Lake Taungthaman, a seasonal body of water which dries up in the winter and leaves fertile, arable land in its wake. We went to visit the Mahagandayon Monastery, where more than 1,000 monks live and study together. It is one of the largest teaching monasteries in Myanmar. Watched over by loads of tourists the monks queue up each day to get their lunch hosted each day by different groups. First we went to the building that had very large woks and ovens where the food is prepared and cooked for

the monks. Then we went to wait at the area where the monks queue up for the precession to get their lunch. You are suppose to be respectful of the monks while taking photos and not be in their faces or get in the way of the precession but some tourist did not follow the rules. Monks are allowed to collect, receive and consume food between dawn and midday (taken to be 12 noon). They are not allowed to consume food outside of this time and are not allowed to store food overnight. Plain water can be taken at any time without having to be offered. Although a monk lives on whatever is offered, vegetarianism is encouraged. This was a special viewing into the private lives of the monks and I felt privileged to be able to be present. Afterwards we went to U Bein's Bridge, constructed from the teak planks of Inwa by King Bodawpaya's mayor (U Bein) following the move to Amarapura. Little altered in two centuries, it takes 15 minutes to cross on foot. It was very hot and sunny so when Mike and I started walking across the bridge, stopping to look at some ladies selling purses and articles made out of seeds, we decided not to walk all the way across the bridge and looked around the many stalls in the area. Not interested in obtaining any more souvenirs and trying to get away from a young girl hooking herself on me to buy her necklaces we dodged into an area that looked like a temple. So glad we did, this was a fantastic temple. Inside the Taung Mingi Pagoda was a very large Buddha with people offering flowers and incense to the Buddha. A large gong was in the front of the altar and the room was designed with very tall pillars made of blue and clear mirror tiles. It was beautiful. We were then transferred to Mandalay airport and our flight back to Bangkok.

Bangkok On Our Own:

Mike and I stayed two more days in Bangkok. I had did some research on places and things to do and visit in Bangkok. We picked a few things that we thought were interesting and not too tiring. We stayed again at the Ramanda Plaza Bangkok Menam Riverside Hotel. We had previously, at the beginning of our trip in Bangkok visited the nearby night market Asiatique. It had a carnival like atmosphere with a huge array of goods to browse, restaurants, snack trucks and bars. We went back to this night market several times as I (for one) could find food that I liked... to say the least I didn't like the food in Myanmar or Bangkok. We didn't really try many places to eat in Bangkok so I could not really give an opinion on Thailand food. At home I do like Thai food. Anyway I love chicken satay and other Asian dishes. Found good food and drinks at Fire & Dine at Asiatique. Had chicken satay, fries and fish and chips...wonderful. Mike had stir-fry dishes he liked.

First day in Bangkok I had planned for Mike and me to go to the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (Wat Phra Kawe), but because of the death of the king we found that to be impossible with our time schedule. When we were in Myanmar on October 13th his Majesty the King Bhumibol Adulyadej had died after reigning for seven decades as a constitutional monarch and unifying figure in the politically febrile county. Thailand's military-led government had declared a year-long period of mourning for the late king, formally known as Rama IX, and many Thais were wearing black as a mark of respect. We were told that people were lined up for blocks to enter the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall. About 80,000 mourners arrived at the palace on Saturday morning. Authorities have said 10,000 mourners would be allowed to enter the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall,

inside the palace, each day. Everywhere around Bangkok were large banners of black and white draped across buildings, homes and stores. Shrines of his Majesty the King Bhumibol Adulyadej decorated with black and white banners, yellow and white banners, flowers and large portraits of the king in elaborate gold frames were a frequent site. When we had dinner in Fire & Dine at Asiatique all of the TV monitors had pictures of the processions going on at the funeral of the king where senior members of the royal family took turns to show respect for the king, amid chanting by Buddhist monks seated on the platform with the body of the king. Many pictures of King Bhumibol Adulyadej and his family sped across the TV screens. Because of the death of the king security had been bumped up since we were in Bangkok at the beginning of our trip. We saw security at the market we visited when large mirrors were being scanned under vehicles entering the market and at our hotel the trunks of cars had to be opened and inspected. Since taking power in a May 2014 coup, the military, which sees itself the protector of the monarchy, has cracked down on perceived royal critics and has shown it is highly sensitive to any discussion of the monarchy and succession. Criticism of the king, queen, heir or regent is a crime punishable by up to 15 years in prison for each offence. The government said that it would ask other countries to extradite people suspected of insulting the monarchy. This was a serious time in Thailand.

We decided to take a taxi from our hotel to the Chatuchak Weekend market. The place is enormous, the largest weekend market in the world, covering 37 acres and containing 15,000 stalls in 27 sections. It rained some of the time after we arrived, some of the markets were on the outside but most were inside covered. We walked around for quite some time looking at wares and food being sold. I was looking for two particular amulets. At one of the stalls I found a case of amulets for sale and spied one of the amulets I was looking for called Phra Pidta Buddha. Phra Pidta, meaning closes or covers it eyes in Thai, is also known as closed eyes Buddha. This Buddha was encased in a mount and on the back side was a stone backing with inscriptions. Phra Pidta amulets can enhance your fortune and ward off evils. The Phra Pidta hides its eyes meaning that when we stop concerning, asking and caring about something, nobody can do any bad things to you such as making rumors. Phra Pidta closes his eyes, thus has the function to prevent villains. It's for avoiding weasel and devil, bringing unexpected money and investing in business therefore business citizens love Phra Pidta. Phra Pidta's facial image is also regarded as the "one we see now, covering his eyes signifying to cover up the six roots of sensations: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and desire to free from human desires and passions." The six gunas: sight, sound, smell, taste and touch, can make one's mind more focused on practicing Buddhism or thinking. I love the meaning of the Phra Pidta Buddha....and Mike and I had to laugh when a shopper passing by looked over my shoulder to see which amulet I was purchasing and when he saw it he said, "Good choice." I was not finished yet in my search for my second amulet I was looking for. I had brought pictures of the amulets I wanted and showed them to the sales clerk. As we were looking I spied the second amulet I wanted, his name is Rahu. In Hindu tradition, Rahu is the severed head of an asura called Svarbhanu, that swallows the sun causing eclipses. He is depicted in art as a serpent with no body riding a chariot drawn by eight black horses. Rahu can be a reminder of beneficence, an action that is done for the benefit of others. Beneficent actions can be taken to help prevent or remove harms or

to simply improve the situation of others. Rahu can impel you forward and make you think about making the future better. He impels you forward and outward. For people serious in the worship of Rahu you worship on Wednesday nights, because it is a time of Rahu. You offer to Rahu black food and beverage. Examples of food and beverage can be black chicken refers to occupations, comfort, abundance, black liquor refers to the profit investment to come back, black coffee refers to thinking to be fulfilled, black eye peas means prosperity, black rice refers to financial cohesiveness and black coconut sweet pudding means to get the reward. I like the look of Rahu and find him an interesting beast. After examining my Rahu from Thailand I thought, where have I seen him before, then I remembered and looked for a pendant I had purchased in Nepal and sure enough it was a pendant of Rahu made of silver with coral eyes and a coral stone representing the sun that Rahu was ready to put in his mouth. Now I have two Rahu's!

