

Thursday, March 31, 2005
Bangkok, Thailand

**THINGS AREN'T THAT MUCH DIFFERENT,
WHEREVER YOU GO.**

Here's a quiz. Where are you when the following things are happening? The first thing they offer you at a restaurant is Tabasco sauce. The major agricultural commodities are cotton and sugar. Cockfighting is a popular but controversial sport. There are numerous scandals involving local and state government officials. Hurricanes and how to get away from them are constantly in the news. Indian casinos are stirring up a great deal of controversy. Big tax breaks are given to new businesses coming in to locate, while local businesses complain bitterly. And there is a rehash of a Louisiana-Kentucky basketball game a few years back. Where are you? Simple. Bangkok Thailand.

A combination of business and pleasure took me halfway around the world to an exotic land I had only read about. This lush, tropical landscape is located right in the middle of modern-day clashing cultures. Burma and Laos to the north, with Cambodia and Malaysia to the south. But in spite of the armed conflicts that surround it, Thailand has never fallen to a European colonial power or a modern-day neighbor.

And there is so much about this country that is unique. A language quite unlike any other form of Chinese or any other language from surrounding countries. Buddhism dominates daily life, and one of the few monarchies left in the world can be found here. But despite this unique flavor that sets this area apart from its Southeast Asian neighbors, there are numerous things in common between Bangkok and the deepest of the deep Southern states in the U.S.

I had arrived at Don Muang Airport on Easter Sunday at 11:56 p.m. having crossed the International Date Line and than losing a day. Easter lasted four minutes. So to make up for the religious day loss, the first stop Monday morning was the Assumption Cathedral, one of the few catholic or even Christian churches in the Thailand. Then a "must stop" at the Oriental Hotel, regularly listed as one of the three or four best in the world. A renowned writer's hangout, Somerset Maugham, Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene, Noel Coward, Gore Vidal, and Barbara Cartland are just a few of the numerous authors who have done some of their best work here.

Leaving the Oriental Hotel, I traveled down Ehulalongkoran Boulevard, supposedly designed after the Champs Elysees in Paris. The wide boulevard gave it a look more like Canal Street in New Orleans.

Remember *The King and I* staged in the country of Siam? The name was changed to Thailand in 1939. (A side note. Ever wonder why Yul Brenner was bald in the movie? He played the role of King Rama IV who ruled around 1850, and who built the country's most famous Buddhist Temple. Rama was a monk for 27 years before becoming King, and all monks shave their heads. Brenner just continued this tradition.)

The first night I arrived at my hotel room in Bangkok, I turned on the one English-speaking movie channels on ABC Asia Pacific. Would you believe they were running a film about Louisiana's first black senator from Coushatta, named Marshall Twetchel? He served in the Legislature during Reconstruction in the 1870s, and was murdered one night crossing a local ferry.

At breakfast the next morning, I asked the waiter for something to spice up my scrambled eggs. He promptly handed me a bottle of Tabasco sauce from Avery Island, Louisiana. A number of Thai spices are sold to Louisiana hot sauce producers.

Casino gambling is being considered in Thailand, but there is much controversy. The big gambling sport here is cockfighting. A number of stories have appeared in local newspapers on the pros and cons of both activities. If Louisiana U.S. Senator David Vitter finds out about the local propensity towards this type of gambling, the locals here better beware. Our voice in Washington has made the outlawing of cockfighting nationwide his top priority. Don't put it past him to launch an international campaign.

And can you believe that LSU basketball even made the local papers? Basketball is gaining popularity throughout Southeast Asia. One of the country's leading newspapers published a story about how the game stays interesting no matter how far ahead one team may be. Let me quote for you LSU's notoriety: "In February 1994, Kentucky trailed by 31 points at Louisiana State with 15 minutes remaining. Rick Pitino, then the Wildcats coach, paced the sideline. Kentucky went to its famous full-court press. When the Wildcats were finished, they had completed the greatest comeback in college basketball history." Well, they are saying something about LSU.

And finally, we confronted the renewed panic about the dangers of another Tsunami hitting Thailand. I returned to my hotel following a late dinner with friends, and again flipped on my television set. Every channel was focused on a quake that had taken place in the South China Sea just a few hours earlier. Tsunami warnings listed possible danger areas including most of Thailand. The danger proved to be minimal in our area.

But when I went down to the lobby about 1:00 a.m., the hotel staff on duty was gathered around a TV set at the bar, and was obviously apprehensive.

The Tsunami that hit this same region just a few months ago took a chunk of ocean floor that was 745 miles long and 9 miles wide, then pushed it up over 100 feet. And then dropped it. The magnitude then was 9.0 on the rector scale. This new disaster reached 8.2.

And if you go back to what happened this past December, the Thai government has little to be proud about. The Thailand Meteorological Department, which is supposed to keep tabs on things like 30-foot tall waves, decided not to issue any early warnings. As the massive disaster approached the southern Thailand shore, officials were debating the pros and cons of damage to the nation's huge tourist industry if a warning was given but later proved to be unnecessary. Boy, did these guys blow it last time.

No one has talked much about a possible major earthquake taking place in the Gulf of Mexico. The only plans for warning devices are locations on both the east and west coast of the U.S. Most of the news articles that have been written since the Indian Ocean disaster would lead us to believe that earthquakes are a West Coast problem. Not so, if you look at history.

In fact, the largest earthquake in the United States that anyone can remember occurred back in 1811 throughout the Mississippi Valley. Whole islands disappeared into the Mississippi River, and this disaster caused Congress to pass the first federal relief act in 1815. Few people lived in this area then, so there was only sparse loss of life. This whole area covers from Memphis South, with a major fault line going right through Baton Rouge.

The director of the national hurricane Center, Max Mayfield, said just recently that: "What we see in Louisiana is a really scary place, and when it comes to hurricanes, it is still our biggest nightmare." So when it comes to setting up warning systems, hey, you guys in Washington don't leave us out of the final plan.

Look, were all in this together. If ever there was a major issue that called out for international cooperation and an integrated multinational plan, giving fair warning of nature's wrath should certainly be a top item on the list.

British poet John Donne summed I up pretty well back in the 17th century.

“No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
Each man’s death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.”

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown

