



Attitude

Where There's a Will There's A Way

A year on the road gave me much more time to spend than dollars, so I resigned myself to the fact that first-class hotels would have to be replaced by bed and breakfast homestays, YM and YWCA lodgings, and maybe even the occasional hostel dormitory.

So much for strong-willed intentions so far. First in Tokyo, again in Hong Kong, then again in Bangkok I had let vague misgivings and fears get the better of me. Faced with foreign sights and sounds, I fled from the airport directly to refuge in upscale North American style hotels of the Hilton, Hyatt and Sheraton variety.

You'll be homeward bound within a month at this rate, my sober side chided.

I'll do better in Chiang Mai I promised myself.

Noted for picturesque scenery and as a starting-place for backpacking trips to various indigenous hill tribe villages, Chiang Mai also had plenty of decent guest houses available for under \$10 a day, I had heard. Determined to keep a tight rein on the lodging budget, I stepped off the train and quickly found several guest house and hotel touts congregated on the platform. Within moments, even with my best intentions at work, I had arranged to stay in a mid-range hotel. Better but not good enough.

It took a colony of ants to accomplish what strength of character could not. Whenever I came back from some excursion or other and set down my handbag for more than ten minutes, the ants would appear. Through a crack in the floorboard they marched in single file across the room straight for my



handbag, attracted by a package of candy-coated chewing gum. No matter what deterrent either I or hotel staff might apply, chewing gum had an irresistible allure for these ants. After two days of waging lethal warfare upon them, I gave up the gum and found solace in the idea that if I had to share a room with ants, I might at least stay within budget.

Following a map purchased at a local book store, I found Chiang Mai Guest House, an elderly yet distinguished teakwood building, central, close to attractions and restaurants. Showers and toilets were a short walk down a wide, open-air veranda-like corridor that surrounded the bedroom wing. The price (about \$6.50 back then) would certainly help restore solvency to my travel fund.

Pleased with myself, I lazed away the sultry afternoon on the verandah stretched out on an authentic Thai wooden chaise. How pleasant I thought, the perfect place to do nothing more than read the original version of *Anna and the King of Siam*, which I had picked up in a local book shop. More active pastimes, like elephant riding, could wait a day. And I had earlier decided that backpacking to remote hill tribes could wait for another trip. I was content to rest. Breezes off the Ping River fanned my cheek, and sounds of a trickling garden fountain played softly on my ear. The idea of fretting over trivia like private bathrooms suddenly seemed nothing short of ridiculous.

Absorbed in the romantic story of Anna Leonowens, the English governess who lived six years in the Royal Palace at Bangkok, I hardly stirred from that spot the rest of the afternoon, except to go for a bite to eat, then I retired early to my sparse but spotlessly clean room. Just as sleep approached, two vexing thoughts nudged obtrusively into my mind: snakes and bladders.

The thing was, two snakes had already crossed my path in Chiang Mai. I met a snake slithering down, as I was midway up, the 300-step approach to Wat Phra That, an otherwise idyllic temple situated atop Doi Suthep mountain, about 16 km from Chiang Mai. Another time, a little green snake and a foot-long lizard had scurried away as I strolled around the city's moated periphery. Then there was the blood curdling image of a pail full of writhing scorpions waiting to be transformed into gilded jewelry, which had been my displeasure to behold while touring a nearby orchid farm. Oh, and who could forget the huge rhinoceros beetles I encountered on the way to the bank. A group of men, each with a beetle leashed to a stick, were having races or some sort of game in the middle of the street. They had teasingly invited me to come and join their play, but I was unamused.

Certainly I'd been astonished, startled, even horrified by such strange scenes. But I at least had gone on my way unscathed, and that is more than can be said for the unfortunate scorpions and beetles.

Now however, in bed, trying to sleep, I suddenly wondered where the snakes go at night. It occurred to me that open-air verandas would likely make good shelter for weary snakes. That's when I thought

about my pesky bladder and the fact that it normally demands relief once or twice during the night. Then I realized that my shoes, in accordance with Thai custom, were stashed neatly outside, at the bottom of many steps.

Okay, no middle-of-the-night wandering for you, I told myself firmly, and shortly after, I nodded off. As usual, I awoke about 3am with the “urge” upon me. I lay there thinking about snakes and trying to will myself back to sleep. By 4:30, still wide awake and the situation becoming critical, I was ready to chance the corridor.

Creeping squeamishly along on tippy-toed bare feet, warily checking the floors, nooks and crannies, there was nary a snake nor any critter to be seen. Moments later, business attended to, I walked confidently back to my room, opened the door, stepped in and . . . splat!