Mike and I had fun at the Chatuchak Weekend market looking for the pet sections. I read that the market had dozens and dozens of stalls selling tropical fish, frogs and turtles and hundreds of puppies, squirrels, rabbits, snakes, lizards and other creatures. We starting see stalls selling toys, food and items for pets. We walked a few steps and I stopped to stare at some squirrels. At first I thought they were stuffed squirrels and then to our surprise their eyes starting blinking. There was sign that you had to pay a small fee to photo the squirrels. We paid the fee. A lady behind the counter told us that the big squirrel was not for sale it was hers. I was in shock as I started to study and focus on the squirrels all dressed with knit hats and jackets, dresses and bows. The squirrels were just lying on a shelf unable to really move as a short noose was around their necks keeping them from escaping. They seemed to be scared out of their fur or drugged or something as they hardly moved. There was also a few sugar gliders in cages some had knit hats onit was bizarre. You could even buy a carrying case for your squirrel with a heart shaped mesh so the critter could have some air, looked like a fabric lunch box. We went outside to some stalls selling tropical fish and supplies for aquariums. There was literally blocks of stalls selling tropical fish packaged in large clear bags lying on the floor and in bottles and jars. Buckets of frogs and turtles of all sizes were for sale. Even more interesting were the food vendors in the middle of all of this selling fried grasshoppers, bamboo worms, wood worms, Maeng Kee Noon (looks like beetles) and Jing Leed, (crickets). Many people in Thailand enjoy eating insects as a snack food, often enjoyed with beer. They're usually fried in a wok, and seasoned with Golden Mountain sauce & a bit of Thai pepper powder. YUK! Continued on down the street to a table with a display of small bunnies in cages. One bunny was allowed to hop around free on the table, I was hoping he could escape but thought if he did he would probably end up on a plate with some kind of sauce slathered over him for lunch. We never found the puppies, kittens, snakes or lizards but had enough of the market and we made our way out to the one of the entrances. On our way out we laughed when we passed a booth playing a vinyl of 14 great songs by Elvis Presley on an old phonograph. Elvis's voice filled the area. I finally found a booth selling maneki-nekos waving one of their paws...often believed to bring good luck. I purchased a white one instead of the silver one, which should have been my choice because when I got home my white lucky cat didn't work! Maybe Mike can fix it.

Because it was raining again when we left the market I suggested to Mike that we go to the Erawan Museum with the Three-Headed Elephant Statue because I thought it was indoors and out of the rain. We had a time trying to get a taxi driver to take us there, either he didn't understand or he didn't want to go there, maybe too far out of his range. We finally got a taxi driver that understood and wanted to take us there. It ended up being an excellent choice. Erawan is a museum in Samut Prakan. It is well known for its giant three-headed elephant art display. A huge, three-headed elephant statue standing upon an equally gargantuan pedestal is the first, and last, thing you see when visiting Samut Prakan's Erawan Hindu Museum. It's a splendid, towering beast: 250 tons in weight, 29 metres high, 39 metres long, and cast in a pure green-hued copper. From conception to completion it took almost ten years to construct. With a proud, war-like demeanor and trunks the size of ancient Banyan Trees, this is an epic image of Hindu mythology's Airavata (otherwise known as Erawan). The three stories inside the elephant contain antiquities and priceless collections of ancient religious objects belonging to Khun Lek Viriyapant Khun who is the museum owner. Housed inside and beneath its roomy belly, it'll also be one you never fully comprehend. Each of its three levels symbolizes a part of the Thai cosmos, and headily fuses rare Eastern antiques, rampant religious iconography, and the most psychedelic de'cor you'll see outside a dream. And, as the brochure informs, that is exactly what this is: one man's dream, come to life. Before you enter you remove your shoes, cover your legs and upper arms and begin your visit. A statue of Bodhisatva Guan Yin stands centre place. Four supporting pillars depicting scenes from the four religions prop up the roof which, in turn, symbolizes earth. Rounding off the fanciful, eclectic blend of East, West, traditional and modern decorative styles is a splendid stained glass ceiling by a German artist, which represents the roof of the world, the Zodiac and stars above. The domed upper level of the pedestal, representing Mount Meru (the centre of the Buddhist universe), is brashly beautiful. A towering, techni-coloured hall rich with iconography and artistic exuberance, what really impresses here is craftsmanship. The mélange of artistic skills used to ornament everything from walls to winding staircases is incredibly diverse, and includes hand-beaten copper work, Benjarong inlays, intricate stucco by Petchaburi craftsmen, tin embossed tableaus, and mural paintings. Outside is a moat that surrounds the museum, at one spot is a tub with lotus flowers and another tub with ceramic bowls. You are to scoop up a lotus flower with the bowl go over to the entrance of the moat and place your flower in. The flower will then float down the moat along with your wishes. The flowers for floating are called "Purnagnata" symbolizing fertility and life-force, prosperity and exuberance. Erawan's lush tropical gardens were the best we had seen on our trip. Thick swathes of rare flora, and tucked away benches, pavilions and rocks make it easy to find spiritual soothing, or seek quiet repose. Visitors can wander stone paths, cross diminutive streams or admire the vivid colorings of plants and palm trees with exotic titles like West Indian Jasmine, Ixora Bush and African Oil Palm. There was also schools of carp in the rock ponds, and mythological statues strewn throughout the gardens. Near the entrance before going inside the museum was an area for Hindu worshippers to offer flowers, food, money or other items to the shrines of Hindu faith. As the people kneeled in front of the shrines they would picked up a box full of bamboo sticks called (Chi-Chi sticks) with numbers on them. You were to shake the box rapidly till one of the sticks mysteriously was to jump out of the box. I gave it a try not knowing to wait till the stick

jumped out of the box but I just thought the highest stick was my fortune. I read the number 3. I went to the description box and in English it stated: Difficulties encountered in conducting activities. Some are ill-intentioned. Suffering from worry and restlessness. Legal case defensible. Hard to find ones you want to see. Good fortune not in sight. Mismatching is likely, Calm down, better not rush. (I had expected better). Anyway Mike took his turn after watching others and how it was suppose to be done he shook his box rapidly and his stick fell out...mysteriously. Mike's had the number 23 and his fortune stated: Enjoyable life. Despite any illness, need no worry. All in the family will be happy and have good lucks. Long journeys will be undertaken safe and sound. Desires will be fulfilled. Patient recovering. Legal case in your favor. All is good for you. I thought 'wait a minute' I did my shaking of the box wrong, I am going to do it again. After shaking and waiting for my stick to mysteriously jump out of the box I picked up my stick and the look on my face was of surprise. Mike said, "What number did you get?" I said number 3. We could not stop laughing. Well I am OK with that because the fortune is for the day you shake the number. We ended up going back to Asiatique and to Fire and Dine for dinner.

For our last day in Bangkok we got a taxi from our hotel and told the driver that we wanted to go to visit the golden Buddha at Wat Traimit near Chinatown. Our taxi driver's name was Tanakul. Since he spoke English and could understand us we asked him to take us to the Shrine of Goddess Tubtim first. Literally hundreds of penises (phalluses) - from small wooden carvings to big stone sculptures that stand ten feet tall and decorated with ribbons - make this shrine quite unique I wanted to see it. It honors Chao Mae Tubtim, a female fertility spirit. Women visit this shrine when they are trying to conceive, leaving offerings of lotus and jasmine. And if rumors can be believed, the shrine has a good success rate. Women will return if their wish are fulfilled, and place yet another phallus at the shrine in thanks. Little is known about the origins of the shrine, which now stands on the grounds of the Swissotel Nai Lert Hotel in the heart of Bangkok. It can only be recalled that a spirit house was built by Nai Lert, for the spirit who was believed to reside in the large Sai (Ficus) tree. Offerings of fragrant Jasmine garlands, incense sticks or lotus buds are commonly placed at the shrine. The star attractions here are the phalluses though. These particular phalluses ('lingams') have their origins from the fabled Hindu god Shiva, and are sold at many markets as good luck amulets, or for protection. They are also believed to have some mystical influence over the cash-flow of businesses, so don't be surprised if you spot one lying discreetly next to a cash register - or even dangling perhaps from the rear-view mirror of a taxi. I did see a phallus shaped amulet at a booth at the Wat Traimit and thought of purchasing it but didn't. Now I wished I had brought it. Our taxi driver was so nice and funny, he kept playing with his phone because he wanted to take some photos of Mike and me for his Facebook page. His phone was not cooperating. He finally got it to work and had Mike take pictures of him and me at the Shrine of Goddess Tubtim.