Something had pelted me on the back of the neck. What, I don’t know, no doubt something horrible, disgusting and probably snakelike, so you may imagine my rather loud reaction.

By the time I got the light on, the thing, whatever it was, had gone. Okay, okay, probably just a gecko (cute, tiny lizard), I reasoned. After checking under the sheets and everywhere, I flopped back into bed.

Night jitters gave way to slumber, and I hadn’t another thought about snakes until 4:05am the following night when a persistent bladder had me going gingerly along the open-air corridor once more.

So far no snake, no gecko as I approached the bathroom. But just as I stepped under the archway between the bathroom and the corridor . . . whizz! something zapped right past my ear.

I must have yelled loud enough to wake the dead, but no sign whatever appeared that another living soul had noticed my predicament. I felt I must be in some bizarre, surreal dream.

Whoosh . . . ! Right over my head this time.

As if prodded by Satan’s pitchfork, I bolted through the archway back to the corridor, turning back just in time to catch sight of a sizeable blurred object flying by again. What? A bug? A bird? No. It was a bat, the biggest bat I’d ever seen. A big, brown, squirrel-sized Thai bat frantically flying to and fro trying to escape the bathroom, the bathroom I now very urgently needed to get into thanks to the adrenalin jolt I’d just received.

I had a bladder problem and, clearly, the bat had a sonar problem. I was afraid to go in. It was unable to come out. While conversing with a bat is not my idea of communing with nature, not like say cuddling a koala, the sight of the poor creature plummeting into the walls aroused my pity. Circumstances called for some kind of action, but all I could think of were a few encouraging words: "Steady now, you can do it. Relax. Take it easy bat, think before you leap. *Pleeease*, I'm in a hurry here."

Was it my wildlife skills or dumb chance that saved the day? I don't know, but suddenly the critter found the archway to freedom and scrambled. The trauma was over for both of us, and I was greatly relieved in every sense of the word.

On my third and last nightly stroll at Chiang Mai Guest House, I met neither gecko nor snake nor bat. But when I arose in the morning, guess what? Once again, my handbag had been occupied by hundreds of tiny ants, attracted, I suppose, by some residue odor of chicklets.

Maybe you think that this episode weakened my fondness for travel. On the contrary, every unsettling experience increased my appreciation for small adventures, and I became less temperamentally rigid with each passing day.

Wanderlust lured me onward, and I had one last night in Thailand before catching a flight to Singapore. Because of my relaxed attitude, I was ready to bus-it back to Bangkok and to try the Lek Guesthouse as recommended by an Australian woman I chummed with one afternoon.

Although the bus was slightly shabby, it was air-conditioned, and the ten-hour trip transpired pleasantly, traversing a mostly rural landscape. A stewardess on board served up soft drinks and coffee, no charge. A lunch concoction of rice and unknown bits of things served at a roadside depot proved more appetizing than it looked. And about 4pm, the stewardess handed out a boxed snack consisting of a chicken leg, a donut, a cupcake and an orange.

This all-inclusive trip cost me about ten bucks, and I figured the budget crisis was finally under control.

A great thunder and lightning storm welcomed our arrival in Bangkok along with a swarm of gabbling taxi drivers, none of whom spoke English. Like a silly twit, I hadn't thought to get directions to the Lek Guesthouse written out in Thai script. No problem, someone at the information booth would surely be kind enough to look up the address in the telephone book and write it out for me.

To make quite a long story short, communications went badly awry, and I ended up riding around Bangkok with a driver who, instructions or no instructions, had no more idea of finding the Lek Guesthouse than I had. As time, trials and errors accumulated, he sensed my increasing frustration and tried to lighten things up by switching the radio from traditional Thai to American music. Fine, except by then I didn't need Credence Clearwater Revival telling me "*There's a Bad Moon Arising.*"

During an hour and a half, he had stopped no less than five times to ask help from various nondescript characters. Each discussion proved fruitless. We were hopelessly lost, and we could not communicate either by tongue or in writing. Growing more desperate by the minute, I took navigation into my own hands the next time we stopped by screaming out the window to the crowd at large: "Anyone speak English?"

Praise be to the guardian angel of naive adventurers, a couple of youths sauntered over to help. However, the Lek Guest House might have been on another planet for all they or any of us knew.

Totally exasperated now, I said, "Please, just ask him how much to take me to a hotel near the airport."

"One hundred fifty baht," the driver replied.

Without argument, I said "Let's go." Half an hour later I was signing the register at the Airport Hotel, nice if you're on an executive's budget. As for my budget, it was at the breaking point once again.

I'll do better in Singapore I promised myself as I slid into a lovely, neck-deep bubble bath.

[See Going Solo Tips](#)

Social Issues, Culture Shock