We then had Tanakul take us to Wat Traimit that houses the world's largest massive gold seated Buddha measuring nearly five metres in height and weighing five and a half tons. In the past, artisans crafted the Buddhas in gold and disguised them from invading armies by a covering of stucco and plaster. The Buddha at Wat Traimit was discovered

by accident when it was accidentally dropped as it was being moved, revealing, under a casing of plaster, a beautiful solid gold Sukhothai style Buddha. Pieces of the plaster are still kept on display. At US \$1,400 per troy ounce, the gold in the statue (18 karat) is estimated to be worth 250 million dollars. The body of the statue is 40% pure, the volume from the chin to the forehead is 80% pure, and the hair and the topknot, weighing 45 kg, are 99% pure gold. We left Wat Traimit and walked over to nearby Chinatown. Lots of interesting restaurants, food stalls and shops line the main street. There were plenty of alleys ways and lots of 7-Eleven stores to get a cold drink, candy or snacks I could easily recognize. In Chinatown were lots of gold shops lining the streets. Some shops had more customers in them than others. We saw one shop called 'Hua Seng Heng Gold Smith'. This shop is the only one to have the rights to the King's Garuda stamp. They also run the gold commodities market in Thailand. When we entered the store it was quite busy with customers standing behind the person that was at the front of the counter. We saw the clerks putting gold necklaces and bracelets in trays and putting them in front of the customer. Each tray having a number on paper inside. I thought 'where do you get the number, what do you do to get waited on'? I heard a man speaking English and asked him. He was standing behind a few Thai ladies. He said I am here with my wife and her friend and they are buying some gold jewelry. You just have to stand behind some one in line by this long counter and wait your turn. I asked, "Is this a good place to buy gold." He said he always brought gold jewelry at this store and they had market prices so you can't go wrong. I was told by him you could always return the gold pieces to get market price back also. It was finally my turn and I told the clerk I wanted to see 16 inch gold chain necklaces. He brought out a few and put them in my tray. I went to handle more than one and he motioned that he would get them for me. I tried on a few gold bracelets finally decided on one with beautiful enamel beads spaced on a gold chain. I picked out a 16 inch gold necklace to match. Thai gold jewelry has a purity of 96.5% gold, equivalent to 23 karat. It was pure fun to get the gold jewelry...but it was hard not to get carried away with purchases and find out just how much you are spending. After a long afternoon, hot and tired, Mike and I went back to the hotel. After a search for something to eat for lunch we found that most of the options were over till dinner. I got a sandwich from the hotel deli and some macaroons (my favorite cookies) and after eating in my room we decided to go lounge by the hotel pool. We had a very early pick-up for our 30 hour journey back home the next day so I wanted to pack and rest for the night. Mike went back to Asiatique for dinner and a brew and I took a nap. I told him to bring me back a chicken satay appetizer. I was asleep when he got back. Early that morning around 3:00 a.m. getting ready to leave our room Mike laughed and said did I see my appetizer. I said No. He said well they didn't give me the chicken satay appetizer I ordered they gave me a whole chicken! So much more to tell about Thailand and Myanmar but I will end here.

Next morning Early... our taxi picked us up before the light of dawn and took us to the airport. After landing in Toyko and then a stop in Los Angeles and then home we arrived safe and sound at our house. We had a fantastic time in Thailand and Myanmar. Lots of photos, gifts, souvenirs and memories of our trip. Glad to get home to (my kinda diet), cooler weather, family and friends.

Where to go next? So many places to see and experience.

Mike and Audrey Lambert